

# **Effective Self-assessment**

**REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE**

**1998-99**

**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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*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

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Summary	
Introduction	1
Preparation for Self-assessment	4
Self-assessment Process	6
Managing self-assessment	6
Governors and self-assessment	18
Evidence for self-assessment	21
Lesson observation	30
Judgements and grading	36
Moderation and validation	41
Action-planning	45
Good practice	53
Self-assessment Report	54
Producing the report	54
Form and content	59
Good practice	70
Conclusions and Issues	71
Annexes	
A: Colleges visited during the preparation of this report	
B: References and bibliography	

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# Effective Self-assessment

## Summary

**Colleges are making good progress in developing self-assessment. At its best, self-assessment is proving to be a powerful mechanism for improvement in further education. Although the inspectorate requires a self-assessment report prior to inspection, the main purpose of self-assessment is to enable colleges to take responsibility for their own continuous improvement through a regular assessment of quality and standards. Increasingly this is happening. There is more to be done, particularly in making well-founded judgements which are subsequently validated by external inspection.**

Effective self-assessment requires careful preparation. In the best examples, there is active leadership from the principal and senior managers, governor involvement, clear guiding principles, a method of self-assessment which is understood by all and staff development to support the process. In most colleges a senior manager is given responsibility for overseeing the entire process, normally working with a co-ordinating group sometimes including a governor. As self-assessment becomes an annual process, colleges are working to integrate self-assessment with their strategic planning and quality assurance cycles but there is some way to go before this is widely achieved.

In most colleges staff teams produce self-assessments for their area. These are brought together in the college self-assessment report. This requires careful co-ordination, clear guidance from the centre, a consistent approach and a procedure for validating judgements and grades. Colleges are finding this a difficult process to get right. In the best practice clear guidance is given to staff on how to assess evidence and make judgements.

Most colleges conduct lesson observations although judgements about the quality of teaching and learning are frequently overgenerous. In some self-assessment reports, judgements are very clear, cover all aspects of the provision being assessed, are supported by clear summary evidence and subsequently validated at inspection. In others too much weight is attached to processes and not enough to outcomes. Many colleges credit as strengths, features which are no more than should be expected. Few colleges consider fully the impact of management, governance and quality assurance on levels of achievement and retention. Some colleges produce a considerable amount of additional documentation. An effective college should already have most of the information required for self-assessment in an accessible form. Generally there is a need for more training in the skills required for effective self-assessment.

All self-assessment reports are expected to include action plans which build on strengths and address weaknesses. Some action plans are meticulous, include action not completed from previous rounds of self-assessment and make clear links with strategic plans and other key college documents. Others omit key weaknesses and do not form a satisfactory basis for creating improvement. Self-assessment reports vary considerably in length and presentation. The best reports are concise and well laid out. Some are too long and include background information which is readily available in other college documents.

Effective self-assessment is not easy to achieve. The extent to which colleges have approached self-assessment with integrity and a clear intention to raise standards is encouraging for the future development of further education.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Introduction

1 Since the start of the second inspection cycle in September 1997, all colleges have been expected to undertake regular and comprehensive self-assessment. Although self-assessment reports were requested during the later stages of the first cycle they were not an integral part of the inspection framework. When the framework was reviewed in 1996-97 it was agreed that inspections should in future be based on self-assessment. Colleges are now asked to grade all areas of their provision including the curriculum and aspects of cross-college provision. The revised inspection framework and associated guidance were set out in Circular 97/12 and Circular 97/13.

2 Although colleges are required to provide a self-assessment report prior to inspection, the report is not written for the inspectorate. The main purpose of self-assessment is to enable the college to take responsibility for its own continuous improvement through a regular assessment of quality and standards. Self-assessment should be an integral part of colleges' quality assurance arrangements.

3 This report focuses on the lessons learned from the first full year of inspections based on self-assessment, 1997-98. Evidence was obtained from a study of the 114 self-assessment reports received by the inspectorate and from visits to 17 colleges which took place during the writing of the report. Findings from inspections conducted early in 1998-99 are also taken into account. The report identifies good practice at each stage of the self-assessment process and concludes with some pointers for future development.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Preparation for Self-assessment

4 Effective self-assessment can significantly influence the way a college operates and how it sees itself. Colleges which have succeeded in establishing productive self-assessment have developed a process which identifies and addresses strengths and weaknesses, and which engages all those involved in the life of the institution.

5 Inspectors have found that good practice in preparing for self-assessment is characterised by:

### ***Active leadership from the principal and senior managers***

Self-assessment will not work without clear leadership from the principal and senior managers. In examples of best practice, the principal has taken a lead, establishing a process in which all staff engage in assessing their own performance and playing a part in the college's self-assessment processes. The commitment to self-assessment is reflected in strategic and operating plans, objectives and targets. Staff and students can see that self-assessment is central to the way in which the college operates.

### ***Involvement of governors***

Governors have responsibility for the strategic direction of the college. It is important that they are involved in assessing both their own work as a corporation and the overall performance of the college.

### ***Clear guiding principles***

Self-assessment is concerned with the development of a self-critical culture. This requires an ethos in which it is possible for staff to be open about weaknesses in order to improve their performance without feeling vulnerable to criticism or punitive measures. Good colleges have established clear ground rules to guide their self-assessment process. Staff need to distinguish clearly between the mechanisms for college self-assessment and the mechanisms for individual performance review.

## Guiding principles

At one college in the north, the principal talked to staff about the need to 'drive out fear'.

At another college, the following statements were included in guidance to staff:

- any measurement and assessment is used to judge processes and outcomes not individuals
- self-assessment is designed to enable improvement not just to monitor and report it
- any process or activity is never permanently excellent – we are always in the state of practising our learning and becoming better (or worse).

## ***A methodology which is understood by staff and governors***

Colleges are complex institutions. It is important that self-assessment is based on a clear methodology which is understood by all, covers all stages of the self-assessment process and is consistently applied across the college. There should be a timetable for stages in the self-assessment process and it must be clear how self-assessment links with other college processes and planning cycles.

## Self-assessment calendar

At a college in the south, a key dates calendar is used to show each stage in the preparation of the self-assessment report including internal inspection activities. The responsibilities of directors, heads of division, and team leaders are clearly shown.

