

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

**The North
Shropshire
College**

June 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-95

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 82/96

THE NORTH SHROPSHIRE COLLEGE
WEST MIDLANDS REGION
Inspected February 1995-March 1996

Summary

The North Shropshire College provides a wide range of academic and vocational courses and an extensive community education programme. At the time of the inspection, enrolment targets had not been met. The board of governors is effective and supportive and the lines of communication are clear throughout the college. Arrangements for students' guidance and support are well co-ordinated and effective. The support provided for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a particular strength. Teachers are well qualified and a high proportion of the teaching is of a good quality. Examination results at GCSE and GCE A level are generally good but success rates on a few vocational courses are poor. The college should: develop a clear marketing strategy; improve the quality of annual course and school reviews; improve its management information systems and make the data available to a wider range of staff; and provide appropriate social areas for students.

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

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics and computing	2	Art and design	2
Business studies	2	English	2
Leisure and tourism	2	Sociology	2
Health and community care	2	Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and adult basic education	2

INTRODUCTION

1 The North Shropshire College was inspected during the period from February 1995 to March 1996. Eleven inspectors spent 53 days in the college. They visited 95 classes involving 946 students. They scrutinised students' work and a range of college documentation. Meetings were held with members of the corporation, college staff, students, parents, local employers, teachers from local schools and universities, representatives of the community and the Shropshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 The North Shropshire College was created in 1979 as part of the tertiary reorganisation in the county. It occupies two main sites in the market town of Oswestry. It leases premises in Whitchurch and Market Drayton which are respectively 20 and 30 miles to the east. The college also delivers an extensive community education programme at over 50 venues in this predominantly rural area.

3 Much of the college's wider catchment area includes The Marches where most of the jobs are in agriculture and related sectors. Over the past decade, there has been a decline in the number of jobs in these sectors. In November 1995, unemployment in Oswestry borough stood at 6.6 per cent. While this is lower than the United Kingdom average of 8.0 per cent, it represents the highest figure for any Shropshire district.

4 Recently-improved road links and the activities of the local authorities are contributing to economic regeneration. The European Commission has designated The Marches eligible for assistance in improving the competitiveness of local businesses, creating sustainable jobs and retraining the local population so that they can take advantage of economic regeneration. The college aims to play an important role in developing The Marches.

5 In the mid 1980s, only 30 per cent of 16 year olds in north west Shropshire continued in education. By 1994 the figure had risen to 70 per cent but it had fallen to 61 per cent by 1995. During the 1994-95 academic year, 12,378 students enrolled on courses at the college, which was more than double the figure recorded in 1988-89. Enrolments on courses listed under schedule 2 of *The Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, have increased in 1995-96, but non-schedule 2 provision has been reduced to approximately 9,000 enrolments. Enrolments by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

6 During the 1994-95 academic year, 389 staff were employed by the college, 289 of whom were part time. There were 81 full-time equivalent teaching staff including senior managers. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

7 The college is divided into seven teaching schools. These are: mathematics, science and computing; business and management;

administration and information technology; humanities; technology; care, education and visual arts; and adult and continuing education.

8 Except for a specialist agricultural college, the nearest further education providers are at Shrewsbury which is 19 miles to the south-east and at Wrexham which is 19 miles to the north. North-west Shropshire shares a longer border with Wales than with the rest of Shropshire. Relatively few students cross the border to study. The college has three designated 11 to 16 partner schools in north-west Shropshire and is increasingly attracting students from a wider area. The only school sixth form in the immediate locality is in the private sector. In north-east Shropshire there are three 11 to 18 schools and the college enjoys a collaborative relationship with all these institutions.

9 In 1994-95, 76 per cent of the college's income came from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), 11 per cent from education contracts and 7 per cent from tuition fees. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

10 The college aims to be regarded as the first choice for post-16 education and training in the area. Its mission is to provide first class education and training opportunities to add value to the lives of all its students and to contribute to the economic and social well being of the community it serves.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

11 The college's strategic plan is clearly linked to its mission. The college is generally responsive to development in further education, such as the national targets for education and training and the changes to vocational qualifications, but some staff have yet to appreciate fully the changes that are taking place.

12 The wide range of programmes meets the needs of most students. There are 19 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level), seven GCE advanced supplementary (AS) and 12 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. Access courses which prepare students for entry to higher education are provided in five areas, including humanities and science. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are offered in six subjects at foundation, intermediate and advanced level. There are over 25 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) courses and several other vocational qualifications including the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national diplomas and National Examination Board Supervisory Studies courses. A particular strength is the college's responsiveness to adults and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There is a range of discrete programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and support is also provided for these students on most mainstream college courses. The college is an associate college of the University of Staffordshire. It has three higher education courses: a higher national diploma in business and finance; a postgraduate certificate of education in partnership with the

North East Wales Institute; and the franchised foundation year of a degree in computing and business technology.

13 There is an extensive community education programme offering part-time vocational, recreational and leisure courses. These are delivered in many venues across north Shropshire. The range of courses is wide and includes the Royal Yachting Association day skippers' course at Market Drayton, upholstery at Gobowen, and the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) teachers certificate in further and adult education at Whitchurch. Funding for these has come mainly from Shropshire County Council and the FEFC. For 1995-96, there was a reduction in county council funding of 85 per cent, leading to a reduction of 60 per cent in the number of community education students.

14 A wide range of curriculum enrichment activities is provided including the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, performing arts, languages and many sports. The enrichment programme is open to all students and some of the provision can be certificated if students wish. Students are generally appreciative of the programme, although some are unable to attend the sessions they want because of timetable clashes with their other studies.

15 The college is generally effective in meeting students' needs for different patterns of attendance and different forms of learning. There are full-time and part-time courses, evening sessions, Saturday provision, open and distance learning classes and some delivery in the workplace. The college has been particularly successful in providing open and distance learning in 47 vocational and non-vocational subjects. Over 150 students are following distance learning programmes. The range of available programmes includes GCE A level physics, and Training and Development Lead Body awards for other education and training providers. Over 350 students are following open learning programmes, mainly in information technology. The college has flexible timetable arrangements which allow part-time students to take a single unit or a collection of units or subjects based on their individual requirements.

16 The college has altered its provision in response to changes in demand; for example, open and distance learning has been expanded and engineering provision has been reduced. They have also been responsive to requests from local employers for training, although the delivery of provision in the workplace and courses tailored to employers' requirements are, as yet, in the early stages of development. There are no systematic arrangements for identifying local education and training needs, such as surveys of local employers' requirements or detailed market research. There are no employers' advisory committees to provide guidance and advice, although a few employers are involved in course reviews. Some monitoring of employers' views on college services has taken place.

17 Liaison with local schools is well developed and relationships are good. There are half-termly meetings and regular contacts between college and school staff in most subject areas. College tutors work with one local school to help broaden its curriculum and students from a local independent school attend the college's advanced GNVQ leisure and tourism programme. The college is involved, in partnership with two local schools, in setting up pilot part I GNVQ courses in business and information technology for 15 and 16 year old pupils. The pilot is supported financially by the Department for Education and Employment, the TEC and Shropshire County Council.

