

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

GCSE in the Further Education Sector

National Survey Report

February 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

The inspection grades referred to in this report are all based on these descriptors.

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SUMMARY

The general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) is the major end qualification for the compulsory phase of education. The achievement of four or five grades A* to C provides a passport to advanced education. However, in 1995, 57 per cent of 16-year-old pupils in England left school without achieving grades A* to C in five subjects. This figure includes 20 per cent who failed to gain grade C or above in any of the subjects they attempted, were absent or were not entered for examinations. The further education sector provides a 'second chance' opportunity for school-leavers wishing to gain GCSEs. Adult students returning to education also regard the GCSE as the nationally-recognised qualification which will open up further opportunities for study or employment. Colleges respond to demand and promote increased participation by providing GCSE courses in a wide range of subjects and at times that suit students. Nevertheless, GCSE provision in the sector is declining: examination entries by students of all ages in further education colleges dropped by 15.5 per cent between 1994 and 1995. Fewer 16 to 18 year olds are following GCSE courses because they can now choose to pursue their education at this level by following courses which lead to one of the relatively new general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs).

Attendance and retention rates on GCSE courses are low and the poor examination results of students who follow a full programme of repeat GCSE subjects are worrying. Generally, a programme of four or five GCSEs is inappropriate for school-leavers who have already failed to gain any A* to C grades. For many of them the repetition of GCSEs reinforces failure and decreases motivation. Results for adult students are much better, although some do not stay the course because they find it difficult to balance the demands of study with personal, domestic or professional commitments. Generally, GCSE provision in colleges has a low priority and managers do not give enough attention to quality assurance, standards, co-ordination and resources.

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INTRODUCTION

1 The general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) is the national qualification taken by most pupils when they complete the compulsory phase of education. It replaced the general certificate of education (GCE) O level and the certificate of secondary education (CSE) in 1988. GCE O level had long been an important element of provision in the further education sector and GCSE continued this pattern.

2 In 1995-96, 4 per cent of the 2.7 million students enrolled at further education colleges on courses funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) were taking GCSEs; 20 per cent were full time, 80 per cent were part time, 27 per cent were aged 16 to 18 and 70 per cent were aged 19 and over. A further 302,000 students were enrolled on courses funded by the FEFC at external institutions; 10 per cent were studying GCSE subjects, and 79 per cent of these GCSE students were aged 19 or over.

3 The majority of younger students are on full-time GCSE courses. Usually, they aim to improve their previous performance at school in order to gain access to more advanced courses or better levels of employment. Older students generally take only one or a small number of GCSE subjects on a part-time basis, mainly in the evening. Often they do so for general interest or to help them progress in the workplace.

4 In 1990, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) published two reports on the newly-introduced GCSEs, one on provision in colleges of general further education and the other on provision in schools and sixth form colleges. They found little change in patterns of provision, numbers of students, retention rates and achievement levels between GCSE and the qualifications they replaced. They found that there was a good choice of subjects in general further education colleges, offering both 16 to 18 year olds and adult students a valuable second chance to gain qualifications. They concluded that while the introduction of GCSEs had led to improved pass rates in schools, students' achievements in sixth form colleges and colleges of general further education remained variable.

5 Eight years on, this report on GCSEs in the further education sector in England echoes some of HMI's judgements. It also provides insights into, and comments on, significant recent trends. For example, there is clear evidence of the impact of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at foundation and intermediate levels on GCSE provision in the sector. The report supports the findings and recommendations on GCSE which are included in Sir Ron Dearing's report (1996), *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*, and in *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* (1995), and its subsequent skills audit.

6 During 1995-96, inspectors surveyed the arrangements for GCSE in 271 colleges. This was followed by a more detailed survey of 60 colleges, and some fact-finding visits. Inspectors reviewed information from curriculum area inspections which formed part of the college inspections conducted in 1995-96, including the grades awarded for GCSE lessons.

They also took account of the inspectorate's national survey reports, reports from other interested groups and information from other bodies including the examination boards. The sources used are shown on page 16.

