

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

South Thames College

August 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-96

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 113/97

SOUTH THAMES COLLEGE
GREATER LONDON REGION
Inspected May 1996-May 1997

Summary

South Thames College offers a wide range of courses from foundation level to degree course level to meet the needs of those who live in Wandsworth and its neighbouring boroughs. In particular, the college aims to help students whose previous educational experience has been unsatisfactory. Courses for students whose first language is not English are a strength of the college's provision. Many students are from different ethnic backgrounds, and from overseas. Governors are supportive and they are well informed about issues facing the college. Senior managers are purposefully addressing problems of reduced funding caused by miscalculation of student numbers in the first two years after incorporation. A recovery plan is being rigorously implemented. Students' recruitment and induction are well managed. Students receive good guidance and support. Some teaching is good and most is satisfactory. Students' examination results are good on some courses but, in general, they are variable. Some accommodation is pleasant. Deficiencies in the management information systems are being systematically rectified. The college should ensure that its quality assurance systems are implemented rigorously across all areas of provision. In addition, the college should improve: some accommodation; some of the teaching; students' achievements on some courses; and students' retention and attendance rates.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	3
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	1
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics and computing	2	English, modern languages, and EFL	2
Engineering	3	Basic education, ESOL and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	3
Business studies	3		
Health and community care	2		
Art and design and performing arts	3		

INTRODUCTION

1 South Thames College was inspected between May 1996 and May 1997. Inspectors spent 86 days inspecting curriculum areas and aspects of the cross-college provision. They held meetings with governors, students, teachers, support staff, and senior managers. They also met parents and representatives from the local community, the local authority, and local businesses. Inspectors examined students' work and extensive documentation relating to the college and its courses. During the inspection of curriculum areas in March 1997, there was industrial action by some teachers at the college. It is likely that this adversely affected students' attendance at some lessons and caused many to be cancelled. Inspectors were unable to observe sufficient classes in some humanities and science subjects to give a grade to part of those respective programme areas.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 South Thames College is a large general further education college which offers courses in all 10 of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas. It operates on eight sites, and at a number of smaller centres, in Battersea, Putney, Tooting and Wandsworth. The college has existed in its present form since 1993. It was formed from amalgamations of previously separate institutions in the areas where its main sites are located. The college has five faculties, four of which operate across several sites.

3 Secondary education within the Borough of Wandsworth is provided in 10 schools for pupils aged 11 to 18. All but two of these are grant maintained. The college has productive links with 50 schools from neighbouring boroughs where sixth form provision is more limited. The proportion of school pupils in Wandsworth and the surrounding boroughs who gain grade C or above in at least five subjects in the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), is well below the national figures.

4 The college's 26,589 students come from diverse backgrounds. Most students live in the London Borough of Wandsworth and the neighbouring inner city boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark, and Hammersmith, but students on specialist courses come from many parts of London. The college also has students from many other countries, who study vocational and English courses. Some of these are refugees and asylum seekers. Half the college's students are black or of Asian origin. Only 12 per cent of the students are in the 16 to 19 age range; 77 per cent are aged between 20 and 44. There is a substantial number of students over the age of 65, most of whom attend courses funded by the London Borough of Wandsworth. About half the college's students follow FEFC-funded courses. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

5 The college offers a comprehensive range of provision at all levels from basic education to degree courses, and timetables are arranged to meet the needs of different groups of students. It has a contract to provide the adult education programme for the Borough of Wandsworth. Through link arrangements with several universities in London, the college offers a range of degree courses. The college is responsible for teaching at Wandsworth and Belmarsh prisons. The college gives priority to meeting the needs of students who have been disadvantaged in their previous education. In its strategic plan, the college states that it gives priority to school-leavers with low previous levels of achievement, students of all ages with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and people who require essential qualifications, or new skills and knowledge, to further their careers.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 The college fulfils its strategic aim of providing students with a wide range of education and training opportunities. Most of the college's work is vocational. There are clear progression routes from provision at foundation level to degree level courses. A wide range of general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) courses is available up to advanced level in science, business, engineering, art and design, leisure and tourism, and health and social care. The range of courses leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) covers electrical installation, security alarms, childcare and education, playwork, administration, accounting and management. All NVQ courses are offered at level 2, and most are offered at level 3. Twenty-six subjects are offered within the general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) programme, and half of these may be taken as GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects. The college offers 27 GCSE subjects, mainly for part-time students. Full-time students, however, can also study GCSE subjects in which they need to be successful in order to progress to employment or further study.

7 Full-time GCE A level students broaden their studies by taking a GCE AS general studies course in the first year. The college is also piloting a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) 'working with others' module to help full-time advanced level students prepare for employment. One hundred and thirty-five full-time students combine general education and vocational courses. There are programmes which combine tuition in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) with a science or vocational course, such as that leading to the BTEC diploma in electro-mechanical engineering or a GNVQ in engineering. These programmes meet the needs of students who are asylum seekers or who require help with their English.

8 The faculty of community education is marketed as Wandsworth Adult College. It maintains close connections with the local authority, and many community groups and agencies. The faculty offers over 230 courses on 14 sites under 67 categories, including accounting, counselling, fashion, languages, yoga, and youth work. Most of these courses are at an elementary level and provide an introduction to subjects or activities.

9 Through the work experience schemes organised by faculties, the college has good links with the two largest local employers, Wandsworth Borough Council and St George's Hospital, and with many small businesses. It provides education and training within the modern apprenticeship programme funded by the A-Z Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), and this involves very close partnerships with 60 or more employers. Recently, the college carried out a market research project by contacting 400 small businesses and analysing their training needs. The results of this research inform the college's training programme. The college has recently established a business unit to improve the contacts which the faculties have already established with local employers. The unit aims also to increase the income generated from providing training for local businesses. A multimedia centre, Volnet, run by the college in partnership with the Open Learning Federation, provides information technology training for business and education providers in the region.

10 Some specialist provision attracts students from a wide area. For example, the college is the only one in the area recognised by the Security Industry Training Board as a provider of courses in security alarm installation. The college offers an unusually wide range of courses in the performing arts, and a music technology course. An innovative motor vehicle course, the Lambeth Auto Project, gives young people who have committed vehicle-related offences, the opportunity to develop skills in car maintenance and repair. A franchised project run on behalf of the British Corps of Conservation Volunteers, enables students to work together to rejuvenate lakes throughout Greater London. A special programme of courses has been devised for St George's Hospital, including language development for bilingual senior medical staff, and beginners courses in four languages. The college is one of the largest providers in the country of English as a foreign language (EFL) courses which attract many overseas students.

11 Relationships with the TEC are good. The TEC regards the college as a responsive provider of good-quality training. The college has made successful bids for two TEC-funded initiatives. A modern apprenticeship scheme involves 90 apprentices in nine vocational fields such as security alarm installation, playwork, and sports and recreation. A single regenerative budget initiative, which was designed to develop the economic potential of young people, has enabled the college to implement a scheme to encourage more students to progress to successful completion of advanced level study. A college vice-principal represents further education colleges on the London TEC forum, which disseminates information about education initiatives, and seeks to produce concerted responses to these from education providers. The chief executive of the TEC is a member of the college corporation. College staff are fully aware of the national targets for education and training for further education, which are outlined in the staff handbook, and mentioned regularly in the principal's newsletters. The national training targets are reflected in the college's strategic plan.

12 College staff maintain productive links with many schools in neighbouring boroughs. They give talks about the college's provision to pupils who can also visit the college. The college is also active on working parties reviewing post-16 education in Wandsworth. It has good links with special schools, which ensure curriculum continuity for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, both on courses specifically designed for them and on mainstream courses on which they receive additional support for their learning. The learning support unit works closely with 10 local special schools and units.

13 The college has good links with universities. There are a number of franchised higher education courses and initiatives. These include provision leading to a higher national diploma in business and finance mounted with the University of Kingston, a teacher training partnership with the University of Greenwich and a modular business degree course run in association with Guildhall University which has 200 students on the first two years of the course. The college has a partnership arrangement with South Bank University. Many students progress to higher education and Afro-Caribbean students have been notably successful in doing so.

