

West Thames College
Reinspection of Science and Mathematics: January 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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**West Thames College
Greater London Region**

Reinspection of science and mathematics: January 2000

Background

West Thames College was inspected in October 1998 and the findings were published in inspection report 14/99. Provision in science and mathematics was awarded a grade 4.

The main strengths identified during the inspection were effectively organised practical science lessons and well-designed and well-equipped laboratories. The main weaknesses of the provision were: poor and declining GCE A level pass rates; poor GCSE mathematics pass rates at grade C and above; poor retention rates on the advanced GNVQ science course; the failure of some teachers to check students' progress during lessons.

The provision was reinspected in January 2000. Twelve lessons were observed, including some practical sessions. Inspectors scrutinised students' work, held meetings with college managers, examined student achievement and retention data and other college documentation.

Assessment

The college has made some progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the last inspection report. However, substantial weaknesses remain, particularly in relation to student achievement and retention. The pass rates on GCE A level biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics courses improved in 1999, but, with the exception of biology, they are still significantly below the national averages. Similarly, pass rates at grades C or above on GCSE biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics courses are still low, particularly in biology. Retention rates on GCSE and GCE A level biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics are below the national averages. Furthermore, GCSE retention rates declined between 1998 and 1999.

Although most of the teaching observed was good or better, there have been few improvements since the previous inspection. Generally, teachers check students' progress during lessons. Practical laboratory sessions are effectively organised. In the better lessons observed, a variety of teaching and learning methods were used to engage the students and sustain their interest. Homework is set regularly and returned promptly to the students, often with helpful comments from teachers on how students could improve their work. Attendance was poor in some lessons observed, particularly in the case of part-time students. The college has recently taken steps which are designed to improve students' attendance. The college has upgraded its computing resources, but the computer network in the science and mathematics accommodation is not yet operational. There is little use made of IT within lessons to facilitate learning. Some lessons take place in accommodation which inhibits interaction between students and teachers.

Course teams meet frequently to review their courses. These meetings are well documented. A C&G numeracy course is now offered as an alternative to students judged unlikely to achieve grades C or above in GCSE mathematics. The advanced GNVQ science course has been withdrawn and there is now no vocational science course available, and no foundation level 1 science provision for students who have low entry qualifications. A significant number of successful mathematics and science students progress to higher level courses.

In an effort to improve the quality of the provision, the college has changed some aspects of the way science and mathematics courses are managed. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these changes on student achievement and retention.

Revised grade: science and mathematics 4.