

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Thurrock College

March 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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 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.

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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 17/95

THURROCK COLLEGE

EASTERN REGION

Inspected September – November 1994

Summary

Thurrock College is a well-managed institution which works closely with the local community, schools and employers. It is a major provider of vocational courses which have been carefully developed to meet local needs. Great attention is given to placing students on courses that are well matched to their abilities. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well integrated on vocational courses and receive good support from specialist staff. Students, generally, benefit from effective guidance and support, and from high standards of teaching. Retention rates are high and examination results are good on most courses. Students' core skills in numeracy and communication are developed effectively on vocational courses, but information technology skills are not as well developed across all curriculum areas. Many of the college's students go on to further and higher education. There are some good mechanisms for monitoring the quality of the provision, but they require more effective integration. The college's accommodation is spread across two sites, six miles apart and is variable in quality. The library bookstock on the Aveley campus is inadequate and the development of learning-resource centres, based on the existing libraries, has yet to be completed.

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	1
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Engineering and technology	2	Health and social care	2
		Hairdressing and beauty	2
Business and office technology	2	Art and design	2
Hotel and catering	2	Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2
Leisure and tourism	2		

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INTRODUCTION

1 Thurrock College, in Essex, was inspected in three stages between September and November 1994. Enrolment and induction were inspected in September, the specialist programmes were inspected during two weeks in October and cross-college aspects were inspected from the 21 to 25 November. Seventy-eight inspector days were used for the inspection. A total of 168 teaching sessions were observed. Inspectors scrutinised samples of students' coursework and held discussions with staff, students, members of the corporation and representatives from local industry, the local training and enterprise council (TEC), the community and higher education.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Thurrock College was established in 1956. The main campus is situated on the outskirts of Grays in south-west Essex and occupies a site of 18 hectares. There is a second campus, originally a secondary school, situated six miles away at Aveley, which occupies a site of 12 hectares. There are a substantial number of full-time and part-time courses at both sites. Management, business, tourism, leisure and languages courses are accommodated at Aveley; other courses are taught at Grays.

3 The main campus is very close to Palmer's Sixth Form College, also located in the borough of Thurrock. A distinctive feature of post-16 provision in the locality is the long-standing agreement between the two colleges whereby Thurrock concentrates on vocational programmes whilst Palmers offers general education courses. The two colleges shared the same chairman of governors between 1985 and November 1994 and have continued to work closely together since incorporation in April 1993. Both principals are co-opted members of each others' boards of governors.

4 Over half of the students attending the college come from the borough of Thurrock, but significant numbers are also drawn from Basildon, Southend, Brentwood and North East London. Other further education providers in south Essex are Palmer's Sixth Form College, Basildon College, South East Essex College of Arts and Technology in Southend and South East Essex Sixth Form College located in Benfleet.

5 Essex has the largest school population of any county in England and Wales. There are 103 secondary schools, 21 of which are located in south-west Essex, the college's catchment area. Five of them have sixth forms. The post-16 full-time participation rate has increased significantly in Essex over the last three years from 65 per cent in 1991, to 73 per cent in 1993. This compares with 74 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively, in the neighbouring counties of Cambridgeshire and Kent. There are wide variations within the county. Basildon and Thurrock have the lowest participation rates at 62 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively. Brentwood, in contrast, has one of the highest rates: 81 per cent.

6 The population of Essex as recorded in the latest census in 1991 was just over 1.5 million. It is predicted that it will grow by 125,000 over the

next 25 years, with an almost 40 per cent increase in those under the age of 20. Those available for work will increase along with general population growth and as a result of the increased participation of women in employment. The minority ethnic population in Essex in 1991 accounted for 1.9 per cent of the county's population, the largest group being of Indian origin.

7 During the recent recession, the area served by the college has experienced a higher rate of unemployment (10.6 per cent) than the average for the county of Essex (9.4 per cent). There has been a shift away from employment in local manufacturing industries and the Tilbury docks towards employment in the service sector. The close proximity of the M25, London orbital ring road and the new Dartford river crossing have stimulated major local developments, such as the Lakeside shopping complex and the extensive Chafford Hundred housing estate.

8 At the time of inspection in November 1994, the college had 5,820 enrolments. Of these, 1,988 were full-time students and 3,832 part time. The college enrolls a large number of adults. Students over the age of 19 represent 67 per cent of enrolments. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2, respectively. The college had the full-time equivalent of 186 teachers and 136 support staff. A staff profile is shown in figure 3.

9 The vocational curriculum of the college covers all of the Council's programme areas. There is an extensive range of courses at foundation level which provide access to further education for students with limited qualifications. There is also provision at intermediate and advanced level and a small range of higher education courses. The curriculum is managed through nine schools: art and design; catering studies; engineering technology; hairdressing and beauty therapy; management and business studies; motor vehicle studies; office and information technology; social and health studies; and tourism, leisure and languages. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are given in figure 4.

10 In 1993-94, enrolments increased by over 7 per cent. There is an expectation that this growth will continue until the end of the century as a result of the economic and demographic factors identified above.

11 The college's mission statement puts the individual learner at the centre of the college's activities and emphasises that the college seeks to be a rewarding and enjoyable place for students and staff to work. The other key objective is the wish to continue working collaboratively with other providers of education and training in the area to develop a curriculum which offers access, and the opportunity to progress, to people in the community.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

12 The range of provision at Thurrock reflects the college's aim to widen opportunities for students through co-operation with schools, local colleges

and universities in the area. Vocational courses are available from foundation to higher education levels. In 1994-95, 47 per cent of enrolments are at foundation level, 35 per cent at intermediate level, and 10 per cent at advanced level, 4 per cent are on higher education courses and 4 per cent on adult leisure and recreation courses. A wide range of National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes are offered. English is taught as a foreign or second language and some General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects, including English and mathematics, are offered to adults on a part-time basis and to full-time students as options on vocational programmes. Students on the leisure and tourism courses study modern European languages, but few students on other courses take the opportunity to study languages as optional units.

13 Since September 1994, the college has provided a free bus service for 16-19 year old students who do not qualify for free local education authority transport. Three routes are operated from the surrounding areas of Havering, Southend and Brentwood. The college has a strong commitment to adult education. Many college programmes are designed for adults wishing to re-enter employment with new job skills. For example, the career opportunities in accounting course enables adult students to gain book-keeping and financial management skills and leads to the Association of Accounting Technicians NVQ level 4 qualification. There are playgroup facilities on both sites for the young children of students. The college also sponsors FEFC-funded provision in two local adult community colleges.

