Northampton College

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

Contents

Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
	%	*%*	*%*	*%*	*%*
Curriculum areas	*10*	*53*	*30*	*7*	*–*
Cross-college provision	*14*	*54*	*23*	*7*	*2*

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report
Sample size: 104 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- *as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification*
- *as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification*
- *as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included.*

Summary

Northampton College
East Midlands Region

Inspected February 2000

Northampton College is a medium-sized general further education college. The main site is on the eastern side of the town. The college also has two smaller sites close to the town centre and uses centres in the local community. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report. Governors as well as staff at all levels were involved in the production of the report. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment but considered that some of the weaknesses, especially those relating to teaching and learning and students' achievements, had not been given enough significance. Overall, the report was detailed and comprehensive.

The college provides courses for a significant number of students in eight of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Provision in six of these areas was inspected together with basic skills and aspects of cross-college provision. The proportion of lessons judged to be good or outstanding was below the national average for 1998-99. Students' achievements are high in some areas, such as art and design and hair and beauty, but in other subject areas, there are some poor retention and achievement rates. Students receive comprehensive support and advice through a range of effective student services, including support for students with specific difficulties. In general, the quality of teaching accommodation on the main college sites is good. There has been a significant recent investment in computing facilities. The quality of courses is reviewed through a comprehensive and consistently applied quality assurance system. The arrangements for maintaining the quality of the franchised provision are effective. There are sound arrangements for the conduct of corporation business. The college finances are monitored closely. There is a systematic strategic and operating planning and review process. The college collaborates productively with many external organisations. The college should improve: the follow-up action on the initial assessment of students' literacy and numeracy; the quality of the library provision; the use of performance indicators, statistical data and targets for quality improvement; the quality of management information; and the corporation's monitoring of students' retention and achievements.

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

Curriculum area	Grade
Computing and information technology	3
Engineering	3
Business and professional studies	3
Hospitality and catering	3
Hair and beauty	2
Performing arts, art and design and media	2
Basic skills	3

Cross-college provision	Grade
Support for students	2
General resources	2
Quality assurance	3
Governance	2
Management	2

The College and its Mission

1   Northampton College is a medium-sized general further education college. It serves Northampton, other nearby towns and a large rural area. The college's main site, Booth Lane, is located approximately 3 miles to the east of the town centre. Many of the buildings have been erected in the last 12 years although some staff rooms, classrooms and support services are in temporary buildings. Military Road, a former elementary school, is close to the town centre and is used for a range of adult and community courses offered there and in other community centres. A leased education shop and adjacent offices in the town centre provide a 'drop-in' enquiry and advice service and an administrative base for 'Training Northants', the college's youth training brokerage. In addition to its own premises, the college provides programmes through some 50 other centres away from the main college. The Kings Heath site is surplus to requirements and is to be sold. The college offers off-site programmes with franchise partners. Northampton has a manufacturing base which, though diminishing, is still strong. Service, retail and distribution are other key industries. There is a high percentage of small businesses. Although unemployment in the town as a whole is low, there are significant areas of deprivation in the town's eastern district and in some central and north-western wards.

2   The college offers a range of full-time and part-time courses in all Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas, although the number of students in land-based industries and construction is small. It offers adult education courses under contract to the local education authority (LEA); youth training and other associated provision funded by the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise and higher education courses funded through University College Northampton. Support is provided for voluntary sector organisations including the Council for Ethnic Minority communities. An information technology (IT) centre of excellence is funded in conjunction with the other Northamptonshire colleges. A subsidiary company, funded under the 1998 skills challenge, offers training for the logistics and distribution industries. The college is a member of the Northamptonshire Federation for Further and Higher Education, which includes the Northamptonshire further education colleges, University College Northampton, the LEA and Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise. These organisations, together with CareerPath and schools' representatives, have also formed a strategic lifelong partnership for Northamptonshire. In July 1999, the college had 9,588 enrolments on FEFC-funded provision of which 2,516 were for full-time courses. In addition, there were approximately 7,000 LEA adult education part-time enrolments, 600 trainees on Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise funded youth training programmes, and approximately 250 higher education students.

3   The percentage of 15 year old students achieving five general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects at grade C or above in Northamptonshire is just below the national average for England. The percentage of students progressing to post-16 education and training is 73%, of whom approximately one-third attend a further education college. The college faces strong competition from local schools, all of which have sixth forms. The college contributes to 'clusters' of post-16 provision in the area, and is collaborating with schools in developing a local framework for curriculum 2000. It has also extended its 'link provision' with schools and the LEA. Around 100 pupils of compulsory school age, including some disaffected pupils, have participated in college provision this year. A number have progressed to college courses.

4   The college's mission is to provide learning opportunities for a wide range of learners. It aims to be 'a quality choice for individuals and organisations seeking learning opportunities, skills and qualifications, in support of personal development and economic competitiveness'.

The Inspection

5   The college was inspected in February 2000. Inspectors had previously studied the college's self-assessment report and information held by other directorates of the FEFC. This information included data on students' achievements for 1997 and 1998 derived from the individualised student record (ISR). The college supplied data on student retention and achievement rates for 1999 and these were confirmed by information in class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of provision to be inspected about two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by 13 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 60 days. They observed 99 lessons and examined students' work and college documentation. Meetings were held with governors, managers, staff and students. Ten inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) worked with the inspection team during the college inspection. The TSC inspectors concentrated on work-based training delivered through the college's training brokerage. Areas inspected were motor vehicle, retail, business administration, hospitality, care, childcare, hairdressing, and pre-vocational. They also inspected trainee support, equal opportunities, management of training, and quality assurance. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC inspection framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

6   The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the 99 lessons inspected, 51% were judged to be good

or outstanding. Excluding the basic skills inspection teaching and learning grades, 55% of lessons were judged to be good or outstanding. This is below the average of 65% for all lessons observed during 1998-99. Of all lessons observed 9% were judged to be less than satisfactory. Excluding the basic skills inspection teaching and learning grades, 7% were judged to be less than satisfactory. Both these percentages are above the average of 6% for all lessons observed during 1998-99.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
GCSE and GCE A/AS level	1	3	1	1	0	6
GNVQ	1	3	11	1	0	16
NVQ	6	15	10	1	0	32
Other vocational	2	13	9	1	1	26
Other	3	4	8	4	0	19
Total (No)	13	38	39	8	1	99
Total (%)	13	38	40	8	1	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

7   The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	**Average attendance (%)**
Northampton College	10.1	75
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

Computing and Information Technology

Grade 3

8   Inspectors observed 15 lessons covering computer literacy, national vocational qualification (NVQ), general national vocational qualification (GNVQ), national diploma, national certificate, and software package and programming language courses. Inspectors agreed with most judgements in the self-assessment. They considered that a strength in teaching and learning was overstated and found a key weakness the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- broad provision offering various modes of study and good progression pathways
- high pass rates on most part-time courses
- students' success in progressing to further study
- effective course management
- constant review and updating of courses

Weaknesses

- inadequate management of learning in some lessons
- below average attendance
- low achievement rates on GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses
- poor retention on a number of courses
- shortcomings in equipment and software
- some teachers' difficulty in keeping up to date in the subject

9   Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that the extensive range of full-time and part-time courses provides good support for a wide range of students. Various modes of study are available. Students can start courses at different times throughout the year and can study at weekends. Franchise partners provide courses for job seekers and community groups. Progression routes are clearly mapped out in the course literature. These factors underline the college's commitment to widening participation and facilitating progression. Courses are well managed. New and existing courses are developed in response to local need. Teachers meet regularly to review students' progress. Actions proposed in meetings are implemented. Course reviews make good use of feedback from students. Teaching and learning methods have been changed in response to students' comments and suggestions. The internal verification system works well. There are mutually beneficial curriculum links with franchise partners. College teachers play a major part in the close monitoring of courses run by partners.

