

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Oldham Sixth Form College

June 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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 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.

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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.*

By June 1995, some 208 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 208 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-95

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	60%	28%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	13%	51%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	11%	56%	29%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 74/96

OLDHAM SIXTH FORM COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected May 1995-March 1996

Summary

Oldham Sixth Form College is housed in a high-quality new building which represents a major investment by the local authority in raising students' achievements. Members of the local community consider that the college has made an excellent start since it opened in 1992 in repaying this investment. Teaching is of high quality. Examination achievements are generally better than national averages. Students benefit from outstanding facilities and from a broad curriculum offer. The college is diversifying its courses from those traditionally offered to younger, full-time students and is starting to make provision for adults and those in employment. Staff are well qualified, energetic and motivated. They have good relationships with their students and have established a safe and friendly learning environment. Staff development is well planned. Governors have wide experience and are informed and supportive. Managers have worked hard to establish the college. They should now spend time in consolidating the decision-making systems and establishing a clear system for quality assurance and self-assessment, as well as planning the next phase of the college's development.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	1
Quality assurance	3
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	1
accommodation	1

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science	1	Art and design	2
Mathematics and computing	2	History, geography sociology and psychology	1
Business	2	English	1
		Modern languages	2

INTRODUCTION

1 The inspection of Oldham Sixth Form College took place between May 1995 and March 1996. Aspects of humanities teaching were inspected in May 1995, arrangements for students' enrolment and induction in September 1995, other specialised areas in January 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in March 1996. Thirteen inspectors, including one inspector from outside the world of education, spent a total of 46 days in the college.

2 Inspectors observed 142 teaching sessions, examined students' work and held discussions with students, staff, governors, and representatives of local communities, employers and higher education institutions. They attended meetings of staff and governors and observed business meetings. They also met with headteachers, the leader of the local authority, the chairman of the Oldham Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, and representatives of the careers service.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Oldham Sixth Form College was designed and built by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council as part of a reorganisation of post-16 education in the borough. Oldham is the 38th most deprived district in England out of a total of 366 districts. The prime objective of the reorganisation was to improve upon the poor participation, retention and achievement rates of young people leaving school. Oldham was to be served by a purpose-built sixth form college, requiring an investment of approximately £17 million. It was the first new sixth form college to be constructed in England for 22 years. Its opening in September 1992 coincided with the implementation of *The Further and Higher Education Act 1992*.

4 The college recognises its unique position in being provided with an enviable building of the highest quality. The governors and staff of the college also consider it their duty and responsibility to repay the debt to the people of Oldham by fulfilling the college mission. This mission is 'to provide the highest quality education for students in Oldham and surrounding areas so that they are equipped to the very best of their abilities, to move into higher education or employment'. The success of the college in raising aspirations and in enabling students to progress from school to the college and from college into higher education has generated a demand for expansion of college provision beyond the capacity of its current buildings. The college is planning to extend its premises in 1997.

5 The college contributes to a wide choice of post-16 education opportunities available to students in the area. In Oldham itself, apart from the sixth form college, there is a college of further education, five 11 to 18 high schools and two independent schools. Within a seven-mile radius, students have easy access to a varied range of further education opportunities. Situated in the town centre, the college has ten 11 to 16

partner schools in Oldham from which it recruits approximately 50 per cent of its students. Since the college is well served by public transport, it also attracts students from outside the borough.

6 The building was originally designed to accommodate up to 1,000 students. By November 1995 there were 1,599 full-time 16 to 19 year old students on roll and 277 part-time students on the continuing education programme which operates in the evening. By the year 2000 the college aims to provide up to 2,100 full-time students with an academically rigorous, enriching experience in a supportive, yet adult environment. It intends to extend significant elements of this provision to 1,000 adults in continuing education and to respond to the demands of the local community through the provision of company training in languages and information technology. In this way the college will continue to play its part in the improvement of Oldham's economic infrastructure and contribute to the growth in local confidence. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The college is committed to increasing the staying-on and achievement rates of 16 to 19 year olds in the borough. It has extended its offer of General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects and introduced a range of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). Staff and governors are fully aware of the national targets for education and training and the requirements of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). In planning its portfolio of courses, it has taken into account courses available at other nearby further education colleges. The college concentrates on full-time academic and general vocational education, offered in the daytime, for 16 to 19 year old students. In September 1994, a range of evening continuing education classes were introduced, offered on two evenings only. Consultancy and training provision for the business community is also developing. Since its opening the college has exceeded its growth targets and has had to introduce waiting lists of prospective students for its full-time provision.

8 The college provision includes:

- 41 subjects at GCE A level
- courses leading to GNVQ in art and design, business, health and social care, information technology, leisure and tourism, science and the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) award in health studies at national diploma level
- seven subjects at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and GCE advanced supplementary (AS)
- foreign language at work, a one-year course providing working knowledge of French, Spanish, German or Russian

-
- evening provision for some 300 adults
 - customised training for industry, in information technology and modern languages.

9 In 1995-96, approximately 90 per cent of the 1,600 full-time 16 to 19 students were following advanced courses, of whom 81 per cent were on GCE A level and 19 per cent were on GNVQ advanced courses. At level 2, 72 per cent of full-time students were on GNVQ intermediate courses. All GNVQ students study a modern foreign language. The most popular GCE A level subjects are biology, business studies, computing, English language, English literature, history, mathematics, media studies and psychology. There is an annual review of the curriculum, commencing at departmental level. Subject tutors are required within this review to consider alternative syllabuses which reflect their students' backgrounds and future aspirations. This informs senior management decision-making and enables the college's strategic plan to respond to students' needs. For example, the introduction of modular syllabuses in the sciences has led to a wider range of optional units being available. One-year GCE AS courses are primarily being taken up by GCE A level students who at the end of their first year do not wish to progress to the second year. Students are encouraged to enrol for GNVQ intermediate courses rather than to resit GCSE subjects in which they have achieved poor grades. There has been a cautious approach to the introduction of GNVQs. Courses are offered only in those areas for which the college considers it has the expertise and resources. Relationships with Oldham College are cordial. The colleges try not to duplicate provision without good reason.

10 Since its opening, the college has committed itself to an entitlement curriculum for all 16 to 19 students. Students during their first year are able to take five short courses, from an extensive choice of over 120, as part of the college enrichment programme. For example, courses in world religions, information technology, career planning and the organisation of a weekend holiday for school pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities provide an opportunity for students to work with a variety of voluntary organisations, schools and commercial undertakings. The courses are accredited by Liverpool University. Successful completion of all five courses leads to the award of a certificate from the university. In 1995, 480 students received certificates, representing 35 per cent of the student population. A wide range of leisure activities is also offered. In 1994-95, over 150 students represented the college in inter-college competitions in a range of sports, including football, hockey, rugby, swimming and gymnastics. Eleven students have represented their country since 1992. There are a number of college clubs. The college sports and fitness centres and several off-site sports facilities are available. Students are also able to gain accreditation for coaching skills and take part in the Duke of Edinburgh gold award scheme. There are many opportunities to participate in music and drama. The college theatre has

established itself as a public venue for touring theatre and dance companies.

