

Strode College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

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Contents

Paragraph

Summary

Context

The college and its mission	1
The inspection	6

Curriculum areas

Science, mathematics and computing	8
Business	13
Health and social care	18
Art and design, media and performing arts	23

Cross-college provision

Support for students	28
General resources	35
Quality assurance	39
Governance	49
Management	58
Conclusions	66

College statistics

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.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report.* Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.
Sample size: 122 college inspections

Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

Summary

Strode College

South West Region

Inspected January 1998

Strode College is a tertiary college in Street, Somerset. The college produced its first self-assessment report for the inspection. Staff were trained in preparation for self-assessment and were fully involved in the process. The self-assessment report is clear, concise and evaluative. In several areas the college has already taken action to address weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team agreed with most of the judgements it contains. Some strengths and some weaknesses were omitted.

The college offers a broad range of provision in nine of the 10 FEFC programme areas. Work in four of these areas was inspected. Most of the teaching is of a high standard. The college has a very good record of students' achievements. There are some outstanding GCE A level pass rates and the college is well placed in the Department for Education and Employment's national performance tables for vocational qualifications. The executive management team provides clear strategic direction. Students are very well supported by personal tutors. Learning support and adult guidance are effective. There have been significant developments in the use of information technology for staff and students including the establishment of a high-quality learning centre.

The college should: improve student retention in some subjects; strengthen operational target-setting; improve aspects of quality assurance; clarify the responsibilities and operation of corporation committees; and improve the quality of some temporary accommodation.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	1	Support for students	1
Business	2	General resources	2
Health and social care	2	Quality assurance	2
Art and design, media and performing arts	1	Governance	2
		Management	1

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Strode College opened as a tertiary college in 1973 in Street, central Somerset. The college operates from one main site which it shares with a school for pupils aged 11 to 16.

The campus also includes the Strode Theatre, run by the college, and a swimming pool and youth centre which are separately managed. The college provides education and training at three prisons in the region, and programmes away from the main site in collaboration with other providers. Major local employers include a footwear company, local government and the college itself. There is also a range of small or medium-sized organisations concerned with leather manufacturing, retailing, agriculture, defence-related work, engineering, plastics, electronics, tourism and leisure. The county is more dependent on agriculture and manufacturing than the country as a whole. The unemployment rate in Somerset is 3.4 per cent compared with 3.8 per cent for the south west region and 4.8 per cent for the United Kingdom (October 1997 figures).

2 The college maintains close links with six local schools for pupils aged 11 to 16. The nearest school sixth forms are in Cheddar (16 miles) and Wells (eight miles). Most of the college's students live in an area bounded by Cheddar, Langport and Wincanton. The nearest further education colleges are in Bridgwater (12 miles) and Yeovil (16 miles).

3 In November 1997, the total number of students was 5,183, of whom 971 were studying full time. Collaborative arrangements with other providers of training, mainly in Somerset and Devon, involved over 1,200 part-time students. There were over 1,600 enrolments in non-vocational adult education and youth activities in partnership with Somerset County Council. Strode College is an associate college of Bath Spa University College and offers teacher training and social science degree programmes. The college also contracts with Somerset

Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) to provide youth training. In January 1998, the college employed 200 full-time equivalent staff including 111 full-time equivalent teachers. The college's average level of funding per unit of activity for 1997-98 is £17.98 per unit. The average for all colleges is £17.00 per unit and £16.72 per unit for general further education and tertiary colleges.

4 The college offers courses in nine of the 10 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas, the exception being construction. In summer 1997, the management of the college was restructured. There is now an executive management team of four directors reporting to the principal. Courses are managed and delivered by five teaching teams and a team responsible for prison education.

5 The college's mission statement is to serve the economic and social needs of the community by providing a centre of excellence for education and training, and promoting lifelong learning through individual care, guidance and personal achievement. Amongst its strategic objectives are: to increase participation rates in further education and training; to expand opportunities for flexible learning and the use of information technology (IT); and to widen access to further education for disadvantaged groups.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in the week beginning 19 January 1998. The inspection team had previously examined the college's self-assessment report. The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 which were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected approximately two months before the inspection. This included work in four curriculum areas: science, mathematics and IT; business; health and social care; and art and design. The curriculum areas not inspected were: engineering; hairdressing and beauty therapy; hospitality, catering, leisure, sport and tourism; humanities; basic skills; and courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The inspection was carried out by 13 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 46 days. Seventy lessons were observed, and samples of students' work and a variety of college documents were examined. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students.

7 Of the lessons inspected, 77 per cent were judged to be good or outstanding. This is well

above the average of 61 per cent for all lessons observed in 1996-97 according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*.

