

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100
Website <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>*

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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

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

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

Student Achievements

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

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

Summary

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College *Northern Region*

Inspected November 1998

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Darlington, has over 1,200 full-time students, most of whom are between 16 and 19 years old. The college offers courses in six of the 10 programme areas funded by the FEFC. Two of the programme areas and aspects of cross-college provision were inspected. The college's first self-assessment report was produced to a high standard in 1998 and involved consultation with all staff in the college. The report included classroom observations which were carried out by external consultants. The inspection team found the self-assessment report helpful in planning and carrying out the inspection. The report identified most of the college's strengths and weaknesses.

Governors, managers and staff provide an effective and demanding learning environment for students. Standards of teaching are good. Staff are well qualified and effectively managed. Work for students is set regularly, marked meticulously and returned promptly; criticism is constructive. The quality of the provision for students of mathematics is outstanding, and for science and humanities it is good. Examination results and pass rates at the higher grades are above the national averages for sixth form colleges in many of the courses inspected. Attendance is excellent and the in-year retention

rates are good, although the retention rates for a number of two-year courses have declined over the last three years. The college has excellent systems for supporting students. The quality assurance system is strong; good use is made of the analysis of students' achievements. The main building is well maintained and well equipped. There is an open and effective management style. The college has maintained a healthy financial position. The college should improve: the declining course retention rates; the arrangements for target-setting; and the shortcomings in the present building stock.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	2	Support for students	1
Mathematics	1	General resources	2
English and modern foreign languages	2	Quality assurance	2
Philosophy, psychology and sociology	2	Governance	2
		Management	1

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College was established in 1970 in Darlington on the site of a school whose charter was granted in the sixteenth century. The town, together with its surrounding area, has an approximate population of 100,000. Darlington was previously a centre for railway and heavy engineering and is now developing a range of business in light engineering and services. It still retains the atmosphere of a market town. The unemployment rate is comparable with the national average of 6.7%.

2 The college has 12 partner schools for the 11 to 16 age-group. Six are within Darlington, four in south Durham and two in North Yorkshire. In September 1998, 47% of the college's intake of 16-year-old students came from partner schools in Darlington. Of the remainder, over a third came from maintained schools for pupils aged 11 to 18 or the independent sector. The participation rate in post-16 education in Darlington for full-time students has increased from 49% in 1994 to 60% in 1997. In 1998, the proportion of students leaving schools in the area with five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects at grade C or above is 37.1%; the national average is 46.3%.

3 At the time of the previous inspection in 1994, there were 935 enrolled students of whom 903 were full time. By September 1998, there were 1,460 students of whom 1,232 were full time. Provision includes: 29 courses that lead to qualifications for the general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level); eight that lead to GCSE qualifications; four general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) courses at both advanced and intermediate level; a BTEC art foundation course; an access to higher education course for adults; and a range of short courses.

4 The curriculum of the college is organised through six programme areas, each of which is

led by a director of studies. Support for students is organised through five teams of tutors, each led by a principal tutor. The senior managers are: the principal, a vice-principal who manages the curriculum and quality assurance, a second vice-principal who is responsible for students, and three assistant vice-principals. In September 1998, the college employed 68 full-time equivalent teachers and 28 full-time equivalent support staff.

5 In its vision statement, the college asserts that its purpose is to help students to fulfil their potential by offering them opportunities to learn in a supportive and stimulating environment. The college aims to make appropriate demands on students and to gain a full response from them. The statement also commits the college: to generating a stimulating working atmosphere for staff; to providing staff with pioneering and creative opportunities; and to seeking excellence in all aspects of college life.

The Inspection

6 The inspection took place in November 1998. In June 1998, the inspection team evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Early in September 1998, the college was notified of the sample of provision which was to be assessed by inspectors. Data on students' achievements for the years 1996 and 1997 were considered and the college's data for 1998 were validated. Data for 1996 and 1997 were taken from the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR).

7 The inspection team comprised eight inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 35 days. Inspectors observed 50 lessons and four tutorials, examined students' work and scrutinised a variety of college documents. Members of the inspection team observed a meeting of the corporation and held discussions with governors and the clerk. There were also

Context

meetings with managers, college staff and students and with a representative of the Tees Valley Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

8 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons and tutorials inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in

1997-98. Of the 54 lessons observed, 80% were good or outstanding which is significantly better than the national average of 65% for colleges inspected in 1997-98. No lessons observed in the college were less than satisfactory.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	14	16	8	0	0	38
GCSE	1	5	1	0	0	7
Other*	2	5	2	0	0	9
Total (No)	17	26	11	0	0	54
Total (%)	31	48	21	0	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

*includes four tutorials

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

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College	14.9	90
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

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

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 2

10 The inspection team observed 13 lessons and sampled students' work in biology, chemistry and physics. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. However, some weaknesses were not given sufficient weight.

