

Oldham Sixth Form College

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) 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 inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate 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.

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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.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	–

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

Oldham Sixth Form College

North West Region

Inspected May 1999

Oldham Sixth Form College opened in September 1992, in new, purpose-built accommodation. Since then the number of full-time students has trebled. The college produced its second self-assessment report for this inspection. All college staff and governors were involved in the self-assessment process. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the report, but found that the report underestimated weaknesses in retention in some curriculum areas and did not sufficiently acknowledge the slow rate of progress made since the last inspection in improving additional learning support.

The college offers courses in six of the FEFC programme areas. It has successfully extended its range of provision to attract students who do not usually participate in further education. Students' achievements are strong in all areas and pass rates on most courses are outstanding. The quality of teaching is high. Inspectors judged 87% of the lessons they observed to be good or outstanding. A well-established tutorial framework includes effective practice in monitoring and recording students' progress. The college has good links with the local careers service and provides highly effective careers education and guidance. Students follow a broad range of enrichment activities which contribute to their personal and career

development. Since the last inspection, the college has made significant improvements to its management and quality assurance. There is widespread use of targets and performance indicators and each section of the college works to agreed service standards which are reviewed regularly by senior managers. The college plays a full part in the local community through a wide range of productive partnerships. Governors monitor all aspects of the college's performance. The college management information system provides them and managers with comprehensive and reliable data. Leadership is strong and there are good communications at all levels. The college has maintained and further improved the high standard of its accommodation. It has developed excellent specialist resources in all areas, and the facilities in its learning support centre are outstanding. Local groups as well as students benefit from its excellent facilities. The college should improve retention rates and the range and monitoring of learning support available in literacy and numeracy.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	2	Support for students	2
Business studies	1	General resources	1
English	1	Quality assurance	2
Modern foreign languages	2	Governance	2
		Management	1

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Oldham Sixth Form College is located on a single, purpose-built campus in the centre of Oldham in Greater Manchester. It opened in 1992 following a major reorganisation of post-16 education in the borough. Between 1992 and 1998, the number of full-time students at the college has grown by 202%. Although 55% of students live within the borough, the college also recruits students from Tameside, Manchester and Rochdale.

2 According to information provided by the local authority, 37% of 16 year olds in the borough gained five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) passes at grades C or above in 1998; significantly lower than the national average of 46%. The unemployment rate in the borough is 17% compared with the national average of 5%. Unemployment is highest among young people in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities.

3 There are districts with high levels of deprivation adjacent to the college. College data show that, in 1995-96, 34% of students were drawn from areas designated as deprived. This proportion has been steadily increasing. This year, 22% of students are in receipt of discretionary awards. Oldham is piloting Educational Maintenance Awards from September 1999 and about 20% of new students are expected to benefit from such awards. Residents of minority ethnic heritage comprise 13% of the population of the borough. Of the college's students, 24% are of Asian origin.

4 Within Oldham, there are ten 11 to 16 schools, which are partner schools of the college, five 11 to 18 schools and two independent grammar schools. Oldham College, a general further education college, is located less than half a mile away. There are six other sixth form colleges and seven other general further education colleges within a 15 mile radius. The college works in partnership with many other local organisations. It is a member of the Oldham Strategic Partnership.

5 The college offers general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) courses in 41 subjects, GCE advanced supplementary (AS) courses in seven subjects and six courses leading to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at advanced level. Eleven GCSEs and five GNVQs at intermediate level are offered as the first year in three-year programmes. Of the 115 students completing this first year in 1998, 66% progressed to level 3 courses. From September 1998, the college has worked in collaboration with Oldham College to deliver higher national diploma courses in business and information technology (IT).

6 The college's mission is 'to provide the highest quality education so that students are equipped to the very best of their abilities to progress to higher education or employment'. The college's aims, which it largely achieves, are to:

- 'provide high-quality teaching by committed, caring and well-qualified staff
- provide appropriate guidance and support for all students to encourage and promote their skills, abilities and personal development
- value and respond to the intellectual and personal needs of individual students
- provide the very best learning environment with excellent facilities for students
- increase participation of Oldham's 16-year olds in post-compulsory education
- respond to the needs of the local community, including business and commerce'.

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during May 1999. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college had submitted audited data for the three years 1996 to 1998 to the FEFC. These data were found to be reliable

Context

and were used by inspectors to inform their judgements. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 40 days. Inspectors observed 47 lessons and evaluated students' work and college documents. They held meetings with governors, managers, other college staff, students, parents, and with representatives from partner schools, Oldham Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (TEC) and the local authority.

8 This college was one of 30 in the current cycle of inspections which agreed to participate in the joint Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and FEFC assessment of careers education and guidance. The joint assessment was guided by the inspection

framework, with careers education assessors contributing to judgements made by inspectors. The emphasis in this report on careers education and guidance will help colleges and careers services to improve the quality of the careers education and guidance they offer and help the DfEE to disseminate good practice.

9 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the 47 lessons inspected, 87% were judged to be good or outstanding and 2% were judged to be less than satisfactory. This profile compares favourably with the averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed during inspections in 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	11	12	2	1	0	26
GCSE	2	2	1	0	0	5
GNVQ	4	5	2	0	0	11
Other, including vocational	2	3	0	0	0	5
Total (No.)	19	22	5	1	0	47
Total (%)	40	47	11	2	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

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10 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Oldham Sixth Form College	13.0	82
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 2

11 Inspectors observed lessons in science and technology in society, physics, biology, chemistry and vocational science courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but found that some weaknesses were understated.