Four per cent of lessons were less than satisfactory. The average level of attendance was 82 per cent, compared with an average of 77 per cent for all colleges in 1996-97 recorded in the same report. The following table shows the grades awarded to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	8	12	4	0	0	24
GNVQ	0	2	2	1	0	5
NVQ	1	2	1	0	0	4
Other vocational	8	5	3	1	0	17
Other*	3	13	3	1	0	20
Total	20	34	13	3	0	70

*includes GCSE

Curriculum Areas

Science, Mathematics and Computing

Grade 1

8 The inspection included general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) courses in science, mathematics and computing, and the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) course in mathematics. Eighteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with most of the conclusions in the self-assessment report. A few weaknesses were understated, for example some unsatisfactory retention rates.

Key strengths

- much successful teaching
- well-organised courses and well-planned lessons
- effective learning support
- some outstanding GCE A level examination pass rates
- high-quality science laboratories
- high standard in coursework and practical work
- a good range of appropriate learning materials

Weaknesses

- low retention levels on two courses
- a narrow range of provision in computing

9 Lessons are well planned. Detailed schemes of work and schedules of assessment are used by all staff. The self-assessment report had insufficient comments on teaching and learning. Over 70 per cent of the lessons observed by inspectors were outstanding or good. In most science lessons, the teaching techniques are effective. As identified in the self-assessment report, insufficient use is made of IT, particularly in the teaching of statistics. In

a minority of lessons, not all students were involved in class discussions. Teachers provide effective learning support. There are informal arrangements to provide extra help where needed. Students' progress is carefully monitored. Homework and periodic tests are set and marked regularly. Helpful written feedback is given to students. Science practical work is carried out efficiently with due regard for health and safety.

10 The self-assessment report identified some, but not all, of the strengths found by inspectors in the quality of students' work. Students work well by themselves and in groups. In science, practical skills and written work are of a high standard. Computing students produce good-quality project work. In mathematics, students showed an appropriate level of understanding and displayed appropriate algebraic skills. Examination pass rates in GCE A level mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology are outstanding. In 1997, they were well above the national pass rate for sixth forms as well as that for further education colleges. The proportion of students achieving grades A to C is also high. Retention rates are good except in biology. This weakness is not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. The value-added analysis adopted by the college indicates that most students are performing at GCE A level at least as well as would be predicted on the basis of their GCSE results. In 1997, pass rates for GCSE mathematics at grade C or above were slightly above the national rate for 16 to 18 year olds in further education colleges and substantially above the rate for students aged 19 and over. Retention rates in mathematics were poor for the 16 to 18 year olds. Retention was also poor for the small numbers taking general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced level science, which has now been discontinued.

11 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that science and mathematics courses are well managed. Helpful course handbooks are

Curriculum Areas

provided for science students. Students evaluate their courses on a regular basis. All full-time students take a basic computer literacy course. There is a narrow range of computing courses but plans are in hand to introduce new courses in the next academic year. There is a successful science society, which is run by the students. Some science students benefit from work experience.

12 All full-time and part-time teachers have relevant degrees; most have teaching qualifications, and some hold appropriate assessor awards. Technical staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. They provide good support for teaching. The science laboratories have been refurbished within the last few years and provide a bright and well-furnished learning environment. In addition to specialist equipment, each laboratory is equipped with a personal computer and audiovisual facilities. The laboratories for GCE A level computer studies have adequate hardware and software. Considerable effort has gone into the production of some good-quality

learning materials, for example, the study booklet for GCSE mathematics. The learning centre has a good range of reference books in science.

Examples of students' achievements in science, mathematics and computing, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level biology	Retention (%)	66	88	59
	Pass rate (%)	72	92	100
GCE A level chemistry	Retention (%)	56	84	77
	Pass rate (%)	96	96	96
GCE A level computing	Retention (%)	69	64	86
	Pass rate (%)	73	89	92
GCE A level mathematics	Retention (%)	78	80	84
	Pass rate (%)	82	100	90
GCE A level physics	Retention (%)	47	79	93
	Pass rate (%)	92	96	100
GCSE mathematics	Retention (%)	38	56	55
	Pass rate (%)	39	35	43

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 2

13 The inspection included GNVQ business programmes, GCE A level business studies and accounting, GCSE accounting and business studies and several national vocational qualification (NVQ) programmes. Thirteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. A few strengths and weaknesses were understated or omitted. Lesson observations were not used by the college to provide evidence for its judgements on teaching and learning.

Key strengths

- well-planned and well-managed courses
- good teaching in most lessons
- good pass rates on many courses
- well-designed course assignments
- high-quality computers

Weaknesses

- excessive note-taking in some lessons
- low pass or retention rates on a minority of courses
- study skills of some students insufficiently developed

14 The self-assessment report makes few judgements on teaching and learning. Many of the lessons observed by inspectors were well planned and well managed. Previous learning was effectively reinforced and there was some particularly stimulating discussion on the relationships between business topics and contemporary economic and social issues. However, in a few lessons students spent too much time copying down notes and teachers missed opportunities to present the material

graphically or in other interesting ways. In some vocational classes, teachers helped students to work together effectively.