## ***Staff development to support the process***

Effective staff development to enable staff to acquire the understanding and skills required for self-assessment is essential. In many colleges, training for self-assessment is brief and incomplete. Although there is an increasing amount of training in lesson observation, much staff development has been focused on raising awareness of issues rather than developing necessary skills, such as gathering and assessing evidence, making judgements and grading, writing reports and action plans.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Self-assessment Process

### Managing Self-assessment

6 Colleges which operate effective self-assessment have established sound organisational arrangements with self-assessment as a central feature of quality assurance clearly linked with other key processes such as strategic planning.

7 Effective co-ordination is vital. Circular 97/13, *Self-assessment and Inspection*, suggests that colleges may wish to:

*identify a group, perhaps developed from an existing committee, which meets on a regular basis to oversee the process of self-assessment and ensure its objectivity and rigour.*

8 Inspectors have found that arrangements are most effective where a senior manager is given responsibility for the co-ordination of self-assessment, working with a central group which oversees the entire process. The senior manager is frequently, but not always, the person responsible for quality assurance and the person who acts as college nominee during inspections. It is important that the person responsible for co-ordinating self-assessment has ready access to the principal. Where the role is delegated to someone outside the senior management team, difficulties can arise because the co-ordinator cannot ensure that there is regular informed discussion about the progress of self-assessment by senior managers.

9 Sometimes the co-ordination of self-assessment is a new responsibility for an existing group, such as the quality assurance group or a committee of the academic board. In some colleges, senior management teams have taken responsibility for designing and managing the whole process, including overseeing the co-ordinating group. In a few colleges, a governor is a member of the group. Some colleges consider that a wide range of staff representation helps all staff to feel that

they have a share in the ownership of the self-assessment report.

### Composition of the co-ordinating group

A general further education college in the north has established groups, comprising staff from all areas and levels, and students, to monitor the self-assessment process. Managers consider that, in this way, staff are reassured about the objectivity, integrity and internal validation of judgements, and of grading in particular.

In one college in the Midlands, the college's strategic self-assessment management group comprised the principal and two senior managers. The group determined what needed to be done and by when, and identified the requirements for each stage of the process including training needs and resources.

A general further education college in the south involved a corporation member with extensive quality assurance experience in overseeing the process of self-assessment, as a member of the college's self-assessment steering group.

10 The co-ordinating group generally issues timetables for the process, monitors progress and considers emerging self-assessment reports from all parts of the college. Regular reporting to the group helps ensure that reports are consistent in content and approach and that deadlines are kept. In some colleges, the group also helps individual teams to prepare their self-assessments. Support may include the self-assessment co-ordinator holding 'surgeries' for any team leader needing help or, as in the case of a few colleges, the setting up of facilitating groups on which team leaders and others can call for help. In some colleges, members of the co-ordinating group are linked with two or more curriculum areas and act as facilitators or consultants for the process. In most cases, facilitators receive some form of training, participate in internal college discussion groups, or attend relevant external events before embarking on this role.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Remit of the co-ordinating group

In one college, the co-ordinating group's remit was only finalised after discussion and consultation at all levels to ensure that nothing had been omitted. The group then issued its remit, prepared and circulated clear and realistic timetables with action plans, and nominated responsibilities to ensure that key stages in the process would be completed consistently and on time.

11 The opportunity to discuss emerging judgements, check perceptions and share experience is valuable. It builds confidence in the process and helps to ensure consistency. Many colleges comment on the importance of continuous reference across curriculum areas and cross-college services, rather than leaving teams to work in isolation. This is achieved mainly through meetings at which each manager gives an account of progress and findings so far.

12 It is important that managers manage the process rather than dominate it. Staff will not learn to be self-critical and objective if managers impose their own views rather than facilitate the making of judgements on the basis of evidence, recording of strengths and weaknesses, and the production of appropriate action plans.

## Communications

Where self-assessment is working well, colleges have established:

- regular and open communication across the college about progress in the self-assessment process, often through staff briefings
- mechanisms to identify problems and obstacles and to provide support for teams
- opportunities for teams to share experience, including examples of good practice and emerging judgements
- procedures under which regular reports are made to the senior management team and relevant co-ordinating groups.

13 Thorough planning is a key factor in a successful self-assessment process. Many colleges are in the process of making self-assessment an integral part of their quality assurance system so that it ceases to be seen as a special activity by itself. This requires a concerted management approach and is likely to involve a review of existing arrangements. Several colleges have mapped all their key processes and established an integrated planning cycle which includes self-assessment, quality assurance and strategic planning. They use flowcharts or other diagrammatic representations to show how the various stages will be taken forward and how other processes contribute to, or are affected by, self-assessment.

## Planning and the links with other college processes

One college devised a chart which plots the activities related to self-assessment, quality assurance, strategic planning, monitoring of exam results, student and parent questionnaires, departmental reviews and action plans. Tasks are set out month by month under the following headings:

- quality assurance (internal and external)
- departmental teams
- senior management team
- corporation
- external demands.

14 Many of the colleges inspected in 1997-98 had just completed their first cycle of self-assessment. Most of these have decided to allocate more time to the process in the future. Some colleges found they did not have time for adequate staff development and several commented that they had underestimated the time which teams needed to gather evidence. As a consequence, there was lack of opportunity to share good practice in producing reports and, in some cases, amendments had to be made shortly after submitting the college



# Effective Self-assessment

self-assessment report to the inspectorate. The Council's expectation is that colleges will undertake regular self-assessment. This is reflected in the criteria for accredited status set out in Circular 98/22, *Accrediting Colleges*. Colleges will need to take account of this expectation in their annual planning cycle.

15 It is important to decide at the outset how teams, groups and units will be organised to undertake self-assessments of their own areas of activity. Colleges generally adopt an approach based on existing teams, whose members are used to working together. Although the structure of most colleges does not match the 10 FEFC

programme areas, this is an issue which has proved to be less difficult to address than many colleges envisaged. The key is to disaggregate self-assessment reports and grades to a level which enables subsequent aggregation to match the college structure or the FEFC programme areas. In this way, judgements can be made which are useful internally and which can also be presented under FEFC programme areas for the purposes of inspection. In bringing together evaluations of subprogramme areas it is important that the overall grade for the programme area takes account of the relative size of contributing areas of provision and reflects accurately the balance of strengths and weaknesses.