11 The student-led Christian union holds a weekly act of collective worship. A number of students are studying GCE A level philosophy and religious knowledge. There is also the opportunity within the short course programme for students to discuss moral and spiritual issues. The college makes accommodation available to Islamic students when required.

12 There are strong links with schools both within and outside the borough. The college gives priority to pupils from its ten 11 to 16 partner schools. The school liaison officer arranges open days, talks to year 11 pupils, open evenings for parents, and joint training days. Schools speak positively of the college. They consider it has a caring ethos and offers high-quality student support and resources. Information provided by the college on the destinations and progress of their former pupils is particularly valued. The principal meets regularly with secondary heads. Teachers in a few departments have developed close links with their counterparts in local schools. For example, pupils with severe neurological difficulties are sensitively and successfully integrated with a college GCSE drama group. As part of the short course programme, students have organised a trip to France for children with special educational needs. Some college staff are providing a programme of language training for teachers of three local primary schools. Whilst addressing their language needs, this training also uses information technology as a teaching tool. This type of curriculum link with schools could be more common among departments.

13 The college is considered to offer impartial advice and guidance to pupils. Relationships between the college and the careers service are well established and the college regularly participates in careers events. Contact with parents is good, and they speak highly of the college. There is an evening meeting for parents of newly-accepted students prior to students commencing their studies. Parents' meetings are held regularly to review their children's progress and to brief them on possible pathways for their progression to higher education.

14 The college has recognised the need to provide opportunities for continuing education. The programme is now in its second year of operation and some 300 adult students are following a variety of evening academic and vocational courses. They are joined by some full-time students who take this opportunity for additional study. The college has many links with the local community. It is a member of Oldham Partnership, an alliance of private sector, voluntary sector and public bodies which has the aim of supporting the economic and social regeneration of Oldham. In partnership with others it has been successful in receiving funding from the government's single regeneration budget and other grants from United Kingdom and European funds. A limited non-trading company, Infonet, has been established with the aim of

utilising its specialised information technology and business language facilities to help local businesses win new markets. In November 1995, a business convention was attended by over 50 delegates to launch the company. A number of successful training contracts have been won. Satisfied customers include British Aerospace and Pilgrim International.

15 Links with the Oldham Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise are very productive. The principal is a member of the Oldham Strategic Forum, a grouping of colleges and the Chamber whose aim is to promote life-time learning. Labour market assessment is carried out jointly with both colleges and the Chamber. The college is acknowledged as having played a major part in increasing the staying-on rate into full-time education and training of 16 to 19 year olds in the borough from 52 per cent in 1992 to 61 per cent in 1995.

16 Work experience is an integral part of GNVQ programmes. For most GCE A level students, work shadowing or work placement is voluntary. For those studying modern languages, foreign exchanges are organised on a work placement basis. In 1995, 35 per cent of GCE A level students took part in some form of work experience. If the college is to increase this level of activity the management of the provision will need to be more closely co-ordinated. Work placement providers consider students are well prepared. There is close liaison between employers and tutors. Students are encouraged to undertake projects of benefit to the placement provider. Employers complete evaluations.

17 The college marketing plan identifies the sources of existing students and sets targets for admissions from each school. Good use is made of local labour market information. The identification of employers' training needs is being developed. The college research unit undertakes curriculum related research. This provides managers with valuable information on which to make strategic planning decisions. For example, it has examined recruitment to GNVQ courses and the impact of the modified information supplied to schools. Enquiries from prospective students are carefully monitored and followed up. The prospectus and course information is of high quality and appropriate to the needs of school pupils.

18 The college has developed some useful links with higher education institutions in the region. Its focus has been on enhancing the progression prospects of its students. For example, it has identified with Salford University the additional units it should include in the advanced GNVQ in business studies. Students awarded the short-course programme certificate are assured an interview at Liverpool University. The need to develop further links with higher education is recognised by the college.

19 The equal opportunities policy is well understood by both students and staff. It is given a high priority both at induction and during tutorial sessions. The college has placed great emphasis on embedding the principles of the policy into all aspects of college life. Respect for the individual is the central theme. However, students from different cultural

backgrounds seldom share experiences or participate in multicultural activities. The few unwelcome incidents that have arisen have been quickly and efficiently dealt with through the college grievance procedures. The college monitors enrolments by gender and ethnicity. There has been particular success in recruiting students from the minority ethnic communities. For example, in 1995, 23 per cent of college students compared with 17 per cent of school leavers were from the minority ethnic groups. The college also considers that it has a role in promoting equal opportunities within the community. For example, students from Asian cultural backgrounds undertaking 'teaching experience' as part of the short course programme, are encouraged to work in local schools which have large numbers of pupils from minority ethnic groups to offer role models to younger pupils. The college is regularly the venue for events which reflect the diverse population of the borough.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

20 Managers and governors are clear-sighted about the mission of the college. They are in no doubt of the importance of their role in the regeneration of Oldham, and of the investment in the future which the college represents. There is considerable commitment to high achievement in all respects. The initial success of the college has been marked by rapid expansion, from 400 to 1,600 students in three years. This expansion has been smoothly managed. At the same time, staff have remained motivated and students' achievements have been sustained. Senior staff have worked hard to establish the college as a significant presence on the local and national education scene.

21 Governors are committed to their work. There are 14 members of the corporation, including two parents, two staff governors, the chief executive of the Oldham Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, and six independent business interest governors. There is one woman. Governors bring a useful range of experience to the board and have provided important advice on legal, financial, educational and political matters. Senior managers service subcommittees relevant to their roles. The principal's personal assistant also serves as clerk to the board. Governors attend college events regularly and give generously of their time. The chairman, in particular, is frequently able to attend college management group meetings. Both he and the principal consider that this helps to speed up decisions.

22 The strategic planning process is disciplined; there is a clearly-defined cycle which links with budget planning and students' recruitment. The models used for resource planning are accurate. Recruitment is tightly monitored and controlled. The substantial growth of the college has brought in additional resources which have been carefully invested. Plans have been modified in the light of anticipated accommodation changes. All teaching areas play a part in the strategic planning process and the

plans they submit are reviewed by governors. The development plans produced by departments could include more precise targets or success indicators; they also need to be scrutinised with a view to improving the consistency of their quality across departments.

23 The computerised management information systems which support decisions are well managed. Good-quality, accurate data are available. There is a computerised registration system which provides information on students' attendance, absence and retention. These data are used to enable tutors to monitor students' progress. However, staff are required to back up the registration system with their own paper registers. The potential of the network to reduce paperwork, both for teaching and administration, could be more fully exploited. The individual student record now contains destinations data.