RANGE OF PROVISION

7 Students studying for GCSEs do not form a homogeneous group. Their differing ages and abilities and their previous achievements vary significantly. In 1995, 57 per cent of 16 year olds in England left school with fewer than five GCSEs at grades A* to C, and 20 per cent left with no recognised qualification. Many school-leavers enrol on GCSE courses at college as a second chance. They generally study full time following a programme of study of four or five GCSE subjects often including mathematics and/or English. The subjects chosen may be a repetition of subjects studied at school, but there are also opportunities to study 'new' subjects such as sociology or psychology. Some school-leavers on advanced courses include GCSE English and/or mathematics in their programme of study because they have not passed them at grade C or above. Others combine advanced or intermediate GNVQ courses with one or two new GCSE subjects which are related to their main course of study. For example, students on GNVQ health and social care courses may take in addition GCSE biology, sociology or psychology; those on leisure and tourism courses may take GCSE sports or business studies. Other students choose GCSEs unrelated to their main courses in order to broaden their studies.

8 Of all GCSE entries in the further education sector, 36 per cent are from students aged 19 or over. The younger students in this group often seek additional GCSE qualifications to help them progress to advanced level study, higher education or employment. Older students sometimes study subjects such as mathematics, English or a foreign language purely for interest or with a view to helping their children with their studies. Often students' motives change as courses progress, and those who enrolled on courses out of interest subsequently find that they want to study more.

9 GCSE entries from further education colleges are very small compared with those from schools. In 1993-94, only 5 per cent of entries for GCSE examinations in England and Wales came from the further education sector. Of those entered for mathematics and English, 13 per cent and 8.9 per cent respectively were from the further education sector. Mathematics and English accounted for 50 per cent of colleges' GCSE entries. These figures underline the importance that students attach to these subjects as necessary passports to further study or employment. They also point to the poor levels of achievement in mathematics and English by school-leavers choosing to enter further education institutions. Almost all colleges offer programmes in mathematics and English. Of the

rest of the students enrolled for GCSE subjects, nearly half study humanities subjects.

10 Although the overall number of entries is comparatively small, many colleges offer a much wider choice of subjects than schools. For example, modern foreign language provision is extensive. Sociology and psychology are very popular; students in the further education sector account for 77 per cent of all entries for GCSE psychology. Vocational subjects, such as accounting and nursing attract many students. Many colleges offer unusual subjects such as astronomy and archaeology, often in the evening. Sciences, with the exception of biology, are not as popular as they are in schools.

11 Colleges allocate much less teaching time for GCSE subjects than schools. In schools, each subject is taught for two-and-a-half hours a week for two years. GCSE courses in the further education sector last for a maximum of 32 weeks and subjects are taught for between two and six hours a week. Practical subjects may receive six hours a week while others have as few as two. Evening class subjects are usually taught for two hours a week. Increasingly, colleges are reducing teachers' contact time with students and providing materials for students to work on their own or in 'workshops' or learning resource centres where they receive some support from teachers. A minority of colleges offer students the opportunity to study at home with specially-designed materials and to attend college for tutorial support.

12 Most colleges choose their syllabuses carefully. Some GCSE subject syllabuses are designed specifically for mature students. For example, in 1993-94 the modular mathematics syllabus provided by the Southern Examining Board accounted for 40 per cent of all mathematics entries in the sector. The content and flexibility of the syllabus is appropriate for mature students as it emphasises practical aspects of mathematics such as money management. The same pattern is evident in English where content is adjusted to suit the needs of mature students and there is some flexibility in assessment procedures.

RESPONSIVENESS

13 Although the number of students on GCSE courses in colleges is declining, there is still a wide choice of GCSE subjects on offer within the sector; over 75 per cent of all colleges, and almost 90 per cent of sixth form colleges, offer more than 10 subjects. Of the colleges surveyed, 4 per cent, mainly sixth form colleges, offer English and mathematics only. Specialist colleges of art and design and agriculture offer either English and mathematics only or a handful of subjects.

14 The pattern of GCSE provision varies with the type of college. Courses in sixth form and some tertiary colleges are aimed at school-leavers who typically have achieved one or two subjects at grade C or above and a

number at grade D. Most of these students subsequently progress to advanced level courses, but with varying degrees of success. Many sixth form colleges are also starting to run GCSE evening classes. In colleges of general further education and many larger tertiary colleges the range and combination of subjects offered to school-leavers is often influenced by other provision in the area. This report does not underestimate the problems these colleges face in planning their provision in such circumstances. For example, GCSE results are published less than two weeks before the enrolment of school-leavers begins. Those with better GCSE results are more likely to attend a school sixth form or a sixth form college. As a consequence, general further education colleges often recruit school-leavers with modest or poor GCSE results and in small numbers. Adult students are recruited to make class sizes viable. Such mixed groups present many challenges for teachers. Where colleges offer GNVQ intermediate courses, these have depleted the numbers of younger students choosing GCSE courses and many colleges have reduced or are considering reducing daytime GCSE provision because it is uneconomic.

