

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

**General
Certificate of
Education
Advanced
Level and
Advanced
Supplementary
Qualifications**

National Survey Report

December 1994

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector in England. It discharges the duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the sector every four years. The Council's inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

College inspections involve both full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have specialist knowledge and experience in the areas they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member from outside the world of education and a nominated member of staff from the college being inspected.

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CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
Context	2
GCE advanced level qualifications	2
Range of provision	6
Organisation and management	10
Course structure	11
Recruitment, guidance and support of students	16
Entry requirements	16
Pre-entry guidance	18
Induction	22
Tutorial support and counselling	25
Guidance on higher education and careers	30
Teaching and learning	34
The quality of teaching	35
Schemes of work	40
Core skills	41
The world of work	43
Assessment and achievement	44
Examination results	46
Retention rates	51
Resources	52
Management of resources	52
Teachers	53
Equipment/learning resources	54
Accommodation	56
Quality assurance	57
Staff development	61
Conclusions and issues	62

SUMMARY

This report is concerned with General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) and advanced supplementary (AS) courses in the further education sector in England. Some 3,300 GCE lessons were inspected during 1993-94. They covered the wide range of A level subjects on offer in the colleges and involved over 40,000 students in over 100 colleges.

GCE A levels are the best known of advanced level qualifications, widely accepted by students, teachers, employers and the public at large as reliable indicators of academic achievement which provide the passport to higher education. Many students who achieve two A levels go on to higher education. GCE AS courses, worth half a full A level, were introduced in 1990 in an attempt to broaden the A level curriculum. Their relatively low take-up is, in part, due to students' perceptions that the workload is disproportionately high when compared with a full GCE A level course and that some higher education institutions are reluctant to accept them as entry qualifications.

In 1993-94, there were 304,100 GCE AS/A level examination entries in further education colleges in England, 41 per cent of the total for all schools and colleges. However, distribution across the sector was uneven. The sixth form colleges, with 5 per cent of all student enrolments in the sector, accounted for 36 per cent of GCE AS/A level entries from the sector. Some tertiary and general further education colleges also offered an extensive range of GCE courses but others provided few courses or none at all.

A distinguishing feature of GCE provision in the further education sector is the relatively high proportion of older students, including adults, many of whom study part time and/or follow one-year rather than two-year courses. In 1993, 51 per cent of all GCE AS/A level examination entries in further education colleges were from students aged 19 or over compared with 13 per cent in schools. In colleges other than sixth form and tertiary colleges, the proportion was 76 per cent and the requirements for entry to A level courses were also generally lower than in other sector institutions.

There were many positive aspects to the work which was inspected. Most of the colleges offered a wide range of subjects, which were available full time and part time. GCE A level syllabuses presented opportunities for study in depth and teachers set appropriate levels of intellectual challenge. The majority of lessons were well planned and effective. Sixty-two per cent were considered to have strengths which outweighed the weaknesses. Assessment was well structured and there were examples of high-quality work from students across a range of subjects. Full-time students benefited from well-planned induction and guidance although the quality of guidance and induction for part-time students was poor.

Many of the weaknesses in A level provision stem from the traditional emphasis on single subjects at the expense of developing comprehensive A level programmes for students. Many GCE A level programmes consist of no more than a two or three- subject curriculum. Little attention is given to the interrelationships between subjects or the development of core skills. Most GCE A level students receive an inadequate introduction to information technology and many science students, for example, find that their weak grasp of basic mathematics is a barrier to progress. Although the quality of individual lessons is acceptable, many students experience a narrow range of methods of teaching and learning across their overall programme. Students taking a GCE A level subject in combination with vocational courses often find difficulty in adjusting to the styles of teaching and assessment at GCE A level which are narrower in scope and different from those they experience in their other areas of study.

Many tertiary and sixth form colleges set high standards in their GCE programmes and these are reflected in healthy retention rates and the good examination achievements of their students. Students in general further education colleges fare less well in examinations. To some extent, the weaker performance reflects the diversity and lower entry qualifications of students in these colleges. However, average results are lower than in the rest of the sector even when account is taken of the value added to students' qualifications by comparing performance at GCSE with A level achievements. Retention rates on some courses are also unacceptably low when compared with those on vocational courses in the same institutions.

A two-year programme, assessed by terminal examinations, which is the norm for the majority of GCE A level students, allows little flexibility. It disadvantages students who make up their minds about courses of study and subsequently come to regret the choice they have made. Those who drop their courses, or who take their final examinations and fail, are rarely able to take away any record of partial achievement. There is, therefore, a heavy responsibility on colleges to ensure that candidates are advised effectively and that those who embark on GCE A level courses stand a reasonable chance of success.

There is some indication that colleges are beginning to raise their entry qualifications and to reduce the number of exemptions and special cases. These are important steps in the light of the evidence available that students with less than five GCSE passes at grade C or above fare badly at A level. Colleges have also had some success in persuading students that genuine alternatives to A level study, for example, access courses, BTEC national courses or GNVQs, are in their best interest. This has often been achieved in the face of pressures resulting from the high status accorded to A levels by students, parents and teachers. Colleges within the sector still have work to do in helping to build parity of esteem for alternatives to GCE A level.

