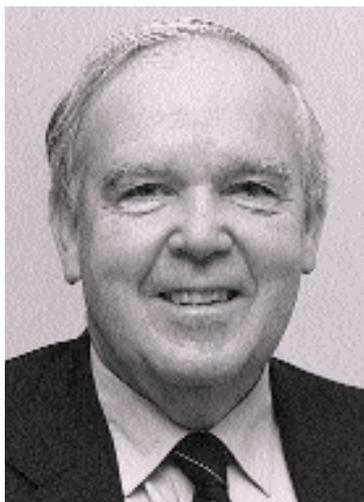


Quality Assessment Committee Annual Report 2000

Webcover

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**



Foreword

This is the seventh and final annual report from the quality assessment committee. The committee has overseen the work of the Council's inspectorate and advised the Council on matters of quality since its formation in 1993.

The work of the committee has been consistently and persistently directed towards the implementation of a clear vision. High quality colleges responsible for their performance, directed by governing boards which contribute to the development of the institution within its community and run by skilled experienced educational executives is no longer an aspiration, it is a reality. This has been achieved with the minimum of noise and by releasing the latent enthusiasm that comes through devolving responsibility to colleges.

Consequently, the last seven years have witnessed an increasingly clear focus on quality improvement within the further education sector. Most college governors and staff now fully understand that they share a collective responsibility for making education and training as productive as possible for their students. They appreciate that the future of their college depends on making a contribution which is valued by those in the community, by industry and commerce, and - most importantly - by each individual seeking to develop their life through study. They understand that the extent to which their college is valued will relate directly to the quality of its work and the standards it achieves.

The expectation that colleges should be able to assess their own performance accurately has been central to the sector's development over the last four years. Regular self-assessment, validated by independent inspection, has not only ensured that colleges accept their responsibility for quality but has also helped promote constructive, professional dialogue between inspectors and those they inspect. This has ensured that the focus of attention is on what needs to be done to make improvements.

The government's clear commitment to raising standards in further education, and its allocation of the standards fund, have been key to many of the sector's recent advances. Through its quality improvement strategy, the Council has forged a direct link between inspection outcomes and priorities for using the standards fund.

This has accelerated action to address weaknesses in individual colleges and underpinned national initiatives of benefit to the sector as a whole.

Raising standards is not just about concentrating on weakness, however. It is, as much, about building on strengths. The introduction of funding to support the dissemination of good practice and the success of the Council's scheme for accrediting the best colleges highlight the fact that there is much outstanding work to be found throughout the sector. These initiatives encourage colleges to collaborate and support each other. They ensure that models of good practice are available to all.

The next year will bring fundamental changes to the sector. The emphasis on local planning inherent in the new arrangements for administering further education should be reflected in increased local accountability for colleges. This is the next major step in the evolution of quality assurance, building on the confidence that colleges have gained through self-assessment, inspection, support for action-planning and accreditation.

Above all, the forthcoming changes should not be allowed to diminish the momentum for quality improvement, which has built up over the last few years. Nor should it deflect attention from the issues set out in this report. There will be many distractions for college governors and staff as the sector adjusts to a new landscape of post-16 provision. Quality and standards must not be allowed to slip down the agenda. A key part of the challenge ahead will be to ensure that those who work in our colleges to promote learning get the recognition, support, opportunities for career progression and rewards that they deserve. This will help them strive for, achieve and maintain the excellence which we all want from further education.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all present and past members of the committee for their valuable contributions to our work. I would also like to acknowledge the high standard of administrative support given to the committee by the Council and its officers.



Sir Bob Reid
Chairman, Quality Assessment Committee

Introduction

1 This is the seventh annual report of the quality assessment committee to the Further Education Funding Council. The committee oversees the work of the Council's inspectorate. In so doing, it receives all college inspection reports, national survey reports and the chief inspector's annual report. Those considered in 1999-2000 and the committee's debates during the year form the basis of the committee's annual report.

2 The committee is conscious that this will be its last report to the Council which concludes its operations in March 2001. It is the committee's hope that issues raised in the report will be taken forward by those bodies which succeed the Council, including the Learning and Skills Council, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

3 The committee wishes to take the opportunity of this report to acknowledge the significant progress made by colleges in response to inspection and to the sharp focus on standards evident in government policy. In so doing, members wish to commend the work of the many teachers, support staff, college managers and governors who have striven to improve the quality and value of further education and training for an increasingly diverse population of students. Without the dedicated work of these people, often in challenging circumstances, many in the community would not seek the opportunities and benefits further education can bring. Without their concern for quality, many of those enrolled on college courses would not succeed in developing and reaching their full potential.

4 Members also wish to record the committee's appreciation of the constructive way in which the Council has responded to its advice on matters of quality. It is the committee's view that the measures comprising the Council's quality improvement strategy, including the introduction of accredited status for colleges and targeted use of the standards fund, have done much to ensure that colleges' aspirations with respect to quality and standards can be turned into reality.

