Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England 2003-05

Sharing good practice

Contents

Summary

This report is based upon the findings of 105 reviews of higher education (HE) delivered in 76 further education colleges (FECs) in England. The reviews were carried out in the academic years 2003-04 and 2004-05. Half of the reviews involved two or more related subjects. Nearly 70 per cent of the programmes reviewed lead to Higher National Certificate or Diploma awards, nearly nine per cent to Foundation Degrees (FDs), about 21 per cent to honours degrees and one per cent to postgraduate diplomas and/or master's degrees.

Most students' education reviewed is at the appropriate standard and of either approved or commendable quality. Overall, reviewers had confidence in the academic standards. In around 86 per cent of the reviews, the reviewers had confidence in the standards of all the programmes. In seven per cent, they had confidence in standards in some, but not all, of the programmes reviewed. They had no confidence in the standard of the programmes in the remainder of reviews.

In around 55 per cent of cases the quality of learning opportunities offered to students is of commendable quality in each of the three aspects: teaching and learning; student progression; and learning resources. However, 10 per cent of reviews resulted in one or more judgements of failing quality in these aspects. In the remainder of the reviews, quality of learning opportunities was at least approved.

Twelve of the reviews were re-reviews following a judgement of no confidence in academic standards and/or a failing judgement in an aspect of the quality of learning opportunities in the preceding years. Reviewers reported confidence in academic standards and approved the quality of learning opportunities in 10 of the 12 re-reviews. The 10 colleges concerned had responded rapidly and effectively to address and improve the areas for development that the reviewers had identified in their report of the first review.

The 2003-05 reviews provide evidence of much good practice, and significant development of the provision of HE by FECs. There are two areas of particular note: the introduction of FDs, and an increased level of effective engagement with the Academic Infrastructure published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Colleges are addressing national as well as immediate local and regional needs. In many cases, employers and professional bodies have informed curriculum development. This is evident in the linking of theory and practice demonstrated, for example, in live employer-led projects.

Colleges can be proud of their achievements in widening participation in HE and the considerable value they add for many of their students. Effective recruitment, retention and progression practices are worthy of dissemination. Some colleges find it difficult to demonstrate their success because of a shortage of statistical data and analysis.

Students benefit from a close working relationship with committed staff who provide a supportive and caring learning environment. Classes are often small and tutors know their students well. The reviews indicate that where tutorial support is timetabled and the outcomes recorded, they provide the most effective academic and pastoral guidance for students.

Students develop a wide range of subject-specific and transferable skills, and attain specified levels of practical skills. Developing intellectual, cognitive skills to a similar level represents a significant challenge for many colleges. The development of an HE-specific teaching and learning strategy, informed by current professional practice, can be an important first step for these colleges.

HE-related staff development and the time allocated to it also pose a challenge for many college senior managers. Most staff reported that their class contact hours and programme administration left little time for them to keep abreast of subject developments and that this made it difficult for them to keep up to date with knowledge of current activities and trends essential for students to progress, either within HE or in employment.

Most students have access to the physical resources they need for their programmes. Learning resource centres (LRCs) support students' learning, particularly where the LRC staff liaise with teaching teams. In those colleges with a policy for updating specialist equipment to reflect current industry standards, students have access to state of the art equipment. Some of the HE programmes reviewed were within subjects that have been designated Centres of Vocational Excellence, for example, for engineering or for the performance arts.

Colleges generally have well-established policies and procedures to maintain and enhance standards and quality. Many are adapting these to address HE issues. Although these policies and procedures are often effective, some colleges are over-reliant on informal methods. The incomplete implementation of procedures at subject level in many colleges reduces opportunities for staff to identify ways of maintaining and enhancing the quality and standards of the provision.

Colleges have a major challenge to raise the profile and understanding of HE internally and to ensure greater staff and student awareness of the demands of HE study. Many colleges have sought to develop a clear HE strategy, often reflected in the appointment of key staff and sometimes in the demarcation of designated areas for HE teaching and social accommodation.

This report bears testimony to the many and varied strengths of HE in FECs. There is much to celebrate and there is also a range of matters to be addressed to enhance students' learning. There is considerable scope for increased sharing of experience between the colleges and their partner HE institutions.

Introduction: the findings of academic review

1   This report provides a summary of the findings of the academic reviews of subjects of directly and consortium-funded higher education (HE) in further education colleges (FECs) in England between September 2003 and July 2005. It is the second overview report of HE in FECs published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and follows the 2003 publication *Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England*, which summarised the findings of academic reviews between January 2002 and June 2003. QAA carried out 105 reviews at the request of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Twelve of the reviews were re-reviews of colleges that had received a no confidence judgement in standards and/or a failing judgement for learning opportunities in previous years.

2   The chief purposes of the report are:

●   to highlight and disseminate elements of good practice identified by the reviewers, and

●   to assist current and potential providers in developing and enhancing their provision.

3   Within this report, the identification of good practice is based on the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), published by QAA. The *Code of practice* is intended to help institutions by providing a framework within which they can consider the effectiveness of their individual approaches to a range of HE activities. The reviewers have paid close attention to the precepts in the *Code of practice* and have identified for comment some of the ways in which colleges have addressed the intentions of the precepts and introduced changes in their practice. Pinpointing this good practice is key to enabling colleges to build on their strengths and to identify areas for further development.

4   Around 7,000 students were registered on the programmes reviewed, the majority studying full-time. The reviews were conducted in 76 colleges across England. The colleges ranged from those serving large conurbations, for example, Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham, to colleges serving dispersed rural areas such as Cornwall. The subjects ranged from those in which the college is the sole provider, for example, Art and Design, and Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, to subjects such as Computing which is delivered in many colleges across England. The highest number of reviews in any one college was three.

5   The reviews were conducted using the method outlined in the *Handbook for academic review,* published in 2000 and the *Handbook for academic review: England, 2004.* The reviews included programmes within the following subject areas:

●   Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences

●   Allied Health Professions

●   Art and Design

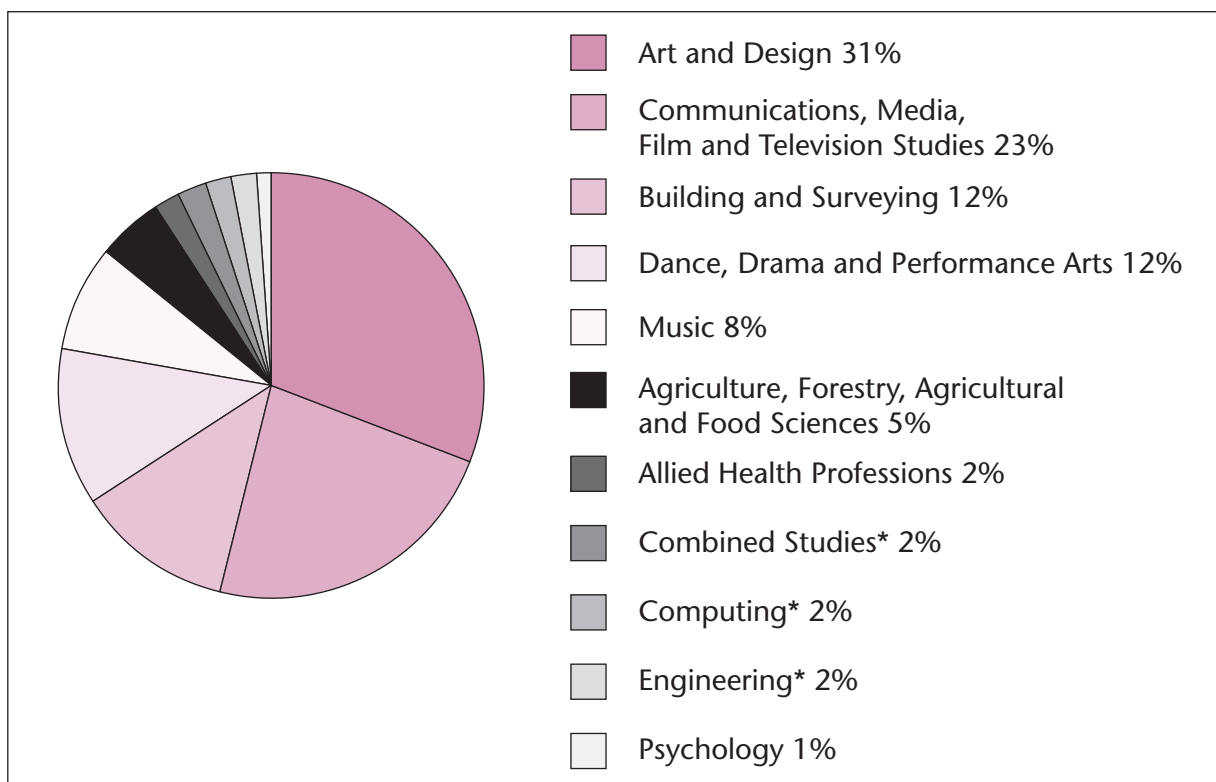●   Building and Surveying

●   Combined Studies

- Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies
- Computing
- Dance, Drama and Performance Arts
- Engineering
- Music
- Psychology.

