

Halton College
Reinspection of Governance: November 2000
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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Halton College North West Region

Reinspection of governance: November 2000

Background

Halton College was inspected in October 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 15/00. Provision in governance was graded 5 and the audit service opinion was that governance was weak.

There were no significant strengths. The weaknesses were: lack of attention to the educational character and mission of the college; failure to exercise proper control over the activities of senior postholders; ineffective committees and an inadequate committee structure; weaknesses in clerking; neglect of duties in relation to franchised provision; unauthorised signing of contracts; few links with staff; and a lack of performance indicators and targets to measure board performance.

The college was reinspected over eight days in November 2000 by an inspector and auditor. The work of the auditor included the reinspection of financial management. Inspectors and auditors held meetings with governors, managers and the clerk and attended a board meeting. They examined a range of documents, including board and committee minutes, franchise contracts and other documents relating to the college's self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Assessment

A new board was appointed in October 1999. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that good progress has been made to address weaknesses. A new mission has been agreed for the college and a strategic plan drawn up which refocuses the college on the needs of the local community. These measures were taken in consultation with staff and key stakeholders. Governors collectively have an extensive range of expertise and use this well in carrying out their responsibilities. They meet every three or four weeks. Average attendance at meetings is 89%. They have carried out individual self-assessments and a training needs analysis. Recently, they approved a set of performance indicators for governance. The college has provided all governors with training for their role and some governors have attended external training events. An appropriate induction process is in place. The arrangements for clerking are good. Governors are well supported by a professional, independent clerk and a full-time clerking assistant. Procedures are well documented. In order to make decisions collectively and quickly on the urgent issues facing the college, governors initially established only two committees, search and audit. These have worked effectively. Additional committees have been approved as appropriate. All committees have clear terms of reference. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The board substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government.

Governors clearly understand the distinction between governance and management. They ask probing questions of managers and often ask for additional information before making key decisions. The chair holds regular, minuted meetings with the principal. Governors have agreed an appraisal system for the principal. The new principal took up post in February 2000 and governors intend to carry out his appraisal early in 2001. Governors have taken action to address the weakness of few links with staff. Curriculum areas make presentations

to the board and governors make visits to areas of the college before board meetings. Many governors have attended college events. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors are much better informed about the college's franchised work. They have addressed the weaknesses in signing contracts identified in the previous inspection report. They receive regular reports and have approved a substantial reduction in the amount of franchised work this year and development of local provision where possible. They approved a more effective monitoring system for franchised work but this has yet to be fully implemented. Governors still have much work to do in establishing closer monitoring of students' retention and achievement and developing specific targets against which the strategic plan can be monitored.

Revised grade: governance 3.