Key strengths

- good teaching
- high pass rates on GCSE and GCE A level courses
- wide range of enrichment activities
- effective use of IT to enhance learning
- well-managed and well-equipped laboratories
- efficient and effective technical support

Weaknesses

- many retention rates well below national averages
- insufficient use of differentiated learning activities
- poor performance on GCE AS courses

12 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the quality of teaching is good. They judged 10 of the 12 lessons they observed to be good or outstanding. Teachers use demonstrations effectively to increase students' understanding. In a GCE A level physics lesson, the teacher used a computer programme to demonstrate radioactive decay. Students used data-logging equipment and calculated the half-life of the radioactive substance from the printouts. Students on a GCE A level biology course gained a clear understanding of the process of meiosis from an activity during which they used coloured beads to represent genes. Lessons are usually well planned and involve a

range of appropriate activities. However, the range of materials and activities used in some lessons was too narrow to meet the learning needs of all the students, a weakness recognised in the self-assessment report.

13 Teachers mark written and other assignment work thoroughly and return it promptly. They involve students in the assessment process. In all subjects, students are encouraged to highlight their own strengths and weaknesses and to identify ways of improving their work. They redraft unsatisfactory work for subsequent reassessment. Teachers provide extensive and effective guidance, often in their own time, to help students to prepare for examinations. For example, they provide revision classes at lunchtimes and during holidays. Students attend and value these activities and feel well supported.

14 Students achieve well on most courses. Pass rates are significantly above the national average on GCE A level courses in biology, chemistry and physics and on GCSE courses. However, pass rates for GCE AS subjects are consistently poor, though the number of students taking them increased significantly in 1998. The self-assessment report acknowledged the low retention rates but understated their importance. On GCE A level physics and chemistry courses, retention rates are well below national averages. Between 1996 and 1998, they fell by 14% and 5%, respectively. Some students transferred to GCE AS courses but on these too, retention is declining. In 1998, only 61% of students completed GCE AS courses compared with 89% in 1997. The department has taken action to improve retention and current retention figures indicate that it has had some success.

15 Students develop a wide range of IT skills. They make good use of information and communications technology to enhance their learning, both during lessons and as part of their study in the learning resource centre. GNVQ students use the internet frequently to

Curriculum Areas

carry out research for assignments. Students benefit from varied enrichment activities including field trips, industrial visits and links with higher education. For example, the chemistry department arranged for students to undertake a week of practical work at Lancaster University.

16 At the time of the inspection, the second year of the GNVQ advanced course in science was the only vocational course running. Staff have worked hard to market this course and the current number of applications for September 1999 is high.

17 Teachers are hard working, well qualified and experienced. They have developed high-quality learning materials for the college intranet including lectures, past papers and study skills tasks. Students find these valuable and use them frequently. Technical staff provide effective support that helps practical lessons to run smoothly. Specialist accommodation is of a very high standard. Rooms are well laid out and contain a range of learning aids. Laboratories are clean, well managed, and equipped to a high standard. Health and safety procedures are regularly reinforced.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in science, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE	2	Expected completions	70	87	65
		Retention (%)	77	68	77
		Achievement (%)	59	97	92
GCE A level biology	3	Expected completions	116	157	171
		Retention (%)	73	80	72
		Achievement (%)	88	92	90
GCE A level chemistry	3	Expected completions	88	108	117
		Retention (%)	64	58	59
		Achievement (%)	92	85	98
GCE A level physics	3	Expected completions	78	82	85
		Retention (%)	69	66	55
		Achievement (%)	94	94	98
GCE AS	3	Expected completions	24	18	43
		Retention (%)	81	89	68
		Achievement (%)	42	0	61

Source: ISR

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies

Grade 1

18 The inspection covered courses in business, accounting, integrated business technology and wordprocessing. Inspectors agreed broadly with the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- much good and some outstanding teaching
- high pass rates on GNVQ, GCE A level and business skills courses
- well-structured courses
- good levels of attendance
- careful monitoring of students' progress
- effective use of IT to support learning

Weaknesses

- some declining retention rates

19 Inspectors agreed that teaching and learning are of high quality. Of the 12 lessons observed, they judged 11 to be good or outstanding. Students experience a range of learning methods that are designed to maintain their interest and achieve the objectives of the lesson. Teachers make particularly effective use of question and answer techniques to check students' learning. In an advanced vocational lesson, the teacher used well-directed questions, handouts and students' accounts of their own work experience to introduce different roles in business organisations. By giving students many opportunities to relate the topic to their own work and life experience, the teacher maintained their interest throughout the lesson. Teachers also use examples from their own industrial experience to illustrate theoretical points, and encourage students to apply their own work experience to classwork and coursework. In one lesson, students carried out independent research and then worked in pairs

to review and analyse the skills needed to undertake various jobs in the business sector. They made good use of IT to present a report on their findings. During the activity, students were able to explore some of the career opportunities open to them. In a few lessons, students made too few notes to have a good basis for subsequent revision.