6   The full list of subjects reviewed at each college is given in Annex 1. Half of the reviews were aggregates, that is they covered more than one related subject; for example, Engineering with Computing. Art and Design was by far the largest subject area reviewed, comprising 21 single subject reviews and 23 aggregate reviews.

7   Of the programmes reviewed, 69 per cent lead to Higher National Certificates or Diplomas (HNC/D), about 9 per cent to Foundation Degrees (FDs), 21 per cent to bachelor's degrees with honours and 1 per cent to postgraduate diplomas and/or master's degrees.

8   The distribution of the 105 reviews across subjects is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Distribution of subjects reviewed between September 2003 and July 2005

Art and Design 31%

Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies 23%

Building and Surveying 12%

Dance, Drama and Performance Arts 12%

Music 8%

Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences 5%

Allied Health Professions 2%

Combined Studies* 2%

Computing* 2%

Engineering* 2%

Psychology 1%

(* includes re-reviews)

Academic standards judgements

9   Reviewers had confidence in the standard of all programmes reviewed in around 86 per cent of cases. In seven per cent, they reached differentiated judgements, with confidence in the standards of only some of the programmes reviewed. There was one case of limited confidence and reviewers had no confidence in standards in six per cent of reviews. Figure 2 presents the academic standards judgments.

10   Differentiated judgements apply in reviews where the reviewers have judged one of the programmes to be of a differing standard or quality of learning opportunities to other programmes in the review. For example, in an Engineering with Computing review, the reviewers may have confidence in the standards of Computing but no confidence in Engineering. In the latter case, only the Engineering programme would be the subject of the re-review.

Figure 2 Judgements of academic standards in 105 reviews

Confidence judgement 86%

Differentiated judgement 7%

No confidence judgement 7%
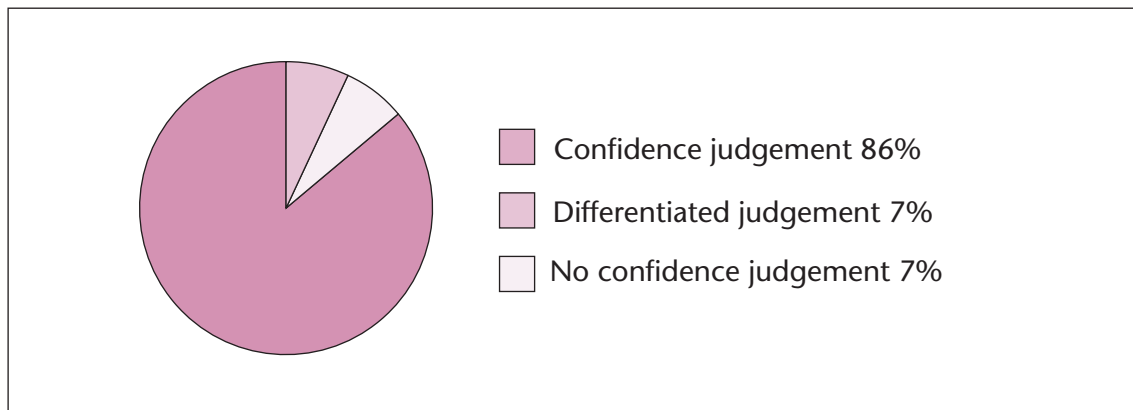
Quality of learning opportunities judgements

11 Most students' education is of approved or commendable quality. The summary of the judgements for the three aspects of the quality of learning opportunities: teaching and learning; student progression; and learning resources are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 Summary of the quality of learning opportunities for 105 reviews
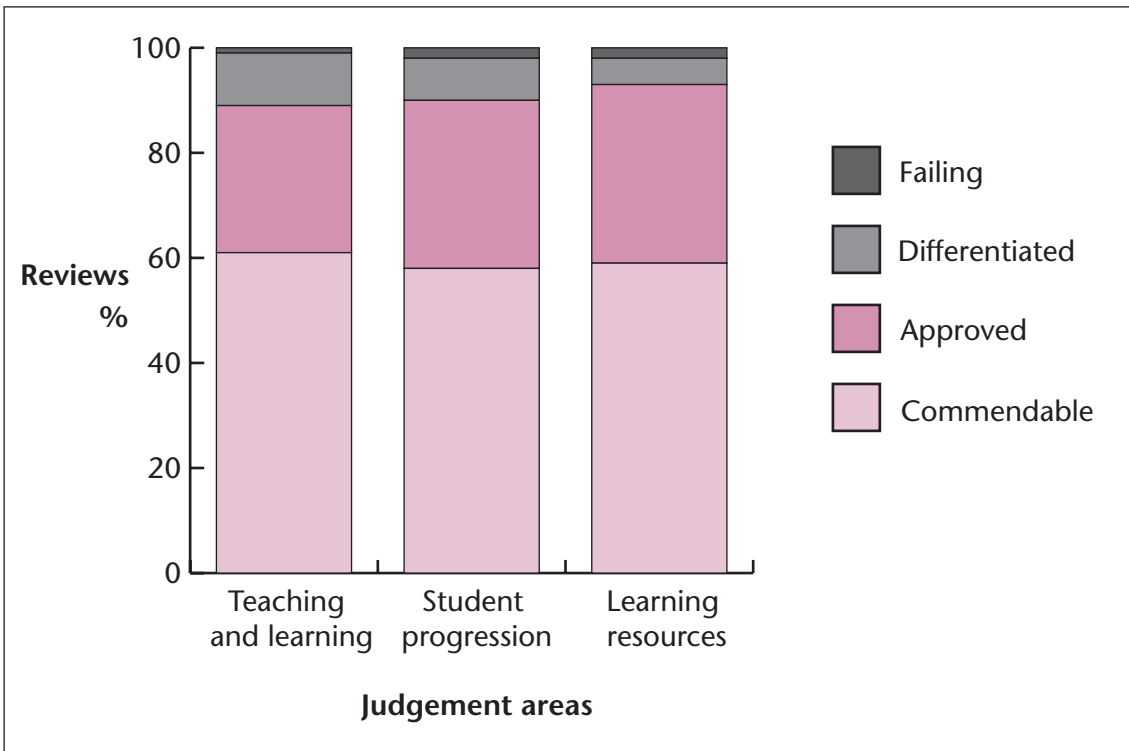
12 Of the 105 reviews, 80 resulted in a judgement of commendable in at least one aspect of the quality of learning opportunities. A large number of reviews, 30, resulted in the judgement of commendable for all three aspects. In another 31 reviews, two aspects were commendable and the third approved. Around 20 reviews resulted in differentiated judgements for one or more aspects of the quality of learning opportunities. Typically, these were judgements of commendable for some programmes and approved for others. In two cases, the differentiated judgements included a failing judgement for one programme.