14 There is extensive provision for students with moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Over 8 per cent of students enrolled in 1994-95 have an identified disability. Specialist support is given to students with hearing impairment, dyslexia and other specific disabilities, but there is no specialist support available for students with a visual impairment. The college is planning to extend provision to students with severe learning difficulties and is working towards this in conjunction with the Thameside Healthcare Trust Learning Disabilities Service.

15 The policy of the college to work in partnership with other education providers is reflected in its relationship with Palmers Sixth Form College and local schools. It has a formal memorandum of co-operation with Palmers College which outlines the existing and planned provision to be offered by each college. There are some jointly-developed programmes, such as the GNVQ advanced programme in leisure and tourism, in which students are taught by staff from both institutions. There is also collaboration with local schools seeking to develop vocational pathways for their pupils. An access to accreditation project involves teaching staff from the college and three local schools in modifying the assignments of pre-16 students at school, to enable them to generate evidence for assessment at GNVQ foundation and intermediate levels. These forms of co-operation have increased the range of options available to students in Thurrock.

16 The college is an associate college of Anglia Polytechnic University and also has links with the University of East London. It also franchises a diploma in management studies course from the University of Kent. Anglia Polytechnic University validates the higher national certificate in business studies and the certificate of education. The University of East London validates the diploma in higher education in playwork, which focuses on the role of play in children's learning and development. The management course, franchised from the University of Kent, was selected by the college because of its relevance to local managers and the opportunities it offers students to proceed to masters' programmes in business administration. The college is a member of the North Thames Higher Education Consortium which involves four local further education institutions. They are seeking to increase the availability of higher education provision for students unable to attend courses outside the locality. The college offers a general access to higher education programme, validated through the Essex Access Consortium. There is also a specialist access to business programme, validated by the London Open College Federation, designed to prepare students for entry to degree and higher diploma qualifications in business. There is scope for rationalising the provision offered by the two access courses.

17 The college has undertaken detailed market research to inform the process of curriculum development. It has collected comprehensive data on the local labour market, local schools and other competitors. There are extensive databases on firms (2,630 entries) employers (518 entries) and schools (134 entries). The college has good information on general labour market trends, but there is potential to do more research targeted at particular occupational areas, such as retailing. There is a detailed marketing plan with clear objectives, timescales and resource requirements. The college's full-time and part-time prospectuses are informative and there is a range of leaflets providing details on individual courses.

18 Strong links have been forged with the Essex TEC and several major companies in the area, such as Mobil Oil and Van Den Burghs. Many full-cost programmes are taught both at college and off-site. Managers from local companies work with teaching staff in the design and assessment of training in response to identified needs for updating skills. Employers are members of advisory panels in leisure and tourism, business studies, social care and engineering and have subsidised the purchase of specialist equipment such as the paint spray workshop for motor vehicles. Several senior college staff are involved in local industry planning groups. For example, the principal is a member of the Thurrock Local Association of Industries, the Thurrock Enterprise Agency, and the Thurrock Business Network, and is chairman of the South West Essex TEC Consultative Group. Local business representatives have a positive perception of the college. There is a TEC-approved training organisation, within the college, known as Thurrock Training Association which provides programmes for

unemployed adults as well as youth training. In 1993-94, the unit received over £400,000 from the TEC to support this work. Support has also been gained from the European Social Fund to finance a business opportunities programme for adults with physical disabilities.

19 The college has strong links with other community groups. Students have recently been involved in an environment 'greening and cleaning' programme run by Thurrock Council. The college's sports facilities are let on a regular basis and some places on the college playgroups are available to the children of members of the public. At the time of the inspection two local primary schools had displays of children's work in the college foyer.

20 The college's curriculum policy entails a commitment to develop modular programmes based upon students enrolling and gaining accreditation, throughout the year. Some progress has been made towards achieving this goal. The GNVQ courses in business are taught on a pattern of termly modules which allow students to join at three stages in the year. Part-time catering students have an individually-designed programme based on NVQ units. In beauty therapy, accreditation of prior learning has been introduced and there are self-study learning materials for some NVQ units which enable students to proceed at their own pace, receiving tutor support where necessary. The college also runs a few open-learning programmes, including one in modern foreign languages. The majority of college provision is still based on students following a common programme of study over a standard academic year. The college recognises the need to develop more flexible patterns of teaching and learning across the entire range of its courses.

21 There is a clearly-demonstrated commitment to equal opportunities. The college's equal opportunities committee has developed a policy and a set of proposed standards to guide practice. The monitoring of performance against standards is at an early stage of development.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

22 The corporation has 16 members including the principal. Ten of the members are connected with business, industry or commerce and have expertise in accountancy, personnel management, property development and legal matters. There are two staff members and one student member. The principal of the neighbouring sixth form college has been co-opted as a member but there is no one representing higher education. Two members of the board are women. The corporation has a comprehensive committee structure to manage its business. The four subcommittees are: finance and general purposes; personnel; audit; and remuneration. Each subcommittee has clear terms of reference and care is taken to ensure that the expertise of members is well matched to the work of the committees. The committees meet regularly and are generally well attended.

23 Members have a clear view of their role which they see as being the stewardship of the human and material resources of the college. Day-to-

day management of the college and the curriculum is regarded as the responsibility of the principal and the management team. Members play an active part in offering advice in the formulation and approval of college policies and plans. They have been influential in shaping the college's mission statement and in reviewing tendering procedures for major purchases of equipment and services, such as financial auditing and banking. The corporation has not yet conducted a formal review of its own performance.

24 Students' achievements are reported regularly to members using a simple format with summary information on enrolments, retention and examination success. In reporting student achievements, each head of school makes a critical assessment of the examination results, using a five-point scale to compare results with national pass rates, the particular ability level of the cohort in question, and other pertinent factors. This procedure allows members to monitor the success of the college in promoting student achievements. Some members serve in other capacities within the college; for example on the equal opportunities committee and on the liaison committees set up to facilitate communication between the college's schools. This enables them to obtain a good insight into specialist aspects of provision.

25 The strategic planning and review process influences all levels of the organisation. The three-year plan and a detailed operating statement for the whole college, which is drawn up by the senior management team and approved by the corporation, is built up from similar three-year strategic and one-year operating plans drawn up by each school and functional area. The objectives at school and section level are closely linked to the overall college objectives. The implementation statements, linked to the planning documents, identify who is responsible for achieving particular objectives and how progress is to be monitored.

26 The present management structure has been in place since September 1992. In addition to the principal, the senior management team consists of a vice-principal and three assistant principals. The vice-principal has responsibility for operational management, quality and resources, and the assistant principals are responsible for finance, marketing, and staff and students, respectively. Management of the curriculum is the responsibility of nine heads of school, who report directly to the principal. The senior management team meet weekly. Minutes of senior management team meetings provide clear records of decisions. There is thorough monitoring of progress to ensure that agreed action has been taken.

