Reading College and School of Arts & Design

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE

1998-99

Contents

Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
	%	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	–

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

Reading College and School of Arts & Design

South East Region

Inspected May 1999

Reading College and School of Arts & Design is a large general further education college serving Reading, Wokingham and the central Thames Valley region. The self-assessment process was thorough and involved staff at all levels. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with most of the grades for curriculum areas and cross-college areas, but they found a significant number of strengths and weaknesses which the college had not identified. In places, the self-assessment report was overdescriptive and insufficiently evaluative.

The college provides courses in nine of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Provision in six of the areas was inspected. The college is developing its provision to meet the needs of the local community and has been successful in widening participation. It has formed many educational and training partnerships, and alliances with major national and international companies, to support and provide high technology training in computing and related applications. Reading College of Arts and Technology merged with the Berkshire College of Art and Design in 1997 to form the present college. The planning and implementation of this operation constituted a major achievement for the governors and the managements of both colleges. The newly-formed board takes an active interest in the work of the college and conducts its business openly and effectively. The college is well managed and benefits from strong leadership. Financial management is sound. A comprehensive range of services provides good support for students. Impartial advice helps students make an informed choice of courses. There is much good teaching and in many curriculum areas students' achievements are at or above national averages for the sector. Since the last inspection, the accommodation has been considerably improved and substantially more equipment is available in many specialist areas. The use of sophisticated IT across the curriculum and in facilitating good communications is a particular strength. The quality assurance arrangements have been improved to meet the needs of the larger merged institution. Good use is made of questionnaires to measure student and customer satisfaction. There are effective arrangements for staff appraisal and staff development. The college's new building proposals address the problems of overcapacity and the poor accommodation on the Maidenhead site. In order to improve its provision further, the college should address: some inadequacies in tutorial support; some aspects of teaching and learning; students' poor achievements on some courses; low retention rates; some students' poor attendance; incomplete implementation of quality assurance procedures; lack of rigour in course reviews; inadequate use of management information reports; insufficiently detailed target-setting; and insufficient monitoring of academic performance by governors.

Curriculum area	Grade
Construction	2
Automobile engineering	2
Hotel and catering and leisure and tourism	3
Hairdressing and beauty therapy	2
Art and design	2
Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	3

Cross-college provision	Grade
Support for students	2
General resources	2
Quality assurance	3
Governance	2
Management	2

The College and its Mission

1   Reading College and School of Arts & Design is a large general further education college. It is the product of a merger in 1997 between Reading College of Arts and Technology and Berkshire College of Art and Design. Proposals exist to transfer to Reading those specialist art and design programmes based in Maidenhead, and create a new purpose-built school of arts and design on the Kings Road campus.

2   The college operates in a highly competitive environment. Within a 20-mile radius there are three other further education colleges, one specialist college of agriculture, 15 schools with sixth forms and three schools with special technology and language status. The majority of students are recruited from the two recently-formed unitary authorities, Reading and Wokingham. For some specialist and higher education programmes, students are drawn from all regions of the United Kingdom.

3   In May 1999, the college had enrolled 10,000 students of whom approximately 2,400 were full time, including over 400 students funded directly from the Higher Education Funding Council for England on higher national diploma, honours degree and certificate in education programmes. The college's higher education courses are validated by the college's associate partners, Oxford Brookes University, the University of Reading and the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside.

4   Courses are provided in all of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas, except agriculture, at levels ranging from entry level to honours degree. A subsidiary company wholly owned by the college, Lifetime Training Solutions, contracts directly with the local training and enterprise council (TEC), Thames Valley Enterprise, for traineeships and modern apprenticeship training.

5   The college benefits from being primarily located in Reading, the heart of the Thames Valley. It is surrounded by major high

technology companies and a substantial number of medium and small enterprises. Reading and Wokingham have high levels of employment in the areas of distribution, services, financial services and information technology (IT). Unemployment is extremely low at 1.7%. There are significant skills shortages in the region and the frequency with which people change their employment is higher than that experienced in most other regions.

6   Links have been forged with schools in the catchment area and a range of collaborative initiatives have been developed for post-16 education. The college is a partner in the newly-emerging Lifelong Learning Partnerships with Reading and Wokingham local authorities. Alliances have been developed with major companies in the region who sponsor and promote high technology training programmes in conjunction with the college. The college has obtained substantial project funding through the regional competitiveness, skills challenge and rationalisation initiatives.

7   In partnership with Guildford College of Further and Higher Education, the college is establishing a regional centre of excellence for printing and multimedia. With the other Thames Valley colleges, a 'virtual college' is being created for the area.

8   The college's mission is 'to provide high-quality further and higher education programmes to meet the needs and aspirations of our customers in the wider community'. To achieve this mission the college intends to:

- be the first choice provider of education and training in Reading and the surrounding area

- assist in the economic development of the Thames Valley region

- develop its role as a major provider of further and higher education programmes regionally, nationally and internationally

- provide high-quality education and learning programmes for all students irrespective of their previous levels of attainment

Context

- empower students to fulfil their potential
- provide an environment which encourages lifelong learning
- manage and develop its resources effectively and efficiently.

The Inspection

9   The college was inspected during the week beginning 17 May 1999. Before the inspection, inspectors considered the college's self-assessment report and reviewed information from other directorates of the FEFC. This included data on students' achievements for three years from 1995 to 1997, which were derived from the individualised student record (ISR). This information was supplemented by data provided by the college on students' achievements in 1997-98. These data were checked against class registers and pass lists from the examining bodies. A summary table for students' achievements is not included in the statistical appendix because the ISR data from the two separate colleges could not be readily combined to illustrate the overall achievement of the pre- and post-merger institutions. The college was given about two months' notice of the provision to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by a team comprising 12 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 56 days. Inspectors observed a total of 83 lessons, plus some tutorials, and examined students' work and documentation about the college and its courses. Members of the team met governors, managers, staff and students and read depositions from the local TEC and a headteacher of a major feeder school.

10   The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the 83 lessons observed, 70% were judged to be good or outstanding and only 2% were less than satisfactory. These proportions are higher than the averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1997-98. This profile is significantly better than that resulting from the inspections of the two previously separate institutions and suggests that teaching and learning activities have improved in all areas.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
Higher education	0	1	1	0	0	2
GNVQ	3	14	6	1	0	24
NVQ	6	15	10	1	0	32
Other vocational	2	11	4	0	0	17
Other*	3	3	2	0	0	8
Total (No.)	14	44	23	2	0	83
Total (%)	17	53	28	2	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report
*includes basic education and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Context

11   The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The highest recorded attendance was 81% in construction and the lowest, 61% in hair and beauty.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Reading College and School of Arts & Design	10.5	73
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Construction

Grade 2

12   Inspectors observed 11 lessons. They agreed with some of the college's judgements about the overall quality of provision but considered that some key strengths and weaknesses had been omitted from the self-assessment report.