20 Students review their progress regularly and agree action plans for further improvement. Teachers provide detailed feedback to students on their written work and this helps them to understand where they need to improve. Initial screening identifies students who need support with communication skills but not those who need support with number skills. Additional support with communication skills is offered to students but curriculum managers do not evaluate its effectiveness.

21 As the self-assessment report stated, achievement rates are high. Pass rates on advanced level courses in 1998 were well above the national average for sixth form colleges, as was the proportion of higher grades. The number of high grades achieved represented a significant improvement on the previous two years. Though the pass rate on the GNVQ intermediate course declined in 1998, it remained markedly higher than the national average. Achievements on the wordprocessing programmes are high and improving. Pass rates on the GCSE accounting course are above the national average for students of all ages. With the exception of the GNVQ intermediate business course, retention rates have declined on all courses. They have fallen below the national average on the GCE A level course. The college has identified this weakness and made efforts to address it. Inspectors saw evidence of improvement in the retention rate on some courses in the current teaching year. Average student attendance at lessons observed was 89% compared with the national average of 77% for this programme area in 1997-98.

Curriculum Areas

22 Teachers seek out ways to motivate students and help them to achieve. They have revised the schedule of GNVQ modules and introduced a modular option for GCE A level alongside the established course. Full-time students have several opportunities to enhance their studies by participating in visits, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. These strengths were mentioned in the self-assessment report. Teachers on full-time courses meet regularly to plan and evaluate their programmes. Good practice on these courses is not shared with teachers on the part-time programme for adults, a weakness not identified by the college. The timely and accurate data available on students' retention and achievements are carefully analysed, though the

profile of service standards referred to in the self-assessment report is not effectively used to measure success.

23 Teachers are well qualified and have recent industrial experience. Students have ready access to high-quality IT facilities. They routinely make use of the internet and the college intranet to supplement what they learn from books and journals. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that learning resources used in lessons are excellent and help to reinforce the professional image to which the staff aspire. Business classes are taught in a new, well-furnished building which provides an attractive learning environment.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in business studies, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Wordprocessing/ textprocessing	1	Expected completions	16	25	37
		Retention (%)	94	84	65
		Achievement (%)	60	89	96
GCSE accounting	2	Expected completions	18	5	20
		Retention (%)	78	80	70
		Achievement (%)	79	75	64
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Expected completions	34	33	32
		Retention (%)	85	88	88
		Achievement (%)	93	97	86
GCE A level business (students aged 16 to 19)	3	Expected completions	76	99	94
		Retention (%)	74	78	67
		Achievement (%)	85	93	94
GNVQ advanced business (students aged 16 to 19)	3	Expected completions	56	59	59
		Retention (%)	79	73	73
		Achievement (%)	93	90	98

Source: ISR

Curriculum Areas

English

Grade 1

24 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering GCE A level, GCE AS, GCSE and Wordpower level 3 courses. Inspectors agreed largely with the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- excellent pass rates on all courses
- much outstanding teaching
- high quality of students' work
- strong course management
- good levels of recruitment
- excellent learning resources

Weaknesses

- unsatisfactory retention rates on some advanced level courses

25 Lessons are carefully planned and well taught. Inspectors judged 11 of the 12 lessons they observed to be outstanding or good. Teachers have a sound knowledge of their subjects. Lessons have clear objectives and include sharply-focused learning activities. Students are interested and diligent and form excellent working relationships with their teachers and peers. In a lesson on an advanced English language course, the teacher devised interesting self-test materials which enabled students to assess their knowledge of key language issues. In an English literature lesson, the teacher had prepared a revision module on Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and guided students through an analysis of the distinctive features of the novel. Students spoke highly of the English literature revision process, which involves each teacher taking responsibility for a group of texts. GCSE students contributed well to a discussion on how to improve their work. Their files were well ordered and recorded their progress through storyboards, resource sheets, background reading and practice in examination

questions. GCSE assignments, particularly on Shakespeare's works, are varied and interesting. In a minority of lessons, the final activities were rushed and teachers did not summarise the main points or check students' understanding. The analysis of classroom observations in the self-assessment report did not identify this weakness.

26 Pass rates are excellent and exceed national averages in all cases. In 1998, pass rates were 100% in English literature at GCE AS and GCE A level and the proportion of high grades was significantly above the national average. Pass rates are consistently good on other GCE A level English courses and are above national averages on both GCSE courses. The department offers Wordpower courses to GNVQ intermediate students. Retention and achievement rates are consistently high on these courses. Retention rates on GCE A level courses have, on some occasions, been below national averages and this was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. However, the college has taken steps to increase retention through improved tutorial support and other measures. For example, attendance is carefully monitored at both course and college levels and is generally good.

27 Students' written work is of a high quality. Students on advanced level courses showed a high standard of commentary and analysis in their literature assignments and a strong understanding of language issues. Written work across all courses shows a mature fluency and a commendably high standard of grammatical accuracy. All teachers give thorough feedback to students about their performance in assignments. They explain the basis for awarding marks through feedback sheets which help students to become familiar with assessment criteria. Students develop IT skills and use them in the presentation of their coursework. Well-presented classroom displays of posters provide a valuable opportunity for students to demonstrate their skills to their fellow students.