Intermediate level students co-operated with each other well in a mixed group which included several students with learning difficulties. In many lessons, teachers succeeded, through skilful questioning, in eliciting responses from less confident students. Most students undertake suitable work experience. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that many course assignments are well designed, and that students' work is thoroughly marked and promptly returned. Some students have yet to develop the study skills necessary to work independently, for example, in the learning centre. Key skills are not assessed consistently; this weakness is recognised in the self-assessment report.

15 Courses are generally well planned and managed. Staff meet regularly and detailed minutes are kept. Close attention is paid to tracking students' progress. Course management arrangements have been strongly endorsed by external verifiers. The self-assessment report claims that there are strong links with local employers. However, this is not the case for new courses such as the national diploma in public services. There are few links with partner schools related directly to the business curriculum.

16 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that there are good working relationships between staff and students. Most staff are well qualified. Some are examiners or assessors in their subjects and many have assessor awards. In a few areas their industrial experience is limited or dated. Few staff who teach on the national diploma in public services have recent relevant experience. Resources, including IT resources, are generally good. The self-assessment report omits some strengths concerning resources. For example, NVQ accounting students are able to move freely

Curriculum Areas

between classrooms and computer rooms where they can put theory into practice using accountancy software packages.

accounting and management. Most business students get jobs or progress to other courses in further or higher education.

17 Pass rates on many courses exceed national rates and some are very high. However, retention rates are low on some courses. In GCE A level business studies, for example, overall pass rates and the percentages of higher grade passes (A to C) have recently been much higher than the national rate for further education colleges. However, retention rates have been low, for example, 67 per cent for full-time students in 1997. Retention was not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report although action to improve retention is included in the action plan. In 1997, all GNVQ intermediate students completed and passed the course. Pass rates for GCSE accounting have exceeded the national rate for further education colleges. Results for RSA Examinations Board single subject examinations in secretarial skills generally equal and sometimes exceed the national rate for further education colleges. NVQ pass and retention rates are good in administration,

Examples of students' achievements in business, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	76	97	48
	Pass rate (%)	80	97	88
GNVQ intermediate	Retention (%)	82	86	100
	Pass rate (%)	75	75	100
GNVQ foundation	Retention (%)	80	89	78
	Pass rate (%)	60	75	100
GCE A level accounting and business studies	Retention (%)	79	77	73
	Pass rate (%)	82	90	95
GCSE accounting and business studies	Retention (%)	86	63	82
	Pass rate (%)	100	70	89
NVQ	Retention (%)	83	89	85
	Pass rate (%)	57	79	76

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Health and Social Care

Grade 2

18 The inspection covered child, health and social care including collaborative provision for counselling and first-aid courses.

Eighteen lessons were observed. Inspectors confirmed some of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, several strengths and weaknesses related to teaching, learning, students' achievements, curriculum organisation and curriculum management are not identified in the report.

Key strengths

- effective teaching
- good use made of students' experiences to support learning
- work experience well integrated with other aspects of the curriculum
- useful extra-curricular activities
- good students' achievements
- most students progressing to employment or to further or higher education

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to key skills
- learning objectives not made clear to students in some lessons
- weaknesses in the assessment of practical skills in collaborative provision
- a minority of lessons in unsuitable accommodation

19 Teachers use appropriate teaching methods which enable students to develop and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills. In the majority of lessons, good use is made of individual students' experiences to extend the knowledge and understanding of the group as a whole. Marking and grading are carried out accurately. Constructive comments

on marked work enable students to improve. All courses contain an element of work experience which is well organised and integrated with other aspects of the curriculum, enabling students to make links between theory and practice. Inspectors agreed with the college that work experience is a strength, but the self-assessment report does not include judgements on any other aspects of teaching and learning. Courses are well structured and the majority of lessons are effectively planned. However, schemes of work and lesson plans do not make clear how and when key skills will be developed. In a minority of lessons, the learning objectives are not made clear to the students. In the collaborative provision, the students' experience is not used to reinforce learning and in a minority of lessons, practical techniques are not properly assessed. These weaknesses are not identified in the self-assessment. There are opportunities for students to participate in sporting activities and events in the student-run family centre. Some students have visited India and have benefited from their experience of the caring professions in a different culture.

20 The pass rates on all courses are in line with or above national rates for further education colleges. At foundation level, students' achievements are outstanding; 100 per cent pass rates have been achieved on GNVQ health and social care. Changes made to the admissions process, attendance monitoring and course provision are contributing to improved retention rates on advanced level courses. In their oral and written work, students demonstrate levels of knowledge, understanding and skills which are appropriate to the level of the course. Written work is well presented. The majority of students on child, health and social care courses progress to employment, or to other courses in further or higher education. There are no evaluations of students' achievements in the self-assessment report.

21 As part of the college restructuring process the management of this programme area has

Curriculum Areas

recently undergone change and a new head of team has been appointed. Changes to the childcare courses have attracted an increased number of students and provided progression opportunities from level 1 to level 3. Lines of responsibility are clear. Course teams work in a co-ordinated manner and use effective systems for recording and tracking students' progress.