18 Representatives from the community said that in recent years the college's image had been enhanced by its active involvement in the district. Activities include the family literacy project which involved staff working with local churches and schools to improve communication skills; students painting murals to decorate derelict buildings, and the delivery of life skills to residential homes. There are good links with local training centres for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Training has been provided by college staff in the centres and at the college. It has included courses in communication and numeracy.

19 The college has a well-established and open relationship with the Shropshire TEC, which receives regular information on college activities and up-to-date details of its courses. There are regular consultations on the college's strategic plan. College staff play an active part on TEC committees, such as the Shropshire Principals' Forum and the North West Shropshire Area Board of the TEC, of which the principal is the acting chair. The TEC regards the college as generally responsive to business and training needs. However, there is an issue for both the college and the TEC over the difficulty of providing management and basic skills training when the recognition of a need for that training by businesses is very limited. Apart from its links with Shropshire TEC the college is also an approved training provider for North East Wales TEC.

20 There are several links with educational providers in Europe. Staff and student exchange programmes have been operated with institutions in France, Germany, Poland and Spain. The connections with France are through the college at Oswestry's twin town Combe-la-Ville near Paris. The German and Polish links are orientated towards general education and the links with Spain focus on vocational education. Further collaborative ventures are being developed with colleges in the United States, Denmark and Finland.

21 The strategic plan identifies the college's wide range of potential students. Provision at the college generally meets the needs of these students. However, at present, there is no established marketing strategy or systematic evaluation of marketing activities. The college is aware of these limitations and has started to review its approach to marketing. Marketing activities currently employed by the college include mailshots

to 16 year old pupils in schools, advertisements in local newspapers and community newsletters, and college stalls at markets in the local towns.

22 The college has recently introduced a comprehensive equal opportunities policy. It covers curriculum, marketing, access, recruitment of students, selection and promotion of staff and their development. The policy reflects the strategic plan's commitment to the promotion of equal opportunities and the avoidance of discrimination. Procedures for implementing the policy for monitoring equal opportunities within the college are still at an early stage of development.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

23 The corporation provides effective governance and is very supportive of the college. The board comprises nine independent members, including the TEC nominee, three co-opted members, two members of staff, and the principal. Three governors are women. At the time of the inspection, there was one vacancy, which the college hopes will be filled by a woman who is also a parent of a student presently studying at the college. Governors provide a good blend of expertise, covering finance, construction, personnel and senior management. Each of the seven academic schools has a link with the corporation through two assigned members. Governors regularly meet staff and students and occasionally attend classes. These experiences provide the governors with some understanding of the curriculum, which helps in their strategic thinking. Governors attend a variety of college functions such as open days and award presentations. The board meets nine times a year and meetings are well attended. The clerk to the corporation is one of the college's vice-principals. Governors have not yet evaluated their performance but the board has considered a discussion paper on self-assessment. The board has a code of practice that will help them to review their effectiveness. They have also completed a register of governors' interests. Governors have undertaken an effective staff-development programme.

24 The four main committees reporting to the board are finance and general purposes, audit, buildings, and personnel. There are two further committees, one for senior management team remuneration and a search committee for new corporation members. Each committee has detailed terms of reference. Most meet regularly, others when the need arises. The briefing of board members by senior managers and others is comprehensive. Reports provide the appropriate level of detail to keep governors well informed. For example, each month the principal provides the board with the latest set of examination results. At the end of the year, a full list of results is produced, giving a clear year-on-year comparison which enables governors to assess trends in students' achievements. Statistics are provided to allow governors to compare the college's achievements with other local colleges and national norms. There is a good working relationship between the corporation and the senior management. Governors ensure that they deal appropriately with strategic

issues and delegate the operational management of the college to senior managers. Board and committee meetings are appropriately minuted and copies of the minutes are available in the main library. Agenda items and briefing papers are sent well ahead of meetings to allow governors sufficient time to scrutinise them.

25 The senior management team, comprising the principal and three vice-principals, meets regularly. Senior managers provide good leadership, are open, approachable and seek to support staff. They regularly review the progress being made on strategic issues. Middle management comprises seven heads of school and cross-college managers for personnel, administration, finance and student services. Generally, the management structure works effectively and the roles and responsibilities of staff are clear and understood. Relations between managers and other staff are good.

26 The college's strategic plan provides a useful framework for monitoring and controlling the key activities of the college. Six corporate objectives provide a set of priorities. These are to:

- increase provision by 10 per cent per annum
- achieve examination results above the national average
- increase participation from among those currently under represented in further education
- increase efficiency
- improve resources
- improve links with other education providers.

The strategic objective of managing efficiency to a national average for the funding of all colleges has been achieved. The operating statement explains clearly how the corporate objectives will be met. Recently, the board identified ways of measuring the objectives to ensure that there were effective procedures for monitoring and control. There is a diary of events which makes clear the responsibilities and monitoring roles of senior managers and governors. The strategic plan was prepared by senior managers with participation from the governors. Some staff were not familiar with the main points of the plan. The college recognises a need to involve staff more fully in the development of the plan in order to strengthen their commitment to it.

27 At all levels of the college, lines of communication are clear and staff know who they need to contact on any given issue. Methods of communication include staff newsletters, management briefings and the use of noticeboards in corridors and staff rooms. Management meetings chaired by the principal are used to identify key issues and to discuss the college's achievements and concerns.

28 The present deployment of resources, including staff, is generally effective. Job descriptions of staff whose roles have changed are updated

following appraisal. The heads of school have both a heavy management workload and a significant amount of teaching and this is having an adverse effect on their effectiveness and efficiency. There is a need for the roles and responsibilities of some managers to be reviewed.

29 The wide range of provision and the extensive geographical area catered for by the many college centres provides distinct management challenges. One of the greatest of these challenges is to devise methods of increasing enrolments at a time of reduced local authority funding of transport, increased competition from other providers, and an already high local participation rate of those in the 16 to 19 age group. At the time of the inspection, the college had failed to meet its current enrolment target by 6 per cent. The college's curriculum development plan provides a useful analysis of existing provision and proposes developments aimed at meeting the needs of prospective students and increasing recruitment. The use of performance indicators in the schools is limited. Action is taken where information indicates it is necessary. For example, retention rates are now monitored as part of the regular process of curriculum review, evaluation and monitoring, and action is taken when low rates are identified.

30 Finances are managed centrally within the college. Senior and middle managers are given detailed summaries of budget allocations. All budgets are approved by the corporation. The majority of staff pay budgets are managed by the principal. All orders for supplies and services are signed by the vice-principal (resources). Budgets for consumable items and staff development are devolved to heads of school. Allocations to schools are historically based but are influenced by student numbers. The budgetary control system provides managers with monthly summaries of expenditure. The college aims to keep a tight control on finances with the objective of ensuring a surplus. A detailed monthly report on finance is produced for the governors. Funding to schools is adequate to meet present demands but the college recognises the need to increase funding to meet planned curriculum changes. The unit costs for courses and resources are rarely calculated. The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 is £17.67 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £17.84 and the median for all sector colleges is £18.56 per unit.

