

Fairfield Opportunity Farm

**Inspection of FEFC-funded provision in
non-sector establishments for students with
learning difficulties and/or disabilities**

Februury 2000

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-2000**

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to secure provision for individual students in England with learning difficulties and/or disabilities where sector provision is inadequate. When it exercises this duty, the Council makes a contract with the establishment making the provision. The contract includes the right of inspection.

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 institutions 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.

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are described in Council Circulars 97/12 and 97/22. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and other aspects 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*

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Summary

Independent Establishment 10/2000

Inspection of FEFC-Funded Provision in the non-sector establishment for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Fairfield Opportunity Farm Dilton Marsh, Wiltshire

Inspected January 2000

The college is situated on a 25-acre farm in the village of Dilton Marsh near Westbury in Wiltshire. It offers residential and day provision for students with a wide range of learning difficulties. Residential accommodation is provided in five houses in the nearby village. The college's mission is 'to provide a holistic learning environment enabling students with learning disabilities to prepare for their future life'. The range of programmes includes horse studies, agriculture, engineering, horticulture, woodwork, literacy, numeracy, lifeskills and personal and social development. Some students also have the opportunity to study additional subjects at a local Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sector college. At the time of the inspection there were 27 students, of whom 18 were fully or partly funded by the FEFC. Sixteen of the FEFC-funded students had residential placements and 14 were between 16 and 18 years of age. Students benefit from opportunities to learn pre-vocational and vocational skills through practical activities. Some teachers use

imaginative methods to help students to learn. Students are making sound progress in the development of their personal, social and vocational skills. Senior managers have developed a clear rationale for the development of the college and the curriculum. Tutors and support workers know the students well and work hard to encourage them to act responsibly and to achieve to their full potential. The quality of support is good. Students have access to a range of specialist support services such as speech therapy and counselling through links which the college has developed with the community team for people with learning disabilities. Many changes have been made to the provision since the appointment of the new principal in September 1998. Much of this work is at an early stage of implementation. A good start has been made to the development of individual programmes for students but some of the objectives within these are too general. Some teachers and support workers focus too much on the completion of tasks and their planning does not take sufficient account of the information in students' individual learning programmes. The monitoring and recording of students' progress is ineffective. Links between the students' vocational programmes and the work undertaken in the houses are weak.

The self-assessment process had proved useful in helping staff to evaluate the quality of the provision in the college. Inspectors found the self-assessment report helpful in planning the inspection. Inspectors agreed with

Summary

some of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report and identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

The work funded by the FEFC was judged to be satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses and was awarded a grade 3.

Context

The Establishment and its Mission

1 The college is based on a farm in the village of Dilton Marsh near Westbury in Wiltshire. It offers residential and day programmes for students with moderate or severe learning difficulties. Some students have additional emotional, behavioural and communication difficulties. The college does not cater for students who have mobility difficulties, students who display behaviour which is very difficult to manage or students who have severe communication difficulties. Residential students live in houses within walking distance of the farm. At the time of the inspection the college had 27 students of whom 18 were fully or partly funded by the FEFC. The majority of the FEFC-funded students are aged between 16 and 19.

2 The college's mission is to 'provide a holistic learning environment enabling students with learning disabilities to prepare for their future life'. The college aims to:

- 'develop each student to their full learning potential
- provide a non-threatening learning environment
- respond, as far as is possible, to individual needs and wants
- furnish each student with an independent programme plan
- provide a wide range of activities
- broaden students' perceived horizons
- enable students to achieve maximum autonomy within their ability
- prepare students for life and work in the community where possible'.

3 The range of programmes offered by the college includes horse studies, agriculture, horticulture, woodwork, engineering, literacy, numeracy, lifeskills and personal and social education. Some of these courses are accredited by external awarding bodies such as the City and Guilds of London Institute, the National Proficiency Tests Council and the Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. The college has a range of facilities for the teaching of pre-vocational and vocational skills such as an equestrian yard and riding arena, a milking and dairy unit, greenhouses, an engineering workshop and a woodwork room. Some students also have the opportunity to study additional subjects at a local FEFC sector college. Students learn domestic and self-care skills in the residential accommodation.