10   The quality of teaching varied considerably. In the better lessons teachers made clear to students the objectives of the tasks they were undertaking. Practical exercises were broken down into clearly specified steps and learning was supported by the use of good-quality, relevant handouts. In one lesson, on the use of the Internet, students were using materials relating to a major current news item. Teachers provide effective support for individual students when they are working on their own. The extent of the less effective teaching was understated in the self-assessment report. Lesson plans vary in effectiveness. In some lessons, learning aims were not made clear and students made little progress with their studies. In a few lessons, teaching methods were inappropriate, leaving students confused and unable to achieve very much.

11   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that there are some shortcomings in the computing equipment and software. The range of software is extensive but not all packages are available when students move between computer rooms. Students have

to keep their work on floppy disks and they have to spend time saving and retrieving their work. Technical problems with workstations and network printers have adversely affected learning activities in some lessons. There is no college intranet to aid teaching. Some staff find it difficult to keep up to date in computing. The college acknowledges these weaknesses in its self-assessment report. It has plans to address the issues.

12   Students' portfolios are carefully organised and well presented and are of an appropriate standard. On GNVQ courses, many students fail to complete their assignments on time. Attendance in the lessons observed was 10% below the national average for the sector. Through its own lesson observations process, the college found a similar attendance pattern but did not identify this as a weakness in the self-assessment report. The team has recently taken steps to monitor attendance more closely. There are poor retention rates on a number of courses, such as general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) computing and the two-year national certificate in computer studies. In 1999, the retention rate on the GNVQ advanced course was poor at 54%. Achievement rates on most part-time courses are above the national average for the further education sector, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. In 1999, achievement rates on NVQ level 2 courses were over 10% higher than the national average and on the national certificate in IT course, they were 30% higher. The college acknowledges that the pass rate on the GNVQ advanced and intermediate courses was poor in 1999. Many students who complete their courses successfully progress to further study.

Curriculum Areas

A summary of retention and achievement rates in computing and information technology, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
Computer literacy and information technology	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	1,132 87 70	959 85 72	803 85 66
GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	40 75 60	41 85 66	56 75 48
NVQ using IT and others[1]	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	10 50 100	241 79 81	360 82 78
GNVQ advanced	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	19 79 77	39 54 62
National diploma computer studies	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	32 59 53	36 47 79	16 63 90
National certificate (IT applications and computer studies)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	20 85 59	30 53 58	33 64 86
NVQ in IT	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	67 79 73	50 84 71

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*course not offered
[1]includes NVQs in install IT products and standalone computer service operation

Engineering

Grade 3

13   Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering general and motor vehicle engineering and electrical installation courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and one of the weaknesses stated in the self-assessment report. They found a strength and some additional key weaknesses the college had not identified.

Key strengths
- wide range of engineering courses
- well-managed practical activities
- many good retention rates
- modern high technology centre and well-equipped motor vehicle workshop
- well-planned work experience for full-time students

Weaknesses
- dull and unimaginative teaching in some theory lessons
- students' poor achievements on many courses
- failure to ensure all students receive regular reviews of their progress

14   Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that there is a wide range of full-time and part-time courses in mechanical/manufacturing, electrical/electronic, welding/fabrication, motor vehicle engineering and electrical installation. A starter course allows students to sample different engineering disciplines during their first term. A substantial number of students from local schools study motor vehicle level 1 courses one day a week. Course teams meet regularly but records of meetings are not always maintained. Course reviews are held three times a year and include the setting of enrolment, retention and achievement targets. Many courses have detailed handbooks. An advisory committee meets twice a year with representatives from local companies and managing agents. The self-assessment report did not identify as a weakness, the failure to ensure that all students receive reviews of their progress regularly. The progress of some students on full-time courses has not yet been reviewed during this academic year.

15   Overall, teaching is at least satisfactory. Schemes of work range in quality from detailed forward plans to no more than a list of topics. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that practical activities are well managed. Students are fully involved in these activities and the teachers make regular checks that they carry them out correctly. In a welding and fabrication lesson the students were given clear instructions which included drawings with dimensions. They worked on a variety of welded joints and the fabrication of a rectangular to circular change of section. The students were enthusiastic and required minimal supervision. By contrast some theory lessons were dull and uninspiring. In these lessons, the teachers failed to ensure that all students were involved in the learning activity. Students laboriously copied notes from the board. The college acknowledged this weakness in its self-assessment report. Assignment briefs set out details of systematically structured tasks, with well-defined grading criteria. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that students on full-time courses undertake a period of well-planned and appropriate work experience. The GNVQ engineering manufacture support programme involves local colleges, major employers and the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise. Some GNVQ assignments are linked to the students' work experience. For example, students complete an assignment related to manufacturing after visiting a bearing manufacturer and learning about the manufacturing process.

16   The technology centre is a modern facility housed in a recently refurbished area of the workshops. It presents an up-to-date image of engineering and it is well equipped with a computer numerical control lathe and milling machine serviced by a robot. There are 70 computer workstations. Some have computer-aided design and manufacture software whilst others have general-purpose software. An electronics laboratory and two classrooms complete the complex. By contrast, the machine shop contains dated machine tools. The electrical installation workshop is too small for some lessons and it is cluttered. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the motor vehicle workshop is well equipped with a comprehensive range of diagnostic test equipment. The motor vehicle bodyshop is light and spacious. Recent donations of equipment include bodyshells, engines, a gearbox and a van. The welding and fabrication workshop also contains a numerical control gas profile cutter. The lighting, however, is inadequate. Staff have suitable qualifications for the subjects they teach. Good use is made of instructor and demonstrator posts.

17   Students are purposeful in their work, particularly in practical lessons. In assignments, most students organise and present their work well and they show a good understanding of the subject. Many assignments are wordprocessed including diagrams, circuits and graphs where appropriate. The self-assessment report did not identify as a strength, the good retention rates on many courses which exceed the national average for the sector. For example, between 1997 and 1999, students' retention rates on City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) craft courses at level 3 have been higher than the national average. The self-assessment report failed to acknowledge that on many courses, student achievement rates are below the national average for the sector. For example, in 1999, the proportion of students who were successful on technician courses at level 3 was 67%, compared with the national average of 75%.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in engineering, 1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
C&G craft	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	187 59 43	277 88 53	186 83 64
C&G craft	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	266 85 46	205 91 58	207 84 57
Intermediate technician	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	21 86 31	10 80 63	12 83 80
NVQ	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	25 80 90	33 94 94	41 73 50
C&G craft	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	128 89 61	27 89 42	25 96 54
Advanced technician	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	115 70 65	134 88 52	87 54 67

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Curriculum Areas

Business and Professional Studies

Grade 3

18   Inspectors observed 14 lessons across the college's range of business and professional studies courses. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. Inspectors found some strengths and weaknesses the college had not identified.