14 The college is responsive to the changing needs of students. Through course review and validation procedures, managers identify changes which need to be made to the curriculum. In the last two years, a number of GNVQ courses have been introduced at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. At the same time, however, 13 courses have been withdrawn owing to a lack of demand for them or because it was evident from quality assurance findings that they no longer provided what students wanted to learn. There has been declining demand for some GCE subjects. In order to prevent the closure of some GCE courses and to preserve a good range of GCE A level provision, the college has rearranged timetables so that full-time and part-time students can be taught GCE subjects together. The college is taking steps to eliminate all unnecessary duplication of courses across sites by September 1997.

15 The college carries out thorough market research. In its needs analysis it makes good use of the labour market information provided by the local TEC. The college supplements its own research with more detailed analysis from specialist organisations. Courses are effectively marketed. The prospectuses are colourful and reflect the culture of the community. The local media are used to promote the college. An international marketing officer liaises with the British Council to recruit language students from abroad. The college has made significant use of the European Social Fund which has financed 21 courses since September 1996, to a total value of over £128,700.

16 Courses are organised and timetabled to meet the different requirements of students. For example, many engineering courses take place on two-and-a-half days a week rather than over five days, in order to accommodate the needs of asylum seekers and others receiving state

benefits, and students who have part-time employment. As a result of some successful initiatives, the college maintains high levels of participation, especially among the minority ethnic groups which constitute a substantial proportion of the local population. For example, the college has a number of open learning centres where students may study on their own, at times of their choosing, using materials which suit their individual needs. In addition, the college provides students with 'learning packages' which they can work through individually. There are 'home study options' for students who cannot come to college regularly. The college has also modularised some courses to enable students to complete them in stages, and at their own pace. Students on the NVQ level 3 course in childcare can study at home and 30 per cent of them do so. Courses are often timetabled to meet the needs of students with young children. Subsidised creches are available at each main site. The college opens on Saturday mornings to provide courses in foreign languages, information technology and on the use of the Internet for students who may not be able to attend during the week. Some of the college's libraries also open on Saturdays.

17 The curriculum is enriched in a number of ways. Full-time students benefit from free access to sports facilities and to foreign language training in the languages centre. Music students give concerts in the foyer at the Wandsworth centre during lunch times. The college's radio and television station broadcasts daily to the college's public areas and there are performances from time to time by media arts students. Students over 60 are encouraged to enrol. There are components of ESOL in many courses. Special arrangements are made to enable students with physical disabilities to take art and design courses.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

18 When the present principal was appointed in 1995, the college faced a number of difficulties relating to funding. Owing to the ineffectiveness of its management information systems and procedures for recording the number of students, the college overestimated the number of funding units it would obtain in 1994-95. In consequence, planning of the college's curriculum and accommodation was based on inflated student numbers. Governors and managers were slow to appreciate that a serious error had been made. The college is now experiencing reduced levels of FEFC funding which it had not anticipated but it now recognises fully the seriousness of its position. In September 1996, the senior management team devised a plan to make the college financially viable through reductions in teaching and support staff, a curriculum plan to reduce costs, and a revised accommodation strategy. This has now been translated into a recovery plan, which is being implemented purposefully by governors and senior managers who are also carefully monitoring its effectiveness.

19 There are 20 members of the governing body including two members of staff, one student, a nominee from the TEC, and the principal. Governors

have expertise in business, accounting, law, education, marketing, the community and voluntary services. Most have strong local connections. Nine of the governors are women and there are five members of minority ethnic groups. There are eight subcommittees of the governing body: finance and general purposes, personnel, estates, audit, remuneration, search, review and the Wandsworth adult college management advisory board. In order that the corporation may achieve both continuity in membership and the regular infusion of new governors with fresh ideas, each member serves for three years and may seek re-election for a further three years at the most. A vice-chair of governors, elected every two years, is expected to become chair of governors for the subsequent two years, if the governing body so wishes. The search committee has been effective in maintaining the required number of governors. New members are attracted through local advertising. The college's director of administration is also the clerk to the corporation. He ensures that meetings are efficiently minuted and that governors are provided with appropriate documentation.

20 Governors are firmly committed to the college and to helping it to fulfil its mission. They are positive about its future, and supportive of all that it does. Full corporation meetings are, generally, well attended. There was an average attendance of 88 per cent during the two years prior to the inspection. The review committee meets once a year to monitor the effectiveness of the committee structure. There has been an extensive programme of training events run by external consultants and college staff on items such as legal responsibilities, finance, and equal opportunities. Governors have a code of conduct, a register of interests, and a charter which states what governors should expect from the college and from each other. They have started to evaluate their own performance. In the past, the governing body and its subcommittees received information which was inaccurate but they did not sufficiently question its validity. They now feel more confident about the accuracy of information they receive on finance and students. They have agreed they should receive formal reports more regularly about the quality of the curriculum.

21 The principal's executive group and other senior managers form a cohesive team which is working systematically to improve the financial position of the college. The management structure was reorganised in 1995 when five faculties were created. Four out of the five heads of faculty had been in post less than four terms at the time of the inspection. The principal's executive group comprises the principal and three vice-principals responsible for curriculum and strategic planning; human and physical resources; finance and administration. Three of the four members of the group, including the principal, are women. The group determines the issues to be considered by the full senior management team and takes executive decisions when necessary. The senior management team meets at least every two weeks. Its 10 members comprise the principal's executive group, the five heads of faculty and the

director of administration. Managers of cross-college support functions receive all the papers prepared for senior management team meetings and are invited to attend the relevant parts of each meeting.

22 The college has a comprehensive planning process which involves consultation with staff at all levels. The strategic plan includes a detailed set of objectives. Following clear guidelines, all faculties and support departments are required to produce annual action plans, in a common format, showing how they propose to meet strategic objectives. The plans contain targets. Most of these are clear and progress towards reaching them can be measured, but some lack precision. The achievement of targets is monitored through regular line management reviews and in senior management team meetings.

23 Most course teams function well and they hold regular, well-minuted meetings. Most courses are carefully planned and comprehensive files of information about course content and assessment requirements are maintained. Verification procedures are usually conducted efficiently. Good records of students' progress are kept by most course teams.

24 The principal consults with staff in various ways. She holds monthly management briefings for an extended team of senior managers and deputy heads of faculty. Briefings for all staff are held once a term at all college sites. Monthly staff bulletins contain articles from the principal and other senior managers; some faculties produce their own newsletters. All faculties have their own boards of study. There is an academic board which successfully represents the interests of all staff, whilst being small enough to foster open debate. Its membership comprises the principal, the vice-principal responsible for the curriculum, the chairs of the faculty boards of study, and representatives of teachers, technicians, and learning resources staff.

25 There is a clear system for allocating funds for staffing and consumable items to faculties. A yearly cycle of financial planning, allocation and review was established in September 1996. Targets are agreed for enrolment, funding units, retention and pass rates for every course. On the basis of these, a contract is drawn up between each head of faculty and the principal. The contract also includes a target for income earned from sources other than the FEFC. At three stages during the year, the extent to which faculties meet their targets is reviewed. Failure to meet targets results in funds being withdrawn and the outcomes of the review are taken into account in making decisions on, and determining bids for, funding for the following year. All budget holders have received financial management training, and training in the FEFC's funding methodology. They are fully aware of the financial position of the college and of the need to improve efficiency. They receive regular financial reports from the finance director. Faculty staffing budgets are monitored carefully. Bids for capital equipment are made to a central fund. The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £19.87 per unit

compared with £20.23 per unit for 1995-96. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £17.97 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

26 In the past, management information on students has proved unreliable. There were inefficient systems for recording enrolments, attendance and retention rates. The accuracy of information has improved. Enrolment procedures have been computerised. In each faculty, a tracking officer is responsible for checking and following up non-attendance and withdrawals by students. There is still some discrepancy between information held centrally and that held in faculties. Information is not always produced as quickly as it is needed by managers. Targets are set for enrolments, retention rates and students' achievements on each course. The college expects to meet its overall enrolment target for 1996-97. The course review process includes the setting of targets for retention rates; the targets are determined by taking previous retention rates into account and, where necessary, increasing these in line with realistic expectations for improvement. The college keeps records on students' destinations and of students' progression to higher education. Information, however, on students' progression to jobs and on the destinations of part-time students not in employment, is incomplete.

