

West Suffolk College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

**THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL**

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 according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100*

© FEFC 1998

You may photocopy this report. A college may use its report in promotional material provided quotes are accurate, and the findings of the inspection are not misrepresented.

Contents

Paragraph

Summary

Context

The college and its mission 1

The inspection 4

Curriculum areas

Business studies 6

Hotel and catering 11

Health and social care 17

Hairdressing and beauty therapy 22

Art and design 27

Cross-college provision

Support for students 32

General resources 39

Quality assurance 46

Governance 52

Management 59

Conclusions 67

College statistics

Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.
Sample size: 122 college inspections

Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

Summary

West Suffolk College

Eastern Region

Inspected November 1997

West Suffolk College is a general college of further education located on one main site in Bury St Edmunds and using eight local centres and over 100 other centres in Suffolk and south Norfolk. The first self-assessment report, together with its action plan, was produced in 1995-96. The annual planning cycle of the college links the self-assessment process and its outcomes with the development of the strategic plan. The college produced an informative 1996-97 self-assessment update for the inspection. Inspectors focused the inspection on the initial self-assessment report and the current update. The availability of clearly referenced evidence enabled inspectors to substantiate the majority of the judgements and grades reached by the college.

The college offers a wide range of courses in nine of the FEFC's programme areas. Five curriculum areas were inspected together with aspects of cross-college provision. The curriculum is well managed. Individual support for students is effective. There are: appropriate and well-organised work placements; some good pass rates for students completing courses;

thorough assessment procedures; good levels of additional learning support; some excellent accommodation and specialist facilities; a rigorous self-assessment process; comprehensive quality assurance arrangements; and clear priorities set by governors and managers. The college should address: poor retention on some programmes and low levels of achievement on a few courses; some ineffective teaching; restricted access for wheelchair users and the non-ambulant in some places; unreliable data on students' achievements; and ineffective use of management information systems at some levels.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Business studies	2	Support for students	2
Hotel and catering	3	General resources	2
Health and social care	2	Quality assurance	2
Hairdressing and beauty therapy	1	Governance	2
Art and design	2	Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1 West Suffolk College is situated in the historic and attractive market town of Bury St Edmunds. The catchment area of the college is more than 1,000 square miles covering west and central Suffolk, north Essex, east Cambridgeshire and south Norfolk and including some 300,000 residents. Although there are significant concentrations of population and industry in six towns located within a 20-mile radius of Bury St Edmunds the catchment area of the college is predominantly rural. Over two-thirds of the population live in villages. To overcome the problems presented to prospective students by the poor public transport facilities, the college operates in eight local centres and over 100 different locations away from the main site in Bury St Edmunds. Employment opportunities are primarily in health, social care, business and market services, distribution, hospitality and tourism, and manufacturing industries. Jobs in agriculture have declined and represent only 4 per cent of the total. There are few large employers and over 90 per cent of businesses have fewer than 25 employees. The unemployment rate in September 1997 was less than 3 per cent in Bury St Edmunds and less than 5 per cent in all other parts of the catchment area.

2 The college operates in a competitive environment. There are a number of private training companies as well as 12 local education authority (LEA) maintained 14 to 18 schools and three special schools in West Suffolk for pupils aged five to 16. There is also one 11 to 16 and one 11 to 18 school in Thetford. There are four private schools within the college's catchment area. The participation rate of students in education after the age of 16 was 72 per cent in 1996-97, an increase from 58 per cent in 1991. The college attracted 14 per cent of these students in 1991 and this figure grew to 24 per cent in 1994 but has dropped back to 22 per cent as general national vocational qualifications

(GNVQs) have been strongly promoted in schools. The college is an associate college of Anglia Polytechnic University with well-established programmes in business studies, humanities, childhood studies and teacher training. New programmes in computing, psychology and leisure studies began in 1997. The college also offers higher national certificate and diploma courses in engineering and construction, a foundation course for foreign students as well as a science foundation programme which it has developed with the University of East Anglia.

3 The curriculum is delivered through 10 departments, some of which have discrete areas organised into sections. The college's mission statement was developed through consultation with staff and governors in 1990 and has been reviewed annually. It states that the college's aim is 'to provide quality education and training which is cost effective and which meets the needs of the whole community in a welcoming and supportive environment'. The college gives priority to the following aims in its strategic plan:

- provision of a comprehensive education and training programme at all levels
- helping students attain their goals, achieving retention and qualification rates above the national average
- the establishment of an integrated quality assurance system
- the development of a well-resourced, safe and accessible learning environment
- the establishment of local learning centres and the use of distance learning and new technologies
- effective links with European and international organisations
- the efficient management of financial resources
- the recruitment, retention and development of committed staff.

Context

The Inspection

4 The college was inspected during the week beginning 3 November 1997. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1994 to 1997 which were validated by the inspectorate against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors for a total of 39.5 days. They observed 59 lessons, and examined students' work and college documents. The inspection team also included an auditor. Inspectors and the auditor met governors, managers, college staff and students.

5 Of the lessons inspected, 64 per cent were rated good or outstanding and 10 per cent were less than satisfactory. This compares with 61 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was 76 per cent which is similar to the average for the sector. The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCSE and GCE A/AS level	2	0	0	0	0	2
GNVQ	4	6	5	1	0	16
NVQ	4	6	3	2	0	15
Other vocational	7	9	7	3	0	26
Total	17	21	15	6	0	59

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies

Grade 2

6 Fourteen lessons were observed, including lessons for full-time and part-time students on intermediate and advanced GNVQ, first and national diploma, national vocational qualification (NVQ) and access to further education courses. The self-assessment report for the curriculum area identifies many strengths and areas for development but some additional key weaknesses were identified by inspectors.