In many respects, GCE A level courses are adequately resourced. Areas of weakness include the limited opportunities for students to use information technology, the inadequate book stock and study space in some libraries and the lack of adequate learning resources to encourage and enable students to study on their own. In order to maintain the wide range of GCE A level provision, many institutions continue to offer subjects which recruit small groups of students and these are expensive of staff time. Teachers are well-qualified academically but few have any experience of industry or commerce and there has been little staff development for updating subject knowledge and developing teaching skills. Teachers provide students with expert advice on progress to higher education but many GCE A level students lack the broad careers education which might include work experience, work shadowing or an understanding of industry gained from visiting speakers or outside visits.

Quality assurance for GCE A level courses is weak. A level examination results are presented in easily accessible forms and many colleges measure the value added to students' levels of achievement between entry and final examination. However, these and other performance indicators are rarely used effectively. In particular, there is a reluctance to give careful consideration to the influence which course organisation, the quality of teaching and methods of learning may have on students' achievements.

GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION ADVANCED LEVEL AND ADVANCED SUPPLEMENTARY QUALIFICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1 This report is concerned with the provision of courses in further education sector colleges leading to General Certificate of Education advanced (GCE A level) and advanced supplementary (AS) awards. It is based on inspections of GCE provision in 100 colleges, more than 20 per cent of the further education sector, which were carried out between October 1993 and May 1994. Twenty-four of the colleges were sixth form colleges. Approximately 3,300 GCE teaching sessions involving over 40,000 students were inspected. Meetings were held with staff and students and samples of students' work were examined. Direct observation of guidance and recruitment procedures and workshop and tutorial activities also contributed to the evidence.

CONTEXT

GCE Advanced Level Qualifications

2 GCE A level is the most well-established and widely-known advanced level qualification. GCE AS qualifications are less well known. They were introduced in 1990 to broaden the range of subjects which a student can pursue at advanced level. AS courses require study to the same academic level as full GCE A level courses, but they are intended to involve only half the study time and are worth half the full A level qualification. Entries to AS examinations made up only 6 per cent of the total GCE entries in 1993.

3 In 1993, 41 per cent of all entries to GCE A level and AS examinations came from students attending further education sector colleges. The overall increase in entries in 1993 compared with 1992 was 7 per cent; the increase in entries from further education sector colleges was almost 10 per cent. Entries from colleges comprised 38 per cent of the total number of AS examination entries. Students taking GCE A level and AS subjects in further education sector colleges tend to be older than those in schools. In 1993, students aged 19 or over comprised 51 per cent of all GCE AS/A level examination entries within the sector: in sixth form colleges they formed 23 per cent of the entries, in tertiary colleges 46 per cent, and in other further education colleges 76 per cent. The comparative figure for schools was 13 per cent.

4 Sixth form colleges provided some 36 per cent of the GCE A level examination entries from the further education sector in 1993 although only 5 per cent of the students enrolled in further education sector colleges attended sixth forms colleges. In some sixth form colleges, GCE courses account for more than 90 per cent of the provision. Some

tertiary and general further education colleges also offer an extensive range of GCE A/AS courses but other colleges in the sector provide few or none at all.

5 GCE A level and AS qualifications make an important contribution to lifetime target 3 of the national targets for education and training which states that 'by the year 2000, 50 per cent of the workforce will be qualified to at least NVQ level 3 or its equivalent of two GCE A level passes.' In the academic year 1992-93, over 146,000 18 year olds, some 24 per cent of the 18 year old population, achieved two or more GCE A level passes. Of these, 46,000 (31.5 per cent) had studied in further education sector colleges.

Range of Provision

6 The range and extent of GCE provision in further education sector colleges vary. Many colleges offer more than 25 subjects and some large colleges offer more than 40. In certain subjects, colleges frequently offer more than one syllabus, sometimes from different examination boards. GCE foreign language courses, most commonly in the major European languages such as French, German and Spanish, are widely available. More recently, local community languages such as Gujarati, Chinese, Turkish, Greek and Urdu have been introduced. Subjects which are not commonly available in pre-16 education, such as psychology, attract large numbers of students. As in the schools, the numbers of students taking mathematics and physics are steadily declining. GCE general studies courses are offered by many colleges, and sixth form colleges often include general studies as part of the curriculum for all students. Students entering for the general studies A level generally receive less formal preparation for the examination than for their other A level subjects.

7 More than three-quarters of all entries at GCE A level are in 10 subjects. In order of popularity these are: English, social studies, mathematics, general studies, biology, history, geography, chemistry, physics, and art and design. However, there are significant differences between types of institution. Social studies, for example, is the most popular subject in general further education and tertiary colleges with 23 per cent of all entries, but it accounts for only 10 per cent of sixth form college entries and 5 per cent of school entries. General studies as a subject accounts for less than 3 per cent of entries in tertiary and general further education colleges compared with 9 per cent in sixth form colleges and 11 per cent in schools.