13 Most colleges that received a judgement of no confidence in standards and/or a failing judgement in the quality of learning opportunities in 2002-04 have responded speedily and effectively to raise the standards of their programmes and/or to improve the quality of the students' learning opportunities. Ten of the 12 re-reviews resulted in judgements of confidence in academic standards and approved or commendable judgements for each of the aspects of the quality of learning opportunities. The judgements for both the first and the re-reviews are represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Outcomes of 12 first reviews (2002-04) and of subjects re-reviewed in 2005-06
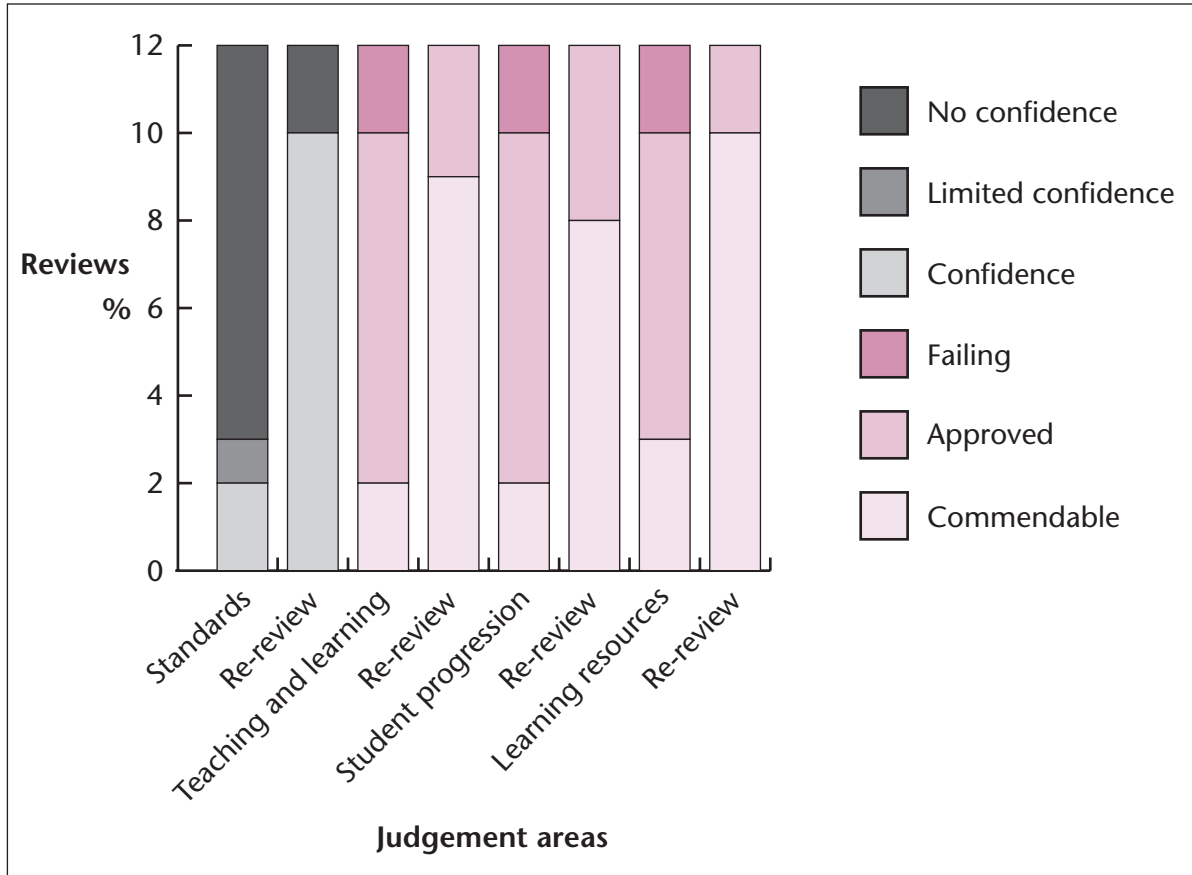
Overview of outcomes from academic review

Academic standards

Aims

14   The overwhelming majority of colleges set their aims within their college mission. These, unfailingly, refer to widening participation and to serving local employment and other needs, such as '…to help bring prosperity to the region and its people in partnership with business and local communities through learning at its best and most accessible to all'. Some go further and seek to address regional and national needs: '…to provide a basis for specialised HE studies that respond to local, regional and national regeneration priorities and skills shortages'. Progression to employment and further study is another key theme. All colleges seek to provide these opportunities within a supportive learning environment, although this is sometimes implicit rather than explicit in the aims [Hull College: Art and Design, SR13/2004. Oldham College: Art and Design/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR21/2004] .

15   There is considerable emphasis on vocational relevance, for example, to enable students to make an immediate contribution to employment', or to '...enable students to become effective in the workplace'. This is reflected in aims referring to professional and practical outcomes, in which the acquisition of subject-specific and generic, transferable skills feature prominently. There are fewer references to higher order skills. Where they occur they often relate to degree provision, although the same college aims '… to supply an intellectually challenging programme that creates the basis for future study' for its HNC programme. Another aims '…to develop critical thinking and creative problem solving [Liverpool Community College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2004. Barnsley College: Allied Health Professions SR36/2004. Barking College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR108/2004].

16   In addition to the continued emphasis on preparation for employment, there is increased emphasis on preparing students for further HE study. These aims are often explicitly stated as to '…provide students with knowledge, understanding, and motivation as a basis for graduate and postgraduate studies', and to'…successfully make the transition to a related degree programme'. This progression is explicit in the case of articulation of FD graduates to honours degree programmes [Guildford College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR76/2004. Wiltshire College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR16/2004].

17   Another recurring theme is to '…widen access for students who would not otherwise have the opportunity to enter HE…' or more specifically, '…to widen access to HE by providing students from non-traditional backgrounds with a nationally recognised vocational qualification, which provides a basis for entry to university honours degree courses' [Tameside College: Art and Design, SR08/2004. Askham Bryan College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR44/2004. Oldham College: Art and Design/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR21/2004].

18 All of the colleges seek to provide an appropriate learning environment for their students. Where this is stated explicitly, it is reflected in aims such as to '…provide a supportive learning environment that enables students to achieve their potential', or, '… to provide opportunities for all students to fulfil their potential through appropriate support and guidance'. Students' comments during reviews overwhelmingly confirm that the support in colleges is readily available and willingly given [North Trafford College: Music, SR56/2004. Barnsley College: English/Geography/History/Politics and International Relations, SR24/2004].

Summary of features of good practice: aims

- There is considerable emphasis on vocational relevance (paragraph 15).

- The acquisition of subject-specific and generic, transferable skills features prominently (paragraph 15).

- There is increased emphasis on preparing students for further HE study (paragraph 16).

- There is a strong focus on widening access to HE by providing students from non-traditional backgrounds with a nationally recognised vocational qualification (paragraph 17).

- Students confirm that the support in FECs is readily available and willingly given (paragraph 18).

Intended learning outcomes

19 In almost all cases, intended learning outcomes (ILOs) are clearly defined. Some are more obviously consistent with the college's vision and mission than others. In a small number of cases, it is difficult to identify the position of the programme within the college's portfolio.

20 An increasing number of colleges have engaged effectively with the Academic Infrastructure. Colleges have embraced the *Code of Practice*, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements to varying degrees. The use of programme specifications is now well established. For example, in one case it was reported that ILOs '…have been developed with reference to the relevant subject benchmark statement..' and that 'Programme specifications are detailed with regard to aims, curricula, assessment and learning and align with the FHEQ. In a number of instances, the position of HNCs within the FHEQ has been confusing to colleges. This has been resolved in the revised *National Qualifications Framework* (NQF), which places HNC at Level I [Bradford College: Allied Health Professions, SR39/2004].

21 Colleges have, in the main, referred to the appropriate subject benchmark statement(s) although, in a few instances, reviewers considered this perfunctory. As subject benchmark statements are set at honours degree level, some colleges do not consider this relevant to HNC/D. Other colleges, however, use them effectively as a valuable guide to the appropriate level of study and the material which students should master to progress to honours degree in the same subject. Effective practice

included relating and adapting the ILOs to reflect and address local circumstances, such as local labour market requirements. One report stated that 'Industry partners were invited to comment on the relevance of the ILOs to employability demands'. In some cases this meant addressing identified skills shortages and in others anticipating increased demand for particular skills and areas of employment [Newcastle College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR23/2004].

22 Employers have been directly involved in drawing up ILOs in some colleges and in others, a professional body qualification has been incorporated into the programme [Capel Manor College and Guildford College of Further and Higher Education: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, respectively, SR92 and SR76/2004].

23 Although generally strong on practical knowledge and subject-specific and transferable skills, ILOs are frequently insufficiently developed in relation to intellectual skills such as critical analysis and reflection. As such, the demands they place upon students are often limited and do not prepare students sufficiently for further HE study. This can result in insufficient differentiation between HNC/D and undergraduate programmes, and, sometimes, insufficient progression between levels. This has led to reports commenting that 'The aims of the two levels of the HNC/D programme are not differentiated…' and, in an HND '…all pathways share the same outcomes and there was little evidence of the distinctiveness of different pathways'. Occasionally, a large choice of options makes it difficult for colleges to ensure that a student will have the opportunity to achieve all ILOs, for example, '…the large choice of second-year options could make it difficult to guarantee that the course studied by an individual student covers all the subject-specific knowledge and understanding' [Blackpool & the Fylde: Art and Design, SR48/2004. Richmond Adult & Community College: Art and Design, SR95/2004. Askham Bryan College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR44/2004].