15 Most general further education colleges use GCSE courses to make a valuable contribution to adult continuing education, not only on their main sites but also in centres throughout the local community. Lesson times are often designed to suit the commitments and preferences of their students. GCSE courses are provided throughout the day, frequently from 09.00 to 21.00 hours. Some colleges have lessons on Saturday mornings. This flexible approach allows colleges to cater for a wide range of students; for example, the timing of classes allows parents to study while their children are at school.

16 External institutions such as local education authority adult and community education institutions and services also provide mature students with opportunities to study GCSEs. Three hundred and forty-one external institutions currently receive funding from the FEFC. An analysis of the strategic plans of a 25 per cent sample revealed that 52 per cent offer GCSEs and a further 6 per cent intend to do so. English and mathematics dominate provision but some institutions offer a broad range of GCSEs including vocational subjects such as health and community care, travel and tourism, and engineering as well as subjects such as ceramics, music, and archaeology. A few of the largest institutions are reducing their range of subjects, but most intend to maintain their provision. Like further education sector colleges, some external institutions are responding to the changing needs of students by developing courses and materials that allow students to study from home, and are trying to attract specific groups such as people who are unemployed.

GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

17 The different abilities, ages and motives for study of prospective GCSE students makes guidance difficult. Many school-leavers are guided onto GCSE programmes which are unsuitable for them. The result is often

disaffection and failure. In the past, the lack of an appropriate national qualification in general education at intermediate level made it difficult to guide school-leavers who did not want specific vocational training. Some colleges tried to tackle this problem by offering general programmes leading to the certificate in pre-vocational education (CPVE) or the diploma of vocational education (DVE). However, parents and students have continued to regard GCSE at grades A* to C as the passport to higher levels of study and improved employment prospects. Only over the last three years has a nationally-recognised alternative qualification to GCSE, the GNVQ, become available. Almost all colleges now have courses leading to GNVQ, although some offer only a limited range. The introduction of this qualification has opened up a number of new possibilities, for example the main GNVQ programme can be supplemented by one or two subjects at GCSE, or relevant GNVQ units may be studied alongside GCSE. Although progress is being made, some school careers teachers, parents and students have yet to be convinced of the value of the new qualification and students are still being enrolled on GCSE resit programmes when a GNVQ programme would be more suitable for them.

18 Colleges are beginning to be more realistic and rigorous in their entry requirements for GCSE subjects and are guiding students more positively towards GNVQ intermediate or foundation courses where this is appropriate. Entry requirements for full-time students to GCSE programmes now vary from a minimum of four or five grade Ds at GCSE to four or five grade Es or a combination of both. However, some colleges still allow school-leavers with much lower levels of achievement to study GCSE subjects. Sixth form colleges tend to have the highest entry requirements. Many colleges expect any student without a grade C in mathematics or English to resit these subjects. This policy helps some, but reinforces confusion and failure in others. Generally, there are no entry requirements for older students and very little planned guidance for those who attend part time. Where colleges offer an open college network programme as an alternative qualification to GCSE, guidance is usually helpful.

19 Colleges rarely take into account the levels of skill and understanding that students have already reached. In effect, students studying for GCSE start again, often on different syllabuses, or simply repeat what they have done before. This approach demotivates students. Some colleges have started to consider the specific needs of students, particularly in GCSE English and mathematics, so that students can concentrate on overcoming their identified weaknesses and building on their strengths. Many colleges provide additional support to help students with their learning in the form of 'drop-in' workshops, learning resource centres and specially arranged extra lessons. Often students do not use this support sufficiently and, in some colleges, the support is not well co-ordinated.

20 Full-time students usually receive tutorial support, but its quality is variable. It is generally more structured in sixth form colleges than in other types of college. Effective support for students is all the more

important because levels of attendance, completion rates and levels of achievement are lower than for many other categories of students. A minority of colleges has recognised this. They have strengthened their arrangements significantly and successfully raised their retention rates as a result. In most colleges, part-time students do not have formal support arrangements and rely on the subject tutor for assistance or guidance.