Key strengths
- well-planned and purposeful learning
- students' above average retention and achievement rates on some accounting and personnel courses
- good support for individual students
- flexible and extended modes of attendance
- strong team commitment to improving the quality of provision

Weaknesses
- poor teaching practice in some lessons
- some teachers' failure to take account of the differing learning abilities of individual students
- students' poor or declining achievement rates on some courses
- some instances of inconsistency in standards for assessment

19   The college offers an appropriate range of GNVQ, GCE A level, NVQ accounting and professional studies courses. Various modes of study are available to suit the needs of students in employment. Curriculum management is sound. Staff work well together as a team. They are committed to improving the quality of provision. Course and lesson plans are in a common format. There is a student handbook for each course. Students' progress is reviewed regularly. Tutorial support and guidance are good. On some courses, however, systems for monitoring students' progress and the internal verification of assessments, are not well established.

20   Lessons are well planned. Learning objectives are shared with students. Adult students value the extra support given to them. The self-assessment report recognised strengths in the teaching and learning on management and higher level courses. Students are enabled to acquire knowledge and understanding and develop and practise wide-ranging skills and personal competences. On these courses, students demonstrate increasing confidence in handling a range of tasks. The self-assessment report failed to acknowledge some weaknesses in the teaching on other courses. For example, some teachers did not ensure that students worked to the best of their ability and realised their full potential. They did not check regularly that students understood the lesson. They did not ensure that the students were given opportunities to explore new concepts or strengthen their understanding of those they had already covered. In some instances, the teacher failed to take account of the differing abilities of students in the group. All students were given the same task and this was insufficiently demanding for some but too difficult for others. In a few instances, basic teaching techniques, such as the use of the whiteboard, were poor. For example, in one lesson, the data the teacher presented on the whiteboard were illegible and some students were misled into drawing the wrong conclusions. Assignments are appropriate to the level of the course and provide opportunities for differential assessment grading. Teachers provide helpful feedback to students on their performance in GNVQ assignments. Assignments are assessed against consistent standards and graded appropriately. The key skill of communication is assessed as part of the assignment. Spelling and grammar are routinely marked on business assignments. Students on the full-time NVQ accounting course

are set work which does not cover the range of NVQ competences in sufficiently varied or imaginative ways. Students spend a great deal of time on workbooks. Teachers give students only perfunctory feedback on their performance. There is a lack of standardised practice in the way work is set and marked across modules of the GCE A level business studies course. In a few instances, students received comprehensive feedback on their performance and were given sound advice on how to improve it. In many other instances, however, teachers made only bland comments or merely gave a grade. The self-assessment report acknowledged the need for the systematic monitoring and moderation of GCE A level assessments. Management and professional students are set demanding and realistic tasks. Students can relate these to their workplace and draw upon their own experiences when carrying them out.

21   The learning environment is good. Lessons are held in appropriate classrooms which lend themselves to a variety of activities. The size of some groups, however, means that the rooms are filled to capacity. Rooms are well furnished.

22   On professional and supervisory level programmes, students demonstrate acquisition of higher level skills and they often show an awareness of current and key issues in the field. The standard of presentation of students' work on most courses is high. However, the quantity and quality of evidence in the portfolios of students on the full-time NVQ accounting course at level 2 are poor. Evidence of students' acquisition of competences is derived from tasks performed in a simulated, rather than real, work-based setting. None of the portfolios of the students on the NVQ course at level 2 was complete even though the students had commenced work at NVQ level 3. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that students' achievements on some programmes are good. In 1999, these included the certificate in personnel practice, Association of Accounting Technicians NVQ levels 2 and 3 accounting, and

NVQ level 3 supervisory management courses. The self-assessment report acknowledges that students' achievements on GNVQ business programmes have been consistently low. Measures have been put in place to improve students' attendance, retention and achievement in this area. In 1999, students' achievements were poor on two-year GCE A level business studies and accounts courses, the diploma in administrative management, and the certificate in marketing courses.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in business and professional studies,
1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Number of starters	39	32	31
		Retention (%)	85	81	65
		Achievement (%)	39	54	60
NVQ accounting	2 and 3	Number of starters	124	114	187
		Retention (%)	81	86	74
		Achievement (%)	52	52	66
GNVQ advanced business	3	Number of starters	70	92	41
		Retention (%)	63	79	88
		Achievement (%)	84	68	55
Certificate in personnel practice	3	Number of starters	38	33	61
		Retention (%)	95	91	92
		Achievement (%)	97	97	91
Certificate and diploma in administrative management	3 and 4	Number of starters	56	43	36
		Retention (%)	71	93	53
		Achievement (%)	66	56	50
NVQ accounting	4	Number of starters	57	72	60
		Retention (%)	84	88	85
		Achievement (%)	8	40	*

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*final achievement for 1999 not available

Hospitality and Catering

Grade 3

23 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering NVQ and GNVQ hospitality and catering courses. Inspectors broadly agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that the weaknesses in students' achievements had been underestimated.

Key strengths

- well-planned and well-documented courses
- the good standard of practical work
- students' acquisition of appropriate technical and social skills
- excellent specialist resources and realistic work environments

Weaknesses

- undemanding teaching in theory lessons
- poor retention and pass rates on most courses
- insufficient attention to the development of key skills on NVQ programmes
- lack of rigour in the analysis of students' achievements data

24 The college offers NVQ and GNVQ courses in hospitality and catering that provide good progression opportunities for students. A range of part-time courses meets the needs of local employers. Links with industry are strong through the local hoteliers' association. Employers sponsor a number of student prizes and contribute to an annual awards ceremony. Inspectors agreed that courses are well planned and effectively organised. Course files are well maintained and course documents are in a standard format. Course and department team meetings are held regularly. Minutes record action which needs to be taken. Matters arising are routinely followed up at subsequent meetings. Students' progress is monitored carefully and absences are followed up promptly. Links with schools are good. Prospective students are encouraged to visit the catering department.

25 Schemes of work are comprehensive. Induction is well planned and includes basic food hygiene training. Aims and objectives for lessons are clearly stated in lesson plans. Teachers, however, seldom shared the aims and objectives of theory lessons with the students. Teaching in practical lessons was good. Lessons were well structured. Students were thoroughly briefed on what they were expected to achieve. Menus contained a good mix of classical, contemporary and ethnic dishes. The restaurants and food outlets enable students to experience different styles of operations from silver service to fast food. The self-assessment report failed to acknowledge that teaching in theory lessons is undemanding. Students on NVQ courses devote an excessive amount of time to completing workbooks which do not engage their interest and enthusiasm. Opportunities are missed to extend their knowledge and skills through other more imaginative learning activities. For example, the use of IT in teaching and learning is underdeveloped. An annual exchange visit with students from Belgium and French hotel schools brings breadth to the students' learning experience. NVQ level 3 students attend a residential team building event in Wales. This feature of their course is a strength that was noted in the self-assessment report. GNVQ assignments relate well to the different sectors of the hospitality industry but the specifications for the tasks they involve are sometimes unclear. Teachers often correct spelling and grammar and make constructive comments on students' written work. Insufficient attention has been given to the development of key skills on NVQ courses. Action is being taken to rectify this weakness, which is acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

26 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the diverse range of restaurants, food outlets and kitchens

provides excellent teaching and realistic work environments. The library bookstock for cookery and wine studies is good. However, there is a narrow range of books for GNVQ courses and few journals and periodicals. Students have good access to computers on a 'drop-in' basis but the range of specialist software and CD-ROMs is narrow. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that staff have relevant professional qualifications and recent industrial experience. Support staff are adequate in number, well qualified and effective.