31 The college's management information system provides information on enrolment, finance, examinations, personnel and payroll in an accurate and timely manner. However, only three senior managers have on-line facilities to use this essential information. Management information systems are not sufficiently accessible, especially to the heads of school. Further development of the management information system is required. At present, several processes require extensive manual input and not all the software systems are compatible.

32 The previous academic board was seen as ineffective and too narrow in its membership. It was reconstituted a year ago with a more

representative membership. The board is starting to address issues such as students' achievements and students' destinations. The early signs are that it is useful in advising on curriculum development and in contributing to the monitoring of quality standards.

33 There are policies for equal opportunities, the environment and health and safety. The college is still in the early days of monitoring these policies to ensure that they are being carried out. The vice-principal (resources) is responsible through the safety and environment officer for administering and monitoring the college's health and safety policy. There is a need for a more active approach to safety audits.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

34 Students' recruitment, guidance and support is effectively co-ordinated by the student services team led by the vice-principal (student services). The team is responsible for all activities associated with marketing, recruitment, schools liaison, advice and guidance, admission, enrolment and induction. It makes provision for welfare and counselling services, study and tutorial support and careers guidance including preparation for higher education. Teachers and administrative support staff work closely together to ensure that services are effectively delivered. The college has strong links with outside agencies including schools. It has a contractual agreement with the Shropshire Careers Services.

35 The college recruits from a wide area of North Shropshire and mid-Wales. It has well-established links with three local 11 to 16 schools and recruits effectively from state and independent sector 11 to 18 schools in the region. Staff attend careers and advice sessions in these schools and the college has an extensive programme of open days, careers conventions and opportunities for prospective students to 'taste' its courses. The college makes a particular effort to recruit students of all ages with learning difficulties. There are strong links with social services and the college makes special provision in its literature on applications and its application procedures for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college is seeking to increase its appeal to adults, particularly those planning new careers. It publishes good-quality promotional material. In addition to the literature on courses and qualifications, there are leaflets on childcare, accommodation, grants and study support services which are aimed particularly at the adult market. The college makes use of libraries, community newspapers, direct mailing and market stalls. During the summer it operates an advice service in a shop in Oswestry. In choosing their courses, potential students are advised by staff from the Shropshire Careers Services and careers staff in their local schools. Students said that the advice they received played an important part in deciding their final choice of study.

36 There are clear procedures for handling applications and queries. The college offers opportunities for enrolment throughout the summer,

although most students enrol over a short period in August and early September. Enrolment takes place at four centres spread over 30 miles. Staff are well briefed and students are made to feel welcome. Staff have a good rapport with adult students and show sensitivity in dealing with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. At the main enrolment sessions, an appointment system minimises waiting time. Application forms are easy to complete. They contain requests for information on disability or special need which is later used in deciding the learning support which students require. All full-time applicants receive a guidance interview and decisions on entry are made at a second interview when examination results become known. Students commented favourably on the guidance they had received and the helpfulness of the interviews. Decisions made during this process are not final and programme changes and transfers can take place during the first term and beyond. These changes are made easier by college organisation, common timetabling and course structure.

37 The college has a policy and procedures for assessing and accrediting students' prior achievements. An initial assessment takes place at the enrolment interview and is used to guide students in their selection of course. Subsequently, course tutors review this information in order to decide which are the most appropriate assignments for students. The accreditation of prior experience enables some students on management, administration and information technology and motor vehicle courses to achieve their qualifications over a shorter period of time than normal. Information technology and administration NVQ level 3 courses involve distance learning and assessment of workplace experience.

38 There is an effective induction programme for all full-time students which focuses on college services and on the courses being studied. Staff are well briefed and students are provided with attractive handbooks, leaflets and other materials. All students receive copies of the college charter. The college has sought to move away from centrally-delivered induction programmes to more course focused induction. Although this has generally worked well, some students, particularly adult students, have not received all the relevant information on college services. The college publishes a range of leaflets designed to provide an induction for its part-time students. It is aware that it has not adequately addressed the induction needs of these students.

39 The college has a clear tutorial policy. Full-time students have a personal tutor and a weekly timetabled tutorial period. Part-time students who attend full-time classes are entitled to tutorials on the same basis. Tutors are provided with guidelines and advice packs. Students receive help with records of achievement, course portfolios, examination and revision techniques and study skills. Tutorials are well attended and students spoke positively about the personal tutor system. Parents of full-time students were pleased with their early involvement in the programme and spoke highly of the quality and regularity of reporting on

the progress of their children. In practice, the quality of tutorials varies from school to school and from course to course. Tutorials for full-time students on two-year programmes, particularly those offering the possibility of progression to higher education, follow clear programmes with a good range of activities. Tutorials on some one-year programmes are less well planned and do not, for example, allow students to receive adequate advice from the careers service.

40 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, whether on separate programmes or receiving support on mainstream courses, enjoy a particularly good learning experience and their progress is recorded within the college's records of achievement system. There is a good induction programme. Personal support and help with basic skills are of a high standard. Documentation is appropriately worded. The work with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is positively supported at all levels of management and is given clear prominence in the strategic plan and the aims of the college.

41 Learning support is provided for full-time and part-time students who require it. The college carries out an assessment of full-time students' basic skills. Part-time students can volunteer to participate in this. The results are co-ordinated by the college tutor responsible for study support and course tutors are notified. Students requiring additional support are encouraged to attend special workshops where their progress is monitored. Course tutors are sometimes reluctant to use the formal procedures for referring students, preferring personal contact with learning support tutors. This sometimes results in students not receiving the help they need. The college is developing a more vocationally-relevant system of assessing basic skills and suitable materials are being produced by individual schools.

42 There are well-developed and long-standing procedures for maintaining each student's record of achievement, managed by a designated college co-ordinator. Records of achievement are carried forward from feeder schools or, if necessary, begun anew at the college. For full-time students, recording of progress in tutorial groups is linked to the records of achievement through agreed programmes of events. However, this process is seen by the college as too complex and is currently under review.

43 Careers advice is well publicised and effective. The college has a designated careers office and a careers library on both main sites. Resources include computer-based self-help programmes. Shropshire Careers Services provides a guaranteed service for college students. Additionally, the student services team provides careers advice and supports course tutors in doing the same. Guidance on progression to higher education is particularly strong.

44 The college provides a counselling and guidance service. It is well advertised and there is appropriate accommodation for conducting

interviews. The student counsellor is part of the student services team. Confidential records are maintained and the student counsellor reports regularly to the student support manager and twice yearly to the vice-principal (student services).

45 Students' attendance is effectively monitored at course level. There are clear procedures to deal with absences which involve subject teachers, course tutors and heads of school. The vice-principal (student services) receives monthly attendance reports for all college students and ensures that any necessary action is taken. Parents, employers and sponsors are contacted, as appropriate.

