

Furness College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: February 2001
Report from the Inspectorate
The Further Education Funding Council

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

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

REINSPECTION

The FEFC has agreed that colleges with provision judged by the inspectorate to be less than satisfactory or poor (grade 4 or 5) should be reinspected. In these circumstances, a college may have its funding agreement with the FEFC qualified to prevent it increasing the number of new students in an unsatisfactory curriculum area until the FEFC is satisfied that weaknesses have been addressed.

Satisfactory provision may also be reinspected if actions have been taken to improve quality and the college's existing inspection grade is the only factor which prevents it from meeting the criteria for FEFC accreditation.

Reinspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Reinspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports and confirm that actions taken as a result of previous inspection have improved the quality of provision. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. The opinion of the FEFC's audit service contributes to inspectorate judgements about governance and management.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Assessments use grades on a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses. The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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**Furness College
North West Region**

Reinspection of quality assurance: February 2001

Background

The college was inspected in January 2000 and the findings published in inspection report 52/00. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: good examples of arrangements to identify and respond to students' views; good student awareness and understanding of the college charter; and a well-documented and effective complaints procedure. The weaknesses of the provision were: inadequate attempts to set appropriate standards; a lack of rigour in course reviews; a lack of strategy for quality assurance in support areas; inadequate use of data and benchmarks to evaluate performance; insufficient links between the different processes for quality assurance; and an underdeveloped strategy to improve retention rates.

The provision was inspected over four days in February 2001. The inspector met with college managers, teachers, support staff and students and examined a wide range of documents.

Assessment

There have been delays in addressing issues from the last inspection. Three different managers have had responsibility for leading developments in quality assurance and the current manager took on this role as recently as September 2000. Actions to address the weaknesses have begun but processes and systems in place have not completed a full cycle. It is not yet possible to judge their effectiveness. The inspector did not agree that progress had been as extensive as claimed in the college's self-assessment report but the report and action plans clearly identify areas for further development. Some strengths identified by the college had been overstated. The inspector found an additional weakness.

The strengths identified at the last inspection have been maintained and the format and use of questionnaires has been improved. However, the college does not set targets for improvements in student satisfaction. The claims of improvement brought about by its lesson observation and internal inspection procedures are premature.

The college has a quality manual which clearly defines the system, responsibilities and procedures. Staff are beginning to understand their roles and responsibilities for quality assurance. Business support areas are still not incorporated into the framework. The student support directorate has developed quality standards against which to measure performance, but other support functions have not yet done so. Although an audit team has been identified it is still awaiting training. There are few mechanisms for sharing good practice. These weaknesses were included in the college's self-assessment report.

The inspector agreed with the college that the quality improvement process has become better integrated with curriculum areas since the last inspection. Evidence from various sources is brought together in teaching and learning quality improvement files. They link course reviews to the self-assessment process. The new framework is designed to bring more rigour to course reviews and to action-planning. In 1999-2000 there were still many examples of documentation which was incomplete or completed in a desultory manner. In many cases the process did not result in clear plans to improve performance. There are early signs of

improvement for 2000-01. Curriculum managers and programme co-ordinators are now aware of the need to make comparisons with national benchmarks and they are more familiar with performance indicators. Course teams set targets which are now more realistic. However, they do not have reliable data to assist them in this process. Draft interim targets for retention and achievement were set in November 2000 but performance data for the previous year were not available. The college acknowledges the need to raise staff skills in target-setting, benchmarking and monitoring of targets and is planning a training programme with the help of a beacon college. The college has taken steps to improve retention. Student attendance and retention are being monitored more closely and absence is followed up by an attendance officer. It is too soon to identify what the impact might be at this stage. A report examining reasons for leaving courses early was recently produced by student services.

There are some improvements in links between the different processes for quality assurance. The professional development process implemented from January 2001 takes into account lesson observation grades and relates more closely to college strategic objectives. However, the system for individual performance review is underdeveloped. Staff performance is not reviewed against targets arising from course reviews or action plans. This weakness was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

Revised grade: quality assurance 4.