27   Most students' portfolios are well maintained and of a good standard. Students demonstrate good technical skills in kitchens and restaurants. They achieve good standards in their food preparation and presentation. Students work well together as a team and they display good social skills when dealing with customers. Inspectors did not fully agree with the judgements on students' achievements in the self-assessment report. There is insufficiently

rigorous analysis of data on students' achievements and the college underestimated the significance of some poor retention and achievement rates. The retention rate on NVQ level 2 baking courses is excellent. The retention rate, however, on other NVQ level 2 courses is around the national average for the sector and on NVQ level 3 courses, it has declined significantly over the last three years to below the national average. Since 1997, the retention rate on the GNVQ advanced course has improved but is still slightly below the national average. With the exception of the craft bakery course, student achievement rates on NVQ courses have declined over the last two years. In recent years, the pass rate on the GNVQ advanced course has fluctuated widely. In some years, it has been poor. Many students on NVQ courses gain awards in addition to their main qualification. All students achieve basic hygiene certification.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in hospitality and catering, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ food preparation and cookery	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	94 81 84	76 73 50
NVQ serving food and drink	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	13 62 63	27 81 36
NVQ craft baking	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	8 100 63	12 100 70
NVQ catering and hospitality	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	18 56 90	35 83 75	20 50 60
GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	18 56 40	16 63 67	15 67 50

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
+disaggregated data not available

Hair and Beauty

Grade 2

28   Inspectors observed 14 lessons covering hairdressing, beauty, holistics and sports therapy courses. Inspectors mainly agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that students' achievements had been understated.

Key strengths

- good-quality teaching and learning in most lessons
- well-managed work experience for full-time students
- good achievement and retention rates on most courses
- high standards of students' practical work
- good curriculum organisation and management
- industry standard accommodation and specialist resources

Weaknesses

- lack of key skills accreditation on many courses
- insufficient opportunity for students to develop IT skills
- poor location of two salons

29   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the curriculum content meets the needs of students and employers. Courses are offered up to level 3. There is good curriculum organisation and management. Regular, productive course team meetings take place at which staff exchange information obtained at other meetings. Students keep diaries giving details of the skills and knowledge they have acquired. Staff review these diaries in their regular monitoring of students' progress. Individual action plans are developed during lessons. Most students are on track to complete all work for assessment within the year.

30   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that teaching and learning were good in most lessons. Most schemes of work and lessons plans are well devised. Plans take account of the differing aptitudes of students and specify learning styles to suit them. Some plans were incomplete or not available at the time of the inspection. An appropriate mix of teaching techniques was used. In one lesson, the students carried out practical work. At appropriate intervals, the teacher intervened to give a short demonstration of how a particular aspect of the practical task should be handled. In most practical lessons, students carried out work in accordance with current commercial practice. The hairdressing salon has many clients. It provides the students with a busy and realistic learning environment for their practical work. Students often work with a number of clients. Teachers give good one-to-one advice and support to develop students' skills and understanding. Students are encouraged to assess their own work. At the end of each lesson, all students complete a diary in which they provide evidence of the skills and knowledge they have acquired and an evaluation of their performance. They discuss their diary entry with the teacher, highlight their strengths and weaknesses and agree action to improve their work in the next lesson. In the weaker lessons, students were not focused on their work or had little interaction with clients. Work experience is well organised. Teachers draw effectively on the experience gained by students during work placements. All full-time hairdressing students have an opportunity to work in an old people's home where a commercial salon is run two days a week by the college. Students on a 'make-up artists' course have been commissioned to complete the make-up and dress the wigs for a production of *La Boheme* at the local theatre. Some lessons contained both students on FEFC-funded provision and trainees funded by the TSC. The TSC trainees are required to work towards certification in key skills whereas most students on FEFC-funded courses receive no

accreditation for their work in key skills. Students use the computer at the reception desk but there are few other opportunities for them to develop IT skills. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

31   Inspectors agreed that the specialist salons are well equipped and provide a realistic working environment. Salons are spacious, well maintained and are amply equipped with industry standard equipment. There are five hairdressing and five beauty salons serviced by a reception, dispensary and laundry on the ground floor. The college acknowledges that some operational problems exist with the two top floor salons. They are well removed from the reception and dispensary and students often have to use the main lift to get products for their clients. Staff are well qualified in their specialist areas and many have recent industrial experience. All full-time and most part-time staff are teacher trained and hold assessor and verifier awards.

32   Students' practical work is good. There is an atmosphere of professionalism in the salons. Students have good communication skills. Some students are able to work at a level beyond that of their course. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that retention rates on most courses are good. Retention rates are very good on the reflexology and aromatherapy courses and have been at, or above, the national average for the sector for the last three years. In 1999, retention rates on hairdressing courses at level 2 and beauty therapy at level 3 have dropped to 69% and 73%, respectively. In 1999, student achievement rates on hairdressing and beauty therapy courses at level 2 were 82% and 95%, respectively; on hairdressing and beauty therapy courses at level 3 they were 100%. The self-assessment report did not give sufficient emphasis to students' good results on these courses.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in hair and beauty, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Hairdressing (all courses)	2	Number of starters	174	170	131
		Retention (%)	75	72	69
		Achievement (%)	71	63	82
Beauty therapy (all courses)	2	Number of starters	18	100	76
		Retention (%)	100	62	77
		Achievement (%)	17	76	95
Hairdressing (all courses)	3	Number of starters	*	75	11
		Retention (%)	*	64	82
		Achievement (%)	*	75	100
C&G beauty therapy	3	Number of starters	34	78	11
		Retention (%)	47	77	82
		Achievement (%)	81	91	100
Beauty therapy (other)	3	Number of starters	64	120	158
		Retention (%)	86	88	73
		Achievement (%)	89	83	88
Sports therapy (all courses)	3	Number of starters	40	31	40
		Retention (%)	80	81	85
		Achievement (%)	63	60	71

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*data unavailable

Performing Arts, Art and Design and Media

Grade 2

33 **Inspectors observed 21 lessons covering art and design, media and performing arts courses. Inspectors agreed with the majority of findings in the self-assessment report but considered that the college had understated weaknesses in students' retention.**

Key strengths

- good teaching in most lessons
- demanding and well-devised assignments
- extensive opportunities for students to perform and display their work publicly
- students' outstanding success in national competitions
- good specialist resources
- students' high achievement rates on full-time programmes

Weaknesses

- ineffective classroom management in some lessons
- low retention rates on GCSE and GCE A level courses
- weaknesses in course planning and organisation

34   As the self-assessment report acknowledges, the range of courses offers students good opportunities for internal progression. Course evaluations indicate that many students are well satisfied with the provision. Most course review reports are thorough and detailed. A few contain insufficiently precise judgements. Minutes of course team meetings do not always contain clear action points. Teachers are skilful in giving students appropriate help with their academic and practical studies. Students benefit from good personal support from staff. The college has recently taken action on low retention rates and these are starting to improve. Some lessons are timetabled in rooms that are inappropriate in terms of their size or layout. There has been insufficient systematic evaluation of students' achievements involving comparison with national averages for the sector.

