

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Achievements of Colleges on their Charter Commitments

National Survey Report

January 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

*THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL*

The Further Education Funding Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector in England. It discharges the duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the sector every four years. The Council's inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

College inspections involve both full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have specialist knowledge and experience in the areas they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member from outside the world of education and a nominated member of staff from the college being inspected.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100*

© FEFC 1996 This report may be photocopied

**Achievements of Colleges on
their Charter Commitments**

**National Survey Report
January 1996**

SUMMARY

This report is concerned with the introduction and implementation of college charters. It presents the findings from quadrennial college inspections and other inspections of colleges during 1994 and 1995.

The *Charter for Further Education* was published in September 1993. All colleges produced their own charters by summer 1994 as a condition of Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funding. There has been a high level of commitment to the development of charters. College corporations played a supportive role during the development stages. There has been widespread consultation on the content. College charters are produced in a variety of styles. The best are clear, relevant and attractively presented.

The charter has become the main source of information on students' entitlements, although most charters make reference to other documents that support or expand upon charter commitments. As yet, some students and other customers do not fully understand their entitlements or appreciate how charters can be used. Part-time students do not always receive college charters.

Some colleges took a deliberate decision to make limited commitments in the first instance. Most charters contain general statements rather than a commitment to standards of service against which performance can be measured. Many are now planning to review their charters.

Most of the commitments set out in the *Charter for Further Education* are developed in colleges' own charters. Common deficiencies include insufficient information on credit accumulation and sources of funding in case of hardship, the lack of attention to employers' entitlements and inadequacies in the information for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Colleges are successfully meeting many of their charter commitments but some fail to provide accurate and timely information on the costs of courses. Other colleges do not present clear information on how well they are doing in meeting their performance criteria. Many colleges fail to make available the results of their annual survey of the views of students and employers.

Although complaints procedures have improved, not all colleges have systems that clearly track and monitor progress on complaints. More should be done to ensure that records are kept of the number of complaints and how many of these receive an initial response on time.

In 30 per cent of colleges inspected, responsibility has not been clearly allocated for monitoring performance against charter commitments. Better monitoring and reporting arrangements should enable colleges to measure improvements and assess whether their charters are improving their service to customers. This will also better equip colleges for the second *Charter for Further Education* due out at the end of 1996.

CONTENTS

Paragraph

Introduction	1
Review Methods Used to Monitor the Implementation of Charters	3
The Development of College Charters	6
The Form and Content of College Charters	10
Standards	21
Colleges' Performance against their Charter Commitments	25
Recruitment, guidance and support	26
Teaching and learning	34
Quality assurance	37
Conclusions	45

INTRODUCTION

1 The *Charter for Further Education* was published in September 1993. Colleges were expected to develop their own charters within this national framework by summer 1994. In the then secretary of state's introduction to the *Charter for Further Education*, he said:

The Further Education Funding Council will, at my request, be making sure that college charters are in place and that they are challenging, and develop over time. The Council will also monitor colleges' performance against the commitments in the Charter and their own.

2 This report forms an element of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) response to the secretary of state, and makes available the findings arising from the inspectorate's monitoring of colleges' charter performance.

REVIEW METHODS USED TO MONITOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHARTERS

3 All colleges have their charter performance monitored as part of the quadrennial inspection round. During these inspections, colleges' performance in observing their charter commitments are examined using the framework set out in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.

4 Between January 1994 and May 1995, inspectors carried out additional in-depth monitoring of colleges' charter performance in 127 of the colleges being inspected, using a guidance note to structure their enquiries. Whenever possible, employers' views of colleges' performance were obtained along with the views of staff, parents, students and other members of the local community.

5 The inspectors also reviewed the charter in a sample of colleges which were not being inspected during 1994-95. Inspection focused on the management and development of charters and on colleges' efforts to measure their own performance in keeping their charter commitments.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLLEGE CHARTERS

6 All colleges met the requirement to produce a charter by summer 1994. In the short period that charters have existed, they have become an important element in developing the profile of many colleges by helping students, employers, parents, and the community to understand the purpose of the college, its ethos, and the standards it endeavours to meet.

7 Colleges consulted widely before producing their charters. In nearly all colleges, the development of the charter involved students, teaching staff, support staff, employers, and representatives of the community and often local bodies such as the training and enterprise council (TEC). In many cases, the staff on the working group provided a

conduit for the exchange of ideas between the staff as a whole and other members of the working group, thus ensuring that there was effective consultation during the period the charter was being formulated.