24 In managing its finances, the college makes use of financial projections and risk calculations. Careful asset management adds significantly to college resources. Substantial reserves have been accumulated in anticipation of the need to finance expansion on a reducing unit of resource. Depreciation costs are high because buildings are new. An accommodation strategy has been developed to cope with expansion. In this the college has received full backing from the local authority. The average level of funding for 1995-96 is £18.48 per unit, having fallen from £19.04 per unit in 1994-95. The median for sixth form colleges is £19.37 per unit. Grant income as a result of successful bidding to United Kingdom and European Union sources has reduced current dependence on FEFC from 92.19 per cent in 1994 to 88.8 per cent in the current year. The establishment of the college training company was preceded by careful business planning, with the help of an outside consultant. The college's estimated income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

25 Staff are well informed about national and local matters. They have been well briefed on the issues facing further education, and the college. Through the college management group, almost 25 per cent of staff are involved in decision making. Careful consultations are conducted over major issues such as the proposed changes to the college day. There are regular information meetings, weekly briefings and staff and student bulletins. All meetings run to a pre-defined timetable to ease attendance. Most meetings are well supported by agendas, papers and minutes. Those attended during the inspection were businesslike and clearly focused.

26 The senior management team has been reduced in size since the college was established and more responsibility has been devolved to middle managers and/or administrative staff. This is leading to rapid development of the capabilities of staff at all levels. Job descriptions exist for all staff. Line management is clear and accountabilities are well defined. The line management of some technical and support staff is currently the

subject of some discussion but ways have been found of sharing their services amicably. Senior managers recognise that the time is now right for middle managers to take on greater autonomy and to shoulder the responsibilities which their position in a large college warrants. This may require a review of the teaching loads of some middle managers. Delegation planned for the current year has not yet been finalised.

27 Deployment of staff is tightly controlled. The basis for budget allocations is well known and understood. Middle managers are given responsibility for materials budgets and receive monthly monitoring reports on their financial position. Reasons for overspend against predicted phased expenditure are discussed, and adjustments made.

28 The organisational structure of the college is complex. There are interlocking responsibilities for students, curriculum and resources. There are too many management groups, resulting in many meetings, and the ultimate responsibility for decision making moves between them and is not always clear. The senior postholders' group, comprising the principal and three vice-principals has responsibility for strategy and resource allocations. Its meetings are not minuted. The college management group is a focus for briefing, coaching, consultation, and recommendations and it meets fortnightly. Senior management team meetings are chiefly concerned with small scale, operational matters. The three curriculum managers and the student managers usually meet separately, but sometimes join together. There are instances where decisions were delayed pending discussions in parallel groups and uncertainty over who would have the final say. The twice-termly meeting of GNVQ managers is necessary because of the devolved nature of GNVQ development. However, its concerns overlap those of other areas and the management of GNVQ has now been taken over by the three curriculum managers. This complex structure has enabled the maximum involvement of staff in the college's early years, but there is now scope for further streamlining and more rapid decision making.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

29 The college's students are friendly and personable. They feel that the college provides a secure environment in which to work and that the relationships between different cultural groups within the college are respectful. Students find the staff approachable and always willing to offer assistance to individuals.

30 The college maintains good liaison with its partner schools. Each year the schools liaison manager visits the schools and arranges link activities which include attendance at parents' evenings, contributions to assemblies, visits by former students and interviewing arrangements. During the autumn term of 1995, all 10 partner schools were visited. Two open evenings were held in late January so that students from partner and non-partner schools could visit departments on separate evenings to

speak to subject staff. In 1996, approximately 1,450 visitors attended over the two evenings. A well-designed college prospectus details the courses on offer and clearly sets out entrance requirements, using case studies to illustrate students' learning programmes.

31 Interviews for applicants from partner schools generally take place in the school, but one school arranged for its students to be interviewed in college. Interviewers make good use of GCSE grade predictions and career action plans. A case conference is conducted in each partner school, prior to interviews, to consider the needs of all applicants and, in particular, those with special requirements. Applicants from non-partner schools are interviewed separately in college. In 1995, 633 applicants from partner schools were accepted out of 825 and 569 applicants were accepted out of 1,080 from non-partner schools.

32 The process of enrolment is conducted in three cohorts over three days. It is well planned and efficiently managed. Experienced, knowledgeable staff are assigned to groups of students as temporary 'provisional' tutors for enrolment. They provide individual guidance and assist students to confirm appropriate course decisions. Some students felt unhappy that they were subsequently reorganised into new subject-linked tutor groups with a new tutor and new colleagues. As a part of enrolment, students were taken through the college charter and the comprehensive student handbook, in some groups participated in a quiz about these documents which they clearly enjoyed. During induction, ample time was given to enable students to settle into college, form friendships and fully discuss their learning programme. This was valued by students. Induction to GCE A level subject areas is carefully planned and felt by students to be a good transition to advanced study. Although many students enjoyed their induction, some felt that it presented them with too much information and that some sessions did not maintain their interest. The college evaluated students' perceptions of its admission procedures and enrolment and induction days using questionnaires and a focused interview session. This exercise was intended to inform future practice.

33 Course changes are kept to a minimum. At the commencement of the year, a two-week embargo is placed upon course changes. Students are only allowed to consider changes after careful discussion with their personal tutor. Course change documentation is provided to students and this is used to track their discussions with subject staff, the head of the new subject department and a careers adviser. The progress of each form is carefully monitored and the requested change is only accepted when the procedure is completed to everyone's satisfaction. In 1995, 218 forms were issued to students and 148 course changes were finally accepted, with the result that only 14.7 per cent of students changed a single subject course.

34 A system of personal tutors, led by three student managers and their respective assistant managers, offers a support structure that meets the

needs of individual students and is valued by them. There are regular monitoring meetings between personal tutors, student managers and the vice-principal responsible for the tutorial system. All established full-time members of staff serve as personal tutors for a group of about 20 students with whom they meet weekly. Wherever possible students are assigned to the tutorial groups of tutors who teach them for one of their main academic subjects. A comprehensive programme of tutorial activities is planned during each year and this allows a mixture of some whole tutor group sessions and individual review meetings. The requirement that the whole group meets briefly towards the end of tutorial sessions, for registration and to receive the weekly college bulletin, places undue pressure upon some students to attend college for a brief morning session when their classes only commence much later in the day. The timing of tutorials also allows for whole year groups to meet in the large lecture theatre for talks which include action planning, interview skills, stress management and preparation for higher education.

35 A comprehensive referral procedure is in place which alerts personal tutors to the specific needs of their tutees. The procedure may be initiated by subject staff, personal tutors or the student themselves for reasons which include absence from lessons for three sessions, poor motivation in class work, late completion or non-completion of work, or personal problems. The procedure ensures that a specific issue, once identified, is systematically pursued and that appropriate action is taken. Referrals can often be dealt with by the personal tutor, but may involve student managers or other senior staff and can lead to parental involvement, if appropriate. The mechanism has proved to be extremely effective as an additional means of identifying students who are experiencing difficulty in college and of promoting student accountability. The system is adaptable and is used by some staff to ensure that individual students' successes are registered with personal tutors. Copies of referral sheets are stored in students' action planning folders; 761 referrals were logged between September 1995 and March 1996. More serious pastoral problems of individual students, often identified through the referral procedure, can be raised for discussion between tutors and student managers and appropriate action decided upon.