35   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment that the quality of most teaching is good. Most lesson plans have clear learning objectives. Students are encouraged to experiment with a stimulating variety of media and materials. Teachers integrate theory and practical work effectively. For example, students studied the key elements of radio drama prior to working on the radio adaptation of a chosen short story. Appropriate attention is given to the teaching of presentation skills. Inspectors agreed that most assignment briefs are stimulating and are written in language that students can understand easily. Assessment is thorough. Teachers generally provide constructive written comments to help students improve their performance. However, some feedback does not include enough guidance on how to structure written work. On occasions, teaching was poor. There were instances when students were not using lesson time purposefully while waiting for specific tasks to be allocated to them. A few teachers failed to adapt their teaching styles and materials to take account of students with different learning needs. There were some missed opportunities for group work. A few teachers failed to brief the students adequately on the tasks to be undertaken. Most of these weaknesses were acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

36   Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report, that students benefit from a good range of spacious and well-equipped specialist accommodation. The photographic studio has good facilities for colour printing and is well designed, although occasionally cramped. There is a spacious

dance studio, a well-equipped multimedia centre, and a refurbished music technology suite. There is a shortage of space in the college which students may use for rehearsals. Music students are provided with leased space for rehearsals and they use this well. The lack of soundproofing in the television studios can disrupt activities in adjoining rooms. Technicians and technician demonstrators provide students with good help and ample support.

37   The standard of students' practical work is good. Most portfolios of students' work show that students have carried out thoughtful investigation and creative exploration of ideas. Some students' work has gained recognition nationally and internationally, as the self-assessment report acknowledges. Art and design students have made promotional posters to raise awareness of autism, and these are being displayed nationally. Fashion students have gained awards in national competitions for

their millinery work for three successive years. Fifty-three music students have played in a series of events in two German towns. Retention rates for students on GCE A level and GCSE courses have been mainly below average over the last three years. On several courses, the retention rate is between 10% and 20% below the national averages for the sector. In addition, retention rates on some full-time courses, such as those in fashion and photography, have fluctuated considerably and have sometimes been poor. In its self-assessment report, the college understated these weaknesses relating to the retention of students. Student achievement rates have been consistently high on the GNVQ and national diploma full-time courses, at levels 2 and 3. For example, achievement rates on the first diploma in performing arts, and the national diplomas in performing arts, fashion and graphic design courses have been above the national average for the sector for the last three years.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in performing arts, art and design and media, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSEs	2	Number of starters	105	33	25
		Retention (%)	72	73	72
		Achievement (%)	76	50	50
GNVQ and precursors	2	Number of starters	59	75	67
		Retention (%)	80	77	73
		Achievement (%)	76	79	90
First diploma in performing arts	2	Number of starters	19	31	23
		Retention (%)	95	94	96
		Achievement (%)	83	97	91
GCE A levels	3	Number of starters	253	351	191
		Retention (%)	67	70	54
		Achievement (%)	74	75	76
GNVQ and precursors	3	Number of starters	166	211	157
		Retention (%)	66	79	70
		Achievement (%)	90	89	84
BTEC national diploma graphic design	3	Number of starters	24	33	27
		Retention (%)	83	88	74
		Achievement (%)	100	100	96

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Basic Skills

Grade 3

38   Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering literacy and numeracy at level 1 or below. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- effective classroom teaching and management
- range of accessible provision to widen participation
- students' progress in developing skills and using them with greater confidence
- wide range of resources on main college sites

Weaknesses

- inappropriate teaching methods in the learning development centre
- students' low achievement rate for acquisition of nationally recognised qualifications
- inaccessibility of relevant data to assist staff in setting targets
- insufficient co-ordination of basic skills provision across college
- failure to maintain some students' records properly

39   The inspection covered three strands of basic skills provision: courses in literacy and numeracy; courses in which basic skills tuition is an integral component; and cross-college basic skills support usually provided through the learning development centre. Students on basic skills courses have the opportunity to work towards a range of qualifications although the achievement of a qualification is not necessarily their primary aim. Students following courses on which basic skills tuition is integral, or those receiving support through the learning development centre do not work towards additional qualifications in basic skills. Their primary aim is to complete their main course successfully. In response to the report of the committee chaired by Sir Claus Moser on the national development of basic skills, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A fresh start*, the college has established an entry level planning team to advise the director of resources and student support. The team has met regularly and has discussed initiatives, but these have not yet been implemented. The college has not yet appointed a manager to co-ordinate basic skills provision across the college. As the self-assessment report acknowledges, staff have inadequate access to relevant data in the college, and make insufficient use of nationally available data, when setting targets.

40   In 1998-99, the college enrolled 398 students on over 40 literacy and numeracy programmes at the Military Road site and at 14 community venues. The accessibility of venues and the range of courses have helped to widen participation. Students enrol on courses which take place near their homes. Literacy courses for the whole family are a growth area. The college runs three family literacy groups in partnership with the LEA which take place in primary schools in the most deprived area of the town. At the Military Road site, most students are following literacy courses and only a few numeracy courses take place there. Comparatively few students enrol on numeracy courses in the community venues. Students can attend at the times scheduled for literacy lessons to receive one-to-one numeracy tuition if they wish. The college has run a summer school in basic skills for the last two years and this attracted 107 students in 1999. The adult basic education service was awarded the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) quality mark in 1995 and was successfully reassessed for this in 1998.

41   Some 30 students have weekly timetabled lessons in communication and number as an integral part of level 1 courses. These courses

include NVQ food preparation at level 1, GNVQ in IT at intermediate level, GCSE-plus, and the vocational access course. In addition, a number of individual students receive regular help with basic skills in the learning development centre.

42 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that classroom teaching and management are effective. Teachers' relations with students are good. In each lesson, teachers set work for each individual student. They communicate well and give clear instructions. They discuss work-in-progress with the students. By contrast, some of the teaching observed in the learning development centre was not effective. It was at an inappropriate level and was not matched to student needs or interests. Some students' records were incomplete. They did not all include details of students' learning plans, the outcomes of progress reviews, and students' achievements. Teachers do not always set students specific and measurable targets. The self-assessment report overstated the strengths of some teaching methods which the college considered to be innovative.

43 As the self-assessment report acknowledges, there is a wide range of appropriate resources to meet the diverse needs of learners. Some computing facilities at Military Road and the content of some worksheets are dated. There are not enough facilities and resources at some of the community venues. Three full-time and 12 part-time teachers in adult basic education have a

qualification in basic skills. Twenty-five volunteer tutors are trained to give appropriate support to students. Plans for providing more staff with training on ways of teaching basic skills are not being carried out until announcements are made on the implementation of recommendations in the Moser review. Some teachers have received training in computer skills.

44 Basic skills tuition is available to a wide range of students. Students who are mainly in the 16 to 19 age group and who need basic skills tuition, receive this as an integral part of whatever course they may be on. Other students receive help in basic skills through the learning development centre. Students who are following courses solely concerned with basic skills come from a diversity of backgrounds. Last year, 75% were female. The retention rate on these courses of 67%, was below the national average of 79% for the sector. In 1999, the proportion of students on basic skills courses who achieved nationally recognised qualifications was low at 24%, compared with the national average for the sector of 44%. Nevertheless, examination of students' work over time and records of assessment show that students have improved their literacy and numeracy skills and have increased their confidence in using them. Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report that the slight improvement in student retention and achievement rates constituted a strength.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in basic skills, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Adult basic education, literacy and numeracy	Entry and level 1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	206 63 24	247 63 18	254 67 24

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Support for Students

Grade 2

45   Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- impartial pre-entry guidance
- effective admissions and induction processes
- well-planned and well-implemented tutorial programme for full-time students
- effective additional support for students with specific difficulties
- good-quality careers education and advice
- wide range of personal support services

Weaknesses

- inadequate support for some part-time students
- failure to provide students with appropriate learning support following initial assessment
- lack of clarity in roles of staff offering personal support

46   Inspectors agreed with the finding in the self-assessment report that students receive impartial guidance before enrolment. There are 'guidance evenings' for prospective students, widely advertised in the press and in local schools. Staff carry out a comprehensive programme of visits to schools. Guidance sessions, principally for adults, are offered once a week at the college's town centre education shop and at a selection of community education centres. The guidance team can also be contacted through the central admissions unit.