The sector's response to inspection

5 The introduction, in 1993, of regular, rigorous and consistent inspections marked the start of a period of continuous development in assessing and improving the quality of further education. This has seen well over 1000 inspections of provision made by sector colleges, independent specialist colleges catering for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, external institutions, universities and, lately, dance and drama schools.

6 At the outset of this process, few colleges were able to demonstrate effective quality assurance. While many had procedures for course reviews, there was little evidence of consistent practice, or outcomes leading to quality improvement. The formulation of an inspection framework, developed in consultation with the sector and advised by the committee, marked the first step in establishing a common understanding of good practice and a regime of quality assurance encompassing the totality of college operations. More importantly, the Council's inspection framework, *Assessing Achievement*, included a clear statement which placed responsibility for the quality of further education in the hands of those working in colleges. Devolution to colleges of responsibility for quality has been a cornerstone of all inspectorate quality-related initiatives.

7 The initial four-year cycle of inspections, from September 1993 to July 1997, resulted in the first comprehensive, public account of the work of English further education colleges in their long history. Inspection reports revealed an education sector of unparalleled diversity, with some 450 colleges varying in size from less than 300 students to a few with more students than many universities. The curriculum offered by colleges included many thousands of qualifications, ranging from those promoting basic education to those catering for postgraduates. The circumstances under which students learned also varied significantly, with full-time, part-time, distance learning, open access, evening and daytime provision all available. Perhaps most significantly, the financial circumstances

inherited from local authorities resulted in an initial state for the sector of substantial variations in funding from college to college to support delivery of identical qualifications.

8 Given this complex context, the energy devoted by college staff and governors to matters of quality speaks highly of their commitment to students. The first cycle of inspections confirmed the importance of well-organised and purposeful quality assurance, understood and supported by all college staff. It was also clear that leadership at the highest level was a key factor in establishing and maintaining high standards. Of the 20 colleges achieving outstanding grades for quality assurance in the period to 1997, three-quarters also achieved an outstanding grade for governance and management. These standards were also reflected in the colleges' curriculum provision, with 88% judged by inspectors to be good or outstanding against a national average of 68%. Such statistics provided early confirmation that colleges taking a strongly led, holistic approach to quality and standards are able to thrive, even during periods of considerable change.

9 Advice given by the committee has always reflected its view that the Council's methods for promoting higher standards should be continuously developed. Self-assessment became a central feature of inspection arrangements from the beginning of the second cycle of inspections in 1997. The revised inspection framework, *Validating Self-assessment*, caused colleges throughout the sector fundamentally to review their quality assurance arrangements. A critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of college performance is now an annual event in the great majority of colleges. In the best, self-assessment makes a key contribution to planning and the use of resources to make improvements. Staff and governors are fully involved. They value the process because it leads to positive outcomes.

10 The committee strongly believes that the emphasis on self-assessment, in tandem with independent inspection, has been beneficial to college staff and students alike. It has helped the sector

understand the process and purpose of inspection, heightened levels of professional competence amongst staff in colleges and encouraged staff to maintain a clearer focus on teaching through the introduction of lesson observation regimes. Most of all, it has enabled colleges to develop for themselves the all-important link between quality assessment and quality improvement through action plans which address weaknesses in provision.

11 Self-assessment is still relatively new to the sector, however, and no one should underestimate the issues that remain. Colleges still have much to do to improve the effectiveness of their self-assessment processes. They need to strive for greater objectivity when making their judgements, especially in relation to teaching and learning. They need to ensure that self-assessment is consistently rigorous at all levels and devote more attention to following through action plans which will lead to demonstrable improvements. The committee strongly recommends that the Learning and Skills Council and inspectorates continue to encourage and support colleges and other providers in their development of self-assessment as a primary mechanism for quality assurance and improvement.

12 The second cycle of inspections also saw changes in the way the inspectorate went about its work. Revised inspection and reinspection arrangements, endorsed by the sector and the committee, resulted in greater emphasis on assessing and reporting on governance, management, and student retention and achievement. The introduction of joint audit and inspection arrangements lent particular weight to the expectation that college leadership should be able to demonstrate administration of the highest standards. The introduction of retention and achievement tables into inspection reports signalled an increasingly clear focus on the outcomes of learning, which for the vast majority of further education students should be to gain a qualification.

13 The focus on outcomes was further sharpened by the inspectorate-led initiative to establish benchmarking data for over 7,000 qualifications available to further education students.

The publication of national benchmarking data and provision of comparative data for each college inspected have been central to the sector's recent development. The small number of colleges unable to provide accurate data on their students or failing to ensure reasonable student retention and achievement levels were justifiably exposed. For the great majority of colleges, however, benchmarking data has provided a valuable measure of how well they are performing in relation to others, and a spur to improvement. The benefits of this initiative, coupled with the requirement for all colleges to set annual targets, are beginning to be seen. Student achievement rates are steadily rising and there have been significant improvements in many of the worst performing colleges. The committee recommends that the Learning and Skills Council should set a clear timetable for the extension of benchmarking data to cover qualifications offered by all providers of post-16 education and training.