Key strengths
- effective teaching and learning
- safe and competent practical work
- high achievement rates on many qualifications
- the broad range of programmes
- well-managed provision
- the linking of the clear development plan to corporate objectives

Weaknesses
- low retention rates on some programmes
- lack of assessment grading criteria for assignments in Edexcel programmes
- lack of rigour in programme review and evaluation

13   The faculty of technology offers a broad range of construction programmes. Courses in construction crafts lead to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1, 2 and 3. In the built environment section, programmes range from national certificate to the professional level of the Chartered Institute of Building courses. In addition to its main FEFC-funded provision, the college provides multi-skilling training courses for local employers and Chartered Institute of Building programmes where employers meet the full cost. Good links with the Thames Valley Centre for the Built Environment have led to the development of short courses such as the Royal Society of Health Construction Safety

Management course. Links with employers, through the three construction consultative committees, are good. Students on the full-time general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced programme have benefited recently from work experience with local employers, and particularly from the opportunity to learn about the commercial application of Autocad.

14   There is much good teaching. Of the lessons observed, 64% were good or outstanding. Lessons are well planned and include a variety of appropriate activities. Practical work is well organised and teachers ensure that trainees develop safe working practices. Students are aware of the regulations for the control of substances hazardous to health. Risk assessment sheets are continually being updated, are readily available in all the workshops and routinely shared with students. On the Edexcel programmes, assignments are vocationally relevant and encourage detailed analysis by students of the tasks they undertake. However, assignments do not contain assessment criteria. Key skills are included in some of the assignments but there is no plan to ensure students meet all the requirements for a key skills qualification. IT is not fully integral to the curriculum and teachers do not use suitable vocationally relevant computer software to support learning. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

15   The standard of the practical work produced by students is good and meets industry requirements. For example, one student on the NVQ level 2 bricklaying programme constructed a very good isolated pier in stretcher bond. He was then assessed against criteria stated in his workbook. The finished product was judged to have acceptable dimensional tolerances. There has been a steady improvement in student achievement rates on most programmes and inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that achievement rates are significantly higher than national averages on many programmes. On the

national certificate courses, the achievement rates for 1996, 1997 and 1998 were 69%, 89% and 100%, respectively. On the GNVQ advanced programme and for the same period, the achievement rates were 85%, 86% and 67%, respectively. Retention rates have fallen over the same time period, particularly on the national certificate programmes, partially as a result of students' success in gaining employment. There is a lack of rigour in programme reviews and insufficient analysis of trends in achievement and retention rates. In the built environment area, the appropriate criterion-referenced assessment and grading are not always used and some students' work is corrected ineffectively and commented on inadequately.

16   The construction provision is well managed and there are regular and formal team meetings at faculty and curriculum area levels. The faculty has a clear development plan which links to the corporate objectives in the college's strategic plan. Since the last inspection, considerable progress has been made in integrating the two formally separate areas of construction and the built environment. Staff now share good practice. Tutorials for craft students are well planned and students' progress is recorded and monitored. However, tutorials are not formally timetabled and individual students may wait a considerable period between one tutorial interview and the next.

17   The college has a good range of construction workshops but the students' baserooms within these workshops are inadequate and do not provide a suitable learning environment. Teachers have appropriate technical qualifications but some have not yet achieved assessor qualifications to enable them to assess students' work adequately on vocational programmes.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in construction, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ (all craft trades)	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	251 43 57	138 66 51	206 54 77
NVQ (all craft trades)	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	44 89 67	39 95 97	44 82 88
GNVQ and precursors	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	33 79 77	28 57 88	41 51 95
Higher national awards	4	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	39 64 80	47 81 76	54 67 64

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Automobile Engineering

Grade 2

18   Inspectors observed 11 motor vehicle lessons. The self-assessment report was not sufficiently self-critical. It listed no weaknesses in teaching and learning or students' achievements and inspectors considered that a number of strengths cited represented no more than normal practice.

Key strengths
- good teaching in workshop sessions
- rigorous internal verification procedures
- effective learning support
- good course management

Weaknesses
- low student retention rates on two-year courses
- poor planning of theory teaching
- insufficient feedback from teachers on students' written work

19   Motor vehicle courses lead to NVQs at levels 1 to 3 in vehicle mechanical and electronic systems and the equivalent City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) qualifications. Students can work towards the NVQ body repair qualification at level 3 as a third-year option. Students take NVQs or C&G qualifications according to the requirements of their training provider. The college has recently taken over the vehicle parts block-release course from another college. The section also provides the opportunity for unqualified mechanics to obtain a qualification by working on their own using open learning materials.

20   Teaching and learning programmes are well managed. Teachers have regular team meetings to plan provision and to monitor students' progress. Each course has an internal verifier with a nominated substitute. Verification records are well maintained.

Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that internal verification is a strength. Teachers have developed their own key skills recording sheets linked to a tracking document which indicates the practical units through which students are likely to be able to provide evidence of each key skill. Each student has a key skills action plan and is working towards an accredited qualification. Additional learning support is delivered by learning support teachers during key skills periods.

21   There is much good teaching. Of the lessons observed, 64% were good or outstanding. Most of the better lessons were in practical workshops; these were well planned and organised. In addition to doing set exercises, second-year students are placed in a demanding realistic working environment where they are required to diagnose and rectify faults on the cars of college staff and students. All full-time students are required to undertake work experience during their course.

22   The planning of classroom teaching is less good. Schemes of work are lists of topics and do not give a clear indication of expected learning outcomes of the teaching methods to be used. Many of the classroom sessions were sound but dull. There were notable exceptions. In one outstanding lesson on health and safety, students were required to investigate statutory documents, such as the factories act, for specific references to health and safety. They were then required to present their findings to the class. This was done well with some students using the whiteboard to illustrate points from their talk. Other students asked questions about issues raised and the teacher then summarised the main points from each presentation. Students are given regular tests to check their progress. Teachers indicate where students have gained or lost marks but do not provide written comments of why an answer was wrong or how students might improve their work.

23   Students' poor retention rates on two-year courses were not identified as a weakness in the

self-assessment report. Some students who fail to complete the first year of their course do not have the aptitude for practical work. The college is seeking ways of identifying the lack of such aptitude in good time through its initial assessment of students. Some full-time students leave college when they are offered full-time employment after their work placement. The proportion of students who complete their two-year courses and obtain their NVQ or C&G qualification are significantly above the national averages for the further education sector. Student retention and achievement rates on three-year courses have been poor but improved significantly in 1998.