36 A supportive system is in place which enables students to review their progress and set personal targets. All students meet individually with their subject tutors following formal examinations to discuss their progress and prepare subject action plans. In biology, students are given individual attention at the end of each module test to discuss their performance. The discussion also covers their potential performance, calculated from departmental projections of individual students' likely achievement. Students who are under-performing are given extra individual support. Personal tutors work with students to review with them their overall progress and assist them in planning improvement. All subject staff contribute to subject reports which follow examinations.

These reports are sent home to parents. Records of achievement are at an early stage of development. Students in their first year at the college are receiving training in the use of a computerised package to maintain these records. There are regular parents' evenings. In general, parents were impressed with the level of communication maintained by the college and in particular enjoyed the annual students' presentation evening which followed the publication of examination results.

37 Students are given sound advice by personal tutors to assist them in making applications to higher education. The process is supported by a compulsory short course which introduces students to the well-qualified college careers team and explains applications procedures. At the time of the inspection, 456 applications had been made through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for 1996 entry. Careers advisers from the Oldham careers service contribute to the higher education preparation short course and offer individual advice through careers interviews. In 1995, 730 careers interviews were held in the college. The careers service also organises an annual higher education conference, hosted by the college, for all students within the borough. The conference has been most successful in providing a series of talks and workshops on higher education and the opportunity for students to meet with higher education representatives. All students receive comprehensive information about employment opportunities after college and have the opportunity to explore this further through a series of lunchtime 'job-seeker' workshops. Careers advice and individual support is also made available to students after examination results are published.

38 The requirements of the small cohort of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are met satisfactorily. Statemented students, and the specific needs of others applying to the college, are discussed with staff at partner school case conferences at the time of the students' applications to the college. Students diagnosed as dyslexic are given appropriate information technology support and more severely disabled students have regular reviews of their needs.

39 Students genuinely feel able to approach personal tutors or other members of staff for support in confidential matters. One member of staff with counselling qualifications and experience works with the student managers' team and offers advice and support to individuals on appropriate external assistance. A comprehensive booklet, detailing external agencies for a variety of needs, is discussed with students during induction and valued by them.

40 There is a small, enthusiastic student association of five elected first-year students, which works to meet the needs of the student body. There is a suggestion box system for use by students. The senior officers of the association respond to students' suggestions with the support of a student liaison manager. Regular meetings are held with the principal and the vice-principal for student services and, where possible, suggestions

are acted upon. The group has been successful in ensuring access to the common room for students with disabilities and in arranging for the restaurant to be opened in the evening to allow Muslim students to break their fast during Ramadan. The association is developing plans for charity events.

41 The assessment of basic skills is restricted to intermediate programmes. It requires further development. Effective learning support is available for advanced students and subject tutors refer students to language and mathematics workshops for help of various kinds. There are difficulties in persuading some students to take up this support.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

42 Strengths outweighed weaknesses in 84 per cent of the classes observed. This is a high figure and confirms the generally good quality of student learning. There were very few instances of lessons with significant weaknesses. An analysis of the grades awarded to the lessons inspected is given in the following table.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		35	44	13	1	0	93
GCSE		10	6	2	0	0	18
GNVQ		4	11	6	0	0	21
Other		4	5	1	0	0	10
Total		53	66	22	1	0	142

43 The average level of student attendance in the teaching sessions inspected was 85 per cent of those on roll. The highest average attendance in a subject area was 93 per cent in science. The lowest attendances, at 82 per cent, were in art and design, and humanities. An average of 12.27 students were present in the classes inspected. The college sets a target of 85 per cent attendance as a minimum for all students.

44 Teaching is stimulating and generally of a high standard. Students consequently have some first-class learning experiences. Schemes of work are detailed and well matched to the requirements of external bodies. Lesson plans are produced to common formats, agreed by departments, and always refer to the students' previous work so that continuity is maintained. Learning activities are varied and there is a good balance in most subjects between teacher exposition, practical activities, small group work, studies based on handout material and written tests.

45 Teachers are enthusiastic and knowledgeable and their confidence as subject specialists enables them to retain the interest of most students. The relationship between students and staff is informal but respectful and students are well motivated. Staff make an effort to offer realistic contexts

for study, sometimes using their own experience outside education. Contemporary examples are often used to develop the understanding of theory.

46 Assessment tasks are clear and students understand what they must do to succeed. Many assignments are demanding. The way in which students are kept informed about their progress is well managed. There are clear records of progress and action plans are regularly updated during tutorial meetings, so that areas of weakness revealed during tests or routine assignments can be tackled promptly. Marking is generally clear, consistent and gives students advice on how to improve their work. Action is taken promptly when students' learning is not progressing well. Extra help is programmed in areas where students experience common difficulties, such as report writing. Additional revision classes are provided during the lunchbreak when necessary. However, the learning support needs of some students are not fully met under present arrangements, particularly for students on level 2 courses, or for those in the early stages of their GCE A level courses.

47 In several departments, learning is supported by some well-made, teacher produced materials. Teachers of modern languages use authentic material from the relevant country as the basis for study packages. In science some good-quality videos have been produced to demonstrate aspects of practical work.

48 In some weaker sessions, the pace of work is too slow and students are not all fully involved or working on material appropriate to their needs. Some unpunctuality disrupts the start of lessons. There is overuse of some teaching methods which do not always help students' learning to progress quickly enough. For example, small group work is sometimes used in lessons in business to try to help students discover for themselves the theory underlying the work when a full explanation of its relevance by the teacher would be more effective. In modern languages some teachers talk too much at the expense of students having time to practise the foreign language they are learning. There are a few examples of students copying from projected transparencies rather than listening to the accompanying explanations which they need to understand.

49 Students are offered a series of short courses which broaden their studies, give them additional opportunities to develop core skills and add to the variety of their learning experiences. Information technology and careers education are compulsory short courses, and are generally well handled. In information technology, students make good progress and are able to describe how they have used information technology to support aspects of their vocational work. Each student has an agreed action plan and progress against action plans is monitored weekly. In performing arts and in the business GNVQ, the core skills of numeracy, information technology and communication are very well integrated with other areas of study. In the GNVQ information technology programme, numeracy

work is not well integrated with other studies. Some science students are not making the connections necessary between relevant modules in different subjects. Some students who need extra mathematics to support their work in physics are not using the workshop facilities provided.