27 The college has an academic board which advises the principal and members of the corporation on academic matters. The structure, terms of reference, membership and operation of the board have recently been thoroughly reviewed to allow for a fuller focus on evaluating the quality of the curriculum and student services. The academic board has two major subcommittees: academic standards, and planning and development. The

cycle of meetings of the academic board and its substructure are carefully timed to allow the principal to take account of advice in advance of the meetings of the corporation. Members of the board value the opportunities it gives them to be involved in the development of the college.

28 The principal has fostered a participative management style that has greatly assisted the development of a whole college ethos. He takes a particular interest in the well-being of staff and in the performance of students. The management of the rapid change since incorporation has been sensitively handled. Effective team work involving the co-operation of teaching and support staff across school boundaries is common throughout the college.

29 The college management has attempted to adopt relevant business methods to achieve objectives. College documentation is generally of a high standard. Where significant developments are identified which cut across the line management system, project managers are appointed to take forward particular initiatives. There is scope for more effective management of such projects through clearer definition of the objectives, timescale and methods for evaluating the successful achievement of project objectives.

30 The corporation finance and general purposes committee, and senior management team receive monthly financial reports covering income, expenditure and the balance sheet. The budget allocation to schools is based upon the achievement of student numbers rather than the historic approach of annual incremental adjustments to previous allocations. There is extensive delegation to school and section managers of funds for capitation and part-time staffing. This is facilitated by an automated ordering system through which budget holders can authorise agreed expenditure without further intervention.

31 Summaries of the college's income and expenditure for 1993-94 are shown in figures 5 and 6, respectively. The college's average level of funding for 1994-95 is £17.03 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £18.17.

32 The college has made good progress with the development of its financial and management information systems. The management information system is accessible from networked personal computers located in school and section offices. Curriculum managers are able to access information on student enquiries, applications, enrolments, completions, examinations and destinations. The computerised finance system provides records of expenditure and income. Facilities exist through the local workstations for information to be extracted for analysis and presentation. The college has an information working group whose next priority is to identify course team requirements for management information.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

33 Students of all ages are well supported in their studies through a comprehensive range of student services. These include diagnostic assessment of all full-time and part-time students at entry, and the provision of additional support to develop basic skills in numeracy, information technology and communication. Professional counselling and careers advice are well organised and there is a good range of recreational facilities for students. These services are promoted through a series of informative leaflets on display in the foyer and other locations. The college provides a friendly environment in which staff and students are caring and respectful of each other.

34 There is a centralised admissions process for all students which is well organised and effective. Admissions staff provide initial guidance to applicants, who are then referred to course tutors for advice on the specialist content of courses. There is a standard college application procedure which assists in the collection of data on students' needs and leads to a smooth enrolment process. The college maintains a high profile at school careers events. Between September and late November 1994, college staff attended 53 careers evenings. Arrangements are also made for careers teachers to visit the college. Throughout the year, the college holds open days, taster days and parents' evenings.

35 There is a common approach to student induction for all courses. Students on many course are provided with attractively-produced course handbooks which give comprehensive details of the areas to be studied and the arrangements for teaching and assessment. On many GNVQ and NVQ programmes, teaching staff introduced students skilfully to the learning styles and assessment methods, through group assignments and other well-designed learning activities. On the access to higher education courses there was a strong emphasis on developing students' confidence and study skills.

36 Initial diagnostic assessment to identify individual students' learning needs in numeracy, communication and information technology is an integral part of the induction process for both full-time and part-time students. Specially-designed diagnostic materials, adapted to different vocational areas are used. These include a useful self-assessment exercise to identify the extent of students' information technology skills. The outcome of this assessment is fed back to course leaders and a programme of additional learning support is agreed with individual students. Great care is taken to place students on courses where they are likely to succeed. On the GNVQ programmes, for example, the first three weeks of the course were defined as a threshold period during which staff worked with students on a mixture of guidance, initial assessment and briefing activities. In some cases, the decision about whether a student was placed on advanced, intermediate or foundation level for GNVQ was only finalised at the conclusion of this threshold period.

37 At the time of the inspection, the arrangements for providing additional learning support in response to the needs identified through diagnostic assessment had not been fully implemented. Some delays had occurred in analysing students' performance in the diagnostic assessments. The learning support workshops in which students are able to work through support packages and receive specialist tuition were not fully operational.

38 Procedures for accrediting the prior learning of students have been developed in some programme areas such as NVQ management and supervisory programmes. The availability of accreditation of prior learning is not uniform across curriculum areas and student awareness of the opportunities for gaining recognition of prior achievements is limited.

39 Systems for diagnosing and responding to the needs of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. There are specialist staff, within the college, to assess and help students with dyslexia and to provide communication support for those with hearing impairments. Other forms of specialist expertise, for example from education psychologists, is available through good links with external agencies. The college is extending its capacity to support basic skills development by giving appropriate training to mainstream teaching staff. A staff development programme leading to the award of the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) initial certificate in teaching basic skills is working well. This training is also raising overall staff awareness of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities across the curriculum areas.

40 All students have a designated tutor and, in almost all cases, an identified tutorial period within their programmes. Students speak highly of the tutoring arrangements and the quality of personal support they receive. Detailed policy and procedures for tutorials, including a guidance manual for tutors, have been developed to encourage consistent practice. The college is attempting to improve practice further by developing a common student handbook. This will include details of the curriculum, assessment, appeals and services available to students.

41 Students' progress is kept under close review and there is regular feedback to the students and to employers. Tutors give careful attention to helping students achieve their learning objectives, agreed with them through a learning agreement. Most full-time students have records of achievement, which are used to clarify and extend their learning goals. Attendance is monitored systematically, and there are clear and supportive follow-up procedures. In the event of absence, students, and where appropriate employers, are contacted and reminded that learning support and counselling are available. Reasons for student withdrawals are carefully analysed by tutors and summary reports are prepared and reviewed at school and college levels.

42 Liaison with local secondary schools is well developed. Opportunities are provided for students coming from special schools to become familiar

with the college and to sample classes and learning activities before enrolling on courses. The college is working with secondary schools towards a common approach to recording achievement using the national record of achievement. Feeder schools are kept well informed of students' progress at the college and are provided with a summary report of their destinations to higher education or employment.