24   Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that the college has good links with training providers and employers. They visit the college regularly for meetings about the progress of their trainees. The parents of students are also invited to the college each term to discuss the progress of their sons or daughters. The technology faculty's twice-yearly newsletter is sent to more than 3,000 employers, almost a third of them in the motor industry.

25   Engineering teachers are well qualified and have the appropriate range of assessor and verifier awards. They undertake regular staff development including attendance at specialist events run by car and equipment manufacturers. The college has recently appointed two technician instructors who provide additional support for students in the workshops. Motor vehicle accommodation is good. The workshops are clean and well maintained. There is a good range of cars, specialist jigs and tools, diagnostic equipment, and hand tools. The learning centre has an appropriate selection of motor vehicle and mechanical engineering textbooks.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in automobile engineering, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	**1997**	**1998**
NVQ	1	Expected completions	+	+	16
		Retention (%)	+	+	75
		Achievement (%)	+	+	58
NVQ and C&G part 2	2	Expected completions	*	55	67
		Retention (%)	*	53	51
		Achievement (%)	*	69	76
NVQ and C&G part 3	3	Expected completions	76	33	17
		Retention (%)	89	70	94
		Achievement (%)	43	36	75

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+courses not running
*data unreliable

Hotel and Catering and Leisure and Tourism

Grade 3

26   Nineteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They found both strengths and weaknesses, however, which the self-assessment report did not mention. They considered that the report focused disproportionately on recent improvements in this curriculum area.

Key strengths

- good teaching in hospitality and catering
- high standards of practical work in hospitality and catering
- good course management
- good individual support for students
- open and constructive consultation with students

Weaknesses

- students' poor achievements on some courses
- low retention rates on GNVQ courses
- unsatisfactory attendance by leisure and tourism students
- lack of work experience on GNVQ leisure and tourism courses
- insufficient opportunities for students to gain additional qualifications in travel and tourism

27   The college offers a range of full-time and part-time NVQ courses. This includes NVQs in catering at levels 2 and 3 and in sport and recreation at level 2. GNVQ courses in both hospitality and catering and in leisure and tourism are available at advanced and intermediate level. The college offers a generic foundation course with pathways through the main vocational areas including hospitality and catering and leisure and tourism. There are proposals to offer a course leading to NVQ in hospitality at level 1 in order to widen participation in this curriculum area. Students can take additional qualifications including a professional cooks diploma, food hygiene certificates and first-aid qualifications. There is little opportunity for full-time tourism students to obtain additional vocational qualifications even though specialist worldwide fares and ticketing qualifications are studied in the college by part-time students.

28   Most of the teaching observed by inspectors was at least satisfactory. The better lessons were in hospitality and catering. Of the lessons observed, 58% were considered to be good or outstanding. One lesson was unsatisfactory. All courses had schemes of work but some of these did not identify teaching methods and did not relate to assessment specifications. The better lessons were lively and well planned. For example, two GNVQ students in hospitality and catering presented a business plan for a new hotel. Fellow students vigorously challenged their proposals which the pair successfully defended. In practical catering lessons, students were well motivated and carried out their work with care and commitment. Students on the GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering course participated in a series of theme events and undertook good teamwork. In less effective lessons, students were not challenged enough to explore ideas in depth, think for themselves and exercise initiative in their learning. In one leisure and tourism class, group work was protracted, lacked purpose and reached few conclusions. Insufficient attention was given to teaching and learning in the self-assessment report. Work experience placements are a strength of catering courses but none is provided for GNVQ leisure and tourism students. The college runs a successful overseas educational visit for leisure and tourism GNVQ advanced students each year.

29   Each student has a personal tutor and receives individual support regularly. Progress reviews are part of the tutorial process. Students requiring additional learning support are identified at an early stage. This support, plus teaching in key skills, are provided by subject teachers who work closely with specialist support staff. The teaching of key skills is not differentiated enough to take account of the needs of students of varying abilities in hospitality and catering groups.

30   The general standard of students' assignment work on GNVQ courses is good and portfolios are well presented. In most cases, written feedback on assessments is constructive. The poor retention rates on a number of courses were acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Attendance was low in half of the leisure and tourism classes observed. Students' results in GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism are at the national average but the GNVQ intermediate results were very poor in 1998. In 1998, results on the GNVQ catering and hospitality advanced level course were poor but were much better in food preparation and cooking NVQ level 2 programmes.

31   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that course management is good and teamwork is effective. Staff roles and responsibilities are clear. There are regular meetings which are properly recorded. Each course group has a student representative who is invited to attend programme area meetings. Students' views gained in this way are taken into account in the annual course review. These reviews lack quantitative data, particularly with reference to student retention and achievement rates.

32   Teaching accommodation is good. Some rooms contain appropriate wall displays but these seldom include examples of students' work. Catering work areas are satisfactory in quality. The restaurant is spacious and it serves as a useful and adaptable teaching area. There are few specific resources for leisure and tourism. The college lacks leisure facilities but it hires the use of a nearby activities centre. The range of quality periodicals and books in the learning centre and the departments is adequate although some books are outdated. Students have good access to IT facilities. Teachers are well qualified and those in catering and hospitality have particularly valuable industrial experience.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of achievement and retention
rates in hotel and catering and leisure and
tourism, 1996 to 1998**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	**1997**	**1998**
NVQ food preparation and cooking (two years)	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	29 34 30	16 81 69	32 53 71
GNVQ intermediate hospitality and catering	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	12 83 40	14 86 50	+ + +
NVQ sport and recreational facility operations	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	27 33 78	29 83 46
GNVQ intermediate leisure and tourism	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	36 53 53	20 60 83	17 71 17
GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	12 42 40	12 58 86	13 38 60
C&G 3320 diploma in professional cookery	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	12 67 100	9 33 100	20 50 100
GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	84 65 82	80 60 85	45 67 78

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+course not running

Curriculum Areas

Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

Grade 2

33   Twelve lessons were observed in hairdressing and beauty therapy and complementary therapies. Inspectors agreed with judgements in the self-assessment report. They found the section in the report on this curriculum area, however, to be too descriptive and insufficiently evaluative.

Key strengths

- much good teaching
- students' high achievement rates on most courses
- effective curriculum planning and management
- good standard of accommodation and specialist equipment

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on a few courses
- some students' poor attendance and lack of punctuality

34   The college offers a wide range of appropriate courses in hairdressing and beauty and these offer good progression opportunities for both full-time and part-time students. There has recently been a significant growth in enrolments for NVQ level 2 full-time and part-time courses and on short specialist complementary therapy courses such as aromatherapy and reflexology.