24 ILOs are contained in programme specifications and are communicated to students primarily through programme handbooks. Most providers also include them in assignment briefs to ensure that students are aware of the ILOs being addressed by any particular assessment. In some instances, the ILOs are too complicated and detailed to be useful to students. There is scope for wider and clearer explanation of ILOs to students before enrolment and during induction to ensure that they choose a programme which will meet their aspirations. One report identified the following example of good practice: '…ILOs are clearly defined, well documented and well understood by students. They are communicated at induction and further reinforced in published assignment briefs, supplemented by substantial contextual matter' [Newcastle College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR23/2004].

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Summary of features of good practice: intended learning outcomes

- Colleges have engaged effectively with the Academic Infrastructure (paragraph 20).

- Colleges have related and adapted the ILOs to reflect and address local circumstances, such as local labour market requirements (paragraph 21).

- Employers have been directly involved in drawing up ILOs (paragraph 22).

- ILOs are included in assignment briefs to ensure that students are aware which ILOs are being addressed (paragraph 24).

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Curricula

25 Most of the programmes are vocational and curricula reflect the requirements of the awarding bodies. In most cases this is Edexcel, although a significant number offer programmes validated by higher education institutions (HEIs). Programmes validated by HEIs include FDs, honours degrees and postgraduate awards. A considerable number of colleges have adapted Edexcel guidelines to reflect institutional and local needs. However, in some colleges subject staff mistakenly believe that they are unable to exercise discretion in their interpretation of the guidelines to reflect the needs of the students and the areas they serve.

26 Curricula are generally designed to provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to allow them to meet the ILOs. In a few cases, however, the design of the curriculum did not enable students to achieve all of the programme aims and ILOs [Askham Bryan College and Capel Manor College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, respectively SR44 and SR92/2004].

27 Many colleges chart and record the development of students' knowledge and skills through the levels of the programme, although in a few cases progression is not made sufficiently clear. The most successful programmes ensure an effective link between theory and practice at all levels. There are good examples of the integration of transferable or common skills, such as working with others and time management within the curriculum. Typically, this occurs where the students' acquisition of skills is reinforced through feedback mechanisms, including group critiques, and tested through the assessment process [Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology: Art and Design/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR003/2004].

28 The breadth and depth of the curricula are often constrained by staffing levels and expertise. On occasions this leads to a curriculum which appropriately reflects the staff profile but offers no real choice to students. The distinction between HNC and HND provision is not always clear. Many colleges run HNC/D programmes where the HND is seen as a natural top-up of the HNC, involving an almost seamless transition from Certificate to Diploma. In these cases, students study 10 core units for the HNC and take a further six optional units to achieve the HND. In other colleges, the HNCs and HNDs in the same subject are quite distinct offerings and students may enrol directly on to a two-year, 16-unit HND.

29   In the majority of cases, there remains scope for further development of students' critical and analytical skills. Projects, particularly those in the final year of degree programmes, are useful in this respect: '…academic and intellectual progression is reflected in the levels of challenge established by project content at each stage'. However, some reports indicate that not all project work is sufficiently rigorous.

30   There is less evidence of staff scholarship informing the curricula than is the case in HEIs. In the majority of cases, college staff have a higher teaching load than their counterparts in HEIs. This high level of class contact reduces the time available for scholarship and research activities and is commonly cited by college staff as a major constraint to ensuring the currency of the curriculum. For example, in one case reviewers commented: '…limited staff academic research and scholarship activities means that the informing and updating of the academic aspects of the curricula are underdeveloped' [Swindon College: Art and Design, SR007/2004. Yorkshire Coast College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, not yet published].

31   The students and staff regard the practical nature of the curricula as a significant strength, and they value highly the work experience opportunities provided. These often lead directly to employment on completion of the programme. Where staff engage in professional practice this informs and enhances the curriculum. Contributions from practitioners (as either part-time or guest lecturers), employers, professional bodies and sector representatives, all make valuable contributions to currency and enhance the relevance of the curricula.

Summary of features of good practice: curricula

- Curricula reflect the requirements of the awarding bodies (paragraph 25).

- Colleges chart and record the development of knowledge and skills though the levels of the programme (paragraph 27).

- Successful programmes have an effective link between theory and practice at all levels (paragraph 27).

- Students and staff regard the practical nature of the curricula as a significant strength (paragraph 31).

- Where staff engage in professional practice this informs and enhances the curriculum (paragraph 31).

Assessment

32   The *Code of Practice* summarises good practice in assessment, particularly *Section 6: Assessment of students*. Although colleges have generally increased their use of the Academic Infrastructure, the reviewers found relatively little formal engagement with the *Code of practice*.

33   Overwhelmingly, colleges ensure that assessment tasks are designed to address, and are capable of testing, the ILOs. In the best examples students engage with assessments which are suitably varied, appropriate to level and vocationally relevant.

This is often summarised by the use of a matrix which matches the assessment to the ILOs being addressed. In some cases, the matrix is used to support formative feedback during personal tutorials and peer assessment in group critiques. However, in other cases, assessment processes need to be developed further, for example, to record and measure students' outcomes against assessment methods.

34   The use of practical, work-related assignments is a major strength of the colleges. The most effective assignments are current projects which students work on within their employing organisations. This provides tangible benefits to the student, the employer and the college. In the best examples, students give presentations to an audience of their peers, college and with colleagues.

35   Students' practical skills are assessed effectively, however, their intellectual higher order skills, such as the ability to synthesise, analyse and evaluate, are often insufficiently tested. Some colleges measure and record student attainment by using differentiated grades, while others adopt a threshold approach and award only passes. Reviewers consider that this threshold approach deprives the students of the opportunity to have a higher level of attainment recorded [South Thames: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Music, SR122/2004].

36   Formative assessment is used to good effect by many colleges and this benefits students. Nearly all students receive timely, supportive feedback to enhance their learning. In some instances, there is scope for more prompt return of marked work and more detailed feedback. The best cases identified are where prompt feedback is directed at the students' attainment of the ILOs and an indication given of how the work could be improved, including for those receiving high grades.

37   The assessment of group work continues to pose a challenge for many colleges. Integrative assignments requiring students to draw on material from more than one unit, while appropriate, often leads to work which can not be attributed to individual students. This makes it difficult for staff to give focused feedback. Generally, ensuring that individual grades fairly reflect each student's contributions remains a problem. A number of colleges use, in part, some form of student group self-assessment which refers appropriately to the ILOs. In some cases this is effective. In one good example, all members of a group have an opportunity to evaluate their own progress on the assessment feedback sheet which they submit with their assignments.

38   A large majority of colleges have established rigorous and secure assessment procedures. These include procedures with clearly defined policies on matters such as late submission of work, extenuating circumstances and plagiarism, which are applied uniformly and consistently. However, reviewers comment that marking is on occasions generous and plagiarism may go undetected, resulting in students obtaining higher grades than are warranted for their work. Internal verification systems are widely employed, but are not always effective at the subject level. This problem occurs, for example, when the process is seen merely as a mechanistic exercise or is not recorded. Effective practice exists where assessment policies ensure rigorous assessment practices that match the intention of the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students.*

39   Edexcel's introduction of an external examiner system to replace the external verifier system has resulted in a more evaluative and developmental reporting format. In general, external examiners are highly supportive of the assessment of HE undertaken in the colleges. Response to external examiner comment is, however, not always easily tracked. In a small number of cases the response is left to programme teams. Formal examination or assessment boards are not widely employed except in colleges who are in partnership with a validating HEI. Colleges would generally benefit from greater engagement with the section of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* to develop good practice.

40   Good practice in assessment design is summed up in one report where '…There is a challenging mix of course work, practical and project work, placement and examinations which are vocationally relevant and imaginative, relate to the module content and enable students to develop theory and analytical skills in a vocational context' [Sparsholt College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR49/2004].

Summary of features of good practice: student assessment

- Colleges ensure that assessment tasks are designed to address, and are capable of testing, the ILOs (paragraph 33).

- A major strength of colleges is the use of practical, work-related assignments (paragraph 34).

- Formative assessment is used to good effect by many colleges and this benefits students (paragraph 36).

- Prompt feedback is directed at the students' attainment of the ILOs and an indication given of how the work could be improved, including for those receiving high grades (paragraph 36).

Student achievement

41   Individual reports confirm considerable added-value for many students who enter with minimal qualifications: '…A significant proportion of students achieve either Merit or Distinction grades on many of their units, demonstrating considerable added-value in achievement relative to their entry qualifications'. Although colleges are justifiably proud of their record in adding value to the individual student's achievement, some do not record this in a systematic manner and, therefore, find it difficult to demonstrate. Reviewers invariably find that students whom they meet are impressive in their commitment and progress and their appreciation of the opportunities they have been offered [North Tyneside College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts SR60/2004].