MANAGEMENT

21 The management of GCSE provision varies according to the size and type of college. In most sixth form colleges, GCSE is managed through subject departments. In colleges of general further education or large tertiary colleges, it is usually managed through humanities or science faculties. A few larger colleges manage GCSE in conjunction with GCE advanced level (GCE A level) programmes through a general education department or faculty, thus providing a strategic overview of academic provision and its development. In other models, the college has a director or co-ordinator of studies who maintains an overall view of GCSE provision. This role is frequently undertaken by a vice-principal in sixth form colleges or assistant principal in colleges of further education and tertiary colleges.

22 Management of GCSEs is comparatively simple in sixth form colleges. Usually the provision is for a discrete group of students taught predominantly by full-time staff on a single site. Such arrangements make communication, moderation of standards and the sharing of good practice possible, even if it is not always achieved. Efforts are made to schedule meetings so that the few part-time staff are able to attend. In contrast, large colleges of further education have much more diverse provision delivered typically on more than one site during the day, and on as many as 15 to 20 sites in the evening, by staff who work mainly part time and who, in some cases, are engaged for only a few hours. This presents formidable challenges for managers attempting to communicate with and provide support for teachers, to supervise standards of teaching and assessment and to ensure consistency of practice.

23 In the vast majority of colleges, curriculum managers of full-time GCSE day provision have not had direct responsibility for part-time courses, particularly if such activity is in community centres or adult education centres away from the main college site. The centre manager has this responsibility but he or she may have no expertise in the GCSEs on offer. In two of the colleges surveyed, a management review has led to faculty or department heads being made responsible for all the FEFC-funded provision in their specialisms. This has had two positive effects: firstly it has improved communication with and support for the many part-time teachers of GCSE courses; secondly it has allowed the gradual extension of quality assurance procedures to cover individual subjects whenever and wherever they are taught.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

24 The inspection grades awarded to GCSE lessons (table 1) are, on average, lower than those awarded to all lessons. In 1994-95, 54 per cent of GCSE lessons had strengths which outweighed weaknesses. This was 8 per cent lower than the national average for all lessons, as recorded in the chief inspector's annual report for 1995-96, *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England*. One in 10 lessons had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. Figures for 1995-96 show a slight improvement: 58 per cent of GCSE lessons had strengths which outweighed weaknesses; 8 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. This is in line with the average for GNVQ foundation and intermediate lessons, slightly poorer than that for GNVQ advanced lessons, and poorer than for GCE A level where 67 per cent of lessons had more strengths than weaknesses and 6 per cent had more weaknesses than strengths.

Table 1. Lesson observation grades for GCSE, 1994-95 and 1995-96

<i>Year</i>	<i>Grade 1</i>	<i>Grade 2</i>	<i>Grade 3</i>	<i>Grade 4</i>	<i>Grade 5</i>
1994-95	200	736	615	152	21
1995-96	190	557	431	99	7

Source: Inspectorate database, 1994-95 and 1995-96

25 Attendance is poor. In 1995-96 the average attendance at GCSE lessons was 69 per cent. This is a lower rate of attendance than for all levels of GNVQ and for GCE A level where the average attendance is 80 per cent. The average level of attendance conceals wholly unacceptable attendance rates in some classes where as few as two students are present. Absences affect the quality of lessons and the continuity of learning. They lead to disaffection among the students who are present as well as those who find it difficult to catch up because of their absence. High levels of absence also tend to be associated with poor retention rates and lower levels of achievement. Colleges are improving their procedures for monitoring attendance and following up absences, but some teachers are more conscientious than others in this respect. GCSE class sizes are generally lower than for other courses. On average, GCSE classes had 10.6 students compared with 11.4 students for GNVQ intermediate, 12.1 students for GNVQ advanced and 11.3 students for GCE A level.

26 The difference in levels of students' prior achievements, motivation, maturity and attendance patterns calls for careful planning, skill and flexibility on the part of teachers. Some plan courses and lessons thoroughly and take these differences into account. They have schemes of work which include details of the available resources, assessment methods and schedules as well as the content to be covered and skills to be developed. They share the aims of the course with their students who have clear notes in their files about the structure of the course and the

assessment requirements. They plan lessons well so that they have a logical flow and sustain students' interest. They know their students' strengths and weaknesses.

27 Other teachers say they are constrained by the amount of time allocated for GCSE lessons and speak about 'getting through the syllabus'. Often, teachers fail to take account of students' existing knowledge or the pace at which they learn. In most cases, the teachers do not know which syllabuses students have previously followed and poor curriculum links with schools mean that there is little continuity in teaching styles. All students, whether or not they have studied the subject before, receive the same tuition. In too many lessons, teachers do most of the work. Students are expected to sit and listen for long periods, to copy notes or take dictation. Frequently, they grow restless and lose concentration.