## Example: Mapping college structures against the FEFC's programme areas

### Grades awarded to college departments

<i>English and communications</i>		<i>Art and design</i>		<i>Business studies</i>	
English	2	Art	2	Business	3
Media	2	Photography	1	Administration	2
Journalism	2	Design	2	Retail and distribution	3
				Leisure and tourism	3
<i>General studies</i>					
Social sciences	2				
Modern languages	2				

### Grades reconfigured according to FEFC programme and subprogramme areas

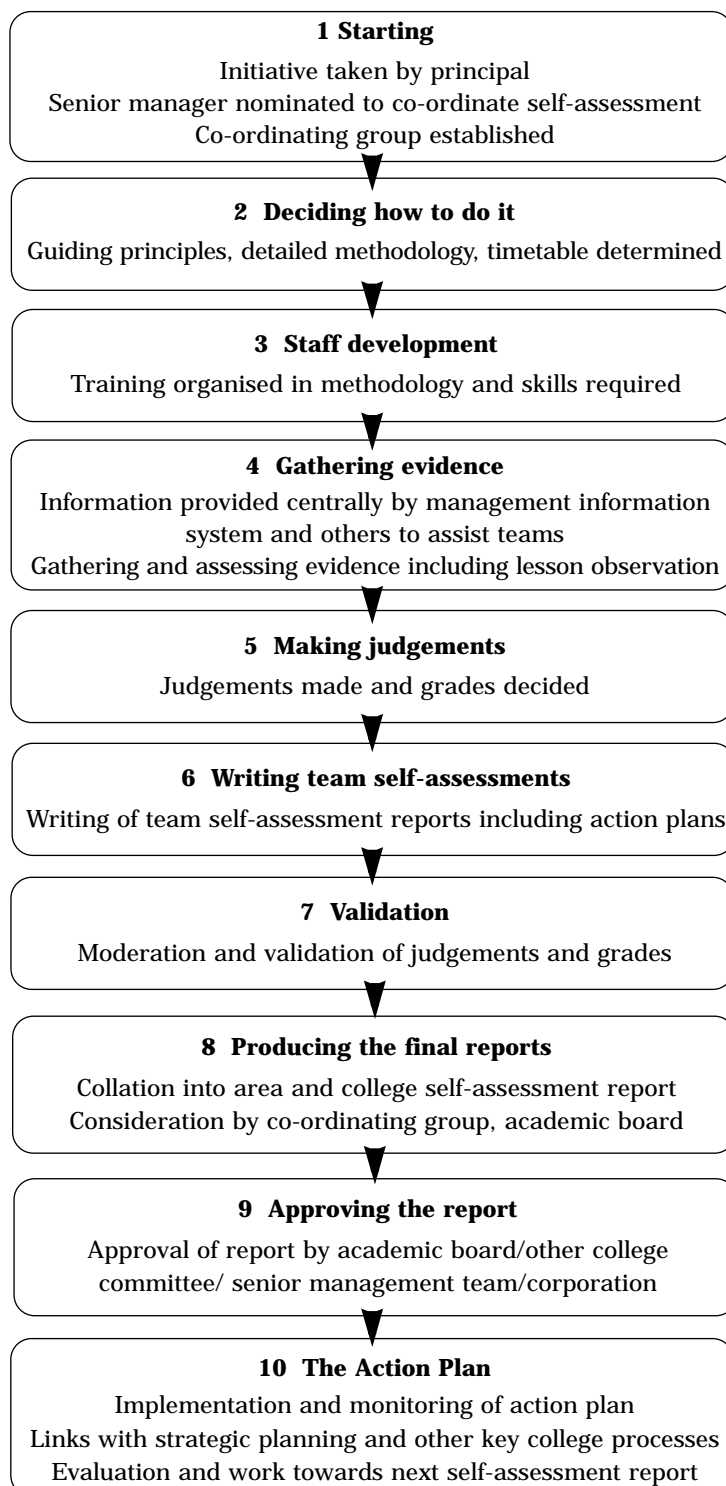
<i>Programme area 5: business</i>		<i>overall programme area grade awarded</i>	3
Business	3		
Administration	2		
Retail and distribution	3		
<i>Programme area 6: hotel and catering</i>		<i>overall programme area grade awarded</i>	3
Leisure and tourism	3		
<i>Programme area 8: humanities</i>		<i>overall programme area grade awarded</i>	2
English	2		
Social sciences	2		
Modern languages	2		
<i>Programme area 9: art and design</i>		<i>overall programme area grade awarded</i>	2
Art	2		
Design	2		
Journalism	2		
Media	2		
Photography	1		

# Effective Self-assessment

16 Colleges have found it is important to decide all these matters at an early stage. Decisions on format and aggregation affect how teams and groups work together to produce

self-assessments which feed into the final report. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of key elements in a well-organised self-assessment process.

**Figure 1. Key stages in the self-assessment process**



# Effective Self-assessment

17 A few colleges have already evaluated their self-assessment procedures, using questionnaires, discussion groups and team meetings. Findings are being shared, weaknesses identified, and amendments made to improve procedures. A common outcome is the request from staff for more time to be devoted to training for self-assessment in areas such as weighing evidence and grading, setting targets and writing reports which are succinct and which take account of relevant priorities.

## **Governors and Self-assessment**

18 Many colleges involve governors not only in assessing their own performance as governors and in agreeing the college's final self-assessment report, but also in overseeing the process of self-assessment. Some corporations, for example, have decided that the audit committee will undertake the monitoring of progress in implementing self-assessment action plans. Others have set up a curriculum or quality committee for this purpose. In some colleges, governors are represented on the college's self-assessment co-ordinating group and may help in validating grades.

19 Inspectors have found that effective involvement of governors in the self-assessment process includes:

- recognition of the importance of self-assessment in raising standards
- briefing and discussion on the college's self-assessment process, including the roles and responsibilities of governors and managers in respect of self-assessment
- training to enable governors to conduct their own self-assessment
- mechanisms for monitoring the self-assessment process such as:
  - regular reports to the board on the progress of self-assessment and implementation of action plans
  - active involvement by individual governors in aspects of the process

- discussion on links between action plans and strategic planning
- approval of the final self-assessment report
- involvement in evaluating the self-assessment process.

20 At its best, self-assessment should provide governors with a valuable means of meeting their responsibilities for overseeing a college's performance. The danger is that they are not fully aware of the self-assessment process. A full understanding of the process and confidence in the rigour of the judgements made will help governors to assess their own performance. As identified in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*, governors too often take a generous view of the quality of their work, particularly when the college's overall record of student retention and achievement is taken into account.

## **Evidence for Self-assessment**

21 In order to write their own self-assessment reports, sometimes referred to as sub self-assessment reports, teams must first gather relevant evidence.