8 Subjects which have a vocational bias are chosen more frequently by general further education and tertiary college students than by students at school. Art and design and business studies are more popular in the further education sector than in schools. Conversely, humanities (history and geography) and physical sciences (physics and chemistry) are less popular in further education colleges.

9 A few sixth form colleges have significant GCE AS provision which has been planned to meet the curricular objectives of breadth and balance. In most colleges, however, there is no AS provision or it is provided in very few subjects. Occasionally, an AS course is offered in combination with a vocational course; for example, human biology as part of a vocational course in caring or a foreign language as part of a business studies programme. Often the reasons for students taking GCE AS examinations are pragmatic. For example, a GCE AS course was substituted for a GCE A level subject which had been dropped at the end of the first year; an AS subject was adopted because of predicted failure at GCE A level; and study for an AS subject was seen as a step towards a full GCE A level as part of a modular course. Separate provision for AS teaching is rare. Often students following AS courses are taught within GCE A level classes. Where there is separate GCE AS provision it is more likely to occur in sixth form colleges than in general further education colleges. Two reasons are given for the relatively low take up of AS courses as compared with GCE A level. Some higher education admissions tutors are perceived to be reluctant to accept AS qualifications for entry to higher education. Many students also feel that the workload on AS courses is greater than they were led to believe, exceeding half that required for a full GCE A level course.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

10 The contribution of GCE A/AS provision to colleges' strategic plans is not always clear. This is particularly the case where GCE work is only a small part of a college's curriculum. Nearly all colleges refer to the national training and education targets in their strategic plans but few colleges indicate clearly the precise contribution their GCE provision makes to the achievement of these targets at the local level. The introduction of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) has led to a re-examination of provision for full-time students in many colleges, prompting some consideration of the role of GCE work in meeting colleges' strategic objectives.

Course Structure

11 Timetabling arrangements are often sufficiently flexible to allow students virtually unrestricted choice of subjects. Constraints on subject combinations occur only in a few small centres. However, in some large colleges, the need for students to move between sites in order to study different subjects imposes practical constraints. Some general further education colleges are trying to solve this problem by developing GCE A level or sixth-form centres.

12 Many GCE A level programmes consist of no more than a two or three-subject curriculum and there is little attention given to the development of core skills or the interrelationships between subjects. GCE subjects are regarded by most teachers as free-standing courses rather than as components of a student's learning programme. The

links between subjects are not made either by teachers or students and many opportunities for applying to one subject the knowledge and skills learned in another are lost. This problem is particularly acute when related areas of study are under different line management systems; for example when English is in one department and communication studies in another. Many colleges are currently encouraging the combination of GNVQ advanced courses with GCE A levels, perceiving this as a way of enhancing students' prospects of gaining a higher education place. However, this can lead to an even less well-integrated programme for students as the approaches to study and assessment methods are so different.

13 Many colleges offer a variety of modes of attendance including full-time, part-time day and evening, and occasionally distance learning. One-year GCE courses, on either a full-time or part-time basis, are widely available. Many colleges allow students who wish to retake a subject at GCE A level in one year to take up spare places in full-time two-year courses; some offer separate courses for students who wish to improve upon existing achievements or to gain a qualification in a new subject over one year. Typically, full-time students on one-year courses are in the 19-25 age range. Despite the age profile of students on such courses, timetabling arrangements are often inflexible and do not suit part-time or older students. Unemployed adults form a significant proportion of part-time day classes. These students are usually seeking to improve their level of general educational attainment by studying GCE A levels. Adult students, many of whom are bi-lingual, are now the largest group of students following GCE A level language courses in some general further education colleges.

14 Evening class students most commonly follow a one-year programme by attendance on one evening a week. Frequently, GCE A level evening class students are women over 25 who are aiming to change vocational direction or rejoin the work force, most commonly to gain a job in the caring professions. Other evening students take GCE courses simply for their personal satisfaction: the achievement of a qualification is not their main objective.

15 There are some imaginative schemes to redress traditional gender and ethnic imbalances amongst students in some GCE A level subjects. Examples of good practice include schemes aimed to attract women to physics courses and Asian students to study GCE A level technology.

RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT OF STUDENTS

Entry Requirements

16 Most colleges set entry requirements for GCE courses, at least for students in the 16 to 19 age range. The commonest entry requirements for full-time students are four or five GCSE passes at grade C or above. Specific entry requirements are set for some subjects, most commonly science, mathematics and languages. Students who do not achieve the

entry requirement frequently join a GCSE course in the hope of improving grades sufficiently to be accepted for a GCE A level course in the following year. There is some evidence that colleges are tightening their entry requirements by reducing the number of exemptions and special cases. In view of the findings presented in the report, *Unfinished Business*, published by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Audit Commission, that entrants with less than five GCE passes at Grade C fared badly at GCE A level, such increased selectivity is likely to be in students' best interests, particularly since A level courses offer no intermediate award and the significant number of students who fail to achieve a pass grade leave college with nothing to show for up to two years work.