Curriculum Areas

28 The college offers a range of courses, all of which recruit well, a strength noted in the self-assessment report. At the time of the inspection, 953 students were following English courses leading to nationally recognised awards. Teachers meet regularly to discuss operational issues and to review schemes of work and students' progress. Each course leader is responsible for the development and evaluation of their course and for organising appropriate staff training. More experienced teachers provide staff development for others during which they share good practice and resources.

Many teachers act as examiners for external examinations. The sharing of expertise in assessment is a particular strength, as indicated in the self-assessment report.

29 Accommodation is of an exceptionally high quality. The subject area has well-equipped classrooms and a study area with IT facilities. Resources are plentiful and up to date. There is a wide range of textual, audio and video materials available to teachers and students. The many resources on the intranet encourage and support independent learning.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in English, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE English (one-year course)	2	Expected completions	116	131	167
		Retention (%)	73	84	74
		Achievement (%)	82	48	63
GCSE English literature (one-year course)	2	Expected completions	31	15	17
		Retention (%)	84	80	76
		Achievement (%)	73	40	83
GCE A level English language (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	96	94	112
		Retention (%)	94	75	75
		Achievement (%)	92	100	98
GCE A level English literature (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	93	104	99
		Retention (%)	78	78	76
		Achievement (%)	100	99	100
GCE A level English literature and language combined (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	70	58	84
		Retention (%)	69	97	82
		Achievement (%)	98	96	97
GCE AS	3	Expected completions	*	13	20
		Retention (%)	*	92	95
		Achievement (%)	*	92	100

Source: ISR

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Modern Foreign Languages

Grade 2

30 The inspection covered courses in French, German, Spanish, and Urdu. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the college's self-assessment report but considered that weaknesses in retention were understated. They noted a few additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good relationships between staff and students
- excellent pass rates on advanced level Spanish, French and Urdu courses
- high retention and pass rates on vocational courses
- good teaching
- effective student support
- excellent accommodation and specialist resources

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on GCE A level courses
- unnecessary use of English on some vocational courses

31 As the self-assessment report stated, the college offers a wide range of courses including 'foreign languages at work' and language options for students on advanced GNVQ courses. Course documentation is generally of high quality and record-keeping relating to all language courses is exemplary. Course reviews take account of lesson observations and of student feedback. Departmental leadership is effective and morale among staff is high. Staff and students have productive working relationships which are valued highly by students, a strength not mentioned in the self-

assessment report. There is a flourishing exchange programme with partner institutions in France, where work placements are available, and with Germany and Spain. Students enjoy theatre and cinema performances to support their studies and attend university study conferences.

32 Much of the teaching is of a high quality. Inspectors judged nine of the 11 lessons they observed to be good or outstanding. Lessons are well planned and carefully structured. Teachers design learning activities that build on previous work and help students to develop new skills and consolidate existing learning. In the best lessons, teachers make good use of information from the internet and other up-to-date sources. In an advanced level lesson in French, small groups of students took turns to present the key policy points of the main French political parties, using information they had found on the internet. A lively debate in French followed each presentation as the rest of the class seized the opportunity to interrogate each group on the validity of the manifestos. In a minority of lessons, teachers used English unnecessarily instead of the foreign language. This contributed to students' reluctance to speak the foreign language naturally and to defects in pronunciation and intonation. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge these weaknesses.

33 On vocational courses, retention and pass rates are above national averages despite a decline in pass rates for French and Spanish in 1998. Pass rates on GCE A level courses in French, Spanish and Urdu are consistently well above national averages. In French, the number of high grades achieved by students improved in 1998 to significantly above the national averages. However, pass rates at GCE A level in German are below the national average. The number of students completing GCE A level courses is generally low. In 1998, retention rates declined on GCE A level courses in French and Spanish to significantly below national

Curriculum Areas

averages. Although retention rates on Urdu improved from 28% in 1997 to 62% in 1998, they remain below the national average. The self-assessment report acknowledged some of the weaknesses in retention. The department has addressed this issue in its action plan and has introduced a number of initiatives to improve retention, such as diagnostic tests, bridging courses, and timetabled workshops. The number of students retained on the current second year of GCE A level courses indicates an improvement, but projected retention rates remain below the national average.

34 As indicated in the self-assessment report, the accommodation and specialist resources for foreign languages are outstanding. Courses are housed in a suite of attractive, well-equipped

rooms. The department enjoys the considerable benefit of having a foreign language assistant for each language. These staff are fully involved in the department's teaching programme. Both teachers and students value their contribution. The excellent range of technical facilities includes satellite television, a wide selection of audio and video tapes, computer-assisted language learning, video-conferencing and foreign language newspapers and magazines. A rapidly developing language intranet site supplements these resources and provides students with opportunities to work on their own. Students have ready access to all these facilities which are conveniently located in welcoming study areas and in the impressive learning resource centre.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in modern foreign languages, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Foreign languages at work in French and Spanish (one-year course)	1	Expected completions	36	21	35
		Retention (%)	89	76	83
		Achievement (%)	81	88	72
GCE A level Spanish language (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	23	17	17
		Retention (%)	48	53	29
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100
GCE A level French language (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	60	45	48
		Retention (%)	77	73	56
		Achievement (%)	86	85	85
GCE A level German language (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	20	28	22
		Retention (%)	90	50	64
		Achievement (%)	72	62	69
GCE A level Urdu (two-year course, students aged 16 to 19)	3	Expected completions	20	25	29
		Retention (%)	70	28	62
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100

Source: ISR

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

35 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but concluded that one weakness was understated.