22 All teaching staff have appropriate specialist qualifications and experience. The majority of staff have direct experience of work in child, health or social care and use this experience to enhance the quality of their teaching by relating theory to work practices. Most of the accommodation is satisfactory, but inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that a minority of accommodation is not appropriate for the classes using it. Students value the facilities available to them for private study in the newly-opened learning centre.

Examples of students' achievements in health and social care, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced child, health and social care courses	Retention (%)	*	57	76
	Pass rate (%)	*	80	97
Intermediate child, health and social care courses	Retention (%)	93	85	78
	Pass rate (%)	45	41	80
GNVQ foundation	Retention (%)	**	83	80
	Pass rate (%)	**	60	100

Source: college data

*incomplete data

**course did not run

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design, Media and Performing Arts

Grade 1

23 Inspectors observed 21 lessons covering a range of art and design, media and performing arts courses. They found the self-assessment report for art and design to be clear and comprehensive and agreed with many of the judgements. Since it was written, some elements of the action plan have been implemented addressing weaknesses identified by the college.

Key strengths

- high standards in teaching and learning
- effectively-managed and well-planned curriculum
- thorough assignment briefs and records of assessment
- much students' work of a very good standard
- good progression rates to higher education
- well-planned, good-quality accommodation
- high-quality specialist equipment

Weaknesses

- poor retention of students aged 19 or over on a small number of courses
- some unsatisfactory temporary accommodation

24 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the standards of teaching and learning are high. Teachers use a variety of teaching methods. Interaction between teachers and students is lively, and includes plenty of debate about students' ideas. Students are well informed about the aims and objectives of lessons and assignments. Teachers keep

comprehensive records of students' progress, and provide good written feedback on their work. Assignment briefs are of a high standard on national diploma courses and clearly incorporate the development of key skills. Students on all courses understand the tasks that are required of them and the criteria by which they will be assessed. Teaching and learning in art and design are enhanced by study visits to London, Paris and Amsterdam. Courses in the performing arts benefit from the presence on campus of the Strode Theatre and the adjacent studio space. The theatre is also a British Film Institute regional film theatre and is a valuable resource for students studying film and media.

25 The self-assessment report describes students' work as outstanding. Inspectors agreed. Much of the coursework is highly accomplished and achievement rates are high in many areas. National diploma general art and design students make imaginative responses to challenging assignment briefs, and are articulate in group discussions of their own and each others' work. Students on this course achieved a pass rate of 94 per cent in 1997. Students on the first diploma in performing arts achieved a pass rate of 89 per cent in 1997, with an 88 per cent retention rate. This compares with a national average across all programme areas of 61 per cent for 1996 for intermediate level courses other than GNVQs. Most students who successfully complete advanced level vocational courses progress to a range of well-regarded higher education courses. Retention rates are generally satisfactory or good, but inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that retention on a small number of courses for students aged over 18 is poor.

26 The curriculum is effectively organised and managed. Staff work together successfully in teams. Teaching is effectively planned. There are comprehensive lesson plans, schemes of work and assignment briefs. Full-time and part-time students are taught together, an

Curriculum Areas

experience they find stimulating and academically rewarding. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that the range of learning opportunities available to students is a strength. It meets the needs of different age groups. Opportunities for part-time students include a national certificate in performing arts and a number of GCSE, GCE A level and City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) courses. Full-time students can enrich their courses with a variety of additional vocational units in the arts.

specialist equipment, including dedicated art and design computing resources, but there are not enough specialist books in the learning centre.

27 Specialist resources in the programme area are of a high standard, although little reference is made to them in the self-assessment. The teaching and support staff cover a wide range of relevant disciplines and are effectively deployed. Many staff are practising professionals in their fields. Most teachers hold teaching qualifications; some have masters degrees. Staff work effectively as cohesive teams. They give effective specialist advice and guidance on higher education and careers. There is some high-quality, purpose-built accommodation. Some of the temporary accommodation is unsatisfactory. Students benefit from good

Examples of students' achievements in art and design, media and performing arts, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level theatre studies	Retention (%)	93	100	100
	Pass rate (%)	62	71	100
National diplomas in media and performing arts (students aged 19 or over)	Retention (%)	37	53	55
	Pass rate (%)	86	100	67
National diplomas in general art and design (all ages and modes of study)	Retention (%)	92	59	78
	Pass rate (%)	100	92	94
First diploma in performing arts	Retention (%)	88	80	89
	Pass rate (%)	86	100	88

Source: college data

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 1

28 The college's self-assessment report on support for students is detailed and the judgements it contains are clear. Appropriate action is identified to address weaknesses. There was a close correlation between inspection judgements and those in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- strong links with partner schools and effective admissions procedures
- effective educational guidance service for adults
- the reviewing of students' progress by tutors
- guidance and support for future careers and educational choices
- high-quality nursery provision
- support for students with disabilities
- testing for, and provision of, learning support

Weaknesses

- some inconsistent implementation of induction procedures
- some varying standards of tutorial support

29 The college works closely with its partner schools. For each school there is a link member of college staff. There is a programme of 'taster' visits to the college for year-10 pupils. Publicity materials are comprehensive and widely distributed. The college organises open days and encourages informal visits. Admissions procedures are well established and thorough. Full-time students are interviewed when they apply and again following the summer examination results. Impartial advice and guidance is provided. The educational guidance

service for adults responds successfully to the needs of adults, including those in groups traditionally under-represented in further education.