Key strengths

- appropriate teaching methods in well-structured lessons
- effective on-course support for students
- examination results above national averages in GCE A level physics and GCSE chemistry

Weaknesses

- insufficient co-ordination of the work of subject teams
- declining retention rates in some subjects

11 The college offers GCE A level courses for full-time students in biology, chemistry and physics, and a GCSE science course. Biology staff teach a unit in the college's access to higher education course. The three science subject teams maintain good enrolments which contrast with declining national trends in recruitment to science courses. GCSE chemistry and physics courses have been discontinued and replaced by the GCSE science course as part of the college's strategy to provide more appropriate intermediate level courses. Within subject teams, the curriculum is effectively organised by experienced teachers. Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that the management arrangements for the programme area ensure a coherent approach and effective sharing of good practice between subject teams. Whilst general scientific matters are dealt with effectively through programme area meetings,

there are few opportunities for a common approach to issues such as strategic planning, curriculum organisation and the development of study skills.

12 Teachers plan their lessons thoroughly and ensure coverage of examination syllabuses. They expect and achieve high standards of attendance, punctuality and commitment by students. The average attendance during inspection was 90% and student surveys indicate that a clear majority of students find lessons interesting and demanding. Teachers have excellent working relationships with students. They successfully develop students' scientific skills and provide helpful guidance on assessment criteria, syllabus content and study skills. Coursework and homework are set regularly, marked carefully and returned promptly. Students work safely in laboratories. In the best practical lessons, experimental work was successfully related to theory. The inspection team agreed with the judgement in the college's self-assessment report that students are given clear guidelines on laboratory procedures. All GCE A level physics students who are not taking GCE A level mathematics take additional mathematics sessions which are planned to help them in their physics course. Students appreciate the amount of time teachers devote to informal individual tuition.

13 The work in students' files and portfolios is well organised. Most of their written work which is neat and provides sufficient detail, shows good levels of understanding and an ability to communicate ideas well. Practical work is of a high standard. Students work effectively whether alone or as part of a team. They obtain reliable results which they use to develop well-researched conclusions. Examination pass rates in GCE A level physics at both A to E and A to C grades are significantly above national averages for sixth form colleges. Retention rates for this subject are also high. Students on the chemistry GCSE course achieved good pass rates at grades A to C over the past three years. The self-assessment

Curriculum Areas

report recognised the strength of these results. The same report acknowledged that pass rates for GCE A level biology have been below the national average for the past three years. Retention rates have been in decline on GCE A level biology and chemistry courses. Of the students completing advanced level science courses, 85% entered higher education last year and of these 43% chose science-related courses.

14 In contrast to physics where laboratory facilities are good, the biology and chemistry laboratories are in poor condition. The college

recognises these weaknesses. Governors regard the refurbishment of these laboratories as the highest priority within the accommodation strategy. The chemistry technician has too little space to prepare for practical lessons. The college has very good specialised scientific equipment and consumable materials to support teaching in class and fieldwork. Inspectors agreed with the college self-assessment on the lack of computer hardware and software in laboratories and the infrequent use of information technology (IT) in lessons.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCE A level biology	3	Expected completions	58	63	51
		Retention (%)	95	76	73
		Achievement (%)	75	81	62
GCE A level chemistry	3	Expected completions	62	79	55
		Retention (%)	89	85	80
		Achievement (%)	87	76	85
GCE A level physics	3	Expected completions	54	78	59
		Retention (%)	82	91	83
		Achievement (%)	94	94	100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Curriculum Areas

Mathematics

Grade 1

15 The inspection covered the provision of mathematics at GCE A level, GCSE, and as part of an access to higher education course. Thirteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. By the date of the inspection, weaknesses noted in the report had been substantially remedied.

Key strengths

- a well-planned and well-managed curriculum
- consistently good teaching
- excellent levels of achievement
- high levels of attendance and punctuality

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of IT

16 The college offers a good range of full-time courses in mathematics. The programme includes: GCE A level mathematics and further mathematics; GCSE courses for students who have not previously achieved a grade C; and a module in the access to higher education course. GCSE provision has recently been reviewed and separate classes provided for those students who previously gained very low grades at GCSE. Mathematics courses are planned and managed effectively. Managers have high expectations of both staff and students. Students are well informed about course content and assessment.

17 All lessons observed were good or outstanding. Inspectors agreed with the college that lessons are well planned, activities are purposeful and teaching is effective. Lesson preparation is thorough. The pace of lessons is brisk; explanations are well developed and teachers use probing questions. They make

students work hard both within and outside lessons. Students' commitment to their work, and the quality and style of teaching are significant factors in the achievement of good results in external examinations. The contribution made outside lessons by teachers is highly valued by students. For example, a considerable amount of time is spent helping students who have been absent to ensure that they keep up to date with their work.