17 Colleges continue to find it difficult to persuade students to follow alternative vocational programmes. Often there is considerable resistance from students and their parents to the suggestion of alternatives to GCE A level. Whilst this resistance stems in part from the high esteem accorded to GCE A level as a qualification, colleges do not always convey consistent messages about the value attached to the range of provision they offer. Many older students are now successfully taking access to higher education courses rather than GCE A level courses, and there has been some success, for example, in offering Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national programmes as a useful vocationally-oriented alternative to GCE A levels in science.

Pre-entry Guidance

18 Prospectuses and other publications dealing with individual courses or subjects play an important part in helping students make an informed choice about their programme of study. Some colleges translate their prospectuses into languages used by local minority ethnic communities. Subject leaflets or course directories are concise and informative and offer students guidance on appropriate subject combinations and opportunities for progression. Most colleges run open days or evenings and parent and student briefings to supplement written information.

19 There are many examples of colleges forming strong links with local schools which help smooth the students' transition from school to college. Productive links include the exchange of staff between college and school and invitations to past students to feed information back to partner school staff and to visit schools to talk about their college experiences. Increasingly, colleges are offering taster activities to students in their last years of compulsory schooling (years 9, 10 and 11). There are instances of joint curriculum projects between schools and colleges, for example, foreign language exchanges to other European countries. However, college staff have difficulty in speaking directly to school pupils in some areas, typically those served by 11 to 18 schools, because of competition in recruiting students.

20 In the best pre-enrolment guidance, the teams of staff have expert knowledge of course options, career requirements and appropriate subject combinations. Many colleges provide diagnostic tests in numeracy and literacy as part of their pre-entry guidance programme. Subject guidance in terms of course content, workload, skill requirements, and assessment methods is important to students when embarking on GCE A level courses. One college found that 50 per cent of students changed their subjects following receipt of GCSE results and that a further 20 per cent changed their subjects in the first few weeks of the course. Another college found that 40 per cent of their students who were well advanced in their programmes would, with hindsight, have chosen different subjects. Such statistics throw doubt upon the effectiveness of initial guidance. They also underline the problem raised by the lack of an intermediate qualification which would give students credit for partial completion of an A level programme.

21 Pre-entry guidance for part-time students wishing to join GCE A level courses is generally weak. It would help students who are retaking GCE A level subjects on one-year programmes if they were given a more-detailed analysis of the reasons for their previous examination failure. For evening class students, guidance procedures are often particularly weak. Such students may have no contact with the college prior to enrolment or their contact may be limited to a brief telephone call. However, many colleges are improving the accessibility and quality of advice offered to part-time students by using drop-in centres with extended opening hours.

Induction

22 Many colleges now offer induction programmes for full-time students, ranging in duration from one to ten days. Part-time students are less likely to receive induction. Students value induction programmes most when they provide opportunities for social mixing, give guidance about the facilities available and do not delay for too long the introduction to teaching. Prolonged study skills sessions at the induction stage are of limited value. During inspections, some excellent work was observed which introduced students to the library facilities and other learning resources. Students set great store by the welcome that the college gives them: reception staff and students already on courses in the college are often important elements in this process.

23 Few colleges have a policy on induction which is consistently implemented for courses in different subjects. In the best practice, staff take trouble to find out about the range of knowledge, skills and aspirations of their students. The early stages of the course are broken down into units which are well supported by learning materials which could facilitate course transfer, should it become necessary, or 'bridging courses' are devised by staff to enable students to make the transition from GCSE to GCE A level more easily. In one college, for example, a bridging unit formed an integral part of a GCE A level modular mathematics programme.

24 Adults returning to study who follow GCE A level courses do not commonly receive any formal introductory unit to introduce them to the demands of study at this level.

Tutorial Support and Counselling

25 The standard of tutorial support for students varies because it too often relies on the unco-ordinated responses of individual teachers. When students are immature and find difficulty in adjusting to the apparent freedom of their new college environment the watchful guidance of tutors is particularly important. Not all tutors ensure that students complete the work required by their courses and some appear to have low expectations of their students. A number of students commented that if they did not do the work set, no action would be taken. Where tutorial support is structured, monitored and evaluated it can be very good, but too often it lacks a framework and/or is relegated to an administrative function. Many part-time students receive little or no tutorial support.

26 In many colleges, the tracking of students' progress was ineffective. The records of achievements were either too vague to provide a focus for measuring progress or there was no systematic attempt to monitor progress. Action planning, which involves students, in consultation with their tutors, in setting their own targets for learning and in monitoring their own progress, was not widespread. Where it had been adopted, the planning was rarely sophisticated enough to be effective. Targets such as 'I must work harder', while possibly true, were of little value in directing a student's studies or in monitoring his/her progress. Isolated examples of good practice included a human biology class in which the teacher encouraged students to review their own progress using the personal objectives set out in their records of achievement. Following this, realistic targets were set and individual action plans revised.