30 All full-time students follow a programme of induction to the college and to their chosen course. There is a successful induction fair which students value. The policy statement for induction includes helpful guidelines for personal tutors, who are free to vary the content to meet the needs of students. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that induction is generally effective but that there is some inconsistency of approach across the college.

31 All full-time students have a personal tutor. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that there are many strengths in its tutorial provision but also that the tutorial system needs to be implemented more consistently. Students value the support offered to them by their tutors, who carry out regular, effective individual progress review meetings with their students. There is also a weekly group tutorial of at least one hour on all timetables. On some courses, including GCE A levels, additional units on learning skills and career planning are included in the tutorial programme and form the basis of action-planning. On a few courses there is insufficient planning of tutorial programmes and a lack of support materials for tutors. Tutorial support for part-time students is appropriately geared to the nature of the courses and the students' needs. Part-time students expressed satisfaction with the level and nature of support they receive.

32 There are considerable strengths in learning support for students as noted in the college's self-assessment report. The college has developed appropriate procedures for the identification of learning support needs. In line with its commitment to inclusive learning, there are high levels of support for students with disabilities on all courses. All full-time and

Cross-college Provision

some part-time students take appropriate diagnostic tests during induction. Personal tutors are responsible for ensuring that students meet with curriculum support tutors to develop an action plan. Personal tutors are also responsible for monitoring individual students' attendance at learning support activities. As a result, attendance rates are high. All full-time students have designated curriculum support time on their timetables and can seek additional support if they, or their tutors, feel it would be helpful. In its self-assessment report, the college recognised the need to raise awareness of support as an entitlement for all students.

33 College careers staff work in co-operation with two advisers from Somerset Careers Limited; together, they provide ample opportunities for all students to obtain individual and group careers guidance and education. There is a well-developed system, involving individual interviews and visits to institutions, for students who are considering progressing to higher education.

34 The student services team includes a qualified counsellor, who also offers guidance on accommodation and benefits. The counsellor makes referrals to appropriate external agencies. Counselling facilities are meeting the current level of need. There is a nursery for children aged two-and-a-half to five years. Parents appreciate the quality of care it provides. They also value the financial support and encouragement given by the student support manager. The student association actively and enthusiastically represents the interests of students. It is supported by team and college forums for raising and responding to issues. Wheelchair access and refectory facilities are aspects of provision which have been improved after consultation using these channels. Students are encouraged to articulate their views and develop their independence by the activities of the student support worker, who involves herself closely in student life.

General Resources

Grade 2

35 Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report. However, a number of weaknesses were overlooked. The action plan identifies the key issues, some of which flow from the strategic plan rather than the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective management and maintenance of the college estate
- high-quality learning centre
- good progress in making the college accessible to wheelchair users
- good use made of the theatre and the sports hall
- refurbished and extended refectory
- improved working areas for teaching staff

Weaknesses

- poor standard of some temporary accommodation
- insufficient quiet study space within the learning centre
- deficiencies in the sports hall facilities

36 The college, based on one site, is part of a community campus which is shared by a school, a swimming pool and a youth centre. The most recent building programme, completed in the summer of 1997, illustrates the college's strategy to invest in IT resources and accommodation in order to support new ways of teaching and learning. It consists of a refurbished two-storey learning centre offering high-quality facilities including a library, new IT and multimedia learning resources and facilities for careers guidance and learning support. During term time, the learning centre is open until late on weekday evenings and all day on Saturdays.

Cross-college Provision

During vacations it is open with reduced hours. There are 74 computers linked to an advanced network. At present many, but not all, staff are helping their students to make good use of the new facilities. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the learning centre is a significant strength, but also agreed that there is a need for related staff training. The head of learning resources supports staff in the use of information and learning technology. The networked computers give access to up-to-date software and CD-ROMs. internet access is available on two computers and is shortly to be extended to 30 workstations. The current provision of workstations throughout the college is adequate to meet students' needs, except at occasional peak times in the learning centre. Within the learning centre, there is adequate space for group work but insufficient quiet study space.