50 There were many examples during the inspection of lively lessons during which students responded well and made positive contributions themselves. In one biology class, a group of seven students simulated an electron transfer chain and the harnessing of energy. They stood in a row in order of height and passed a hydrogen atom model between them while the remaining students identified whether the individuals (or molecules) had been oxidised or reduced by the loss or gain of the transferred hydrogen. One GCE A level theatre studies class used topical press cuttings as the basis for an interpretation of the theatrical perspective of Dario Fo. The tutor carefully avoided political bias and provided a successful opportunity for students to work on a complex and demanding concept. GCE A level English literature students were encouraged to challenge the views of established critics, and arrive confidently at their own opinions, for example, of Hamlet's character in Shakespeare's play.

51 Adult students are catered for in a growing number of evening classes. These are well taught, sometimes by part-time staff. The use of individual guided learning on the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programme was well planned and very effective. This teaching method was particularly appropriate for a group of adults with differing abilities and experience. There were students on a GCE A level business part-time class whose needs might have been better met by the NVQ programme. Several students in the GCE A level psychology class had relevant expertise because of their current employment. This was exploited by the teachers to enable students to make greater progress in their learning.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

52 Science students were able to speak about their work with clarity and enthusiasm. They clearly enjoyed working in groups and had good relationships with their colleagues. In their written work they demonstrated a good understanding of their subjects. Their approach to practical work would have been improved, in some cases, by more emphasis on prediction and analysis rather than the use of trial and error. Science students worked safely in the laboratory and handled equipment carefully and precisely. Assignment work showed an imaginative use of support material and some high standards of wordprocessing in the reports. Homework was generally satisfactorily completed. Mathematics and computing students were able to describe their work clearly and with understanding. They were generally well motivated and tackled their course assignments conscientiously.

53 Business students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their programmes and their lecturers. Students' written work and their oral

responses in class indicated a sufficient command of core skills for the level of their programmes. However, some business studies assignments included far too much description and insufficient analysis.

54 Art and design students worked well individually and in groups and offered mutual support to each other. They were developing skills and knowledge appropriate to their level of study. Well informed on their chosen subjects, they were able to make judgements and deal with theoretical and abstract issues. Coursework assignments were challenging and students responded in lively and innovative ways. They used up-to-date technical resources competently. Their presentational skills were generally good but their observation, life drawing and sketchbook work needed to improve. They demonstrated an understanding of health and safety requirements when using equipment. In practical classes in dance and drama, tutors were vigilant in ensuring that work was done safely.

55 In social science, students were clearly deriving both benefit and enjoyment from their courses. Much written work showed good verbal ability, an awareness of the key skills required by examiners, and appropriate knowledge. History and geography students contributed to group and discussion work. Their coursework demonstrated effective skills of research, analysis and evaluation, particularly in working with documentary material in history and in undertaking geography fieldwork projects. Students of English worked well in groups. They were generally confident readers and were developing their skills in analysing texts through a range of materials. Their spoken English was clear and they talked confidently in a range of situations. They could write in a variety of styles, and used technical terminology and critical frameworks appropriately. Their coursework often showed flair. Language students were motivated and attentive. There were several instances of students working well in pairs and groups, including discussions in the language they were learning. Their accents and intonation in the foreign language were often good. There were examples of good writing skills, both for examination coursework and for essay writing.

56 The 459 students aged 16 to 18 entered for GCE AS or GCE A level examinations in 1995 scored, on average, 4.8 points per entry (where A=10, E=2). This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, based on the data in the 1995 performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment.

- in 12 GCE A level subjects, all 16 to 18 year old candidates entered for examination were awarded grade E or above. These subjects were biology, chemistry, environmental science, mathematics, religious studies, philosophy, physics, performing arts, media studies, Urdu, dance and general studies. There were 1,081 entries

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- in most of the 17 subjects offered at GCE AS the percentage of candidates achieving grades A to E was above the national average and in the top 10 per cent of colleges in the north west area. There were particularly good results in biology, computing, mathematics, physics and religious studies. There were 144 entries
 - students aged 16 to 18 years achieved GCE A level pass rates at grades A to C higher than the national average for English sixth form colleges in dance, general studies, geology, mathematics, further mathematics, physical education, performing arts, physics, politics, religious studies and Urdu
 - GCE A level grade A to C pass rates were below national averages in archaeology, art and design, business studies, chemistry, computing, design and technology, economics, English language, environmental science, French, German, music, psychology and Spanish
 - compared with the previous year, there were improvements in GCE A level pass rates of at least 10 per cent in art and design, business, geography and politics
 - in 1995, there were 273 entrants in the eight subjects offered at GCSE level. The pass rate at grades A to C was 62 per cent, which was well above the national average for students aged 16 to 18 in sixth form colleges in England of 48 per cent
 - GCSE pass rates of more than 70 per cent at grades A to C were achieved in sociology, English literature, drama and media studies.

57 Five GCE A level examinations involving 28 candidates were offered as evening provision. College figures show that in English language, English literature and Urdu all candidates entered in the GCE A level examination were awarded grade E or better. Candidates scored above the national average in psychology, but below in sociology. Four subjects at GCSE were offered on an evening only basis. The proportion of entrants awarded grades A to C was 54 per cent, which was below the 60 per cent national average for students aged 19 or over in other further education sector colleges. Good results were obtained in psychology and sociology.

58 Eighty-eight per cent of the 69 students aged 16 to 18 in their final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education and Employment's 1995 performance tables were successful. This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. There were 121 students in 1995 following either GNVQ or equivalent courses. The intermediate GNVQs in art and design, business and health care had pass rates of 100, 89 and 65 per cent, respectively, in 1995. GNVQs at intermediate and advanced levels in leisure and tourism were less successful recording pass rates of 50 and 54 per cent, respectively. BTEC first diploma courses in information technology and science both recorded 100 per cent pass rates. BTEC

national diplomas in science and business and finance recorded pass rates of 100 and 98 per cent, respectively.

59 The college operates its own value-added system at subject level, to measure how well actual grades at GCE A level compare with students' GCSE results on entry. Because there is as yet little historical data, the main benefit of this system is to compare subject performance with the college average for all subjects. Using this method, results in politics, further mathematics and the performing arts were particularly good in 1995 whilst in languages and biology grades were below the college average.

60 College policy on examination entry requires all students to attend at least 85 per cent of lessons and never to fall behind by more than one piece of coursework. In the final year of two-year courses, the lowest retention rate was 78 per cent, and on most courses it was over 80 per cent. At GCE A level 27 subjects had a retention rate of over 90 per cent. GNVQ advanced courses recorded an overall retention rate in their second year of 97 per cent. Retention over the two-year period dropped as low as 60 per cent but the average was almost 80 per cent, with GNVQ advanced courses overall achieving 81 per cent. For one-year courses, the retention rates ranged from 78 per cent upwards. GCSE courses averaged 81 per cent and GNVQ intermediate courses 91 per cent. Continuing education courses ranged from 53 per cent to 100 per cent in their first year of operation. There were 552 leavers in 1995. The college was able to track 90 per cent of its students; of these 71 per cent went into higher education, 2 per cent into further education, 13 per cent into employment, 2 per cent joined the armed forces and 2 per cent went on to resit their GCE A levels. The college is making good progress in tracking the destination of its students.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

61 The college places particular emphasis on delivering education of the highest possible quality for students. This is a central plank of the college's mission. The aim is to provide high-quality teaching and support for individual students in a stimulating learning environment, using the best facilities available. College staff are clearly committed to the improvement of quality as expressed through students' achievements.