43 The college is promoting entry of students to higher education through a regional student scheme. This is an arrangement with Anglia Polytechnic University, which, given the historically low participation rates in the area, is designed to persuade more students to proceed to higher education. Accreditation incentives are offered to students on GNVQ advanced programmes to encourage them to go on to degree and higher national diploma courses. For example, students successfully completing GNVQ core skills units are given credit for their achievement when applying to degree and higher diploma courses.

44 Professional careers advice is available to students in the careers information centre adjacent to the college reception area. This includes guidance from visiting careers, employment and training officers. There is close collaboration with the Essex Careers and Business Partnership to extend the range of professional advice available to staff and students. Two full-time youth workers are employed to enhance the range of social, cultural and recreational activities available to students.

45 The commitment of the college to supporting learning is reflected in the strategic plans at school and college level.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

46 Most of the teaching is of a good standard. In 60 per cent of the sessions inspected the strengths outweighed the weaknesses. The strengths and weaknesses of the work were evenly balanced in a further 32 per cent of the classes. In 8 per cent of classes the weaknesses of the work outweighed the strengths. The following table shows the grades awarded during the inspection.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE/GCSE		0	1	2	0	0	3
GNVQ		3	8	6	2	1	20
NVQ		4	26	17	5	1	53
Vocational diploma		6	13	14	3	0	36
Vocational certificate		3	18	9	0	0	30
Other		4	4	1	1	0	10
Basic education		3	8	4	1	0	16
Total		23	78	53	12	2	168

47 Teaching and learning is informed by the college curriculum policy. This stresses the importance of matching the learning experience offered by the college to the aims, experience, skills and abilities of its students. It also highlights the need for students to take some responsibility for their progress in learning. Records of achievement are used by staff and students in many courses and each student signs a learning contract with the college which outlines the provision that the college will offer the student and the responsibilities accepted by the student for completing work and developing relevant skills.

48 The distinctive learning needs of adult students are well catered for on the vocational and access to higher education courses. Teaching and support staff are sensitive to the feelings of adults returning to study. The staff concentrate on the development of study skills which help such students to tackle project work and other assignments. On many of the full-time courses adults are well integrated with younger students, and teaching staff successfully relate the subject matter to the adults' own experience. Group exercises are used to good effect to bring students together and to allow for the sharing of knowledge in tackling assignments.

49 Student with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well integrated on many mainstream courses, and tutors of vocational subjects work closely with the teaching staff responsible for co-ordinating their work. There are well-established separate specialist courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities linked to specialist teaching in vocational subjects such as business administration, retailing and catering. Through the open-access provision, adult students with moderate learning difficulties are offered individual learning programmes which include vocational elements. These help to develop their confidence and skills. The college runs a programme which enables adults with disabilities to gain NVQ accredited qualifications. The programme includes well-designed work placements. In a few of the teaching sessions, where students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were integrated on mainstream courses, teaching staff did not give enough attention to checking students' understanding of the material.

50 In engineering and motor vehicles courses, students are benefiting from well-designed practical projects which are carried out safely and to a good standard. Students pursuing motor vehicle courses make use of modern vehicles and specialist equipment to develop their practical skills. They are well supported by teaching and technician staff in the workshop areas but insufficient emphasis is placed upon the development of students' communication skills through the writing up of project reports. Students were not making use of clean areas away from the workshop to complete written work. On the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national certificate in process technology, the teaching materials have been customised to reflect the training needs of students working in the petroleum industry.

51 On many of the professional and management programmes, teachers make use of case studies and business documentation to develop students' ability to tackle business tasks. For example, in NVQ accountancy classes, teachers use forms from the Inland Revenue to develop students' skills in analysing complex data on taxation and earnings. In some less-effective sessions, teachers presented students with theoretical material without relating it to current business issues. Teaching is well prepared on the NVQ business administration programmes and students gain valuable practical experience in the office technology centre. There is scope, however, for developing students' independent study skills more fully through the greater use of assignment and study packages.

52 In hotel and catering, the teaching of practical skills in the restaurants and kitchens is good. Staff carefully monitor students' progress with the aid of comprehensive documentation. Teachers support students' learning by giving immediate feedback on their performance in completing practical tasks. The aims and objectives of some of the theoretical sessions were unclear. In some GNVQ sessions, students needed further guidance on terms such as 'range statements' and 'grading themes', which are used to describe the assessment process.

53 Students on the GNVQ leisure and tourism course are developing confidence in speaking European languages through the introduction into the course of optional units in French and German. The college is experiencing difficulty in establishing good links with colleges abroad to develop further the international aspect of the curriculum. Field trips to local tourism and leisure facilities enable students to apply their knowledge to organisations in the industry. Second-year students, on the national diploma in travel and tourism, have developed good investigative skills by carrying out a market research project for the local council on consumer use of leisure centres.

54 Teaching in health and social care is generally varied and well organised. Teachers demonstrate care and concern for their students and employ approaches which develop students' confidence and self-esteem. Residential courses for students which involve outdoor pursuits are used to strengthen teamwork: second-year students act as team leaders for the first-year groups. Assessment on the GNVQ health and social care courses is well organised. Assessment criteria for each assignment are discussed with students during classes, to enable them to make an evaluation of their own work. More emphasis should be given to some of the themes common to different subjects in the course. For example, students' skills in recording their observation of children at play could be better related to the use of observation techniques in other subjects, such as psychology.

55 On hair and beauty therapy courses, teachers draw upon their own experience of the industry to prepare full-time students for their future careers. Through a well-structured induction programme, students have become familiar with the styles of assessment on NVQ programmes; for

example, in taking responsibility for gathering evidence to satisfy the performance criteria. The relationship between the theoretical and practical aspects of the curriculum, however, is often unclear to students.

56 Teachers work closely with technicians to enliven the learning experience of students on art and design courses. Staff have high expectations of students and this results in high standards of work in fashion and three-dimensional design. Teachers of different subjects are able to link their teaching to the overall aims of the course. There are good relationships between staff and students. The main studio is subdivided by movable screens which enables a variety of learning activities to take place. However, this can lead to high levels of extraneous noise, particularly during lecture sessions, when different student groups are making use of the area.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

57 Students express satisfaction with their programmes of study. In the majority of teaching sessions students enjoy their studies and are well motivated. Learning takes place in a supportive environment in which students are able to participate effectively in whole-class discussions and well-focused group work. Adult students who accounted for 67 per cent of the enrolment in 1993-94, were appreciative of the efforts of staff in preparing them for further education and employment. Adult students on the access to higher education programmes, were confident in presenting their points of view and successfully tackled essays and assignment work. On the career opportunities in accounts programme, adult students demonstrated competence in tackling real financial tasks and benefited from regular periods of work placement.