35   There is much very good teaching. Of lessons observed, 67% were good or outstanding. Students benefit from, and enjoy, practical sessions which involve them in a range of appropriate activities. For example, in one hairdressing lesson the teacher carefully guided a group of NVQ level 2 students through an evaluative exercise related to client consultation on hair tests. Samples of different hair types were subjected to different treatments by the students and the results of these were evaluated. Later, the students went on to discuss the results as a group and identify implications for their work in salons. All students participated enthusiastically in the lesson. During commercial salon sessions, students work to a professional standard, paying particular attention to client care. However, client care can sometimes be compromised because of students' failure to attend. In one lesson, two clients had to be reallocated to another salon as a result of student absence. Students' practical work conforms to standards in commercial practice, particularly in beauty therapy. Students' written work is mainly of a good standard. Portfolios are well organised and contain much useful material. Sheets giving feedback on students' performance in assignments are returned with corrected work but on some, comments are limited to content and presentation. Students' errors in punctuation and spelling are not corrected. Students say they receive good verbal feedback from teachers about their work. Students are able to speak knowledgeably about their learning and they demonstrate clear understanding of assessment requirements and the standards to be achieved.

36   Students receive good support for their learning through the tutorial system. They are encouraged to take responsibility for monitoring their own progress. Reviews, leading to individual action plans, take place regularly. Students undertake vocationally relevant work experience and this helps them to demonstrate professionalism in their work in the college's salons. Work placements are carefully chosen and thoroughly monitored. Employers are involved in the evaluation of students' performance on work placements. The salon supervisor contributes to students' work placement diaries by commenting on the students' general performance. In one example, reference was made not only to the quality of a student's work but also to her motivation and

ability to use her initiative. Students' achievements are mainly at, or above, the respective national average for the sector. Results on a number of beauty specialist courses including the diploma in aromatherapy, the beauty specialist diploma and NVQ level 2 beauty therapy have been consistently above the national average for three years. Results on the NVQ level 2 hairdressing course are also above the national average. Retention rates on most courses are mainly in line with the national average but fell below it on a few courses in 1998, including the body massage diploma and the certificate in salon hygiene for hairdressing.

37   Courses are effectively managed and carefully planned by a cohesive team. There are clear lines of communication for staff. Students appreciate and acknowledge the dedication of staff who are willing to help, counsel and guide them. There are regularly minuted team meetings which concentrate on planning and review. Internal verification is carefully recorded. All members of the teaching team are involved in verification and they ensure it is completed satisfactorily.

38   The hairdressing and beauty salons were upgraded to professional standards in 1995. They were given new reception facilities and a computerised client system was introduced. All students are trained in the use of this system which enables client usage of the salons and budget expenditure to be closely monitored. All staff are appropriately qualified and hold, or are working towards, a teaching qualification. Six salons are on the ground floor and there is a suite of classrooms on the second floor. Where necessary course timetables have been altered in order to relocate classroom sessions at ground floor level to accommodate wheelchairs users.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in hairdressing and beauty therapy, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ hair and beauty	2	Expected completions	184	151	213
		Retention (%)	71	61	79
		Achievement (%)	89	85	75
Salon hygiene (hairdressing and beauty)	2	Expected completions	+	71	73
		Retention (%)	+	93	81
		Achievement (%)	+	88	68
Beauty specialist courses (one year)	2	Expected completions	31	31	35
		Retention (%)	71	74	74
		Achievement (%)	95	87	92
NVQ hair and beauty	3	Expected completions	+	10	13
		Retention (%)	+	90	85
		Achievement (%)	+	89	100
Beauty specialist courses (two year)	3	Expected completions	113	138	92
		Retention (%)	78	88	87
		Achievement (%)	95	87	85

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+courses not running

Art and Design

Grade 2

39   Twenty classes were observed. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report but they considered that some strengths and some weaknesses were underestimated. In some instances, the statements of key strengths referred to practice which was normal and in no way exceptional.

Key strengths

- high-quality teaching
- highly motivated students
- effective assessment
- good use of specialist practitioners from outside the college
- students' high achievements on most courses
- innovative and successful community arts programme

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on most courses
- students' poor attendance in many classes
- inadequate IT provision at Maidenhead

40   The school of arts and design offers a wide range of specialist and general courses in art and design and performing arts, providing progression from foundation level through to honours degree. Courses inspected included those leading to the national diplomas in design and performing arts, GNVQs at intermediate and advanced level in art and design and at intermediate level in performing arts, the higher national certificate/diploma in design crafts and the diploma in foundation studies in art and design.

41   Teaching and learning are well planned in most courses. Of lessons observed, 95% were considered to be good or outstanding. Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that the wide range of appropriate strategies used in teaching is a strength. Students gave well-articulated presentations confidently to explain the process and outcomes of their individual projects. The project tasks had been well specified and included clear instructions, although occasionally the assessment criteria had not been included in the original brief. Students have a high level of motivation and commitment to their work. Frequent visits are made to galleries and exhibitions to deepen and sustain students' knowledge and interest in their specialism. Most courses include live projects to fulfil real design briefs. These projects bring students into regular contact with external professional designers and clients. A sculpture had been commissioned from students on the higher national certificate design crafts course. In planning the construction, they costed and ordered the necessary materials and services. In so doing, they demonstrated prowess in key skills effectively.

42   Students at all levels are encouraged to plan and manage their work effectively and they are helped to do this through regular tutorials. Assessment procedures are effective and students have a clear understanding of the standards expected of them. Teachers provide useful comments, both spoken and written, with their marking of all set work. The portfolios of students, especially those on the general foundation course, contain work of a high vocational standard. There is, however, scope for improving the quality of students' observation and drawing on the general foundation course and on many of the national diploma courses. The examination results of students who complete their courses are at, or above, the national averages for the sector, and those on the general foundation course are exceptionally high. Most students progress to higher education courses either within the college or elsewhere. Retention rates on

national diploma and GNVQ courses are mainly poor and in some cases, less than 50% of the students complete their course. Attendance on a number of courses is also poor. The college is aware of these problems and steps are being taken to remedy them.

43 The management structure of the school underwent a number of major changes following the merger of the two colleges. These changes are proving beneficial and were recognised in the self-assessment report as a strength. The responsibilities of the management team are clear and ensure that the planning of resources, quality assurance, key skills and the provision of pastoral care is more effectively linked to curriculum development and delivery.