46 Although the college's policy is to recruit more adult students, existing facilities are not geared to this: social facilities and creche facilities are limited and there is unequal provision between the two sites; there is pressure on information technology equipment and on resources designed to enable students to study on their own; and the library has restricted hours of opening.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

47 Inspectors observed 95 teaching sessions. Of these, 80 per cent had strengths which outweighed weaknesses, which is well above the average for general further education colleges, based on the data in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1994-95*. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in only 5 per cent of sessions. The average attendance at the sessions inspected was 77 per cent. The following table summarises the grades awarded to the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		2	15	3	1	0	21
GCSE		1	8	1	0	0	10
GNVQ		4	12	2	0	0	18
Other vocational including NVQs		6	15	5	2	0	28
Basic education		1	2	3	1	0	7
Other*		1	9	0	0	1	11
Total		15	61	14	4	1	95

*includes access to higher education.

48 Teaching and the promotion of learning were generally of a high standard. There were good schemes of work. Lesson plans were well organised and detailed. Teachers prepared work thoroughly and took good account of individuals' learning needs, including those of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Lessons were conducted at an appropriate pace, activities were suitably varied and much of the work

was of good quality. In a few cases, lesson plans were inadequate, learning objectives were unclear or teaching methods were inappropriate.

49 The college tries to provide relevant work experience for all its full-time vocational students. The quality of placements is checked thoroughly. Students are prepared effectively and most receive appropriate feedback from teachers. There have been several successful business education partnerships. For example, in 1995, GCE A level physics students successfully developed a new method for attaching cooling fins to gas vapouriser units for Air Products (UK) Limited. A draft policy for work experience has been in existence for over a year but has yet to be formally approved. Only a few full-time GCE A level students undertake work placements.

50 Teaching in computing and mathematics was of a high standard. Teachers encouraged questioning and used this effectively as a means of checking students' understanding. For part of the time, students were encouraged to work on their own, learning for themselves, and most made good progress. In one GCE A level computing session, imaginative use of group work and presentations enabled students to develop interpersonal skills; a particular feature of the session was the good use of computer-generated display slides. The lack of clearly-focused learning objectives in some computing workshops restricted students' progress. In mathematics, the recently increased use of information technology has helped students. However, students still do not make enough use of information technology. There is inadequate opportunity for them to engage in discussion about mathematics.

51 The teaching in business studies was sound, well organised and supportive. Students were drawn into question and answer sessions, and teachers made effective use of their individual experiences. Teachers' notes were well prepared, assignment briefs were clear and handouts were informative. In order to help students develop some responsibility for their own learning, teachers encouraged them to use the learning centre and workshops in their own time. Little use was made of teaching aids such as overhead projectors or videos. In some sessions, the wide range of topics covered by teachers meant that students did not have enough opportunity to develop a satisfactory understanding of each topic.

52 The teaching on leisure and tourism courses was good. Programmes were well organised and had clear aims and objectives. Students experienced a good range of methods of working which related well to GNVQ requirements. In one GNVQ session students were investigating the range and type of catering outlets in Oswestry to discover how different establishments responded to the needs of visitors to the town. Teachers dealt effectively with students of differing abilities. Verbal instructions and written briefs were clear and precise. There was no programme of educational visits to leisure and tourism venues to help in providing a commercial context for the work and a greater understanding of the subject.

53 Teaching in health and social care was vocationally relevant and of a high standard. Teachers employed an appropriate range of teaching methods. Sessions were carefully planned and aims and objectives were shared with the students. Teachers regularly challenged students to show that they understood the topic under discussion. In an advanced GNVQ session, the students gave presentations on topics they had investigated, and were then extensively questioned by the teacher and other students. The process meant that there was a thorough evaluation of students' work. Students' ability to cope with the rigour of the exchanges was a testimony to the quality of the professional relationship which existed between teacher and students. Often, nursery nurse students, in negotiation with the teacher, evaluated their own counselling skills during practice sessions. Students benefited from a regular schedule for the setting and collecting of assessments and they were provided with good opportunities to discuss their progress. Occasionally, in some sessions, the pace of work was too slow and students tended to lose interest.

54 In most art, design and media studies sessions teaching was enthusiastic and effective and students worked well. Students' work was carefully assessed and teachers provided constructive feedback. In one session on the place of women in advertising, analysis was supported by the effective use of old advertisements and recorded television material; the group discussion was lively. In introducing new topics, good use was made of original material, teachers' own artistic work, videos and historical references. In art, some assignment briefs were complex and several students found them confusing. The balance between allowing students to develop their own style and providing them with direction is not always judged with sufficient care. In some instances, particularly on GCE A level and intermediate GNVQ courses, students were over directed.

55 Most teaching in English and sociology was of a high standard. Teachers used an appropriate range of teaching methods. Lessons were carefully devised and based on thorough schemes of work. Suitable use was made of handouts. Teaching aids, including audio and video materials, helped to strengthen students' understanding of the topics being covered. Teachers monitored students' performance on a regular basis. They used clear criteria in assessing students' work. Marking was fair and accurate and written comments were generally helpful. Some English lessons were exciting and inspirational. For example, in a GCE A level class on Friel's *Making History*, skilful and dramatic teaching prompted all members of the class to co-operate in forming a view about O'Neil, a major character in the play. Some English teaching was hampered by overcrowded classrooms. Some part-time evening classes for adults were not well managed. For example, time was poorly organised and students were given insufficient opportunity to develop or express ideas fully. In sociology, good use was made of small group work and of question and answer sessions involving the whole class. Occasionally, more able students were not sufficiently extended. Lessons often started late because

students had not arrived on time. Teachers failed to remark on this lack of punctuality.

56 Teaching in learning support sessions, on adult basic education courses and on courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was generally purposeful and effective. Additional support was provided for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities so they could work on mainstream courses where appropriate. Schemes of work were well organised and lessons were closely related to these schemes. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefited from individual learning programmes. However, in adult basic education lessons, teachers sometimes failed to take account of the different needs and abilities of their students. In several lessons, poor monitoring of students' performance meant that many of them were not fulfilling their potential.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

57 In most sessions, students were interested and enthusiastic. They found their studies suitably challenging and were achieving appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding. Many students had developed sufficient confidence and skill to take some responsibility for organising their own learning. For example, intermediate GNVQ art students displayed sound skills and produced work of a high standard, based on original research and knowledge of materials. Most students worked well on their own or in small groups. In practical sessions, students worked safely. They were motivated particularly by tasks that involved investigation and were confident in presenting their findings to their peers.

58 Core skills were well developed, especially information technology skills. Health care students were able to make effective use of compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases to help them in their research. Nursery nurse students were competent and confident at wordprocessing. Leisure and tourism students' information technology skills were particularly well developed. In art and design, information technology was integral to coursework; for example, the use of computer-aided design in art, and to a lesser extent, wordprocessing in media studies. However, in mathematics there needs to be further development in the use of information technology.

59 Students' written work in sociology, GCE A level English, business, and the adult access programme was of an appropriate standard. The college has published an excellent anthology of students' poetry as part of a literary festival. Good portfolios of work and assignments were produced by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and by those on courses in health and care, leisure and tourism, English, and business. In art and design there were some good written assignments, often containing original subject matter. In health and community care, some of the written work contained basic errors which had not been corrected by teachers.

