

**East Berkshire College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: November 2000
Report from the Inspectorate
The Further Education Funding Council**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

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

REINSPECTION

The FEFC has agreed that colleges with provision judged by the inspectorate to be less than satisfactory or poor (grade 4 or 5) should be reinspected. In these circumstances, a college may have its funding agreement with the FEFC qualified to prevent it increasing the number of new students in an unsatisfactory curriculum area until the FEFC is satisfied that weaknesses have been addressed.

Satisfactory provision may also be reinspected if actions have been taken to improve quality and the college's existing inspection grade is the only factor which prevents it from meeting the criteria for FEFC accreditation.

Reinspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Reinspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports and confirm that actions taken as a result of previous inspection have improved the quality of provision. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. The opinion of the FEFC's audit service contributes to inspectorate judgements about governance and management.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Assessments use grades on 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 weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- *grade 5 - poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.*

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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East Berkshire College South East Region

Reinspection of quality assurance: November 2000

Background

East Berkshire College was inspected in November 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 29/00. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4.

Inspectors regarded as strengths the thorough internal inspection of curriculum areas and the detailed lesson observation scheme, although the grades awarded in these observations were much higher than those awarded by inspectors. The weaknesses were: the failure of the quality framework to cover all aspects of the college's activities; the slow response to weaknesses identified at the last inspection; the declining quality of teaching and learning; course reviews that were not sufficiently rigorous, and which made poor use of statistical evidence; the absence of an overview of compliance with quality assurance arrangements; and the failure of quality assurance measures to impact on student retention and achievement.

Reinspection took place over two days in November 2000. Inspectors held meetings with staff and students and examined a wide range of documentation, including a sample of programme logs.

Assessment

The college is aware of the need both to improve quality and the systems which assure it, but it has been slow to take action on the weaknesses in the inspection report. The original post-inspection action plan had no section dealing specifically with quality assurance, although some relevant remedial measures were indicated as management actions. The plan was subsequently revised, but many actions have only been addressed very recently and are not due for completion for several months. At the time of the reinspection, there was no evidence of an improvement in quality. A new director for planning and quality was appointed in June 2000 and this has strengthened the relationship between corporate planning and quality assurance activities. Improvements have been made to documentation, including guidance on the implementation of policies. The operating statement for 2000-01 contains clear and quantified objectives. Quality standards have been developed by staff in service units, and these are being tested in the current process of self-assessment. However, the first self-assessment report since the inspection is not due to be validated until February 2001.

The lesson observation scheme was strengthened, and arrangements for key skills were put in place across the college. There is a more realistic grading of lessons, and the overall profile is nearer to the national pattern according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report*. The mentoring programme, which is intended to support teachers after observation, is not yet in place. In other respects, arrangements for training and development have improved. There is now a college-wide training plan, derived from personal and course reviews. Staff report that they have found useful the many training courses provided in support of corporate objectives. Support for training for individual requirements is also good. The budget for training and development has risen to almost 2% of payroll. However, the college has still not achieved the Investor in People standard, since it has not been able to evaluate the impact of its development activities on the organisation as a whole.

The college was allocated £150,000 from the standards fund to effect improvements in its unreliable management information systems. The project to upgrade the systems is now underway and centrally generated figures for 1999-2000 are being verified against data held by course leaders. Data up to, and including 1998-99, do not give an accurate picture of the college's retention and achievement so it is still not possible to identify trends. The college agrees that the published figure of 92% for in-year retention in 1998-99 is exaggerated. Inspectors found major anomalies between data in programme logs and those on the management information system. Reconciling these differences is likely to result in significantly lower levels of achievement for some courses in 1999-2000 than are at present centrally recorded. The figures presented to governors, which show almost all categories of retention and achievement to be above national benchmarking levels, represent only partial information.

A central part of the quality assurance process is course review. Programme leaders are expected to keep logs of relevant information about their courses. College managers agree with inspectors that the contents of logs are not yet satisfactory. There is confusion among staff about their purpose and wide inconsistencies in their content. Some contain a proliferation of routine material relevant to the conduct of courses, which should be available elsewhere. Records of achievement and retention are not consistently kept, and are therefore of limited use. More support, training, and guidance is needed to ensure that these logs are kept accurately. Tutor handbooks have improved the consistency of course management, and the enrolment and admissions process in September 2000 is reported by returning students to have been smoother than the previous year.

Although the student handbook and the college charter are clear and up to date, some students had complaints which they did not consider had been properly dealt with. Some of these concerned issues about security with which the college has attempted to deal. Students need to receive feedback about actions which result from their complaints and comments. An externally commissioned survey conducted in March 2000 revealed a 75% student satisfaction rate with the college. While this suggests that there are areas for improvement, students raised no significant issues regarding teaching and learning.

In order to improve further, the college should: continue to review its post-inspection action plan, accelerating the timescale for actions and clarifying responsibilities; maintain its efforts to produce a management information system which provides useful, reliable and credible reports; train staff in the requirements of course review, without making further changes to systems; improve the accuracy and clarity of performance data provided for governors; ensure that tutors follow up student complaints and keep them informed of progress.

Reinspection grade: quality assurance 4.