14 A key enabling mechanism for the sector has been the government's clear commitment to raising educational standards and, in particular, its provision of the standards fund for further education. This dedicated funding has grown from £35 million in 1999-2000 to a current commitment of some £160 million in 2001-02. The committee warmly welcomes the government's tangible recognition that raising standards is not without cost. The committee also welcomes the tight link the fund has secured between quality assessment and quality improvement.

15 The use of targeted funding to address issues identified during inspection, at the level of individual colleges and at a national level, has been of significant benefit. Early indications are that, beyond the impact on individual colleges, the standards fund is helping to accelerate change in the sector as a whole. Evidence for this may be seen in an increase in collaborative activity resulting from support for the dissemination of good practice and in the enthusiasm shown by the sector for training and support programmes for governors, principals and senior managers. Funded support from the Learning and Skills Development Agency (formerly FEDA) and the Association

of Colleges has also been beneficial, for example contributing to a general improvement in college action plans and better access to consultancy services.

16 Further incentive to improve has been provided for colleges by the possibility of achieving accredited status, introduced by the Council in November 1998. This has established an effective mechanism for focusing the efforts of staff and making sure that high standards are achieved and sustained across all aspects of a college's performance. To date, 40 colleges have achieved accredited status. Their variety clearly demonstrates that the ability to achieve excellence is not limited to particular types of provider, nor is it restricted by the circumstances under which a provider operates. The committee strongly recommends that the Learning and Skills Council considers how accreditation can be continued as part of its strategy for raising standards. This should build on the recent extension of accreditation to non-sector providers which has enabled the first external institution to achieve accredited status.

17 The success of all of these developments highlights a growing realisation within colleges that quality, standards and the long-term success of the sector are intimately linked. This echoes a conviction voiced by the committee in its annual report three years ago. Most encouragingly, there are clear signs that colleges' responsibility for quality, articulated in the first inspection framework, is now fully accepted and understood. For the most part, governors and staff have moved on from the idea that once every four years inspectors assess the quality of their work to a much more proactive approach to quality and standards, based on annual self-assessment and continuous improvement. Inspection is seen as a constructive input to this process, providing a useful independent, professional measure and public account of a college's achievements.

Progress during 1999-2000

18 The pace of change, documented above, did not abate in 1999-2000. The chief inspector, in his 1998-99 annual report, sent a

clear message that colleges should become more realistic about their performance. In particular, those in a leadership role – governors and managers – should take responsibility and action when college performance is evidently mediocre. The sector’s response to this message was characteristically positive. In 1999-2000, there was robust evidence to suggest that the sector was sustaining the quality of its work and, in many respects, making improvements. There were, nevertheless, fewer claims of good or outstanding provision arising from self-assessment.

19 This is a further indication that several strands of development are beginning to converge: the sector’s significant efforts to improve student data quality; the inspectorate’s sharp focus on learning outcomes; colleges’ gathering confidence about self-assessment; the growing interest of college staff at all levels in the standards they achieve; and a greater emphasis on meeting the needs of individual learners so that they have the best chance of success. The result is that most colleges are increasingly realistic and open about their strengths and weaknesses, and increasingly keen to make improvements. This is illustrated by the fact that of almost 1,200 grades awarded by inspectors in 1999-2000, less than 30 were subject to appeal.

20 In its last report, the committee highlighted a range of issues needing attention. The committee is encouraged by the Council’s decisive action to address many of these through prioritising its use of the standards fund from April 2000. In particular, the committee endorses the fund’s focus on teaching and learning through, for example, specific initiatives to improve basic skills provision, support part-time teachers, enhance teachers’ information technology skills and facilitate opportunities for professional updating. Action to help improvements in specific areas of the curriculum, such as engineering and construction, is also timely. The committee would wish to see more tightly targeted funding of this kind, perhaps with some local discretion about how it is applied.

21 The committee also welcomes the broadening of programmes to develop leadership and management skills through extending the principals' programme to senior management teams. The specific sponsorship of training within this programme for managers from black and minority ethnic groups is especially welcomed since these are under-represented at the highest level of college management. The committee would wish the Learning and Skills Council to give similar priority to this kind of sponsored activity.

22 The expansion of the Council's good governance programme to provide training for corporation clerks addresses a specific concern expressed in the committee's last report. Inspection reveals that standards of college governance suffer too often from an insufficient understanding of corporation duties and responsibilities. The role of the corporation clerk is central in this regard. Better support for corporation clerks, allied to the Council's recent introduction of funding to support governors in carrying out regular 'health checks' on their operation, should reduce the significant risks to educational provision which always arise when a college's governance is unsatisfactory.

23 The last year has seen the Council's extension of financial support for quality improvement to providers which are not in the college sector. This is an important and welcome decision which, it is hoped, will be a precursor for further extensions of funding in the future. The committee wholeheartedly supports the view articulated by the secretary of state that the learner should be at the heart of the new arrangements for post-16 education and training. In this context, high quality should be expected and encouraged across all those organisations making provision for learners, regardless of traditional boundaries which have caused funding and administration to be segmented.

