

Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

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

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

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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.

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

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

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

Retention and Pass Rates

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

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

Summary

Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture

Eastern Region

Inspected January 1998

Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture is the major provider of further education courses in agriculture and horticulture for Suffolk. Since incorporation the college has extensively developed its curriculum to provide for the increasing range of opportunities for employment in land-based industry. The college's self-assessment report did not appropriately evaluate all aspects of college work. Some judgements made in the report were not adequately supported by evidence. The inspection team identified significant areas of weakness and a few areas of strength that were not identified in the self-assessment report.

The college provides courses in three of the FEFC's programme areas: agriculture, business and management studies and humanities. Three curriculum areas were inspected together with aspects of cross-college provision. The college has extensive and productive links with external organisations and is successful in attracting a significant level of income. Governors are well informed about college developments. Many resources are efficiently used. Courses are generally well organised and there is an extensive programme of curriculum enrichment. Additional learning support is well

managed. The standard of teaching is generally satisfactory and most examination results are good. The college should improve: the ineffective implementation and monitoring of some cross-college policies; the poor quality of some course reviews; the unreliable and often weak arrangements for quality assurance; the analysis and reporting of students' achievements; and financial reporting.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Animal care	3	Support for students	2
Horticulture	2	General resources	2
Business and management studies	3	Quality assurance	4
		Governance	2
		Management	3

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture was established in 1970 seven miles north of Ipswich on a demonstration farm which belongs to an agricultural trust. The college is the major provider in Suffolk of further education courses in agriculture and horticulture. It has opened centres away from the main site at Lowestoft and Stradbroke to widen access to education and training. At the request of Suffolk Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) it has taken over the management and organisation of a training centre at Leiston. The college also attracts students from outside Suffolk.

2 Ninety per cent of the land area of Suffolk is devoted to agriculture. Although there has been a decline in the number of people directly employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, the overall figure for the county of 4 per cent is still higher than the national average. The county contains a large number of small industrial and commercial concerns; 87 per cent of all businesses employ less than 25 people. Many agricultural businesses have diversified into new enterprises in recent years. The unemployment rate in Suffolk reduced in 1997-98 to 3.9 per cent. However, the rate is higher in the north of the county, including areas around Leiston and Lowestoft, where it reaches 9.2 per cent.

3 Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture is situated in an area in which there are 16 secondary schools of which eight have sixth forms. There are now 28 sixth forms in Suffolk that offer an increasing range of vocational courses. In recent years the proportion of young people over the age of 16 in education has risen from 66 per cent in 1992 to 74 per cent in 1996 but fell last year to 72 per cent. There are three general further education colleges in the county, at Lowestoft, Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds.

4 Since incorporation the college has extended its curriculum to include: courses in floristry, animal care and environmental conservation; additional courses in business and management studies to provide for the increasing range of opportunities for employment in land-based industry; and higher education courses in horticulture, environmental conservation and animal science and welfare. The mission of the college is to 'provide wider vocational opportunities for young people and adults in land-based industries and environmental conservation in the UK and in Europe'. It intends to achieve its mission 'by delivering the knowledge, understanding and skills required, flexibly and to the highest standards resulting in appropriate nationally-recognised qualifications in further and higher education for its students'.

The Inspection

5 The college was inspected in January 1998. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and the information on the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college submitted data on students' achievements for 1996 and 1997 which were validated by the inspectorate against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. Approximately two months before the inspection, inspectors notified the college of the sample of its provision that would be assessed. The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 29 days. Inspectors observed 33 classes and examined samples of students' work. They also studied documents that the college had provided to support its self-assessment report. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students.

Context

6 Of the lessons inspected, 52 per cent were assessed as good or outstanding and 9 per cent were less than satisfactory. This profile is weaker than the average for colleges in the sector inspected in 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. It is also weaker than the average published in the FEFC curriculum area survey on agriculture. College records show that during 1996-97 the average attendance was 83.5 per cent. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was 84 per cent which is higher than the average for the sector of 77 per cent according to the chief inspector's annual report. The following table summarises the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
NVQ	1	2	1	0	0	4*
Other vocational	5	9	12	3	0	29
Total	6	11	13	3	0	33

*includes observation of two student support sessions

Curriculum Areas

Animal Care

Grade 3

7 The inspection included observation of 11 lessons from full-time courses. Inspectors concluded that the self-assessment report lacked sufficient supporting evidence, did not include some important areas and did not clearly identify weaknesses.