42   Students often demonstrate high levels of achievement in respect of subject knowledge and in the development of some transferable or common skills. However, the ability to write in appropriate language and communicate effectively is sometimes weak. The lack of skills, such as referencing, is frequently criticised in review reports.

Students' information and communications technology (ICT) and presentation skills are often impressive, but their work often lacks attention to detail, such as correct spelling. These are summed up by the following: '…at the lower end of the marking range … students' work frequently lacked a developed, analytical and conceptual approach, drew on a small number of sources, were sometimes poorly expressed, and suffered defects in presentation' [Wirral Metropolitan College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR73/2004].

43   The ability to integrate theory and practice is valued highly by employers and students, but it is not always in evidence. Employers often comment that they are looking for a combination of subject skills and transferable or common skills, or the ability to analyse problems from the wider perspective which students obtain from engagement with HE. This is most evident where programmes stretch students' intellectual abilities: '…the academic work seen was distinctive in terms of the integration of theory and practice and the development of analytical and transferable skills' [Northbrook College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR121/2004].

44   External examiners generally praise the level of achievement of students, particularly the progress of those who are the first in their family to study at HE level. However, in some instances there is a lack of understanding by staff, and consequently by students, of the requirements of HE-level courses; the challenge of their transition from FE-level study is not recognised. This is reflected in reports, for example, '…there is a need to ensure that students are able to demonstrate achievement of the higher-level skills such as analysis and critical evaluation appropriate to the level of study', and that '…work for level 2 units generally lacks the focus on "independence in systematic enquiry and analysis" that is specified in generic Edexcel descriptors for that level'. In such cases, students may be disadvantaged if they intend to seek further HE qualifications [South Nottingham College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR78/2004. Strode College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR100/2004].

Summary of features of good practice: student achievement

- Programmes provide considerable added-value for many students who enter with minimal qualifications (paragraph 41).

- Students are impressive in their commitment and progress and/or their appreciation of the opportunities they have been offered (paragraph 41).

- Students often demonstrate high levels of achievement in respect of subject knowledge (paragraph 42).

- The ability to integrate theory and practice is valued highly by employers and students (paragraph 43).

- External examiners generally praise the level of achievement of students, particularly the progress of those who are the first in their family to study at HE level (paragraph 44).

Quality of learning opportunities

Teaching and learning

45   HE in FECs is characterised by a highly supportive learning environment in which there is a strong rapport between staff and students. Students are highly appreciative of the efforts and guidance of their teachers.

46   Students experience a range of approaches to teaching and learning. The best teaching and learning methods use live projects and direct contributions from practitioners, including part-time staff. Full-time staff usually have current knowledge of the relevant vocational area and may use their professional practice to inform their teaching and students' learning. This has prompted comments such as '…staff are enthusiastic, dedicated and well informed of current developments. Tutors are able to draw regularly upon knowledge of professional practice, extensive industry links and their own work to inform… teaching'. The result is a vocationally relevant, practically based learning experience for students [Newcastle College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR23/2004].

47   Many students are accepted under colleges' widening access policies, some with non-traditional entry qualifications. Colleges place considerable emphasis on further developing and enhancing students' study skills to help them with the transition to higher-level study and provide the preparation for the increased demands of HE. Staff offer considerable developmental support outside timetabled teaching hours. Generally, small class sizes enable attention to be paid to each student's development and enable them to pursue relevant career aspirations, a feature reflected in one report: '…teaching is conducted in small cohesive groups. This supports the individual development of students who confirmed the value of the approach'. However, very small classes can inhibit the effective use of group work [Richmond Adult and Community College: Art and Design, SR95/2004] .

48   College staff generally teach a wider range of specialisms within their subject than their counterparts in HEIs. Typically they teach at FE level as well as HE programmes within their college and for a higher number of hours each week. Their teaching may be less informed by scholarly activity and research because of the corresponding lack of time and the greater breadth of coverage. As a result, student learning can lack depth. As noted elsewhere, a theme running through the reports is the limited development and application of students' subject knowledge and skills in applying independent critical judgement.

49   The development of an HE teaching and learning strategy, as distinct from the strategy for teaching and learning for FE-level programmes, can be helpful in ensuring that students are prepared for advanced study, by raising their awareness of the particular challenges that characterise HE programmes.

50   Colleges generally have well-established systems for teaching observation. Although, typically, these are used to inform the staff appraisal process, increasingly, peer observation schemes which focus on enhancement are being introduced in parallel. The use of role models, Advanced Practitioners, to demonstrate and

disseminate good teaching practice within colleges, is another positive step to enhance the quality of teaching. Reviewers confirm that benefits accruing from these developments are greatest where they operate within a clearly-defined HE teaching and learning strategy.

Summary of features of good practice: teaching and learning

- A range of approaches to teaching and learning is employed within a highly supportive learning environment for students (paragraph 46).

- Colleges place considerable emphasis on further developing and enhancing students' study skills to help them with the transition to higher-level study (paragraph 47).

- Small class sizes enable attention to be paid to each student's development (paragraph 47).

- Colleges have well-established systems for teaching observation (paragraph 50).

- Role models, Advanced Practitioners, demonstrate and disseminate good teaching practice (paragraph 50).

Student progression

51 In general, admissions arrangements are handled well. The majority of colleges recruit through a central operation, although this is often reinforced by helpful contributions from subject staff. The reviews confirm that retention is enhanced where central services and subject staff work cooperatively during the admissions stages. Screening of students' abilities to identify learning support needs is often well developed: 'All prospective students are interviewed, and the process is used to identify specific learning needs…and their level of attainment in mathematics and English'. In the best examples, this also includes analysis of students' preferred learning styles. [Guildford College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR76/2004]

52 Colleges know the nature of their intake very well, particularly where a significant number of students progress from other programmes within the college. Taster days for potential students, where they experience the college environment, meet the staff and experience a range of potential programmes of study, represent good practice. Mature students seeking to return to study confirmed that they found these particularly helpful. Students who indicated that they had '…entered onto their programmes with trepidation, felt that staff had eased their transition into enthusiastic and confident learners'. In a number of cases, there is a need to develop accreditation of prior learning (APL), including experiential learning, in order to facilitate wider access to HE. Reference to the QAA publication, *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning. September 2004*, may assist colleges in addressing this area. Full details can be found on QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp APL is particularly important where there are prospective students with limited or unconventional academic qualifications and/or relevant experience.

53 Reviewers found some cases of incorrect information, including that in prospectuses, distributed to students. There is inconsistency in the quality and quantity of information provided, even in related subjects in a college. A key requirement is that information is written in a style which is accessible and comprehensible to the students, otherwise they do not use it. Regular updating of information is essential [Sparsholt College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR49/2004].

54 All colleges provide induction for students, typically for one or two days but occasionally over a week. Central services and subject staff combine to deliver a range of activities. Students may meet their personal tutors at this point. However, there is scope at this stage for greater emphasis on referencing guidelines and definitions and warnings on plagiarism. Reviewers found cases where students reported that they had been overwhelmed with information and would have appreciated an extended induction period to ensure exposure to appropriate knowledge and skills when they need them [Liverpool Community College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2004].

55 Effective practice includes the close monitoring of the students most at risk of leaving the programme prematurely, particularly in the first few weeks. The availability of students from later years of the programme to offer peer support is good practice, although not always practicable, for example, in programmes of only two years duration [Sparsholt College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR49/2004].

56 Frequent formal and informal opportunities for students to discuss their general progress and voice any concerns contribute to good retention rates and can provide helpful records of issues raised and actions proposed. Generally, colleges are stronger at providing informal opportunities for academic guidance than regular, timetabled sessions. Use of formal sessions provides a structure and may reach students who are reticent about initiating contact. In over half of the reviews, the reviewers found retention and progression were higher where formal tutorial arrangements were in place.

57 Student support services are generally provided centrally. These are usually comprehensive and appreciated by the students, although part-time students do not always make full use of them. The most effective student support occurs where, while maintaining confidentiality, there is close liaison between central and subject staff.

58 Retention rates vary considerably across subjects and colleges. Collection of relevant data is not always well developed and could usefully be strengthened to allow greater analysis of varying rates. For example, the retention of students progressing from an FE-level programme in the college compared with external entrants is seldom considered systematically. In addition, many colleges need to analyse the number of the students who enrol at the beginning of year one and who complete the programme and achieve the qualification.