8 Almost all charters have been approved by the college's corporate body. Most corporations played a supportive role in the development of their college's charter although some were more directly involved than others. In approximately half the colleges inspected, the corporation commented on initial drafts of the charter before approving the final version. In a few colleges, a member of the corporation acted as a channel of communication between the corporation board and the college. In 10 per cent of cases, the corporation had little or no involvement with the charter other than approving the final version.

9 The majority of colleges recognise the importance of ensuring that the person with overall management responsibility for the college charter is a member of the college's senior management team. In two or three colleges, the principal leads the charter initiative. Strong leadership ensured that charters were published by the required date. As time has passed, however, the urgency and drive have diminished. A critical period lies ahead. In some colleges, the early momentum will have to be rediscovered if their charters are to continue to be relevant and central to their work.

THE FORM AND CONTENT OF COLLEGE CHARTERS

10 College charters have been written in a variety of styles. They vary in their content and format and in the uses to which they are put. Whilst some concentrate on trying to specify students' entitlements, others focus more on defining important values or giving information. Some charters are designed to complement the students' handbook and the prospectus as useful sources of information on college procedures, facilities and policies.

11 College charters are generally well prepared and students find them attractive. The best have been composed carefully and are clear, readable and relevant. Students find charters more useful and informative when they are comprehensive without being over complex.

12 Most colleges have distributed their charters to all full-time students and staff, and many have also sent them to parents, employers and representatives of the local community. Not all part-time students receive charters.

13 Colleges that have been successful in creating familiarity with their charters have used various means to achieve that objective. They have promoted their charters using posters, leaflets, handbooks, pocket-sized summaries, student guides to the college, and other forms of publicity. They have also used carefully-planned presentations at induction sessions and discussions in tutorials. One of the colleges inspected makes copies of the charter available to prospective students at open

days, and to parents of prospective students at liaison events with partner schools.

14 Although most of the commitments set out in the *Charter for Further Education* are covered and further developed in colleges' own charters, there are some common omissions. College charters have little information on arrangements for obtaining credits that can be built up and transferred if students decide to change their course or move to another college. Information on sources of funding in case of hardship is often incomplete.

15 The *Charter for Further Education* requires that the names of corporation members are published and that there are explanations of how they can be contacted and what their role is. Just under a third of colleges inspected have chosen instead to make the information available on request. Several colleges publish members' names and addresses in their prospectus and in one college the names of members are found in reception, student services, the common room, and the learning resources centre.

16 The *Charter for Further Education's* commitments to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are only partly reproduced in most college charters. There is adequate information for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on the courses available and on the additional support provided by the college. However, information on access to buildings is less readily available. A few college charters have been produced in Braille and on tape to help students with sensory difficulties.

17 Employers' entitlements are given a variable amount of attention. One college charter covers these comprehensively; separate sections of the charter are devoted to employers' rights when involved in providing work placements, when recruiting students for employment and when seeking college links. Another charter clearly confirms the service that will be provided to any employer sending staff on courses at the college. In about 10 per cent of the colleges inspected, a separate charter has been written to address the needs and rights of employers. In contrast, a few college charters completely ignore the service standards that employers can expect.

18 Information for employers on the specific provisions made to improve students' literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and communication skills is promised under the *Charter for Further Education* but colleges have not yet responded in sufficient detail to this.

19 Several colleges are considering ways in which their charters can be made more relevant to the needs of adults and to the community. One college has a community charter that covers the rights of members of the community who use college facilities such as the sports hall, the theatre rehearsal space and the music studio.

20 In several of the colleges inspected, there has already been good discussion between students, staff and college managers about the content of the next edition of the college charter. Having had nearly a year to assess their performance on their charters, and to consider which service improvements might be made, some college managers have expressed an interest in devising a new charter using the experience gained. Just under half of the colleges reviewed have plans to issue new versions in the near future. In most of the remaining colleges the view is taken that it will be appropriate to revise the college charter after a two-year period.

STANDARDS

21 It has been common for college managers to decide that their charter statements should reflect only those standards that can be readily achieved under their usual arrangements and within their existing resources. They have been wary of the risks of committing themselves to levels of service the college might not be able to achieve. Fears of legal arguments have constrained some colleges' willingness to set standards to which they aspire but may not always meet. Instead, the charter has been seen as a document that brings together and describes what already exists.