28 In an effective English lesson, the teacher and students worked on examination questions which they had prepared in advance. Some students understood the material more easily and were more confident than others. The teacher ensured that each student contributed and showed that all contributions were valued. Students were encouraged to think deeply, express themselves and analyse the suitability of different examination techniques. By the end of the session, all students had a good grasp of the material and its relevance, enjoyed the work, and appreciated the way the teacher had involved them.

29 In a purposeful mathematics lesson which took place in the evening, students who were learning about the use of graphs received a well-produced handout containing a challenging exercise. They started by working in pairs, discussing what they thought the answers were and the reasons why. Then they reported their findings back to the rest of the class. The teacher recorded their replies on the board and in the general discussion which followed, students and teacher explained and justified their positions. Throughout the exercise students displayed confidence in proposing and rejecting ideas and were able to link concepts they had learned previously. There was a real 'buzz' in the classroom.

30 Sometimes there is very little planning and preparation. In one English lesson, the teacher arrived eight minutes late and had no lesson plan. Students attempted a series of unconnected exercises. Then, there was reading aloud from *The Merchant of Venice*. Much time was wasted allocating parts to students who did not want to read and who subsequently read badly. Throughout the reading, a group of students at the back of the class were allowed to chat about other matters. Only half the students on the register were present for this lesson. Another group of students spent the whole of an English lesson going through an out-of-date magazine article to which there had been no reference before the lesson began. The teacher read the article aloud sentence by sentence, pausing occasionally to elaborate a point. In a history lesson, where the students did not appear to be used to working in groups, the teacher provided no

advice or direction. One group produced much better work than the others and the main object of the lesson was defeated because the teacher subsequently ignored the conclusions which the groups had reached and answered all the questions personally.

31 In a Spanish class, some of the students intended to specialise in languages and were studying the subject for one year from scratch before progressing to GCE A level. Others were following a programme of GCSE resits and appeared to be reluctant members of the class. The teacher failed to provide material to suit either of these two groups. The lesson was conducted at far too slow a pace and there was little sense of direction.

32 Sometimes teachers make unacceptable mistakes and mislead students. In a mathematics class for part-time evening students, the teacher was constantly corrected by the students themselves. An English teacher could not explain accurately the meaning of some words in a comprehension passage and even wrongly altered some correct suggestions from the students. In another English lesson on the use of the apostrophe the teacher consistently misinformed students who were taking careful revision notes.

33 Key skills such as communication, application of number and information technology are rarely explicitly developed in GCSE programmes of study. Students who are not studying computing as a subject make little or no use of information technology and are rarely encouraged to do so. With the introduction of GNVQ, a few colleges are beginning to introduce GNVQ key skills units within GCSE programmes. For example, in one large college, key skills are developed through interesting and relevant assignments which satisfy the requirements of both the GCSE syllabuses and GNVQ key skills units.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

34 In 1995, there were 145,000 entries for GCSE examinations from students aged between 16 and 19 in the further education sector, a decline of 18 per cent compared with entries in 1994. There was also a 10 per cent fall in the number of entries from students aged 19 and over. However, there was little change in the percentage of students gaining grade C or above. Figures show that 48 per cent of full-time students aged 16 to 18 in sixth form colleges achieved grades A* to C, 11 per cent above the average for students of a similar age in other colleges of further education. Students aged 19 or over in all sector colleges were more successful; 60 per cent achieved grades A* to C.

35 Sixteen to 18 year olds' performance in the GCSE is even more worrying when it is subjected to more detailed analysis. Figures 1 and 2 present a depressing picture.

36 Figure 1 demonstrates that in 1995, only 9 per cent of students gained grades A* to C in all five subjects. A further 9 per cent gained grades A* to C in four out of five of the subjects attempted. Over 20 per cent failed to achieve grade C or above in any of their subjects.