60 Most students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can set their own learning targets and monitor their progress towards achieving them. They show understanding of appropriate technical language. Students' level of achievement in externally accredited work is good. Many progress to other courses. Self-esteem and personal confidence were cited by several adult basic education students as important objectives which they felt they had achieved. Occasionally, adult basic education students were placed on unsuitable courses and failed to make progress.

61 In 1994-95, the 106 students aged 16 to 18 entered for GCE A level examinations scored, on average, 4.5 points per entry (where A=10, E=2). This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on the basis of the performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment in 1995. Overall, the college's GCE A level pass results were good; 65 per cent of students enrolled in 1995 gained three or more GCE A levels and 77 per cent gained two or more. In all, 87 per cent of students enrolled gained an award. In English, geography and computer studies, examination results in 1994 and 1995 were well above the national average for general further education colleges, and in mathematics and sociology they were above the national average. In art and design the pass rates have been erratic; they were well below the national average in 1994 but well above in 1995. The pass rate in GCE A level photography has been consistently below the national average. In the business studies GCE AS examination the pass rate was just above the national average, but the percentage of those achieving grade A to C was well below.

62 The pass rates at GCSE in subjects with large numbers of students are good. In total, 85 per cent of those students who enrolled were successful in gaining a GCSE qualification with grades A to G. In 1994 and 1995, results of students aged 16 to 18, at grades A to C, were above the national figures for the sector in biology, English, mathematics and sociology. English results are consistently good. Notable successes were the 100 per cent achievement rates of grades A to C, in French, and health education but only four and eight students, respectively, sat these examinations.

63 Sixty-nine per cent of the 58 students aged 16 to 18 in their final year of study on the vocational courses included in the then Department for Education's 1994 performance tables were successful. In 1995, there were only 39 such students and 82 per cent of them were successful. These figures place the college in the bottom third of colleges in the further education sector for 1994 and the middle third in the tables published by the Department for Education and Employment in 1995. However, they are not a measure of the college's overall performance because 86 per cent of the college's students are aged 25 years or over. Students sit a wide range of externally assessed courses including those of the C&G, RSA Examinations Board (RSA) and BTEC. Those on vocational courses leading

to the award of C&G qualifications were the most successful with 93 per cent achieving awards. Seventy-four per cent of those completing RSA programmes gained awards. In 1995, there were 100 per cent pass rates on the BTEC national diplomas in business, science, and the national certificate in information technology applications. Similar pass rates were achieved in the C&G courses for hairdressing, basic engineering and computer-aided design, and in the RSA courses for text processing. Good results were achieved on courses leading to National Examination Board Supervisory Studies qualifications, the BTEC national diploma in leisure studies, Pitmans shorthand tests, Training and Development Lead Body qualifications and the C&G further education teachers certificate. Pass rates on the motor vehicle repair course ranged between 49 and 100 per cent. Courses with low pass rates included the certificate in marketing, the RSA qualifications in audio transcription and advanced typewriting skills and the diploma in information technology. In the GNVQ intermediate examinations in business, leisure and tourism, and care, pass rates were above the national average. In art and design they were well below. The limited availability of video editing equipment and graphic design computers is affecting the quality of students' work in art and design.

64 In 1994-95, 29 per cent of the students completing their courses progressed to other further education courses, mainly in the college, a further 27 per cent progressed to higher education, 20 per cent gained employment, 7 per cent were unemployed, and 3 per cent were listed as others. The destinations of 14 per cent were unknown. Some limited analysis of students' destinations has been undertaken in co-operation with Shropshire Careers Services.

65 Shropshire LEA provides the college with a range of value-added data, involving a comparison of students' GCE A level scores with the scores predicted on the basis of their GCSE results. For the last two GCE A level cohorts which have been analysed, 1991-93 and 1992-94, the college has improved its ranking, in terms of value-added performance, from tenth to sixth against the other 17 schools and colleges in the county. The early indications are that results for the 1993-95 cohort are a significant improvement on previous results.

66 Three students received national awards in 1994-95. A bronze medal from C&G was awarded to one student for significant achievements in carpentry and joinery. Another student gained a silver medal for physics, and a third gained two bronze medals for achievements in physics and informatics in the British Olympiad competition.

67 The average retention rate in the college is 92 per cent. However, there are variations between subject areas. For example, there was a high drop-out rate in art and design, especially on the GNVQ intermediate course.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

68 The college does not have a quality assurance policy as such, but a process of quality assurance and continuous improvement has been developed over the last five years. The quality process is defined in a succinct college review, evaluation and monitoring document which is circulated to staff. It lays down common procedures for meetings of school and course teams and formats for reports and questionnaires. The annual college review process is well understood and used by curriculum teams and staff. There is no single individual responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of quality assurance across the college. Overall responsibility for quality assurance rests with two of the vice-principals.

69 The established process of annual course review involves the systematic collection of information from students through a standard questionnaire and end-of-year student meetings. This information, along with minutes of team and school meetings and the final course review document, forms the college review, evaluation and monitoring course review. Course reviews are summarised in a school review. In practice, the course and school reports generally comply with requirements but the content of the reviews varies. Most tend to emphasise operational issues more than strategic issues and few are self-critical. They contain few performance indicators and measures. The college has recognised some of these limitations and the latest review process requires the collection of information on retention and more detailed analysis of examination results.

70 For the inspection, each school produced a position paper which summarised the main aspects of school curriculum reviews. These are informative documents which helped the inspection team. They are written to a basic framework, loosely complying with the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The documents are mainly descriptive in content and most focus only on the strengths of the provision. They include retention rates and examination results and some have evaluative comments. All contain aims and objectives for further development but few have clear performance measures or target dates. The best position paper reviews examination results and has targets for student retention and achievement. It also contains detailed action plans, designates those responsible for seeing that action is taken, and sets dates by which such action is to be achieved.

71 Surveys are undertaken of students' satisfaction with the induction and enrolment processes and student support services. The end-of-year student questionnaire asks questions about teaching style, accommodation, equipment and core skills. In addition, a random sample of students are selected and interviewed to obtain their detailed opinions of courses. The survey results are produced for the whole college and some have been analysed in detail. However, not all surveys are evaluated by school or course. One school has recognised this limitation and has produced its own detailed termly questionnaires.

72 Quality assurance procedures and performance measures have yet to be established and applied to administrative and support areas. An objective of the strategic plan was to achieve Investor in People status by October 1995. This objective has been deferred for 12 months. There is no scheduled review of the college-wide quality assurance process within the college's strategic plan. The updated college review, evaluation and monitoring process and the six FEFC performance indicators have been discussed at recent management and academic board meetings.

73 All full-time staff are appraised annually by their line manager using a common scheme. Records show that around 10 per cent of staff have still to be appraised. While preparing for Investors in People accreditation, the college recognised the limitations of its original appraisal process. It has set up a streamlined scheme that reduces the administrative workload on staff. Part-time staff are now included in the appraisal scheme.