22 Colleges are getting better at identifying and collecting such evidence, but many still have difficulties. Some produce huge quantities of information which has not been properly analysed while others omit key material. In some self-assessment reports, there is not enough evidence to support judgements on teaching and learning and too little summary data on students' achievements. It should not be necessary to generate large quantities of new material to write the self-assessment report. An effective college should already have the information required in an accessible form.

23 Several colleges have issued detailed guidelines for staff on how to find relevant data and documents. Some have devised helpful guidance based on Circular 97/12, *Validating*

# Effective Self-assessment

*Self-assessment* in which the indicative sources of evidence set out in the circular are summarised, together with information on where appropriate documentation and statistics may normally be found.

## How to find evidence

**An extract from one college's guidance to staff, based on Circular 97/12, Validating Self-assessment**

<i>Focus of inspection</i>	<i>Indicative sources of evidence</i>	<i>College documentation</i>
<i>Teaching and learning</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work experience, where appropriate, makes an effective contribution to students' learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>records and reports of work experience</li> <li>the views of students and employers</li> <li>use of students' experience in teaching and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>records and reports of work experience held by general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) teams</li> <li>other work experience records held by careers manager</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students attend regularly, are punctual, attentive and organise their own learning effectively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attendance records</li> <li>students' learning agreements and action plans</li> <li>lesson observations</li> <li>scrutiny of students' work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>weekly/monthly MIS* attendance registers kept by curriculum team leaders</li> <li>learning agreements stored in main office</li> <li>course summary printouts on attendance level and lateness</li> </ul>
<i>Resources: staffing and specialist provision</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teachers have appropriate qualifications and up-to-date knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teachers' qualifications and experience</li> <li>documents showing staff deployment across the institution</li> <li>lesson observation</li> <li>the views of managers, teachers and students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>programme handbooks</li> <li>details of staff qualifications</li> <li>personnel records</li> <li>management structure</li> <li>contractual induction records</li> </ul>

\*management information system

# Effective Self-assessment

24 Many colleges are making considerable efforts to ensure that accurate and useable data is provided from their central computerised information systems, to help teams compile their self-assessments. This process is becoming more effective as the general reliability of college management information systems improves. Some colleges hold training events for managers and staff on the analysis of students' achievement data.

25 Nearly all colleges require teams, departments or units to record strengths and weaknesses, together with supporting evidence, in a standard format.

## Gathering and recording evidence

Two sixth form colleges in the south of England, which gave teams an almost free hand to draw up their own reports, found later that they had to ask staff to rewrite them to a standard format. The task of collating and comparing variously presented findings made it too difficult to produce the final college report and to validate evidence and grades.

At a college in the Midlands, the process is clearly structured. Before teachers start their self-assessment, useful information is provided on students' achievements, benchmarks, lesson observation outcomes and students' perceptions and there are guidelines to show how the work of each team feeds into the final self-assessment report. Staff are clear about what they have to do. Forms have been written to make clear which issues must be covered in the self-assessment. Diagrams indicate what is happening all the way through the process. Each year, new elements are added to the programme of training for self-assessment, to pick up on lessons learned from previous years and to promote greater understanding.

26 Even in colleges with good records and good documentation the paperwork generated by self-assessment can be excessive. Several colleges have found that their determination to

give thorough guidance to staff and to involve everyone has resulted in too much paper being produced. Lessons are being learned from this experience and procedures refined to ensure that they are manageable.

## Managing the paperwork

Managers of one college in the south of England have recognised that the quantity of paper produced in respect of self-assessment is becoming counterproductive. For the next round of self-assessment the college aims to reduce paperwork by 50%.

27 Most colleges use Circular 97/12 as a key reference in compiling evidence and have found it a helpful guide. Inspectors have found that in the better self-assessment reports the evidence quoted to support curriculum area judgements often includes:

- three-year trends in achievement and retention rates measured against national averages and other benchmarking data
- average attendance rates and patterns of attendance
- grades awarded for lesson observation and annual comparisons of grades where possible
- analysis and examples of students' coursework and the marking of coursework
- course reviews and other quality assurance outcomes
- lessons plans, schemes of work, teaching materials, related documentation
- arrangements for additional support and records of implementation
- course management records
- arrangements for tracking students' progress
- arrangements for teaching key skills

# Effective Self-assessment

- summaries of external verifier, moderator or other external reports
- a summary of student achievements outside their main studies
- analyses of the views of students, employers, external interests
- a description of specialist teaching resources
- information on the experience and qualifications of teachers.

28 The evidence used in good assessment reports on cross-college aspects of provision (general resources, support for students, quality assurance, governance, management) often includes:

- a summary of provision, structure and organisation
- arrangements for internal and external controls and resulting reports
- details of compliance with legal and other external requirements
- a description of key policies and their implementation
- information on the use of performance indicators, monitoring of outcomes, use of services, and other quality assurance outcomes
- reference to other key reports, manuals, position papers
- responses to government and other national initiatives
- an analysis of the impact of this area of work on the standards of service provided by the college: for example the impact on students' achievements
- an analysis of the views of staff, students, external interests
- information on the experience and qualifications of staff
- information derived from observation of practice: for example in tutorials, meetings and the workplace.

29 Most colleges would like to have spent much more time training staff in the use of evidence. Many teams have difficulty in summarising evidence to support their judgements. Some fail to distinguish between simply recording evidence and using evidence to make judgements. Regular sharing and testing of emerging judgements, between teams and with managers, helps to ensure that final judgements are robust and soundly based. Some colleges have produced specific guidance to help teams summarise evidence succinctly.

## Summarising evidence

Two colleges of general further education, one in the north, the other in the Midlands, provided examples of statements for staff, written in a way that would corroborate strengths and weaknesses:

- an average of 8% of students withdrew from the course within the first eight weeks
- of the 15 external verifier reports received in 1997, 13 made reference to the high standard of specialist accommodation
- improved utilisation of laboratories from 50% in 1996, to 65% in 1997
- only 25% of students initially diagnosed with (poor) numeracy skills received additional support
- management information data show improved retention over three years  
65% – 1995  
72% – 1996  
76% – 1997.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Lesson Observation

30 Most of the colleges inspected in 1997-98 conducted some lesson observations, but only a minority did so on a wide scale. Although lesson observation is not a requirement of Circular 97/12, there is a growing recognition that sound judgements on the curriculum are not possible without observation of teaching and learning. In colleges where lesson observation has become an established part of self-assessment there has generally been considerable staff development, including specific training for observers. In the best examples, clear criteria for making judgements about teaching and learning have been drawn up, sometimes by a group representing all levels of the teaching staff. In most cases, the lessons observed have been graded, usually using the FEFC grading descriptors. A few colleges are considering asking students to grade lessons, using the forms used by staff observers, in order to collect students' views of the quality of teaching and learning.