18 Students' work is well presented and shows that examination requirements are thoroughly covered. Progress is assessed regularly and effectively and includes reports to students and their parents. Marking of assignments is thorough, indicating the standard reached and giving guidance on how to improve. The induction programme for first-year GCE A level students covers the algebraic skills that are necessary for successful advanced level study. Additional help outside lesson time is available for those who need it. Assessment on entry of students on GCSE courses identifies topics and skills which individual students find difficult. This information influences course and lesson planning and ensures the early referral of students to the study and skills support centre where they can receive extra help.

19 Inspectors confirmed the strength noted in the self-assessment report that achievement rates, particularly at the grades of A to C, on GCE A level courses are high, and above the average for sixth form colleges. For example, in 1998, over 40% of students gained grade A. The pass rate on the GCSE mathematics course has also been above the average for two out of the past three years. In 1998, over 88% of students improved on their previous grade, and 68% of students gained at least a grade C. Data on students' achievements are carefully monitored. Students on GCE A level courses consistently show that they add high levels of value to their work since their results are significantly above those predicted from their GCSE grades on entry. Students are hard

Curriculum Areas

working; their levels of attendance and punctuality are high.

20 Teachers are well qualified, enthusiastic, and confident in their subject knowledge; they work well together. Staff responsibilities are clearly defined and understood. Specialist rooms are well maintained and relevant mathematical displays create a good working environment. Graphical calculators are used effectively in some lessons to assist in solving problems and software packages are used in study support sessions to develop further students' skills. However, there is insufficient use of IT to enrich students' experience in mathematics lessons. The self-assessment report recognised that the use of IT is not incorporated into schemes of work for GCSE.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE mathematics	2	Expected completions	150	114	150
		Retention (%)	88	84	84
		Achievement (%)	55	45	68
GCE A level mathematics and further mathematics	3	Expected completions	99	130	80
		Retention (%)	86	82	76
		Achievement (%)	81	92	98

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Curriculum Areas

English and Modern Foreign Languages

Grade 2

21 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in English, French, German and Spanish. They were in broad agreement with the findings of the self-assessment report, although they identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good teaching in most classes
- the promotion of learning outside the classroom
- a wide range of well-managed programmes
- good achievements by students at GCE A level

Weaknesses

- low retention rates in some subjects in 1998
- low pass rates in some GCSE subjects

22 The college offers a wide range of provision in English and modern foreign languages that includes English language, English literature, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and Russian. As well as courses for GCSE, GCE A and advanced supplementary (AS) level, the curriculum area provides courses leading to open college qualifications and contributes to an access to higher education course. The range of evening courses is growing. All students have the opportunity to study a foreign language through the college's supplementary studies programme. The curriculum area is well managed. As the self-assessment report indicates, teamwork is a strength. Teachers work well together to plan courses, discuss teaching methods and devise common materials. Managers have successfully remedied weaknesses; for example, courses in which

recruitment or achievements have been consistently low have been withdrawn or reorganised. Course documentation is helpful and a staff newsletter promotes effective communication.

23 There is an extensive range of specialist activities to enrich the experience of students. For example, modern foreign language students tutor pupils from the college's partner schools and take part in foreign visits and exchange programmes, that include work experience abroad. Activities for English students include: theatre visits; drama workshops; residential study; and visits to the college by poets.

24 Teaching in most lessons is appropriately varied, imaginative and effective. English lessons contain an effective blend of individual, group and whole-class activity. Students have access to materials which allows them to extend their studies beyond the topic being taught. Modern foreign language courses are structured to ensure that the different language skills are evenly covered. Most lessons are conducted in the language being studied. Teachers set students of foreign languages a listening task for homework each week, using audio cassettes. The self-assessment report defined the different strengths of the two areas. Learning outside the classroom is effective and matches students' needs. Teachers in both areas arrange extra help for those experiencing difficulties, and provide additional learning materials. In a few lessons, poor planning resulted in teachers ending lessons abruptly, without sufficient review of the salient points that had been covered.

25 Students respond well to their teachers in lessons and produce coursework of good quality. They make good use of IT in their own research, and in redrafting written assignments after they have been marked. In 1998, A to E pass rates for all five GCE A level subjects were above national averages for sixth form colleges. With the exception of results in 1997, pass rates for grades A to C in GCSE subjects were above

Curriculum Areas

national averages for English language and English literature. GCSE results were below the average for modern foreign languages. The self-assessment report does not identify as a weakness the failure of some students to complete their course. For example, although pass rates have improved significantly in GCE A level French over the last three years, there has been a decline in retention rates.