Key strengths

- high retention and achievement on full-time courses
- well-organised courses
- good progression to employment and higher level courses
- records of students' performance

Weaknesses

- insufficient co-ordination in the teaching of theory and practical work
- some ineffective teaching methods
- the inappropriate level of some assignments
- insufficient opportunity for students to gain supplementary vocational qualifications

8 The college offers a comprehensive range of full-time courses in animal care. Many students progress to higher level courses at the college. In 1997-98, 66 per cent of first diploma students progressed to a higher course. Part-time provision is limited to courses in veterinary nursing which have been introduced recently and attract few students.

9 Courses are well organised; course files are appropriately detailed. Schemes of work are thorough, relate directly to the syllabus and are followed by teachers. Topics are developed logically though teaching of theory lacks sufficient reference to practical situations.

Teaching often lacks sufficient momentum and can fail to challenge and motivate the students. Teachers rarely checked in class that students understood the work. Most lessons ended without helpful conclusions about the work that had been covered. Inspectors considered that the self-assessment report did not include a sufficiently detailed evaluation of teaching and learning. The college recognises that few staff have teaching qualifications and most have little teaching experience. Practical duties, that occupy some lesson time and are not systematically monitored and assessed, do not always contribute to the development of effective practical skills. Students were not always fully occupied. Insufficient attention is given to developing students' skills in handling dogs and cats.

10 There is a regular programme of tutorial support that is appreciated by students. Tutors maintain accurate and detailed records of students' progress. The records include information on attendance and on the learning support provided. Tutors also give helpful informal guidance and support. Written instructions for assignments are clear and identify the assessment criteria. Work is returned to students with helpful comments. Procedures to assess the standard of assignment work do not identify the appropriate level for such work; there is no standardisation of assessment for practical activities. A few assignments are at an inappropriate level and insufficiently challenge students, particularly those students who are progressing from intermediate to advanced courses. Most assignments are very theoretical and have insufficient links with practical work. For example, few make use of the range of animals at the college. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

11 The animal unit is well maintained and has an appropriate range of animals. Students have access to large animals and to sufficient exotic animals. The level of technician staff support is

Curriculum Areas

good. The lack of a telephone or computer in the animal care unit impedes effective teaching on the use of booking and recording systems. The grooming room is small and has, for example, only one bath. Plans exist to increase the facilities for dogs and cats. At present the shortage of facilities leads to students wasting time.

12 Retention on full-time courses is high; in the last two years 87 per cent of full-time students completed their courses. Reasons for the early departure of students from courses are investigated. Examination pass rates on full-time courses are high with 92 per cent of students who complete their courses achieving the qualification. The quality of students' work and their success in examinations were neither evaluated nor identified as strengths in the self-assessment report. Students have insufficient opportunity to achieve additional vocational qualifications to help them progress to employment. However, first diploma students are given support to study for a national vocational qualification (NVQ). National diploma students are encouraged to take computer literacy and information technology level 1 and to take part in activities that can lead to awards by Young Enterprise.

Examples of students' achievements in animal care, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
National diploma animal care	Retention (%)	*	100	79
	Pass rate (%)	*	92	100
National certificate animal care	Retention (%)	*	88	80
	Pass rate (%)	*	87	100
First diploma animal care	Retention (%)	*	81	95
	Pass rate (%)	*	86	87

Source: college data

*courses were not running or had not been completed

Curriculum Areas

Horticulture

Grade 2

13 Inspectors observed 11 lessons, mainly selected from full-time courses at levels from foundation to advanced and leading to the award of national diplomas, national certificates or NVQs. Inspectors concluded that the college undervalued some of the strengths identified in its self-assessment report, particularly in relation to the quality of teaching. They also identified some strengths and a few weaknesses that had been overlooked by the college. The self-assessment report lacked rigour in assessing students' achievements. Many of the weaknesses identified by the college are in the process of being resolved.

Key strengths

- high standard of teaching
- effective links between theory and practice
- well-organised work experience for full-time students
- tutors' records of students' performance
- high retention and pass rates for most full-time and some part-time courses
- the wide range of well-managed courses
- progression to further study or employment
- specialist facilities to support teaching and learning

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to some students
- instructions for and marking of some assignment work
- lack of clarity and detail in course review and evaluation reports

14 The wide range of courses provides substantial numbers of specialist options.

There are good opportunities for full-time students to gain additional NVQs, which are practically based, directly relevant to employment, and help students to develop their potential. A high proportion of students continue in further education, gain employment or progress to higher education. Inspection fully confirmed the claims made in the self-assessment report that the college has productive links with local employers. Employers' facilities are effectively used to complement the resources at the college. Students benefit from well-managed work experience which is an integral part of their course.