27 Many colleges offer students a comprehensive personal support service. For example, counselling is commonly available to support students with emotional problems. Some larger colleges offer welfare advice on such topics as accommodation, finance and grants. Students are appreciative of the informal support given to them by their teachers. Many staff show an excellent, unsentimental understanding of 16 to 19 year olds and are sensitive to difficult issues such as the appropriate degree of parental involvement. Most colleges hold regular consultation evenings with the parents of 16 to 19 year old students and have well-established methods of informing parents of students' progress. Older students, too, speak with enthusiasm of the support they receive from their teachers. The support given to many adult students in evening classes is particularly noteworthy.

28 Relatively few students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were observed in GCE classes. Facilities for those with restricted mobility studying GCE A levels are generally satisfactory. Few colleges have made all parts of the institution accessible to students with

restricted mobility but most have made significant progress towards achieving this. The support for students with a hearing or sight impairment is more limited. Some colleges are beginning to develop systematic screening and support for students with specific difficulties such as dyslexia, but these developments are not widespread. Support for students for whom English is not their first language is sometimes available but it is often not at a level appropriate for the requirements of individual students.

29 The monitoring of student absences was not always efficient or effective. Many colleges did not have clear policies on absence so that any response was at the discretion of individual teachers. Where absence was carefully monitored and followed up, colleges were able to support students effectively and improve retention rates. Late arrival at classes was rarely challenged or monitored.

Guidance on Higher Education and Careers

30 Higher education is the goal for most GCE students. They generally regard their studies as a step along the way to achieving higher qualifications and career success. Students on one-year courses are frequently resitting subjects in order to achieve this objective. Evening class students have a wider range of aspirations although many wish to pursue higher level courses. Many colleges now record progression data although much of the value of such information will only become apparent as records accumulate over time.

31 Advice on higher education is generally extensive and expert. Full-time students can take advantage of organised information-gathering visits to universities. A full range of prospectuses, and computer software giving information about higher education provision, is often available. Some colleges seek to maintain contact with their students, at least in the early stages of their higher education courses, and invite them to return to provide informal advice to those who are contemplating entering higher education.

32 Careers guidance for students following GCE A/AS programmes is mainly concentrated on entry to higher education. Careers officers provide individual advice on careers but such careers guidance is not usually an integral part of students' programmes of study. Most GCE A level students do not have the benefit of a broad careers education which includes work experience, work shadowing, or an understanding of industry gained from visiting speakers or outside visits. Students who are following a GCE course as an enhancement to their vocational programme benefit from such opportunities through their vocational studies. The absence of effective careers education and guidance is a weakness, particularly for those GCE students who leave college directly for employment. Some 13 per cent of the leavers from the GCE A level cohort in one college entered employment directly.

33 Colleges offer support to their students on publication of the GCE results in August. Many colleges work closely with their local careers service during this period. Students are offered academic advice, help with the setting of new targets and welfare information. As competition for places in higher education has increased, colleges have responded by giving advice to students on personal skills such as letter writing and negotiation by telephone. However, few colleges provide a comprehensive and co-ordinated support service and often the provision relies mainly on the goodwill of a small number of teaching and support staff.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

34 Of the 3,300 GCE A and AS lessons inspected, 62 per cent were judged to have strengths which outweighed their weaknesses, compared with 56 per cent for National Vocational Qualifications, 54 per cent for General National Vocational Qualifications and 47 per cent for the General Certificate of Secondary Education. The distribution of grades is shown below.

<i>Grade</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>% of lessons</i>	18	44	31	6	1

The Quality of Teaching

35 In the best lessons there was a buzz of excitement as students debated, questioned and carried out practical activities, or an atmosphere of concentration as students were absorbed in writing, listening, reading and thinking. Examples of good teaching were observed in which teachers used up-to-date materials and conveyed enthusiasm for their subject. Teachers were well prepared and made clear the short and long-term targets for learning. Questioning techniques were well developed. The work made rigorous demands on students. Changes in teaching methodology or in the activities of students were effectively managed so that the momentum of the session was not lost as, for example, in the move from a whole group session to small group work. Material was presented in an innovative way using relevant examples. In a German class, for example, students listened to a dialogue about a couple who had won a lottery. They were then asked to work in pairs to suggest how they might spend the money. In the resulting discussions, students handled the conditional and subjunctive moods with great success. In a chemistry class, students worked co-operatively in pairs to answer graded questions which led to an understanding of various types of bonding and to the development of a vocabulary relevant to the topic.

36 Teachers were knowledgeable about their subjects and gave clear explanations. Relationships between staff and students were good. However, in contrast to the liveliness and intellectual challenge of the best teaching, much of the teaching, although sound, was often dull.

Students were required to listen or take notes for long periods at a time and their interest was hard to maintain, especially in sessions of three hours or more when there was insufficient variety in the teaching methods used. Shortcomings were particularly evident in one-year courses where the pressure to cover the syllabus in a limited time too often led to capable but uninspired teaching.