74 Training activities identified in the strategic plan and the curriculum development plan are used to influence college and individual staff-development programmes. Staff-development days for all staff are provided on current aspects of education and support. Topics such as GNVQs, student support, the charter and value-added analysis have been discussed. External speakers are regularly invited. As part of the appraisal system, staff have the opportunity to discuss their training and development needs. Their requirements are matched against those of the school and the college. Staff are required to justify their requests for attendance at internal and external courses. They are also required to evaluate and disseminate their findings on return to the college. Most staff have undertaken staff-development activities over the last two years and comprehensive records are kept in their personnel files. To focus development activities further, heads of school now control their own staff-development budgets. The overall staff-development budget, at £34,000, is about 0.9 per cent of the college expenditure.

75 Induction opportunities are made available to all new full-time academic and support staff. The new staff induction pack contains many useful documents, contact names and policies. The information in it is more up to date than the official, but outdated, staff handbook. Part-time staff receive contact names and telephone numbers in a document that outlines the procedures for running courses. It also gives them the opportunity to request training. Heads of school have a meeting with such staff before they take their first class.

76 The student charter contains a basic guide to students' entitlement, provides contact addresses and telephone numbers and indicates where more detailed information can be found. It has sections for parents, the community and employers. There are few quantifiable measures in the charter and there are no links to quality assurance procedures. Staff are aware of the charter and are contributing to its improvement for the next version.

77 The college's self-assessment report, produced by management for the inspection, is closely based upon the headings in the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It is a useful document which helped the inspection process. Each of the seven curriculum areas provides paragraphs on strengths and weaknesses and awards grades for the quality of its work. There is no referencing to other college documentation to justify the judgments and no entries for teaching and the promotion of learning or students' achievements. In some sections, the report tends to overlap the strengths and under represent the weaknesses. In others, there is a close match with inspection findings. Most of the grades in the self-assessment report are in line with those agreed by the inspection team.

RESOURCES

Staffing

78 The college's strategic plan highlights the high average age and cost of current staff. This is attributed to low turnover. The college is addressing this issue by limiting the initial salary band for new appointments. There has also been a saving in management costs following the reduction of the senior management team from eight to four.

79 Teachers are appropriately qualified and experienced. Seventy per cent are graduates and 49 per cent have relevant trade or professional qualifications. Eighty-two per cent have teaching qualifications. Several staff, particularly in the school of mathematics, science and computing have second degrees. In some areas, staff do not have recent work experience in industry. The college is beginning to address this with industrial placements funded by the TEC. There is a need to improve the guidance and support skills of staff across all areas of the college. The proportion of teaching carried out by part-time staff varies from 8 per cent in business and management to 42 per cent in health care. In some subjects, the high level of part-time teaching and the use of part-time staff as course co-ordinators is placing a considerable administrative and development load on the few full-time staff. During the last year all lecturing staff have signed new contracts; the full teaching requirements of the contracts are being phased in over two years. The efficiency gains achieved by the new contracts have enabled the college to transfer some temporary hourly-paid staff to permanent fractional appointments.

80 Although the college has sufficient support staff overall, there are shortages in particular areas. For example, there is no direct secretarial support to the seven heads of school and there is a historical imbalance in the allocation of technicians. The technician support for information technology has been increased, but growing areas such as media studies and art and design still lack specialist technician support. Since incorporation, there has been a programme of professional training for administrative staff who have taken on increased responsibility in areas

such as finance, personnel, management information systems and health and safety. When the training is complete, the college will have professionally-qualified staff in all these areas. The care and support staff for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well deployed and supported by effective use of volunteers in the teaching of adult basic education.

81 Many staff have achieved Training and Development Lead Body qualifications, 34 as vocational assessors, three as assessors of approved prior learning and 18 as internal verifiers. The direct employment by the college of cleaners and catering staff, functions that were previously contracted out, has ensured these staff feel valued and the college benefits from greater flexibility which they show.

Equipment/learning resources

82 The college has worked hard since incorporation to improve its stock of equipment and furniture. As a result, most classrooms are well appointed and the Upper Brook Street site, in particular, has been furnished and equipped to a high level. In all programme areas, the range, quality and quantity of teaching and learning aids are satisfactory. In the Market Drayton and Whitchurch centres there is a good range of learning materials and appropriate audio-visual aids including portable video machines. The college has an equipment replacement policy based on its strategic plan. The college asset register is regularly maintained. The specialist computing areas are well equipped with networked, industry-standard hardware and software. There is a new language laboratory with television able to tune to foreign language stations through use of satellites. At the time of inspection there were insufficient equipment and resources for the new media studies course and no industry-standard computers for graphic design. The college has begun to address these deficiencies with a new television lighting studio for media and the purchase of specialist computers for both art and design and media. In general, there are adequate resources and materials for most subjects.

83 The college has identified a need to improve the library. It has recently increased the library budget to £15,500. A new library was created at Upper Brook Street in September 1995. This facility complements the main College Road library. Together they provide pleasant and adequate study facilities. There is a good ratio of one study place to every seven students. The need to staff the two sites and the flexible learning centres makes heavy demands on the one qualified librarian and her small team of staff. The library catalogue is being computerised. The library only opens one evening a week to 18.30. The stock of 16,000 books is just adequate for the number of students although there are outdated books and limited holdings in some subject areas. Partly as a response to these limitations, several departments have developed their own subject libraries. The libraries have a good stock of videos and although there are only a few standalone CD-ROMs the use of these is increasing. There is a

good, although small, careers library. The library staff are responsive to staff requests to search through journals and magazines and produce study packs in support of students' assignments.

84 The college has invested heavily in computing resources in recent years. There is a ratio of one industry-standard machine for every seven students. There are inconsistencies in software across the college and only the suite of computers in the specialist computing area is networked. The number and quality of printers are limited. These problems restrict the students' general use of information technology at the College Road site. The learning centre has only a few machines, many of which are dated, and the opening times of the centre are limited. Some computers are available for student use on an open access basis. The college has identified the need to increase and replace computers in the drop-in centres at Whitchurch and Market Drayton.

Accommodation

85 Most of the college's teaching accommodation is located on two freehold sites in Oswestry with smaller rented premises at Market Drayton and Whitchurch. The college has more than 50 teaching locations, such as rooms in village halls, over a wide area of north Shropshire. Provision is offered to communities where a need exists and where such provision can be financially justified.

86 The College Road site on the outskirts of Oswestry, comprises single and two-storey teaching blocks and workshops together with many timber prefabricated buildings. The second site, Upper Brook Street, was formerly a high school. It is within the town centre and comprises a two-storey building restored to a high quality three years ago.

87 The college provides a supportive learning environment. The permanent accommodation is mainly of a satisfactory quality. Buildings are generally well maintained. The grounds are well kept and the standard of cleaning throughout is high. Students respect their environment. During the inspection, there was no evidence of vandalism or graffiti. Wall displays of students' work and of relevant teaching materials are used to good effect to improve the environment in most rooms, corridors and public areas. Most teaching rooms are in good condition, adequate in size and adaptable to multiple use. The only notable exception is the dining area at College Road which is drab and uninviting and in need of refurbishment. There are no student common rooms or meeting areas, and students tend to congregate in corridors.