Key strengths

- some high standards of teaching
- good opportunities for the development of and assessment of students' key skills
- rigorous assessment procedures
- students' work of a consistently high standard
- good pass and retention rates on intermediate vocational courses
- significant achievements by individual students
- the broad range of curriculum provision

Weaknesses

- failure of some teachers to set sufficiently challenging work
- teachers' monitoring of students' learning not always effective
- poor retention and pass rates on some courses

7 A reorganised departmental structure was introduced in March 1997 and aspects of business studies courses are taught across four departments. A wide range of business studies courses at all levels is offered. Some foundation provision is available at the college and in collaboration with local providers. Good links with higher education institutions in the locality

provide students with opportunities for progression.

8 The quality of teaching was generally good and some was outstanding. Teachers used question and answer techniques effectively to extend students' learning and to encourage students to participate in discussions. In a few lessons, teachers failed to provide work which was sufficiently challenging and they did not always check that learning was taking place. This was not identified by the college in its review of teaching and learning. Students' work is of a high standard. Staff feedback is generally detailed and analytical and helps students to improve their work. Students' portfolios are generally well presented and together with records of achievement provide impressive evidence of the progress they make. Course handbooks are comprehensive and students find them useful. Planned work experience and well-structured visits to industry are an integral part of most courses. Some students achieve notable success; they have won the West Suffolk Young Enterprise award for the last three years. A profoundly deaf student won the college best business studies student award for 1997.

9 Most business studies lessons are timetabled in rooms allocated and managed by the department. They are well appointed and appropriately furnished with whiteboards and overhead projectors. Business studies students have good access to specialist information technology facilities in departmental resource rooms and in the college's resource centre.

10 Pass rates and retention on vocational and advanced business courses have fluctuated during the last three years. The self-assessment recognises that pass rates have fallen on some advanced vocational courses. Results at intermediate vocational level are stronger and pass rates are significantly above the national average, and there is a consistently good pattern of retention averaging about 85 per cent.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in business studies, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational (national diploma, GNVQ)	Retention (%)	79	79	60
	Pass rate (%)	87	85	63
Intermediate vocational (first diploma, GNVQ)	Retention (%)	90	79	83
	Pass rate (%)	79	60	66

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Hotel and Catering

Grade 3

11 Courses in the hotel and catering area are taught by staff in the hospitality studies section. Eleven lessons were observed, including practical and theory lessons for students enrolled on full-time and part-time courses. Inspectors did not agree with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report. The self-assessment report fails to recognise the seriousness of the drop in retention and pass rates on some courses.

Key strengths

- good individual support for students
- appropriate use of a variety of teaching methods
- well-structured work experience and some productive links with industry
- effective induction and tutorial programmes
- the range of enrichment activities
- good pass rates on advanced level courses

Weaknesses

- ineffective teaching in some theory lessons
- the poor quality of some teaching materials
- the poor development of key skills on NVQ programmes
- poor retention and low pass rates on some courses

12 The section offers a national diploma in hotel and catering, the Hotel and Catering International Management Association certificate and a range of NVQ catering and hospitality awards. Some planned NVQ level 3 courses have not been run owing to insufficient demand. There are productive links with

industry and the hospitality advisory board meets regularly. The section works closely with local employers to support training in the work place and provide training for assessor and verifier awards.

13 Induction activities are well planned and introduce students to the college and their course. There is some good tutorial practice and students' progress is closely monitored. Tutorials include action planning for students' learning and a programme for their personal and social development. Key skills are not included on NVQ courses; this is recognised as an area for development in the self-assessment report. National diploma students are able to gain additional qualifications by working towards an NVQ award. All students are successful in basic food hygiene certification.

14 Teachers have recent experience of working in the hospitality industry. Most lessons are well planned and teachers use an appropriate variety of teaching methods. Examples from industry are used to relate theory to its practical application and encourage students to draw on their own experiences of work. In some theory lessons, teachers did not maintain students' interest. In a few lessons, teaching was too complex for students at that stage of the course. On the NVQ course teachers provide a good range of worksheets which enables students to work on their own. However, some handout materials were not well presented.

15 There is good individual support for students in kitchen skills sessions. Kitchen and restaurant facilities provide realistic work environments. Demonstrations by tutors are followed by students' practical activities. Students display good organisational skills and develop good teamwork and interpersonal skills. The overall standard of practical work is satisfactory. However, insufficient attention is given to ensuring that all students develop appropriate technical skills. The range of enrichment activities is extensive. There is a

Curriculum Areas

well-planned programme of work experience for national diploma students. All students have the opportunity to gain valuable experience catering for events such as open golf championships and receptions at royal palaces. Well-established European cultural exchanges extend students' experience.

16 Inspectors do not wholly agree with the college's judgements on the quality of teaching and learning and students' achievements. Examination pass rates for the national diploma in hotel and catering are consistently good but retention is erratic. There has been a significant decline in pass and retention rates on NVQ level 2 food preparation and cooking programmes over the last three years. In 1997, all students enrolled on the part-time level 3 patisserie course achieved the full award. Students' portfolios of work are generally well maintained and presented and national diploma assignments are often wordprocessed. Students' work is generally carefully marked and teachers' comments help students to improve their performance.