24 The introduction by the government of area-wide inspections of provision for 16-19 year olds marks a significant step towards future arrangements. The assessment of quality across colleges, schools and other providers during these inspections should provide a

significant input to planning and improving provision. Outcomes to date underline the good work many colleges are doing in encouraging young people, especially those with modest prior attainments. However, they also highlight the need for continued pressure to raise retention and achievement rates in many colleges. The first round of annual target-setting by colleges, completed in the summer of 2000, has been encouraging in this regard, even though many colleges were too ambitious in setting targets. As reported by the chief inspector some 52% of colleges improved their aggregated retention levels and 62% their aggregated achievement levels. Almost a third of colleges made overall improvements in both retention and achievement. The committee is clear in its view that annual target setting provides a useful focus for college staff and governors, and it would strongly recommend that the initiative is continued and extended to all publicly funded providers.

Priorities for action

25 Although the sector is making good progress in many areas associated with quality and standards, there are issues highlighted by inspection which continue to be of concern. The committee would hope that colleges and those organisations that work with the sector will be particularly alert to these over the coming year when so many changes are to be implemented.

Teaching and learning

26 The committee fully agrees with the view that teaching lies at the heart of college operations. Inspection evidence indicates that around 62% of lessons seen by inspectors in colleges are good or outstanding. A further 31% are satisfactory, with strengths but also some weaknesses. The remaining lessons are unsatisfactory. Although the percentage of unsatisfactory lessons seen during inspections is relatively low, there is no room for complacency. Poor teaching can have a severe impact, not only through undermining individuals' chances of immediate success but also by permanently colouring their attitude towards education. In this context, teachers

deserve recognition, rewards and support commensurate with the significant role they play in people's lives. It is also essential that all concerned with education work to improve standards of teaching.

Teaching at levels 1 and 2

27 The quality of teaching on courses at levels 1 and 2 in the national framework of qualifications is particularly important. Students are frequently at the start of a process of learning which should result in progression to higher level qualifications. Many are returning to education after an absence. Others are wishing to improve on their record of previous achievements. Inspection evidence suggests that, on average, lessons observed at levels 1 and 2 are not as effective as those at level 3. Fewer lessons are judged to be outstanding and slightly more are considered unsatisfactory. For example, in 1999-2000, 8% of level 1 lessons were judged to be unsatisfactory, compared with 5% at level 3. These data, and average student attendance levels of less than 75% for observed lessons at levels 1 and 2, underline the need for better provision on courses at these levels. The committee recommends that colleges and other agencies working with the sector make the improvement of teaching at levels 1 and 2 in the national framework of qualifications a priority for action.

Basic skills

28 During 1999-2000, special attention was paid to the inspection of basic skills in colleges. Inspectors undertook 54 inspections in this area over and above their normal programme. The inspections focused on literacy and numeracy, and included observation of 644 lessons. The outcome of this exercise showed the significant amount of work needed to improve these areas. Only 50% of literacy lessons and 47% of numeracy lessons observed by inspectors were judged to be good or outstanding. Unsatisfactory provision accounted for 9% and 13%, respectively. These figures are significantly worse than average. Apart from the issue of teaching quality, other issues were also identified to do with the co-ordination of provision, monitoring student progress and the adequacy of resources.

29 The government has clearly made improving levels of literacy and numeracy in England a national priority. Further education providers have a central role to play if rapid progress is to be made. A Council initiative using the standards fund to help providers develop curriculum management skills is already under way. The committee welcomes this timely intervention. It strongly recommends that the allocation of funding for this work should remain a high priority in the future and that the enhancement of teachers' skills is given particular attention.

Part-time teachers

30 The issue of support for part-time teachers has been brought forward for several years now. The evidence from inspection clearly indicates that lessons given by teachers on part-time or fractional contracts are, on average, not as effective as those of their full-time colleagues. It is of some concern that the gap in the percentage of good or outstanding lessons between these two groups widened slightly to 9% in 1999-2000, compared with 6% in the previous year. It is also worrying that, in 1999-2000, 9% of lessons given by teachers on part-time or fractional contracts were judged by inspectors to be unsatisfactory, compared with 5% for their full-time colleagues. The message derived from these statistics is clear. More needs to be done to help part-time teachers improve the quality of their work.

31 The committee fully endorses the government's objective of improving the qualification levels of further education teachers. This, of necessity, will be a long-term project but one which should be given comprehensive support by all concerned with improving education and training. The committee also commends the Council's allocation of funding targeted to help colleges establish mentoring systems for part-time teachers, involve them in lesson observation programmes and improve their access to staff development. The committee recommends that further work should be carried out to identify and disseminate the best practice in supporting part-time teachers. The committee would also wish to see greater clarity in

arrangements for developing and supporting teachers supplied to colleges through third party providers. Despite the fact that colleges do not directly employ these teachers, students' interests demand that they should have no less access to staff development and training opportunities than their directly employed colleagues.