15 A wide range of teaching methods is used. Students also benefit from some good specialist facilities. The self-assessment report understated the strength of the teaching of practical skills. Teachers demonstrate techniques clearly, giving appropriate emphasis to all aspects of safety. Students' work is carefully supervised and they are given clear guidance on how to improve their performance. The link between theory and practice is frequently and effectively reinforced and teachers provide well-chosen examples making use of their experience of the industry. Lesson content is relevant and up to date and topics are developed logically. Discussions are not always well managed. Some teachers do not systematically check that students understand the work being covered. Students often do not know how to take notes; their notes did not always reflect the content of the lessons. Realistic assignments complement the class work and provide opportunities for students to apply and develop their understanding. The self-assessment report noted that briefing instructions for assignments often lack sufficient detail and that feedback is inadequate. These shortcomings reduce the effectiveness of the work.

16 Courses are effectively managed. Students' personal tutors keep up-to-date and

Curriculum Areas

detailed information on their performance. In addition, teachers provide considerable informal support; students are very appreciative of their willingness to help. The effectiveness of these arrangements is reduced by the failure to help students identify reasons for areas of under-performance and overcome their difficulties. Systems to assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning are often not comprehensive and course review reports lack clarity.

17 The written work of most students is of a high standard. However, the work of students on first diploma and national certificate courses is often barely adequate. National diploma students are not given enough encouragement to apply their knowledge. Most of their assignments are well researched and presented but often lack conclusions. A high proportion of students successfully complete their studies although the pass rate for the national certificate (horticulture) has been low in comparison with similar awards nationally for the last two years. Many part-time students are successful; last year all NVQ level 2 students passed. For other part-time courses there have been some weaker results. Only 33 per cent of students taking the Royal Horticulture Society examinations passed in 1996-97. Comments in the self-assessment

on the performance of part-time students were insufficiently detailed and did not address these weaknesses.

Examples of students' achievements in horticulture, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
First diplomas	Retention (%)	86	82	96
	Pass rate (%)	95	100	87
National certificates	Retention (%)	85	91	84
	Pass rate (%)	82	71	79
National diplomas	Retention (%)	100	72	90
	Pass rate (%)	100	86	83
Part-time amenity horticulture – levels 2 and 3	Retention (%)	90	84	85
	Pass rate (%)	91	91	91

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Business and Management Studies

Grade 3

18 Courses in business at intermediate, advanced and higher levels for both full-time and part-time students were inspected. Nine lessons were observed. The college's self-assessment report was descriptive and contained few evaluative judgements. Inspectors identified some additional key strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- some high standards of teaching
- reliable assessment procedures
- a consistently high standard of work from most students
- some good pass rates on courses in computer literacy and information technology (IT)

Weaknesses

- the lack of knowledge and understanding of some students
- some ineffective note-taking skills
- poor liaison between staff in separate units
- inadequate liaison with employers

19 Business and management studies were introduced in 1991. Provision has expanded to a range of courses from levels 2 to 4 that meet the needs of the local community. Teaching in business management and administration is located within the centre for business and management. The centre also contains the rural business centre and the business management unit. Management courses can run on employers' premises. To maintain appropriate opportunities for students, some courses continue to run even though numbers are low.

Course leaflets and handbooks provide appropriate information for students.

20 Course management is good.

Regular course team meetings have helped the successful introduction of several new courses over the last three years. Staff from the rural business centre and business management unit do not meet to discuss common issues.

Although effective links with employers exist at course level, there is no business studies advisory committee to assist overall in the development of the curriculum for business and management studies. Work experience is an integral part of most courses. Procedures to inform employers of course requirements and of their responsibilities towards students on work experience are not always effective. Students are not always visited by teachers during their work placement to monitor progress.

These weaknesses were not noted in the college's self-assessment.

21 The quality of most teaching is good.

Most classes are well planned. Lesson plans are regularly reviewed by curriculum managers and course teams. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods which maintain students' interest. Learning materials are well matched to the needs of the students. In lessons teachers encourage students to draw on their own backgrounds and work experience.