Examples of students' achievements in hotel and catering, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational (national diploma)	Retention (%)	62	67	61
	Pass rate (%)	88	88	100
NVQ level 2 (full time) – (food preparation and cookery)	Retention (%)	90	67	53
	Pass rate (%)	89	88	74
NVQ level 2 (part time) – (food preparation and cookery)	Retention (%)	+	88	44
	Pass rate (%)	+	79	64

Source: college data
+course not running

Curriculum Areas

Health and Social Care

Grade 2

17 Inspectors observed 12 lessons within the two departments of health and social studies and learning support. Childcare courses did not form part of the scope of the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements identified in the college self-assessment report, although some additional strengths and weaknesses were identified.

Key strengths

- appropriate teaching methods that meet students' individual learning needs
- well-organised work placements
- well-designed course handbooks and clear assignment guidelines
- high levels of achievement for most students completing their courses
- well-managed courses

Weaknesses

- some poor schemes of work and lesson plans
- poor use of resources in some lessons
- low levels of retention on some programmes
- poor levels of achievement on the GNVQ foundation programme

18 There is a broad range of health and social care courses, including GNVQs in health and social care at intermediate and advanced level, a BTEC national diploma in science (health studies), a BTEC national certificate caring services (social care), and a City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) certificate in advanced care management. There is a growing area of NVQ provision in care at levels 2 and 3, much of which is available for students to work on their own and at times of their own choosing.

19 A broad range of teaching methods are used effectively to meet students' learning needs. They generally make good use of question and answer techniques and classroom discussion to extend students' learning. Students appreciate the opportunities they have for group work and for study on their own. They value the positive working relationships they have with staff. Well-planned and carefully monitored work experience is an integral part of full-time courses. Students are able to complete planned assignments while attending work placements. Assignments are varied and stimulating and supported by clear guidelines. Schemes of work consist largely of lists of topics and the college recognises in its self-assessment report that some lesson plans lack clear aims and objectives. Few lesson plans indicate how students' learning is to be assessed. In a few lessons, teachers failed to make clear to students the links between the different parts of the lesson. Some teachers taught at such a slow pace that it did not maintain students' interest, or made no attempt to draw the lesson to an appropriate conclusion by summarising for students the main points of the lesson. These weaknesses were not identified by the college in its self-assessment report.

20 Courses are well managed and staff have a clear understanding of their roles. Course teams work effectively. Course files provide good evidence of sound organisation and a cohesive team approach. Systems for course evaluation are thorough. Course teams have identified in their self-assessment the need to address poor retention on some courses. Some new approaches to course organisation have been developed in an attempt to improve retention. Students have access to an appropriate range of resources in the department and in the learning resource centre. There is a wide range of vocational journals for health, social care and childcare. Most teaching takes place in a suite of rooms which are comfortable, attractive and well maintained. Each course is allocated a

Curriculum Areas

base room. Rooms are of good quality and have attractive display material and noticeboards. There are specialist rooms for the teaching of information technology key skills, practical care skills and first aid.

21 The high levels of achievement for most students who complete their courses were acknowledged in the college's self-assessment report. In some cases, for example, the GNVQ intermediate health and social care course, pass rates are substantially above the national average. In two courses, the BTEC national certificate in caring services (social care) and the C&G advanced care management, pass rates are regularly above 90 per cent. The department has made good progress in teaching for, and assessment of, NVQs in care and assessment opportunities in the workplace have been developed. The majority of students are achieving their awards within the target time. Students on the GNVQ foundation programme have made good progress in achieving vocational units, and demonstrated good levels of personal and social skills. However, the failure to complete all aspects of key skills units has prevented any of these students from obtaining the full award for the past two years. Only three students have progressed to the GNVQ intermediate course.

Examples of students' achievements in health and social care, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Foundation	Retention (%)	100	90	69
	Pass rate (%)	62	0	0
Intermediate	Retention (%)	88	67	85
	Pass rate (%)	59	92	72
Advanced	Retention (%)	90	75	73
	Pass rate (%)	96	89	82

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

Grade 1

22 During the inspection 10 lessons were observed covering a variety of full-time and part-time programmes in hairdressing and beauty therapy. The quality of work seen was outstanding. Eight out of 10 lessons observed were good or outstanding.

Key strengths

- a wide variety of appropriate teaching methods
- teaching and learning planned to meet individual students' needs
- well-managed courses and work experience programme
- high pass rates for full-time students
- practical and theory work of a high standard

Weaknesses

- some poor levels of retention in 1996-97

23 There is a wide range of full-time and part-time courses leading to NVQs at levels 2 and 3, including more specialised part-time courses in aromatherapy and reflexology. There are also new courses, for example, in Indian head massage and in kinesiology and an international sugaring certificate. Courses are designed to meet the needs of 16 to 19 year olds and adults who wish to return to work or change careers. Courses are well designed and planned. There are strong links with employers who provide work placement opportunities for full-time students. The programme is effectively managed and helps students to understand the demands of the work environment.

24 A wide variety of appropriate teaching methods is used to promote learning and

motivate students. Teachers use teaching aids imaginatively. In one lesson, part-time diploma students were introduced to the basic chemical structure of aromatherapy oils; the teacher made effective use of handouts, question and answer techniques, and a presentation using overhead transparencies. Particularly noteworthy was the use of a computer programme in a hair and beauty reception area to store clients' records and of a new information technology package to help students learn anatomy. Students develop practical skills under particularly effective tuition from a highly motivated and experienced staff team. There were a few weaknesses in isolated lessons. For example, in some practical lessons, students were not given additional tasks when they had finished their set work. In one session, there were insufficient models available for students' practical assessments in hairdressing and some students had to work on blocks. All but one of the lessons observed took place in appropriate and adequately resourced accommodation.