62 There is a policy statement covering quality assurance, which was drawn up when there was a designated quality manager. The college management team is now taking shared responsibility for issues associated with quality, in line with their perception of a 'total quality management' approach. There is no particular framework for the review and assurance of quality. There is, however, a quality assurance cycle which determines a date each year when each aspect of the college's work is reviewed. This calendar has been drawn up during the current academic year and the reviews due to have been completed are recorded.

63 Strengths of the current system include:

- a thorough system of course review, with curriculum heads producing action plans for improvement of courses and student performance
- an extensive analysis of both internal and external examination performance, some good examples of rapid action by staff to improve students' achievements
- analysis of enrolment and retention data and the resulting action through the student support system
- a standardised approach to obtain feedback from students on courses and other aspects of college services
- a strong association between staff review, development plans, and staff development, leading to well-focused training opportunities.

64 Course reviews and evaluations within the quality cycle lead to subject department action plans. All of these have defined responsibilities for action, most have an indication of a target date and some are audited twice a year to check achievement of the target. They represent a good start to a rigorous system of action planning, but they could be more consistent in setting defined targets which could be more easily monitored. Course reviews are summarised in a curriculum review conducted by the relevant vice-principal and the three curriculum managers. Outcomes of the review are recorded. The identification through the review process of actions which have been successfully completed could be more effective.

65 Specialist inspection of subject areas highlighted the review of examination performance as a strength. In geography, immediate action was taken to provide additional support in an area of the syllabus which was causing problems. This resulted in a 27 per cent increase in the proportion of students gaining A to C grades at GCE A level in the following year. Poor retention in mathematics GCE A level was responded to by the offer of GCE AS as an alternative for those students who might otherwise have given up the course. This improved retention by 12 per cent in one year, as well as increasing to 100 per cent the pass rate for mathematics GCE A level. In some departments, the review was less systematic and could be more rigorous.

66 The college admits that while certain aspects of its review activities are systematic, they do not yet constitute an identifiable system. There is no overall picture of the relationship between the various review activities, such as that offered within the strategic planning system. As yet, the review process has not produced sufficient evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness as a formal system for quality improvement. There is no opportunity for peer involvement either in the review processes, or their outcomes. Its inclusion would improve the consistency of reviews and lead to greater sharing of good practice. The college should use its developing base of historic data to modify its value-added system which does not yet enable analysis of the college's performance as a whole.

67 The self-assessment process in preparation for inspection required key staff to produce an analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses relative to the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. These were then summarised in a college self-assessment report. The report is generally consistent with the assessments made by inspectors. In some respects, it would have been improved by the inclusion of more quantified evidence. College managers did not wish to supply inspectors with their own assessment of grades, although they were recorded privately. Some were shared after the inspection.

68 Staff development is a strength. There is a well-structured and well-documented framework covering all aspects of recruitment, induction procedures and reviews. There is no formal appraisal system, but there are systematic reviews which identify staff training and development needs. The college has made considerable progress towards the Investors in People award and the development of personnel procedures has benefited from this preparation. There is evidence of a major commitment to staff development. The staff-development budget is 0.93 per cent of the college payroll costs and there is significant additional activity in the form of briefing and training days as well as the benefits derived from the various team activities and meetings in the college.

69 The college offers mentoring and support to teachers in training at Manchester Metropolitan University. Trainees are supported by volunteer staff who provide comprehensive feedback to them. Newly-qualified teachers also have a well-structured support programme, including assistance from experienced teaching staff.

70 The college charter is a simple booklet which outlines the college's commitments to students and employers. It refers to other policy statements and sources of information which are more detailed. It contains few precise targets or performance indicators. It was recently reviewed, but this resulted in few changes.

RESOURCES

Staffing

71 The college had the unusual opportunity of appointing an entirely new staff team when it opened in 1992. The average age of all staff is 37.5, and teachers are generally younger. All teachers are graduates and 82 per cent are qualified teachers. They have a variety of industrial and educational experience. Turnover among the original group of senior managers has created opportunities for internal promotions. Several new appointments have included staff with experience of teaching vocational courses in colleges of further education. There are 11 newly-qualified teachers. Many staff have recent experience outside of teaching. There has been no opportunity so far for staff to have placements in industry and, for the time being, the college has other priorities in developing its staff.

72 Staff morale is good; staff are enthusiastic about the role which the college has to play, and have invested enormous energy and hard work into establishing the college as a successful place of learning. They work well together.

73 Teachers are appreciative of the work of the support staff, who are well qualified, and form an important element of teaching teams. There are some instructors among the technical support staff.

Equipment/learning resources

74 There are good levels of high-quality equipment in most areas, since the college was fully equipped when it opened. In science, there are examples of specialist equipment which is not normally available to GCE A level students. Protective clothing and safety glasses are provided. In most areas the textbooks necessary for courses are supplied to students. The teaching materials produced by the college are of good quality.

75 Computing equipment is of good quality. There are about 200 networked machines, some in heavily timetabled specialist rooms, and others distributed around the college. There is one computer in each teaching room which is used both for students' work and to support the computerised registration system. In addition, there are 60 personal computers for use by specialist computing students. Industrial standard software has been purchased which will run on all the computers. These facilities together with those for teaching modern languages are good enough to support training courses for commercial customers. For business students, there needs to be more access to the personal computer systems which are standard in the commercial world. There is an overall ratio of one computer to every six students.

76 Access to some specialist equipment is limited because of the rapid rise in student numbers. For example, 190 media students put significant pressure on the availability of the two editing suites. The well-equipped learning centre is often full with students who make good use of the facilities for independent study. The library has 16,500 items, which offers a lower than usual ratio of books to students. All these items are new, however, and there is no outdated material. There are also videos, and compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database facilities both networked and accessible on request. About one-third of the library allocation is spent on periodicals. The library is fully automated. Book collections housed in departments are catalogued by the library to assist access to them.

77 The college has reserved 15 per cent of its revenue budget to provide funds for the replacement of equipment. New courses such as electronics, or art and design, are not as well equipped as more established ones. Resources are made available when the demand for a course has sufficiently established itself to justify the purchase of specialist items.

Accommodation

78 The college occupies purpose-built accommodation of an exceptionally high standard in the centre of the town. Staff and students take great pride in its appearance and are keen to ensure there is no graffiti or vandalism. Standards of cleaning are high. There is an effective planned maintenance programme. This ensures that the decor is kept at a standard which will prove attractive to both continuing education students and the local business community. Emphasis is placed on creating a safe working environment. Security systems, whilst comprehensive, are not unduly obtrusive.