Effective question and answer techniques were not always used to encourage students to participate in class discussions and to extend their knowledge and communication skills.

In some lessons, teachers fail to take adequate account of the different abilities of students.

In a few classes students were insufficiently challenged and teachers did not always check that learning was taking place. Students on the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced course did not always demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge.

22 Most written work from students is of a good standard and well presented. Students

Curriculum Areas

understand the tasks that are set and speak confidently about them. Marking schemes and assessment schedules are well planned. Students' work is marked and returned quickly. Appropriate attention is given to spelling and grammar. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that regular group and individual tutorials enable students to monitor and evaluate their progress. Student portfolios on GNVQ advanced courses were well presented, and showed that the students had acquired an appropriate range of skills. Students' achievements on the RSA Examinations Board (RSA) course for computer literacy and IT and on the first year of the diploma in secretarial and administrative procedures are excellent.

23 The classrooms for business and management studies are well appointed and appropriately furnished with whiteboards and overhead projectors. Students are able to make full use of the library and the study skills centre which includes specialist IT facilities providing access to the Internet. As stated in the college's self-assessment report, the range and quality of video materials are insufficient for teaching or private study.

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

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Computer literacy and IT	Retention (%)	*	88	97
	Pass rate (%)	*	93	88
NVQ administration levels 1 to 4	Retention (%)	*	79	78
	Pass rate (%)	*	79	40
NVQ levels 3 and 4 management studies	Retention (%)	*	89	84
	Pass rate (%)	*	56	62
GNVQ advanced	Retention (%)	**	**	78
	Pass rate (%)	**	**	71

Source: college data

*data not available

**courses were not offered

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

24 Inspectors considered that the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report were clear but were mainly descriptive and insufficiently evaluative. They concluded that some strengths and weaknesses were overstated; others had not been identified.

Key strengths

- the range of opportunities to obtain impartial advice and guidance
- the well-managed additional support provided to students
- the extensive programme of curriculum enhancement
- induction programmes that meet the needs of individual students
- progression opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Weaknesses

- insufficient clarity on management responsibilities for student support
- some inadequate record-keeping
- no comprehensive statement on tutorial policy

25 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college enables students to make informed decisions when choosing a course. The college prospectus and other promotional literature is clear and informative. Additional information is available at a wide range of events including school presentations, careers evenings, open days and exhibitions in local towns. There are efficient administrative procedures to ensure that course enquiries and applications receive prompt attention. Service standards have been set for these activities but they are not monitored.

26 Students told inspectors that the college provides a friendly, helpful and supportive learning environment. Each student is allocated a personal tutor who is responsible for the academic and pastoral care of a group of students. The tutoring and guidance policy lists some, but not all, of the features of the support services available to students. There are no details of what should be covered in tutorials. The range of advice available covers: careers opportunities; learning support; counselling; financial matters; and benefits for families of students with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Inspectors considered that the self-assessment report did not distinguish clearly enough between careers guidance and careers education. Inspectors found that students have good access to impartial careers advice but that the college overstated the need for staff development to help to improve careers guidance. There is a good range of services available to support students but management responsibility for the overall co-ordination, monitoring and development of those services lacks clarity.

27 Most tutors have recently reviewed arrangements for induction to their courses and, responding to comments from students, made the process shorter and more focused on the needs of particular groups. Inspection confirmed the observation in the self-assessment report that students settle quickly into their studies. Course tutors are responsible for maintaining accurate records of the progress of individual students and for the completion of termly reports. A comprehensive system for recording students' progress has recently been introduced. Inspectors found some examples of incomplete record-keeping and superficial completion of termly reports; these weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

28 Since the last inspection the college has opened a centre to develop study skills. It has introduced comprehensive procedures to: identify the additional support needed by

Cross-college Provision

students; give students the appropriate help; and monitor the outcome. During induction all students are asked to take the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) assessments in both numeracy and literacy. Students identified as needing support have a subsequent interview with a member of staff who determines the precise nature of the support required. Acceptance and retention figures indicate that students value the service. In the 1996-97 session, for example, only 2 per cent of students refused the offer of additional support and approximately 86 per cent continued to attend the study skills centre for the required period. Tutors are regularly informed of the attendance and the progress of their students. The college recognised that the delays that occur between the time of initial assessment and the start of additional tuition has limited the effectiveness of support. There is evidence that many students should experience less delay in 1998.