58 Students generally achieved good standards in practical work. In engineering, students' assignment work demonstrated a good appreciation of the applications of computer-aided design. On the BTEC higher national certificate courses in business, and on management programmes, students had successfully completed work-based projects. It was evident that these had led to the development of good investigative and report-writing skills. Standards of presentation of written work were high on the modular business administration NVQ programmes for part-time students. In workshop activities in hairdressing and beauty, the standard of student work was appropriately matched to the level of course, and there were many good examples of effective use of current commercial practices.

59 The results of the initial diagnostic tests, conducted by the college in September 1994, indicated that over 250 students of the new intake of full-time and part-time students needed support in basic skills if they were to achieve an NVQ or equivalent at level 1 or above. Many students are being provided with additional skills support in numeracy and communication and receive specialist tuition in the college learning workshop. Their progress is monitored through tutorials and their records of achievement.

60 The assessment of the core skills units of numeracy and communication is well integrated with other work on many of the GNVQ programmes. Comprehensive documentation for assessment, designed by the cross-college GNVQ group, is being used to good effect to record students' progress in the skills areas. On other vocational qualifications including NVQs, core skills are not yet integrated effectively with other aspects of the curriculum.

61 In courses such as business administration, information technology is employed effectively in teaching. Students are able to work independently, utilising modern equipment and relevant computer applications. Information technology skills are not developed as fully in all curriculum areas. Information technology skills are not well integrated with other aspects of work in catering, hairdressing and beauty therapy. The college has recently revised its information technology policy and a member of staff is to take responsibility for co-ordinating the development of information technology skills across different curriculum areas.

62 The retention rates on most vocational programmes are high. In 1993-94, the overall retention rate for full-time and part-time courses across the college was 88 per cent. In engineering technology, social and health studies and tourism, leisure and languages the average retention rates were 90 per cent or above. In art and design, catering, hairdressing, business and motor vehicles retention rates were above 80 per cent. However, retention rates on a few courses were well below the college averages. For example on the BTEC first diploma in information technology applications, the national diploma in business and finance and the full-time RSA business administration programme retention rates ranged from 63 per cent to 73 per cent. Staff maintain careful records of the reasons for withdrawals and these are collated and evaluated at college level.

63 Most students entering for the 1994 awards in the main vocational courses offered by the college achieved the qualification they were seeking. Eighty-three per cent of the 129 students in the final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education's 1994 performance tables were successful. This places the college among the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. The pattern of success was variable across different programmes. All students passed in some art and design, engineering, office technology, leisure and tourism and social and health care programmes. Generally pass rates at advanced level were good, but pass rates at NVQ level 2 and intermediate level were more variable. For example, in the first diploma in information technology course the pass rate was below 60 per cent.

64 There are examples of outstanding individual achievement in some curriculum areas. One of the college's art and design students who successfully completed the BTEC national diploma in fashion was awarded

a bronze medal in the 1994 BTEC student of the year awards. There were 200,000 BTEC students nationally who were eligible for this award and 11 students eventually received a bronze medal having successfully completed a regional and national selection process. A student with severe dyslexia who enrolled on the pre-nursing course in 1992 had achieved GCSE pass grades at grades A to C in seven subjects by 1994. In addition she achieved St. John certificates in first aid and caring for the sick and C&G awards in food hygiene and computer literacy. At the time of inspection she was enrolled on the GNVQ advanced course in health and social care.

65 The college maintains detailed records of the destinations of full-time students. These indicate good rates of progression to further and higher education in many curriculum areas. There was an excellent record of entry into higher education from the foundation course in art and design and from the national diploma in fashion design, with over 95 per cent of students completing the courses going on to degree or higher national diploma courses. Almost 80 per cent of students from the college's access to higher education programmes were also successful in obtaining places in higher education. Most students completing programmes at NVQ level 2 and BTEC first diplomas continue in further education. Many of these students are now studying on BTEC national diplomas and on GNVQ advanced level programmes at the college.

66 Entry to full-time and part-time employment from college courses was more limited, reflecting the current lack of employment opportunities in the area. There were many examples of students, especially adults, being successfully trained and not being able to secure employment. For example on the career opportunities in accounts programme only three of the 25 students who successfully completed the course had obtained either full-time or part-time work. A similar pattern was evident on the clerical skills programme where, despite obtaining an NVQ qualification in business administration, most students had been unable to secure employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

67 There are a number of useful initiatives in place for reviewing the quality of courses and other services. These include an internal validation procedure for approving new course developments, guidelines for internal verifiers to check the consistency of internal assessment, and a system of annual course monitoring and review. The college has only recently established an academic standards committee to bring the different aspects of quality assurance together. The system is evolving quickly but is not yet fully implemented.

68 A positive aspect of quality assurance in the college is the link between the strategic planning cycle and the establishment of explicit quality standards for the college schools and service units. As part of the annual planning process, each school and unit prepares an operating statement

which contains a list of objectives with related quality standards and target dates for achievement. The extent of achievement of these standards is reviewed on a termly basis by heads of school working collaboratively with course leaders and members of the senior management team. The way this process is structured encourages a high level of participation and commits staff to the achievement of the performance standards.

69 A range of questionnaires are used to gather feedback from students about the quality of provision. There are college-wide questionnaires to evaluate the success of marketing activities and student induction. These have been used to good effect and have led to changes in the induction programme for 1994-95. There is not, however, a college-wide system for the collection of student feedback on the effectiveness of teaching. On some courses, students' perceptions are carefully recorded and analysed, and this good practice should be extended.

70 All course teams produce annual monitoring reports which are reviewed at school level. The standard of critical self-evaluation in these reports is variable. The best examples show that critical comments from external moderators and students have been taken into account. There are many reports which are mainly descriptive in tone, and which reflect the limited experience of some course teams in using the review process to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A summary of the main themes of each report together with examination results is presented to the academic standards committee and academic board. Data on student retention rates were not routinely presented with the examination results, but this has now been rectified.

71 Common procedures are in place to check the consistency of internal assessment on NVQ and GNVQ programmes. These have been well implemented on many courses. For example, in hairdressing and beauty therapy, there is an effective internal verification system, in which nominated members of teaching staff double mark samples of student assignments to ensure consistency of standards between different assessors. Common guidelines for internal verification have recently been agreed across the college to ensure more comparability between programmes. Thirty-two teaching staff have gained qualifications as NVQ and GNVQ assessors and another seven are qualified as internal verifiers. There is an extensive and continuing staff-development programme of assessor and verifier training.