25 Students on full-time programmes visit conferences in their specialist subject area. Teachers organise competitions for students each year. Hairdressing competitions enable full-time and part-time students to demonstrate practical skills in a highly creative way. These events provide links with employers and effective publicity for the college. As stated in the self-assessment report, NVQ level 3 hairdressing students organise a major hairdressing event in the college each year which enables them to provide evidence of their skills in an exciting and enjoyable context. The college is developing links with Nordic countries and hairdressing students this year will participate in an exchange visit with students from Sweden.

26 There have been high levels of achievement on advanced vocational courses during the last three years, although students completing courses in 1997 were less successful than in previous years. A high percentage of full-time

Curriculum Areas

students achieve the awards they are seeking; in 1996-97 there was an overall pass rate of 92 per cent in beauty therapy and 89 per cent in hairdressing. There was a 100 per cent pass rate on the diploma in aromatherapy course and a pass rate of 90 per cent on the Indian head massage course. Retention rates on a few courses have fallen in 1996-97, particularly in hairdressing. The college has investigated the reasons for students leaving and taken measures to address this. Retention on beauty therapy courses is good. Students develop practical skills at a level appropriate for their course. Students' portfolio work is of a good standard and provides an impressive record of the progress made and achievements gained. More students could use wordprocessing to improve further the presentation of their work.

Examples of students' achievements in hairdressing and beauty therapy, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Professional courses diploma in aromatherapy	Retention (%)	92	88	88
	Pass rate (%)	83	100	100
NVQ level 3 beauty therapy (full time)	Retention (%)	+	81	71
	Pass rate (%)	+	92	92
NVQ level 2 hairdressing (full time)	Retention (%)	67	72	53
	Pass rate (%)	58	92	89
Advanced vocational programmes	Retention (%)	85	74	73
	Pass rate (%)	94	94	78
Other – Indian head massage Institute of Health and Holistic Therapies	Retention (%)	+	+	77
	Pass rate (%)	+	+	90

Source: college data
+course not running

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 2

27 Twelve lessons were observed which covered the range of levels and courses offered by the college, including all full-time GNVQ and national diplomas, general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) dance, general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) media and C&G photography. Provision has been extended by the recent addition of courses in performing arts and media. Inspectors generally agreed with the college's self-assessment report. Particularly noteworthy is the strength of students' achievements. Insufficient account, however, is taken of low retention rates on some courses and of the problems caused by the rapid growth of the department.

Key strengths

- good levels of recruitment to a developing range of courses
- well-planned teaching and clear assignment briefs
- emphasis given to students studying on their own
- thorough assessment procedures
- good pass rates for those completing vocational courses
- good levels of progression to higher education
- additional achievements by art and design students
- staff with relevant industrial experience
- good use of community projects and visits

Weaknesses

- low retention over a number of years, particularly on two-year courses
- unsuitable use and poor organisation of accommodation

- inadequate access to specialist equipment
- lack of balance in students' workloads

28 The recently-formed department of creative media and performing arts offers a good range of subjects in art and design, graphic design, photography, performing arts, dance and media. There is a lack of courses at intermediate level in media and performing arts and few vocational opportunities for part-time students. The college offers an extensive programme of non-vocational art and design courses but there is no evidence of progression from these classes. The department has good links with local schools and the community. The local Theatre Royal works closely with the college on the performing arts course and provides good opportunities for work experience for students. The department recognises that better links need to be developed with industry in art, design and media. Six students have recently had work experience in Beijing with Central China Television.

29 Teaching is well planned. Project briefs use a standard format that clearly sets out what is required including key skills, and assessment criteria. Assessment is thorough. Students feel that they are kept well informed of their progress. Some teachers' written feedback on students' work, while helpful, is difficult to read. However, teachers take care to ensure that all feedback is discussed. A particular strength identified by the college is the encouragement given to students to study on their own. Students are required to keep a diary in which they record and evaluate their work and develop action plans. These diaries are particularly strong in performing arts where students reflected on their individual performance and produced highly perceptive comments. As the self-assessment report acknowledges, there is a heavy workload for many students and deadlines set for assignments in media overlap. In performing arts there is too much emphasis on written work.

Curriculum Areas

30 There is effective communication between course leaders and managers. In September 1997, recruitment was well above target. This success has caused extra demands on the small full-time staff team. To accommodate the increase in numbers the department has taken over the use of converted construction studios and storerooms. The photography facility is poor; there is no lighting studio and the dark room is very small. The specialist computer room is too small and unsuitable. The range of video and audio equipment for media is of a reasonable standard but there is insufficient video and audio editing equipment for the number of students. These specialist facilities are integrated with general purpose teaching space and this, consequently, restricts their effective use. The college recognises these weaknesses. A new performance space, including video projection, provides an excellent base for performing arts. Many lessons took place in unsuitable spaces, where the crowded conditions and inappropriate placement of furniture had an inhibiting effect on the quality of students' work. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

31 Pass rates in examinations are high; pass rates for GNVQ intermediate art and design and BTEC foundation studies are well above the national average. Part-time day students, although small in number, achieved a 100 per cent pass rate in the C&G photography course. Full-time art and design students have been particularly successful in achieving additional qualifications. The high GCSE grades achieved in critical studies and photography are particularly noteworthy, although these were not identified in the self-assessment report. In general, a high percentage of students progress to appropriate further education and higher education courses. Teachers recognised in their self-assessment report the problem of low retention in media, but there are other courses with low retention. Retention on the performing arts course and in the last two years of the national diploma in general art and design course are below the national average and college targets. The college has implemented changes to the media syllabus and introduced sharper interview procedures to ensure that applicants have a realistic expectation of course requirements.