29 Students benefit from the wide range of additional activities that enhance their opportunities to learn. Many gain a formal secondary qualification, such as an NVQ in a related subject. The range of other activities includes: European exchange trips; periods of work experience; and entry in trials competitions or as team members in the Suffolk Young Enterprise Programme. The self-assessment report does not identify the value of these activities.

30 College courses provide opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to continue their studies. The course for agriculture and related studies meets a wide range of learning needs by providing individual schedules of work. It is well organised; effective support and guidance is given to the students. There is an emphasis on the development of numeracy and literacy skills. Where appropriate, students join mainstream courses; most work towards NVQ units. Attendance and retention rates are very high and students clearly enjoy the course. In 1996-97, over

85 per cent of students achieved qualifications in word and number power and 94 per cent achieved some accreditation at NVQ level 1. A few students went on to gain the full award.

General Resources

Grade 2

31 Inspectors attached greater significance to the strengths listed in the college's self-assessment report than did the college itself; they also identified additional strengths and weaknesses. Most of the weaknesses should be resolved by the facilities in a new building which was under construction at the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- most accommodation of high quality
- effectively utilised, well-maintained accommodation
- well-managed library and learning resources
- up-to-date IT facilities for students

Weaknesses

- inadequate student common room and refectory facilities
- library bookstock below appropriate level

32 The college has continued to improve its accommodation since the last inspection. At the time of this inspection, a large new building was under construction. The college has successfully attracted substantial sponsorship to fund these developments. Many of the buildings on the campus are new and provide high-quality accommodation. Teaching rooms are well equipped, clean and generally well maintained. Inspection confirmed a number of deficiencies in the accommodation that had been identified in the self-assessment report. A few classes are held in poor-quality mobile accommodation.

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The refectory is overcrowded at peak times; there are long queues. Residential accommodation for 50 students is located five miles from the main site. Some staff offices are cramped.

33 The college identified that its teaching accommodation is effectively and efficiently used. The usage rate for rooms is well above the average for colleges of agriculture and horticulture. Wheelchair users can reach most college facilities but experience difficulty in gaining access to almost half of the teaching accommodation. Arrangements are made to ensure that students with restricted mobility are timetabled into suitable rooms. The recent installation of a lift has given the students access to the learning resources area.

34 Substantial investment has been made to develop general learning resources. The learning resources area which has recently been expanded provides a library, a study skill centre and facilities for IT. The rooms have been well planned, provide a welcoming environment, and are suited to their purpose. The college has five well-furnished computer rooms containing mostly modern computers that meet a wide range of demands. College records which are kept to monitor the usage indicate that there are sufficient computers to meet current demand. In order to support the introduction of more IT into the vocational curriculum a new computer-aided design suite is scheduled to open this year; there are plans to expand the range of vocationally specific software. The college recognises that some staff have insufficient access to IT equipment that could help them in the management of courses.

35 The self-assessment report does not refer to the substantial improvements that have been made in the provision of resources for the library which offers a comfortable, well-furnished, high-quality learning environment. In comparison with other college libraries, the bookstock is well below the appropriate level. High priority has been given

over the last few years to increasing the bookstock; as a result over 60 per cent of the books are recent acquisitions. The budget has been increased and funding has been specifically allocated for the development of new courses. A commercial software package is used by staff to monitor the usage rate of books. Teachers and library staff are working together effectively to identify new books and learning materials. There is a good supply of journals; and the provision of materials other than books is satisfactory.

Quality Assurance

Grade 4

36 Inspectors could only give qualified support to most of the strengths that the college had identified in its self-assessment. Inspectors' findings confirmed the weaknesses and identified others.

Key strengths

- the achievement of awards that recognise quality for some areas of work
- staff development linked to appraisal and to strategic objectives
- the manual for quality assurance procedures

Weaknesses

- a lack of rigour in application of procedures for quality assurance
- some staff unclear on procedures
- incomplete reports for course reviews
- inadequate action plans
- lack of rigorous analysis of data on students' achievements
- inadequate arrangements for gathering the views of students and employers
- inadequate self-assessment report

37 The strategic plan, policy on matters affecting quality assurance and the

Cross-college Provision

self-assessment report confirm the college's commitment to continuous improvement. A senior manager has recently been given the responsibility for co-ordinating quality assurance and is assisted by a quality assurance manager who will develop and manage the systems. The college is working towards standardising procedures across the college. A calendar of quality assurance activities has been planned to align with the college's strategic planning cycle. However, as identified in the self-assessment report, not all staff fully understand the quality assurance procedures which relate to their area of work. Inspectors found that the self-assessment report did not sufficiently recognise the inconsistent application of the quality assurance procedures. The quality procedures manual which has recently been introduced is a positive development. It outlines quality standards covering many aspects of the college's work. A tutor handbook provides helpful guidance on the implementation of quality assurance systems for the curriculum but there is no similar documentation to help those working in non-teaching areas of the college. Procedures to monitor progress towards achieving quality standards are not in place. The college has achieved ISO 9001 status for its services to business and received a quality award from the BSA.