72 The college has a materials development unit which is improving the quality of college and course documentation by following agreed quality standards and a house style for policy statements, student handbooks and teaching materials. Course submissions to validating bodies conform to a common college format which is adapted to satisfy examining and awarding bodies requirements. The college is preparing a comprehensive manual of quality standards which will assist in bringing together aspects of good practice.

73 The college is committed to staff development for all teaching and support staff. At the time of inspection the allocated staff-development budget was £85,000, about 1 per cent of payroll costs. Part of the budget is devolved to heads of school and section heads to enable them to meet identified curriculum objectives. A positive aspect of staff development is the extensive involvement of administrative and caretaking staff in courses leading to NVQ qualifications in management and supervisory studies.

74 All new staff are entitled to an induction programme, covering two half-days, in which they are briefed about the college. Each has a mentor to provide guidance during their first year at the college. The commitment of the college to developing its staff is reflected in its objective of gaining the Investors in People award by autumn 1995.

75 In response to the requirements of the national charter for further education, a first issue of the college charter has been produced and distributed to students and some employers. It addresses all the areas in the national charter. At the time of the inspection, many students had not read the college charter and were unaware of its significance in defining their rights and obligations. Not all students found the language used in the college charter easy to understand and the document was not attractive in format and presentation. Future issues of the college charter will be modified in response to comments received from an evaluation sheet which is included with the current document.

76 As part of its response to the inspection requirements, a self-assessment report was produced by the college nominee under the headings of the inspection framework. It provided a comprehensive and critical look at the college's quality of management and provision but evidence was only offered in support of achievements. Many of the judgements on the key assessments were consistent with the conclusions reached by the inspection team but in other areas, and notably where there were shortcomings, they lacked rigour.

RESOURCES

Staffing

77 The college makes efficient use of its staff. There are good personnel procedures and practices in place. Job descriptions are reviewed before new appointments are made. There is collaborative working and effective deployment of staff across most areas. Management are seen as supportive, open and concerned for their staff.

78 Lecturers are well qualified for the teaching and course development they undertake. The majority have a first degree or higher professional qualification and many have post-graduate degrees. Over 80 per cent of full-time teaching staff have a teaching certificate. In the few areas where staff are not appropriately qualified, training is being undertaken to meet changing needs. Some staff are accredited with the competence standards of the Training and Development Lead Body and others are being trained.

79 Staff working in administrative, clerical and technician capacities work closely with teaching staff. The deployment of technician staff in related areas of work, or in areas which span school divisions, is valued by staff and has led to effective technician support for most subjects. The distance between the two college sites has led to less effective technician support at the Aveley campus.

Equipment/learning resources

80 Courses are generally supported by sufficient equipment and there is a rolling programme of replacement based upon a careful assessment of needs. Recent improvements have included the re-equipping of workshop areas in art and design, carpentry and joinery. In engineering, students benefit from working on modern vehicles, some of which have been donated by local vehicle manufacturers. In fashion and graphic design, there are insufficient modern sewing machines. In catering, specialist equipment requires further updating.

81 There are learning-resource centres at both sites which house collections of books and periodicals, and have linked open-access information technology facilities. The learning-resource centres are at an early stage of development and the resources available have not yet been integrated to support students undertaking project work and other forms of investigation. Access to library books is still based upon a manual reference system. The book and periodical stock in Aveley is limited and many students are reliant upon lecturers providing handouts and study materials.

82 Recently there has been substantial investment in the provision of information technology. There are excellent facilities in art and design, and in office and information technology, and the college is seeking to upgrade old equipment in other areas. The college has about 360 computers located in workshops, classrooms and the learning-resource areas. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is good, but students at both sites do not always have access to the most modern equipment. The recent decision to appoint an information technology co-ordinator should improve access and the level of response to changing needs. Staff are encouraged to develop their information technology skills through a drop-in centre which has excellent facilities. These include industrial standard software, and video transfer and digital camera facilities which enable staff to manipulate photographic images for the production of visual aids.

Accommodation

83 The college operates on two sites six miles apart. Access to both sites is difficult. The Aveley site is off the main bus routes and a college service is provided to transport students between the two campuses. The Grays site contains a number of flat-roofed buildings of varying quality. Many date from 1956 and have been subsequently modernised. The site

incorporates the main administration and reception area of the college. The internal decoration is poor in some areas but a substantial refurbishment programme since 1993 has led to some improvements.

84 The Aveley site, previously a secondary school, was upgraded prior to incorporation. The classroom accommodation is in good decorative order, but the external appearance of the buildings is unattractive. There has been substantial damage caused by vandalism. The college is planning to base all teaching at its Woodview site by 1997 and has detailed plans to achieve this. Management of the current accommodation is sound. There is effective use of space. Significant savings of expenditure on energy have been made through a scheme involving external consultants.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

85 Thurrock College works closely with its community and provides a range of vocational courses in response to local needs. The college's strengths are:

- the systematic identification of local needs through effective marketing and liaison
- the range of vocational courses
- excellent links with local schools, higher education and the adjacent sixth form college
- committed governors who lend their expertise to the college
- senior managers who promote participation in planning and decision making
- effective strategic planning at all levels of the institution
- good communication and teamwork
- well-designed diagnostic assessment of students' basic skills
- the comprehensive range of student services
- good monitoring and reporting of students' progress to employers and feeder schools
- extensive provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- high standards of teaching across different curriculum areas
- generally high levels of student retention and progression to further and higher education
- well-developed procedures for course monitoring and improvement
- highly-qualified and motivated teaching and support staff
- astute management of accommodation and equipment.

86 If the college is to continue to raise its standards it should:

- provide additional basic-skills support in response to identified student needs

-
- co-ordinate the different elements of the quality assurance system
 - update the library bookstock and integrate it more effectively with other learning resources
 - improve some parts of the accommodation
 - improve the quality of equipment in some areas of work
 - further develop students' information technology skills.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (as at November 1994)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (as at November 1994)

 - 3 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at November 1994)

 - 4 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1994)

