

Wirral Metropolitan College
Reinspection of Support for Students: 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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Wirral Metropolitan College North West Region

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Background

Wirral Metropolitan College was inspected in March 1999 and the findings published in the inspection report 69/99. Support for students was awarded a grade 5.

There were no key strengths. The significant weaknesses were: inequity of access to support; the failure to address a decline in enrolments and poor retention rates; underdeveloped systems for the delivery of impartial advice and guidance; ineffective systems for identifying and responding to students' learning support needs; ineffective tutorial support for most students; inadequate careers education and guidance.

The provision was reinspected over four days in November 2000. Inspectors observed five tutorials, held meetings with managers, teachers and students from a range of courses and examined a variety of college documents.

Assessment

The college has made significant improvements to support for students since the last inspection. Inspectors generally agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Many of the weaknesses in the action plan had been addressed and some action points achieved by the time of the reinspection. A new teaching and learning policy designed to increase the consistency of the support that students experience is being implemented. A clear management structure now effectively draws together the different strands of student support. Staff who provide support services operate well as a team. Inspectors agreed that the college has improved the range and quality of recruitment and promotional activities. There are now effective arrangements for pre-entry impartial guidance and advice. Improved links with partner schools have been established. Careers education and guidance is well managed. Careers tutors have clear roles and responsibilities. The careers libraries and information databases are available on each main site and are kept well-stocked and up-to-date. There is a clearly defined careers education programme for all full-time students and tutors are provided with guidelines and support materials. Links between the curriculum teams and the careers service have been strengthened. The college has clarified its partnership arrangement with Careers Connections and reviews it against targets. Improvements have been made in the identification of students' learning support needs and the provision of additional learning support. Initial assessment takes place and the range of support has widened. Learning support tutors work effectively in the classroom with teachers and students. Inspectors agreed that the new tutorial framework is comprehensive and carefully designed. All full-time and part-time students are allocated a personal tutor. The college has taken steps to improve quality through training tutors and observing tutorials. There are models of good practice in some curriculum areas. Arrangements to support part-time students are good. Childcare facilities have been extended to more sites and neighbourhood centres. All students now have access to appropriate counselling support.

There remain areas in need of further improvement. The central enquiry database that logs all career choice and course enquiries is not yet fully operational. Evaluation of the new tutorial system is incomplete. The sharing of good practice is underdeveloped. Systems to monitor the quality of learning support and its impact on retention and achievement need further

development. Performance indicators for some student services, though planned, are not in place. The college has recognised that students have insufficient access to social and cultural activities. It has made slow progress in addressing this weakness.

Revised grade: support for students 3.