27 There is a clear set of policies on personnel, equal opportunities, health and safety, and students' support, with procedures for monitoring their implementation. The policy on equal opportunities is detailed and it is put into effect through all aspects of college life. The equal opportunities committee has played a valuable part in securing equal opportunities for everyone in the college. It analyses and reviews information, and sets up projects which have a beneficial impact on the experience and achievements of students, such as those from minority ethnic groups. The college has monitored the use of its disciplinary procedures to ensure that minority ethnic groups do not experience discrimination. The health and safety manager and a working group have been successful in updating health and safety policies. In addition, they have devised clear and effective health and safety procedures and they have provided staff with relevant information and training.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

28 The college provides a very effective range of student services led by a student care manager. The student services team is responsible for admissions, enrolment and induction, childcare facilities, guidance and counselling, additional learning support and welfare. The college has always given priority, and has devoted substantial resources to the care and support of students across different sites. Since incorporation, there has been considerable development of college policies and procedures for central aspects of provision such as admissions, advice and guidance, enrolment and induction, interviews, tutorials, learning support and

childcare. A 'student care committee', chaired by the student care manager, meets termly to monitor services. The manager produces a detailed and evaluative annual report, containing a range of useful management information.

29 Prospective students learn about the college at open days which are held each term and at other events such as parent evenings and career conventions. Last year about 250 parents attended events at the college. The college has regular contact with schools in neighbouring boroughs and provides a series of 'taster' courses for pupils. In 1996-97, 300 pupils visited the college to learn about GCE A level and GNVQ courses. The college has centres at its main sites where support staff provide information to prospective students. Information on entry requirements, course content, assessment, learning support and careers advice is made available to potential students through well-designed and clearly-written prospectuses. The college produces a range of course leaflets and handbooks providing students with more detailed information and the names of staff whom they can contact. Care is taken to ensure that students have accurate information about the cost of courses and sources of financial help. A students' handbook, incorporating a diary and the college's charter, provides further information on the appeals and complaints procedures. It provides students with advice on how to deal with bullying and harassment, and how to prepare for examinations. All students have access to sound and impartial guidance before choosing their courses. There is evidence that the college puts the needs of students first and that they take precedence over its own needs to achieve recruitment targets for courses.

30 The college has developed an effective admissions system, and procedures for dealing with applications are clearly described in an admissions and initial guidance handbook. Enrolment is well organised and efficient. Teachers and support staff are given appropriate training and they are provided with useful guides to help them in supporting students through the different stages of the enrolment process. All prospective students are interviewed. During their interview, staff check that the students have chosen a course which is suitable for them and that they have appropriate qualifications for it. Students spoke positively about their experience at enrolment and said that they were dealt with courteously and efficiently. There are well-organised induction procedures which introduce students to college services and to their chosen courses. The students' handbook containing the college's charter, which explains their rights and responsibilities, is given out during induction. Most induction to courses is effective, and students are given clear information about courses and a useful introduction to the ways in which they will learn.

31 All full-time students are interviewed prior to enrolment and are required to take the Basic Skills Agency test to identify whether they need

additional support for their learning. Staff record students' support needs in an admissions log. The log is then sent to course teams and learning support staff who check that students receive the relevant additional support. In 1996-97, 180 students received support in literacy and numeracy each week. Their needs were met through a variety of learning support arrangements for developing their language, numeracy, and information technology skills. For example, key skills support workshops are held in the learning resource centres. The resources available to students who need additional support include compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases and packs of relevant reading texts and other learning materials. There is appropriate support across the college for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Their needs are carefully assessed and specialist staff are present when they are interviewed. Good support is provided for students with hearing and visual impairment, for students with emotional difficulties and for students with dyslexia. The college has, generally, effective arrangements for those students who wish to transfer from one course to another and they receive advice about the implications of the changes they wish to make.

32 All students on full-time and substantial part-time courses are entitled to a one-hour tutorial each week. In general, the time in both group and individual tutorials is well used. Following a review of its tutorial policy, the college has developed a common approach to the way tutorials are organised on all its courses. A handbook for tutors defines the role of the personal tutor and explains the tutor's responsibility for reviewing each student's progress and for helping every student to plan how to be successful. However, the quality of tutorials is variable in some programme areas. Some tutors had failed to carry out reviews of the progress of individual students and students' action plans were not always well developed. Part-time students are informed about their tutorial entitlement at induction. They said that they felt well supported by their specialist teachers. During tutorials, students maintain their records of achievement using a recording scheme which the college introduced in 1994. Staff have recently reviewed the scheme and although they identified benefits associated with it, they also found inconsistencies in the way it is implemented. Most students value working on their records of achievement and consider the development of a personal action plan to be particularly beneficial.

33 The college has a policy on the assessment and accreditation of the students' prior learning. Staff are encouraged to estimate the extent of prospective students' previous experience and to consider how it may be accredited when they apply to the college. On business administration and childcare courses, this assessment and accreditation process has been successful, with students taking units which build on their previous experience. As a part of its internal verification process, the college is reviewing and redefining its systems for accrediting students' prior learning. The college's vocational qualifications manager has produced

some useful guidelines for staff who accredit previous study and experience. Students who wish to have their prior learning accredited are provided with clear instructions on how this can be achieved and the criteria by which they will be assessed.

34 Students have good access to the college's comprehensive advice and counselling services. There are four professionally-qualified counsellors who work closely together to provide a confidential, effective service which is well regarded and used by students. The counsellors have bases at the college's three main sites and they advise students on a wide range of personal and practical matters. In 1995-96, they held 4,500 interviews with students. They also refer students who need more specialist support to external agencies. Students can apply for support from the college's access and hardship funds which are augmented by money obtained from other external sources, including some substantial sponsorships. In 1995-96, 500 students received financial assistance, 40 per cent more than the number who were helped in the previous year. The creches at five of the college's sites cater for about 140 children of students. Places in the creches are subsidised and applications for them from students who are on concessionary fees and on adult basic education courses are given priority.

35 Students are entitled to careers advice and guidance. The college has a service level agreement with a careers advice and guidance company and its staff work in the college for approximately 100 days a year. The service is well used and appreciated by students. The contractor, however, has decided to reduce the number of days upon which the service is provided each year. In addition to the assistance given to them by specialist careers teachers, students can also obtain a wide range of careers information in the well-resourced learning centres. For the last two years, careers fairs have been held in the college and these have been attended by representatives from employers and training organisations. Higher education fairs are also arranged and are attended by university admissions tutors. Careers guidance is effectively co-ordinated by the college's careers and schools liaison officer. She also provides training on careers education for staff, arranges for external speakers to address the students, organises careers conventions in the college, and monitors and evaluates the careers advice and guidance service. In 1995-96, 10 group sessions on careers education were held as part of the students' induction programmes, and 80 similar sessions were held throughout the year. Over 600 guidance sessions took place with individual students. All students leaving the college are offered an information pack about self-employment and running a small business.

36 The college is concerned about the unsatisfactory levels of attendance on some courses. It has been agreed that termly reports on students' attendance will be submitted to the senior management team. Statistics on attendance are monitored regularly. Individual students who are absent

without explanation are contacted promptly by telephone. The system for following up absence is working effectively. The college has identified a number of factors which have contributed to the improvement in attendance on several courses. Students' unpunctuality is also being addressed. Students are required to explain why they are late for classes, and to include among their personal targets, one which relates to punctuality. Managers are aware of the important role which tutors have in encouraging students to attend regularly.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

37 Strengths outweighed weaknesses in 56 per cent of the classes observed during the inspection. In 12 per cent of the sessions, weaknesses outweighed strengths. The profile of these lesson grades is below the average for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. The average attendance rate of students in lessons observed was 62 per cent. It is likely that this figure was adversely affected by industrial action. The following table summarises the grades awarded for the lessons inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Access to higher and further education	1	3	1	0	0	5
GCE AS/A level	6	8	5	0	0	19
GCSE	2	3	3	1	0	9
GNVQ	1	6	18	2	0	27
NVQ	0	23	3	0	0	26
Basic education	5	9	11	8	1	34
Other*	16	27	20	11	1	75
Total	31	79	61	22	2	195

*includes EFL and BTEC courses.

