

Robinia Advantage

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

May 2000

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00**

***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.

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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 09/2000

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

Robinia Advantage Marchington, Staffordshire Inspected May 2000

Robinia Advantage provides residential and day placements for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some students have additional physical, sensory or cognitive impairments. Most students display behaviour which is difficult to manage and may be injurious to themselves or others. The establishment has undergone many changes since the previous inspection in March 1996. In September 1997, the establishment was sold to Robinia Care Homes Limited and in February 1999 the head of education was appointed to the post of principal. In February 1999 a new head of education was appointed, in June 1999 a new head of care was appointed and in October 1999 the establishment moved to new premises on an industrial trading estate in Marchington. Most courses are provided in three separate units on the industrial trading estate but a small number of students attend courses at local FE sector colleges. The residential accommodation is located in Burton-Upon-Trent, approximately 20 miles from the industrial estate. Currently there are 50 students, of

whom 48 are funded wholly or partly by the FEFC.

Although staff are committed to their work with the students, few have the qualifications or the experience necessary to help the students to learn effectively. The curriculum does not meet the students' needs and the students' individual action plans are at an early stage of development. Much of the teaching is poor, and the monitoring and recording of students' progress is ineffective. Students do not participate well in lessons and display disruptive behaviour. The establishment does not have sufficient specialist support to address the students' difficulties. The co-ordination of the work undertaken on the industrial estate with that which takes place in the residential houses is poor. Communication within the establishment is poor. The establishment has a range of policies and procedures but these are not adequate to protect the safety and well being of the students. Quality assurance procedures are inadequate and action has not been taken to address the weaknesses identified by staff. The standard of some of the accommodation has improved, but the new site on the industrial estate is inappropriate and potentially dangerous for many of the students.

Senior managers state that all staff have been involved in the development of the self-assessment report but few staff were able to describe their contribution to the process. The report was insufficiently evaluative. Some of the

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deadlines by which action should have been taken to address weaknesses had not been met. Inspectors judged that the establishment had over-estimated the quality of its provision.

The provision funded by the FEFC was judged to be poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses, and was awarded a grade 5.

Context

The Establishment and its Mission

1 Robinia Advantage is part of Robinia Care Limited (a private company) and is located in three separate units on an industrial estate in Marchington, Staffordshire. The establishment has nine residential houses which are situated in Burton-upon-Trent, approximately 20 miles away. Four FEFC-funded students whose behaviour is particularly difficult to manage are accommodated in a house in Branston which is managed by a separate part of the organisation, Robinia Mencare Midlands. Robinia's mission statement indicates that the organisation is 'Passionate about making a difference' and states, 'We will strive to become the leading national provider of comprehensive services to people with complex and challenging needs.' Robinia Advantage's prospectus states that the establishment 'is designed to meet the social and educational, emotional or therapeutic needs of young people aged between 16 and 25 who require additional support to join the adult world.' At the time of the inspection, the establishment had 50 students, of whom 48 were fully or partly funded by the FEFC. Twenty-five of the FEFC-funded students are aged between 16 and 19.

2 The provision has expanded rapidly since the previous inspection when the establishment had 23 FEFC-funded students. The needs of the students have changed considerably. All the current students have very

complex needs resulting mainly from their emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some students have additional physical, sensory or cognitive impairments. Most students display behaviour which is difficult to manage and may be injurious to themselves or others. All the students require specialist support to enable them to address their emotional and behavioural difficulties so that they can engage productively in learning. The establishment does not provide for students who have severe epilepsy or severe physical or sensory impairments.

3 The establishment has undergone many changes since the previous inspection in March 1996. In September 1997 the establishment was sold to Robinia Care Homes Limited and in February 1999 the head of education was appointed to the post of principal. In February 1999 a new head of education was appointed, in June 1999 a new head of care was appointed and in October 1999 the establishment moved to its new premises in Marchington. In addition, four tutors and one teacher have left the establishment during the past year.

4 Robinia Advantage's curriculum comprises key skills and vocational skills. Currently, most students have to study all the subjects offered by the establishment. The subjects include literacy, numeracy, information technology, the Youth Award Scheme, life and social skills, light engineering, woodcraft, horticulture and cooking. Students

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also attend regular sessions with the establishment's counsellor. A small number of students attend courses at local FE sector colleges and six students undertake work experience placements with local firms. Within the residential accommodation students have the opportunity to learn domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing.

The Inspection

5 The inspection was carried out by two inspectors over three days. Twelve sessions of teaching and learning were observed. Inspectors' judgements were informed by discussions with a director of Robinia Care Limited, the principal, the head of education, the deputy head of education, the head of care, the curriculum co-ordinator, the counsellor, staff and students. Students' work and college documentation, including students' files, were examined.