26 There is good provision of specialist equipment. Dedicated classrooms have

attractive and useful displays of students' work. Most English classrooms are helpfully clustered around a private study and resource area. Teachers are well qualified and suitably experienced. They are ably assisted by foreign language assistants who, in addition to their work with students, record materials from foreign radio and television broadcasts. The use of computer software for foreign language learning is underdeveloped.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE English language and English literature	2	Expected completions	95	106	123
		Retention (%)	81	85	77
		Achievement (%)	45	30	65
GCSE French and Spanish	2	Expected completions	33	29	20
		Retention (%)	73	74	67
		Achievement (%)	73	55	55
GCE A level English language and English literature	3	Expected completions	182	213	186
		Retention (%)	67	81	80
		Achievement (%)	91	88	97
GCE A level French, German and Spanish	3	Expected completions	79	96	92
		Retention (%)	89	72	73
		Achievement (%)	77	91	94

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Curriculum Areas

Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology

Grade 2

27 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in philosophy, psychology and sociology at GCE A level, GCSE and on the access to higher education course. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-structured and well-managed lessons
- good examination results
- the effective management of the programme area
- good accommodation and resources

Weaknesses

- some weaknesses in classroom management
- declining retention rates in some subjects

28 Inspectors agreed with the observation in the self-assessment report that the provision of a wide range of courses is a strength of the humanities programme area. GCE A level philosophy and access to higher education courses are recent additions to curriculum provision. The programme area is well led. Teachers are energetic and enthusiastic, work well together and are dedicated to their students' progress. Students' views are welcomed and responded to. There are regular programme area and subject team meetings. Students' achievements are closely monitored.

29 In most lessons, the aims are made clear to students and there is an appropriate variety of activity which maintains their interest. Poor time management is a weakness that is not identified in the self-assessment report. For

example, the conclusions of some lessons are too perfunctory and fail to emphasise the learning which has taken place. Teachers make good use of learning resources, including video recordings, a local IT network and CD-ROM facilities. They manage students' work in pairs, groups and whole-class discussion effectively. Teachers show a good command of their subject. They are thorough in developing their students' grasp of technical terms and understanding of concepts.

30 In most lessons, there are excellent working relationships between teachers and students; humour is used effectively to stimulate students' interest. Attendance and punctuality in the lessons was good. Teachers make effective use of students' own ideas and experiences to illustrate points and aid understanding. Many students spoke enthusiastically of their satisfaction with their course of study, their teachers and the support they receive. As identified in the self-assessment report, humanities students are encouraged to become self-motivated and so prepare for the transition to higher education. All courses have induction programmes which familiarise students with the variety of learning resources available. The confidence of philosophy students is developed through extensive reading around the subject. An effective link with a local university allows students to use its library. This arrangement helps them to develop essential research skills. Extra lessons, which are held at lunchtimes and in the evenings, go beyond the syllabus and aim to extend the more able students. The informal learning support given to all students is extensive and includes non-timetabled support for individual students as well as occasional revision sessions in the evenings and at weekends.

31 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that achievement in external examinations is high. Both sociology and psychology courses at GCE A level had 98% pass

Curriculum Areas

rates in 1998; the proportion of A to C grades is also above the average for sixth form colleges. Students studying for both subjects are performing to, or exceeding predictions based on prior achievement at GCSE. Results in psychology and sociology are good on the access to higher education course. Students' assignments demonstrate appropriate skills. Some coursework is of a standard that shows high levels of knowledge, understanding, analysis and organisation. Retention rates for two-year GCE A level courses reveal a downward trend.

32 Staff are well qualified, hard working and enthusiastic. The teaching accommodation is good. Classrooms are large, airy and well equipped. Individual subjects have specific base rooms and good learning resources. Some information is stored in classrooms and is not so readily accessible. This shortcoming is recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report and is being resolved by the gradual transfer of the material onto the IT network. There is good access to, and use of, IT facilities to support each of the subjects.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in philosophy, psychology and sociology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE sociology	2	Expected completions	12	17	9
		Retention (%)	86	85	69
		Achievement (%)	67	71	100
GCE A level psychology	3	Expected completions	80	61	82
		Retention (%)	82	73	62
		Achievement (%)	92	84	98
GCE A level sociology	3	Expected completions	61	59	47
		Retention (%)	81	73	69
		Achievement (%)	93	93	98

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 1

33 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses included in the self-assessment report. The college has taken effective action to remedy the weaknesses identified in the report.

Key strengths

- productive relationships with partner schools
- good arrangements for supporting learning
- successful monitoring of tutorials
- excellent arrangements for careers guidance
- a well-managed programme of enrichment activities

Weaknesses

- imprecise targets for monitoring student progress

34 The college and its partner schools co-operate fully in ensuring that pupils receive appropriate information and guidance on their future options. This strength is recognised in the self-assessment report. The extensive information and guidance programme includes visits to the college for year 10 pupils and interviews held at the partner schools. Open evenings are widely advertised and popular. Many pupils and parents from non-partner schools attend. Some current students said that they particularly valued the bridging week which takes place in July before enrolment. During the bridging week, students sample lessons in a range of subjects and are introduced to their prospective tutor and fellow members of the tutor group. The college is leading an initiative with the local schools and other partners to encourage pupils to aspire to entering higher education. A special open

evening is held for prospective adult students who praise the quality of the guidance which they receive. An act of collective worship, open to all students and staff, takes place once a week at a nearby church. There are close links with this church and the vicar visits the college regularly to provide an input into religious study programmes.