22 Most charters make commitments to broad principles rather than to the achievement of specific standards of service. Although many charters include some standards which can be measured, about a third of them have very few or none at all. Most charters make reference to other documents and policies that support or expand upon charter commitments; for example equal opportunities policies are usually well referenced in college charters.

23 The most regularly used standards in charters are concerned with colleges' response times for various services. For example, teachers in some colleges have to meet a standard of 10 working days for the return of assignments. Administrative staff in others have to meet a standard of two days for the acknowledgement of applications. One college charter promised a decision on applications for access funds within 14 working days, and cheques within five working days for successful applicants. In some charters, there is a commitment to a progress review for every student every term. Most colleges recognise that quantitative standards have advantages and many have plans to adopt them when they revise their charters.

24 In many colleges, the requirement to produce a charter has given added force to the need for a better quality assurance system, and has emphasised the importance of setting standards and measuring performance in relation to those standards.

COLLEGES' PERFORMANCE AGAINST THEIR CHARTER COMMITMENTS

25 Some colleges have given insufficient consideration to how they ensure that all their customers are thoroughly introduced to their entitlements under the charter. Staff are not always familiar with the details of their charters. This has reduced their ability to explain the charter to students and partly accounts for the low, or variable, level of student awareness and understanding, which was often found in the colleges inspected. Students frequently fail to see what relevance their charters have for them, or fail to appreciate fully how they can be used. Occasionally, charters fail to capture students' interest because they are perceived as having little effect on the quality of the education that is being provided.

Recruitment, Guidance and Support

26 The students' right to receive relevant information to help them choose their courses is well met. Those considering making applications for admission to colleges are given accurate and clear information on most aspects of college provision. There is readily-available information through a variety of media including the press, radio, and television. Written information is well distributed through public information services such as libraries, careers guidance services, and other community outlets. Most college prospectuses and course leaflets are clear and comprehensive.

27 Applicants usually receive information on courses, entry requirements, qualifications offered, teaching methods, methods of assessment and learning resources. Occasionally prospectuses give the names of staff to contact if applicants want more information.

28 In colleges that accept overseas students, specific information relevant to overseas students is often limited in charters, although it is often available in other documents. A small number of colleges operate a separate induction programme for overseas students and one college makes additional provision to ensure that the information and guidance unit is well equipped to handle their special needs. Once overseas students have enrolled on a course at a college they have good access to information about their courses.

29 Not all colleges ensure that students with learning difficulties understand their entitlements.

30 Colleges are required to make information available on how well they are doing in relation to a range of performance criteria. However, although the quality of comparative data on enrolments, retention rates, completion rates, examination results and students' destinations has improved substantially over the last teaching year, such information was poorly presented or difficult to access in a quarter of the colleges inspected.

31 The majority of the colleges give an indication of their charges, although potential applicants do not always receive full and accurate information on the cost of courses. Colleges usually refer to fees in their publicity, but sometimes there is no mention of specific sums of money. Fees for part-time courses are not made known sufficiently early in the year and this creates difficulties for some students. In many colleges, the financial help available from access funds is not documented clearly.

32 Students' rights to have their applications handled fairly and efficiently are nearly always met. Colleges usually publish their admissions arrangements though some have yet to set clear targets for the time taken to handle applications.

33 Colleges are fulfilling their charter commitments on guidance to students. Help is available when students experience personal difficulties and advice is given when alternative courses of study need to be considered. The scope for further study is well explained and most colleges provide adequate information on jobs and careers. Recently, there have been significant improvements in the status, physical accommodation, and accessibility of guidance services in some of the colleges inspected.

Teaching and Learning

34 Staff take seriously their commitments on marking and commenting on students' work, and assignments are returned promptly. Learning agreements are now widely used. For example, one college's learning agreement involves students making a commitment to the amount of private study they will do, and staff undertake to return assignments within a specified period.

35 Most colleges meet their charter commitment to review students' progress effectively. Reviews are undertaken at regular intervals and are highly valued by students. Students' progress on courses is generally carefully recorded. However, the method of recording students' achievements at the end of their courses of study is not always clear and comprehensive. Better use could be made of records of achievement to ensure that students have detailed documentary evidence of the knowledge, skills and abilities which they have acquired.