37 Most of the college's general classroom accommodation is of a satisfactory standard, clean and well maintained. There is a small proportion of very good general teaching rooms in permanent buildings. The quality of temporary hatted accommodation varies. Some huts are well appointed, fit for their purpose and adapted for flexible use. Those used for health and care courses have attractive displays. A minority of the huts are of poor quality. For example, some of those used by business and public services students are unwelcoming, poorly equipped and lack relevant displays. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that good progress has been made in providing access to its accommodation for wheelchair users. Whilst obstacles remain, no wheelchair user is denied access to any part of the college's specialist provision or main services. The college's estate is being effectively maintained and developed. Where possible, economies of scale are achieved by co-operating with the adjacent school. Room allocation is now centrally managed. Utilisation data are beginning to inform strategic planning. The college is aware from its data there is scope to

make more efficient use of its space. Some temporary huts have been taken out of service; others are due to follow.

38 New working areas with integrated computing facilities have improved staff accommodation and made communication easier. Business support staff are appropriately located, although some of the shared office accommodation in the information centre is cramped. The college refectory, recently refurbished, provides a good facility. The amount of seating has been increased and it has become easier for people in wheelchairs to use. A bar service is available when the theatre is in use. College students and members of the community make full use of the theatre, which hosts visiting companies. The well-used sports hall is also a focus for community as well as college sport. Because of its age, the fabric of the sports hall is deteriorating, although much of its equipment is serviceable. The hall lacks some important facilities, such as changing rooms, lockers or a reception area.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

39 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements about quality assurance in the college's self-assessment report. Some weaknesses were omitted, and others were already being addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- thorough course reviews
- effective student consultation procedures
- well-maintained course management files
- effective and well-monitored internal verification
- clear links between appraisal, staff development and strategic priorities
- thorough self-assessment process

Cross-college Provision

Weaknesses

- absence of quality targets set by governors
- underdeveloped links between strategic planning and quality assurance
- lack of service standards for support services
- lack of monitoring of charter commitments
- insufficient self-assessment of teaching and learning

40 The college has demonstrated its commitment to quality assurance by creating management and supporting posts with responsibilities in this area. The policy for quality assurance has recently been revised. It includes arrangements for the observation and grading of lessons, using the quality statements set out in the FEFC's inspection framework. These developments have raised the awareness of quality assurance issues among staff. At the time of inspection the new quality assurance policy had not been approved by the academic board or the corporation. Quality assurance procedures have not been collated in a single document for convenient reference.

41 The corporation scrutinises the clear and detailed information it receives about students' examination performance and final destinations. On occasions it has investigated the reasons for unsatisfactory examination results. It does not set standards and targets which would enable it to monitor improvements in quality. The outcomes of the quality assurance processes are not closely linked to the strategic planning processes.

42 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that course review is thorough and effective. Termly course review meetings between staff and student representatives provide information for annual course reports. Minutes of these meetings are passed to the quality manager. Performance statistics are

included and commented on. Action points are set for the coming year, but there are few comments on the achievement of the previous year's action points. Course managers complete the review forms conscientiously. The reviews are discussed at meetings of teaching teams. These are attended by the quality manager and at least two members of the executive. Improvements have resulted from the course review process. For example, study skills have been introduced into courses at foundation and intermediate level.

43 Students are encouraged to express their views about the college. Student questionnaires used by some course managers have revealed valuable information about the quality of teaching. Students express their views on recruitment and induction by completing a detailed questionnaire in the first term. Issues are also raised at student forum meetings. At these meetings, different groups of students are invited for different purposes. They may include all the students on a single course, the student representatives from a group of courses, or all the student representatives in the college. College forums are attended by the principal. Students confirmed that the college acts on issues raised at the forums.

44 The college has effective systems to ensure fair and consistent assessment, and for student appeals. Internal verification is monitored by the quality manager. Responsibility for internal verification and for the implementation of external verifiers' recommendations is clear. There is an effective procedure to respond to external verifiers' reports. There are appropriate quality assurance arrangements for off-site collaborative provision. The college quality manager observes lessons, samples students' course evaluations and acts as an internal verifier. Bi-monthly review meetings are held between the college and off-site providers to discuss the quality manager's findings and the results of the providers' course monitoring systems.

Cross-college Provision

45 The college's charter makes commitments to students, their parents and employers. It covers many issues, but contains few measurable standards. The college has recently improved the complaints procedure. Responses to complaints are monitored by the quality manager. Most complaints are resolved within the 10-day limit specified in the charter. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that charter commitments are not effectively monitored, and that support services lack service standards. There are insufficient opportunities to express views about the standards of service provided by support services. The personnel section carries out a thorough annual evaluation of its activities, but this good practice does not extend to other areas.

46 Inspectors agreed with the college's positive assessment of the staff appraisal system. All full-time and part-time teaching and support staff are appraised every two years, and have a review meeting in the intervening year. Appraisal of teachers generally includes lesson observation, although this is not a requirement of the system. Individuals' staff development needs are identified during appraisal and the staff development manager monitors the outcomes in order to identify needs which are common to several staff. Staff development needs are prioritised according to college strategic objectives. Staff have confidence in the appraisal and development system. They feel that it provides valuable feedback on their performance and enables their training needs to be identified and met. Induction procedures for new staff are also effective. In 1996 the college achieved the Investor in People award.

