Hadlow College
Reinspection of Management: December 1999
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.

Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 02476 863000
Fax 02476 862100
website: http://www.fefc.ac.uk

Hadlow College
South East Region

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Background

Hadlow College was inspected in March 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 82/98. Provision in management was graded 4 and the audit service's opinion was that financial management was weak.

The strengths of the provision were: the recent introduction of an open and consultative approach to management; recent initiatives in business planning; effective middle managers. The main weaknesses identified at inspection were: the failure to address key issues; breaches of the financial memorandum with the FEFC; inadequate strategic planning; poor management reporting; late submission of returns to the FEFC; insufficiently adequate and accessible non-financial management information; no implementation strategy for equal opportunities; the management of some cross-college initiatives.

The college's commentary on progress against the post-inspection action plan and the management self-assessment report address all of the previously identified weaknesses. The self-assessment report describes the strengths as: well developed business planning cycle; compliance with the financial memorandum; working to clear budgetary and FEFC unit targets; timely returns to the FEFC; strong strategic planning; monthly management accounts; controlled cashflow; strategy for equal opportunities implemented. The areas of weakness identified are: underdeveloped management information systems; quality standards for non-academic activities yet to be fully proven; monitoring of equal opportunities; communication lines.

The provision was reinspected in December 1999 by an inspector and an auditor working for a total of three days. Meetings were held with senior and middle managers, and staff from throughout the college. Documentation, including policies, procedures and minutes of meetings was scrutinised.

Assessment

Progress has been made on most areas of weakness identified in the previous inspection report, although some weaknesses remain.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, financial management is adequate and the college operated within the scope of its financial memorandum with the FEFC. Financial budgeting, monitoring and controlling have all improved since the last inspection, although there is still some way to go to achieve parity with current good practice. For 1998-99 the college achieved a modest operating surplus compared with the prior year's deficit. The three-year financial forecast for 1999 to 2002 anticipates further surpluses based on significantly enhanced unit targets agreed by the FEFC and continuing tight financial control. The timeliness of returns to the FEFC has improved greatly since the last inspection.

The college has introduced some measures to rectify the weakness identified in the last inspection report that there was a failure to address key issues. Since the last inspection the management structure of the college has been revised. The process was well managed. Staff understood the need for the radical restructuring and feel that they were kept well informed. The final phase is still in progress. The structure has clear lines of accountability and reporting which are understood by all staff. A comprehensive structure of cross-college teams has been introduced to ensure that managers respond appropriately to local and national initiatives. Each team meets on a regular basis and has clear terms of reference. The standard of minutes of meetings has improved and they now contain action points. A development programme for senior and middle managers is ongoing.

The strengths of the previous inspection continue to be a characteristic of management. There is an open and consultative approach to management and middle managers effectively manage the curriculum.

A strategic plan ‘new directions’ was prepared for 1998 to 2000. It was complemented in 1998-99 by a detailed operating plan containing annual targets related to strategic objectives. There was a strategic plan update but no operating plan for 1999-2000. Each curriculum and cross-college service area produces a business plan. These review current provision and identify future developments. The quality of the plans is inconsistent and they contain few quantifiable targets. There is a lack of rigour in the setting and monitoring of targets and performance indicators.

The adequacy and accessibility of non-financial information has improved since the last inspection. A new data system has been introduced, processes and procedures have been revised and staff skills have been enhanced. There is a better understanding of the information needs of managers. The college recognises that the system remains underdeveloped. The quantity and scope of management reports are still inadequate. Some managers do not have access to the computerised management information system. There is inconsistent use by managers of centrally produced data.

A strategy has been developed for the implementation of the equal opportunities policy. This included procedures for the review of the policy, awareness raising events for staff and students and initiatives to widen participation. The joint consultative committee considers staff deployment and development on a regular basis. The college recognises that not all aspects of equal opportunities are adequately monitored. Neither the senior management team nor the corporation systematically consider equal opportunities issues.

Revised grade: management 3.