35 Tutor groups contain students from a variety of courses. Tutors have short daily meetings which are used effectively to communicate with individuals and the group. These meetings are supplemented by a longer weekly session that follows a programme planned centrally and common to all tutor groups in the college. Tutors know their students well. Personal matters that are beyond the scope of the tutorial system are referred to the college's qualified counsellor. Students receive a comprehensive introduction from their tutors to the facilities and resources that will help them in their studies. Other group tutorials cover a range of topics, for example study skills and the introduction of records of achievement. These tutorials are sometimes less popular with students. Tutors keep records of weekly activities; the records are regularly inspected by their principal tutor. Part-time students benefit from suitably modified tutorial arrangements. Inspectors judged that the uneven standard of tutorials across the college, which had been identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report, had been rectified by the time of the inspection.

36 Since the last inspection, the college has extended and strengthened its arrangements for supporting students' learning. These improvements are recognised as a strength in the self-assessment report. A well-designed and extensive system for determining students' needs is used, and staffing has been increased to enable the additional support to be given. All teachers of first-year classes assess students in the context of their own particular subject. Students found to be needing help are referred

Cross-college Provision

to the study support unit and an appropriate programme is organised for them. The rate of attendance at the support sessions is excellent. A high standard of support for individuals and groups of students is a positive and distinctive feature of the college. Class and tutor group sizes have steadily increased and staff are concerned about their ability to maintain current standards of support.

37 College staff have high expectations of their students. They check attendance at lessons and tutorials rigorously; absences are thoroughly and promptly investigated. Students are regularly assessed in each of their subjects and their performance is discussed with them. Targets for improvement are agreed but these sometimes lack precision and some students suggested that their progress is not always closely monitored. The self-assessment report identified the strengths in assessment but not the shortcomings in target-setting. Parents are invited to meet tutors soon after enrolment, and again later in the academic year to discuss progress with subject teachers. They receive detailed annual reports and are encouraged to accept college invitations to meet staff. Care is taken in guiding and supporting students who wish to change courses or subjects after enrolment.

38 The careers and higher education advice service for students, including adult students, is outstanding. The college employs a full-time careers adviser who in 1997-98 held interviews with 80% of the student population. Effective co-operation with the County Durham Careers Service benefits students. There are excellent arrangements for helping students to select and make applications to universities. Tutors successfully encourage nearly all students to complete a record of achievement. These records are put to good use when students are preparing their applications. The college library has a well-stocked careers section. The college computer network carries a range of software which receives intensive use and helps students

to make sensible choices. In 1997, 80% of students completing advanced level courses gained places in higher education; of these, 87% went to the institution of their first choice. The self-assessment report recognises the many strengths in the provision of careers advice.

39 The college maintains a wide and well-managed programme of supplementary studies which provides opportunities for students to broaden their range of study. Many of the activities result in formal qualifications in, for example, IT and languages. Competitive sports, and work in the community and for charities also feature in the programme. Unless their main timetables are particularly demanding, all full-time, 16 to 19 year old students are required to take options from this programme. First-year students with high academic potential are offered a series of seminars to broaden and extend their learning.

General Resources

Grade 2

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

Key strengths

- a welcoming and attractive environment
- the responsible use of study spaces by students
- high-quality reprographic resources for students and staff
- good IT resources

Weaknesses

- poor access for those with restricted mobility
- insufficient study space and IT facilities in the library

Cross-college Provision

41 The college, located in a conservation area near the centre of Darlington, is based in a grammar school building dating from the middle of the nineteenth century which has had several additions in the last 40 years. Buildings are in good condition with the exception of the wing that contains the science laboratories. One of the two demountable classroom blocks is beyond its design life. In 1994, the college bought an adjoining late-Victorian building, previously used as a centre for community drama, as a base for its own English and drama provision. Considerable refurbishment has taken place since purchase. Courses in the visual arts and music are run in a converted Victorian house separated by a minor road from the main campus. This building is in need of refurbishment, but it appeals to the students who use it. A gymnasium, dating from 1938, no longer reflects modern needs for indoor sporting facilities. Heat control is difficult in much of the building stock. The college has recognised weaknesses in its accommodation and, in the accommodation strategy has identified a range of options to rectify them.