47 The college produced its first self-assessment report for the inspection. Staff were trained in the self-assessment process. Standard forms, based on headings in Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*, were used to collect information from course managers. Curriculum managers

aggregated these reports into self-assessments for each programme area. Cross-college sections were written by members of the executive team. In each case they consulted members of staff. The chair of the corporation wrote the section on governance which was based on the findings of a governors' working party. The self-assessment process was thorough. Staff were fully involved in the process and valued it. Some staff felt that the aggregation of information provided by course teams changed the emphasis of some of their judgements. No one from outside the college was involved in the self-assessment. Staff with responsibility for quality assurance scrutinised the draft report and discussed amendments with relevant managers. Grades proposed by curriculum managers were moderated by the executive team. The final report was approved by the academic board and the corporation before submission to the FEFC.

48 The self-assessment report is clear, concise and evaluative although it contains relatively few judgements on the quality of teaching and learning. The introduction contains a brief profile of the college, an explanation of recent developments and information on the self-assessment process. Each section is clearly laid out, with an introduction, strengths and weaknesses supported by evidence, an action plan, a statement of strategic priorities and a commentary on the proposed grade. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary. Action plans attribute responsibilities and establish timescales. In several areas, actions were completed in the time between the writing of the self-assessment report and the inspection week.

Cross-college Provision

Governance

Grade 2

49 Governors have played an important role in the successful development of the college. The inspection confirmed many of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, some weaknesses were omitted or were underestimated, and some strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- extensive experience of business and community involvement
- preparedness to take difficult decisions in the interests of the college
- well-prepared minutes and papers
- code of conduct and ethics in place
- governors constructively addressing self-assessment
- governors actively involved in college life

Weaknesses

- lack of clarity in the operation of some committees
- lack of standing orders for the conduct of meetings
- governors' limited financial accounting expertise on the finance and general purposes committee
- incomplete monitoring of policies

50 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. Some weaknesses in procedures were identified, for example there are no standing orders to govern

the conduct of corporation and committee meetings. Although some compensating arrangements are in place such as detailed terms of reference for each committee, addressing the weaknesses identified will enhance the governance of the college.

51 Governors actively promote the college's interests in the community and are actively involved in college life. Many hold senior positions in industry and are influential in the local community. The gradual introduction of new members has provided fresh insights and experience. The self-assessment report noted that new governors were not receiving sufficient induction to their duties. As a result, a formal induction process for new governors has been introduced.

52 The self-assessment report acknowledged the need to review the activities of the corporation committees. There is some duplication between the work of committees and the full board and a lack of clarity about where responsibility lies for financial monitoring. The finance and general purposes committee reviews management accounts and should also review the statutory year-end accounts. In fact these are reviewed by the audit committee which recommends them to the full board for approval. The board does not receive minutes or written reports from the audit committee. The finance and general purposes committee members have limited financial accounting expertise. The board has begun to address this weakness. The newly-appointed chair of audit, who is an accountant, and the director of finance and corporate services are to provide members with training in understanding accounts.

53 The college's director of finance and corporate services, who has substantial experience of committee work, acts as clerk to the board and most of its committees. Despite the separate job description for the role of clerk, there is a potential risk of conflict in this arrangement. Papers for meetings are well prepared and presented in good time. Minutes

Cross-college Provision

are sufficiently detailed and decisions are clearly recorded. The board has established a code of conduct and of ethics. There is a register of interests, but this is not complete. Senior managers attend board and committee meetings and frequently present useful reports. There are regular meetings between the chair of the corporation and the principal.

54 The governance section of the self-assessment report was informed by the findings of a governors' working party which examined the board's effectiveness. Its recommendations have been agreed by the board and a second report is being prepared. Governors have discussed, but not yet implemented, performance indicators for evaluating their own performance.

55 Governors have played an important role in the successful development of the college. Following the appointment of the new principal, the management structure has undergone significant changes. The board approved the revised management structure, endorsed the loss of a number of permanent posts and contributed to the appointment of staff in the new structure. Last year for the first time, members of the corporation took part in the initial discussion relating to the strategic plan although the production of the plan was largely the work of senior managers. The governors considered and approved the final draft.

56 Governors regularly discuss aspects of the college's performance. For example, they scrutinise examination results. The systematic monitoring of all aspects of performance is still being developed. For example, governors have begun to compare the college's retention rates with those for the further education sector as a whole.

57 The board's monitoring of college policies is incomplete. For example, although the college's health and safety statement is regularly updated and approved by the board, reporting on implementation of the policy is not

systematic. Similarly, there are no arrangements for regular reporting to governors on the implementation of the college's equal opportunities policy.

Management

Grade 1

58 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. A few weaknesses were not identified or were not given sufficient emphasis. Many of the weaknesses identified by the college are being addressed.