79 Teaching rooms are sound-proofed, double-glazed, fully carpeted and have window blinds and indirect lighting. There are extensive displays of students' work. Specialist accommodation is of a high standard. However, at times student group sizes can cause overcrowding, particularly in science laboratories. Catering facilities of a very good commercial standard and the student common room form attractive focal points. The theatre, editing and sound suites are all of professional standard. The Mowlem library provides a pleasant study area. The collegiate sports centre and the fitness centre cater for a wide range of activities. There are two lecture theatres capable of seating 100 and 300 respectively. Staff accommodation is of a high standard. There is good access to all facilities for students with restricted mobility.

80 The college has formulated an accommodation strategy in response to the planned growth in student numbers. European funding has been successfully obtained. An adjacent site has been acquired on which the college plans to construct a new building which will be used for business and commercial courses, among other things. A building within a quarter of a mile of the main site has been leased to accommodate students until the new building is completed.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

81 The strengths of the college include:

- a high-quality learning environment with excellent learning resources and equipment
- well-qualified and enthusiastic staff, who are strongly committed to maximising students' achievements and repaying the borough's investment in the college
- better than average student attainments, arising from good-quality teaching and learning experiences in a broad curriculum
- well-designed systems of student support which give tutors and parents ample information about students' behaviour and progress
- good relationships between students and staff and a safe and friendly working environment
- a well-informed governing body, offering a useful range of expertise and contacts.

82 In order to consolidate the achievements of the first four years of its existence, the college should:

- increase the number of students on intermediate courses to accommodate a larger proportion of the pupils from its partner schools
- continue to extend its links with industry and work experience opportunities and publicise its commercially targeted training
- extend its links with higher education institutions
- encourage teaching staff to maximise the potential of the computer system
- streamline the structure of committees to make better use of staff time and ensure that decisions are taken at the appropriate level
- speed up the plans to deploy appropriate learning resources to develop the core skills attainments of intermediate level students
- ensure that course reviews and the review of students' achievements result in clear and consistent action plans which can be monitored
- consider devising a framework for quality assurance and self-assessment which monitors the outcomes of existing reviews.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1995)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area
(as at November 1995)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-1996)

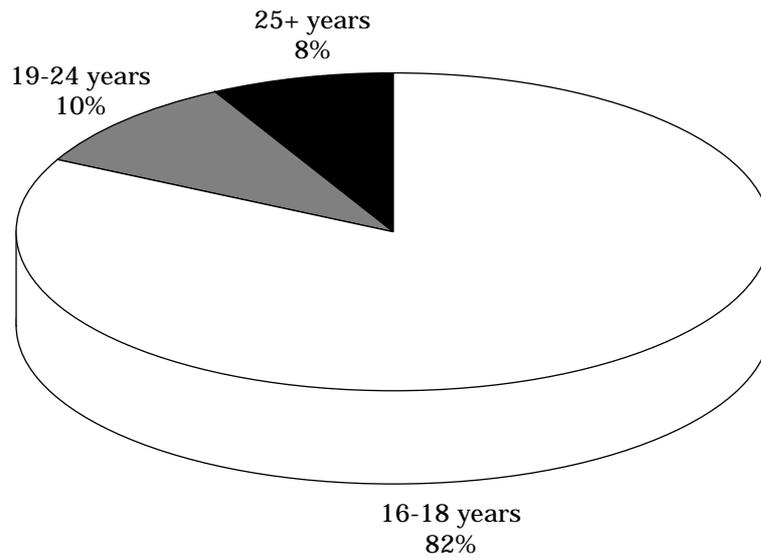
 - 5 Estimated income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Estimated expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

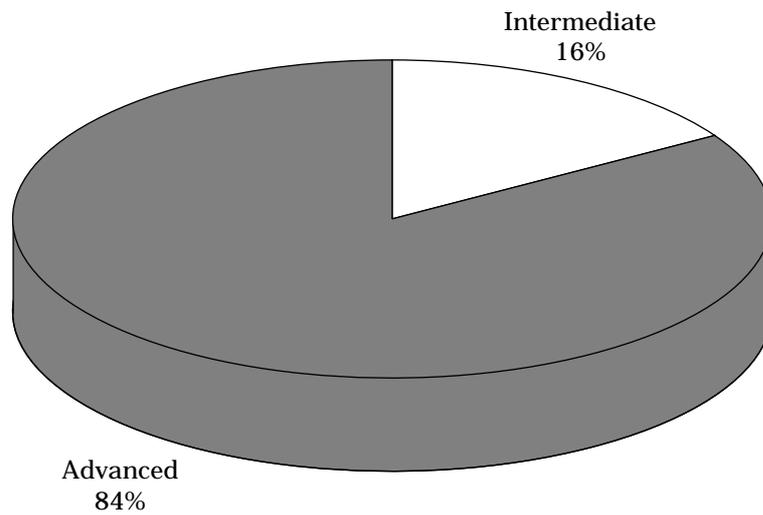
Oldham Sixth Form College: percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 1,876

Figure 2

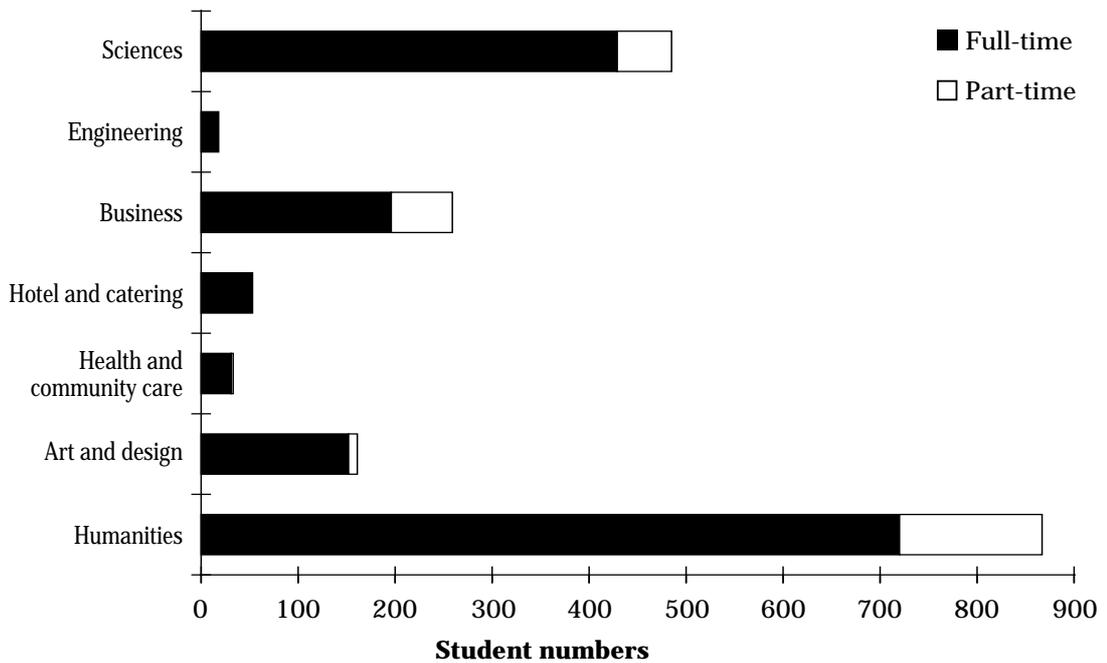
Oldham Sixth Form College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 1,876