31 A variety of forms are used to record lesson observations. Some are over-complicated and include checklists which constrain rather than guide the observer. There is a danger that observers focus on teachers' performance instead of students' learning. A preoccupation with the mechanics and props of teaching can also get in the way of clear judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. In the most effective practice, the observer concentrates on whether, what and how much students are learning, and what they are achieving. All other issues are subordinate to these.

## Recording lesson observations

A northern tertiary college and a college of general further education in the south have devised succinct lesson observation forms containing a small number of key questions about lesson plans and objectives, the range of teaching methods and how effective they were in promoting learning, attendance patterns, how teachers check students' learning, the extent to which students know more about a topic or skill at the end of the lesson than at the beginning, and the resources available. Observers are required to note alongside each question whether the practice they are observing constitutes a strength, a weakness, or what is routinely to be expected. The form is designed to develop staff understanding of the purpose of lesson observation.

32 Some colleges began with complex checklists for use when observing lessons but simplified these considerably after a trial period.

## Lesson observations: lessons learned

A sixth form college in the south produced descriptions of what might typically constitute a grade 1, a grade 3 and a grade 5 lesson. However, observers used the descriptions too rigidly and problems arose where the account of a lesson did not match precisely the description of the grade. The college is abandoning this approach and now intends to introduce more general guidelines related to first principles of effective teaching and learning.

33 In some colleges, all levels of staff are involved in observing lessons. In others, observation is carried out by line managers or by managers from another curriculum area. Most colleges distinguish between lesson observations used to produce evidence for self-assessment and those used as part of staff

# Effective Self-assessment

appraisal. Colleges that employ teams of observers drawn from across all areas and levels of work report that this creates fruitful opportunities for sharing good practice in teaching and learning. Some colleges plan to train a different team of observers each year, ultimately involving most full-time staff in the process.

## **Sharing good practice**

Two sixth form colleges in the south ensured that lesson observation included the opportunity to share good practice in the classroom. Space was left at the bottom of the observation form to describe what had worked particularly well. The intention is to collate the descriptions without identifying the staff involved and for the staff development manager to make use of the information in staff development events devoted to teaching and learning.

34 Several colleges have used external consultants to assess teaching and learning, and have thus delayed the development of lesson observation skills within the college. In most of these cases, colleges felt they had insufficient time to train their own staff in lesson observation before preparation of their self-assessment report. Colleges are divided about whether to grade individual lessons and inform teachers of the grades. Most record a grade profile for each curriculum area and present a college-wide grade profile to a quality committee, academic board or other similar group and, subsequently, use these grade profiles as evidence for the self-assessment report. In a few cases, lesson observations are not graded. Instead, the strengths and weaknesses identified are used in determining curriculum area grades. The lack of overall judgements about the quality of teaching and learning sometimes makes it difficult to establish how colleges have arrived at curriculum area grades.

35 It is clear that there is a need for more training and practice in lesson observation. It is not uncommon for colleges to have a grade profile where the proportion of grade 1 and 2s is more than 10% higher than the national average of grades awarded by inspectors. If a college's assessment of lessons has been overgenerous it is likely that the resulting curriculum grade will also be overstated. In 1997-98, 28% of the curriculum grades awarded by inspectors were one or two grades lower than the grades colleges awarded themselves.

## **Judgements and Grading**

36 Some colleges have made good progress in assessing evidence and making appropriate judgements. They have clear principles and procedures for self-assessment which encourage constructive criticism and maintain a clear focus on students' learning and achievement. A number of colleges have produced written guidance on assessing evidence. Colleges use consultants and facilitators to help staff recognise significant strengths and weaknesses when analysing evidence. They also involve staff in pilot assessments and assessment exercises. External training events have also proved useful in developing assessment skills.

## **Guidance for assessing evidence**

A college of general further education in the north produced a brief list of questions for staff to ask themselves when assessing evidence. Questions related to the identification of strengths included asking how well processes worked, what improvements had been delivered, how 'big' was the strength, and whether the evidence 'backed up' the claim being made. Questions related to weaknesses included asking how 'big' was the weakness, how widely did it affect the area of work, when and how had the weakness been recognised, and did the planned actions fully address the weakness.



# Effective Self-assessment

A college of general further education in the south arranged for the college nominee and another senior manager to hold informal meetings or 'surgeries' for line managers and team leaders individually to discuss what constituted a strength or a weakness in their particular areas of work, based on the evidence collected. There was also discussion of the distinction to be made between a strength and a routine expectation. Though time-consuming, these discussions helped to clarify people's thinking.

37 Many colleges say, that despite the support and guidance provided, staff continue to have difficulty in assessing evidence. Inspectors have found that many colleges give too much weight to processes, procedures and documentation and too little to outcomes. There is not enough attention to student achievement and retention rates. Few colleges consider fully the impact of management, governance and quality assurance on levels of achievement and retention. In many cases, processes are simply described and there is no assessment of how effective they have been in raising standards.

38 The analysis of evidence is often insufficiently rigorous. For example, many colleges report that team leaders and managers tend to draw up lists of strengths and weaknesses and then set about finding evidence to support their judgements. Inspectors, in contrast, base their judgements, and subsequently their grades, on an analysis of the evidence. This may account for some of the differences between colleges' grades and those of inspectors and for some of the weaknesses missed by colleges but identified by inspectors. Some colleges are planning to revise their procedures to address this issue in their next self-assessment cycle.

39 Colleges have different procedures covering the point at which grades are attached to judgements. Most require teams to propose

grades for their area of work when submitting their self-assessment. In some cases however, the co-ordinating group collects all the self-assessment reports without grades. This group then examines the strengths and weaknesses and supporting evidence and comes to a view about the appropriate grade, which is subsequently discussed with the team concerned.

## Guidance on grading

A college of general further education in the north provided a list of points for staff to bear in mind when considering a grade: it was important to have appropriate evidence to confirm the judgement; 'gut feeling' should not be the basis for making judgements; and the aim of the exercise was not just to add up and compare the number of strengths and weaknesses.