44 Staff have appropriate qualifications and professional experience. Good equipment and materials are available for students' use and enable students to have varied experience in a range of media. Further education students benefit from access to the facilities for higher education courses, particularly the very high-quality library at the Maidenhead site. Whilst all students have access to general IT resources at both Reading and Maidenhead, specialist art and design IT facilities are only available on the Reading site. The lack of such specialised IT facilities at Maidenhead disadvantages students on the foundation and fashion courses. Because of staffing constraints, some workshops and photographic facilities at Maidenhead are not always accessible to students. There are plans to provide purpose-built accommodation for the whole school at Reading. At present, some courses at Maidenhead are housed in accommodation which is inappropriate and in very poor condition. In most areas, there are acute problems with the storage of students' work in progress.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in art and design, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate art and design and performing arts	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	29 70 75	32 78 80	49 65 66
GNVQ advanced art and design, national diplomas (performing arts, fashion, computer graphics, graphics, three-dimensional interior)	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	120 61 79	133 52 80	195 64 80
Art foundation	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	124 96 100	129 98 100	166 92 97
Higher national certificate/higher national diploma design crafts	4	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	+ + +	14 86 100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+courses not running
Note: ISR data could not be used because it is not possible to combine the ISR for the two colleges before their merger in 1997

Curriculum Areas

Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Grade 3

45   Inspectors considered that, in its self-assessment, the college had overlooked strengths in some areas, overestimated its strengths in others and had failed to identify some important weaknesses. Nine lessons and one tutorial were observed.

Key strengths

- good teaching
- good progression opportunities for students
- good work experience opportunities for students
- judicious use of accreditation
- procedures to enable students to express their views

Weaknesses

- inadequate initial assessment arrangements
- underdeveloped arrangements for reviewing progress
- underdeveloped opportunities for developing students' key skills
- little use of performance indicators and targets

46   Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is based in the faculty of education and care. There have been some significant recent staff changes in this area and the newly-constituted team is committed to addressing issues of programme development and quality assurance. In the current year, 81 full-time and seven part-time students are involved in Skills for Living, Work Preparation and GNVQ foundation programmes. A further 12 students who live in supported environments attend classes on a part-time basis, and a school links programme enables 76 special school pupils aged 14 and above to sample college activities. Most students have severe or moderate learning difficulties and/or emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most come to college from local special schools, but efforts have recently been increased to attract young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties who attend other schools in the area.

47   Programmes are flexibly arranged in order that they may meet students' individual needs. Arrangements for the initial assessment of students are weak, however, and the students' capabilities are not sufficiently taken into account in the planning of individual learning programmes. Students receive personal support through the weekly tutorial system, and the learning activities they have undertaken are recorded in their course files. However, the twice-yearly reviews which are undertaken by the personal tutor on the basis of teachers' comments, do not give a comprehensive picture of how far an individual student has developed as a result of his or her learning. Nor do they indicate appropriate action towards the achievement of the student's long-term learning goals.

48   Most teaching is good. In most lessons, students maintain a keen interest in their work. Students in a GNVQ hospitality and catering class worked enthusiastically on the preparation of shortbread. They showed awareness of health and safety issues, confidence in the use of appliances and they demonstrated their skill in measuring quantities. The teacher gave clear explanations, and used questioning effectively to introduce a new culinary technique and to prompt students to consider how temperature affects consistency. In a work preparation lesson where students were working towards Wordpower level 1, students responded positively to the opportunity to talk about local and national radio and their own and other people's listening habits. They used high-quality

materials prepared by the teacher. Teachers created a learning environment which was supportive, and students worked, where appropriate, with assistance from classroom assistants and from a sign language interpreter. The self-assessment report did not recognise that the quality of teaching was a strength. Some progress has been made in identifying how key skills can be developed in other curriculum areas and what resources will be needed, but there is more work to be done.

49   Students have many opportunities, through assignments undertaken in specialist areas within the college and through work experience, to gain vocationally relevant knowledge and experience. They have a real chance of going on to employment or further training. In 1997-98, of those students completing the GNVQ foundation course, 29% went on to a new programme in further education, and 13% went into employment. Of those completing the work preparation programme, 27% progressed to the GNVQ foundation course, 33% went to TEC training and 33% went to employment. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that progression opportunities were a strength. Work experience placements are carefully planned and effectively monitored. The college has established links with over 100 local employers ranging from charity shops to large retailers. Wherever possible, students work towards a qualification if this is suitable for their learning needs. Staff choose one for them judiciously from the range of appropriate awards available. The programme team has not yet agreed performance indicators as a means of judging achievements. Staff have not identified ways of improving some students' performance including the low retention rate on the GNVQ foundation course.

50   Teachers use some learning materials which have been carefully chosen in the light of the students' cultural backgrounds and ethnicity. Other learning materials, lesson plans and the general learning environment, however, fail to take account of the cultural diversity of the student population. The college's quality assurance arrangements are modified to reflect the particular features of this programme area. The views of students on the quality of provision are gathered and acted upon. Students can use the college's complaints procedure through the services of an advocate. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to specialist facilities throughout the college. Staff are appropriately qualified for their roles.

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

51   Inspectors agreed with the college's judgements in the self-assessment report. They found some strengths and weaknesses, however, which the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- high-quality information about the college and courses
- well-managed customer information centres
- well-conceived tutorial system
- effective diagnosis of students' learning support needs
- strong pastoral support for students

Weaknesses

- some unsatisfactory tutorial practice
- no evaluation of additional learning support
- limited social provision

52   The college has a strong commitment to providing support for students. It has made significant improvements in this area of cross-college provision since the last inspection.

53   Information available for prospective students is of high quality. There is a wide range of printed materials. Advertising media include posters, local radio and cable television. The college participates in exhibitions and publicity events, and has a summer 'roadshow' in the town centre. Advice and information are also available through an outreach worker who works with the African-Caribbean community. The college has recently appointed an adult guidance worker through a collaborative project with other partners in the town.

54   The college has created effective customer centres at its two main campuses. These are open to students and the public throughout the week, including evenings and Saturdays, to provide information, advice and guidance. Dedicated telephone lines and a freepost address ensure that students can obtain information at no cost. Staff can guide students through initial advice, enrolment, financial assistance and careers information. Staff in the customer centres receive regular briefings from curriculum specialists to keep up to date with new developments. The numbers of persons seeking advice are recorded in order to inform planning for peak periods. Targets are set for customer satisfaction and response times, and these have been consistently achieved or exceeded. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that these customer centres are a strength.

55   A tutorial entitlement for all students is described in a detailed tutor handbook. It is sufficiently sophisticated to take account of the wide range of students' needs in the college. Curriculum areas may devise their own tutorial programmes, which are then validated to ensure entitlements are met. The tutorial system is managed by a group of senior tutors. To improve shortcomings in the delivery of the entitlement, senior tutors have established a quality audit which includes observation of tutorials and an examination of documentation. Some tutorial procedures have been tightened up and made more systematic. Practices relating to timetabled tutorials, careers education and student induction vary considerably, however, and some are unsatisfactory. The self-assessment report identified induction for part-time students as a weakness. There are inadequate arrangements for the induction of students who join courses late.