Figure 1. Achievement of students in further education colleges taking five GCSEs

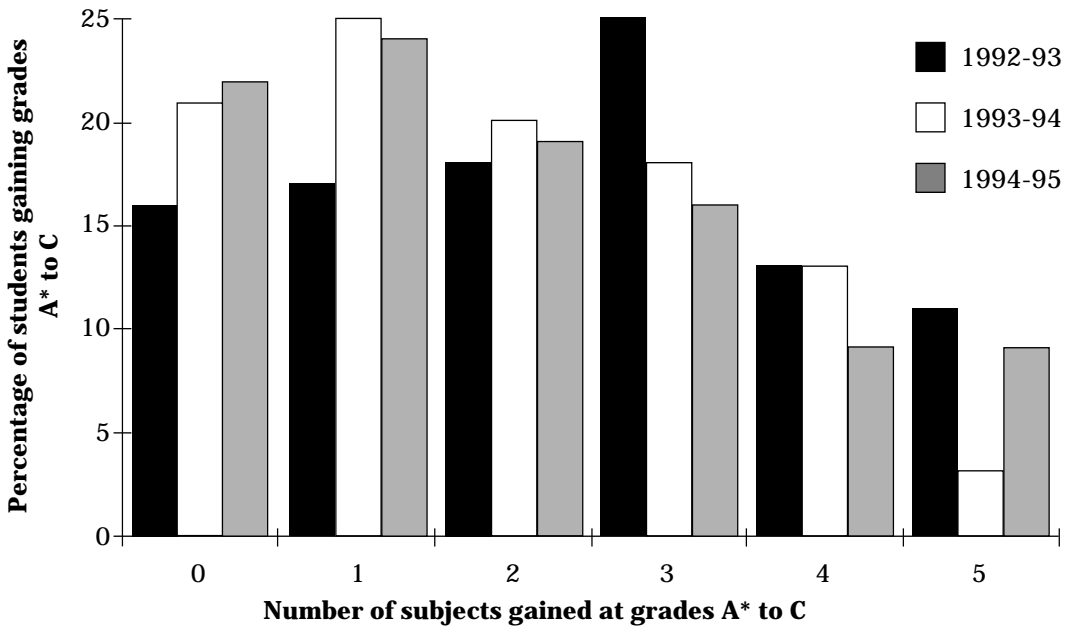
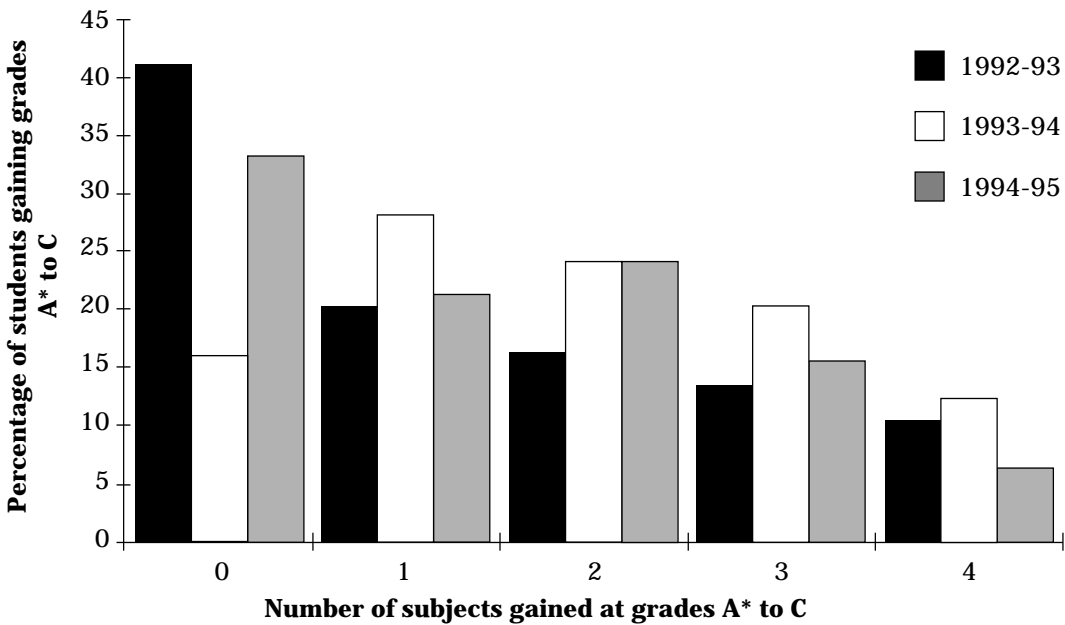


Figure 2. Achievement of students in further education colleges taking four GCSEs



37 Figure 2 shows the levels of achievement of students who sat four subjects. In 1995, only 6 per cent of these gained A* to C passes in all four subjects; a further 15 per cent were successful in three out of the four; and 33 per cent failed to gain grade C or above in any of their subjects.