59 Student progression within programmes is generally very high with a majority of programmes recording rates in excess of 70 per cent from the end of year one to the

start of year two. However, retention of part-time students is, on occasions, a problem and due, in part, to acute changes in the fortunes of their employers. Opportunities for progression within colleges vary considerably, but have increased substantially in recent years, with HNCs leading to HNDs or FDs and on to honours degree programmes. Upon completion, increasing numbers of students are progressing to further study. Where a college is in partnership with a validating HEI, communications between the two are generally formalised, with students receiving advice and guidance about progression. For other colleges, the extent of communication with HEIs is variable, as is the provision of advice and guidance given to students [Guildford College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR76/2004].

60 Careers advice is generally provided centrally and is supplemented by subject staff who use their knowledge and professional contacts to offer specialist advice. Skills such as interview techniques and curriculum vitae writing are often developed within programmes. However, in a number of cases, students regarded this as focused unduly on the needs of students taking FE-level programmes as reflected in the following report: '…students considered that it is focused strongly on the requirements of further education students and does not cater for their progression onto honours degree programmes' [Capel Manor College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR92/2004].

Summary of features of good practice: student progression

- Retention is enhanced where central services and subject staff work cooperatively to admit prospective students (paragraph 51).

- There are well-developed arrangements for screening students' abilities, to identify learning support needs (paragraph 51).

- Colleges know the nature of their intake very well (paragraph 52).

- Taster days for potential students represent good practice (paragraph 52).

- The close monitoring of the students most at risk of leaving the programme prematurely encourages student retention (paragraph 55).

- Retention and progression are higher where formal tutorial arrangements are in place (paragraph 56).

- Student progression within programmes is generally high (paragraph 59).

Learning resources

61 The reports indicate that academic and support staff are a key strength of HE in FEC provision and contribute current or recent professional experience: 'staff have considerable professional experience. It is College policy to appoint staff with appropriate industrial experience and to support them in their career shift'. College staff are qualified in their specialism and generally hold teaching qualifications. New staff appointed on the basis of their professional qualifications are offered the post on the understanding that they attain a teaching qualification within the early years of their teaching career [Yorkshire Coast College: Communications, Media, Film and Television/Dance and Drama and Performance, SR131/2004].

62   The use of practising professionals as part-time or guest lecturers brings additional currency to the provision: '…access to the expertise of the relatively high proportion of part-time teaching staff on the programmes significantly enhances the student learning experience'. In the best cases, full and part-time staff are integrated to form effective teams: '…both programme leaders are Advanced Practitioners and they provide considerable support for staff, especially less experienced part-time staff. This is to be commended, as is the range of guest speakers of international repute'. Effective team building is facilitated by joint participation of full and part-time tutors in staff development and other events. The reviews show that this is best achieved by paying part-time staff for their participation. As is often the case, teaching teams are small. This makes it difficult for colleges to replace specialist staff at short notice, for example, in the case of staff illness, and it reduces the quality of the students' learning opportunities if other staff are required to teach outside their specialisms. Staff development activities are predominately designed to meet the requirements of FE level programmes. While there can be useful sharing of the more generic aspects, the development is often not wholly appropriate for those delivering HE [Liverpool Community College Dance SR27/2004. Yorkshire Coast College: Comms, yet to be published].

63   Learning resource centres (LRCs) generally offer a welcoming and supportive learning environment and are most effective when there is close liaison between LRC and subject staff. Regular attendance by LRC staff at subject meetings and the identification of named link staff are good practice. In the best examples, there is provision of accommodation suitable for both individual quiet study and group work. Book, and particularly journal stock, is sometimes limited and outdated: '…many [textbooks] are outdated and some have not been borrowed for several years'. However, where colleges have partnership arrangements with an HEI, students generally have access to the HEI's LRC and on-line learning materials. This results in a welcome increase in students' access to electronic journals and databases. Students sometimes claim that they are not aware of opportunities offered by the interlibrary loans services or comment that they have reading rights at HEI's LRCs but no borrowing rights. There remains scope for enhancement in this area. The sharing of physical learning resources between colleges and their HEI partners is an area offering significant benefit to students if problems of their access can be overcome [Richmond upon Thames College; Building & Surveying, SR70/2004].

64   There is often a noticeable lack of an HE strategy in college LRCs and insufficient encouragement of students to use learning materials such as academic journals. This is reflected in reading lists that rely largely on set texts which are frequently out of date.

65   The limited opening hours of LRCs and other resource areas, identified in a number of reports, do not encourage or facilitate student independent study to the level typical in HEIs: '…students had expressed concern that they could not access key areas outside direct contact hours and that other, non-HE students, including some in the 14-16 age range, use these same areas'. This contrasts with the experience described at West Kent College which provides '…a well-resourced, dedicated and exclusive HE resource centre' [Manchester College of Art and Technology: Art and Design/Music SR63/2004. West Kent College: Building & Surveying, SR89/2004].

66 Information and communications technology (ICT) provision is generally good and often excellent. In the best examples, hardware and software are updated regularly to reflect industry standards. Technician support and accessibility to computing facilities outside timetabled hours is key to effective student support. More cost-effective use is made of such facilities when students are allowed to use ICT teaching rooms if computers are not in use, as well as open-access facilities. Remote access to computing facilities is generally being extended, but cannot be seen as an alternative to extended campus access. Although many students now have their own computing facilities, this is by no means universal.

67 The use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) is in its infancy, although some colleges have made considerable progress. Where the VLE is used, it is regarded as effective and is welcomed by the students: '…the provision of on-line briefs, timetables, studio booking information, hardware manuals and some teaching notes supports the students' learning'. VLEs offer significant potential benefit to students, but at present require further development and implementation for HE programmes [The People's College, Nottingham: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SRE65/2004. West Herts College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR98/2004].

68 Specialist equipment is frequently identified as a major strength of the provision. State-of-the-art equipment underpins student learning effectively in many subjects. A number of colleges have been designated as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE). Achievement of CoVE status brings additional funding from the Learning and Skills Council and this is instrumental in enhancing learning resources. A CoVE is primarily funded for the use of students on FE-level programmes so access to these facilities by HE students is often less than they had expected.

Summary of features of good practice: learning resources

- Part-time or guest lecturers whose professional practice brings additional currency to the provision (paragraph 62).

- Staff with academic and professional qualifications plus recent relevant professional experience matched to the curricula they teach (paragraph 61 and 62).

- Effective teams of well integrated full and part-time staff (paragraph 62).

- Effective team building facilitated by joint participation of full and part-time tutors in staff development and other events (paragraph 62).

- Regular attendance by LRC staff at subject meetings and the identification of named link staff which leads to provision of appropriate learning resources for students (paragraph 63).

- hardware and software are updated regularly to reflect industry standards (paragraph 66).

- Specialist equipment that is fit for purpose or state-of-the-art is updated regularly to reflect current industry standards and professional practice (paragraphs 66 and 68).

Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

69 Colleges' quality assurance procedures are, in most cases, well established and robust. Some colleges continue to develop policies and procedures for the maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality specific to their HE programmes. In the best cases, the policies and procedures apply not just to quality assurance arrangements, but also to the development of HE-specific teaching and learning policies, assessment strategies and learning resources arrangements. These procedures include annual monitoring with considerable emphasis on self-evaluation and the use of action plans. They are most effective when they are closely monitored and recorded, to provide an effective check on progress made: '…there is clear evidence of monitoring and subsequent action planning from programme level through the HE Academic Board and to Faculty development planning'. The greatest progress has been made in colleges where one member of staff has oversight of all HE provision within the college. This is further enhanced where designated staff have responsibilities for leading specific HE subjects and programmes [Doncaster College: Art and Design, SR103/2004].

70 In 10 of the 12 re-reviews, the colleges concerned had responded rapidly and effectively to address and improve the areas reviewers found to be in need of immediate development. This prompt action has enhanced the quality and standards of their students' experience and resulted in judgements of confidence in standards and at least approved quality of learning opportunities at re-review.

71 Generally, college procedures are based largely on those that have been developed to meet the requirements of FE-level programmes. These policies and procedures are not always entirely appropriate, or suitable, for HE provision: '…there are clear quality assurance procedures in place, based largely on the needs of the FE sector…they offer little evidence that the requirements of HE are addressed routinely or explicitly', and, '…useful sets of college quality procedures have been put in place, based on an FE model…However, attention should be given to ensuring that they…include a greater HE focus' [Hertford Regional College: Art and Design, SR26/2004. East Surry College: Art and Design, SR20/2004. The Calderdale College: Art and Design, SR55/2004].