42 The buildings provide a welcoming environment for students and staff. In the main blocks, corridors and classrooms are carpeted and well decorated. Corridors and other public areas display notices and exhibits which provide information, and promote subjects and activities. Displays include: posters commemorating the careers of past students; works of art; and references to the history of the former grammar school. Room usage is carefully monitored and controlled. General purpose classrooms have been modified to increase the seating as group sizes have risen. The college's estate is the responsibility of a professionally qualified manager, appointed since the last inspection. Students with restricted mobility or other physical disabilities have difficulty in getting around the college but the self-assessment report does not mention this weakness in provision. Wheelchair users cannot reach the science laboratories, the students'

common room, or the gymnasium. Only the main buildings have toilet facilities designed for the disabled.

43 The college's equipment and learning resources are the responsibility of an assistant vice-principal who was appointed to this new post since the last inspection. There are good, modern, and accessible general-purpose IT resources which are well managed. This provision is recognised as a major strength in the self-assessment report. Overall, there is one modern workstation for every 10 full-time equivalent students of which 85% are available for individual use. About half have permanent access to the internet; the rest can be connected with staff permission. All open access workstations in the main buildings and the demountables are on a common network which carries sufficient relevant software. The college is on a shared network with seven local sixth form colleges, who are collaborating in the development of common materials. The capacity of the network has been increased recently. This improvement widens access to the college's stock of CD-ROMs which previously could only be reached through the four computers in the library.

44 The library provides a significant resource for students. It is a pleasant environment for study, but restrictions on space lead to congestion at periods of peak use. This weakness was recognised in the self-assessment report. The main library is supplemented by individual subject libraries operated by teachers. There is no central record of all the books held throughout the college. Some subject teachers have consulted the librarian on improving the management of their bookstock. In many subjects, students are issued with set texts. A computerised library administration system was installed in 1998 which now catalogues the main library lending stock. For private study students also use the recently refurbished main hall, an attractive large room and a smaller reading room. However, these spaces are

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sometimes occupied for other purposes. Students behave well in study areas and work effectively without supervision. The college's reprographic and design service produces learning and publicity materials of high quality. The students' common room, which contains a small food servery, is well used but is often overcrowded. Students also use a nearby community arts centre with a cafeteria, and shops and cafes in the town centre.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

45 Inspectors agreed with the judgements on quality assurance in the self-assessment report. The college has made progress in overcoming some of the weaknesses identified in this report.

Key strengths

- a strong college-wide commitment to continuous improvement
- a well-conceived framework for quality assurance
- the thorough analysis of the value added to students' achievements on GCE A level courses
- the extensive development of key performance indicators in curriculum areas
- a rigorous process of self-assessment
- good use of students' evaluation of provision

Weaknesses

- some deteriorating retention rates
- some targets and action plans unspecific
- over-optimistic evaluation of teaching and learning

46 The college has a long-standing commitment to quality assurance. Staff and governors strive to achieve continuous improvement. Since the previous inspection in 1994, the college has modified its policies and procedures relating to quality assurance to take account of the changing needs of the college and the national priorities for improvement in the sector. The college acknowledges that these new procedures have yet to demonstrate their full effectiveness. Clear links exist between the college's quality assurance framework, the self-assessment process, and strategic and operational plans. In preparing for and undertaking its self-assessment, the college has gained independent views of its provision. For example, a number of experienced and independent classroom observers were employed to assess the quality of the teaching and learning. Whilst this was an innovative approach, the observers did not provide a sufficiently critical view.

47 The college has developed an extensive range of key performance indicators to measure and monitor its academic performance. Statistics relating to in-year retention, attendance, students' achievements and the value added on GCE A level courses are meticulously monitored. They are regularly published within the college and are used in the well-established course reviews. However, some of the targets and action plans in the reviews lack clear measurements of progress which creates difficulty in assessing achievement. The self-assessment report failed to identify deteriorating retention rates and the poor achievement of some students on a number of courses. The organisation has many features of good practice identified by the college's quality indicators. Targets have not been set for all the quality indicators used by the college. Effective service standards for all cross-college functions have not yet been developed.

48 The college's charter clearly states its commitment to ensuring the educational success

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and welfare of its students. It also summarises what parents, employers and the community can expect from the college. Performance against charter commitments was evaluated rigorously until 1996 and the charter itself was reviewed in 1997. The college aims to evaluate the charter through regular reviews of operational plans but strategies to achieve this aim are not yet effective. The self-assessment report does not refer to the charter or the college's performance when measured against its charter commitments. However, a comprehensive range of surveys are carried out to establish students' and other people's views of the college's provision. The responses are overwhelmingly positive. The college is quick to take action in areas perceived to be in need of improvement.

49 The self-assessment report involved all staff in its preparation and contained well-considered judgements on performance in most areas of provision. It evolved from the college's annual report on quality assurance. The self-assessment report is well written in a candid style which was valued by inspectors. It is based on the headings in the Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment* to which additional quality indicators have been added by the college. Clear evidence is provided to support the college's judgements. The process of self-assessment was rigorous and took into account course reviews, lesson observations and analysis of performance indicators. The use of action plans to improve strengths and remedy weaknesses is an integral part of the self-assessment process. Action is monitored through the review of operational plans which takes place five times each year.

