

**Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: December 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.

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

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Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture Eastern Region

Reinspection of quality assurance: December 2000

Background

Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture was inspected in January 1998 and the findings were published in inspection report 40/98. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4. Quality assurance was reinspected in November 1999 and was graded 4.

The key strengths at the inspection in 1998 were: the achievement of awards that recognise quality for some areas of work; staff development linked to appraisal and strategic objectives; and the manual for quality assurance procedures. The major weaknesses identified at the inspection in 1998 and the reinspection in 1999 were: the lack of rigour in application of procedures for quality assurance; some staff unclear on procedures; incomplete records for course reviews; inadequate action plans; lack of rigorous analysis of data on students' achievements; inadequate arrangements for gathering the views of students and employers; and an inadequate self-assessment report.

The second reinspection took place over four days in December 2000. Inspectors held meetings with the chair of the governors' quality committee, college management and staff. They reviewed a wide range of documentation, including course reviews and self-assessment reports, the minutes of meetings from the academic board and the corporation, and summary data on students' achievements and retention.

Assessment

The college has made significant progress in addressing the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. The college has demonstrated a clear commitment to improve the quality of provision and learning experience for students. The quality assurance team has been strengthened. The quality manager reports directly to the principal. Responsibility for the implementation, monitoring and reporting on quality assurance is explicitly stated. Staff have a good understanding of the quality assurance procedures that relate to their area of work. The curriculum quality manual identified as a strength at the last inspection has been enhanced. A complementary manual has been developed for non-teaching areas. A useful calendar gives details of the weekly quality assurance activities and reports required at all levels in the college from staff through to governors. The academic board has been reconstituted with a greater emphasis on quality in the curriculum. Quality assurance procedures are thoroughly and effectively audited to ensure compliance and rigour. Comprehensive audit reports provide good guidance to staff on ways to improve their performance. Courses with low levels of performance and those at risk of underperforming are routinely identified. Staff are required to identify the actions to be taken to bring about improvement. There are measurable improvements in the quality of course reviews and most are completed well. Inspectors agreed with the college that there is inconsistency in the monitoring and updating of some action plans. The quality committee of the corporation has become more actively involved in monitoring the college's academic performance. Detailed reports on quality assurance and trends in students' achievements are scrutinised by governors. Student achievement rates have improved on courses at levels 1, 2 and 3 since 1998-99. However, over the same period student retention rates have declined. The FEFC standards fund has been used to support the development of the management information system. The quality of the data on students' achievements has improved significantly.

Routine reports on retention and achievement are readily available to staff and managers. The college has well-advanced plans to introduce an electronic student register system. Appropriate procedures for the setting and monitoring of realistic retention and achievement targets at course level were introduced for the first time in 1999-2000. Staff are becoming increasingly confident in the use of data.

Student survey questionnaires have been revised. Responses are thoroughly analysed and carefully considered by teams at all levels in the college. The arrangements to systematically gather the views of employers are still a weakness. The revised charter contains few measurable targets. Procedures to monitor charter commitments have recently been established. There is no routine reporting of complaints to the academic board or the corporation. A significant development is the identification of quality standards for teaching and non-teaching areas. Appropriate and realistic performance indicators and measurable targets have been established. Procedures to monitor the progress towards the achievement of targets are not yet fully implemented.

The self-assessment process has been improved substantially. It covers all aspects of the college's work. Non-teaching areas completed self-assessment reports for the first time in 1999-2000. The self-assessment report is comprehensive, self-critical and evaluative. The evidence to substantiate the judgements was rigorously audited. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment. The detailed action plan adequately addresses the weaknesses identified in the report. Most action plans are systematically monitored and updated. The lack of sufficiently robust procedures to assess the quality of teaching and learning is still a weakness. The outcomes from lesson observations are insufficiently used to share good practice and inform staff development.

Revised grade: quality assurance 3.