Key strengths

- effective procedures for pre-entry guidance, enrolment and induction
- well-developed tutorial support
- close monitoring of students' progress
- well-organised and effective careers education and guidance
- appropriate curriculum enhancement
- supportive and friendly college environment

Weaknesses

- inadequate monitoring of the impact of learning support

36 As the self-assessment report indicated, the college has well-managed arrangements for initial guidance, advice and enrolment. Members of the schools liaison team work closely with partner schools, attend parents' evenings, contribute to school assemblies, and arrange visits by former pupils who are now at the college. The college prospectus sets out entry requirements clearly. It is supplemented by useful course information sheets. Prospective students are carefully interviewed by subject tutors, where possible in their own schools. If the college does not offer an appropriate programme, applicants are guided to other providers. Induction procedures are effective. All students receive a useful diary, which contains the college charter. The charter is discussed with students during induction. For students who wish to change their course there are clear procedures which include discussions with their personal tutor, subject staff, the head of the new subject department and a careers adviser.

37 The tutorial system plays a major part in supporting the college's aims to provide appropriate guidance and support to all students and to value the individual. Students receive good personal support. All full-time students have a personal tutor whom they meet weekly. Wherever possible, students are assigned to a tutor who teaches them for one of their main academic subjects. Accredited programmes such as GCE A level general studies and the key skill of 'improving own learning' are delivered through tutorials. Changes to the timings of tutorials has resulted in improved attendance. Guidelines for tutors give details on topics which should be covered in tutorials. In a few of the group tutorials observed by inspectors, students did not take much part in discussions. Throughout the year, college-wide events, such as health education days, help to raise students' awareness of particular issues but it is up to individual tutors whether they discuss the issues further at subsequent tutorials.

38 Procedures for reviewing students' progress are well established and effective. Students discuss and evaluate their performance with subject and personal tutors. Targets for improvement are agreed and monitored, as noted in the self-assessment report. Parents receive progress reports and are invited to parents evenings. They speak positively of the information provided, the support offered to students, and the approachability and helpfulness of staff. Staff in subject areas offer additional support and revision workshops as a strategy to raise achievement. The college has an electronic register system and personal tutors quickly follow up absences in accordance with the college procedure.

39 The college effectively supports students with physical disabilities, such as those with visual impairment. College staff discuss their specific needs with them and with relevant teachers at their school. Some college staff have had dyslexia awareness training. Initial diagnostic tests to identify literacy support needs were piloted in September 1997 and all new entrants were tested in 1998. Strategies to

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assess and meet the numeracy support needs of students on advanced level courses have yet to be fully developed. All students on intermediate level programmes follow Wordpower or Numberpower courses at the appropriate level. Since they were introduced, the achievement rates on these courses have improved each year and they were well above the national average in 1998. Students with identified literacy support needs on advanced level courses are referred, or refer themselves, to English language workshops. All students referred to these workshops attend but the impact on their progress is not effectively monitored. The self-assessment report did not fully recognise the significance of this weakness.

40 All full-time students follow a comprehensive careers education and guidance programme delivered in liaison with the careers service. The college hosts an annual higher education conference for all students in the borough organised by the careers service. Applications for university and employment are effectively supported. The careers information centre is particularly well resourced and occupies excellent accommodation. These strengths were identified in the self-assessment report. All students receive comprehensive information on employment opportunities and can attend lunchtime 'job seeker' workshops. Students' destinations are collected and disseminated annually. There is a well-attended awards presentation evening.

41 All students have an entitlement to a range of courses and activities outside their main programme. These include key skills tuition, the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, first-aid courses and community sports leaders awards. Students on vocational programmes are provided with opportunities to undertake work experience, and work shadowing is available for GCE A level students. A small but enthusiastic students' association meets regularly with college managers to discuss the needs of students. It organises a range of social events.

There is also a suggestion box for students' use. Cultural difference are respected and valued. Prayer rooms are available for Muslim students and the Christian union meets weekly.

General Resources

Grade 1

42 The college has outstanding general resources. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-maintained and well-managed buildings
- excellent specialist accommodation and resources
- efficiently used, well-equipped teaching rooms
- outstanding facilities in the learning resource centre
- the integrated approach to the management of learning resources
- high standard of IT and computing equipment
- excellent sport and recreational facilities
- good access for wheelchair users throughout the college
- the displays of students' work in teaching and communal areas

Weaknesses

- insufficient space in some teaching and staff rooms

43 Since the last inspection, the college has placed a high priority on maintaining and improving its accommodation and resources. It has developed an effective strategy to integrate IT and learning resources and has built a new learning resource centre to accommodate these resources.

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44 The college's three buildings provide purpose-built and attractive accommodation constructed from low maintenance materials. The original buildings, opened in 1992, accommodate general and specialist teaching areas, a lecture theatre and a sports hall. A newer building, opened in 1997, includes a learning resource centre with a multimedia facility, library and teaching areas, and a business centre which has video-conferencing facilities and well-equipped IT training rooms. All the buildings are clean and well maintained. The campus provides a safe and secure environment. Teaching rooms are sound-proofed, double glazed and fully carpeted. In most areas, there are attractive displays of students' work. Specialist accommodation is particularly good. For example, editing and sound studios are of industry standard. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college has high-quality accommodation. Room usage rates are high. However, some of the teaching rooms in the original buildings are sometimes overcrowded. Staff work rooms are well equipped, but a few cases provide insufficient working space. There is full access to all the buildings for people with restricted mobility.