38 Most courses are well planned. Schemes of work and individual lesson plans have clear aims and objectives and they specify how the students will be assessed. Relationships between staff and students are good. Staff are encouraging and supportive towards their students, particularly towards those who are experiencing difficulty with their work. Some staff, however, do not take into account sufficiently the needs of students of different abilities and experience when they plan their courses and lessons. Assignments are carefully marked and, in most cases, students receive thorough and helpful written comment on their work. Teachers are confident when presenting subject matter. Much of the

teaching was lively and it challenged the students to think and use their skills well. In many lessons, the teaching was imaginative and it stimulated the students to develop and articulate their own ideas. In some classes, teachers spent too much time teaching the class as a whole and they failed to create opportunities for discussion and small group activities. Some students are provided with high-quality work experience, but students on some vocational courses do not have placements. Students have more experience of, and access to, information technology facilities on some courses than on others.

39 Teachers of mathematics identify the aims of lessons. They give students clear explanations of mathematical concepts and problems and they check regularly that students understand what is being taught. Mathematics teachers are particularly effective when giving presentations, or making expositions to the whole class. The teaching of full-cost courses in computing is carefully planned. Students are provided with good-quality learning materials which they value. In one lesson, adult students made rapid progress through logically structured worksheets with the help of class discussion and individual support from the teacher. In other information technology lessons, teachers spent too much time talking to the whole class and they provided the students with very few opportunities to participate in learning tasks, individually, or in small groups; teachers seldom used computers as teaching aids. In many computing lessons, students do not have access to an appropriate range of computers.

40 Engineering students are provided with a good balance of theoretical and practical work. Those following courses leading to NVQs are made aware of the need to keep detailed records of what they do. Students in employment are encouraged to collect evidence of tasks carried out at their workplaces. Motor vehicle engineering students make use of the modern vehicles they work on in garages to carry out assignments on components such as car entertainment systems and catalytic converters. In practical computing lessons on electrical engineering courses, students were encouraged to work collaboratively in groups. In motor vehicle body repair, and building services lessons, the teaching is of a high standard and teachers ensure that learning builds on students' industrial experience. In some lessons, little learning takes place because the teacher fails to make enough use of good teaching aids and the students have to spend too much time on the undemanding activity of copying notes from the whiteboard. Some handouts contain out-of-date material.

41 Business and administration courses are planned competently and taught well. In lessons on secretarial and on administration courses, training offices are used effectively. In most lessons, students are provided with useful written materials which strengthen their learning. They also receive helpful feedback on their work. Teaching on some law and management courses is lively and stimulating. Teaching on other courses, however, is sometimes lacklustre. Less able students on all courses receive

encouragement and effective support from their teachers. Individual students are given help regularly. More able students, however, are rarely challenged to work to the best of their ability and the pace of lessons is often too slow. In many lessons, teachers miss opportunities to provide students with learning activities which they can carry out on their own initiative, using skills of enquiry and investigation effectively in order to extend their knowledge and understanding of their subject. In addition, teachers failed to draw upon examples from local employment and the world of work to illustrate particular points and concepts.

42 Teaching on health and care courses is, generally, satisfactory. Staff use language and styles of teaching in lessons on foundation and pre-foundation courses which are particularly appropriate and effective. The planning of many courses, especially those in counselling is thorough. Teaching is often imaginative. For example, in a lesson on a GNVQ advanced course in health and social care, the teacher used role-play to help students understand the way teams function in organisations. The students were required to plan, cost, and complete a project to a precise specification. The teams had to allocate individual roles, and evaluate their performance. In some lessons, however, the teaching failed to challenge students to use their abilities to the full, or it did not hold their interest. Some group work was not planned or managed well.

43 Teachers in performing arts are skilled in managing lessons in which students work individually or in small groups. They are able to help and encourage students without imposing their own ideas on them. Drama and music students are encouraged to produce and perform their own work for audiences in the college and in the local community. In a lesson on a BTEC national diploma course in popular music, students were using a software package to arrange a piece of music. The teacher introduced them to theories of harmonic progression which enabled the students, once they had mastered these, to produce more sophisticated responses. The composition which resulted was essentially their own, but it had benefited from the teacher's guidance. Students' work is carefully assessed but occasionally teachers fail to provide students with written comments which are sufficiently detailed. Approaches to teaching and learning in art and design vary in their effectiveness. On well-established courses, such as the BTEC foundation diploma course in art and design, the quality of teaching and learning is good. Course documentation is generally sound in art and design. Lessons for adults in jewellery, ceramics, stained glass and photography are notably well planned and taught. The planning and teaching of lessons on some other courses are unsatisfactory; students are not always aware of what is required of them or of the standards which they need to achieve. Some teachers fail to recognise that students have varying levels of aptitude. For example, in one lesson, the teacher gave a task on an aspect of design to a student who lacked any understanding of perspective drawing.

44 Course teams in English and communications studies work together effectively to plan work and moderate assessment. Marking is usually detailed, consistent and constructive. Tasks given to students are appropriate and they find them interesting. In most lessons, a variety of appropriate teaching techniques was used. In some classes, there were limited opportunities for students to discuss issues. EFL lessons were well managed, and teachers skilfully used a range of activities to give all students the chance to speak English in a variety of different contexts. In an English lesson for business and tourism students, a student acted as scribe to summarise and report the key ideas arising from a session where students planned the making of a video about commercial franchising. The scribe's work proved effective in helping the students plan the development of a video in a logical and detailed manner. In other lessons, teachers made good use of visual aids and students' presentations. Modern foreign language lessons stimulated the students' interest; they had momentum and a strong sense of purpose. Teachers used the language being studied as the principal medium of instruction. In some lessons, however, teachers gave long expositions on grammar and failed to provide students with activities through which they could explore and work out grammatical rules for themselves.

45 Most English courses for speakers of other languages are accredited externally. The courses are comprehensively planned to facilitate progression from one level to the next. Lessons cover the necessary language skills and provide students with a variety of appropriate learning experiences. In one lesson, students were using the language laboratory to practise telephoning for information about a job. In another lesson, students took part in a role-play activity which involved shopping for clothes. Teachers' schemes of work do not always reflect the skills being taught and assessed. Generally, there are not enough opportunities for students to practise speaking English and listening to it, and to have their pronunciation corrected. The timetabling of courses does not take account of students' requirements for different modes of attendance. There are few opportunities for part-time students to receive feedback on their progress and to be involved in the assessment of the skills they have acquired.

46 Students on basic education courses have individual learning plans in which the content of courses is adapted to their needs. Staff agree learning objectives with each student. Students follow a programme of study which leads to a qualification. Teachers are careful to choose accreditation schemes for individual students which match their needs and aptitudes. Teachers are less careful, however, in their recording of students' progress and achievements. In the best lessons, the pace of learning was varied to meet the needs of students; teachers made it clear that they valued students' contributions in discussions; and they encouraged students to undertake a variety of appropriate activities. In one lesson, students worked together productively, preparing and

serving food, and their work was of a good commercial standard. In many lessons, however, the teaching was unimaginative and staff used an insufficiently varied range of teaching styles. In some lessons, students spent a long time on a single task without knowing why they were doing it. In one instance, the students were asked to take part in a drama session but some were reluctant to do so because they did not understand its objective.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

47 Most students enjoy their lessons and have a positive attitude to their studies. Vehicle and fabrication and building students carry out their assignments with enthusiasm and are keen to record their achievements. Students of English are interested in their work and are prepared to join in discussions. Most modern languages students are willing to speak in the language being studied and do so fluently and accurately. Students on the BTEC foundation diploma course in art and design spoke confidently about their work. EFL students gain confidence as they progress to higher levels of competence. Across the college, staff and students work well together.

48 The quality of coursework and other assignments is generally sound, as the reports of external moderators and verifiers testify. Some of the work on the BTEC national diploma course in nursery nursing is of an exceptionally high standard. Written work in English, modern languages, mathematics and engineering is well presented. It is the product of hard work by the students and demonstrates that they have developed skills and have acquired knowledge and understanding. Students on business courses leading to GNVQs and NVQs plan and organise their portfolios of work carefully.

49 Students carry out practical work competently and safely. In a practical lesson about security alarms, students displayed a sure grasp of technical principles as they made modifications to circuits in systems. Some electrical engineering students have developed a good range of useful technology skills. Adult students' work is of a consistently high standard in jewellery, stained glass, ceramics and pattern cutting. An improvised *commedia dell'arte* performance by students on the GCE A level course and the BTEC national diploma course in performing arts was fluent and contained considerable wit and invention. Students on the BTEC national diploma course in popular music have a varied repertoire of performance pieces and they display reasonable levels of competence, but the singing skills of some are weak. Some students' work on the GNVQ advanced art and design course does not reach appropriate standards, and the drawing skills and other essential skills of the students are insufficiently developed. Although some students, notably on language courses, use wordprocessors in the presentation of their assignments, the extent to which students are competent in information technology varies widely across courses.

