

St Austell College
Reinspection of Management: 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.

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St Austell College South West Region

Reinspection of management: December 2000

Background

St Austell College was inspected in November 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 24/00. Management was graded 4 and the FEFC's audit service judged that financial management was weak.

The strengths of provision were: the clear management structure; effective development of course costing mechanisms, and the wide range of external links. The weaknesses were: the college's continued involvement in substantial franchised activity at distant locations contrary to FEFC guidance; the lack of a clear strategy for reducing the college's financial dependency on franchising; unsatisfactory contractual arrangements for franchised provision; weak financial management; actions taken by the principal adversely affecting relations with the governors; and the insufficient links between the St Austell and Saltash centres of the college.

Management was reinspected in December 2000 by an inspector and an auditor working for four days. They held meetings with senior managers, staff and governors and studied relevant documentation.

Assessment

The college has made considerable progress in addressing the major weaknesses identified during the previous inspection. The self-assessment report on management provided for the inspection recognises both the progress made and the work still to be done. The acting principal took up post in May 2000 and together with other managers has successfully developed an open and responsive style of management. Senior managers are accessible to staff who are well-informed about the proposed merger with Cornwall College. They have confidence in the acting principal and senior managers to lead the college successfully. Faculty heads have increased responsibilities, including those for delegated budgets. Programme managers have been appointed to lead curriculum teams. There is an increased emphasis on teamwork. Relationships between governors and managers are open and professional. They have improved significantly since the previous inspection. The respective roles of governance and management are well understood.

Despite these improvements, the FEFC's audit service concludes that financial management remains weak. The potential ineligibility of some short course provision from 1997 to 2000 is still at issue. The college remains in a financially vulnerable position. Budgets and three-year forecasts are reviewed by the executive team and approved by the corporation. The latest three-year forecast reflects the reduction in franchised courses and the increase in direct provision in relation to the curriculum 2000 changes and the widening of participation. Management accounts are produced monthly for college managers and governors. The accounts are detailed but they are presented in a format which does not give managers and governors a sufficiently clear oversight of key financial activities. The finance and curriculum standards committees of the corporation receive termly reports on franchised activity. Budget-setting and monitoring processes are detailed in financial regulations and procedures. The information received by budget holders does not clearly show spending to date against budget.

College managers have taken appropriate action to reduce the college's strategic dependency on franchised provision. The proportion of income generated from franchised activity is much lower than at the time of the last inspection. There has been no new franchised provision with distant partners or locally since 1 August 2000. The college provides support to students continuing on long courses started before 1 August 2000; 73% of the students are with six local partners and the remainder are with one out-of-region partner. Improvements have been made to the management structure with the aim of addressing issues relating to the management of franchised provision. However, there has been insufficiently close monitoring of the remaining franchised provision by senior managers. In 1999-2000, the college extended some local contracts to existing franchise providers, contrary to guidelines issued by the FEFC. The college acknowledges that it needs to improve arrangements for managing and monitoring franchised provision contracts locally.

Links between the St Austell and Saltash centres have improved but remain incomplete. Staff at both centres have been involved in planning activities with Cornwall College in anticipation of the proposed merger. Efforts have been made to ensure that successful collaborative relationships are made with the new partner.

Though there has been significant progress much still needs to be done. The college has made slow progress on the monitoring of key policies at a senior level. Staff and managers need continued support to ensure consistency of communication and the productive participation of all staff in the planning process.

Revised grade: management 3.