37 In the majority of institutions the emphasis on the single A level subject meant that no one member of staff had an overall picture of what students were doing in the different subjects which made up their A level programme. Consequently, despite the high quality of some individual lessons, many students experienced a narrow range of teaching styles and methods of working.

38 The ability range of students within classes can be wide but teachers rarely acknowledged this. Differentiation, in terms of teaching methodology and materials, was not apparent in the majority of lessons. As a consequence, less able students were not receiving the help they needed and more able students were not being offered sufficiently challenging work.

39 In the weakest lessons, text books were relied upon too heavily, dictation was used to excess and there was little attempt to check students' understanding or to reinforce learning. The pace of the work was often too slow, for example, when the teachers' exposition drifted into personal anecdote, or too fast, so that students could not consolidate their learning. Group work and discussions which drew upon students' own experiences were not used. There was a failure to use basic aids, such as blackboards. Students in very small classes often endured the most dreary practice because they had so little opportunity to share ideas and to generate excitement and enthusiasm.

Schemes of Work

40 Teachers' schemes of work were rarely comprehensive. They were frequently limited to a list of the contents of the syllabus. A few good examples were seen in which content was linked to methods, resources and assessment and in which reference was made to core skills, study skills and personal development. Students were not usually aware of what was contained in schemes of work.

Core Skills

41 The development of core skills such as literacy, numeracy and the application of information technology is not explicitly required by GCE syllabuses and teachers rarely planned for it. It occurred mainly by accident in the teaching and learning. Few colleges have policies to ensure that GCE students acquire a basic competence in the use of information technology. The systematic and supportive correction of errors in written English was rare and colleges lacked a common policy for the teaching of English across subjects. In some cases, the lack of

core skills was hampering students' achievements. It was often the case in science subjects where students' lack of mathematical knowledge and skill limited their progress. Some colleges are now making efforts to address this problem through diagnostic audits of students' skills, structured self-study materials, drop-in workshops or specially-designed short courses. Often, however, the referral systems established in colleges fail to ensure that all students who need support to develop their core skills receive it.

42 Many students learn the skills of note-taking through their GCE A level courses. Some subject teachers also provide helpful support for students in the development of essay skills. Careful and systematic preparation for project work, when this is a major assessment component, is built into some schemes of work, for example in art and theatre studies. Some students develop excellent independent study and research skills but too often this relies upon the enthusiasm of a particular teacher.

The World of Work

43 The world of work has little impact on the teaching and the promotion of learning in GCE courses. There were a few notable exceptions where work experience and project work were used to good effect. The use of vocationally-relevant material or the application of industrial experience was rare although a few good examples were seen, notably in business studies and in GCE A level computer studies where real material from commercial and industrial sources was used in problem solving. Some students were given opportunities for external visits, for example to theatres and art galleries, but such visits were not always followed up effectively. This was less true of fieldwork trips in, for example geography, geology and biology, which were often well integrated with other aspects of the course. There were many examples of foreign visits for cultural, language and work experience purposes. However, some GCE A level teachers expressed the view that time spent out of the classroom was wasted time.

ASSESSMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT

44 Assessment procedures were sound and closely related to the requirements of the examining boards. In the best practice, standards were consistently maintained through systematic checking and moderation. In most cases, work was set regularly and marked in a supportive way. However, there were examples where work was rarely checked, marking was superficial and assessment criteria were not uniformly applied. Few subjects had assessment policies. Moderation of the grades awarded for work was not practised extensively, although there were some good examples, particularly in English.

45 Many students are articulate, hard working and committed. This was particularly evident in extended coursework or project work: for

example, some biology projects demanded daily measurement over long periods; some geography projects combined personal research with wide reading of the relevant literature and compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database searches; and there were science projects which involved the presentation of conclusions through a variety of media. The best work of language students showed a high level of fluency, accuracy and command of idiom. Some students produced highly-sensitive and carefully-considered critical responses to literature. Groups of students in the humanities and social sciences carried debate to the highest level, using evidence and argument effectively. In practical work in a range of subjects, including the performing arts and sciences, students often produced original work which they presented with a high level of skill.

Examination Results

46 Table 1 shows the 1992-93 GCE A level examination results in sixth form colleges, tertiary colleges and other further education colleges. Schools results are also shown for comparative purposes. Pass rates at grades A-E and also at the higher grades A-C are similar in school sixth forms and in sixth form colleges. Pass rates are slightly lower in tertiary colleges and significantly lower in other further education colleges. In all types of institution, older students do less well than 18-year olds, although this is less marked in general further education colleges than in other types of institution.