50 On some courses, notably EFL and care courses, retention rates are high. Completion rates on English and mathematics GCSE courses in 1996 were over 70 per cent, above the rates on other GCSE courses. The college is monitoring retention rates on the first-year of GCE A level courses, and these have improved significantly. For example, by May 1996, of 28 students who had enrolled for GCE A level chemistry in the previous September, only 11 remained on the course. In May 1997, of 27 students who had originally enrolled for GCE A level chemistry, 20 were still on the course. On some courses, however, retention rates are low. In 1996, the proportion of students completing the BTEC national diploma course in mechanical, electrical and electronic engineering was 39 per cent of those originally enrolled. Fewer than half of those who enrolled on the part-time NVQ intermediate level 2 course in electrical installation completed it.

51 Thirty-three per cent of the students who completed intermediate level vocational courses at the college in 1996 gained a full qualification, according to the tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). This places the college within the bottom 10 per cent of colleges in the sector, on this performance measure. Sixty-three per cent of students who completed advanced vocational courses at the college in 1996 gained a full qualification, according to data published by the DfEE. This places the college in the bottom third of colleges in the sector on this performance measure.

52 Results on some GNVQ courses offered at different sites vary considerably. In 1996, 70 per cent of the students completing the GNVQ advanced business course at Wandsworth were successful. Less than half the students completing the same course at Tooting in the same year were successful. Results on GNVQ advanced health and care courses throughout the college are well above the national average. Seventy-eight per cent of students completing the GNVQ foundation course in health and social care gained the full qualification in 1996. At intermediate level, results on GNVQ courses in art and design and health and social care have improved between 1994 and 1996. Results on GNVQ intermediate engineering courses have declined during the same period. The results of students taking NVQ courses in administration at levels 1, 2 and 3 were close to national averages. Pass rates of students on NVQ courses in business administration and engineering were below the national average. In 1996, the number of students at Tooting on NVQ courses in accountancy at level 2 and level 3 who gained the full award was particularly low. In the same year, only 27 per cent of students taking NVQ level 1 and level 2 courses in engineering gained full accreditation.

53 Students on BTEC national courses in business and finance, health studies, childhood studies, social care, media, graphic design, and performing arts achieved pass rates of over 90 per cent. The results of students taking Institute of Legal Executives examinations are also good. The results of students on higher level EFL courses are average. Students

on typing courses do well. On several other courses students' achievements have been disappointing. The number of students who are successful on the Association of Accounting Technicians and the Chartered Association of Certified Accountants courses is very low. No students at all fully succeeded on the one-year legal secretaries course in 1996.

54 In 1996, 171 students aged 16 to 18 were entered for GCE A level examinations. Their average points score per subject entry was 2.9 (where grade A=10 points, E=2), based on the data published by the DfEE. This places the college in the bottom third of sector colleges on this performance measure. Results on two-year GCE A level English courses have improved significantly, and are above the national average. Results in GCE A level performing arts and on one-year language courses are consistently good. Only half of the students completing one-year courses in English and communications studies achieved passes in 1996. The proportion of students passing in GCE A level theatre studies, art and design, and computing are at, or below, the national average. The college's analysis of GCE A level results suggests that although the average points score per examination entry has declined, the 'value-added' component of students' achievements has increased. This component indicates the extent of students' achievements and is measured by comparing the students' final GCE A level grades with the GCSE grades which they held when they started their course.

55 In 1996, the number of students achieving grade C or above in GCSE sociology and most modern languages exceeded the national average for post-16 GCSE students. Results in GCSE English showed a significant decline from 1995 to 1996 but were still at the national average. Results in GCSE mathematics improved from 1995 to 1996 but were still below the national average. In 1996, results in GCSE science, economics and computing were poor.

56 Students whose first language is not English are acquiring good language skills, especially in reading and writing. Full-time students become competent in key skills. Achievement levels and retention rates on the full-time, return-to-study course are good; 92 per cent of those who completed the course gained wordpower certificates in 1996, and 70 per cent gained accreditation of their work by the London Open College or Pitmans. Adult students on basic education courses make worthwhile progress over a period of time. Some students are well motivated; they enjoy their studies and are mutually supportive in their work. Generally, the achievements of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on basic education courses are poor. Some students are unclear of the purpose of the courses they are studying, and few progress to other courses in the college.

57 A number of students have recently gained special awards. Two business studies students have won national awards for their achievements on BTEC and NVQ courses. A GCE A level photography student has been awarded one of only four scholarships from the American

College in London to take a four-year course in photography and video. Other students have substantially improved their qualifications while at the college and have progressed to higher education.

58 Twenty-three per cent of the students who had followed GCE A level courses or advanced vocational courses, progressed to higher education in 1996. A substantial proportion of students on the college's access courses progress to higher education. In 1996, over 50 per cent of students who had studied intermediate and foundation level courses, progressed to other further education courses. Students on administration courses have been particularly successful in progressing to further study; significant numbers of them have progressed from foundation level to level 4 courses and the higher diploma programme. Seventy per cent of the students on full-time 'return-to-study' courses for those whose first language is not English, progressed to other courses. Significant numbers of students on the advanced level performing arts courses, progress to other further education courses.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

59 One of the principal strategic aims of the college is 'to achieve quality through continual improvement'. The college has made progress in the development of quality assurance systems. The quality assurance statement supports the college's mission. The college's quality assurance group, a subcommittee of the academic board, monitors the implementation of the quality assurance systems. The strategic plan contains direct references to quality assurance and to staff development. The quality assurance co-ordinator has overall responsibility for quality assurance. Nominated teaching and support staff have responsibility for quality assurance in their particular areas of work. There are clear procedures for them to follow in reporting the findings of the quality assurance process to managers.

60 There is an established process of annual course review and development, which has been refined and improved over the five years during which it has been in operation. Documentation for the process includes clear guidelines for course teams on what should be covered in the reviews. At the beginning of each year, the teams consider the response of the faculty board of studies to the previous course review. During the year, each team has two meetings with the quality assurance co-ordinator to review progress of the current review, and to identify clearly future action. When the course review is complete it is submitted to the board of studies, and a report summarising its contents is submitted to the academic board for consideration. The course reviews take into account students' opinions on the quality of provision and they make use of performance indicators for enrolments, students' achievements and retention rates. Many course reviews are thorough and evaluative, but some are insufficiently detailed or critical. In some instances, there is insufficient

checking to ascertain whether necessary actions have been taken. Each course team is required to keep a quality file which has a standard set of contents. Most files are comprehensive but a few are incomplete. In the best practice, the files are kept centrally in the faculty and are reviewed regularly by the 'quality co-ordination manager'.

61 The college has a formal system for approving new courses which takes into account issues relating to quality. Faculty boards of study submit proposals for new courses to the academic board, which supervises the course approval system. All courses must be revalidated every five years, or earlier if there are problems with them in relation to retention rates, students' achievements or other aspects of quality. Students' views on their courses and the service the college provides are obtained through an annual questionnaire. Most course teams include student representatives who present students' views on the quality of provision. Some representatives attend meetings more regularly and contribute to them more effectively than others. Although students' views are taken into account by course teams in drawing up their action plans, student representatives are not always aware of the outcomes of their meetings with course teams. Part-time students' views are sought through the tutorial system. The college has attempted to collect data on employers' views of courses through a questionnaire. In 1995-96, few responses to this questionnaire were received from employers. A new system of telephoning employers whose employees study at the college, in order to gain their views, is proving more successful.

62 The college has recognised that retention has been poor on many courses for some time. It has identified a number of measures to improve retention rates, including the regular review of individual students' progress, which aims to raise students' aspirations and increase their motivation. Other measures taken have included increasing the hardship fund and improving tutorial support. For example a second personal tutor has been allocated to a course which had a retention rate of less than 50 per cent in 1995-96. Only two of the 22 students who started the course in September 1996, had left by the time of the inspection. Retention rates have improved on many courses in 1996-97. Observation of lessons has been introduced to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the college. The teaching of most staff has been observed, usually by heads of section who have received training in observation techniques. A record of lesson observations is kept on a well-designed form, a copy of which is kept by the teacher observed and his or her manager. After being observed, teachers can, if necessary, be asked to take part in a staff-development session to improve their teaching. There is no procedure for monitoring how effectively observation is carried out, and the system for observing lessons is to be reviewed before the next academic year.