56   Customer centres contain good careers resources. These are provided by an external careers service which has a comprehensive service level agreement with the college. Detailed agreements with each faculty specify the range of services and information that will be provided for students, both by careers service staff and college careers advisers. Tutors can,

therefore, tailor programmes to meet the needs of students in their groups, and take account of the careers education content of vocational programmes.

57   Learning support is provided by a team of well-qualified staff who have developed excellent diagnostic assessments at three different levels for literacy and numeracy. These test skills in a variety of ways and provide a model of good practice. Over 70% of students diagnosed as needing support take it up. The tutor is pivotal to the success of the learning support process, and there is evidence that it is working better in some areas than others. Some tutors are insufficiently rigorous in their monitoring of students' attendance in support sessions. The learning support team is based in the learning centres. These are accessible to students and contain good learning materials devised by learning support staff. Students with special learning difficulties and disabilities are well supported by specialist members of the central team. For example, hearing impaired students are assisted by communicators who work alongside them during their programmes, and provide advice to teachers on appropriate teaching and learning methods. The college has not carried out any evaluation of its services to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

58   Pastoral support for students is comprehensive. The college has a qualified counsellor. Advice on financial support is available to students through the customer centres. The access fund is supplemented by the 'principal's fund' to provide over £65,000 of assistance for needy students. Allocations are made on a means-tested basis. Students are also able to obtain loans at preferential rates and to make staged repayments. The college has a chaplaincy representing different denominations. An accommodation service is provided which is mainly used by international students.

59   There are few opportunities for students to participate in activities beyond those associated with their courses. The students' association executive is comprised exclusively of higher education student representatives. Many further education students are unaware of the association and its work, despite efforts by the higher education students to involve them in it. The president of the association is a member of the academic board and the corporation.

General Resources

Grade 2

60   Inspectors agreed with the college's overall assessment in relation to general resources but they identified one weakness which was not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths
- clear accommodation strategy
- significant refurbishment of accommodation since the last inspection
- high standards of maintenance on the Reading sites
- high-quality information and learning technology
- well-managed learning resource centres
- good monitoring of security and health and safety

Weaknesses
- poor accommodation on the Maidenhead site
- insufficient study spaces
- too much underused accommodation

61   Following the merger of the two former colleges in 1997, an appraisal of the combined building stock was commissioned. The key objectives of this appraisal were to identify ways of making the best use of space and how the

quality of accommodation might be improved. The resulting report provided the basis of the college's accommodation strategy and this is now well advanced.

62   The main building on the Kings Road campus was completed in 1955. It houses technology, education and care, and most of the school of arts and design. Other art and design programmes are currently located at the former art college's Maidenhead site. This consists of a former secondary school built in 1906 which is inappropriate for its current use. The college aims to relocate these programmes in new purpose-built accommodation on the Kings Road campus following the completion of a building project. A further site on Wokingham Road accommodates the central administration, the business faculty, and the college nursery.

63   Accommodation on the Kings Road campus has been much improved since the last inspection. It now has a well-designed reception area with a customer services centre immediately outside the college's new security entry system. A new Skills for Living Centre, designed specifically for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, provides very good facilities including specially adapted units for wheelchair users. Other major developments include the creation of the centre for the built environment, the integrated engineering centre, a software engineering centre, an open-plan 100-station IT centre, and a large well-equipped multimedia centre. Many other teaching rooms have been substantially refurbished and decorated. Inspectors agreed with the finding in the college's self-assessment report that teaching accommodation on this site is well maintained and appropriately equipped. The main building is open on Saturdays to students and members of the public wishing to use the college's IT and learning resource centres.

64   The Wokingham Road campus occupies an 8-hectare site with extensive playing fields. The main building houses the college's management and administrative functions and the faculty of business and service industries. There is a reception area which includes the college's second customer services centre. Nearby is the college nursery providing for 20 children. There has been significant investment in hairdressing and beauty therapy facilities. All teaching accommodation is fit for its purpose. There are two other buildings on the campus, both former secondary schools. One provides a well-furnished suite of rooms for the college's training company; the other is currently not used and will be vacated as part of the college's rationalisation of its accommodation.

65   On both Reading campuses, much of the accommodation for teaching staff is good, although in some areas it is cramped. Administrative support areas are also good and they are well equipped. Catering services for both staff and students have been much improved, although these still come under pressure at peak times. Both staff and students appreciate the college's security arrangements and the care taken to maintain a healthy and safe working environment. Lifts in the main building on the King's Road campus provide access to essential areas for students with restricted mobility. The proposed new building will further improve access.

66   The development and use of information and learning technology constitute a key strategic objective of the college. All college buildings have a fully integrated communication and telephone system. Every member of both teaching and support staff has a personal networked computer and electronic mail is a major means of communication. All staff and students have easy access to the internet and to the college's intranet. The college has over 600 modern computers providing a computer to student ratio of 1:7. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of machines and the technical support provided are outstanding. Students have good access to computers on both major sites. Further investment through partnerships with

major software companies has led to excellent specialist facilities including on-line staff development. The college is about to open new 'centres of excellence' in computer animation and digital technology in collaboration with another college and national and international companies.

67 The college has learning resource centres on the two Reading campuses and on the Maidenhead campus. These are well managed. The Maidenhead learning resource centre is dedicated to art and design. It has a good collection of 12,000 books, numerous periodicals, CD-ROMs and audiovisual materials. At the appropriate time, these resources will be transferred to the King's Road learning resource centres. This centre is the largest of the three and contains 47,000 books, 90 CD-ROMs and a collection of some 3,000 audiovisual materials. Building plans include the redevelopment and extension of this centre. There is also a small study centre for higher education students on this campus. The main Wokingham Road building has a smaller learning resource centre with 7,500 books, periodicals and audiovisual materials. Overall, there has been a modest increase in the number of books since the last inspection, but regular reviews of bookstock and consultation with curriculum managers ensure that most texts are relevant to the college's current provision. The learning resource centre budget for the current year is £117,000. The total of 164 study spaces is low for a college of this size.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

68 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report on quality assurance but considered that some weaknesses had been understated.

Key strengths

- well-documented quality assurance system
- rigorous internal inspection system
- rigorous internal verification
- effective complaints procedure
- effective staff appraisal and staff development procedures

Weaknesses

- incomplete implementation of quality assurance procedures
- lack of rigour in course reviews and action-planning
- insufficiently self-critical and evaluative self-assessment report

69 The college has made good progress in establishing quality assurance arrangements to meet the needs of the combined institution and to redress the absence of an effective quality assurance system in the former Berkshire College of Art and Design. The new quality assurance cycle aims to link course review, self-assessment and business planning.