Managing learning

32 The process of learning is complex. Ensuring that students learn to the very best of their ability should be a responsibility shared by all who work in colleges. The requirement is for the very best guidance, needs assessment, curriculum management, on-going support, teaching and use of resources to be brought to bear on the issue of how best to make the experience of learning beneficial for every student. Such a holistic approach will ensure that the environment in which learning takes place is carefully matched to the needs of each student. This should afford the best opportunity of drawing in those students who might not otherwise consider further education, keeping those who find the experience of learning a significant challenge and ensuring that all students gain the most out of their studies.

33 The sector is beginning to make good progress in adopting a more inclusive approach to learning. In many colleges, this helps to articulate a strong commitment to equal opportunities and widening participation. The committee commends the Council's work in supporting the development of the sector's capacity in this area and, in particular, the input to this initiative from the inspectorate. There is, however, more to be done before provision across the sector fully reflects the emphasis on the learner which is central to many current government policies in education. The committee recommends that the identification and dissemination of the most effective practice in managing learning for individuals should be a priority in future strategies for the sector's development.

Student retention and achievement

34 In 1999-2000, the chief inspector was able to report that overall achievement had risen by between 2% and 3% for both 16-18 year old students and adults. This builds on a 4% rise the previous year and is set against a background of gains in widening participation and an increase in the number of qualifications being taken by students each year. This good news has to be moderated by relatively little progress in improving student retention rates. In many colleges, especially those primarily catering for full-time 16-18 year old students, retention rates are already high. In some of those which have previously had a poor record of student retention, there have been significant improvements. However, according to the Council's analysis of the first round of target-setting, others are making no headway.

35 This highlights the need for better strategies to ensure that students, once enrolled, have the confidence, support and determination necessary to complete their studies. The complex reasons which are frequently associated with a student's withdrawal from study need to be unpicked and, if possible, dealt with. Those whose attendance is wavering need to be identified and supported early. As revealed by inspection, students' lack of punctuality and poor attendance are sometimes treated too tolerantly. There is already a growing body of research into the reasons why students withdraw from their studies. As yet, however, the impact of this on national figures for retention is not clear. To make headway in this area, the committee recommends that the establishment of a concerted national initiative aimed at improving student retention should be a matter of priority for the government and the Learning and Skills Council.

Quality assurance

36 This report has already conveyed the committee's unequivocal belief in the value to colleges and their students of regular self-assessment. There is robust evidence to suggest that

self-assessment, the use of benchmarking data, target-setting, inspection and reinspection, the dissemination of good practice and the incentive of accredited status are all encouraging colleges to focus on the quality of what they do and how it can be improved. Notwithstanding the sector's steady progress, colleges frequently overestimate the effectiveness of their quality assurance arrangements.

Lesson observation

37 Most colleges now incorporate programmes of lesson observation into their regular quality assurance arrangements. These have helped colleges to take account of teaching when assessing the quality of their own work. They have also helped college managers to identify development needs amongst teachers. They have a particularly useful role during the induction of newly appointed teachers. Inspection evidence suggests, however, that colleges often view the quality of their own teaching generously. Inspectors also find that programmes are not always sufficiently comprehensive, either in terms of the frequency with which teachers are observed or because, for example, the programme does not extend to all part-time teachers. The committee recommends that colleges and the organisations which support them should continue to develop lesson observation schemes, particularly to provide better support for part-time and newly appointed teachers.

Self-assessment

38 Each year, the inspectorate compares the grades it awards for college provision with the grades awarded by colleges for the same provision as a result of self-assessment. In 1999-2000, inspectors agreed with 62% of the curriculum grades claimed by colleges for their own provision and 58% of the grades for cross-college provision. The committee's view is that it would be unreasonable to expect college staff and inspectors always to have an identical view of the quality of work being assessed. Nor should it be surprising that where there is disagreement, it is usually the case that

inspectors consider colleges to be overgenerous when judging their own work. Nevertheless, to strive for a mutual understanding of quality and standards, which would bring aggregate grade profiles closer together, should be a priority.

39 A key factor sometimes differentiating inspectorate and college judgements is the wider perspective on quality and standards which inspectors gain from their national programme of work. Although this cannot be duplicated by colleges, the committee recommends that they do more to include and take note of benchmarking data and external views of the quality of their work when carrying out self-assessments. Action in this regard should help college managers and governors to ensure that judgements about their own provision are internally consistent and commensurate with assessments of provision elsewhere.

Governance

40 The committee welcomes the concerted effort on the part of the Council to help governors understand their responsibilities and do their work more effectively. The last two years have seen a review of all guidance to governors, the establishment of a register of consultants trained to support corporations and the allocation of funding to assist corporations to assess themselves. The proposed training for corporation clerks, referred to earlier in the report, will provide further assurance that governing bodies are properly supported in their key role of overseeing the strategic development, viability and standards of college operations.