Figure 3

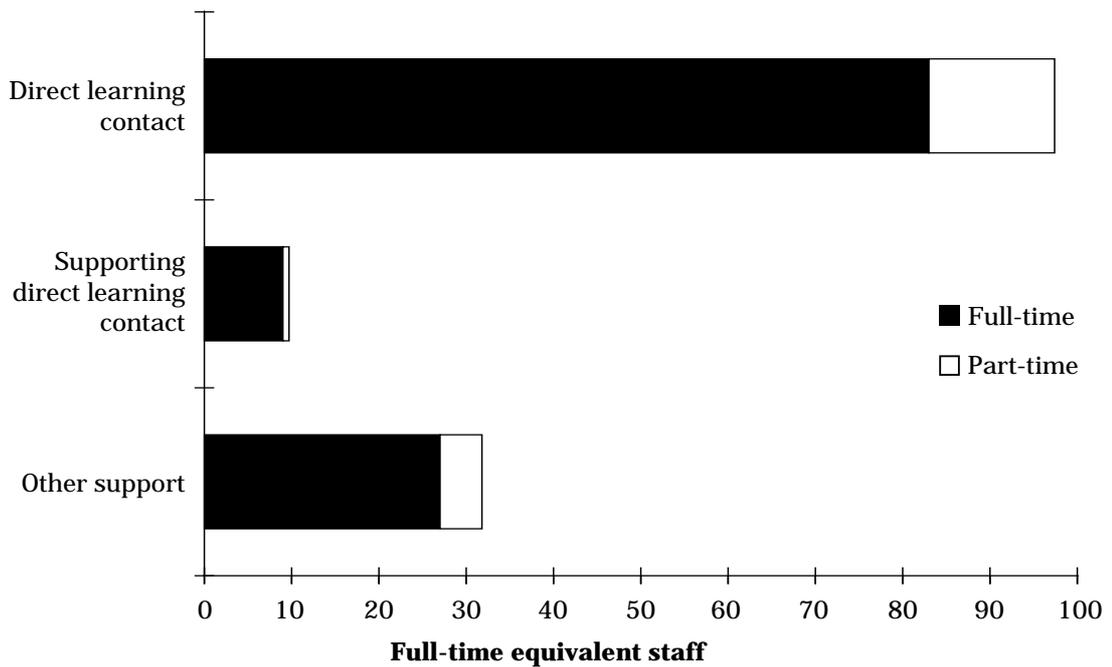
Oldham Sixth Form College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 1,876

Figure 4

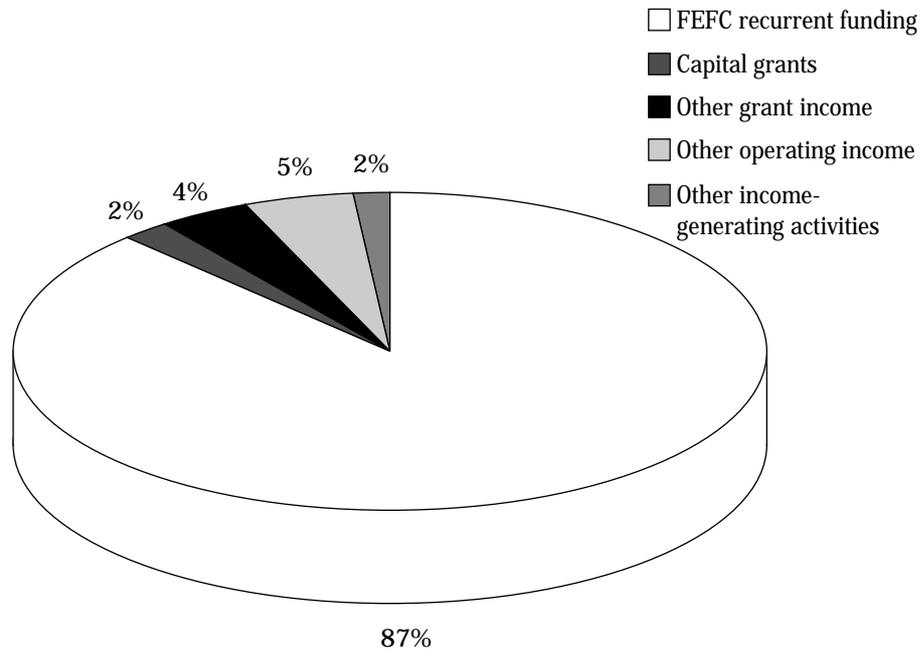
Oldham Sixth Form College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 139

Figure 5

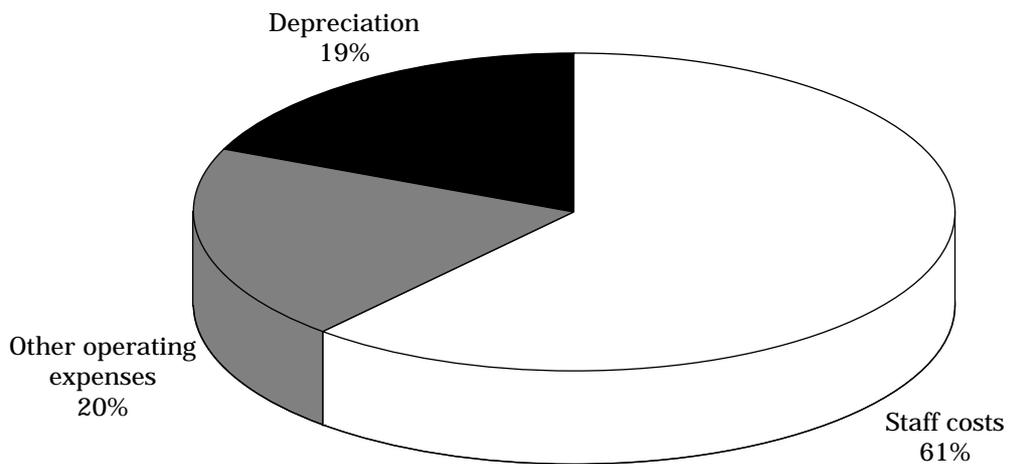
Oldham Sixth Form College: estimated income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Estimated income: £4,500,000

Figure 6

Oldham Sixth Form College: estimated expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Estimated expenditure: £4,979,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
June 1996