88 There is good access for wheelchair users at both Oswestry sites. There is ramped access to ground floor accommodation, lifts to upper floors and good access to toilet facilities. Students' and parents' surveys suggest a high level of satisfaction with the college buildings and accommodation, including access to the adjacent sports and leisure centre facilities. There is adequate car parking on both main sites.

89 The college commissioned an accommodation study that assessed existing land and buildings against the college's future expected requirements. This study forms an integral part of the colleges' overall strategic plan. Maintenance is planned and reviewed annually resulting in a co-ordinated approach to maintaining the college fabric. There are systems in place that give accurate and systematic information to management on the use of rooms, which, in turn, leads to effective monitoring of space utilisation. The college has a plan to phase out the existing timber prefabricated buildings that are costly to maintain and expensive to heat. These buildings are currently kept in good order and provide adequate facilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

90 The strengths of The North Shropshire College are:

- the wide range of programmes, including an extensive community education programme
- good relationships with local schools
- a supportive and effective board of governors
- clear lines of communication at all levels
- effective recruitment, guidance and support services
- the good quality of most of the teaching
- good GCE A level and GCSE examination results
- well-qualified teaching staff
- well furnished and decorated accommodation
- good access to the buildings for those with restricted mobility.

91 The college should address the following issues:

- the failure to meet current enrolment targets
- the absence of a marketing strategy or any systematic evaluation of marketing activities
- the need to improve, and make more accessible, the management information system
- the lack of social areas for students
- the variable content of course and school reviews and the lack of performance indicators
- the lack of measurable targets in the college charter
- the need to improve the monitoring of equal opportunities, and health and safety.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

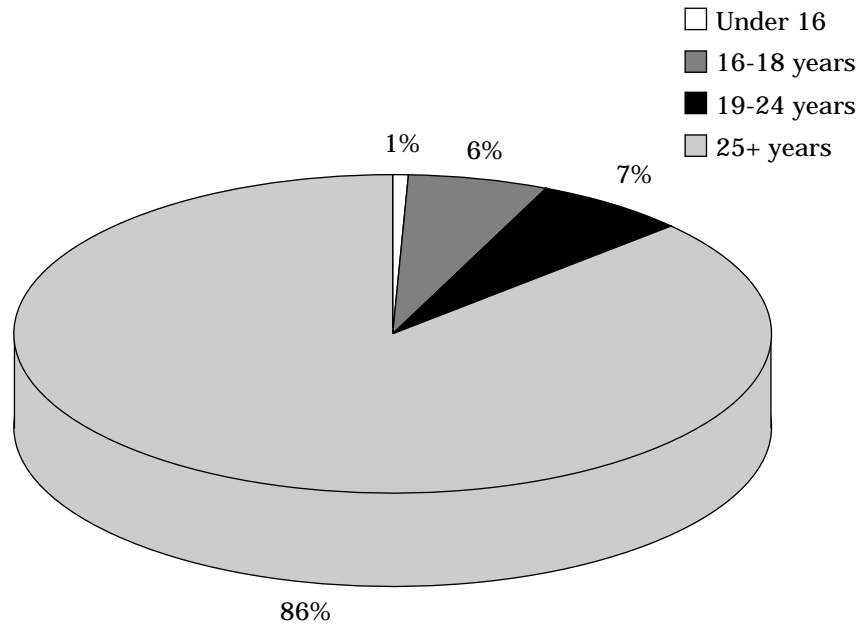
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

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

Figure 1

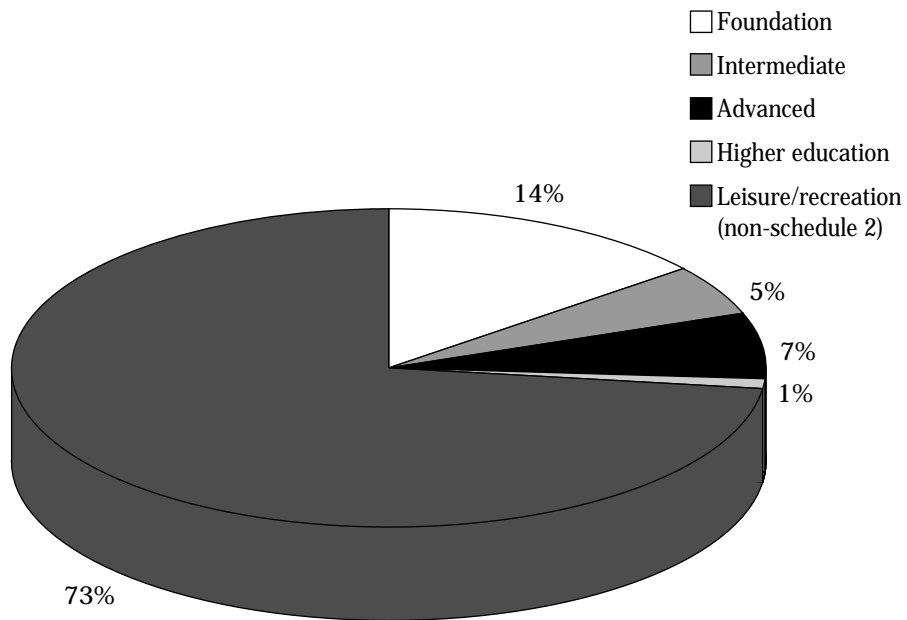
The North Shropshire College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 12,378

Figure 2

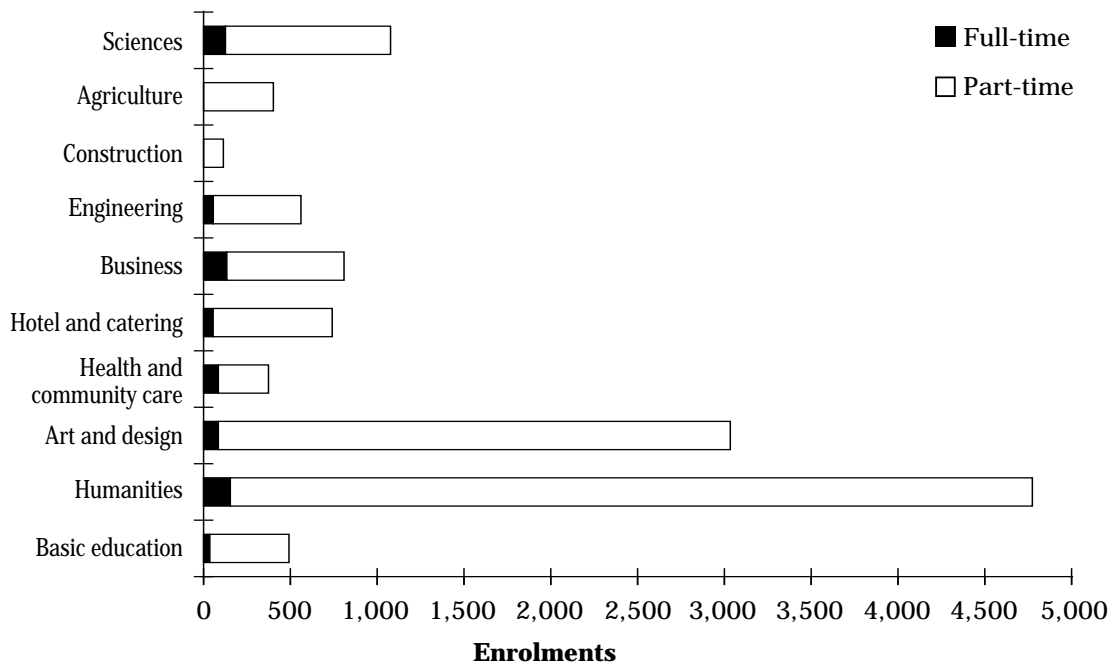
The North Shropshire College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 12,378