47   Course entry interviews are conducted according to prescribed college guidelines. The central admissions unit follows up applicants who are referred for further guidance, learning support, and financial advice. In 1998-99, a survey of students' opinions found that a small number of interviews were unsatisfactory. Interviewing staff now have to complete a course guidance record which states the needs of prospective students for further guidance and support. Induction is well planned. It is carried out effectively to specified standards. Late starters receive a comprehensive student handbook. The induction process for late starters is not monitored. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the effective admissions and induction processes constitute strengths in provision.

48   Tutors compile an initial skills profile of all full-time students. Students can receive help with their basic skills from the learning development centre. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that students' initial assessment is not followed up systematically to ensure that students are offered the learning support they need. Only two-thirds of those identified as seriously in need of extra support have attended learning support sessions in the centre. Individual learning plans for students referred to the centre are very general and insufficiently specific. Tutors take groups to the centre for skills development sessions. Some group sessions do not have clear objectives. There are good long-term plans for the provision of learning support and help with key skills. These plans, however, have not yet been fully implemented.

49   The college provides help for a number of students on mainstream courses with a range of difficulties. These include 70 full-time and 33 part-time students with dyslexia, visual impairment, mental health problems and cerebral palsy. Fifteen designated tutors in the curriculum areas supplement the work of the core team of additional support staff. Inspectors agreed that this service is a strength.

50   The self-assessment report recognises that tutorial support for full-time students is good. Students on each course have a weekly tutorial

programme, including careers education, based on a college-wide framework. Each term, tutors carry out reviews of students' progress on a one-to-one basis. During these, students agree, sign and keep copies of action plans for improving their performance. In most areas, these reviews are supplemented by additional recorded interviews. Some tutors fail to encourage students to monitor their own progress towards reaching their targets. The importance of attendance is emphasised. Students receive sound advice on higher education and employment. The college has achieved the Career Mark quality standard for its careers education and advice systems. There is a well-stocked careers library. Students can obtain careers information and guidance in several ways. Careers service staff are available for consultation in sessions four days a week. Advice can also be obtained from their tutor or the college guidance staff.

51   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that support for part-time students is less effective and thorough than the support provided for full-time students. It is college policy to allocate a tutor to part-time students who attend for more than four hours a week. This policy, however, is not always followed. The student guidance and information services are not clearly signposted for the benefit of part-time students seeking help. Teachers of part-time courses are now given a handbook containing details of college services and also key telephone numbers, and they are able to pass on relevant information from this to part-time students seeking help. Provision of support for part-time students is currently under review.

52   Students obtain personal support from their tutor and in several other ways. Two student support workers are readily available. Students can be referred to other members of the support team with expertise in finance, and travel, and who understand the Department of Social Security regulations. An external counsellor attends the college weekly and can refer students for long-term counselling if necessary. There have been recent changes of personnel. The roles of different counselling and support staff are not entirely clear. Tutors, who are the first line of support for students, are not always clear about the support procedures.

53   There are annual audits of the quality of all aspects of the student support service. These aim to identify ways of continually improving the quality of support for students. Issues are identified and addressed systematically and imaginatively. These audits constitute a strength not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

General Resources

Grade 2

54   Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths
- attractive and well-maintained main college site
- good-quality teaching accommodation
- well-resourced and well-designed learning development centre
- significant recent investment in computing facilities
- the range of good-quality catering facilities on the main site

Weaknesses
- the inadequate size and poor design of the library
- some aspects of the Military Road site
- the inappropriate use of some temporary buildings

55   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the Booth Lane site provides a spacious and attractive campus, with a range of facilities. Buildings are in a

good state of repair. The main reception area, the reception areas for the hair and beauty salons and the restaurant are attractive and welcoming. Apart from the lack of clear signposting of guidance services for students, signposting throughout the college is helpful and effective. There are 600 car parking spaces. As the self-assessment report acknowledges, most accommodation on the site is of a high standard. Classrooms and specialist teaching areas are good. They are well equipped, well maintained and furnished to a high standard. Some temporary buildings are used as offices for administration and student services, and as two classrooms. They occupy a prominent site and as the self-assessment report notes, they do not present a good image of the college. One, used for student services, gives visitors a poor first impression of the college. In general, the state of cleanliness of rooms and communal areas is good. There is a detailed planned preventative maintenance programme. In its self-assessment report, the college recognises that some teaching accommodation is not fully used.

56   The Military Road site is a popular location with adult students from the local community. Most rooms have been pleasantly refurbished. However, the reception area is poor, exterior stonework is crumbling and the car park is in need of repair. The college shop and adjacent office in the town centre provide a modern, welcoming information and advice centre for the college and an administration centre for Training Northants. A total of 52 community venues are also used in various locations.

57   There has been a significant recent investment in the student computing facilities. All computers have been upgraded and 75% are now of good industry standard. A variety of software is available. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is about 1:8. There is a team of qualified and experienced technician staff. Extensive work has been undertaken on network and security systems. Forty-two computers are available to students on an open access basis and this number is low

for the size of college. However, students can normally use computers in other parts of the college when they are not timetabled for lessons. Students with disabilities have access to computers which have enhanced screens and are available on trolleys.

58   The number of library books is below the median level for further education college libraries. Accommodation for the library is unsatisfactory. The library has a poor layout and not enough general space, and study spaces. The college is considering various ideas for improving the library. The experienced and well-qualified library staff offer an efficient and valued service. A good audiovisual service is provided. Several curriculum teams have their own small resource areas, which students may use. Six computers are sited in the library for general use by students. They have a CD-ROM facility and give access to the Internet. The small library at Military Road houses a multicultural resource base operated in conjunction with the Council for Ethnic Minority communities. This is the only such base in the county and is also used by a number of outside groups. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the facilities in the learning development centre are a strength. The centre is well designed and has modern furniture. Nineteen computers provide access to the Internet and specialist software for learning support is available.

59   As the self-assessment report recognises, a range of good-quality catering facilities is available for staff and students, including a restaurant, a coffee shop, a cafeteria and a fast-food outlet. A variety of food is served, including vegetarian and ethnic dishes. In its self-assessment report, the college acknowledged as a weakness the inadequate communal areas and poor recreational facilities for students. Many students congregate in the cafeteria and cause it to be crowded at times. The college has no sports hall or playing field but arranges for students to use neighbouring leisure centres. A small fitness centre is

available for staff and students. There is a well-maintained and pleasantly decorated playgroup at Booth Lane and a crèche at Military Road.