The Curriculum

Grade profile of lessons observed

Grade	1	2	3	4	5
Number of lessons	0	0	1	10	1

6 Most of the lessons observed were unsatisfactory. Many staff do not have the skills and experience required to meet the educational needs of the students, all of whom have severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. The content of lessons is not well matched to students' needs or interests. Lessons, most of which last for 80 or 90 minutes, are too long to maintain students' interest and concentration. Students spend too much time in classrooms completing literacy and numeracy worksheets which have little relevance to their lives or levels of ability. Some students are studying programmes which are at a level below that which they have attained at their previous placements. The range of vocational options is small. Currently, all students have to study all the subjects offered by the establishment. Few of these weaknesses are recorded in the self-assessment report.

7 The establishment does not have a curriculum which has been devised specifically to meet the needs of the students. This weakness is not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Students study for awards which have been devised by external awarding bodies and these are used as a substitute for a curriculum. The content of lessons is often dictated by the need to produce evidence for the awarding body. For

example, in a lesson which was designed to teach the students how to use the telephone to get information, the students made the telephone calls and then had to write descriptions of what they had done to present as evidence for their award.

8 The content of some lessons overlaps with that in others with the result that students are bored and resentful of the repetition. Although this weakness was identified in the curriculum audit which was carried out in the establishment, it was not included in the self-assessment report. Students have too few opportunities to build on their strengths or to sample a range of vocational options. Many students consider the work they are doing to be irrelevant to their needs and interests. Lessons are not sufficiently stimulating or challenging for the students.

9 Some students are accepted into the establishment before staff have received sufficient information about their needs from their previous placements, and this causes difficulties in developing appropriate individual learning programmes for them. Students' literacy and numeracy skills are assessed on entry to the establishment but the programmes they then study are not well matched to their levels of ability. Staff often disagree with the findings of the assessments and the levels of award for

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which the students are entered. When information about students' needs and difficulties is available on their entry to the establishment, too few staff pay sufficient attention to it when planning students' programmes.

10 The establishment does not have a curriculum for the work which is undertaken in the residential accommodation. Students are expected to learn domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing. They also have the opportunity to learn social skills through outings which are arranged for the evenings and weekends. The co-ordination of the work which is undertaken on the industrial estate with that which takes place in the residential accommodation is poor. This weakness is acknowledged in the self-assessment report and a co-ordinator has been appointed to address the issue.

11 The houses are at a considerable distance from the industrial estate and this hinders communication between the residential support workers and the teachers. Copies of the students' individual educational plans have only just been sent to the residential houses so staff have had little opportunity to plan activities to meet the objectives specified in the plans. Care staff organise a range of activities for students but do not evaluate these to identify the skills and competences students have learned through them.

12 Students do not participate well in lessons. Many students arrive late, leave classes early or disrupt them through inappropriate behaviour. Their behaviour

often has a negative effect on other students' behaviour and results in little learning taking place. During the inspection, some students spent only a minimal amount of time in the sessions for which they were timetabled. Some staff are not fully aware of which students should be in their sessions and as a consequence do not always report students who do not arrive as missing. Some students refuse to get into the minibuses which bring them from the residential accommodation to the industrial estate. During the inspection some students were seen wandering around the industrial estate when they should have been in their timetabled sessions.

13 Some students benefit from opportunities to study vocational subjects in local FE sector colleges. For example, two students have successfully completed NVQ level 1 programmes in horticulture at the local college of agriculture, and one student has completed NVQ level 1 in catering at another college. However, only five of the current students are attending sector colleges. The students are able to follow their programmes in the sector colleges without support from staff at Robinia Advantage. Staff at the colleges telephone staff at Robinia if they need any information or experience any difficulties with the students. Contact between staff is minimal. Six students are undertaking work experience placements with local companies. Although students benefit from these placements, opportunities for learning are missed because the placements are not planned specifically to address the objectives in students' individual

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programmes. The work experience co-ordinator has recently left the establishment and a support worker has been transferred to the role on a temporary basis.

14 Senior managers claim that students make significant progress while at the establishment. However, the current system for monitoring and recording progress is ineffective and, as a consequence, it is difficult to measure the progress made by students. The number of incidents recorded, many of which are of a serious nature, indicate that students are making little progress in improving their behaviour, the prime reason for the placement of many students at the establishment.

Other Aspects of Provision

15 The self-assessment report states that the newly developed model of care is a strength of the provision but inspectors did not agree with this judgement. The practice of having assessment houses, supported and semi-independent houses, quoted in the report as evidence to support the strength, is common practice in many colleges.