41 In his annual report for 1999-2000, the chief inspector commented that most colleges are well governed. The committee fully endorses this view, noting that 86% of colleges inspected in 1999-2000 had governance judged to be satisfactory or better. Nevertheless, it must be of concern that inspections during the same year found 14% of governance to be unsatisfactory. Furthermore, governance was the aspect of college provision most often considered by inspectors to be too generously self-assessed.

Clearly, there is a need for governors to be utterly realistic about their strengths and weaknesses. In this regard, more needs to be done to improve self-assessment. In particular, governors need to ensure that they obtain a clear picture of how successfully their college is helping students to achieve their goals. This will help ensure that retention and achievement targets, agreed by governors, are challenging but achievable and that provision for students clearly supports the college's strategic development.

42 Significant levels of authority should be delegated to governors of a high calibre if the sector is to thrive in response to major initiatives such as Ufi and, more generally, within the new arrangements for post-16 education and training to be put in place this year. In this regard, the committee recommends that models of best practice in reporting to governors on student performance and the development of provision should be identified and made widely available.

Management

43 Inspection reveals that most colleges are well managed, with 55% of colleges inspected during 1999-2000 judged to have good or outstanding management and a further 34% judged to be satisfactorily managed. Senior management teams generally have a clear understanding of their objectives and accountabilities, they communicate effectively and are active in encouraging high standards of work. This, however, is not always the case. In 1999-2000, 12% of colleges were judged to have weak financial management and inspectors concluded that 11% of colleges were unsatisfactorily managed overall. The potential impact of this level of poor management on the lives of students and college staff is significant. The committee therefore welcomes the government's proposal to establish a nationally recognised qualification for college principals. It also strongly endorses the Council's establishment of development programmes for existing principals and their senior managers, and notes their success to date. It is to be hoped that these two initiatives can be brought together to help form a coherent career development path for those who aspire to the highest levels of college leadership.

Data quality

44 A key factor in effective management is the organisation and quality of data. Much of the sector's effort to date has been devoted to satisfying the funding and administrative requirements associated with student records. Progress in this area has been significant but there are still a few colleges which are unable to count their enrolled students accurately. The committee strongly endorses the chief inspector's view that this is unacceptable and welcomes the Council's use of the standards fund to facilitate rapid improvements where necessary. Nevertheless, it is evident that many colleges have well-proven management information systems. The committee recommends that more should be done to facilitate the sharing of practical experience between colleges that effectively manage the capture and use of high quality, reliable data and those which struggle to do so.

Monitoring students' progress

45 Beyond the need for systems to secure and account for funding, there is a wide range of other data systems which colleges have developed to track students' progress. These record, for example, attendance at lessons, support needs and provision, the outcomes of tutorials, intermediate learning objectives, access to information technology and the use of other learning resources. The data held in each such system can contribute to an overall picture of a student's progress. Their importance is central to the management and provision of high quality education, especially with the growth of more flexible programmes of learning, some of which put significant decisions about how and when to learn into the hands of students. The challenge for colleges is to ensure that the various information systems they use present a coherent, accurate and easily accessible account of each student's learning and progress. The output from such systems should link into quality assurance and improvement arrangements, enabling provision to be managed to the best advantage of each student. The committee recommends that the development and promotion of comprehensive systems to track each student's progress while they learn should be a priority.

Raising standards

46 Inspection reports frequently show that strong leadership in the matter of standards is a key feature of the best colleges. In those colleges where student success is notable, senior managers and those working at departmental level have a clear understanding of the standards they aspire to and the actions necessary to achieve them. They lead by example and provide a driving force for quality improvement throughout the college.

47 Evidence from inspections in 1999-2000, while identifying much that is good, shows that many colleges have pockets of excellence within provision which is otherwise undistinguished. In a significant proportion of colleges, inspectors found the majority of work to be satisfactory, but no better. Clearly, this sets a challenge for all college managers. For the sector as a whole, relatively modest improvements made to the standards achieved by each middle-ranking college department would yield substantial benefits in terms of the national profile of further education and the achievements students might expect.

48 Success in this endeavour, in part, requires rigorous attention to detail. Good quality data, unambiguous presentation of information, detailed action plans, effective monitoring and evaluation arrangements, attention to the views of students, external references, accurate target-setting and objective reporting from classroom to corporation all help to ensure that attention is focused on improvement and responsibility for raising standards is shared.

49 There is also much that can be done by seeking out the best practice in a college and disseminating this across the curriculum. Too often, inspectors find teaching teams working independently to tackle the same issues. Sometimes there is a lack of communication amongst staff within a single department which impedes progress towards higher standards. College managers should do as much as they can to recognise and make use of the expertise amongst their staff. To assist them, the committee recommends that the current

arrangements for using the standards fund should be reviewed to enable it to be used to support internal, as well as external dissemination of good practice by colleges.

Non-sector provision

50 Each year, inspections are carried out of provision made by institutions funded by the Council which are not in the designated further education sector. These include independent specialist colleges catering for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, external institutions and universities. In 1999-2000 inspections were also carried out in dance and drama schools with students in receipt of awards from the Department for Education and Employment.