A college of general further education in the south issued guidelines for staff that cautioned against: the use of 'rose-tinted specs'; an emphasis on systems rather than their effectiveness; insufficient account being taken of student achievement and retention rates; and insufficient attention being paid to effective teaching and learning. It also circulated to all staff a 'phantom' section of a self-assessment report from a curriculum team containing descriptive statements rather than evaluative ones, which had been used for grading. Alongside the statements were comments and questions designed to help staff think about what they should ask of themselves and of the evidence before deciding a grade.

A tertiary college in the south included in its guidelines for staff the recurring message that evidence had to confirm the grade awarded. It was also emphasised that staff should take appropriate account of relevant cross-college strengths and weaknesses when grading a curriculum area.

# Effective Self-assessment

40 In deciding grades, many colleges credit as strengths features which are no more than should be expected as normal practice. For example, schemes of work, varied teaching methods, examination pass rates that reach national averages or student retention rates of around 80% are often cited as strengths when they should be seen as norms. In most cases where inspectors have been unable to validate the college's grades it is because average practice has been overstated and aspects of work falling below the standards normally expected have not been recorded as weaknesses.

## **Moderation and Validation**

41 Colleges recognise the importance of ensuring that a grade 3 awarded to work in one part of the institution means the same as a grade 3 awarded elsewhere in the same institution. Most have, therefore, developed some mechanisms for moderating self-assessment judgements, such as regular reports on progress and the sharing of emerging judgements between teams. Increasingly, this is being formalised into a process of internal validation.

42 Internal validation procedures frequently involve writers of curriculum and cross-college reports sending or presenting their reports to the co-ordinating group which then scrutinises the evidence, strengths and weaknesses and action plans. Depending on the particular system used by the college, the reports are either returned to the authors with comments, questions and occasional requests to re-grade or shorten the report, or the designated member of the group linking with that team meets with the team leader to discuss revisions and editing. A few colleges have established a second group, separate from the co-ordinating group, comprising representatives of staff at all levels, to scrutinise and compare reports.

43 In some colleges a governor is a member of the self-assessment co-ordinating group. If not, the governors may become involved at the validation stage. Several colleges invite at least one governor to join the group to assist with the validation of findings. Occasionally, a college invites an employer, a member of the local training and enterprise council (TEC) or a head of a local school to join in its validation work. Alternatively, a few colleges invite an external person to provide an objective view by reading the completed report. In a minority of colleges, the principal and the vice-principal, sometimes with the senior management team, conduct the internal validation of reports before allocating to a senior manager the task of synthesising the findings and producing a self-assessment report for the college.

## **Validating judgements and grades**

A college of general further education in the south adds a further early stage in the process of validating findings by having curriculum and cross-college area managers scrutinise each other's reports before they are passed to the monitoring group. The college has found this a useful staff development tool as it enables curriculum and cross-college managers to understand the impact their work has on other areas.

A college of general further education in the north regularly involves local employers, or others who are in contact with the college, in validating judgements on curriculum areas and cross-college aspects of provision, as appropriate. The college establishes a group of scrutinisers and publishes the remit of the group and its membership. Group members are required to analyse the self-assessment reports in advance, and authors of the reports are invited to the group meeting to discuss any identified areas of inconsistency in reporting or grading.

# Effective Self-assessment

44 The extent of training for internal validation varies considerably. A few colleges undertake their own in-house training by looking at published inspection reports to see how grades have been determined. The senior management team at one college involved the quality manager from a large multinational computer company with considerable experience in the business excellence model, itself based on rigorous self-assessment, to join them at a validation meeting. Many colleges, however, acknowledge that they are not yet sufficiently practised in this skill and plan to devote more time to it in staff development.

## Action-planning

45 All self-assessment reports are expected to include action plans which outline how weaknesses will be addressed and strengths consolidated and built upon. Many colleges have devised forms for teams to help them produce their action plans. Most of these forms follow closely the guidance issued in Circular 97/13, *Self-assessment and Inspection*.

46 The most common format for action plans is a table with columns listing:

- the weaknesses or strengths to be addressed
- the action to be taken
- the person responsible for each action
- the dates by which actions are to be completed.

47 Some action plans also contain columns showing:

- the dates for reviewing progress
- whether the actions have high, medium or low priority
- performance measures.

48 In colleges where the strategic planning cycle is linked with the self-assessment process, action arising from operating statement objectives is sometimes included, with an additional column giving the reference. Similarly, where key actions apply to several areas of the college, or contribute to longer term strategic objectives, these actions are marked and referenced. A few colleges also indicate which actions emerge from course and service quality reviews. In some cases, however, the weaknesses and requisite corrective actions identified in course and service reviews are not included in action plans. Building on strengths is important as well as addressing weaknesses. Many action plans made no reference to the consolidation and further development of strengths in provision.

49 Good action plans identify the specific steps needed to address weaknesses and set measurable targets for improvement. Some plans do not address all the key weaknesses listed in the self-assessment report. Others present a list of broad intentions rather than specific and measurable actions which tackle the root of the problem. Some of the proposed actions are inappropriate, revealing a lack of understanding of the cause of the weakness. Many plans do not contain measurable targets for improvement, even where, for example, weaknesses in student retention rates or students' achievements require prompt action.

50 Only a small number of colleges had completed more than one self-assessment cycle by 1997-98. In many of these colleges, any action not completed from the earlier self-assessment cycle was included in the current action plan, appropriately referenced. The non-completion of action from earlier self-assessment reports was sometimes rightly recorded as a weakness.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Content of action plans

A college of general further education in the north requires staff not only to ensure that their action plans contain targets for improvement which are quantifiable, but also to provide a brief indication of activities, showing the stages which are necessary to achieve the target.

A college of general further education in the south requires staff to include in their plans the action to be taken to maintain or enhance already good performance. This appears under a subheading in the action plan.

51 Action plans have limited value unless they are carefully monitored to ensure success. A few colleges require curriculum and cross-college area managers to meet regularly with their teams or team leaders to chase progress, and to identify and overcome obstacles. In the better examples, there is a requirement that plans are reviewed at set periods with regular reporting to either the college senior management team, self-assessment co-ordinating group, academic board, or a quality assurance group.

## Monitoring action plans

A tertiary college in the north has established a team of staff to audit action plans, to ensure that actions are appropriate to achieve the desired outcomes and can be completed on time.

A college of general further education in the south requires action plans to be reviewed as part of its quality assurance process. A report is written by the appropriate manager, accounting for any lack of, or limitations on, progress, or confirming that the actions have been completed. The reports are collated and analysed centrally by the quality manager.