38 Over the three years 1993 to 1995, the pattern of achievement by students repeating GCSEs has changed very little. A partial explanation of this may be found in the attitude of some students whose goal is advanced study but who gain only two or three passes at grade C or above while at secondary school. Typically, these students take a one-year full-time GCSE repeat course of four or five subjects. The students know that in reality they need only achieve grade C or above in two or three of these subjects in addition to those already gained at school to satisfy the standard requirement for progression to advanced study. As the college year progresses, therefore, students tend to concentrate on their strongest subjects to the detriment of others, and this is reflected in some poor examination results for themselves and for the college. It must also be acknowledged that for many school-leavers the repetition of GCSE reinforces failure and decreases motivation. This is particularly so in classes that are formed of students with different learning goals and widely varying levels of ability. The effective management of learning in such groups is a formidable task for teachers. However, it is evident that some teachers are more successful than others.

39 One of the worst records of achievement and retention was found in a large college of general further education. In 1993-94, only 96 of the 132 students, aged 16 to 18, who were enrolled in November, completed the course; a drop-out rate of 27 per cent. Of the 96, only one student achieved grades A* to C in five subjects; nine students achieved grades A* to C in four subjects and 16 in three subjects. Twenty-three students failed to achieve grade C or above in any of their subjects. In 1994-95, the college's retention rate was significantly better; 81 out of 93 completed the course. However, of these 81, no student gained grades A* to C passes in all five subjects; four students gained four grades at C or above, and six gained three. Twenty-six students failed to gain a grade C or above in any subject. Although sixth form college students and students in some tertiary colleges tend to perform better than others in the sector, poor results can still be found in these types of college. In 1995, inspectors found that GCSE results were unsatisfactory in more than 60 per cent of the colleges visited.

40 The few colleges which carry out systematic value-added analysis of the achievements of students on repeat GCSE programmes, to determine whether and by how much they have improved on previous performance, often provide additional learning support. Where this is the case, many students show a gradual improvement in their level of achievement.

41 Throughout the sector, retention rates on GCSE programmes are a cause for concern. Retention rates for full-time students are generally higher in sixth form colleges, but even here, they rarely exceed 80 per

cent. Within the sector there are many examples of retention rates below 40 per cent. An average retention rate is sometimes difficult to establish because few colleges disaggregate GCSE statistics from overall college figures, and do little more than compare examination entries with enrolments. *Unfinished Business*, a study of full-time courses for 16 to 19 year olds, carried out by the audit commission and published in 1993, stressed the high cost of non-completion of courses. Retention rates for part-time students are also poor. The main reasons for withdrawal are domestic or financial difficulties, gaining employment, and lack of commitment or understanding of the demands of the course. Some part-time students complete the course but do not enter the examination.

42 'Dropout' of full-time students usually occurs at the end of the autumn term when those whose attendance has been poor begin to appreciate how much of the course they have missed and how much time and effort, for example to complete essential coursework, will be required to redeem the situation. Further 'dropout' occurs in the spring term when colleges submit entries to examination boards. Those colleges which warn students that they may be required to pay entry fees if they fail to complete the course or sit the examination, report a slight improvement in retention rates. Information on the reasons why full-time students leave a course is limited. Some leave because they have gained employment. Retention rates are better where single GCSE subjects are taken to complement or supplement a full-time programme by students who are highly motivated and who have chosen the subject for a particular reason such as to help them gain employment or progress to higher education.

43 Destinations of full-time GCSE students are not systematically monitored and those of part-time students are rarely tracked. Full-time students progress mainly to advanced GNVQ or to GCE A level, frequently in the same college in which they studied for GCSEs, or find employment. Some GCSEs provide access to professional courses such as the Association of Accounting Technicians qualifications. Few colleges are able to assess the contribution which GCSEs make to the national targets for education and training because they do not systematically track the progress of their students.

RESOURCES

Staffing

44 In general, full-time staff are appropriately qualified and experienced for the courses they teach. Most also teach on GCE A level programmes. Often, teachers fail to take into account the different levels of ability of GCSE students and their specific needs. Full-time teachers have the advantage of being supported by the course team. Part-time staff do not enjoy the same level of support, particularly where they are engaged for only a few hours a week and do not work on the college's main site.

Part-time teachers sometimes lack classroom skills and have insufficient information on the prior achievements of their students. The turnover of part-time teachers can create problems of continuity. Some students have several different teachers over the year of the course. One group, for example, had three part-time teachers in less than a year; they were ill-prepared for oral examinations and some had not completed their coursework folders by the time of the examination. In a few instances, some GCSE subjects, and particularly English, are taught by non-specialists. Compared with teachers of vocational courses, GCSE teachers rarely have industrial experience, which is a disadvantage in subjects such as sciences, art and design, business studies and law.