4 The senior management team comprises the principal, the company secretary and the residential care manager. This team is responsible for strategic planning and the operational management of the college. A board of directors oversees the work of the college and is responsible to the Registrar of Companies and to the Charity Commissioners for the proper and efficient management of the college as a charitable company. The managing director is responsible for ensuring that the instructions of the board of directors are implemented and that the organisation operates in accordance with its statutes and policies.

Context

The Inspection

5 Two inspectors carried out the inspection over three days. They observed 12 lessons, had discussions with staff and students, scrutinised students' files and examined documentation provided by the college to support the judgements identified in the self-assessment report. Inspectors visited three of the houses and the local FEFC sector college where students from Fairfield were studying part-time courses.

6 The self-assessment report prepared for the inspection is the first that has been produced by the college. It is comprehensive and set out under the headings of Council circular 97/12 *Validating Self-Assessment*. Initially small groups of staff worked together to identify what they considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of the college's provision. The principal used this information as a basis for the development of the self-assessment report which was then shared with all staff and amended to reflect their comments. Most sections of the report include judgements but some statements are more descriptive than evaluative. Inspectors agreed with some strengths and weaknesses identified in the report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

The Curriculum

Grade profile of lessons observed

Grade	1	2	3	4	5
Number of lessons	0	3	6	3	0

7 In the best lessons, teachers help students to learn through practical activities. For example, students learn to be punctual, to behave appropriately and to follow instructions through working in environments such as the dairy, the equestrian yard, the workshops and the greenhouses. Schemes of work are coherent and relevant to the skills and competences which students need to learn. Teachers know the students well, create a purposeful learning environment and use a variety of teaching methods to motivate students and sustain their interest. Lesson plans specify what students are expected to learn and teachers inform students of the targets they have set for them. Teachers organise their lessons to take account of the different abilities and experiences of the students in the group and check students' understanding effectively. Teachers concentrate on the development of appropriate skills and competences rather than the completion of a task and record what students have learned rather than the projects or tasks they have completed.

8 However in some lessons, aims and objectives are too vague, do not take into account the information derived from students' initial assessments and are not linked to the

generic aims and learning outcomes which have been established for the provision. Some teachers focus too specifically on the completion of tasks and do not give sufficient thought to identifying the skills and competences students can learn through the tasks. Teachers often record what students have done but do not evaluate what students have learned. In these lessons teachers miss many opportunities to extend students' learning and knowledge. Few of these weaknesses are acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

9 Many students are making sound progress in the development of their personal and basic vocational skills. They are able to carry out practical tasks such as mucking out stables and preparing lunch for other students competently and safely. In woodwork, students have made high-quality items such as stools and bird boxes which have won prizes in country shows. The students are rightly proud of their achievements. Most staff have high expectations of the students and the students respond positively to the challenges set for them. Although few students undertake external work experience placements, those who do are highly regarded by their employers for their reliability and work skills. Students

The Curriculum

have many opportunities to participate in recreational and social activities within the community. Such opportunities are enabling students to develop their communication skills and to behave in a socially acceptable manner. The acquisition of these basic skills is enhancing students' self-esteem and extending their opportunities to participate in a wider range of vocational, recreational and social activities. The self-assessment report does not acknowledge many of these strengths.

10 Through their placements at the college some students have learned skills which are enabling them to live more independent lives. For example, some students who could not cross the road safely on arrival at the college are now able, without supervision, to catch the bus and go shopping in the nearby town. Some students have also progressed from houses where they have had support from staff to houses where they look after themselves with minimal supervision from support workers. Several students talked to inspectors about the confidence they have gained at the college and described the improvements in their behaviour.

11 Some students have the opportunity to study part-time programmes at a local FEFC sector college. This arrangement extends the range of programmes available for students and enables them to practise their social and communication skills in different contexts. The potential of this link is not fully exploited as staff

at the sector college are not given details of students' individual programmes and cannot therefore take account of these when planning their lessons. Communication between staff at Fairfield and staff at the sector college is weak.