38 The college's first self-assessment report was produced in 1997 in preparation for the inspection and is presented using the headings of Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. The report also included information under each section on the developments that have been achieved since the last inspection. Strengths and weaknesses were identified but the report lacked sufficiently-detailed evidence and failed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the college's work. Evidence that was provided to support the self-assessment report did not always substantiate the college's judgements.

Action plans to maintain or improve strengths and to rectify weaknesses indicate responsibility for action and timescales for achievement. The self-assessment reports from teaching sections were based on annual course reports. The observation of lessons did not always constitute part of the assessment of the quality of teaching. Some of these reports are insufficiently self-critical and lack evaluative judgements.

39 The college expects that the work of the academic board will be strengthened by a quality and curriculum development subcommittee. This committee is to approve new courses, 'audit' external quality reports and monitor the quality of the curriculum. This committee has met once. A quality subcommittee of the corporation has been established to scrutinise data on students' achievements and to monitor improvements in the quality of provision. Analysis of data on students' achievements is insufficiently detailed to allow staff to identify reasons for poor performance. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report. College targets have been set for enrolment, retention and achievement rates; these are monitored. The performance level of individual courses is not monitored against college targets. The college recognises in its self-assessment report that comparison with national performance indicators on students' achievements is underdeveloped.

40 Procedures to collect students' views about the college and their courses are improving. The end of course questionnaire has been supplemented by an evaluation at the end of the first term; a mid-year questionnaire is being developed. However, there is no overall analysis of student questionnaires to give a college-wide perspective. Employers' views are gathered during visits by staff to monitor work placements and from the report forms that employers complete on students who have placements with them. Some improvements

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have been made as a result of student and employer feedback, for example changes have been made to the scheduling of assignments and to the balance of practical and theory work on some courses. Valuable feedback is gathered from advisory councils which between them cover all the major areas of the college's work. Inspectors agree with the self-assessment report that views about the college from the wider community are not gathered in a systematic and structured way.

41 Course review and evaluation procedures have recently been revised. Heads of section follow a standard format for course reviews and report termly to the academic board. Course team meetings take place regularly and most identify action points which are then generally followed up. Some interim course reviews include feedback from student questionnaires and providers of work experience. End of course reports are intended to inform curriculum self-assessment reports but are not sufficiently self-critical. In many cases, strengths and weaknesses that have been identified lack enough supporting evidence. Action plans to improve courses are inadequate; responsibility for action is rarely specified and criteria for achievement are seldom established. Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that the quality assurance procedures are rigorously applied.

42 The college charter is issued to all students and is reviewed annually. Service standards are only set for a few of the commitments contained in the charter. Some charter commitments are monitored separately by college units but there is no overall check by the college that the charter is being observed. The college has established well-documented procedures for dealing with complaints but these are not clearly explained in the charter. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the complaints procedure is not well publicised.

43 The college is committed to the professional development of its staff.

A well-established annual appraisal system operates for all staff, as claimed in the college's self-assessment report. The outcomes of individual appraisals influence plans for staff development; the college's strategic objectives determine the order of priority for implementing the plans. Lesson observation which is part of college policy for the appraisal of teaching staff is seldom carried out. Staff value the development opportunities available to them. Twelve of the teaching staff have updated their industrial experience in the last year and 72 per cent of staff have attended external training courses. The college gained Investor in People status in 1996.

Governance

Grade 2

44 The inspection team confirmed the college's self-assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of governance. There are effective procedures for governors to approve the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- complete and wide-ranging register of interests
- governors' awareness of key strategic issues facing the college
- effective conduct of the corporation's business
- appropriate committee structure
- sound and independent clerking

Weaknesses

- inadequate monitoring of the achievement of strategic objectives
- lack of formal arrangements for the induction and training of governors
- lack of consideration of the college's long-term financial position

Cross-college Provision

45 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. Procedures for the conduct of the corporation's business, whilst effective, have not been drawn together as standing orders. The corporation has established a register of interests which is complete and has an exceptionally wide scope: it includes declarations by all governors and also by college staff. There is a governance working group which actively considers emerging governance issues and is involved in the recruitment of new governors. The level of attendance by governors at meetings of the corporation and its committees is good.