63 Service level agreements covering most of the college's services have been in place for two years. In 1995-96, managers concentrated on setting

appropriate standards for these services. In 1996-97, they have begun to place more emphasis on monitoring their effectiveness. For example, timescales have been agreed within which minor repairs on the college's sites must be completed. The effectiveness of site management is reviewed each week, and staff have reported an improvement in the services provided. Site staff have also reported an increased level of satisfaction in doing their jobs.

64 The staff-development policy relates staff development to the college's strategic objectives. Three senior staff, including two full-time staff-development managers, co-ordinate staff development across the college under the leadership of the vice-principal responsible for human resources. This year, £120,000 has been set aside for staff development, which represents 0.7 per cent of the staffing budget and 0.5 per cent of the total budget for the college; the amount is the same as that spent on staff development in 1995-96. Many other budgets in the college have been reduced, and the fact that managers have not reduced the budget for staff development indicates the importance they attach to the training of the college's workforce. Three days are set aside each year as staff-development days for all teachers, and one-and-a-half days are set aside for support staff. Faculties and service areas produce annual staff-development plans. Current staff-development priorities include improving the quality of teaching, and training staff for new teaching and management roles. Some teachers have undertaken work shadowing or work experience to update their professional or commercial skills. The college allows staff to take up spare places on part-time courses and does not charge them fees. Over 200 staff are attending courses in 1996-97, in subjects such as information technology and education. The staff-development committee is responsible for the planning, provision, monitoring and evaluation of staff development and reports to the academic board. All training events are evaluated by the participants. Staff development is monitored by the vice-principal responsible for human resources and an annual report on staff development is submitted to the academic board.

65 Good progress is being made in training staff to be assessors and verifiers. The college has been slow to formalise procedures for internal verification although there are policies for assessment and internal verification. At present there are variations in the formality and effectiveness of internal verification procedures across the curriculum areas. The vocational qualifications committee, a subcommittee of the academic board, is considering common procedures and guidelines for internal verification. Reports from external verifiers are considered by the vocational qualifications manager. Course teams are required to respond in writing to verifiers' reports, outlining actions required to address issues raised in them. The effectiveness of actions which are carried out is monitored carefully within sections.

66 Each member of staff has a number of interviews during the year with his or her line manager. During the interview, the manager discusses the member of staff's action plan with him or her and reviews the progress made in carrying this out. This system of interviews between staff and their line managers is in accordance with the aims of the college's strategic plan. Most staff in two of the faculties have had at least two interviews with their line managers. They speak positively about the effective and purposeful discussion about their professional and personal development which they had during the interviews. The scheme is monitored by a vice-principal. Because of industrial action, most staff in three of the faculties have declined to take part in interviews. All new staff participate in an induction programme when they join the college. Because staff join at various times during the year, the induction programme has been offered eight times in 1996-97. Faculties and service areas each produce an induction handbook for new staff. Most of these handbooks provide information about the area of work, and give examples of procedures used in the college.

67 The students' charter is clearly written and widely publicised. It is displayed around the college, is readily available to students, and is produced in several languages, in addition to English. The charter sets out clearly what students can expect of the college, and what they should do if they have a complaint. The charter specifies some service standards. There is a formal, annual evaluation, by the college's charter group, of the college's performance in meeting the charter's commitments. Members of the group meet regularly to consider aspects of the charter. Students' rights and responsibilities are clearly explained in three documents: the students diary, the learning contract, and the 'statement of student entitlement'.

68 The college produced a self-assessment report for the inspection after thorough consultation with staff at all levels. The college is clearly aware of the importance of self-assessment, and is embedding self-assessment procedures in all quality assurance systems in the college. The report follows the headings of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. Each area is graded and strengths and weaknesses are clearly identified. Action plans are set out in an appendix to the report, as are the sources of evidence. The report is realistically self-critical, although it gives insufficient attention to students' achievements. In general, the judgements are consistent with the findings of the inspection, but in some cases, insufficient weight is given to some of the strengths of the college.

RESOURCES

Staffing

69 The college employs 328 salaried teaching staff. Seventy-eight per cent are full time; 52 per cent are women and over 75 per cent identify themselves as being white. Over 80 per cent are qualified at degree level

or above, and 89 per cent have teaching qualifications. Nearly 50 per cent of teachers have been employed at the college for more than 10 years. The college also employs 982 part-time lecturers. Fifty-four per cent have degrees and 55 per cent have teaching qualifications. One hundred and eight staff support learning. Ten of the 17 members of the senior management team are women. The college has appropriate personnel policies and procedures. The deployment of both teaching and support staff is monitored at faculty level.

70 Most teaching staff are well qualified and suitably experienced in their subject area. Many of those teaching English for speakers of other languages have EFL qualifications but only a third possess ESOL qualifications. Staff in most curriculum areas possess relevant commercial, industrial, and professional experience, although in some cases, this is dated. Many staff teaching health care have recent professional experience and keep this up to date by undertaking work experience. Science staff maintain their contacts with the scientific and health industries by visiting their students on work placements. Most engineering teachers have relevant industrial experience although this is limited in some cases. Business staff have relevant experience but few update this. Students studying art and design are taught by practising artists.

71 Staff responsible for central support functions such as estates, finance, the libraries, personnel and student services, have appropriate qualifications and experience. The level of technical and administrative support is adequate in most areas. Some technicians are used to supervise open learning and workshop sessions in order to give students increased access to studios and materials, but some do not have the appropriate expertise to support learning effectively.

Equipment/learning resources

72 Most classrooms on the college's main sites are well equipped, but, by comparison, some classrooms at some of the smaller centres are not. The standard of specialist equipment is satisfactory. Students studying electrical and electronic engineering have access to well-resourced workshops and laboratories. There is a good range of equipment for automobile engineering and electrical installation courses. Equipment for art and design is mainly adequate, although there is limited specialist equipment for students designing and making stained glass. Media students use a well-equipped television studio from which the college's own television station broadcasts. Performing arts courses are mostly well resourced, particularly those in music technology, but the drama studio is modestly equipped. Business students have the use of two well-equipped training offices, and language students are taught in well-equipped rooms and have access to three language laboratories. The equipment in science laboratories is limited.

73 There are learning resource centres on four of the college sites. The centres include library and study areas, some of which have resources for students to work by themselves at their own pace. The centres also contain information technology to which students have ready access and workshops where students can receive help in developing key skills. Learning centres vary in size and quality, and there is a shortage of study spaces on some sites. In total there are 365 study spaces across the college, a ratio of approximately one space to 14 full-time equivalent students. The college libraries contain a total of 78,850 books and packs of learning materials, and a good range of CD-ROMs, cassettes, newspapers and periodicals. The budget for the various centres is controlled centrally. In 1996-97, the budget was £442,000, of which £40,000 was for books, a reduction of over 25 per cent from the previous year. There is effective liaison between librarians and teachers. In some curriculum areas, the bookstock is good. For example, law students have access to a good range of specialist books. In other curriculum areas, and on some sites, the bookstock is not satisfactory. There are few art and design and performing arts books on some sites where these subjects are taught. Some of the collections of books on economics, history, psychology and social science need updating.

74 There are 771 computers available for students to use, giving an overall ratio of approximately one computer to 6.5 full-time equivalent students. There is a better provision of computers on some sites than on others; at the Putney site there is a ratio of one computer to 14 full-time equivalent students. Most computers are managed by faculties. Until the current year, computers have been purchased with funding from faculty budgets. Some of the equipment at Wandsworth is obsolete and in poor condition. The number of computers available for students to use at any time the college is open, is low. Some faculties have developed ways of enabling students to use computers in specialist rooms when these are not being used by timetabled classes. The extent to which students have access to free computers varies considerably within, and between, faculties. Computing students sometimes do not have access to an appropriate range of computers during their lessons. Students have limited access to computers in science laboratories and in areas used for the teaching of art and design. Some business students use typewriters instead of wordprocessors. As a result of the college's new policy on information technology, the purchase and management of equipment is to be centralised, with the aim of increasing students' accessibility to information resources across the whole college. The college prides itself on providing students with physical disabilities with specially-adapted equipment.