51 Inspection evidence indicates that the quality of teaching is an issue in both independent specialist colleges and external institutions. Good or outstanding lessons accounted for 41% and 49%, respectively, of those observed in 1999-2000. These figures are significantly lower than the average for further education colleges. Although the achievements of students in specialist colleges are often good, more emphasis needs to be given to determining the most effective learning programme for each student. Similarly, in external institutions more thorough initial assessments are needed to ensure that students undertake an appropriate course and get the support that will give them the best chance of success.

52 In many cases, non-sector providers have relatively few full-time staff, each carrying a range of responsibilities. This, and in some cases extensive dependence on part-time teachers, presents particular challenges in relation to the management and development of provision. There is, however, no reason why the highest standards should not be reached and maintained. The formation of the new post-16 sector provides a good opportunity to ensure that those working in non-sector providers have the same access to development and support as their colleagues working in sector colleges, including opportunities to improve teachers'

qualifications. In this context, the committee strongly endorses the Council's extension of the standards fund to facilitate quality improvement in non-sector providers and the provision of training for senior managers. It recommends, however, that additional funding should be made available to ensure rapid improvements in teaching and in curriculum management where these are judged to be deficient.

Future arrangements

53 The committee welcomes the new arrangements which are about to be introduced for post-16 education and training. It strongly supports the government's desire to improve opportunities for learners and believes that the far-reaching changes brought about by the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* will have many beneficial outcomes which help to ensure that young people and adults alike, have the best chance of educational success.

54 A key feature of the new arrangements will be the strengthening of local planning and administration spanning all providers of post-16 education and training. This will have a substantial impact on colleges, including an increase in the degree to which they are judged alongside other providers in their locality in terms of quality and standards. The committee believes this to be a healthy development which will help colleges examine what they do, and how well they do it, with renewed energy.

55 The committee also welcomes the explicit remit for raising standards given to the Learning and Skills Council. It is to be hoped that this extension of the legal duties placed on the Further Education Funding Council will be at the forefront of the new organisation's concerns. It is the committee's view that, with the active participation of the Further Education Funding Council, the sector has built up significant momentum in the area of quality improvement. This must not be allowed to diminish during the forthcoming years. As indicated in this report, the benefits of the sector's hard work are beginning to be seen but there is much that

still needs attention. The committee's view is that everything possible should be done to ensure that quality and standards remain high on the agenda of college governors, managers and staff.

56 Colleges will be helped in their efforts if inspection arrangements are effective. The development of a common inspection framework for all non-HE post-16 provision is an important and welcome step forward. It is the committee's hope that this will soon be backed up by benchmarking data extending across all providers, including those data useful for measuring added value, so that the colleges' many achievements can be seen in a proper perspective. It is also the committee's hope that joint working during college inspections between the Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted will work well. In practical terms, the committee is confident that the transfer of inspectors from the Further Education Funding Council to both these organisations will help to reassure colleges and cement joint inspection teams. This will build on the joint working which inspectors have increasingly carried out with colleagues from Ofsted and the Training Standards Council. Beyond this, the committee is certain that all involved in inspecting colleges will share the same concern for improving provision for learners. This should ensure that the experience of inspection will continue to be constructive and useful to all those inspected.

57 The value of inspection will be significantly enhanced if close links are forged between the inspectorates, the Learning and Skills Council and other agencies working with providers. The committee's view is that inspection provides a wealth of information which should contribute to policy development. Experience of the last four years, in particular, has convinced the committee that the Further Education Funding Council's active response to issues identified during inspection has significantly accelerated quality improvement in colleges. A key to this has been the professional advice available from the inspectorate. This input has often been formal, through working groups, committees and case conferences. There has also been a great deal of informal contact and advice between the inspectorate and others in the Council which has helped

to steer policy and its implementation. The role and work of college inspectors has frequently proved to be valuable in this regard. It is to be hoped that the new arrangements will not diminish the availability of inspectorate advice to other professionals working to raise standards.

Conclusion

58 This report includes an account of an energetic sector committed to its students and keen to improve the quality of its work. Members of the committee have the greatest regard for the staff and governors working in colleges and the way in which they have responded to inspection. The committee believes that the central role of self-assessment in colleges' quality assurance arrangements has been a key to this. College staff at all levels now have a good understanding of the evidence and processes involved in inspection. They are better able to accept inspection judgements and they move on to take action to remedy weaknesses in provision when necessary.

59 The future holds many uncertainties for colleges. It is the committee's belief that progress over recent years in relation to quality and standards will hold the sector in good stead. The great majority of colleges are well managed and well led. Staff working throughout the sector have the interests of their students at heart. Nevertheless, this report highlights a range of issues arising from inspection evidence considered by the committee during 1999-2000. The committee is concerned that these should not be allowed to slip down the agenda during the forthcoming period of change. Progress in tackling those aspects of provision which need improvement will ensure that the sector maintains its strong position in the broader community of post-16 education and training providers.