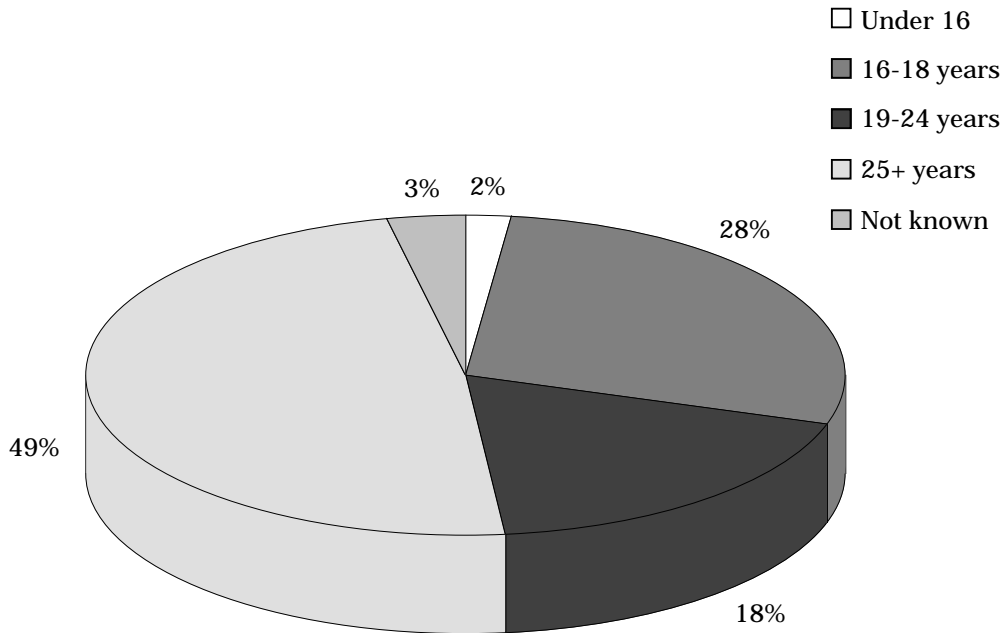
 - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

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

Figure 1

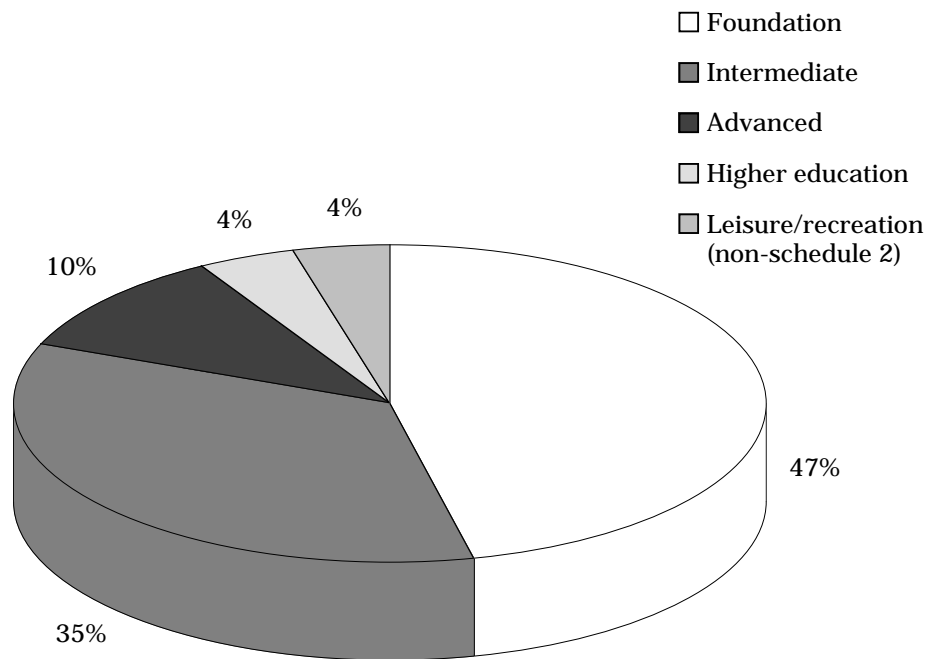
Thurrock College: percentage enrolments by age (as at November 1994)



Enrolments: 5,820

Figure 2

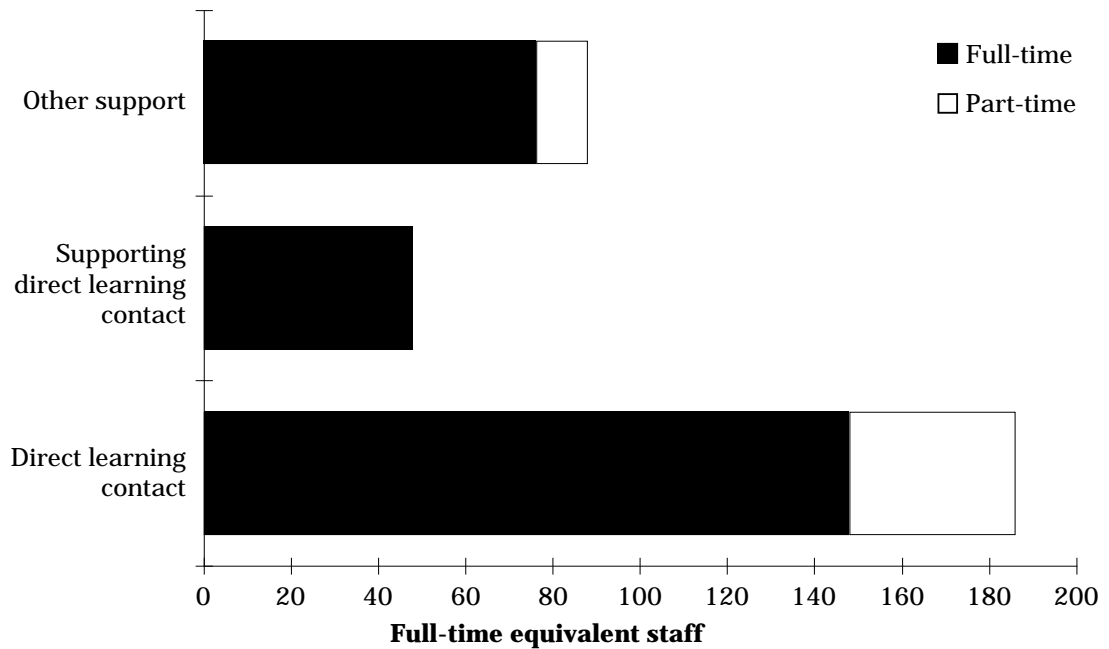
Thurrock College: percentage enrolments by level of study (as at November 1994)



