

**West Cumbria College**  
**Reinspection of Management: October 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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## **West Cumbria College North West Region**

### **Reinspection of management: October 2000**

#### **Background**

West Cumbria College was inspected in May 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 103/98. Management received a grade 4. Management was reinspected in November 1999 and again received a grade 4.

In the inspection in 1998, the audit service assessed financial management as good. Key strengths of management were close attention to financial performance and progress in implementing the accommodation strategy. The major weaknesses were: absence of a strong corporate culture; anomalies in the management structure; inconsistencies in management control; ineffective management information systems; tenuous links between strategic objectives and business plans; limited effectiveness in stimulating participation in education and training; and slow implementation of initiatives.

In the reinspection of 1999, inspectors noted that some progress had been made in many of the weak areas, while the identified strengths had been sustained through a period of uncertainty. Significant improvements were noted in communications, staff awareness and support of management developments, aspects of business planning and line management arrangements. However, inspectors judged that many weaknesses remained. These included: the unsettled management structure; uncertainty among staff about the future direction of the college and their role in relation to the college's overall objectives; the unclear relationship between different aspects of the planning process; duplication in information demands; weaknesses in marketing; the slow implementation of policy initiatives; little progress on the development of an equal opportunities strategy; and insufficient use of management information.

A further reinspection took place in October 2000. Inspectors examined a range of documents, conducted meetings with managers and staff and held telephone discussions with external partners.

#### **Assessment**

Good progress has been made on many of the weaknesses identified in November 1999. The college has strengthened its marketing unit and has made good use of market information from a range of sources to inform the clear strategic plan. The thorough strategic planning process involves all governors and staff. The revised mission is appropriate to the college and its context and is supported by clear strategic aims and objectives. Inspectors agreed that there are strong links between strategic and operational plans. A well-documented performance management system clarifies the implementation and review process. Staff understand and support the mission and are clear about the future direction of the college. The new principal has taken effective action to address urgent strategic issues. He has introduced co-ordinated systems and policies designed to clarify all aspects of the college's work and improve performance. A calendar of meetings, clear and well-circulated minutes and regular oral and written briefings for staff contribute to effective communication and consultation systems. Good progress has been made on revising college policies and ensuring that staff are aware of them. A comprehensive equal opportunities policy is in place although further action is needed to promote and monitor it. Successful efforts have been made to

improve the management information system. It is now providing reliable reports that managers are beginning to use for a range of purposes. The college has become more outward looking in an attempt to secure a constructive strategic position in the locality. Well-designed publicity and the building of collaborative links with a wide range of external partners have started to generate a more positive image.

Though significant progress has been made on addressing weaknesses, some important initiatives are at too early a stage to judge their effectiveness. The first stage of the revised management structure was introduced in September 2000 as part of a restructure to be completed in January 2001. Though there has been increased training and development of managers in the last year, as the self-assessment report acknowledges, some managers are not yet carrying out their responsibilities fully. Aspects of the recently introduced management protocols are not consistently followed. The role of the course manager lacks clarity. Inspectors agreed that there is still a need for a college-wide approach to developing a curriculum which is responsive to local needs. Insufficient gathering, analysis and sharing of intelligence on employers and local businesses have hampered action to identify and meet their needs. There has been a loss of work-related training contracts over the past year. Insufficient progress has been made on widening participation.

**Revised grade:** management 3.