Examples of students' achievements in art and design, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational (national diploma media)	Retention (%)	+	62	55
	Pass rate (%)	+	85	83
Intermediate vocational (GNVQ, first diplomas and certificates)	Retention (%)	80	78	84
	Pass rate (%)	88	100	75
Professional courses C&G photography	Retention (%)	+	65	89/50*
	Pass rate (%)	+	100	100/80*
Foundation art and design	Retention (%)	77	91	86
	Pass rate (%)	94	100	97
National diploma in general art and design	Retention (%)	79	67	62
	Pass rate (%)	90	89	100

Source: college data

+course not running

*evening classes

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

32 Inspectors agreed with the main findings in the college's comprehensive self-assessment report but identified strengths and weaknesses which differed in some significant respects from those listed in the report.

Key strengths

- prospective students are well informed about the college and its courses
- effective provision of additional learning support
- strong informal support from staff for students
- effective guidance services

Weaknesses

- inconsistent implementation of the support for students' personal development
- shortcomings in the overall co-ordination and management of support for students
- lack of formal procedures for referring students for counselling

33 The student services team has a comprehensive brief and covers admissions, guidance, careers, counselling, advice and the students' union. Students are generally well supported by these services. Guidance staff, trained in customer care, provide effective guidance on courses, benefits, transport and student finance. Counselling support is provided by staff with counselling experience from outside specialist agencies, with whom the college has good links. There are no formal procedures to help guidance staff on the referral of students to specialist counselling agencies, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report. Childcare for full-time and part-time

students in the college's day nursery is highly regarded. In cases of hardship, students can apply for subsidy from special college funds. Different parts of student services are managed by separate managers. The lines of communication and accountability between the respective managers are not always effective. This weakness is not identified by the college self-assessment report. There is no senior manager with overall responsibility for reviewing the quality of provision against agreed service standards. Student services has few service standards by which to monitor their work.

34 Prospective students are well informed about the college and its courses. Printed information about college services and courses is comprehensive and of a high standard. However, it is not readily available and potential students have to request specific brochures from reception staff. Prospective students value the opportunities provided by 'open' days to view the college. The principal and senior staff give effective presentations to local schools. A programme of 'taster' days is in place and the college runs a successful activity week for year eight middle school pupils. Course entry requirements are set by subject specialists and records of these are held centrally. Enquiries and applications are followed up efficiently and applicants receive helpful advice. The college records the outcomes of interviews. Part-time students are enrolled by course teams. The use of management information systems for monitoring the applications of prospective students has yet to be fully developed. There is no clear sign indicating the location of student services in the foyer.

35 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that the enrolment and induction of new full-time students is well planned. Students are clear about course requirements and are made familiar with the college and its facilities. They receive a student handbook, a copy of the student charter and a

Cross-college Provision

course handbook. For part-time students, induction is included in the first lesson of their course. Induction arrangements for students who join courses late are not always satisfactory.

36 Arrangements for learning support are thorough and well organised. All full-time students are assessed to identify learning needs in numeracy and literacy. Vocational support tutors provide additional guidance and support in departments. Two basic skills co-ordinators support the 11 vocational support tutors. Course tutors are regularly informed of students' progress and attendance. Students are encouraged to use the well-resourced learning centre and the key skills, mathematics and communications workshop. Part-time students are informed of their entitlement to learning support. Those whose programme of study exceeds 120 hours are assessed for numeracy and literacy support. Good links with local upper schools ensure that the need for specialist support can be identified early. The college underestimated the strength of its provision for additional learning support.

37 The college's model for tutorial support is not applied comprehensively and effectively across all departments. All students are allocated a personal tutor. Where tutorials are working well, tutors review students' academic progress and provide support, as necessary, and also develop a programme of activities for students' personal and social education. For example, students in the department of hotel and catering discuss with tutors topics for a programme of visiting speakers. However, in some departments tutorials only cover reviews of academic progress. There are variations between departments as to the number of academic tutorials that full-time students receive each term. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

38 Students are advised of their entitlement to professional careers advice at induction and in the student handbook. However, few students

take up the offer of an individual interview and some students are unaware of the arrangements with Suffolk Careers Ltd. Only half of the course tutors invite careers staff to tutorials. The extent to which the careers service is used varies considerably between departments and courses. There are procedures for course transfer during the 'chance for change' week in November. Few students interviewed, however, were aware of the 'chance for change' week or of the opportunities to discuss career and course changes with careers staff. The college self-assessment report acknowledges the lack of a comprehensive careers education programme.