Enrolments: 5,820

Figure 3

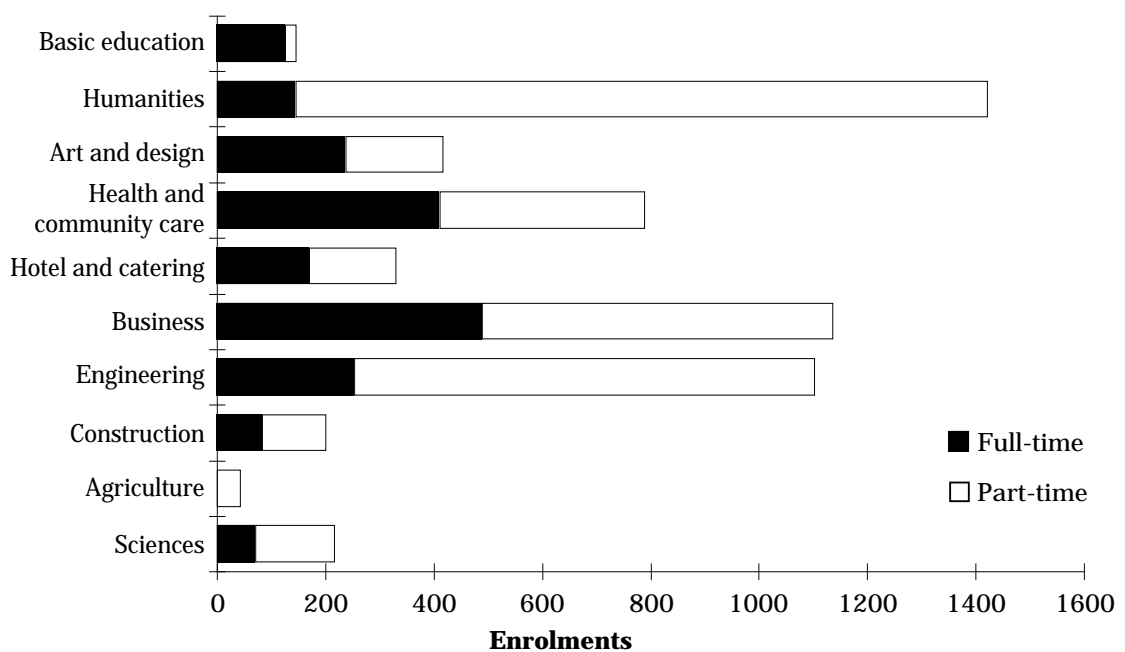
**Thurrock College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents
(as at November 1994)**



Full-time equivalent staff: 322

Figure 4

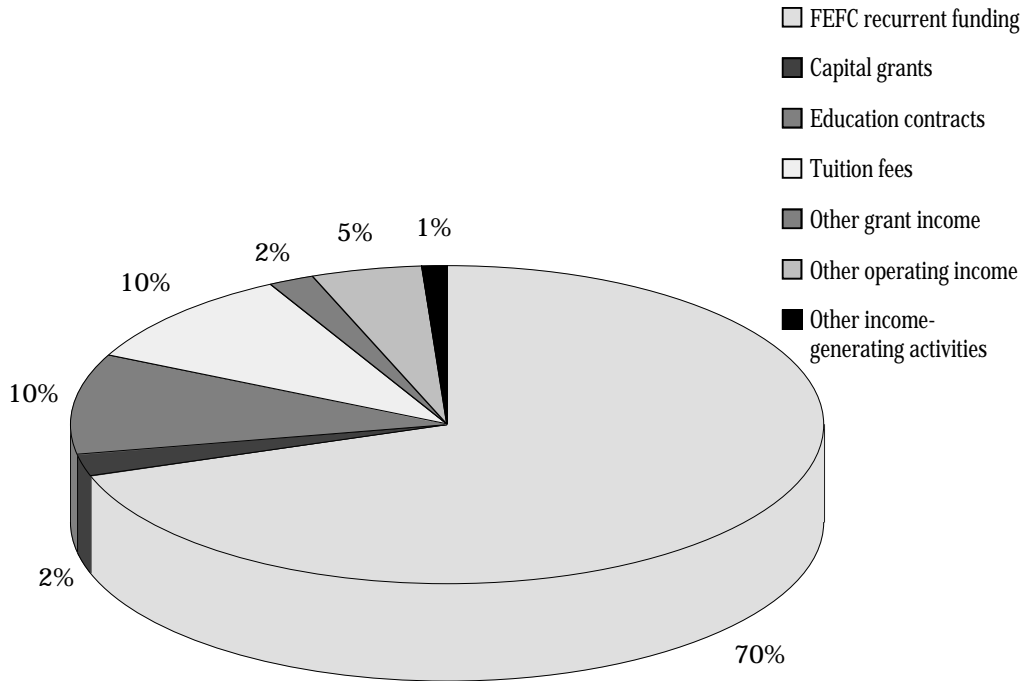
**Thurrock College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area
(as at November 1994)**



Enrolments: 5,820

Figure 5

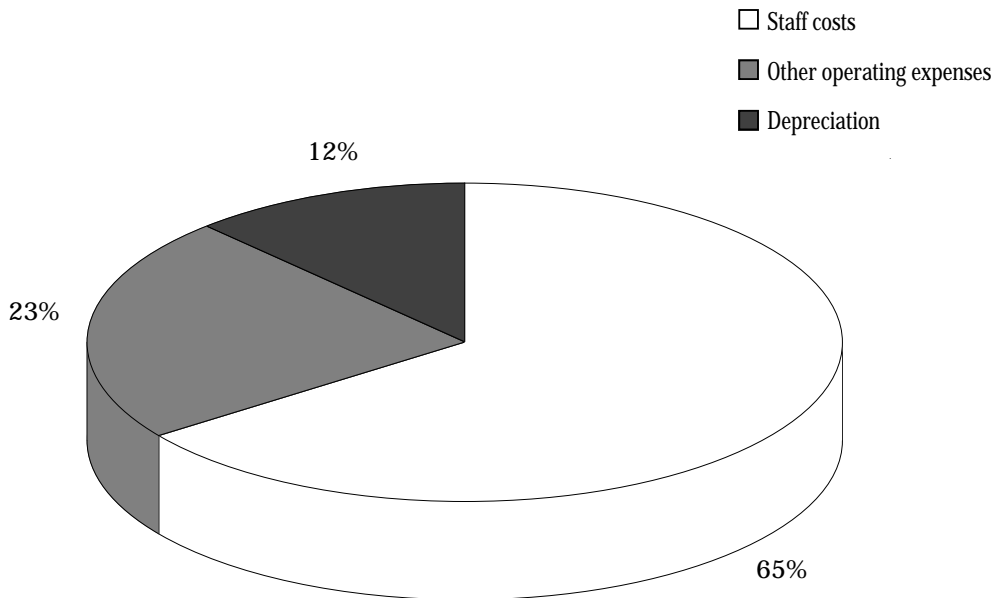
Thurrock College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)



Income: £10,432,000

Figure 6

Thurrock College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)



Expenditure: £11,099,000

Note: this total includes £6,000 interest payable.
The historical cost surplus for the period is £562,000.

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