70 The quality assurance system is clearly explained in the new quality assurance manual. A quality and performance manager heads an enthusiastic team of 'quality and performance' co-ordinators who have responsibilities for the organisation and implementation of the quality assurance system, and the provision of data to support it. They are representative of all areas of the college. They help to ensure that all faculties and cross-college services are fully involved in the quality assurance procedures,

comply with them and implement them with consistent thoroughness. Until recently, franchised work was not subject to the same quality assurance arrangements as the college's own provision. The college has only recently established systematic arrangements for gathering details of students' retention and pass rates from all of its collaborative providers. One of the quality and performance co-ordinators is now specifically responsible for applying the college's quality assurance process to franchised work.

71   Methods for carrying out annual course reviews have been refined and improved over the years. In 1997-98, reviews were simplified to single summaries for each curriculum and support area. Students' and sometimes employers' views are taken into account in the reviews. The quality of existing course reviews varies considerably. Some lack rigour and are insufficiently evaluative and self-critical. Many lack statistical data. Specific course retention and pass rates are seldom scrutinised, and there is no specific analysis of trends over time. Significant improvements to the review system are being introduced. An improved system of internal verification has recently been introduced following a wide-ranging pilot exercise and this is to be used on all courses.

72   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the use of performance targets has recently improved. These include performance targets for cross-college areas and targets for enrolments and students' achievements and retention rates across the college. The setting of realistic achievement targets for each level of qualification based on sector benchmarks was introduced this year. Data on students' achievements and examination results held on the central management information system have not always agreed with data held by course teams. A report identifying particularly high or low pass rates and retention rates for groups of courses has been submitted to the academic

board for the past two years. This has focused interest on ways of improving poor performance. Students' achievements and pass rates have improved on many of the courses identified in this way.

73   A number of the refinements to the quality assurance system have been introduced this year and have yet to prove their effectiveness. Some improvements are attributable to quality assurance procedures, such as the college's rigorous internal inspections and the academic board's review of courses causing concern. The quality assurance system, however, has yet to lead to significant improvements in a number of areas. In its self-assessment report, the college failed to acknowledge the extent to which the revised quality procedures have still to be implemented.

74   Students are given the opportunity to express their views on the college and its provision by answering questionnaires. Their responses to these are carefully analysed for course and service teams. Action upon students' views has led to improvements. The students' charter sets out the college's commitments to students, employers, parents and the local community. It is regularly reviewed but contains few measurable standards. The formal complaints procedure was introduced in 1997. It uses a voice-box scheme which works well. The record of complaints is analysed each term and a report is prepared for the senior management team. There are clear procedures for dealing with students' appeals on their assessments.

75   All staff are appraised annually. As noted in the self-assessment report, appraisal arrangements are well documented, effectively monitored and staff regard them positively. Appraisal helps to identify the training needs of individual staff and these are met through the staff development programme. Overall priorities for staff development are determined to meet the college's strategic objectives. For example, staff were recently trained to use the new

learning and communications networks. All teaching and support staff are confident that the college is furthering their professional development and is thereby fulfilling one of its key objectives. The college is preparing for revalidation as an Investor in People.

76 The self-assessment report was the second prepared since the merger. Most staff and all managers were involved in its production. The self-assessment review group included a governor and a TEC representative. Curriculum self-assessments were informed by many lesson observations. These were carried out according to well-defined procedures but the lesson grades awarded were, in some subjects, too generous. Lesson observations have also been used to identify additional staff development priorities. Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the curriculum and cross-college grades but found a significant number of strengths and weaknesses which differed from those identified by the college. Some sections were descriptive rather than evaluative and gave insufficient attention to teaching and learning and students' achievements.

Governance

Grade 2

77 **Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They considered that one of the weaknesses was understated.**

Key strengths
- governors' significant contribution to strategic development
- the corporation's oversight of college projects
- clear understanding and observance of the distinction between governance and management
- good administration of corporation business

- governors' close monitoring of college finances

Weaknesses
- insufficient monitoring and evaluation of academic performance

78 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

79 The merger of Reading College of Arts and Technology and Berkshire College of Art and Design necessitated the integration of both corporations, with a commensurate reduction in overall membership. This was handled sensitively and, as noted in the self-assessment report, the resulting corporation has been strengthened through the introduction of new members to serve alongside existing experienced governors. During the past 12 months the search committee of the corporation has been giving careful consideration to the implications of the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE's) 'accountability' proposals and will shortly report its recommendations to the full corporation. In recognition of the forthcoming changes, and in order to ensure a prompt transition to the new arrangements, all governor appointments made in the past year have been for one year only.

80 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the corporation has been very effective in its oversight of the strategic development of the college. Planning for a redevelopment of the Kings Road site to accommodate art and design courses relocated from Maidenhead was initiated immediately after the merger. One governor, the former chair of Berkshire College of Art and Design, has advised on the design of this

redevelopment. Governors contributed to the formulation of the strategic plan for 1997 to 2000 and have monitored progress against agreed strategic objectives as part of their annual review of the strategic plan update. As the self-assessment report acknowledged, members have taken a keen interest in college projects. They have approved the formation of a subsidiary training company and three governors serve on the board. The former chair of the corporation has chaired the steering group on a collaborative project with ICL and two other colleges, known as Cyberskills. The finance and general purposes committee has closely monitored the college's major IT developments.

81   Governors have ensured that there is an appropriate and productive relationship with senior managers. Faculty heads have been invited to present their business plans to the corporation and the assistant principal (curriculum development) has advised on self-assessment. In previous years, the chairman has conducted an annual appraisal of the principal involving the measurement of progress against agreed objectives. This process has been revised to involve the full remuneration committee.

82   There is an appropriately scheduled annual cycle of meetings for the corporation and its committees which ensures that routine business is covered within externally imposed deadlines. The corporation operates within a well-structured framework of standing orders, a code of conduct and other specific policies and procedures. A number of developments, for example the college's 'whistleblowers' charter, have taken place well in advance of advice to the sector or statutory requirements. Attendance targets for the corporation and committees are set and the clerk reports annually on progress towards reaching them. Attendance is good at an average of 80%. Clerking arrangements are good. Agendas and supporting papers are distributed to governors a

week in advance of meetings. An executive summary is provided by the clerk for lengthy agenda papers. The agenda clearly indicates whether an item is for decision or discussion. Minutes are prepared promptly, approved by the appropriate chair and distributed to all governors and members of the senior management team. Once approved, draft minutes and supporting papers are available for anyone to see in the college's learning resource centres.

83   Management accounts are provided monthly to members of the finance and general purposes committee. Other governors may also request copies but will receive the latest available set of accounts at the next corporation meeting. Governors exercise a thorough oversight of all financial activities of the college. They were instrumental in ensuring the finance team was strengthened following the merger.