General Resources

Grade 2

39 There have been substantial improvements to accommodation and resources since the last inspection in 1994. The self-assessment report understates some of the improvements. Inspectors broadly agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- the extensive range of new accommodation and facilities
- the planned maintenance, refurbishment and new building programmes
- the extensive range of information technology equipment
- the good resources in the library and resource centres

Weaknesses

- some facilities and resources inaccessible to wheelchair users
- the inappropriate use of some accommodation

40 Since the last inspection a building

Cross-college Provision

programme has been completed, other accommodation has been successfully remodelled and new learning centres created. Innovative alterations have resulted in useful teaching space being created to take account of changes in the curriculum. The self-assessment report significantly underestimates the quality of the facilities and equipment. There is a 10-year planned programme of maintenance which is updated annually. Accommodation is generally clean and tidy and routine inspections are conducted to ensure standards are maintained. Most classrooms are bright, attractive and appropriately furnished. Minimum standards for classroom accommodation are being developed but monitoring procedures have not yet been implemented. Many general circulation areas are enhanced by interesting displays of students' work. The college reception area offers a welcoming environment. The space allocated for student guidance and careers in the foyer is too small for the number of students using it and detracts from the service offered. Rooms used for interviewing and counselling lack privacy.

41 A system to monitor effective use of accommodation has not yet been fully developed. This weakness is not explicitly stated in the self-assessment report. There has been some inappropriate use of some rooms. A few rooms are too small for the number of students using them and some theory teaching takes place in specialist workshops. Departmental room use surveys have not yet been brought together to give a college-wide overview. A few poor-quality temporary huts are used for teaching. A second phase building is planned which will address many of these shortcomings in accommodation.

42 Inspectors agreed that the library and learning resource area provides excellent facilities for students and staff. It is a bright, spacious area with approximately 120 study places and both quiet and silent study areas. The wide range of books and journals is

catalogued and colour coded for ease of reference. Other facilities include 50 computers, a good range of CD-ROMs and videos, a key skills workshop and a well-stocked careers library. There is a good level of qualified staff to assist students with enquiries and those requiring additional help. Technicians give technical advice to students and help teachers prepare learning materials using information technology. Advisers from the library staff liaise with curriculum areas to ensure that resources take account of changes in the curriculum. Learning resource centres have been established adjacent to several curriculum areas and contain high specification information technology and appropriate vocational learning materials. A planned programme for the improvement and replacement of general equipment has not yet been developed.

43 The college has a well-conceived information and learning technology policy and implementation strategy. Overall, there are almost 500 high-specification computers with up-to-date software for students' use and the majority are available on an open access basis. In addition, about 130 computers are available for teachers and administrative staff. The majority of staff work rooms have computers from which staff can access the academic and management network. Inspectors judged that the provision of information technology hardware and software was of greater significance than the college stated in its self-assessment report.

44 The self-assessment report acknowledges that not all areas of the college are accessible to wheelchair users. The main reception entrance is unsuitable for wheelchair users and there is a lack of prominent signs to alternative entrances. Some entry doors are difficult to manoeuvre. There is no access by lift to some business studies teaching rooms and to the upper floor of the mechatronics centre. There is a realistic action plan and work is in progress to provide ramps and install a lift to improve access.

Cross-college Provision

45 Social facilities for students are generally good. The new student common room is a well-resourced recreational area and is well used by students. The area is staffed by student services staff who work with students to help organise a range of sporting, leisure and charitable activities. Refectory facilities are too small for the number of students and staff. There is a 36-place nursery which offers an after-school and holiday play scheme for children of students and staff. The college does not have sports and leisure facilities on the site but students are able to use local authority playing fields and a leisure centre located on the campus boundary. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that college grounds require some tidying and environmental improvements. There is a well-managed and efficient car parking scheme. Updated external and internal directional signs have improved movement around the college.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

46 Inspectors agreed with the key strengths and weaknesses identified by the college in its self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- strong commitment to continuous improvement of provision
- comprehensive quality assurance arrangements covering all aspects of the college's work
- a rigorous self-assessment process which informs strategic planning and leads to improvement in students' learning experience
- a well-developed staff appraisal system, linked through professional development to quality assurance

Weaknesses

- service standards are not established for all areas of the college's work
- unreliable data on students' achievements

47 Examination of the mission statement, the strategic plan and minutes of the corporation provide clear evidence of the college's commitment to continuous improvement of its provision. There has been a significant increase in the staffing allocated to quality assurance since the last inspection, including the appointment of a quality assurance manager and a quality assurance adviser. The college has recently purchased a software package specifically designed to assist in the analysis of students' perceptions of the provision. The comprehensive procedures manual represents one of the college's major initiatives for quality assurance and arrangements are being made for it to be available on the college-wide computer network. The governors have recently established a quality subcommittee. A revised quality assurance policy that is more easily understood and more accurately reflects the system in operation was approved in July 1997. The college, with the assistance of a consultant, is working towards the European Quality Award. However, since a number of these initiatives are relatively new, it was too early for inspectors to make a judgement of their effectiveness in improving students' achievements.

48 Self-assessment is viewed positively by staff. This attitude has been helped by the college's code of practice which values the achievements of students and staff. The college has a comprehensive quality assurance system. The system includes: observation of teaching and learning; an internal verification system; surveys of students' perceptions; course reviews; and a new course approvals procedure. Several of these elements contribute to the college self-assessment reports that are

Cross-college Provision

produced by teaching and cross-college support services. The college has gained ISO 9001 and 9002 certification for its services to business and its training programmes respectively. The academic board has not yet identified a substantive role for itself in the quality assurance process.

49 The 25 line-managers of teaching, administration and support departments are required to produce an annual self-assessment report. These reports are formally presented to the principal and the director of curriculum and quality assurance. Strengths and weaknesses and the supporting evidence are rigorously investigated, and action plans are required to address identified issues. The college self-assessment report is scrutinised by a review group which includes an external representative, the chair of the corporation and the principal. For the 1995-96 self-assessment report, this robust review process resulted in a curriculum grade being revised downwards. Action plans and target dates for achievement are keenly monitored twice a year. Inspectors were provided with clear evidence of resulting improvements such as modifications to courses and extended opening times for the learning centres. However, the college is unable to monitor the overall effectiveness of this comprehensive process on students' performance because of the lack of centrally held, accurate data on students' achievements. The college recognised this in its 1996-97 self-assessment report update.