45 The learning resource centre is well equipped and provides a pleasant environment in which to study. Students find its opening hours convenient. There are over 130 study spaces. The computerised library management system catalogues the learning materials kept in curriculum areas as well as those in the library. Staff and students have ready access to the catalogue. It holds details of the college's comprehensive range of resources including 17,000 books, 600 videos, 30 periodicals and newspapers and 100 CD-ROMs. Most of the stock is new. Facilities in the centre include four self-service photocopiers and a high-speed digital printer. Links between library staff and teachers are effective, and ensure that learning materials are readily available for students' use.

For example, teachers supply the library staff with copies of their schemes of work. Careful monitoring of students' use of the facilities shows high usage; so far in 1998-99, there has been an average of 3,000 visits a week. In 1997-98, 97% of students borrowed resources from the library; a 27% increase over the previous year. The centre is valued highly by students and staff and its strengths were recognised in the self-assessment report. Four study areas, located close to teaching areas for languages, media, mathematics, and humanities have paper-based and IT resources, televisions, video facilities, and specialist editing equipment.

46 The college has good computing resources, as noted in the self-assessment report. All computers are modern and have industrial-standard software. The learning resource centre has 82 computers for students' use, which are available until 20.00 hours on four nights a week. It is staffed by well-qualified learning resource technicians who provide regular training sessions for staff and students. Staff and students have excellent access to the college's internal computer network and the internet through over 200 computers, some located in specialist rooms and others distributed around the college. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students of 1:5 compares favourably with most colleges. A member of staff is responsible for the development of the college-wide network which includes electronic mail for students, management information and a wide range of learning materials. Through close liaison with teachers, a wide range of information has been produced. For example, students on travel and tourism courses can use college-produced indexes which identify case studies produced by staff, internet sites run by national parks and support materials produced by major tourist attractions. Portable computers and specialised equipment, such as large monitors and closed-circuit television, are available for students with disabilities.

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47 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that recreational and sports facilities are good. The sports centre includes a multi-purpose sports hall, dance studio, squash courts and fitness centre. Two lecture theatres can seat 100 and 300, respectively. The larger is used regularly by both students and the local community for drama and other productions. Catering facilities are of a very good standard and are popular with students. Students' common rooms provide pleasant areas for students to meet.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

48 The college has made considerable improvements to its quality assurance system since the last inspection. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report. A number of identified weaknesses had been addressed before the inspection. Inspectors found a few additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- commitment to continuous improvement at all levels
- strong links between the quality assurance and planning cycles
- comprehensive quality assurance framework
- performance targets set and monitored against agreed service standards
- rigorous internal verification procedures
- effective staff development

Weaknesses

- weak links between some aspects of the quality assurance system
- variation in the rigour of course reviews

49 The college has made significant improvements to its quality assurance arrangements since the last inspection. It has strengthened its review process and its use of targets, performance indicators and national benchmarks. Its self-assessment process is supported by the quality assurance framework that operates in all areas of the college's work. Curriculum and college-wide activities are assessed against agreed service standards. The college has sustained and further developed its strong staff development system. As the self-assessment report stated, an effective framework for quality assurance and self-assessment is now well established and the college has a clear commitment to continuous improvement at all levels. All staff are involved in the self-assessment process and understand the quality systems and targets. The academic board monitors the use of performance indicators, progress towards targets and the outcomes of lesson observations. Every course has a representative on the students' association and students gave inspectors examples of developments that they attributed to this representation.

50 The comprehensive quality assurance process is based on annual reviews of every college function. Targets are set and performance is monitored against agreed service standards in all curriculum and service areas of the college. The management information system generates regular and timely reports to all managers so that they can monitor progress towards their agreed targets. Reviews within curriculum areas provide managers with evidence to formulate their annual self-assessment reports. Staff in most subject areas carry out course reviews rigorously. They systematically seek students' views through questionnaires distributed during the year. In a few subject areas, staff do not invite students to attend course reviews or seek their involvement in the evaluation of the curriculum in other ways. Their review processes do not produce a critical review of performance against the

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agreed service standards. They rely on a college-wide questionnaire, distributed at the end of the teaching year, but the results come too late to benefit many of the students who have completed this questionnaire. As noted in the self-assessment report, the college employs rigorous internal verification procedures. Assessor and verifier training is well established. Effective methods of cross-marking are used in some subjects. External verifier reports are good.

51 Since the last inspection, the college has developed clear links between the annual quality assurance and planning cycles. Senior managers meet the staff who report to them regularly and question them on their plans and targets and on their verification of course reviews. They assess the outcomes of self-assessments against service standards. The outcomes of the process inform strategic planning and enable the setting of realistic objectives. Despite the rigour of the process, weak links remain between some aspects of the quality assurance system. The range of student questionnaires is narrow and they include some superficial questions. The method used to determine added value is not well understood by all teachers and is used inconsistently. Links between managers and the staff who deliver continuing education are weak. Internal verification in continuing education is not so well developed as in the rest of the college. There is infrequent reporting of performance against the charter standards.