46 Governors bring a wide range of expertise and experience of the land-based sector to the work of the college. They have, between them, skills as directors and managers, knowledge of the local and regional community and experience of financial matters, personnel issues and estates management. Governors take an active interest in the college. Representation on college committees, including industrial advisory groups and the academic board, helps the corporation to keep up to date with college developments. Governors attended a range of meetings and training sessions on self-assessment. There are no formal procedures to assist in the induction of new governors. Governors receive briefings on issues related to governance, but they have not formally reviewed their training needs nor identified a training programme.

47 The clerking arrangements are sound. The clerk's independence is secure; the service is provided by an external organisation. The corporation has an appropriate committee structure. Committees comply with their terms of reference, which are clear and appropriate.

Comprehensive papers assist decision-making. Senior managers keep governors well informed of the college's financial position. However, some financial reports have not been made available in advance of corporation meetings. The annual budget for 1996-97 was not considered by the finance and general purposes committee in advance of presentation to the corporation. These weaknesses impair the ability of governors to give proper consideration to reports and, when appropriate, to challenge their content.

48 Governors have an excellent awareness of key strategic issues facing the college. However, the inspection team agreed with the college's judgement that governors are not sufficiently involved in the early stages of strategic planning. The three-year financial forecasts which underpin the strategic plan are not subject to detailed scrutiny by either the corporation or the finance and general purposes committee. Governors do not receive regular progress reports which would enable them to monitor the colleges' progress toward the achievement of its strategic objectives. These issues were not recognised in the self-assessment report.

Cross-college Provision

Management

Grade 3

49 Inspectors found that the college had overstated the strengths of its management and had failed to identify some key weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a well-formulated strategic plan
- entrepreneurial leadership
- effective monitoring of current financial performance
- well-managed procedures for the allocation of some resources
- effective liaison with external organisations

Weaknesses

- ineffective co-ordination and unclear responsibility for some cross-college areas
- ineffective academic board
- the implementation of some college policies ineffectively monitored
- insufficient financial information on the future financial position of the college
- incomplete management information for students' achievements

50 There is strong entrepreneurial leadership within the college. Significant growth in student numbers has been achieved and targets have been exceeded by 30 per cent in each of the last two years. The average level of funding is well below the average of the sector. Senior managers have devised strategies for income generation and attracted significant levels of income from a wide range of sources. A range of initiatives to increase education and training opportunities for the local community has been successfully introduced. The strategic plan is well formulated and addresses the

challenging and changing context in which the college is operating. The college makes effective use of labour market information from a wide range of organisations. Strategic objectives are clearly communicated to staff at section level by the executive managers. Full-time staff help to prepare section operating plans. The arrangements for monitoring operating plans do not benefit from the identification of clear targets and action plans. Some sections manage the planning and monitoring process well.

51 Inspection evidence supported the college's assessment that a wide range of external contacts are used effectively to support the development of the curriculum and promote the college. Excellent relationships are maintained with external bodies and the college has a high reputation for responding well to the training needs of employers. Liaison with employers is supported by meetings of advisory councils for each curriculum area. The college is also an active member of a number of employer organisations and co-operatives. The college has developed contracts with the Suffolk, Essex and Norfolk and Waveney TECs and works closely with them. Meetings are regularly held with TEC managers. The TECs report that the college and its staff are responsive and proactive in promoting new initiatives. A wide range of contracts with TECs currently provides an income of over £1.5 million. Liaison with other educational establishments is also positive. The college has good relations with high schools and special schools and provides them with support for vocational courses which helps students to progress to further education. The college works closely with the University of East Anglia which validates most of its higher education programmes. In partnership with Suffolk College and Suffolk TEC the college is promoting the development of a 'Televersity for Suffolk', a university that uses an IT infrastructure to provide higher education in business and management studies.