50 The college charter is clearly presented and contains service standards for many, but not all, of the charter commitments. For example, there are no standards for the time taken to handle enquiries or for the commitments made for academic and personal guidance and counselling. Some departments, such as 'services to business', have established service standards and have begun to monitor their own effectiveness. The need for all departments to establish service standards is acknowledged as a

weakness in the 1996-97 update of the self-assessment report. Examination of the complaints file confirmed that the principal monitors the time taken to respond to the few letters of complaint.

51 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that staff development is a strength. A substantial budget is allocated for the staff development programme which includes a comprehensive range of activities within the college. Many staff development needs are identified through the well-established annual staff appraisal process that applies to all permanent staff. Lesson observation has been an element of the appraisal process for some time and grading of lessons was introduced during 1997. It has been readily accepted by staff as part of self-assessment and managers received appropriate training to undertake observations. Inspectors did not completely agree with the college's assessment of the quality of teaching and learning. The profile of lesson observation grades awarded by college managers has a much higher proportion of lessons graded 1 or 2 than in the sample of lessons observed by inspectors. The college was awarded the Investor in People status in February 1996.

Governance

Grade 2

52 Inspectors agreed broadly with the college's overall assessment of its governance but identified some issues which were not highlighted in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective administration of corporation and committee business
- the open approach to the search for and selection of new governors

Cross-college Provision

- productive relationship between governors and college management
- the well-developed awareness of strategic issues
- the governors' high level of contribution to the success of the college
- critical monitoring of some elements in the strategic plan

Weaknesses

- the underdeveloped arrangements for rigorous monitoring of all aspects of quality assurance
- unclear terms of reference of some committees
- little development of criteria for assessing own performance

53 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

54 The governing body has a membership of 16, including 11 independent members, a TEC nominee, two co-opted members, one staff member and the principal. The corporation has taken an open approach to the selection of new governors. Governors bring an appropriate mix of skills and expertise to corporation business. Clerking arrangements are effective and committee agendas and minutes are prepared to a high standard. At an early stage, the corporation adopted a register of interests and a code of conduct but these require updating. Procedures for the conduct of corporation and committee business could be drawn together into standing orders.

55 There is an appropriate range of committees, supported by advisory groups. The

terms of reference of the finance and general purposes committee and estates committee do not give a clear indication of their roles and responsibilities. As stated in the college's self-assessment report, committee business is clearly reported to the corporation. All governors receive financial information at a suitable frequency. Financial information is considered in detail by the finance and general purposes committee which reports, appropriately, to the corporation. The corporation has a well-developed understanding of strategic issues.

56 There is a strong and productive relationship between governors and the senior management team. Members have a clear understanding of their role and those of the college management. Governors use their expertise to support senior managers in the development of areas such as estates, marketing, quality, and finance. The corporation receives regular presentations from curriculum departments. Some governors have well-established links with curriculum areas. Challenging objectives are set for the principal and senior managers and the achievement of these forms part of their appraisal.

57 The corporation is committed to making an effective contribution to the success of the college. Corporation members have attended training sessions on a variety of issues such as the implications of the Nolan committee report, strategic planning, and self-assessment. These have encouraged members to improve their own performance and that of the college. The corporation's own self-assessment review has involved feedback from a members' questionnaire. It recognises that it has not yet set its own performance criteria, and that it should assess the contribution of individual members. There is an annual audit of the details of governors' appointments and interests, committee membership, and individual governors' attendance at college and civic events, committee meetings and training events.

Cross-college Provision

58 Arrangements to monitor rigorously all aspects of the quality of provision are not fully established. There is regular and effective reporting of factors underpinning financial performance, for example, enrolment, retention, completion, staff costs and income generation. More recently, there has been a clear statement of the targets underpinning strategic objectives within the new strategic plan. However, analysis and reporting is not well developed in the areas of students' achievements and support services. The reporting of students' achievements does not yet give a coherent picture of year-on-year trends. The corporation has established a committee to monitor the quality of provision, addressing a weakness recognised by the corporation in its own self-assessment report.

Management

Grade 2

59 Inspectors substantially agreed with the self-assessment report's judgement about management. However, there were some issues that inspectors judged to be of greater significance than was apparent from the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- achievement of targets and review of operations through effective management
- clear, well-documented procedures and policies
- an efficiently and effectively managed curriculum
- well-managed and effective liaison with external organisations
- appropriate management attention given to improving college communications
- frequent, regular and timely monitoring and reporting of college finances

Weaknesses

- ineffective use of the management information system at some levels
- lines of communication and accountability in some areas
- arrangements to review achievement of strategic objectives and operational plans for some cross-college functions
- limited monthly updates of financial forecasting

60 Effective management enables the college to achieve its targets, and keep under constant review the operation of the college. College growth targets have been met in each of the last three years. Good links are made between strategic priorities and curriculum development in the formulation of the strategic plan. Appropriate account is taken of market information and clear targets and performance measures are identified. Senior managers have clear responsibilities for monitoring strategic objectives and governors receive reports on progress made. At the time of the inspection, some departmental plans had not been developed to take account of the priorities identified by the senior management team. Operational plans contain few measurable objectives with quantified targets. Close attention is given to monitoring the achievement of curriculum objectives through regular meetings and course reviews.