36 Work placements are widely available and in almost all colleges these are well managed and effectively monitored. The *Charter for Further Education* states that students should have the opportunity to build up credits towards a transferable qualification where possible but, currently, few courses are organised in ways which enable this to happen.

Quality Assurance

37 Charters require colleges to obtain and publish students' views. Students' opinions of their colleges are gained through their responses to questionnaires and contributions to course reviews. However, the findings from questionnaires are made available to students in only just over half of the colleges inspected.

38 Colleges have had difficulty in devising effective techniques for obtaining employers' views of their work. Several colleges have employers' advisory panels and other colleges depend on their corporation members to provide employers' perspectives. Two of the colleges inspected had carried out formal surveys of employers' opinions but had encountered a very low level of response; other methods of obtaining the information were being considered. The *Charter for Further Education* indicates that summaries of employers' views should be available. This requirement has not yet been met in the great majority of colleges.

39 In nearly all colleges, complaints procedures are well publicised and the procedure for making a complaint is clear. In many colleges, the principal or vice-principal takes a direct part in handling complaints. Only half of the colleges inspected during 1993-94 had clear and effective arrangements in place for handling formal complaints, but colleges have worked hard to improve these. By 1994-95, many were able to point to improvements in their monitoring arrangements, including monitoring the number of complaints, the type of complaints made, and the outcomes. In about a quarter of colleges, action is still required to ensure that there is an effective tracking system for complaints. It is not always clear whether all complaints are acknowledged within 10 days as required, usually because tracking procedures are inadequate or incomplete.

40 Usually charters were published without detailed consideration being given to the methods by which they would be monitored. In about 30 per cent of the colleges inspected, responsibility for monitoring charter performance was not clearly allocated.

41 Management information systems are not yet being used to monitor charter commitments on a routine basis. Colleges should develop systems which enable managers to carry out regular checks on levels of compliance with charter commitments and standards. About 10 per cent of colleges have developed simple monitoring systems. In some colleges, there is a charter users group which includes students and community representatives. The terms of reference and authority of these groups are rarely well established and their effectiveness is therefore limited. One college plans to organise a 'feedback day' to obtain students' opinions on the college's approach to its charter. About a third of colleges still have not decided how to monitor compliance with charter commitments.

42 Many senior management teams have decided that a review of charter commitments would be sensible at the end of the college year, as part of the college's general review and most colleges plan to use questionnaires for students to find out how well the college is perceived to be meeting its commitments.

43 Methods of measuring colleges' performance on their charter commitments should be strengthened. To date, most of the reports received by senior management teams have been in verbal rather than documentary form. Only a handful of colleges have devised a co-ordinated system for drawing together reports from all parts of the college.

44 Approximately 80 per cent of colleges inspected have not made any preparations for reporting on their performance in response to charter commitments.

CONCLUSIONS

45 Colleges have shown considerable drive and energy in developing their charters. Most have placed responsibility for the charter in the hands of senior managers.

46 There is much variety in the charters. Most have been well prepared and some are attractively presented. There has been wide consultation in the development of charters. Employers entitlements do not always receive adequate attention and information on physical access for students with disabilities is not sufficiently comprehensive.

47 Most colleges have distributed their charters to staff, full-time students and other customers. Colleges generally need to strengthen arrangements for ensuring that all students receive a copy, understand their entitlements and appreciate how charters can be used, including part-time students and students with learning difficulties.

48 Some of the entitlements set out in colleges' charters are not met effectively. These include the entitlement to accurate and timely information on the costs of courses and on credit accumulation. Some colleges need to improve the presentation or availability of information on how well they are doing in relation to a range of performance criteria, such as examination results and students' destinations. Precise standards for administering applications for hardship grants are often lacking. Many colleges fail to make available an annual survey of the views of students and employers.

49 Complaints procedures have improved and are generally understood by students. However, some colleges do not have adequate systems for tracking and monitoring progress on complaints, and more should be done to ensure that records are kept of the number of complaints that receive an initial response on time.

50 Charters should be strengthened by converting the general statements they contain into standards that are more focused and precise. There is also a need for more effective monitoring and reporting arrangements so that colleges can measure the improvements that they are making, and judge whether their charters are improving the service to their customers.

51 Many colleges intend to review their charter performance and some plan to issue revised versions of their charters after these reviews. The lessons of the first round of charters should be widely discussed and disseminated in order to assist all colleges in making their new charters a success.

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
January 1996