52 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that staff development is effective. The staff development policy emphasises the role of training in supporting the implementation of the strategic plan. All staff have two professional reviews each year. The resulting individual professional development plans inform the college staff training plan. Funding for staff development is almost 2% of the staffing budget. A proportion is delegated to subject leaders to support

curriculum updating. The staff development activities provided within the college are clearly focused on meeting strategic objectives. For example, current training programmes support the college's growing higher education collaboration, acquisition by staff of IT skills, acquisition of assessor and verifier awards, developments in independent learning and management. The college has an effective induction and mentoring programme for all newly qualified and recently appointed teachers, a strength noted in the self-assessment report.

53 The college has an established programme of lesson observations which covers all curriculum areas and all teachers. Classroom observation is standardised and evaluates aspects of teaching but not students' activities and achievements in the classroom. College managers awarded grade 1 to a larger proportion of the lessons they observed than inspectors did, though overall the proportion of grades 1 and 2 was similar to that awarded by inspectors. Since the last inspection, the proportion of lessons graded good or outstanding by inspectors has risen by 3%.

Governance

Grade 2

54 Inspectors generally agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but identified additional weaknesses. Many of the weaknesses mentioned in the report had been addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- good monitoring of all aspects of the college's performance
- effective self-assessment
- good relationships between governors and senior managers
- governors well informed about key issues

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- close involvement in strategic planning

Weaknesses

- some committees not operating in accordance with their remit
- incomplete register of interests and no approved 'whistleblowing' policy
- inadequate attention to the clerk's advisory role

55 Governors are closely involved in the preparation of the strategic plan. They make the plan the focus of one of their meetings and allocate sufficient time to this aspect of their work. The plan is well supported by financial data and sets clear targets for the college. Governors receive regular reports from senior managers regarding the progress being made towards the attainment of these targets. Governors are clear about their financial responsibilities. Health and safety matters are reported to governors, one of whom is a member of the college's health and safety committee.

56 The governors have a good understanding of the importance of the contribution made by the college to raising the aspirations of local people. As the self-assessment report indicated, the strategies they have discussed and adopted clearly support the college's mission. For example, their strategic approach to creating strong partnerships between local organisations involved in education and training has resulted in new opportunities for education and training in the Oldham area. Their commitment to widening participation is long standing. Course entry qualifications are set at a level which encourages a broader ability range of students to enrol than may be expected in a sixth form college located near to a large general further education college. Links between the governing body and senior managers are open and productive. Each vice-principal is responsible for briefing and supporting the governing body committee whose remit aligns most closely with their area of responsibility in the college.

57 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The governing body 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.

58 The governing body has 18 members including two staff members and a recently appointed student member. The governors have a wide range of experience which includes finance, personnel, law, marketing, education, and the public sector. They undertake an annual skills audit. There is a formal induction process and governors also receive training on relevant issues. Governors have adopted a code of conduct, comprehensive standing orders and a register of interests which is available to the public. They have only recently received appropriate guidance to help them to complete the register of interests and, as yet, not all have done so. While governors have been aware of the need for a 'whistleblowing' policy since July 1998, one has yet to be approved. Governing body minutes are available to the public on request but this availability is not publicised. There is no annual public meeting or report. Attendance at some governing body meetings has been poor, a weakness recognised by the college. A target for attendance has recently been set. The clerk's job description focuses on administrative tasks and pays insufficient attention to the role of clerk as adviser to the governors.

59 A range of committees to support the governing body meets according to a predetermined calendar. The finance and general purposes committee receives comprehensive management accounts. The personnel committee receives reports on issues of equality of opportunity affecting staff, as well as other staffing issues. Committees do not always operate within their remit. The remuneration committee has not been reviewing targets set for senior postholders, a weakness

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identified in the self-assessment report. The finance and general purposes committee has exceeded its remit as it has considered internal control issues. The audit committee has not considered the implications of the *Audit Code of Practice*. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report. The search committee has considered the new statutory rules relating to membership which come into effect from August 1999. They have agreed to delay filling a vacancy on the board so that they have the flexibility to meet the new requirements.

60 Governors are closely involved in their own self-assessment. They discussed both the content of the college self-assessment report and the grades to be awarded. By the time of the inspection they had already remedied many of the weaknesses in governance identified in the report.

Management

Grade 1

61 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They concluded that it provided clear judgements about the management of the college based on reliable evidence.

Key strengths

- effective strategic planning involving most staff
- productive collaboration with a range of partners
- well-planned curriculum developments to encourage wider participation
- strong leadership
- detailed and productive analysis of the college's performance
- effective communication
- reliable and accessible data

- wide range of strategies to improve retention
- good financial management

Weaknesses

- there are no significant weaknesses

62 The college is effectively fulfilling its mission to raise educational aspirations among the local community. It has consistently met its funding targets and successfully extended its range of courses to encourage access by a wider range of students. Student numbers have grown substantially since the college was established in 1992 and it has opened a large new building to accommodate this growth.

63 College managers work well as a team. The principal, three vice-principals and six assistant principals form the senior management team. They work closely with the nine cross-college managers and the academic board. The four senior postholders work closely with the board to ensure that the college fulfils its legal and social responsibilities. Roles are clearly defined. Responsibilities are effectively devolved. Management team meetings are held regularly. They have clear outcomes and action points. There is a good team spirit across the college. Staff are closely involved in the strategic planning process. They are clear about the aims and objectives in the strategic plan and the strategies to achieve these. These strengths were all identified in the self-assessment report.