12 Procedures for assessing and recording students' progress are not well developed. Most teachers record what students have done but do not assess and record their progress in relation to the skills and competences which have been identified as priorities for them. Teachers and support workers meet regularly to discuss individual students but the discussions are unstructured and do not concentrate sufficiently on monitoring students' progress in relation to their individual programmes. Much of the recording of progress is descriptive rather than evaluative, and does not clearly show the progress which students have made.

Other Aspects of Provision

13 The new principal who took up her post in September 1998 has initiated many changes at the college. The process of self-assessment has proved to be a useful means of involving staff in reviewing the provision offered at the college and developing a shared view of the changes needed. The strategic development plan clearly sets out plans for the development of the provision. Much of this work is at an early stage of development and implementation.

14 As the self-assessment report states, the process for selecting and inducting students to the college is thorough and comprehensive. Students who wish to be considered for a place at the college are invited to visit the college for a day. If the student and staff at the college feel that a placement might be appropriate, the student attends the college for a week so that staff can assess the student's needs. During this week the student participates in activities and lessons alongside students already at the college. At the end of the week each member of staff writes a report identifying the student's strengths and weaknesses and a decision is taken as to whether or not to offer the student a place. Staff have a clear understanding of the needs they can meet and are careful to accept only those students for whom they feel the provision is appropriate. Students who are accepted at the college undertake further assessments for the first three months of their placement. At the end of this time staff use the information they have gained from the assessment to develop individual learning programmes for the students. Many of these programmes

lack clear objectives and are not used routinely to inform teachers' and support workers' planning.

15 Teachers and support workers provide good-quality support for students. Each student has a teacher who acts as a personal tutor and a support worker who acts as a keyworker in the residential setting. Although the self-assessment report states that liaison between residential and teaching staff is good, inspectors could not agree fully with this statement. Although teachers and support workers now meet regularly to discuss individual students, these meetings lack structure and no formal meetings of personal tutors and keyworkers are held. Consequently, the link between the vocational and residential programmes is weak. Specialist support such as speech therapy and counselling are provided as needed by members of the local community team for people with learning disabilities.

16 Most of the vocational areas have appropriate equipment and accommodation. Students benefit from opportunities to learn within real work environments. Facilities for the teaching of catering are poor and restrict students' learning. This weakness is acknowledged in the self-assessment report. In the residential houses students benefit from opportunities to learn domestic skills using equipment which is similar to that which they are likely to use when they move on from the college. The strategic development plan provides a clear outline of planned improvements to the college's accommodation.

Other Aspects of Provision

17 Most staff have appropriate basic teaching and /or social care qualifications. However, few staff have specialist qualifications relating to the teaching of students with severe and complex learning difficulties. Many staff do not fully understand how to plan lessons and activities to exploit the learning opportunities within them and to address the individual needs of the students. Inspectors agree with the college's judgement that good use is made of supported employees, some of whom are former students of the college, to undertake routine tasks on the farm thus enabling the teachers to concentrate on helping students to learn.

18 Procedures for monitoring the quality of the college's provision are at an early stage of development. However, the college is small and the principal has a good overview of the quality of the provision through her daily work. Senior managers are currently planning an appraisal system for staff and some lessons have been observed by the principal and an external consultant as part of the self-assessment process. Staff have access to a range of training opportunities such as Makaton sign language which improve their skills and enable them to support students more effectively. The strategic development plan provides details of training which is planned for staff and reflects the high priority which senior managers are giving to staff development.

19 The principal currently has responsibility for the strategic and operational management of the college. Since her appointment she has made

significant changes which have led to improvements in the quality of the provision. Staff value her supportive leadership and clarity of vision. A part-time senior tutor has recently been appointed and her responsibilities are currently being defined. The care manager who was appointed in June 1999 is working closely with the principal to enable teachers and support workers to develop a coherent approach to their work with the students. As the self-assessment report acknowledges, members of the board of directors are supportive of the work of the college but have little contact with many of the staff and students.

Conclusions

20 Key Strengths

- emphasis given to helping students learn through practical activities
- students' progress in the development of their vocational, personal and social skills
- clear rationale for the development of the provision
- good-quality support

21 Weaknesses

- inadequate individual programmes for students
- missed opportunities to extend students' learning
- ineffective monitoring and recording of students' progress
- insufficient links between the vocational programmes and the work undertaken in the residential houses