

Isle of Wight College
Reinspection of Management: March 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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Isle of Wight College South East Region

Reinspection of management: March 2000

Background

Isle of Wight College was inspected in February 1999 and the findings published in inspection report 52/99. Management was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: prompt action by the new principalship to address some key management issues; clear communication to staff of the college's difficulties; and understanding among staff of the roles and responsibilities of key managers. The major weaknesses were: weak financial management; the poor financial position; poor management information; the legacy of failure to address key strategic issues; the absence of a middle management structure; inefficiencies in class sizes and course hours; poorly managed budget preparation and allocation; and little development of equal opportunities or health and safety management. The FEFC's audit service concluded that the college's financial management was weak.

Reinspection took place in March 2000. Inspectors examined a range of documents and had meetings with governors, managers and teaching and support staff.

Assessment

There was a delay in addressing key management weaknesses which had built up prior to the last inspection. The principal resigned in March 1999, seven months after his appointment, and the vice-principal became acting principal. A new principal was appointed in October 1999, following significant changes in the governing body. A new and robust partnership between governors and senior managers has ensured that the major problems facing the college are being systematically addressed. The college has a clear strategic direction understood by all staff. An evident improvement in staff morale is underpinned by better communication between the new principal, senior managers and staff. Inspectors and auditors judged that significant progress had been made in addressing weaknesses identified in February 1999.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is now adequate. An appropriately qualified accountant has been appointed as director of finance. The director of finance and the college executive team have expended considerable effort in unravelling the reasons for the poor financial position of the college and determining its true financial position. As part of this exercise, the current year's inherited budgets have been frozen, and additional controls established over routine purchases and the approval of overtime. Steps have been taken to address some of the inefficiencies in course delivery. There has been a reduction in the number of very small classes and some cross-college timetabling has secured some efficiency gains. The budget for the remainder of the current year, together with the forecast to 2001-02, are in the process of being reconstructed on a more realistic basis. This includes action intended to secure the longer-term financial position of the college. Monthly management accounts, including a detailed rolling 12-month cashflow forecast, are being produced promptly. They are discussed by the executive team and distributed to all governors. Meaningful financial targets have yet to be fully established.

With the assistance of standards fund monies, the college has installed a network which provides on-line access to student information for all managers. The quality and reliability of data are now much improved. Reports on enrolments, withdrawals and transfers are updated on a daily basis. There is regular checking by managers to ensure that these central data are consistent with data held in departments. An additional quality control is the implementation of regular checks on course registers. The system also provides detailed records of students' learning agreements and retention and achievement statistics. The database also records national benchmark data for every college programme. This information is intended to inform self-assessment and target-setting. The January self-assessment report was better informed as a result; heads of department have set more precise targets; course leaders will be expected to base their targets on this data from now on.

The college has created a well-conceived middle management structure. The six heads of department are supported by programme area managers, quality verifiers, senior tutors and professional tutors. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. In addition to the departmental business meetings, there are regular meetings of the new middle managers with the relevant senior manager. These meetings are intended to promote consistency in implementation of college policies and procedures and provide opportunities for the sharing of good practice.

Following the corporation's approval, in autumn 1999, of revised policies for equal opportunities and health and safety, management committees were re-established to monitor their implementation. Reports are submitted to the academic board and to the corporation. There have been awareness-raising activities in equal opportunities for staff and students. A full-time health and safety officer has been appointed and members of staff have been provided with opportunities for health and safety training. In order to improve further the quality and impact of management, the college should: continue to secure improvements in the efficiency with which staff are deployed; develop further the consistency and use of target-setting; identify more accurately the weaknesses in budget management; and improve the three-year financial forecast.

Revised grade: management 3.