Accommodation

75 The college operates from eight sites, four of which are freehold and four leasehold. In addition adult programmes are offered at a number of centres, mainly schools in the evenings. The college is planning to close

the Mayfield Building, and also is considering vacating one of its two sites in Tooting, thus concentrating most of its further education provision in Putney, Tooting, and Wandsworth. Many of the college's buildings have been neglected, and the level of room usage is very low. The college has belatedly adopted a new accommodation strategy which aims to address problems associated with its buildings.

76 The quality of general teaching accommodation varies widely from site to site, and ranges from good to poor. Most rooms used by language students are generally spacious and well maintained. Students of English have access to pleasant accommodation which can be used in different ways. Some of the rooms used for EFL courses are too small. Most of the business classrooms are of a good quality but a few are unattractive and dated. Most rooms used for the teaching of humanities are good but some of those at Wandsworth are bleak. There is good accommodation at Gatton Road and Putney Hill for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but the rooms they use at Manresa House are cramped. In many areas, no effort has been made to make rooms visually more stimulating by the use of display materials, including students' work. With a view to improving its accommodation, the college has drawn up specifications for a model class room. Each year, money is set aside from the limited maintenance budget to bring some rooms up to the standard exemplified by this model.

77 The quality of specialist teaching accommodation is variable. There is a range of rooms available for art students and effective use has been made of limited space for stained glass and jewellery making. These rooms, however, are spread over a number of sites. As a result, it is inconvenient for students on art and design courses who are mainly based at one site, to make the best use of specialist rooms some distance away on other sites. There are appropriate dance, drama and music studios for students on performing arts courses, but space for public performances is limited. There is an adequate number of specialist science laboratories. Most laboratories, however, need refurbishment and their size and layout limit the range of activities, and the sizes of groups using them. There is a suitable vehicle and body repair shop for students on automobile engineering courses. The electrical installation workshop is fitted to lead body specification. The accommodation for electrical and electronic engineering courses is good and the workshop used for security alarms systems courses is of a high standard. Some of this accommodation is not fully used. Rooms used for health care courses are adequate but they require some modernising. Computing rooms vary in quality from site to site. Languages students have access to a good language centre and language laboratory.

78 There is a variety of social facilities for students. Across the college as a whole, refreshment facilities are limited. There are cafeterias and student common rooms on the five main sites and these vary in size and ambience. The small canteen at Gatton Road has recently been refurbished

and is welcoming, with table cloths and cut flowers on the tables. There are sports halls at Putney and Wandsworth, and a dance studio and multi-gym at Putney. These facilities are used by students for various activities. Five of the sites have creches. On a number of the college's sites, only the ground floor of the buildings is accessible to wheelchair users. The college has carried out a survey of the accessibility of its accommodation, and is allocating funds to improve the accessibility of its buildings for people with restricted mobility.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

79 The main strengths of the college are:

- its wide range of vocational courses
- its success in meeting the requirements of students to whom it gives priority in its strategic aims
- its senior managers who are addressing current problems in a systematic and vigorous way
- its positive and supportive governors who are firmly committed to the college and its aims
- its well-qualified and experienced staff
- the effective systems for delegating and controlling budgets
- the effective admissions procedures which include the provision of good and impartial advice for applicants
- the well-managed systems for the guidance and support of students
- the expert counselling and welfare services available to students
- some good achievements by students on some general education and vocational courses
- clear quality assurance policies and systems, including systematic and effective self-assessment
- the system of regular interviews between staff and their line managers
- some imaginative and stimulating teaching
- good levels of resourcing and equipment in most specialist areas.

80 To make further progress, the college should:

- ensure that governors receive reliable information about the quality of the curriculum
- improve further the reliability of management information about students
- continue to implement measures to secure the financial viability of the college
- address the variable quality of tutorials

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- improve some teaching which fails to interest and motivate students
 - improve students' achievements and retention rates on many courses
 - address variability in the effectiveness of course reviews
 - address the poor attendance of many students
 - improve some unsatisfactory and unattractive accommodation
 - improve access to information technology equipment and learning resources for some students.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)

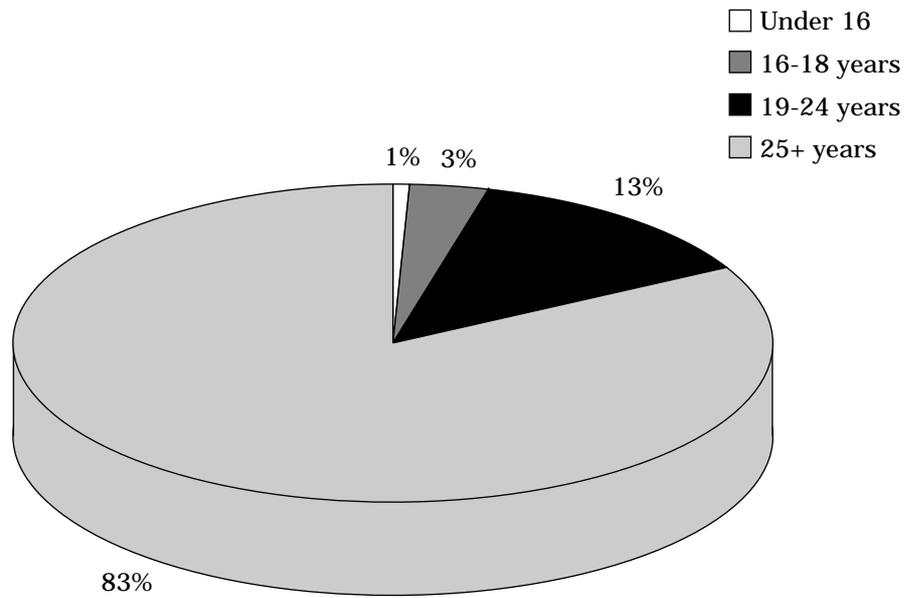
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

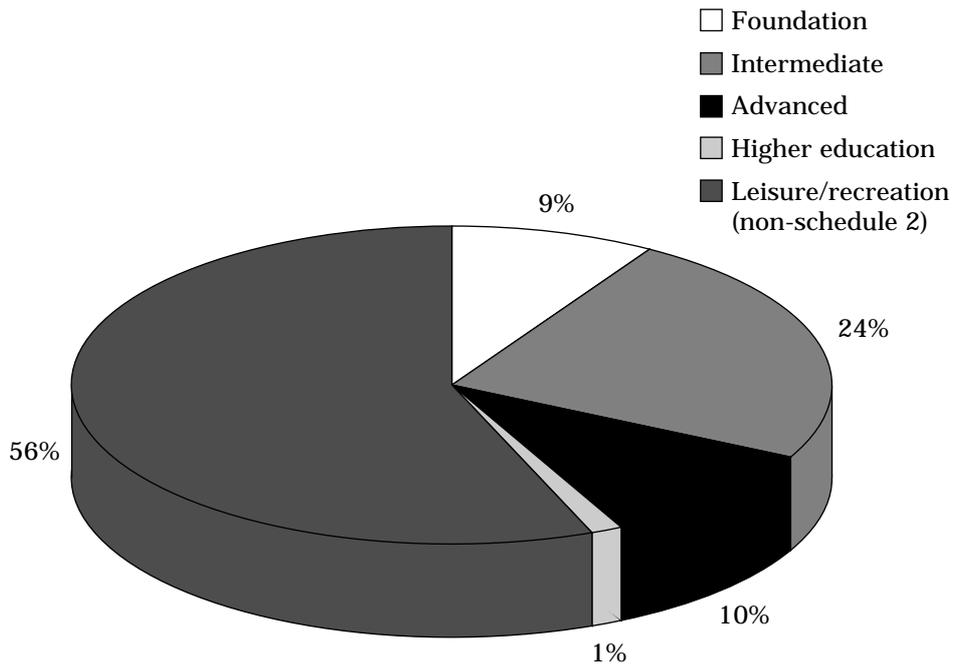
South Thames College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 26,589