60   Most accommodation is accessible to persons with restricted mobility. Ramps provide access to many areas. As the self-assessment report states, a number of improvements to the college premises have been carried out to make them more accessible to people with disabilities, but there is still some work to be done. The doors to the main reception are very heavy and are scheduled for replacement. Some ramps are not easy to use. There are no covered walkways between the blocks on the main premises.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

61   Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that one strength had been understated and they found a weakness the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- strong commitment to ensuring the continuous improvement of provision
- the comprehensive and consistently applied system for course reviews
- effective quality assurance arrangements for franchised provision
- the thorough internal verification system
- effective procedures to gather and respond to students' views

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped use of performance indicators, statistical data and targets for improvement
- deficiencies in some aspects of action-planning

- shortcomings in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of staff development
- underdeveloped service standards

62   Since the last inspection, the college has made significant improvements in its quality assurance arrangements. The college's mission and strategic objectives reflect a strong commitment to continuous improvement. There are clear lines of responsibility for quality assurance within senior management and in curriculum and business support teams. Staff have a good understanding of quality assurance procedures. Curriculum team leaders meet regularly with the vice-principal to discuss performance. The academic board and its two subcommittees play a central and effective role in promoting and reviewing the quality of all aspects of the college's work.

63   Inspectors agreed that the college has a well-planned and rigorous self-assessment process. The self-assessment report is concise and evaluative and makes effective use of a wide range of evidence to support judgements. Supplementary self-assessment reports cover all areas of the college's work. A governor chairs the self-assessment review group. A panel consisting of a wide range of college members validated the self-assessment report. An external consultant supported the work of the panel. The validation process was thorough and self-critical. A systematic procedure for observing teaching was introduced in 1998. This has produced useful evidence for self-assessment. Findings from the observation process, however, have not been analysed effectively in order to identify good practice which may be shared with all staff. Some of the action plans arising from self-assessment and from other aspects of the quality assurance procedures lack precision and detail. The relationship between strategic objectives and individual action plans is not always clear. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

64   The college has developed a comprehensive and well-documented system of course review and evaluation. Course teams hold formal review meetings at three key stages in the college year. The standard agenda includes reviews of students' progress, analysis of student retention and achievement rates, and internal verification. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the internal verification system is thorough. An internal verification task group checks that the internal verifiers apply consistent standards. Reports from external verifiers are closely scrutinised to identify good practice and written feedback is given to the relevant team leader.

65   In its self-assessment report, the college recognises that there is underdeveloped use of performance indicators and targets for improvement. There are inconsistencies in the targets set at college level and those used by curriculum teams. Some curriculum teams have difficulty in identifying and using appropriate and accurate achievement data. National benchmarking data are not used effectively to assess the level of students' achievements. Little analysis of trends in students' achievements is carried out, in order that the college may identify reasons for the significant fluctuation in pass rates on some courses. There is insufficient systematic comparison of the final examination results students obtain, with the GCSE grades they held on entry to college, in order to determine the extent of their achievements. The use of service standards for business support areas is at an early stage. Some of these standards and the targets related to them, are more appropriate and concise than others.

66   Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality assurance arrangements covering franchised provision are effective. The detailed quality assurance manual is updated regularly to take account of developments in the college's internal curriculum review procedures. Record-keeping is clear and consistently thorough. Staff make regular monitoring visits to all franchise partners and subject them to random and unannounced spot checks. Monitoring activities include checking on students' attendance, gathering the views of students on provision and observation of teaching and learning. There are effective links between college curriculum teams and franchise partners.

67   The college charter is well presented and informative. It is available on audiotape and in large print. The charter contains clear statements regarding the standards of service offered to students, parents, employers, and the community. Separate charters have been developed for franchise partners. Students' views are systematically collected through questionnaires, focus groups and course reviews. Improvements have been made in response to students' comments. In its self-assessment report, the college underestimated the effectiveness of its procedures for gathering, and responding to, the views of students. A perceptions questionnaire is sent annually to parents, although the response rate for this is low. In 1999, a survey was carried out of employers' views of the college and its provision. The college has a thorough system for recording and dealing with complaints. An annual report is presented to the academic standards committee.

68   The college produces an annual prioritised staff development programme. The current priorities include industrial updating, information and learning technology and curriculum 2000. The self-assessment report acknowledges that there is insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of staff development. Records of staff development activities are incomplete. The college recognises deficiencies in the staff appraisal system and plans to revise it by June 2000. There is no reliable central record of staff appraisal. Staff are set targets during appraisal. Progress towards reaching these targets is not monitored with consistent thoroughness across the college. Some targets are imprecise.

Cross-college Provision

Governance

Grade 2

69   Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- extensive range of governors' skills
- sound arrangements for the conduct of corporation business
- effective financial monitoring
- effective procedures for monitoring the implementation of strategic and operating plans

Weaknesses

- insufficient oversight of college policies
- little use of performance indicators in evaluating the corporation's effectiveness
- deficiencies in the monitoring of students' retention and achievements

70   Governors have a wide range of relevant skills and backgrounds. There are seven female governors and two governors from minority ethnic backgrounds. There is one vacancy. The breadth of experience of the governors was not recognised in the self-assessment report. The corporation has responded positively to the need to redetermine its membership to include new categories of governor. The search committee is currently recruiting the new categories of governor. The appointment process is a formal and open procedure. Person specifications and job descriptions for governors have not been drafted. Inspectors and auditors did not agree with the judgement in the self-assessment report that attendance levels at corporation meetings were low and constituted a weakness. Overall attendance levels are satisfactory, although attendance by some governors is poor. The recently introduced governor development policy is thorough. The policy covers induction and

continuing development for governors and is based on existing college practice. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of this policy.

71   There are sound arrangements for the conduct of corporation business. Clerking arrangements are independent of college management. The clerk to the corporation is experienced and he clerks all corporation committees. Standing orders are comprehensive. The quality of agendas and minutes of meetings is high. Useful summaries of the proceedings of committees are provided for the corporation.

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

73   The corporation has appropriate committees and these each have clear terms of reference. The business of delegated governance is largely conducted through the policy and resources committee. This committee plays a key role in furthering the corporation's business. Inspectors and auditors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment that the corporation rigorously oversees the college's financial performance. The policy and resources committee closely monitors the college's financial position through its monthly meetings. The remuneration committee has considered, and made recommendations relating to, the pay and conditions of the senior postholder. The college has had problems in collecting data on students and it has a history of sending in funding claims to the FEFC late. The audit committee has overseen recent improvements to the student records system. There is no systematic review of corporation policies.

74   The corporation agreed a three-year strategic plan in 1997. It has supported the

achievement of this plan annually and agreed the annual operating plans. Most of the annual operating objectives have measurable outcomes. Objectives are prioritised. The principal reports on the achievement of the annual operating objectives at each corporation meeting. An annual report is presented to the corporation and any outstanding items are incorporated into the following year's plan. The strength of strategic planning procedures was not fully recognised in the self-assessment report.

75   The corporation has established some procedures for ensuring its openness and accountability, but the self-assessment overstated their strength. The governors' register of interests has recently been extended to senior managers and budget holders. An annual declaration is signed by governors confirming their eligibility to act as governors. A 'whistleblowing' policy has been adopted and the code of conduct for governors has recently been updated. Corporation and committee minutes and the register of interests are open to public scrutiny. The corporation has recently adopted a formal confidentiality policy. Items of corporation business are rarely classed as confidential. The corporation has acknowledged that it needs to improve its communications with all who provide and use the college's services and has very recently published a governors' newsletter.

76   Governors participated fully in the production of their self-assessment report. In order to arrive at judgements about their own performance, governors responded to questionnaires on the way the corporation conducted its business. Governors are represented on the college's self-assessment working party. The corporation does not formally review its performance other than through the self-assessment process. The corporation has not established enough performance indicators to use when evaluating the effectiveness of all the considerable work it has to do.