61 The self-assessment report recognises the strength of the well-managed and effective liaison which the college has with local industry and with external bodies involved in education and training. The college has fostered excellent relationships with the training and enterprise council (TEC). The college is regarded as flexible and responsive to employer needs and is one of the TEC's largest contractors for training credits and modern apprenticeships. College staff are actively involved with local training initiatives and have good links with other

Cross-college Provision

educational institutions. Several departments have active advisory boards but some have found these to be ineffective. Close links are maintained with industry through work placements and the development of specific courses for particular employers. There are no systems to assess the effectiveness of external links.

62 The senior management team has recognised the need to improve some aspects of college management. The senior management team comprises the principal and four directors who have responsibility for: business development, marketing and student services; curriculum and quality; finance, estates and management information; and personnel. The college's management arrangements were reorganised following the appointment of the principal in 1995 and more recently with a restructuring of curriculum departments. A survey of management effectiveness has enabled the senior management team to identify four key areas for improvement: communications with college staff; the level of managers' skills; the effectiveness of managers working as a team; and staff perception of the college as an employer. An action plan to address these weaknesses and a programme of management training to improve the effectiveness of communications have been agreed. The college communications strategy has been revised to provide more opportunities for staff to be briefed and to express their views. In spite of these initiatives, inspectors considered that the importance of the effectiveness of communications within the college was not given sufficient emphasis in the self-assessment report.

63 Procedures and policies have been definitively stated and documented in a well-organised manual for college managers and staff. Staff contribute to the review of procedures and policies through working groups. For example, the college equal opportunities policy has recently been revised

following proposals from a working group. The manual is kept up to date although there is no agreed timetable for the review of policies.

64 The curriculum is well managed. Inspectors agree with the self-assessment report that this is a major strength of the college. There are effective procedures for course management supported by comprehensive course documentation. Departments and course teams meet regularly. Staff are effectively deployed. Staffing costs are kept under close scrutiny by managers. The cost of courses is closely monitored and analysed. The appointment of technician/demonstrators to undertake workshop activities and a recent programme of redundancy is helping to redress the trend of rising staff costs. Staff have a high level of commitment to the college and its work.

65 The self-assessment report recognises the weaknesses in the provision of management information to support curriculum and other managers. The management information system is not effectively used at all levels. Most heads of department are able to access data on enrolments and use that information to manage staffing and timetables. However, accurate and timely data on attendance and students' achievements are not routinely available to course directors and heads. The information requirements of managers have not been formally identified. Performance monitoring data, including financial data, are reported regularly to the senior management team and the finance and general purposes committee of the corporation. This enables the achievement of strategic targets to be appropriately monitored. The college has experienced delays in meeting the deadlines for the individualised student records but now anticipates that returns will be made on time.

66 The FEFC's audit service concludes that within the scope of its review the college's financial management is adequate. The average level of funding is £16.88 per unit for 1997-98. The median for general further education

Cross-college Provision

colleges is £16.72 per unit. The finance department has appropriate expertise. The majority of routine financial reports are generated directly from the accounting system. Within the main financial reports, forecasts of income and expenditure to the year end were not updated. Cash flow is forecast to the current financial year end but not beyond and is of decreasing use as the year progresses. Due to external circumstances the college experienced considerable difficulties in finalising its 1995-96 audited annual accounts and has acted to overcome this for its 1996-97 accounts. The internal audit plans agreed by the college are narrowly focused on the college's financial systems and do not adequately cover other college activities that are part of the whole system of internal control.

Conclusions

67 The inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for carrying out the inspection. Most of the findings in the college's self-assessment report are in agreement with those of the inspection team. Some strengths identified by the college were described in terms which suggest that they had less significance than that placed on them by inspectors. Conversely, inspectors considered the significance of some weaknesses to be exaggerated by the college. Inspectors considered the college's self-assessment of teaching and learning to be largely accurate. However, lessons observed and graded by the college produced a profile of grades considerably better than those awarded by inspectors. Inspectors agreed with most curriculum grades awarded by the college and all grades for cross-college provision.

68 Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	15
19-24 years	12
25+ years	67
Not known	5
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	4
Intermediate	21
Advanced	12
Higher education	3
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	60
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	96	1,147	8
Construction	103	398	3
Engineering	182	538	5
Business	263	2,172	16
Hotel and catering	203	307	3
Health and community care	290	2,777	19
Art and design	183	1,621	12
Humanities	249	4,682	31
Basic education	95	340	3
Total	1,664	13,982	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	119	74	0	193
Supporting direct learning contact	38	0	5	43
Other support	85	0	19	104
Total	242	74	24	340

Source: college data, rounded to nearest full-time equivalent

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£8,905,000	£9,450,000	*
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£17.43	£17.45	£17.65
Payroll as a proportion of income	67%	70%	*
Achievement of funding target	102%	+	*
Diversity of income	35%	34%	*
Operating surplus	£355,000	£66,000	*

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

*data not available

+agreed data not available

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	31	82	92
	Average point score per entry	3.0	2.5	3.1
	Position in tables	bottom third	bottom third	bottom third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	108	221	225
	Percentage achieving qualification	73%	72%	73%
	Position in tables	middle third	middle third	middle third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	112	121
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	54%	56%
	Position in tables	*	middle third	middle third

Source: DfEE

Note: the majority of the college's students are 19 years of age or older

The achievements of these students are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

FEFC Inspection Report 19/98

**Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
February 1998**