Figure 3

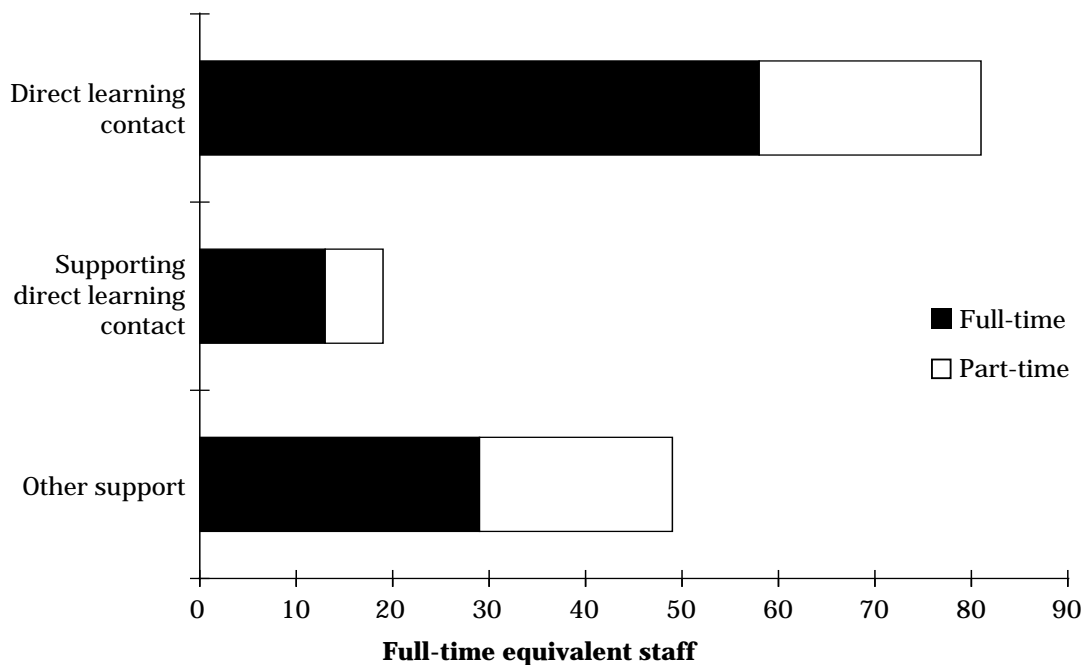
The North Shropshire College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 12,378

Figure 4

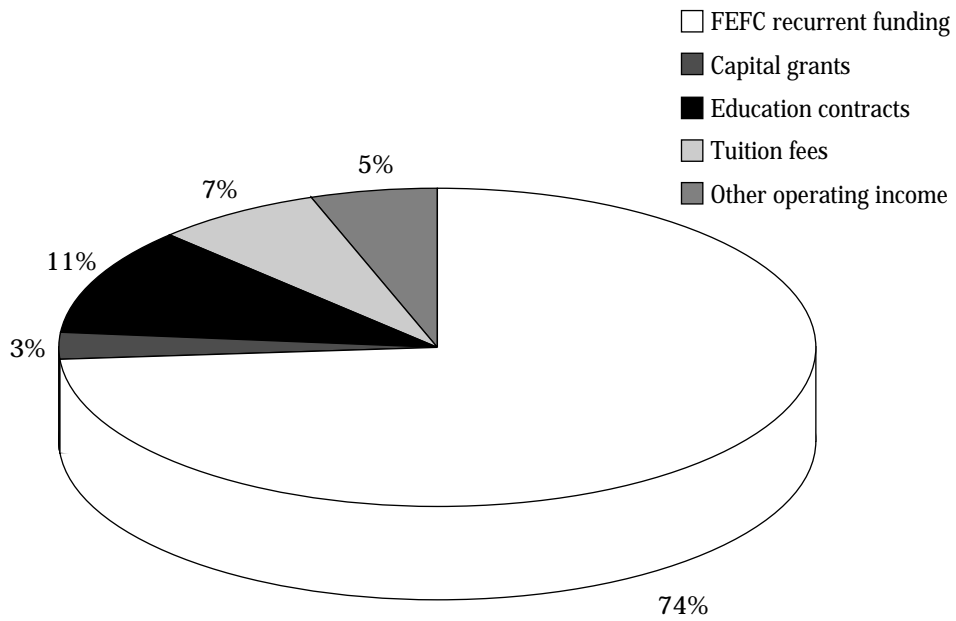
The North Shropshire College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 149

Figure 5

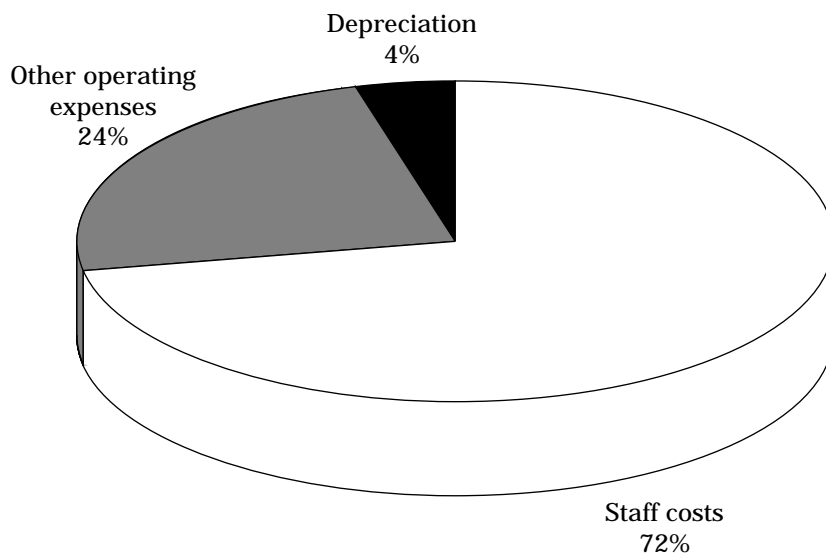
The North Shropshire College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £3,653,000

Figure 6

The North Shropshire College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £3,696,000

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