Copies of all action plans in a college of general further education in the north are sent to the monitoring group. The form used for action-planning allows both the manager responsible for an area and the monitoring group to follow progress in completing the actions. A column is provided for the monitoring group to record when progress reports from managers have been received or discussions held, and when or whether all the actions have been completed.

52 Few colleges arrange specific training on target-setting and action-planning. Following the publication of FEFC benchmarking data and the expectation that colleges will set annual targets for achievement and retention, outlined in Circular 99/08, *Guidance on Target-setting*, there is an increased need to develop the skills required for performance measurement, action-planning and target-setting.

## Good Practice

53 Good practice in the process of self-assessment includes:

- clear organisational arrangements, understood by all
- a senior manager nominated with responsibility for the co-ordination of self-assessment
- a group or committee with a clear remit and the authority to oversee the self-assessment process
- early decisions about how curriculum areas and support services will be grouped to undertake self-assessment, both for college internal purposes and for FEFC inspection
- clear links between self-assessment and other key college processes and planning cycles

# Effective Self-assessment

- clear guidance for staff on all stages of the process, including reporting arrangements and timescales
- a robust system of lesson observation
- standard formats for all reporting
- effective procedures for moderating and validating judgements and grades
- clear action plans with measurable and achievable targets for improvement and rigorous monitoring of progress in reaching these targets
- training for all staff and governors in the skills required to undertake effective self-assessment
- governors' thorough scrutiny of the final report
- an annual cycle of self-assessment which builds on strengths, addresses weaknesses and demonstrates continuous improvement in performance
- effective evaluation of the process of self-assessment.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Self-assessment Report

### Producing the Report

54 Although self-assessment reports are required by the inspectorate before inspection, the main purpose of self-assessment is to enable colleges to take responsibility for their own continuous improvement through a regular assessment of quality and standards. The self-assessment must therefore meet the needs of the college and also be capable of presentation in a form which enables the inspectorate to draw comparisons across the sector.

55 Most self-assessment reports are the end result of a series of reports produced by teams and units across the college. The number and extent of these sub self-assessment reports depends on the methodology chosen by the college and the way in which self-assessment is being used. In many colleges, reports are produced for subject areas and then collated into reports for departments or teaching schools according to the college structure. This enables the college to assess strengths and weaknesses in the various parts of its organisation before aggregating reports into programme areas. Whatever approach is adopted, it is important that the sequence of gathering evidence, making judgements and grading, producing reports, internal validation, and collation of findings from local area reports into wider reports is clear and consistent.

56 The writing and editing of reports are skills which many colleges have underestimated. Some staff find this part of self-assessment very difficult. It is important that central decisions are taken about the format of reports and the required style of writing and that clear guidance is issued. Colleges which have not done this have often found it difficult to collate separate self-assessments into an overall report. Where guidance is supported by training in report writing the resulting report is easier to read, understand and evaluate.

57 In many colleges, the task of putting together the final report is allocated to the self-assessment co-ordinator. This is a demanding job. Introductions and annexes must be written and self-assessment sections checked for consistency, length and content. Then, the whole report needs to be edited. Some colleges have decided that this work should be shared among members of the co-ordinating group or carried out by a small task group formed specifically to produce the final report.

58 After the final draft of the report has been checked by the co-ordinating group, it is frequently examined by a college committee, such as the academic board, before approval by the senior management team and finally by the corporation. In some cases a subcommittee of the corporation, which may also have been responsible for the self-assessment of governance, looks in detail at the final draft prior to formal consideration and approval by the full corporation.

### Form and Content

59 Circular 97/13 urges colleges to keep self-assessment reports concise. It was envisaged that they would be no more than 50 pages long, including appendices. In practice, there is a significant variation in the length of reports. Many are too long. Of the self-assessment reports presented before inspection in 1997-98, the longest report was eight times the length of the shortest, 284 pages compared with 35 pages. Many of the longer reports suffered from a poor layout and too much background detail. In writing their introductions, some colleges failed to distinguish between summaries of key information and full accounts lifted from other college documents which were readily available.

60 The best reports are concise and well laid out. They clearly record judgements together with summary supporting evidence. They include an introduction with key information about the college, followed by curriculum sections related to the FEFC programme areas

# Effective Self-assessment

and the cross-college aspects of provision set out in Circular 97/12. In some reports, action plans are linked to each curriculum section; in others they are presented together in a separate section at the end of the report. The latter form of presentation sometimes makes cross-referencing difficult or leads to weaknesses identified in the self-assessment being omitted from the action plan. Most reports include a few annexes giving important statistical and other data.

61 Introductions set the context for the report. They should also provide a link to previous assessments. In 1997-98, approximately 80% of the self-assessment reports included a commentary on improvements since the previous inspection. As self-assessment becomes an annual process, the best reports are identifying the actions taken since the previous self-assessment. This information is often represented in summary form in the introduction, with more specific references under each curriculum and cross-college section of the report.

62 Some colleges express concern that reports focus too exclusively on weaknesses and that they tend to neglect improvements required to aspects of provision identified as satisfactory or strong.

## **Introductions to self-assessment reports**

In the best examples, introductions include:

- a summary of the college's mission and key strategic objectives
- the main features of provision
- the numbers of students in each programme area and subject
- a description of the local context
- information on the college management structure
- reference to actions taken in response to the last inspection report and/or self-assessment

- a description of the college's self-assessment process
- a summary of the curriculum area, cross-college and lesson observation grades awarded by the college.

## **Demonstrating progress since the last inspection**

A sixth form college in the south included a table listing progress towards improving areas of weakness. Against each weakness, improvements were recorded together with an account of what had not yet been achieved.

A college of general further education in the south showed how the strengths identified at the last inspection had been further developed. The report provided information on action taken to deal with areas needing improvement but not recorded as weaknesses including:

- accommodation and specialist facilities
- management information
- quality assurance procedures
- student support
- library stock and equipment.

63 All reports now identify strengths and weaknesses, in contrast to the first inspection cycle when weaknesses were sometimes referred to euphemistically as 'issues for development'. The discipline of specifically identifying weaknesses has made reports much clearer and heightened their value as a mechanism for improvement. Although some reports are written in continuous prose, which occasionally makes it difficult to pick out the judgements being made, most are now presented in tabular form. Strengths and weaknesses are usually listed separately, with an indication of supporting evidence. In some reports, there is a tendency to quote the location of documents rather than distil the corroborative evidence which they provide. What the reader wants to see is an indication of the evidence which supports the judgement, not a list of documents or surveys.