50 The college gives priority to the professional development of its staff. It offers effective training opportunities, either directly or through external agencies. There is a good framework for staff development that is aligned with the priorities in the strategic plan. The need for staff development is also identified

through well-organised appraisal for teachers and personal review procedures for support staff. The college intends that these separate processes of appraisal and personal review will be merged in 1999. Staff speak highly of the appraisal process. The college has held Investor in People status since 1995.

Governance

Grade 2

51 Many of the strengths and weaknesses of governance identified in the self-assessment report were confirmed by inspectors.

Key strengths

- a strong commitment by governors to the college and its students
- the broad range and effective use of governors' expertise
- good knowledge of the college's academic achievement
- the close monitoring of the college's financial performance
- a comprehensive range of effective committees

Weaknesses

- insufficient involvement of governors in determining strategy
- no quantifiable indicators of the board's effectiveness
- underdeveloped systems for the training and induction of governors

52 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.

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53 The corporation has 18 members of whom seven are women. The membership comprises: two parent governors; two members of staff; a TEC nominee; the principal; a co-opted member; and 11 independent members. Between them, governors have a broad range of relevant skills and professional experience which includes law, finance, accountancy, education, management, human resources, local government, architecture and quality assurance. Inspectors agreed with the observation in the self-assessment report that these skills are used to good effect. Governors demonstrate a strong commitment to the college and its key objectives. They have a clear oversight of the life of the college, but are insufficiently involved in shaping the strategic direction.

54 The comprehensive committee structure enables the board to discharge its responsibilities effectively. The committees have good reporting arrangements and clearly defined terms of reference. Some of the committees are innovative and are closely involved with academic and student affairs. For example, members of the curriculum committee receive and comment on reports on students' achievements as well as on new and discontinued courses of study. The student committee receives regular updates from students about their college activities and their perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning. These issues are in turn reported to and discussed by the full corporation. The finance and resources committee receives comprehensive management accounts at each of its monthly meetings, supported by a sufficiently detailed commentary. This committee is also closely involved in the process of setting the budget. Governors pay close and careful attention to financial matters. The role that the committees play in governance supports the conclusion in the self-assessment report that the corporation is able comprehensively to monitor the performance of the college. The board's performance committee was established in 1995

to enable the corporation to monitor the governing body's performance; it also has a role as a search committee. Quantifiable indicators other than attendance have yet to be determined. Although only minimum targets have been set, attendance is good, averaging over 80% in 1997-98.

55 The business of governance is conducted openly. Corporation agendas, minutes and papers are available on demand to members of the public together with the register of interests. The board has decided to hold its first annual general meeting in March 1999. In response to the last FEFC audit report, the corporation has recently appointed an independent clerk. Agendas and corporation papers are sent out in good time and the conduct of meetings is regulated by a comprehensive set of standing orders. Although the code of conduct is well established, it has not been updated to reflect fully the recommendations of the recent Nolan committee report.

56 Presentations are made to the corporation by senior managers on aspects of the college's work. Inspectors confirmed the view expressed in the self-assessment report that a more systematic approach to the training of governors is required and that induction arrangements need to be formalised. Currently, no analysis of training needs has been undertaken which might help to establish a training programme. A planned review of induction arrangements is intended to lead to the creation of a standardised induction checklist for new governors. A governors' handbook has recently been introduced and contains: appropriate details of membership; instrument and articles of government; committee terms of reference; a calendar of meetings; and the current three-year strategic plan.

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Management

Grade 1

57 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the strengths in the management of the college are substantial.

Key strengths

- the achievement of key performance targets
- the stringent monitoring of operational targets
- an effective management structure
- robust financial planning and management
- the efficient deployment of staff

Weaknesses

- shortcomings in the management information system

58 The self-assessment report refers to a wide range of targets which are set for institutional performance. The college has achieved or exceeded its funding targets in each of the last three years. The number of students, particularly those studying part time, increased significantly between 1995 and 1997. The college planned and achieved zero growth in enrolments in 1997-98. In-year retention figures over the last three years compare favourably with the average for sixth form colleges. Students' achievements are of a consistently high standard and have been improving year by year. In 1998, the pass rate at GCE A levels was 91%, a 3% improvement on the previous year. The figures for 1998 also demonstrate a significant element of value added for GCE A level results: on average students achieved a quarter of a grade higher at GCE A level than the prediction based upon their GCSE results. The overall achievement of qualification aims by students consistently

exceeds 90%, which is above the benchmark for sixth form colleges.