Figure 2

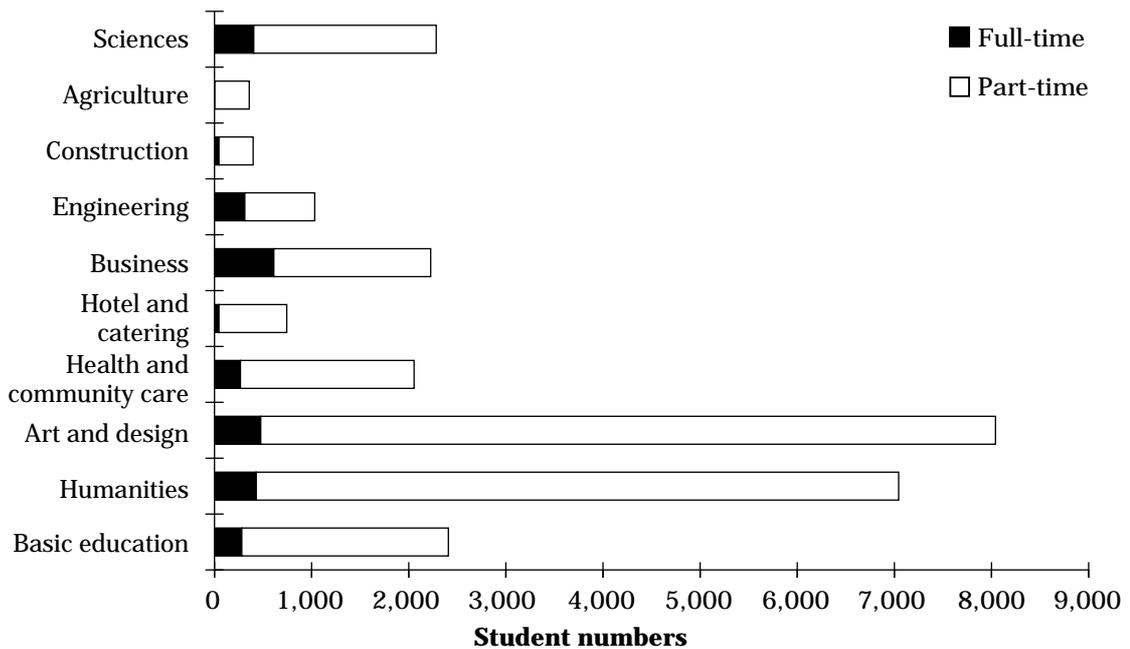
South Thames College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 26,589

Figure 3

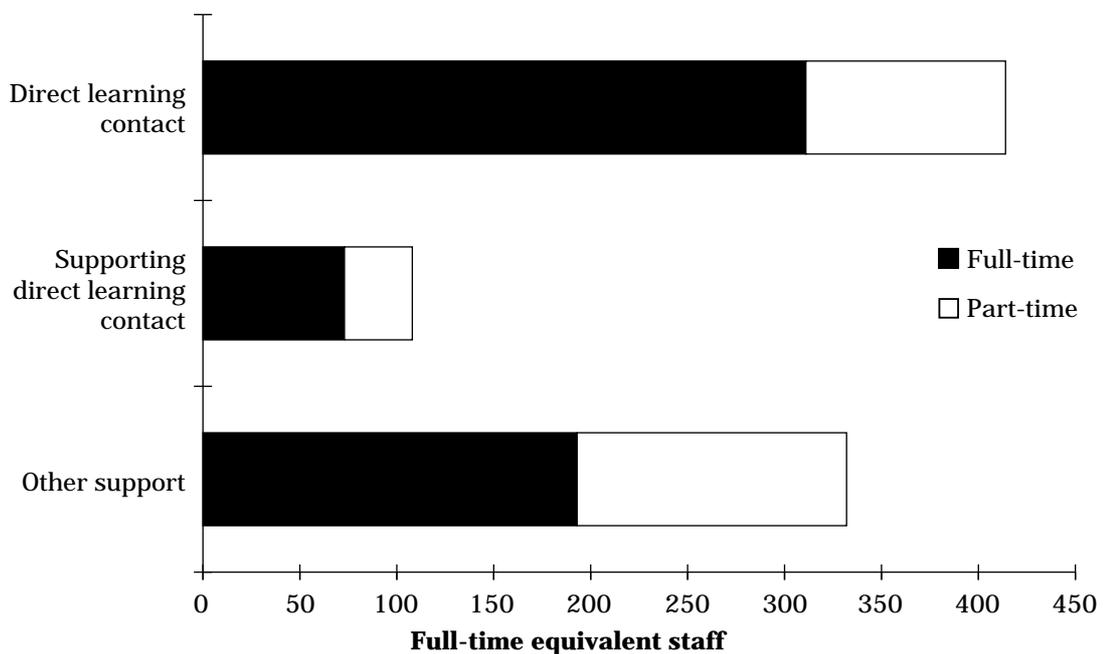
South Thames College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 26,589

Figure 4

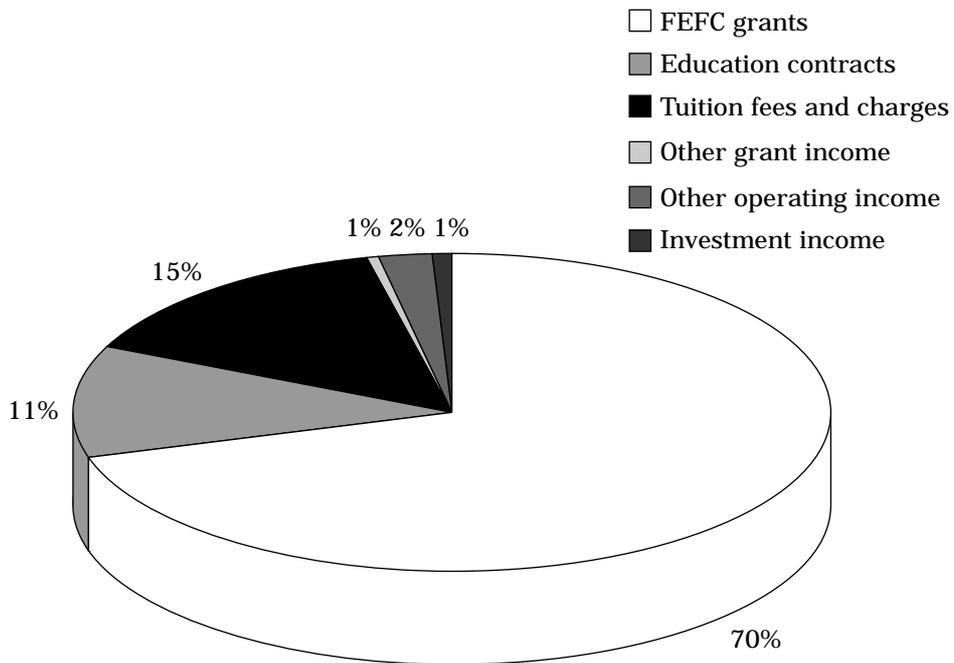
South Thames College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 854

Figure 5

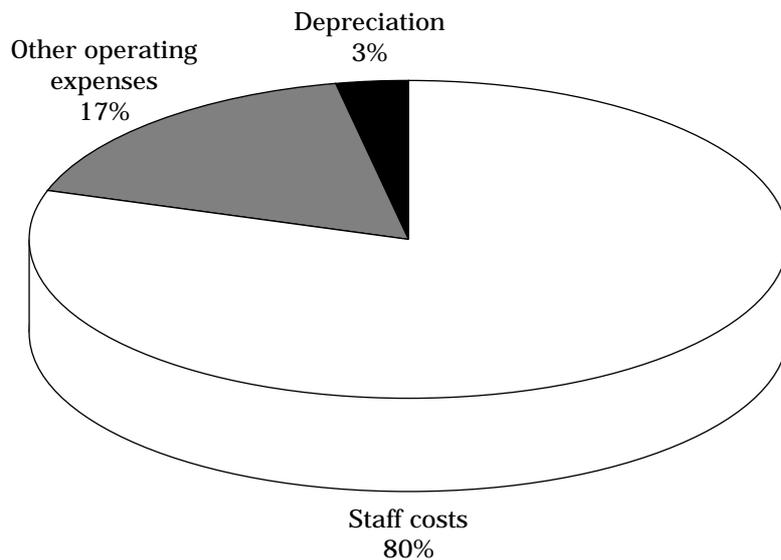
South Thames College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £21,307,000

Figure 6

South Thames College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £22,974,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
August 1997