72 Documentation is not always sufficiently geared towards the requirements of HE students, but where HE quality handbooks have been developed, the quality is often impressive: '…A process designed specifically for higher education programmes was introduced in 2001-02. This is encapsulated in its Higher Education Curriculum Quality Procedures Document which conveys essential documentation and sets out guidelines with great clarity'. However, while significant progress has been made at college management level, this is not always sufficiently embedded at programme level where consideration of quality assurance procedures is sometimes limited [South Thames College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Music, SR122/2004].

73 Procedures for the collection, collation and analysis of management information, particularly student statistical data, are not always well developed. As a result, during reviews, colleges were not always able to substantiate easily their claims, particularly

in relation to student retention, successful completion and first destinations. In some cases there is an over-reliance on informality and anecdotal evidence. This is usually associated with small teams of staff and small groups of students.

74 Evidence from some reviews suggests that the engagement with the quality assurance process is perfunctory. In the best cases, subject benchmark statements, the FHEQ and the *Code of practice* are used to inform internal reviews and quality assurance systems. Quality assurance procedures are also effective where comments are detailed and resulting actions are clearly documented. In some cases, college systems had not been applied in the subject being reviewed. In one case, it was reported that, '…the efficacy of the [college] process relies on a reflective and self-critical programme log…the reviewers found little evidence of such an approach being taken, and no evidence…within the programme log'. In many cases, colleges would benefit from closer attention to the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme monitoring and review* [Oaklands College: Building and Surveying, SR72/2004. NESCOT: yet to be published. St Helens College: Building & Surveying, SR71/2004. York College: Art and Design, SR50/2004/2004. Blackburn College: Art and Design, SR29/2004. Oldham College: Art and Design/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR21/2004].

75 The level of colleges' responses to both University-appointed external examiners and Edexcel's external examiners is variable. In the best cases, the reports are used first by a nominated member of staff, such as the Principal or Academic Registrar, who forwards them with comments and a request for a response, to the subject staff. When agreed, a prompt and full response is made to the external examiner: '…Of particular note are the detailed responses to external examiners' and external verifiers' reports, with external examiners commenting favourably on this practice'. In some cases, however, this is dealt with largely at subject level and is not always recorded. In a few instances there was no evidence of any response. *The Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, sets out good practice in relation to external examining and colleges may benefit from comparing their own practice with that described in the *Code* [Suffolk College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies/Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR17/2004].

76 The use of formally constituted examination or assessment boards similar to those employed in HEIs is in its infancy in colleges, with the notable exception of those validated by a partner HEI. As a result, there are limited opportunities for colleges to monitor student performance across units and programmes. Consequently, it is proving difficult for many colleges to fully demonstrate consistency of standards and quality across units and programmes for all students.

77 The views of students are largely gathered using questionnaires. Colleges normally use a common format student perception of college (SPOC) questionnaire. These indicate that students are generally happy with the responsiveness of colleges to their views. Often, however, issues raised by students are addressed informally rather than through formal channels. This makes recording and evidencing enhancement difficult and limits feedback to students. The process would be strengthened by the introduction of more formal arrangements which are recorded appropriately: 'while it is evident that students find the staff in all subjects to be

accessible and supportive, it is also clear that the more formal systems for drawing together student feedback are variable in their effectiveness for quality enhancement purposes' [Liverpool Community College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2004].

78 There are limited opportunities within colleges for staff who teach HE programmes to share experience and good practice, although some colleges disseminate effective practice. Similarly, reviewers found few instances of joint activities between colleges and their partner HEIs: 'opportunities exist for the staff and students of both institutions to share resources, facilities and events, but the distance between them was seen to be inhibiting this. There was no evidence of joint activity' [Stockport College of Further and Higher Education: Art and Design, SR37/2004].

79 The colleges' self-evaluations for the reviews often lacked self-critical and evaluative comments supported by evidence. In many cases, they contained insufficient detail, and particularly lacked reliable student statistics. The extent of consultation about the development of the self-evaluation varied considerably. In the best examples, subject and central services staff, current and former students, and employers are regularly involved in internal review and evaluation, and the self-evaluation document was based on the documents resulting from these processes. '…The thorough and well-evidenced self evaluation document is based on outcomes of the internal Quality Review Process…, which includes input from both internal and external sources….It is clearly referenced, evaluative and supported by cited evidence'. In a number of cases, students were not systematically consulted [The Sheffield College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR77/2004].

Summary of features of good practice: maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

- Well-established college quality assurance procedures are applied effectively to HE programme procedures (paragraph 69).

- Systems for the maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality have been developed specifically for the HE programmes (paragraph 69).

- Teaching and learning policies, assessment strategies and learning resources arrangements are devised specifically for HE and applied effectively (paragraph 69).

- A specified member of staff has oversight of all HE provision within the college (paragraph 69).

- High quality of handbooks developed specifically for HE students, (paragraph 72).

- Internal reviews and quality assurance systems refer to subject benchmark statements, the FHEQ and the *Code of practice* (paragraph 74).

- Colleges are responsive to students' comments and report their response to these comments regularly to students (paragraph 77).

Conclusions

80 Higher education (HE) in further education colleges (FECs) has many strengths. The most successful HE in FECs reviewed is characterised by:

- aims that are aligned with the college mission and reflect the college's place in its community, and focus on widening access to HE (paragraphs 14, 17)

- intended learning outcomes (ILOs) that demonstrate engagement with the Academic Infrastructure; address identified local or national needs, have been informed by external sources including employers and are communicated clearly to students and others (paragraphs 20, 21, 22, 24)

- programme specifications that are comprehensive, but written in a style which is accessible to students (paragraph 24)

- curricula that are designed explicitly to facilitate students' achievement of the ILOs, link theory with practice and enable students' intellectual progression through the levels (paragraphs 26, 27)

- curricula that are kept current through staff professional practice and through wide consultation processes with employers and professional bodies (paragraph 30, 31)

- assessments that are suitably varied, appropriate to level and vocationally relevant; practical, work-related assignments are a particular strength (paragraph 33, 34)

- assessment strategies that link assessments and feedback to students explicitly with ILOs (paragraphs 36)

- rigorous assessment procedures with clearly defined policies on matters such as late submission of work, extenuating circumstances and plagiarism that are applied uniformly and consistently (paragraph 38)

- student work which demonstrates clear linkage of theory and practice and correct use of technical language at the appropriate level (paragraph 42, 43, 44)

- teaching and learning strategies that are informed by current professional practice, require students to be actively engaged in their learning and take cognisance of students' preferred learning styles (paragraphs 46)

- a wide range of approaches to teaching and learning employed within a highly supportive learning environment for students (paragraphs 46, 47)

- careful diagnosis of each student's learning support needs and the provision of advice or support to address these needs (paragraphs 47, 51)

- high levels of student retention to which central services and subject staff contribute through their support of students from their admission to the completion of their programmes (paragraph 51, 52)

- documentation which is correct and up-to-date and written in a style which is accessible to students (paragraph 53)

- effective induction which includes guidance for students on referencing and avoiding plagiarism (paragraph 54)

- close monitoring and support of students at risk of leaving the programme prematurely, particularly in the first few weeks (paragraphs 55)

- formal tutorial arrangements which contribute to a level of high student retention (paragraph 56)

- clear progression routes which are available and understood by students and are supported by HE-focused careers advice (paragraph 59)

- staff with academic and professional qualifications and recent relevant professional experience matched to the curricula of the programmes they teach and who benefit from specific HE-related continuing professional development activities (paragraphs 61, 62)

- effective teams of full and part-time staff who share staff development and other activities (paragraph 62)

- close liaison between subject staff and learning resource centre staff to ensure that the provision encourages and supports students' independent learning (paragraph 63)

- students' access to learning resources for independent study at times that are convenient for full-time, day-release and other part-time students (paragraphs 64, 65, 66)

- college policies for maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality which emphasise self-evaluation, involve closely monitored action-planning, and include effective pre and post-assessment internal verification procedures (paragraphs 65, 69)

- specialist learning resources that are fit-for-purpose and sometimes, state of the art, reflecting current industry standards and professional practice, and which are updated regularly (paragraphs 66, 68)

- a clearly defined and documented HE policy that encompasses all aspects of delivery, including teaching and learning, assessment, quality assurance and the effective sharing of good practice (paragraph 69)