77   The corporation has only recently established a formal process for the review and evaluation of student retention and achievement rates. Governors are uncertain of the grounds for determining particular targets, how targets may be best achieved, and how they compare with those set by other colleges. This uncertainty has been compounded by a lack of confidence in the reliability of data on students. Using these data, the corporation initially set annual targets that were unrealistic. These weaknesses were identified in the self-assessment report and the corporation is taking action to rectify them.

Management
Grade 2

78   Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that some of the strengths had been understated.

Key strengths
- well-defined and effective organisational structure
- systematic strategic and operating planning and review
- open management style and good communications
- productive collaboration with many external organisations
- effective financial control

Weaknesses
- poor quality of management information on students and personnel
- long delays in making student data returns to the FEFC
- underdeveloped procedures for reviewing and monitoring policies

79   The organisational structure of the college has been changed extensively since the last

inspection. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the new structure is effective. Following a recent review of the structure, key aspects of the directorate responsibilities have been strengthened. The senior management team consists of the principal, a vice-principal and director of planning and development, and four further directors for, respectively, finance, information services, resources and student support, and external programmes. Each director has line management responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood. Meetings are well managed. There are regular one-to-one meetings between line managers at middle management level and those at senior level. The meetings enable the managers concerned to give each other help and support. The meetings also further the open style of management and aid effective communication across the college. These meetings were not specifically identified as a strength in the self-assessment report. Communications across the college are mainly good. Task groups and cross-college teams work effectively to implement college policies and aid the sharing of good practice. Teachers from a wide range of curriculum areas are members of cross-college teams and task groups and these help to consolidate changes. Some teachers are members of several cross-college teams. Some said that they felt that such multiple membership reduced their ability to contribute fully to the work of any one team. Some task groups continue to meet even though they have fulfilled their initial objectives.

80   As the self-assessment report acknowledges, the college consulted widely when drawing up its last strategic plan. Consultation involved staff, the corporation, and external bodies including the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise. Staff conferences and group meetings aided the internal college consultation process. The strategic plan and associated annual operating statement contain clear measurable objectives and targets against which progress is measured and reviewed. However, annual plans developed by teams do not include appropriate targets based on the operating statement. The college recognises that it has not met a number of its targets such as FEFC funding targets and income generation from its college company. A diverse range of policies and guidelines covers many aspects of college operations including implementation of the curriculum. A number of policies have been reviewed effectively and their implementation has been monitored carefully. The self-assessment report acknowledges as a weakness, the lack of any systematic programme for the regular review of all policies and guidelines, and the monitoring of their effectiveness.

81   The college has established constructive links with a large number of external bodies involved with education and training. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the college contributes effectively to a wide range of national and local initiatives. The college has strong links with industry through a number of specific projects and work in some curriculum areas.

82   Management information is often unreliable and does not meet the needs of all managers. This weakness has an adverse impact on several areas of activity and was instanced several times in the self-assessment report. The failure to complete a schedule of management information reports has hindered some aspects of planning and the devolution of budgets. Appropriate steps have been taken to deal with these problems. Staff are deployed effectively and care is taken to keep within the college's staffing budgets. The paucity of reliable management information on personnel makes it difficult for the college to carry out human resources planning effectively.

83   The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. Operating

deficits are forecast for the next three years. Action taken has improved and maintained the college's solvency and reserves from a formerly weak position. A qualified accountant, who is a member of the senior management team, heads the finance team. Detailed monthly management accounts show the achievement of progress against financial performance indicators. The senior management team formally considers the monthly management accounts at meetings. Separate management accounts are produced for the college companies, but these are not consolidated into the college management accounts. Budget holders receive monthly reports of actual and committed expenditure against budget. The finance team provides budget holders with effective support. Recently updated financial regulations are comprehensive and widely distributed. A considerable amount of time and effort is given to internal audit and it is accorded high priority. The self-assessment report acknowledges as a weakness, the college's failure to get its returns to the FEFC on time. The college's funding unit claims for 1995-96 to 1997-98 were severely delayed because of problems over producing reliable data on students. Recent action has been taken to address long-standing internal and external audit concerns about the reliability and robustness of the college's system for maintaining students' records. The unaudited funding claim for 1998-99 was received on time.

84   The college has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy and disabilities statement and their effectiveness is reviewed regularly. The curriculum has been reviewed and modified to ensure that the ethnicity and cultural background of all students are respected, through all its aspects. During the last year, curriculum teams have completed an 'equal opportunities' audit of their areas and produced action plans to further the promotion of equality of opportunity. Data on students' gender and ethnicity are collected. The data, however, are

not analysed to identify trends in the retention and achievement rates of particular categories of students. In its self-assessment report, the college underestimated the high degree of commitment on the part of staff to upholding and promoting equality of opportunity.

Conclusions

85   The inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. The self-assessment report was the second annual report the college had produced. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the report. Inspectors considered that some of the weaknesses, especially those relating to teaching and learning and students' achievements, had not been given enough significance. The self-assessment report was detailed and comprehensive. Inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college for five out of the seven curriculum areas. The grades they awarded for the other two areas were, respectively, one grade higher and one grade lower than those given in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with the grades in the self-assessment report for three of the five areas of cross-college provision. The grades they awarded for two areas were higher than those given by the college.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1999)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	20
19-24 years	13
25+ years	66
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1999)

Level of study	%
Level 1 (foundation)	25
Level 2 (intermediate)	22
Level 3 (advanced)	21
Level 4/5 (higher)	2
Non-schedule 2	30
Total	100

Source: college data

FEFC-funded student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1999)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	380	1,453	19
Agriculture	7	10	0
Construction	27	145	2
Engineering	207	402	6
Business	321	1,071	14
Hotel and catering	251	474	8
Health and community care	528	1,284	19
Art and design	443	190	7
Humanities	290	1,325	17
Basic education	62	718	8
Total	2,516	7,072	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 16% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1999)

	Perm-anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	222	4	90	316
Supporting direct learning contact	20	2	0	22
Other support	78	1	3	82
Total	320	7	93	420

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£13,086,000	£12,794,000	£12,584,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£16.39	£16.39	£16.33
Payroll as a proportion of income	66%	65%	65%
Achievement of funding target	94%	99%	96%
Diversity of income	29%	29%	29%
Operating surplus	£303,000	£243,000	-£235,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)
ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999)
Payroll – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)
Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
Diversity of income – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)
Operating surplus – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1997	1998	1999	1997	1998	1999
1	Number of starters	694	614	500	1,553	3,627	2,787
	Retention (%)	80	82	71	72	85	82
	Achievement (%)	52	52	55	54	64	59
2	Number of starters	1,364	1,534	1,637	1,317	1,920	2,360
	Retention (%)	79	78	75	74	83	75
	Achievement (%)	74	57	58	69	63	63
3	Number of starters	1,643	2,255	1,707	1,561	1,800	1,602
	Retention (%)	66	76	68	75	76	74
	Achievement (%)	67	69	59	65	64	58
4 or 5	Number of starters	3	20	2	167	264	151
	Retention (%)	100	90	0	83	86	77
	Achievement (%)	67	54	0	46	64	65
Short courses	Number of starters	546	28	280	3,844	384	620
	Retention (%)	89	93	86	89	89	87
	Achievement (%)	61	75	90	74	56	81
Unknown/ unclassified	Number of starters	341	1,327	750	535	769	1,345
	Retention (%)	89	84	68	80	76	80
	Achievement (%)	32	7	91	67	34	91

Source: college