64 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The financial position of the college is strong. It has experienced historic cost surpluses and operating cost deficits. These are attributable to high depreciation costs resulting from the high value of the college's buildings. A small but effective finance team provides budget holders with timely reports of actual and committed expenditure against budget. Detailed

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management accounts are produced each month and formally monitored by the college management team. The key assumptions underlying current financial forecasts are clearly stated and understood by managers. The college's financial regulations have been revised recently and reviewed and approved by the finance and general purposes committee. The internal auditors identified a significant weakness in financial control in their 1997-98 annual report. This was immediately addressed by college managers. No issues were raised by the external auditors.

65 A comprehensive range of policies and procedures including those concerning personnel and equality of opportunity are well monitored and regularly updated. Detailed analyses of the ethnic origin and gender of the student population inform curriculum planning. Procedures to recruit and select staff are carefully designed and monitored. The traditions of different faiths are well catered for. Staff welfare has a high priority, as the self-assessment report noted. Staff at all levels are aware of college policies and participate in reviewing them and taking action to improve them. All areas of the college have service standards and well-understood monitoring procedures which contribute to the college's commitment to continuous improvement. Job descriptions are clear and understood by staff.

66 The self-assessment report stated that there are effective communication networks across the college. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. Staff consider managers to be easily accessible. Methods used to aid communication are well organised and are appreciated by staff. They include regular meetings, weekly staff bulletins, electronic mail and an intranet. Staff at all levels feel well informed about the important issues facing the college. Communication with students is helped by course reviews, tutorials and the student association.

67 The college has strong links with its partner 11 to 16 schools and with a wide range of other external bodies. Collaboration with Oldham College is particularly well developed and includes joint provision of higher education opportunities. The two colleges plan to increase this provision significantly in September 2000 to meet identified needs by providing local progression pathways. There are productive and mutually supportive relationships with the local council, careers service and Oldham Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise. As the self-assessment report indicated, the college uses its knowledge of local needs to develop its curriculum. It has extended its range of courses to cater for adult students. The business centre provides for the needs of a wide range of groups and offers its facilities to local organisations including those working with people with physical disabilities. The college has been successful in securing alternative sources of income to supplement FEFC funding.

68 Student performance is closely monitored by curriculum and senior managers. The achievements of students who complete their courses are excellent. The college has identified poor retention in some curriculum areas. Senior managers require these areas to implement strategies for improvement. As yet, the strategies have not had an equal impact across all affected areas but there has been an overall improvement in retention in 1999. For example, retention on two-year full-time courses has improved from 76% in 1998 to 81% so far in 1999. Good-quality data from the college's computerised management information system are effectively used to inform decision-making. The system delivers a wide range of reliable reports. It ensures that internal and external reporting requirements are met within appropriate timescales. The college is using national benchmarking data to compare its performance with that of other colleges.

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Conclusions

69 The college's self-assessment report was comprehensive and clearly presented and formed a good basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. It was based on a rigorous self-assessment process involving all staff and governors. The judgements it contained were supported by a range of evidence including performance indicators and comparisons of course retention and achievement rates with college targets and national averages. All sections contained detailed action plans. Since the report was drawn up, the college has addressed many of the weaknesses it identified. Inspectors agreed with the majority of the strengths and weaknesses in the report but concluded that the college had underestimated the significance of weaknesses in retention in one curriculum area and had underemphasised the slow rate of progress in improving additional learning support. Inspectors agreed with all but one of the curriculum grades and with all but one of the cross-college grades.

70 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 (March 1999)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	69
19-24 years	11
25+ years	20
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (March 1999)

Level of study	%
Foundation	4
Intermediate	8
Advanced	80
Higher education	3
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	5
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (March 1999)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	397	208	26
Engineering	10	0	0
Business	250	66	14
Hotel and catering	95	49	6
Health and community care	69	15	4
Art and design	163	0	7
Humanities	880	72	42
Basic education	20	0	1
Total	1,884	410	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 34% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (May 1999)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	71	22	0	93
Supporting direct learning contact	20	2	0	22
Other support	36	4	0	40
Total	127	28	0	155

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£4,733,000	£4,983,000	£4,742,000
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£17.29	£15.81	£16.03
Payroll as a proportion of income	64%	68%	70%
Achievement of funding target	114%	127%	103%
Diversity of income	14%	12%	11%
Operating surplus	-£356,000	-£526,000	-£876,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Expected completions	1,381	2,752	1,402	31	92	62
	Retention (%)	81	85	80	94	68	79
	Achievement (%)	52	55	98	91	85	88
2	Expected completions	641	745	735	77	72	126
	Retention (%)	79	76	72	51	56	63
	Achievement (%)	80	98	93	76	76	92
3	Expected completions	2,547	2,893	3,138	123	89	24
	Retention (%)	79	76	72	51	56	63
	Achievement (%)	89	92	90	77	78	86
Short courses	Expected completions	61	1,296	1,455	138	312	366
	Retention (%)	93	95	91	91	94	66
	Achievement (%)	91	65	42	100	96	85

Source: ISR

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