- a designated member of staff who has oversight of all HE provision within the college and other designated members of staff, each of whom lead an overview of an HE programme and/or subject (paragraph 69)

- formal, as well as informal, procedures for hearing student opinion and for feeding back the college's response to their comments to the students (paragraph 72)

- staff development for academic and support staff that identifies and addresses needs specific to HE programmes (paragraph 73)

- focused collection, collation and analysis of key management information, particularly student statistics such as entry profiles, progression rates and first-destinations to enable staff to identify emerging issues (paragraph 73)

- staff who make regular use of external reference points such as the Academic Infrastructure to support the quality and standard of the HE programmes (paragraph 74)

- clear and well-understood procedures for receiving and responding to external examiners' reports (paragraph 75)

- a forum where HE experience and good practice may be shared and planning coordinated (paragraph 78)

- self-evaluation which is informed by structured contributions from students, lecturers, employers and others (paragraph 79)

Recommendations for further development

81 There is substantial evidence of good and improving practice in colleges, however, there are number of areas which colleges need to address to maintain and enhance the standards and quality of their HE programmes. The sharing of good practice both within and between colleges and their partner HE institutions can provide solutions and offers considerable potential benefit. Areas for further development include:

- further engagement with the Academic Infrastructure to include drawing up programme specifications that are comprehensive, written in a style which is accessible to students, communicated to students early and clearly, draw appropriately on award and subject benchmark statements and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of Practice*) and are aligned appropriately within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (paragraphs 20, 21, 23)

- the development of ILOs and curricula that include appropriate higher level cognitive skills and demonstrate distinctive characteristics relevant to the subject and the level of programme, and enable a clear distinction to be made between different programmes (paragraphs 23, 29, 42, 43, 44)

- provision of sufficient time for staff delivering HE programmes to engage in relevant scholarship and/or research to inform the curricula and their teaching (paragraphs 30, 48)

- clear assessment policies and procedures which ensure reliability and integrity of the assessment process (paragraphs 33, 35, 36, 38, 39)

- greater use of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, particularly *Section 6: Assessment of students*, to inform assessment strategies and practice, including more explicit linking of assessment to ILOs, testing of students' attainment of higher level cognitive skills and the provision of prompt, constructive feedback on students' work (paragraphs 35, 38, 42, 43, 44)

- consideration of means of assessing students' individual contributions to group work, and disaggregating student performance in integrative assignments which address ILOs for more than one unit (paragraph 37)

- means of ensuring more effective internal verification procedures that are implemented fully for each programme and a more systematic approach to responding to external examiners as discussed in the *Code of practice: Section 4, External examining* (paragraphs 38, 77)

- systematic recording of each student's achievements (paragraph 41)

- development of scholarship of staff teaching on HE programmes (paragraph 48)

- the development of a teaching and learning strategy for HE programmes (paragraphs 49, 50)

- cooperative working between central services and subject staff to provide effective support and guidance for students (paragraphs 51, 54)

- ensuring that documentation, including that which is distributed pre-entry, is up-to-date, accurate and suitably focused on the needs of the readers (paragraph 53)

- placing greater emphasis on referencing guidelines and definitions, and warnings on plagiarism during students' induction (paragraph 54)

- reducing the over-reliance on informality in academic guidance and ensuring that appropriate records are kept (paragraph 56)

- providing advice and guidance to students on routes of progression to further study as well as to employment (paragraphs 59, 60)

- sufficient teaching staff with qualifications and experience matched to curricula to maintain the quality and standards of the HE programmes during periods of unplanned staff absence (paragraph 62)

- increasing the number of current books and journals to support HE programmes (paragraph 63)

- sharing learning resources between colleges and their HEI partners, and ensuring that students understand these arrangements (paragraph 63)

- developing an HE strategy for library and learning resource centres (paragraph 64)

- increasing students' access to library, learning resources and information communications technology (paragraphs 64, 65, 66)

- establishing an HE focus that pervades and informs all aspects of the provision, refers to the Academic Infrastructure and ensures that policies and practice are appropriate to HE programmes and is applied to all HE programmes (paragraphs 69, 71, 72, 74)

- more comprehensive collection, collation and analysis of key management information, particularly that relating to student admissions, progression and first-destinations (paragraph 73)

- opportunities for staff to consider student performance across units and programmes rather than just unit by unit to help to assure consistency of standards and quality across and within programmes (paragraph 76).

Annex 1: Academic reviews in FECs in 2003-05

Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences

Askham Bryan College
Bishop Burton College
Capel Manor College
Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
Sparsholt College
Wiltshire College

Allied Health Professions

Accrington and Rossendale College
Barnsley College
Bradford College

Art & Design

Bedford College
Bishop Burton College
Blackburn College
Blackpool and The Fylde College
City College Coventry*
Calderdale Colleges Corporation*
Croydon College
City of Westminster College
Doncaster College
East Surrey College
Herefordshire College of Art and Design
Hertford Regional College
Hull College
Leicester College
Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education, Birmingham*
New College Nottingham*
Oldham College*
Richmond Adult and Community College
Salisbury College
Solihull College
South Nottingham College*
Stockport College of Further and Higher Education
Stourbridge College
Swindon College
Tameside College
The Walsall College of Arts and Technology*
West Hertfordshire College
Wirral Metropolitan College
York College

* denotes an aggregate review

Building and Surveying

Blackpool and The Fylde College
City of Bath College
City of Westminster College
Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology
Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
Highbury College, Portsmouth
Lincoln College
Liverpool Community College
Manchester College of Arts and Technology
North East Surrey College of Technology
Oaklands College
Richmond Upon Thames College
Sandwell College of Further and Higher Education
St Helens College
West Kent College
West Nottinghamshire College

Combined Studies

Barnsley College
Doncaster College

Communication, Media, Film & Television Studies

Accrington and Rossendale College
Barking College*
Chichester College of Arts, Science & Technology
Farnborough College of Technology*
Grimsby College
Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
Liverpool Community College*
Newcastle College*
North East Worcestershire College*
North Tyneside College*
Northbrook College Sussex*
Peterborough Regional College*
Sandwell College
South Thames College*
St Helens College
Strode College
Suffolk College, Ipswich*
The People's College Nottingham
The Sheffield College*
The Solihull College
Wirral Metropolitan College
Yorkshire Coast College of Further and Higher Education

* denotes an aggregate review

Computing

Herefordshire College of Technology*
Leeds College of Technology
The Calderdale Colleges Corporation
Westminster Kingsway College

Dance, Drama & Performance Arts

Carshalton College*
City College Manchester*
Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology*
Havering College of Further and Higher Education*
Hull College
New College Nottingham*
North East Surrey College of Technology
Oldham College
Peterborough College
Suffolk College
West Hertfordshire College
Worcester College of Technology*
Yorkshire Coast College of Further and Higher Education

Engineering

City College Coventry
Cornwall College
Yeovil College

Music

Manchester College of Arts and Technology
North Trafford College of Further Education
South Downs College

Psychology

Suffolk College

Social Policy and Administration and Social Work

Barnsley College
Doncaster College*

Annex 2: Reviewers who took part in academic reviews of subjects of HE in FECs in 2003-05

Mr Gavin Allanwood
Dr Christopher Amodio
Mr Tim Appelbee
Professor Allan Ashworth
Mr Duncan Backhouse
Dr George Bainbridge
Mr Jonathan Baker
Ms Marie Baker
Mr Andrew Bates
Dr C Paul Beckwith
Professor Clive Behagg
Mr Ian Blackhall
Ms Penny Blackie
Ms Bernadette Blair
Mr Timothy Blinko
Ms Joanna Breslin
Miss M Glenda Brindle
Mr Frank Brogan
Eur Ing Geoffrey Browning
Mr Maldwyn Buckland
Professor John Bull
Mr Kevin Burnside
Mr David Burrows
Mr Roger Bush
Mr Jeffery H Butel
Mr Michael Caddis
Mrs Helen Campbell
Mr Ross Campbell
Mr Tom W Cantwell
Professor Derek Cassidy
Eur Ing Alan Chantler
Mr Keith Chapman
Dr Val Chapman
Mr David Cheetham
Mr Tony Clancy
Dr Andrea Clarke
Mr Peter Clarke
Miss Elspeth Clements
Dr David Collins
Mr Paul Collins
Ms Jo Compton
Mr Roger Conlon
Dr Paul Conway
Dr Andrew Cooper
Mrs Alison Cotgrave

Dr Dee Davenport
Mr Allan Davies
Mr Damian Day
Professor Anthony Dean
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