

Halton College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: 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 quality assurance: November 2000

Background

Halton College was inspected in October 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 15/00. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: staff fully involved in the self-assessment process; and good staff development arrangements. The weaknesses of the provision were: slow progress in addressing the main issues arising from the last inspection; lack of routine use of standards and performance indicators to measure progress; uneven quality and rigour of some course reviews; and the ineffective monitoring of achievement of curriculum targets.

The provision was reinspected over four days in November 2000. Inspectors met with college managers, teachers, support staff and students and examined a wide range of documents.

Assessment

Since the last inspection the college has made substantial improvements to its quality assurance arrangements. Though well designed and well focused, several improvements are quite recent. They were put in place after the formation of the quality and continuing professional development directorate in May 2000. The college acknowledged in its self-assessment report that there is still work to be done in introducing service standards in all business support areas and in systematically incorporating employer feedback into the course quality review process. It has begun to take action to address these weaknesses. It has also further developed its arrangements for collecting and taking account of the views of students. A recently appointed student liaison officer is working enthusiastically, and with some success, in helping students to communicate their opinions, views and ideas to college managers.

Inspectors agreed that there is a clear commitment to quality assurance at all levels. The quality committee, which involves a range of staff from across the college, devised the new quality manual. Teaching and support staff have a good understanding of the system and of their own and others' responsibilities. The quality manual provides a clear framework and documentation, all of which is also readily accessible on the college intranet. Course review and evaluation has been integrated with the self-assessment process. Course team self-assessment monitors performance indicators, targets, results from student surveys and action plans. Formal reviews are held once a term. There is evidence that course reviews are more rigorous. However, processes and systems have not been in place long enough to accurately judge their full impact or effectiveness. Inspectors agreed with the college that self-assessment is well integrated with the academic and planning cycles. They could not agree that quality monitoring arrangements for franchised provision are a key strength. Although records of quality monitoring demonstrate elements of good practice in relation to franchised provision, evidence from the small sample of providers visited during the reinspection indicates that quality monitoring is inconsistent.

The college has introduced a revised programme of lesson observations based upon FENTO standards. A trained team observes lessons across departments and has brought a greater degree of consistency and objectivity to the process. In the two curriculum areas reinspected,

there was an increase since the last inspection in lessons graded good or outstanding and a decrease in those graded less than satisfactory. The self-assessment report stated that lesson observations are having an impact in raising staff awareness of how to improve the quality of teaching and learning and inspectors agreed.

Quality audit reviews, designed to be both rigorous and supportive, are now an important part of the quality improvement process. The audit team has identified priority areas for early scrutiny. It intends to conduct reviews in all curriculum areas at least once a year. The monitoring of retention and achievement rates is a key item in the audit reviews. Outcomes of the reviews include action-planning, advice and guidance and staff development activities where appropriate.

The college has maintained and further strengthened its good staff development arrangements identified at the last inspection. There has been a considerable investment in staff development and training linked to the college's mission. A new mentoring system, linked to induction, was established in September 2000. The college's Investor in People award was renewed in June 2000. Though teachers have staff development interviews twice a year, the system for individual performance review is underdeveloped. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

Revised grade: quality assurance 3.