

**Stourbridge College
West Midlands Region**

Reinspection of management: June 1999

Background

Stourbridge College in the West Midlands was inspected in December 1997 and the findings published in inspection report 34/98. Management was awarded a grade 4. The key strengths were the commitment of the staff to team management and the effective working of some of the teams in the revised management structure. Other strengths were the effective relationships with external bodies and the successful initiatives to widen participation and promote equal opportunities. The budgeting process was well documented and budget holders had received good training in budgetary matters. The weaknesses included the unreliability of management information, the lack of adequate arrangements to set targets and monitor progress towards their achievement, the poor quality of some teams' operating plans and the inadequacy of the arrangements for the curriculum management of some franchised provision. Some policies were not effectively monitored. Several weaknesses related to financial management included; the lack of appropriate financial qualifications amongst the management team, the inefficient production of financial reports, the failure to give clear information in management reports upon changes to budgets and the inadequate and insufficiently up-to-date financial regulations.

Following the inspection the college prepared an action plan to address the weaknesses. The area was re-inspected during the week commencing 7 June 1999 by an inspector and an auditor working for a total of five days. The action plan, together with a new self-assessment report, provided the main basis for the reinspection. Inspectors also examined a range of documents, considered students' achievements and retention data and targets set by the college. They had meetings with governors, managers, staff, students and some external representatives.

Assessment

The college has made progress in addressing areas of weakness identified during the previous inspection and in building on strengths. Some weaknesses remain. Roles and responsibilities within the college are clear and well understood by staff. Staff morale has improved and communications throughout the college are effective. Key committees have been formed to monitor and develop important areas of the college. Early indications are that these committees are functioning well. The quality of minutes and the recording of decisions in meetings are uneven, good for senior management meetings, poor for other cross college committees. The operating statements at management and curriculum level are clearly linked to the strategic objectives of the college. Actions to complete objectives are not always explicitly defined. Some of the college's wide range of policies and procedures lack detail and need updating.

The college has well-developed and effective partnerships with a large and diverse number of external organisations. The management and links between curriculum areas of the college and its partners in franchised work have much improved. The college has opened a new student centre in the community to widen participation. Market research is

comprehensive and soundly based.

There is now systematic monitoring of the college's performance and especially of students' progress and achievements at all levels in the college. The college's management information system has much improved. Students' data are now accurate, timely and appropriate, in contrast with the previous weakness. All staff have confidence in the data. Some useful reports on GCE A level and admissions have recently been produced but there are few others. Student achievements between 1995-96 and 1996-97 were poor, those in 1997-98 were satisfactory. These weaknesses were not included in the college's action plan. Student retention in the last three years has been good and has improved further this year. Improving target setting for curriculum areas has only just begun and is not yet fully developed. There have been major differences in the extent to which curriculum areas have met their targets. This reported weakness has not yet been resolved. The targets for next year are being refined to be more realistic and in some cases more challenging.

A comprehensive and regularly updated equal opportunities policy is carefully monitored. Staff are effectively deployed. Information technology facilities are insufficient in certain curriculum and support areas but action is being taken to address this.

Within the scope of its review the FEFC's audit service concluded that the financial management of the college is adequate. At the end of 1995-96 the college had a significant accumulated deficit. During 1996-97 and 1997-98 this deficit position was successfully reversed, and the college now has a small accumulated surplus. Previous concerns about the robustness of college data and the failure to finalise college accounts have now been successfully addressed. Detailed management accounts are produced after the end of each month. The college's funding position to date is reported to senior managers and governors every month, but unit funding forecasts require greater sophistication. The college's sensitivity analysis also requires further development. Budget holders receive monthly reports on expenditure together with good support from the finance team.

Revised grade: management 3