Table 1: GCE A level examination results (England) 1992-93

<i>Source of entrants</i>	<i>No. of entrants</i>	<i>Percentage pass</i>	
		<i>A-E</i>	<i>A-C</i>
Schools			
18 year olds	364,000	83	52
19 year olds and over	52,000	72	38
Sixth form colleges			
18 year olds	79,000	83	50
19 year olds and over	23,000	73	35
Tertiary Colleges			
18 year olds	32,000	79	45
19 year olds and over	27,000	65	32
Other FE Colleges			
18 year olds	30,000	70	36
19 year olds and over	95,000	62	31
Totals	702,000	78	45

Source: Department for Education

47 In all institutions, pass rates for GCE AS examinations are lower than those for A levels (Table 2). The variation in pass rates across different types of institution is broadly similar to that for A levels, although sixth form college AS examination results are particularly good.

Table 2: GCE AS examination results (England) 1992-93

<i>Source of entrants</i>	<i>No. of entrants</i>	<i>Percentage pass</i>	
		<i>A-E</i>	<i>A-C</i>
Schools			
18 year olds	26,000	69	36
19 year olds and over	3,900	57	25
Sixth form colleges			
18 year olds	5,300	75	40
19 year olds and over	1,800	64	27
Tertiary Colleges			
18 year olds	1,900	60	29
19 year olds and over	1,700	52	26
Other FE Colleges			
18 year olds	2,100	47	18
19 year olds and over	5,300	50	24
Totals	481,000	64	32

Source: Department for Education

48 The weaker GCE examination performance of students in general further education colleges compared with that in other institutions reflects to some extent the wider diversity and lower entry qualifications of students in such colleges. One way of taking entry qualifications into account is to compare the performance of students at AS/A level with their previous performance at GCSE in order to determine the added value that has been achieved through AS/A level study. Table 3 shows some illustrative data of this kind for 17 year-olds entering two or more GCE AS/A levels in sixth form colleges, tertiary colleges and other further education colleges. The point scores used in the table are calculated as follows.

Points score for each grade

<i>Examination</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>
GCSE	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
GCE A	10	8	6	4	2		
GCE AS	5	4	3	2	1		

Table 3: Examination performance of 17 year-olds entering two or more GCE AS/A levels compared to their GCSE point scores at entry

<i>GCSE points score (selected cohorts)</i>	<i>Average GCE AS/A level entries per student</i>	<i>% Candidates with AS/A level score of</i>	
		<i>0-19</i>	<i>20 and over</i>
Schools			
45-49	2.8	82	18
60-64	3.2	24	76
Sixth form colleges			
45-49	2.8	83	17
60-64	3.2	30	70
Tertiary colleges			
45-49	2.8	83	17
60-64	3.1	32	68
Other FE colleges			
45-49	2.7	87	13
60-64	3.1	40	60

Source: Department for Education

49 The most common GCSE point score for 17 year olds who had taken two or more GCE AS/A levels by the end of 1992-93 was 45-49 points. The GCE performance of this group was similar in schools, sixth form colleges and tertiary colleges. For the group with a high GCSE score of 60-64 points, GCE performance was better in schools. For both groups, GCE performance was somewhat lower in general further education colleges. Relatively few colleges complete a detailed value-added analysis of their examination results, or set targets and monitor their achievement on a subject by subject basis.

50 Apart from final examination results, other course outcomes are rarely recorded. The small number of colleges which have used records of achievement to record students' progress during their courses are able to produce final records which provide a wider profile of student achievement. Students who do not complete their GCE A/AS programme are rarely able to take away any record of partial achievement. In a few cases, internal college documents may be available to students detailing what the student knows, understands and can do as a result of following part of a course. Otherwise, modular GCE A level courses are the only programmes in which students commonly obtain accreditation for partial course completion. Modular courses in performing arts and mathematics, for example, are particularly valued by students because intermediate AS qualification can be achieved through the accumulation of sufficient units at an appropriate level.

Retention Rates

51 Some colleges, particularly sixth form colleges, report high retention rates of over 90 per cent on many courses. However, it is difficult to draw comparative conclusions from college statistics on retention rates because they are not compiled on the same basis. Regular monitoring of retention is now becoming a feature of many college quality assurance systems. However, follow-up and enquiry into why students leave courses before completion are poor. Some colleges do not take any action in response to drop-out rates of 15 per cent or more. Drop-out is particularly wasteful when it occurs between the spring and summer of the final year, yet this occurs to a significant degree in a number of general further education colleges. There is evidence to suggest that retention rates are related to the quality of course monitoring. For example, some general further education colleges have high wastage rates and poor examination results in GCE business related subjects. When compared with vocational programmes in the same subjects, co-operation between teachers is less effective and course monitoring less thorough.

RESOURCES

Management of Resources

52 The management of resources is not always efficient. Colleges rarely cost GCE courses accurately. The Audit Commission and OFSTED report, *Unfinished Business*, indicated the significant savings that would result if a minimum group size of 10 students were achieved. Many colleges have responded to this by setting a college-wide minimum class size of at least 10 students. However, despite such policies, many colleges have classes smaller than their stated minimum. Small numbers were particularly evident in the second year of courses. To overcome this, some colleges have combined groups for some or all of the teaching. The allocation of classrooms, workshops and laboratories does not always take account of class sizes. Growth areas such as media studies, psychology, sociology and geology are often timetabled in rooms which are too small. In some colleges, access to information technology is poorly managed; equipment is often unavailable during lesson times. In other colleges, good practice is developing, sometimes as a consequence of investment in resource bases attached to teaching departments.

