Ludlow College
Reinspection of Management: November 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.

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Background

Ludlow College was inspected in March 1998. The inspection findings were published in inspection report 78/98. Provision in management was graded 4.

The college had strong links with a range of organisations, including local schools, colleges and community groups. Staff understood the college's mission and communications in the college were good. A wide curriculum and community programme, which gave more opportunities to full-time and part-time students, had been developed. However, these strengths were outweighed by weaknesses: insufficient use of clear and coherent objectives and targets; the lack of an operating statement to enable the college effectively to monitor its progress; inadequately defined management roles and responsibilities with a lack of clarity about expectations of some postholders; underdeveloped use of management information to assist staff in course management and to inform decision-making; weak financial management with both historic and forecast deficits; and inadequate financial monitoring by the senior management team.

The provision was reinspected by an inspector over four days and an auditor over two days in November and December 1999. Before the inspection, inspectors studied the self-assessment report and the action plan in response to the last inspection, and reviewed information about the college provided by other directorates in the FEFC. The inspector and auditor held meetings with the principal, senior and middle managers, full-time and part-time staff and reviewed college documentation.

Assessment

Initially the college was slow to respond to the inspection. Most of the senior managers left shortly after it. A part-time acting principal was appointed four months later: she took up the post full time a year before the reinspection. These instabilities initially reinforced the weaknesses in management and adversely affected progress with the other weaknesses identified in the report. A new management structure was introduced just before the reinspection. A heavy burden had been placed on the principal as a result of the significant reduction in the size of the senior management team since the inspection. The change in management structure has been well managed. There are clear job descriptions for middle and senior managers and they have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. The effective communication identified in the first inspection has been further improved and all staff have been kept well informed about the changes. Staff identified the principal's open, supportive management style as a significant benefit during this period of uncertainty. The new management team has made a good start but, as the self-assessment report accurately identifies, many of them are inexperienced and it will take time for the structure to operate effectively. The principal still has a too broad and diverse range of responsibilities. Currently, a major capital project is also taking some management time.

Overall levels of retention and achievement had declined prior to the last inspection and this trend continued last year. Some are below the average for sixth form colleges. There are good achievements in some GCE A level subjects. The college has introduced a range of initiatives this year to improve performance. Retention and attendance are closely monitored and all staff are keenly aware of the need to raise standards of performance. Modification to the management information system has provided useful information on student performance but the other weaknesses remain and can not be resolved until the newly installed system is fully operational towards the end of the year. Income forecasts have not been accurate. As a result the full extent of a financial deficit in 1998-99 only became apparent some time after the year-end and was not recognised in the management accounts for the year. A qualified accountant, who works part time, has been appointed to head the finance team but is not a member of the college management team. The college's financial position remains a concern. Although improvements have been made to financial regulations and procedures and the presentation of the monthly management accounts, the FEFC's audit service concludes, within the scope of its review, that the financial management of the college is weak.

An appropriate planning framework has been introduced which includes an operating statement and operational plans. The annual operating statement does not relate well to the strategic plan, which is in need of updating. There are gaps in the directorate operating plans and some of them are weak. They are not effectively linked to the operating statement. Monitoring of the plans is not yet fully established. Action-planning has started but is generally weak. Enrolments have continued to decline and overambitious target-setting for these and retention has hindered effective planning. Closer attention is being paid to staff costs and teaching group size. Staff costs have declined significantly as a proportion of the budget.

The college has further strengthened its partnership links with a large and diverse number of organisations. While it has detailed information on potential students aged 16 to 19 in the area through its links with schools, there is a lack of information to support planning provision for other students. The college has effectively widened participation, broadening the curriculum to meet a full range of learning needs. The equal opportunities policy has not been reviewed recently and is not monitored. The college should improve: students' retention and achievements; financial management; the expertise of some managers; allocation of the responsibilities of the senior management team; management information; strategic and operational planning; action-planning; target-setting; and the management of equal opportunities.

Revised grade: management 4.