# Effective Self-assessment

64 In the best reports, colleges summarise the supporting evidence and indicate clearly where the evidence can be found. In some cases, this is cross-referenced to an index of key college documents included as an annex to the report.

## Poor recording of evidence

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Evidence</i>
Progression to higher education very encouraging	Destination survey
A high proportion of completing students achieve success	Examination results
Resources used effectively	Observation

## Good recording of evidence

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Evidence</i>
The majority of full-time students completing courses gain employment or progress to further and higher education.	In 1996-97, 28% of students progressed to employment, 10% to higher education and 43% to other further education provision.
Regular assessment at appropriate level, marked quickly with proper feedback given.	Homework returned within two days (82%) with proper feedback (89%) according to a survey of year 2 students. Year 1 given a test every week in run up to exams.

## A clear format for presenting judgements

<i>Support for Students</i>		<i>Grade 3</i>	
<i>Strengths</i>			
Topic	Strengths	Supporting evidence	Evidence location



# Effective Self-assessment

65 The presentation of self-assessment reports on curriculum areas varies. In some reports there is a brief introduction to each curriculum area, including information on courses and student numbers. This is useful in establishing the size of the curriculum area if it has not otherwise been mentioned.

66 In some colleges there has been confusion in the use of the inspection framework. Although the prime purpose of self-assessment is to improve provision in an individual college, it is important to remember that inspectors will work to the framework set out in Circular 97/12. If the college uses different parameters for grading areas then validation by the inspection team becomes more difficult and the benefits to the college are reduced. The two aspects of the framework over which there has been most uncertainty have been the curriculum areas and resources. Two points should be remembered:

- the framework distinguishes between specialist resources which are assessed under the relevant curriculum area and general resources which are awarded a separate cross-college grade (Circular 97/12, annex B, paragraph 21). Some colleges have assessed and graded all resources together. Inspectors then have to disaggregate the judgements and evidence before deciding curriculum and cross-college grades;
- the framework as it applies to the curriculum areas covers:
  - teaching and learning
  - student achievement and retention rates
  - curriculum content, organisation and management
  - resources: staffing and specialist provision.

67 The number of grades presented in self-assessment reports varies greatly. Some colleges grade, in every programme area, each of the four aspects covered in the assessment of teaching and learning in the inspection framework, with little or no reference to the relative weighting given to each aspect. In 1997-98, eight colleges included 30 or more grades in the self-assessment report. In a few colleges, grades were awarded for every quality statement in Circular 97/12. The presentation of so many grades does little to increase the clarity of the grading decisions made by a college. The majority of colleges produced between eight and 14 curriculum grades. Several awarded additional cross-college grades for curriculum organisation and management, teaching and learning, and student achievements in order to give themselves a whole-college view.

68 Circular 97/13 (paragraph 28) asks colleges to grade all programme areas or substantial curriculum areas. The question of how colleges map their own structures against FEFC programme areas is addressed earlier in paragraphs 15 and 16 of this report. The way curriculum grades are presented in self-assessment reports is important. In examples of best practice, a grade is given both for the programme area and subprogramme areas. This enables colleges to reflect the relative strength of subject groups within a programme area and enables the inspectorate to select a subprogramme area for inspection.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Good practice in presenting curriculum grades

### Programme area 9 Humanities

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Subject grade</i>	<i>Programme area grade</i>
English and communications	2	3*
Social sciences	3	
Modern languages	2	

*\*in this example social sciences may be over 50% of the programme area provision*

69 A good self-assessment report is invaluable to colleges in developing a strategy for improvement. It gives governors, managers and staff a clear insight into the relative strengths and weaknesses of different parts of the college and regular self-assessment combined with effective action-planning, provide effective means of enabling as well as monitoring progress.

## Good Practice

70 Good reports will have:

- clear procedures for bringing together area self-assessments to form an overall report for the college
- a clear layout, a contents page and appropriate cross-references in the text and will be of moderate length
- an introduction providing succinct information about the college and its context, range of provision, student numbers, self-assessment methodology, action since the last inspection or self-assessment, a summary of grades awarded and a summary of lesson observation grades
- clearly-stated strengths and weaknesses covering all aspects of each curriculum area and cross-college aspect which is graded
- curriculum grades for each programme area and main subprogramme area
- grading of all areas using the parameters set out in the inspection framework (Circular 97/12)
- summary evidence to support each judgement and an indication of the source and location of evidence
- action plans, clearly linked to the relevant sections of the report, which address all weaknesses and build on the strengths identified
- appendices confined to essential additional information.

# Effective Self-assessment

## Conclusions and Issues

71 Colleges have made good progress in developing self-assessment. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect is the extent to which self-assessments are carried out with integrity and with a clear intention to raise standards. Most colleges find the process demanding, but constructive. Self-assessment at its best is enabling governors, managers and staff to know their college better and consequently to be in a stronger position to improve the quality of provision. Many colleges comment that staff at all levels are now more ready to question average performance and that managers have a clearer view of the quality of the provision for which they are responsible. There is also a growing recognition of the link between students' achievements and the quality of management, governance and quality assurance.

72 The good practice identified in this report is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive. However, clear features of what constitutes effective self-assessment are emerging. There is more to be done, and those colleges which were inspected following their first cycle of self-assessment have learned much about how to improve the process in future.

73 Aspects of self-assessment which require further attention include:

- making increasingly well-founded judgements which are subsequently validated by external inspection
  - planning for self-assessment, which involves the development of a clear methodology and guiding principles
  - the involvement of all staff and governors
  - staff development and training in self-assessment skills
  - attention to the links between student achievements and levels of retention, and the quality of provision
  - accurate assessment of the quality of teaching and learning
  - opportunities to share good practice
  - robust procedures for validating judgements
  - identification of supporting evidence
  - reports which are comprehensive but concise and which comply with FEFC guidance on length.
- establishing a regular cycle of self-assessment as a mechanism for raising quality and standards
  - effective integration of self-assessment in colleges' strategic planning and quality assurance cycles
  - developing a culture of constructive criticism in which weaknesses can be reported openly and attention focused on improvement

# Annex A

## **Colleges Visited During the Preparation of this Report**

Blackpool and The Fylde College

Bromley College of Further and Higher Education

Chippenham College

Christ the King Sixth Form College

Henley College Coventry

Highbury College, Portsmouth

Knowsley Community College

North Lindsey College

Northern College for Residential Adult Education

Orpington College of Further Education

Park Lane College

Preston College

Selby College

Sutton Coldfield College

Swindon College

Woodhouse College

Worthing Sixth Form College

# Annex B

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