59 The current three-year strategic plan is prefaced by a statement of corporate objectives and a 'vision for the 1990s'. These were last updated in 1996. The self-assessment report recognises that these sections are due for revision. Accordingly, a review that involves all staff is scheduled for January 1999. The annual operating statement, which forms a key element of the plan, is sufficiently detailed and aligned to the main headings of the inspection framework of the FEFC. A named person is responsible for each of the targets which are reviewed by the senior management group at five points during the academic year. Copies of all college policies which cover the main aspects of college operations are included in the staff handbook. An equal opportunities committee, which includes students, is responsible for the operation of the college's equal opportunities policy. It produces an annual report which is presented to the governors' curriculum committee.

60 The management structure of the college is effective and supported by sufficiently detailed and personalised job descriptions for all staff. Inspectors agreed with the college that management adopts an open style, that the roles of different postholders are clear and that communications are effective. The curriculum and guidance management groups meet fortnightly and receive reports from the regular meetings of the curriculum and tutor teams. The senior management group meets weekly. Cross-college committees which cover, for example, GNVQ courses, staff development and appraisal, and IT development, give effective assistance to the management teams. All committees have full terms of reference; a college meetings calendar schedules all meetings through the academic year. Additional meetings are held for support staff, cleaners and estates workers on a termly basis. Daily minuted briefings are held by the principal for all staff.

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Occasional staff bulletins consider key issues. A termly newsletter about college activities is issued to parents and other people who have an interest in the college.

61 There are good examples of effective links with external agencies. For example, the principal is a member of a TEC task group promoting closer links between education and business and is also a co-opted member of the local education committee. An annual health fair at the college links GNVQ students with health service agencies to promote health messages. Science weeks and participation in the Young Enterprise scheme bring representatives of local business into college. The college has an effective marketing policy and three-year plan. Attractive promotional and publicity materials are on display. The use of local labour market information has led to the development of new courses including Japanese, computerised accounts and IT.

62 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good, and appropriately recognised as a strength in the self-assessment report. Reports from internal and external auditors do not indicate any significant weaknesses in internal control; financial regulations are clear and comprehensive. The financial position of the college is strong. A small but effective finance department provides budget holders with timely reports of actual and committed expenditure against budget. Detailed management accounts are produced each month and formally monitored by the senior management group. The key assumptions underlying the current financial forecasts have been clearly defined and are understood by senior managers. Returns to the FEFC are made within the specified deadlines.

63 In order to promote efficiency, targets are set for the average class size and for staff teaching hours. Average class sizes have

increased from 13.4 in 1994-95 to just under 16 in 1997-98. The college has also achieved its targets with a unit of funding which has decreased by over 25% over the last four years. In order to ensure that these efficiency measures do not reduce the quality of teaching, the college has sometimes employed external staff for some non-classroom duties, for example, marking and invigilating examinations. Although the management information system fully meets the needs of external reporting requirements, it is currently being improved. New hardware and software are being installed in order to produce a wider range of electronic reports and to extend electronic mail and internal network functions. Currently, as the self-assessment report recognises, middle managers do not have access to the network, and reporting facilities rely heavily on manual procedures.

Conclusions

64 The college's self-assessment report was extensive, rigorous and detailed. The judgements within it were supported by comprehensive evidence which was well cross-referenced. There was an appropriate section on priorities for action. Work on a number of these priorities had been completed by the time of the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report which provided a useful basis for planning the inspection. The college produced a helpful supplement of students' achievements in 1998. The supplement was used by inspectors to identify a few weaknesses which the college was not able to include in its original report.

65 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 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	81
19-24 years	4
25+ years	14
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	0
Intermediate	16
Advanced	80
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	4
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1998)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	318	145	30
Business	79	1	5
Hotel and catering	75	1	5
Health and community care	56	1	4
Art and design	147	2	10
Humanities	541	155	46
Total	1,216	305	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 14% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (September 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	54	13	1	68
Supporting direct learning contact	7	1	0	8
Other support	17	2	1	20
Total	78	16	2	96

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£3,188,000	£3,331,000	£3,201,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£19.20	£17.78	£17.26
Payroll as a proportion of income	78%	76%	76%
Achievement of funding target	104%	114%	102%
Diversity of income	4%	4%	4%
Operating surplus	-£94,000	-£86,000	-£66,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	132	169	182	12	57	136
	Retention (%)	100	95	86	75	79	82
	Achievement (%)	93	95	99	100	91	93
2	Expected completions	644	578	627	58	46	59
	Retention (%)	88	87	86	50	70	73
	Achievement (%)	98	95	95	97	90	97
3	Expected completions	–	1,643	2,037	–	117	110
	Retention (%)	–	84	79	–	65	73
	Achievement (%)	84	88	88	90	79	89
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	0	0	–	0	0
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Short courses	Expected completions	0	6	228	2	28	96
	Retention (%)	n/a	100	94	0	100	95
	Achievement (%)	n/a	100	97	n/a	100	96
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	0	37	75	21	29	141
	Retention (%)	n/a	95	83	71	45	65
	Achievement (%)	n/a	66	100	93	77	91

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

n/a not applicable

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