Key strengths

- clear strategic direction from executive management team
- new organisational structures resulting in improvements
- good financial management
- clearly-defined staff roles and responsibilities
- effective links with partner schools and external organisations
- effective communications

Weaknesses

- over-reliance on informal recording of executive meetings
- lack of detail in some operational and management targets

59 The executive management team, comprising the principal and four executive directors, is providing clear strategic direction for the college. There has been a consistently high level of students' achievements in recent years. In the nine months before the inspection there were a number of changes with a view to improving the operational efficiency of the college. The management structure was reorganised, ready for September 1997, into five

Cross-college Provision

teaching teams. Staff consider the new arrangements to be an improvement. Curriculum management has been strengthened. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities. They are well supported by their line managers. Management communications are effective and use various media including electronic mail. The executive places considerable emphasis on close team working. They meet regularly as a team. Progress in completing agreed action is reviewed in regular individual meetings with the principal. Each director keeps a record of agreed action but there is an over-reliance on informal records of executive decisions.

60 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The finance team includes a qualified accountant and an appropriate number of experienced staff. The financial forecast and the strategic plan are integrated. Management accounts are produced within 10 working days of the month end and are closely monitored. Internal and external auditors have not identified any significant weaknesses in the college's system of internal control. The work of the internal audit service substantially complies with audit standards. Budget holders receive detailed monthly information which shows both actual and committed expenditure. Management information relating to recently delegated part-time teaching budgets is being developed.

61 Strategic planning has for some years involved contributions from curriculum managers. Staff consultation leading to the current strategic plan started before the recent management restructure. Clear consultation on changes to the management structure accompanied work on the new strategic plan which had to be produced quickly to reflect the proposed strategic changes. College managers have a clear sense of strategic objectives and their role within them. Some operational and

management targets and performance indicators are expressed in general terms with insufficient detail to enable effective monitoring. Teaching and other teams have produced development plans with more detail.

62 Changes to learning methods have resulted in a standard number of teaching hours for every course. There is an increased emphasis on IT. These changes were introduced in September 1997, to the concern of some staff and students, particularly those returning to the second year of their courses. These difficulties have been largely resolved following further consultation with students and staff. The benefits of the changes which have been developed from a strong base are becoming increasingly apparent.

63 As indicated in the self-assessment report the college has very good links with its partner schools and with many community organisations. It responds well to initiatives from other agencies. The college is developing a number of TEC and European Social Fund projects and there is increasing collaboration with employers and other education and training providers. A growing number of college courses are being provided in isolated villages to meet the needs of the rural community.

64 The self-assessment report draws attention to the underdevelopment of the management information systems. However, since the report was written considerable improvements have been made to the accuracy of student tracking information, and a new management information strategy has been developed. This defines the information which is being made available at all levels within the college to monitor students and to inform college planning and management control. A single database and network has been installed to provide this information to most staff.

65 The college has an equal opportunities policy and is active in promoting equality of opportunity in various ways. For example,

Cross-college Provision

consultation with students with disabilities has resulted in improved access to college buildings. Students with learning difficulties are included in the general life of the college. However, there is insufficient monitoring of the operation or effectiveness of the equal opportunities policy.

Conclusions

66 The self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. It is generally a frank and constructive document. Action plans are clearly laid out, and have already resulted in improvements. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths identified by the college, and found others which had not been mentioned. Some weaknesses were omitted, and some which were included were considered by inspectors to be more significant than the self-assessment report suggested. Some programme area assessments had insufficient evidence to provide secure judgements about the quality of teaching. There was insufficient quantitative information to support some of the statements about students' achievements. Nevertheless, inspectors agreed with the college's overall conclusions on the curriculum areas. Some of the college's assessments of its cross-college provision were overgenerous.

67 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 (November 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	2
16-18 years	29
19-24 years	9
25+ years	59
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	30
Intermediate	13
Advanced	23
Higher education	2
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	32
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (November 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	113	297	8
Agriculture	6	0	0
Engineering	56	66	2
Business	147	420	11
Hotel and catering	57	189	5
Health and community care	146	1,647	35
Art and design	217	563	15
Humanities	206	873	21
Basic education	23	157	3
Total	971	4,212	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (January 1998)

	Perman-ent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	64	47	0	111
Supporting direct learning contact	16	10	0	26
Other support	62	1	0	63
Total	142	58	0	200

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£5,628,000	£6,330,000	£6,286,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£19.86	£19.36	£19.98
Payroll as a proportion of income	72%	69%	70%
Achievement of funding target	107%	105%	103%
Diversity of income	25%	26%	30%
Operating surplus	-£518,000	-£335,000	-£359,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), college (1996-97)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	195	234	196
	Average point score per entry	4.8	5.8	6.0
	Position in tables	top third	top 10%	top 10%
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	143	159	151
	Percentage achieving qualification	90%	86%	88%
	Position in tables	top third	top third	top 10%
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	64	63
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	84%	73%
	Position in tables	*	top third	top third

Source: DfEE

Note: the majority of the college's students are 19 years of age or older

The achievements of these students are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

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