84   Members of the corporation evaluate the corporation's performance annually by means of a questionnaire which they answer individually. Their responses are collated by the clerk and contribute to the governance section of the self-assessment report. They also help to identify governors' training needs. Governors have received regular reports from the principal on educational developments within the college but, as the self-assessment report acknowledged, they have not been closely involved in monitoring students' retention and achievement rates or in setting targets. A new standards committee has been established with a remit to ensure that the targets set will help the college to fulfil its objective of raising educational standards each year.

85   The audit committee operates within clear terms of reference. The committee was late in ensuring that the college's audit services were put out to tender within the timescales set out in the college's financial regulations and the FEFC's *Audit Code of Practice*, but when carried out, the tendering process was very thorough.

Management

Grade 2

86   Inspectors agreed with the findings in the self-assessment report. They found some strengths and weaknesses which the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- successful implementation of a merger
- clear management structure
- sound financial management
- achievement of mission objective through partnerships
- good communications

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped use of management information
- failure to integrate business planning fully with quality assurance
- no well-established market research

87   Under the strong leadership of the principal, the merger of Reading College of Arts and Technology with Berkshire College of Art and Design has been successfully completed. A key factor has been the development of a clear and well-understood management structure with a senior management team of four assistant principals with cross-college responsibilities, four heads of faculty covering the main curriculum areas and the director of the college's training company. The appointment of a deputy principal every two years from that team provides a good opportunity for the professional development of staff. At faculty level, the introduction of curriculum managers has been achieved effectively. Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that the college has an open style of management which is exemplified by the consultative nature of all the team meetings at all levels of management. The staff appraisal

scheme is also conducted in an open way. Staff agree clear annual objectives with their managers and progress towards reaching them is regularly monitored.

88   The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The finance team is well qualified and, between them, its members have good depth and breadth of experience. As noted in the self-assessment report, the college has maintained a strong financial position despite its merger with a financially weak college. Current financial ratios indicate that the college is significantly above the national average for general further education colleges. The corporation and senior managers have a firm commitment to prudent financial management. Both revenue and capital budget submissions by divisions are supported by detailed business plans. Comprehensive management accounts are produced monthly on a timely basis. They are clearly laid out, informative, and include a report on key financial performance indicators as well as a rolling 12-month cashflow forecast in graphical format. They are considered by the senior management team and distributed to all members of the finance and general purposes committee as well as budget holders. A version is supplied to budget holders which includes financial targets. Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that the college has been very successful in securing support from a range of major commercial and industrial companies for college initiatives such as the Digital Academy. Inspectors also agreed with the statement in the self-assessment report that although data returns to the FEFC are accurate, they tend to be late.

89   The college strategic plan has been well organised and progress in implementing it is closely monitored by the senior management team and governors. Progress in fulfilling strategic objectives is reviewed annually. A detailed budgeting model clearly links to the

college's strategic plan. The model is being revised for 1999-2000 to reflect more closely the activities of the four divisions of the college although it is not yet sufficiently developed to provide full course costing information. The self-assessment report recognised the need for closer integration of quality assurance with business planning and the college intends to achieve this in the next planning cycle.

90   Communications are very good. All teaching and support staff interviewed were well informed about the important key developments in the college. Staff valued the newsletters from the principal and heads of faculty, the quality of team meetings and, in particular, the opportunity to receive electronic mail through their own computer. Investor in People status achieved for Reading College of Arts and Technology was transferred to the new college in 1997 and it will have to achieve renewal of this by the end of 1999. Management information has been the subject of review and development since the merger. An assistant principal has oversight of a team which manages the new management information system. Each faculty has a member of staff with responsibility for management information who is a member of a cross-college group. This oversees current IT operations and plans future developments such as the pilot scheme for the use of electronic registration. Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that there is a need to ensure that the various management information reports are more easily understood by users and that appropriate action is taken on them.

91   In order to achieve its mission objectives, the college has given priority to developing partnerships, for example with two universities, and with another college, in establishing a Digital Academy to meet regional IT needs. Its strong link with Thames Valley Enterprise has led to regional government contracts to provide courses and consultancy for the needs of the computer animation industry. The self-assessment report recognised that there is a

need to establish a more systematic approach to identifying market needs and a member of staff has recently been appointed to do this. The college has established an advisory committee to help the assistant principal who is responsible for the implementation of the equal opportunities policy. The importance of equal opportunities has been acknowledged in the preparation of publicity material, in staff development events, and in the appointment of outreach staff to work with minority ethnic communities. The college has begun to review its arrangements for monitoring the effectiveness of the equal opportunities policy and the extent to which it is fully implemented.

Conclusions

92   The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report through its quality assurance system. Judgements in it were supported by clear evidence and the self-assessment report produced a sound basis for the planning and implementation of the inspection. The inspectors broadly agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified by the college for its curriculum areas and aspects of cross-college provision, although there were some differences of emphasis between the judgements in the self-assessment report and those of the inspection team. In places, the report was over-descriptive and some statements of key strengths related to activities which were no more than normal practice. Inspectors agreed with the grades for five of the six curriculum areas inspected, and with three of the grades for the five cross-college aspects of provision. Inspectors considered some poor aspects of teaching and learning in one curriculum area were more significant than the college acknowledged them to be. Inspectors felt that an identified weakness in one aspect of cross-college provision had been given insufficient weight. In a second aspect of cross-college provision there had been insufficient time for some recent improvements to demonstrate their full impact.

Cross-college Provision

93   Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	19
19-24 years	23
25+ years	56
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	23
Intermediate	36
Advanced	30
Higher education	11
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1998)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	253	1,425	14
Construction	100	582	6
Engineering	128	451	5
Business	220	2,350	22
Hotel and catering	117	227	3
Health and community care	420	2,155	21
Art and design	600	227	7
Humanities	287	2,234	21
Basic education	90	84	1
Total	2,215	9,735	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 14% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1998)

	Perm-anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	166	46	4	216
Supporting direct learning contact	61	6	1	68
Other support	117	28	1	146
Total	344	80	6	430

Source: college data, rounded to nearest full-time equivalent

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	*1996**	*1997**	*1998*
Income	£15,659,000	£15,333,000	£15,444,000
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£22.40	£21.22	£20.06
Payroll as a proportion of income	67%	67%	61%
Achievement of funding target	94%	100%	103%
Diversity of income	28%	29%	30%
Operating surplus	-£635,000	-£643,000	£110,000

Sources: Income – college (1996), Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)
ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)
Payroll – college (1996), Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)
Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
Diversity of income – college (1996), Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)
Operating surplus – college (1996), Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)
*combined data for the two pre-merger colleges

FEFC Inspection Report 103/99