45 The in-service training for full-time teachers is rarely directed at the specific needs of GCSE students and the ways of responding to them. Staff development usually takes the form of introductory or updating sessions on new syllabuses or assessment regimes, which are provided by the examination boards. The focus for staff development in colleges has moved to a consideration of the issues related to the introduction and teaching of GNVQs. Part-time teachers often do not have access to in-service training.

Equipment and Learning Resources

46 Some specialist resources are of good quality. Those resource centres which have learning materials designed for GCSE students are effective when teachers introduce students to them and make their use part of the programme. Some language laboratories and workshops for English and mathematics are well equipped. Much of the equipment GCSE students use in science, foreign languages and computing is out of date or ageing. In some evening classes, in particular, audio-visual aids are not available because they are locked away, or the teacher does not know how to get hold of them. The quality of handouts prepared by some part-time teachers of evening classes is poor.

Accommodation

47 Where GCSE is taught in the main teaching areas of the college, accommodation is generally of a satisfactory standard. In other circumstances, where specialist equipment is not required, lessons often take place in temporary accommodation which has a neglected appearance. English is often taught in such accommodation. In the evenings, poor accommodation is sometimes used even when much more pleasant and comfortable rooms are available.

THE FUTURE OF GCSE IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

48 There are many providers of GCSEs post-16. This fact alone presents considerable risks for colleges and external institutions in their planning of future provision. For some colleges, the fact that neighbouring secondary schools are seeking permission to open sixth forms threatens established recruitment patterns since their provision is likely to include opportunities to repeat GCSEs or to study new ones. For colleges of general further education and external institutions, the development of adult provision in sixth form colleges and schools also poses a threat to recruitment.

49 The deployment of staff in GCSE programmes has become an urgent issue for many colleges. Colleges are funded by a methodology which rewards retention and achievement and requires efficient deployment of staff. As a result, many colleges, particularly general further education colleges, have taken the decision to discontinue or reduce drastically daytime GCSE provision.

50 Already GCSE provision for 16 and 17 year olds is declining. The number of providers and the consequent proliferation of small uneconomic groups have prompted some colleges to reduce the range of subjects and to concentrate on a small number, most frequently mathematics and English. Many students who have hitherto enrolled on GCSE programmes are being guided onto GNVQ foundation or intermediate courses which are increasingly accepted as more appropriate and realistic options. Between 1994 and 1995 there has been an 18 per cent decline in GCSE entries from 16 to 18 year olds. Over the same period, the number of GNVQ awards at intermediate and foundation levels has almost doubled. There has also been a reduction of 10 per cent in GCSE entries from students over the age of 18.

51 In the 1995 competitiveness white paper, the government set more challenging national targets for education and training. In order to assess the United Kingdom's performance in the level of basic skills per head of population in comparison to that of its principal competitors, research was commissioned in France, Germany, the United States of America, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The results of this research, *The Skills Audit*, were published in June 1996 and confirmed that the United Kingdom still lags behind its principal competitors at level 2, which includes GCSE, by as many as 5 to 25 percentage points. The usual measure of general education attainment at level 2 in the United Kingdom is the achievement of five GCSEs at grades A* to C. However, the skills audit used only three subjects, mathematics, English and one other. This different measure slightly deflates the United Kingdom's performance, but does not change the relative positions of the countries which were audited.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

52 The best practice in GCSE provision involves a clear recognition of, and response to, the needs of the many different students seeking to progress to higher level courses or to employment. Particular strengths of GCSE provision in the further education sector are:

- a second chance for students to gain the qualifications they need to progress
- the use of GCSE subjects as an additional element of study for those following GCE A level or GNVQ programmes
- the broad range of subjects to suit different interests
- flexible arrangements which enable students to choose when and where they study
- the examination results achieved by many adult students.

53 Issues of concern are:

- the significant proportion of 16 to 18 year olds, often inappropriately enrolled on GCSE programmes, who are poorly motivated learners
- some mediocre teaching
- poor levels of achievement, particularly for 16 to 18 year-old students
- poor completion rates
- very poor levels of attendance
- failure to provide opportunities to develop key skills
- lack of rigour in quality assurance
- neglect of management and resourcing issues
- uneconomic provision
- some poor accommodation and equipment.

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Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
February 1997