Wirral Metropolitan College
Reinspection of Governance: November 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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Wirral Metropolitan College
North West Region

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Background

Wirral Metropolitan College was inspected in March 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 69/99. Provision in governance was graded 5 and the audit service opinion was that governance was weak.

There were no significant strengths. The weaknesses were: the failure of the corporation to ensure effective management of the college; failure to ensure the solvency of the college; failure to secure accurate management information on which to base corporation decisions; insufficient involvement in monitoring the implementation of the strategic plan; lack of performance indicators to measure college and governor performance; lack of attention to monitoring academic performance and quality assurance; and failure to ensure effective links with curriculum areas.

Following inspection the college prepared an action plan to address the weaknesses. This, together with a new self-assessment report, provided the main basis for the reinspection that took place in November 2000. An inspector and auditor worked for a total of eight days. The work of the auditor also included the reinspection of financial management. They held meetings with governors, managers, teachers and the clerk and examined a wide range of college documentation. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Assessment

Governors have made significant progress in addressing the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. They produced a revised recovery plan in July1999 and have actively overseen its implementation. The objectives of the plan focused on working towards solvency, improving the curriculum and reducing the amount of excess accommodation. Good progress has been made on achieving these objectives. In particular, the college returned to normal banking arrangements in May 2000 and resumed a normal trading position with major creditors. All income targets were met or exceeded and repayment of the debt to the FEFC is underway. The first phase of the accommodation strategy has been implemented successfully. Governors play an appropriate role in reviewing the mission and in setting the strategic direction of the college. A wide range of information including analyses of demographic, economic and social trends has informed the strategic plan and programme area business plans. Governors use performance indicators effectively to review progress on each strategic objective and monitor college performance. They ensure that college managers propose and implement effective action to address weaknesses. Attendance at the monthly corporation board meetings is good. Governors ask challenging questions and thoroughly interrogate the statistics and reports presented before making decisions. They have a clear understanding of the need to take action to address issues that will result in loss of revenue to the college. The corporation benefits from the services of an experienced, independent clerk who provides comprehensive and objective advice on procedures. Governors undertake rigorous self-assessment and have produced an action plan to address the weaknesses identified. For example, they noted in their self-assessment report that the profile of governors in the college is low and they need to further develop understanding of the curriculum and services. Action taken includes twinning individual governors with curriculum and service areas, inviting programme managers and student representatives to governor seminars and attending information evenings hosted by programme teams.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The board substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. Governors were faced with the problems of governing a college in extreme financial difficulties. They have met monthly so that they can closely monitor the financial position; each governor receives monthly management accounts. They have ensured that the financial targets set in the recovery plan have been achieved for the year ended 31 July 2000. However, the financial state of the college remains extremely weak. As at the 31 July 2000, the college had negative income and expenditure figures of £11.3 million and net current liabilities of £3.2 million.

The board has established a committee structure that includes an audit committee, a remuneration committee, a quality standards and achievements committee and a governance and search committee. The audit committee adheres to its terms of reference and has a very clear view of its independent monitoring role. The board has reviewed all aspects of governance and agreed its own policies and procedures. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of some of these. The board has not yet monitored important college policies such as the equal opportunities policy, though it has recently established an annual cycle to ensure that policy review and evaluation takes place systematically.

Revised grade: governance 3.