16 The specialist support available in the establishment is inadequate for the students' needs. The college employs a full-time counsellor who sees all students, except those based at the Robinia Mencare establishment, every two weeks. This is a very heavy caseload. In addition, a part-time teacher is employed to help students who have dyslexia. An occupational therapist and a drama therapist were employed at the beginning of the current academic year but were made redundant soon after taking up their posts. Productive links with the art and drama therapy department of a local university enabled a small group of students to participate in useful therapeutic sessions at the end of the last academic year, but this link has now ceased.

17 The Robinia Care organisation has provided additional resources at the industrial estate and in the residential houses. The quality of some of the residential accommodation has improved since the previous inspection, but as the self-assessment report states, some is still in need of refurbishment. The location of the units on the industrial estate is a cause for concern. The three units are some distance apart and students moving between the units have to negotiate their

way through lorries, forklift trucks and other vehicles. The students' emotional and behavioural difficulties often result in them being distracted and distressed and staff are concerned for the students' safety at such times. The noise from lorries and other vehicles makes it difficult to hear what teachers are saying in some classrooms and has a negative impact on students' concentration.

18 Few staff have qualifications and/or experience in teaching and caring for students who have severe emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. Much of their time and energy is spent trying to contain the students and to control their behaviour. They have little knowledge of therapeutic approaches to education and insufficient understanding of the educational implications of students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

19 Quality assurance procedures are at an early stage of development. A curriculum audit, which included observation of lessons, was undertaken at the instigation of the principal during February and March 1999. Ten main weaknesses were reported but little progress has been made in addressing them, and few of the weaknesses were reported in the self-assessment report. There are insufficient opportunities for students and their parents or carers to contribute to an evaluation of the provision. Teachers' evaluations of lessons indicate weaknesses in the content and the teaching methods used but no action has been taken to address these issues.

Other Aspects of Provision

20 As the self-assessment report states, the expansion of the college and the departure of staff has resulted in the recruitment of new and inexperienced staff. Although the residential support staff have been given the opportunity to study for NVQ level 3 awards in health and social care, teachers and support workers have not had sufficient training to help them work effectively with students who have severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. The support staff do not have the opportunity to attend supervision sessions with a trained counsellor to help them cope with the stress of the work.

21 The self-assessment report provided for the inspection was the first produced by the establishment. Although senior managers stated that all staff had been involved in the development of the self-assessment report, few staff were able to describe their contribution to the process. The report was insufficiently evaluative. Some of the deadlines by which action should have been taken to address weaknesses had not been met. For example, the deadline for the development of a policy and guidelines for managing behaviour had been set for April 2000 but these were not available at the time of the inspection. Inspectors judged that the establishment had over-estimated the quality of its provision. They did not agree with many of the strengths claimed by the college and identified additional serious weaknesses.

22 Robinia Care Limited has introduced a range of policies to protect the safety and well being of students. However, procedures to implement the

policies are inadequate and some staff are not aware of the action they should take in particular circumstances. College records indicate a high number of incidents of violent behaviour and of students missing from college or the residential houses, sometimes overnight. During the inspection it was evident that some staff did not report students as missing from their classes because they were unsure which students should be in their class.

23 Roles and responsibilities lack clarity. Some members of staff have not seen their job descriptions and are not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. There are overlaps between some roles such as the head of education, the deputy head of education and the curriculum co-ordinator. Communication between staff is poor. Teachers are based in one of the units on the industrial site and have few opportunities to meet staff who work in the other units.

24 Managers have established regular meetings, but staff report that their views are not taken seriously. For example, many staff voiced their concerns about the implications of the move to the new site for the safety of students. They compiled a list of nine actions they felt would be essential to protect students, but action has been taken to address less than half of these. Other staff have put forward suggestions for changing the structure of the day and timetabling arrangements to meet the needs of the students more effectively, but have not had a response from managers.

Other Aspects of Provision

25 Robinia Care Limited has pursued a policy of increasing the numbers of students at the establishment. Although they have provided additional resources, insufficient thought has been given to the severity of students' emotional and behavioural difficulties and the problems that can result from having all the students together in one establishment. As a consequence of this policy, students lack appropriate role models and their behaviour sometimes deteriorates because of their interactions with other students who have different but equally severe emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Conclusions

26 Key strengths

- there are no key strengths

27 Weaknesses

- an inappropriate, poorly co-ordinated curriculum
- inadequate individual programmes for students
- much poor teaching and ineffective monitoring and recording of students' progress
- inadequate policies and procedures to protect the safety and well-being of students
- students' poor punctuality and inappropriate behaviour in classes
- insufficient specialist support for students
- poor communication
- inadequate quality assurance procedures
- inappropriate accommodation