Teachers

53 Teachers are academically well qualified, sometimes with postgraduate degrees in their subjects, and most have a teaching qualification. However, many teachers have no experience outside education, even in terms of short-term secondment, and some have experience in a single institution only.

Equipment/Learning Resources

54 Not all libraries effectively support GCE courses or provide suitable resources to enable students to study on their own. The lack of enough suitable books both for loan and reference was a particular problem for those students who were following courses which demanded extensive coursework projects. A few libraries encouraged the development of research skills, by providing, for example, a newspaper cuttings service. Many libraries offered the use of compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases which students appreciated. Generally there was insufficient study space in libraries.

55 Many students had access to a good range of equipment to support their learning. The age of the equipment rather than the type or volume of equipment was the major weakness. This was a particular cause for concern where the books available gave dated and misleading information. Much of the learning material produced by teachers themselves was of a high standard.

Accommodation

56 There were weaknesses in some of the accommodation for GCE courses. Some rooms were too small for the classes using them. Furniture was not always arranged to best advantage for teaching and learning. Classrooms and laboratories often lacked a subject identity. Display material was entirely absent in many colleges and in others it was particularly lacking in areas dedicated to humanities, social sciences and languages.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

57 Colleges do not review their GCE provision regularly and systematically. Where GCE courses are spread across a number of faculties or departments, co-ordination is often lacking or fails to address issues such as resource management, staff-development, assessment policy and quality assurance.

58 At subject level, there is sometimes a sharing of methods and ideas, the development of joint resources, well-structured and appropriately-documented meetings, critical review and evaluation of GCE provision, and clear accountability for quality assurance. However, these features are not common.

59 Measurement of the value added to a student's level of attainment, by comparing GCSE results on entry with performance in GCE A level on exit, is carried out in many colleges. However, little action is taken as a result of such analyses. Although target enrolments, completion rates and success rates are beginning to be monitored and reviewed by some colleges, quantitative performance indicators are rarely used effectively at the level of individual subjects. In reviews of examination performance, there is a reluctance to give careful and critical consideration to the effect which college practices or methods of teaching have on students' performance.

60 Students' perceptions of courses are not systematically gathered and students' criticisms are rarely acted upon. Responses to the student questionnaire used in one college included the following comments: 'I wish I could just read the book and then go over the important points in class' and 'We spend so long on each section that you forget what has gone before and lose the thread'. Such comments are valuable but they were not considered in the final review documents.

Staff Development

61 Staff-development programmes are not meeting teachers' needs for updating subject knowledge and the development of teaching skills for GCE courses. Training in tutorial work and for the teaching of GNVQ courses are commonly offered to staff but, while much of this training is applicable to GCE work, it is rarely applied in the context of GCE A level. There is little transfer of good practice from other courses to GCE A/AS work even though staff may teach on both kinds of courses. More advantage should be taken of the experience gained from access courses or BTEC national diploma courses in the use of explicit assessment criteria, the accreditation of prior learning and the teaching of study skills. Links with examining boards are often good. Many teachers serve as external examiners and moderators and keep abreast of developments in examination schemes. Teachers welcome the information available from examining bodies such as examiners' reports and sample mark schemes and the opportunities to meet examiners.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

62 The strengths of GCE A level and AS qualifications are that:

- they are well known and widely recognised
- they are generally accepted as entry qualifications for higher education
- they provide the opportunity for in-depth study of a single subject
- they are available in a wide range of subjects.

63 However, GCE courses have several weaknesses:

- they do not explicitly require the development of core skills such as literacy, numeracy and information technology
- there is insufficient attention to students' overall experience on their A level programmes
- they do not allow credit for partial completion of courses.

64 Notable strengths of the provision made for GCE students in further education sector colleges are:

- the wide choice of subjects offered
- some high-quality work from students in a range of subjects

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- productive links with local schools
 - well-planned induction for full-time students
 - caring support of individual students
 - relevant and well-structured assessment
 - academically well-qualified teaching staff
 - expert guidance for students on progress to high education.

65 A number of issues have to be addressed if colleges are to improve the quality of their GCE provision:

- greater emphasis on the coherence of students' A level programmes including the development of core skills
- more effective monitoring of students' overall progress
- the strengthening of entry policies to ensure that students entering A level courses have a reasonable chance of success in examinations
- the development of parity of esteem between GCE A level and vocational courses
- the poor examination performance and low retention rates on some courses and in some institutions
- the strengthening of initial guidance for part-time students
- careers education which alerts students to relationships between their studies and the world of work
- the improvement of learning resources which enable students to study on their own
- the elimination of very small classes to ensure the efficient use of teachers
- more effective quality assurance.