Cross-college Provision

52 Inspectors agreed with the college's view that communications throughout the college are not fully effective. Managers have taken steps to improve the operation of college committees. Minutes of all meetings are available to staff. A wide range of staff attends weekly briefing meetings. The main focus of the academic board has been strategic planning but it is not fulfilling its terms of reference in relation to quality assurance. The board is incorrectly constituted as it is not chaired by the principal. Students' representatives sit on college committees; they do not always understand their role and responsibility. The student association is not active and consequently there is no formal forum for discussions with college management. These weaknesses were not identified in the college's self-assessment report. Informal levels of communication with students are good.

53 Lines of accountability and responsibilities are not always clearly defined. Some staff do not have a current job description. Cross-college initiatives and policies are not being effectively implemented; there is a lack of clarity about the responsibility for monitoring their implementation. Agreed procedures are not always followed at sector and course team level. There is no comprehensive list of existing policies and no schedule of review to ensure that policies meet the current needs of the college. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

54 Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that fully effective arrangements are in place to keep all aspects of teaching and learning under review. For example, the college has given insufficient attention to promoting and monitoring the implementation of the equal opportunities policy. The equal opportunities committee has met only twice. Relevant statistics have been presented to the committee but analysis is superficial. Awareness and understanding of the policy amongst staff is sometimes low. The policy is not well publicised to students.

55 The allocation of resources to courses is well organised. Staff are deployed to fulfil a wide range of activities. Teaching costs are below the average for the sector. In some curriculum areas there is a high proportion of part-time staff, many of whom are teaching more hours than some full-time staff. Some full-time teaching staff are below their operating target for teaching hours. The college was unable to provide records of how total workloads are established and how the effectiveness of staff is monitored. There is insufficient evidence to substantiate the claim of the self-assessment report that the deployment of staff is efficient and effective.

56 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The budget planning process is well defined and clearly understood by staff. There is detailed and effective monitoring of the college's financial performance to date by management. However, financial reports include neither forecasts of out-turn for both income and expenditure to the financial year-end nor a rolling cashflow forecast for 12 months ahead. Internal audit plans do not ensure the college's whole internal control system is subject to review. The college's financial regulations are appropriate.

57 The management information system provides an increasingly wide range of internal and external reports on finance, students, staff, timetables and the use of resources. The college takes pride in completing its returns to the FEFC on time. However, the capabilities and requirements of the management information systems are not understood by curriculum managers and some still maintain their own data. The college recognises that managers need to use management information systems more effectively. Information on student enquiries, applications, enrolments and rates of retention is thorough and well used by managers. Appropriate information on achievement and success rates, particularly of

Cross-college Provision

part-time programmes and qualifications additional to students' primary learning goal, is not readily available.

Conclusions

58 Inspectors concluded that the college's self-assessment report was insufficiently self-critical and did not appropriately evaluate all aspects of the college's work. The judgements made in the report were not adequately supported by evidence. Lessons observed and graded by an external consultant produced a profile of grades similar to that subsequently awarded by inspectors. College staff did not always use the consultant's evidence to assist their own assessment of the quality of teaching in curriculum areas. The inspection team identified significant areas of weakness and some areas of strength that were not identified in the self-assessment report. Some additional information on students' achievements was made available during inspection. Half of the curriculum and cross-college grades that were established by the college were confirmed by inspectors. Some of the judgements were also confirmed.

59 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 (November 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	2
16-18 years	15
19-24 years	16
25+ years	67
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	20
Intermediate	33
Advanced	24
Higher education	7
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	16
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	96	721	14
Agriculture	363	1,695	34
Construction	40	100	2
Engineering	18	257	5
Business	234	927	19
Hotel and catering	4	55	1
Health and community care	0	388	7
Art and design	0	144	2
Humanities	15	796	13
Basic education	108	97	3
Total	878	5,180	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (November 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	66	2	0	68
Supporting direct learning contact	5	17	3	25
Other support	38	45	6	89
Total	109	64	9	182

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£4,921,000	£5,159,000	£6,056,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£15.82	£13.96	£16.64
Payroll as a proportion of income	58%	62%	55%
Achievement of funding target	104%	131%	(est) 143%
Diversity of income	55%	46%	50%
Operating surplus	-£15,000	£118,000	£309,000

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

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

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

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), college (1996-97)

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

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

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	4	3	14
	Average point score per entry	3.3	2.0	0.9
	Position in tables	middle third	bottom 10%	bottom 10%
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	+	35	53
	Percentage achieving qualification	+	80%	81%
	Position in tables	+	top third	top third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	93	83
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	86%	84%
	Position in tables	*	top 10%	top 10%

Source: DfEE

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

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

+results not published

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

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