Summary of recommendations

- 1 The Learning and Skills Council and inspectorates should continue to encourage and support colleges and other providers in their development of self-assessment as a primary mechanism for quality assurance and improvement (paragraph 11).
- 2 The Learning and Skills Council should set a clear timetable for the extension of benchmarking data to cover qualifications offered by all providers of post-16 education and training (paragraph 13).
- 3 The Learning and Skills Council considers how accreditation can be continued as part of its strategy for raising standards (paragraph 16).
- 4 The standards fund should continue to have a clear focus on teaching and learning, including targeted funding to improve specific curriculum areas, with some local discretion about how it is applied (paragraph 20).
- 5 The Learning and Skills Council should continue to extend training opportunities for college managers and give priority to sponsoring activities which will assist the development of college staff from black and other minority ethnic groups (paragraph 21).
- 6 The government and the Learning and Skills Council should continue to extend access to the standards fund to assist all publicly funded providers to raise the standard of their work (paragraph 23).
- 7 The Learning and Skills Council continues the initiative of requiring providers to set targets for student retention and achievement on an annual basis (paragraph 24).
- 8 Colleges and other agencies working with the sector should make the improvement of teaching at levels 1 and 2 in the national framework of qualifications a priority for action (paragraph 27).
- 9 The allocation of funding to improve basic skills teaching remains a high priority and the enhancement of teachers' skills should be given particular attention (paragraph 29).

10 Further work should be carried out to identify and disseminate the best practice in supporting part-time teachers (paragraph 31)

11 There should be greater clarity about arrangements for developing and supporting teachers supplied to colleges through third party providers (paragraph 31).

12 The identification and dissemination of the most effective practice in managing learning for individuals should be a priority in future strategies for the sector's development (paragraph 33).

13 The establishment of a concerted national initiative aimed at improving student retention should be a matter of priority for the government and the Learning and Skills Council (paragraph 35).

14 Colleges and the organisations which support them should continue to develop lesson observation schemes, particularly to provide better support for part-time and newly appointed teachers (paragraph 37).

15 Colleges should do more to include and take note of benchmarking data and external views of the quality of their work when carrying out self-assessments (paragraph 39).

16 Models of best practice in reporting to governors on student performance and the development of provision should be identified and made widely available (paragraph 42).

17 More should be done to facilitate the sharing of practical experience between colleges able to produce high quality, reliable data and those which struggle to do so (paragraph 44).

18 The development and promotion of comprehensive systems to track each student's progress while they learn should be a priority (paragraph 45).

19 Current arrangements for using the standards fund should be reviewed to enable it to be used to support internal, as well as external dissemination of good practice by colleges (paragraph 49).

20 Additional funding should be made available to non-sector providers to ensure rapid improvements in teaching and in curriculum management where these are judged to be deficient (paragraph 52).

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Inspection programme, 1999-2000

1 During the year ending in July 2000, the Council's inspectorate carried out inspections of:

- 112 colleges in the further education sector
- 12 independent establishments making provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- nine dance and drama schools
- six external institutions
- further education provision in two higher education institutions.

2 The inspectorate visited 23 colleges to reinspect provision in 28 curriculum areas in which serious weaknesses had been identified during previous annual inspection programmes. Inspectors reinspected 45 cross-college aspects of provision (support for students, general resources, quality assurance, governance, management) in 24 colleges where provision was weak. In two colleges, inspectors reinspected quality assurance previously graded 3, to assess if sufficient improvement had been made to make the college eligible to apply for accreditation. In another college, governance was reinspected for the purpose of accreditation. Of the 112 sector colleges inspected, two were awarded a single grade for all areas of curriculum and cross-college provision.

3 In addition to its programme of college inspections, inspectors carried out curriculum surveys of agriculture, construction and business studies. They carried out surveys on open and distance learning, teaching theory in practically based subjects and tutorial work. In addition, they surveyed aspects of college management including: college action plans; combating social exclusion; corporations and quality; improving retention and achievement; supporting part-time teachers; using value-added data; target-setting and the introduction of plans for curriculum 2000.

4 The inspectorate carried out joint inspections with the Training Standards Council (TSC) in 49 colleges. In addition, inspectors joined some TSC inspections of work-based training. The inspectorate has worked jointly with Ofsted and TSC on nine area inspections since autumn 1999. Four inspectors joined teams, set up by the chief inspector of prisons, to inspect the provision of education and training in 12 prisons.

5 The inspectorate also contributed to the development of Council policy and initiatives in areas such as the standards fund, college accreditation, benchmarking, including extending these arrangements to over 350 providers of further education funded by the Council that are not sector colleges. The inspectorate contributed to implementation of the recommendations in Sir Claus Moser's report on basic skills, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A fresh start*, in order to help the sector improve the standards and quality of its literacy and numeracy provision. Inspectors contributed to more than 200 external conferences, seminars and other events during 1999-2000.

6 The inspectorate continued its programme of training for those wishing to become registered part-time inspectors. Particular emphasis was given to increasing the number of part-time registered inspectors specialising in literacy and numeracy. Training was also provided for college staff who had been nominated by their colleges to join the inspection teams and for those involved in the preparation of college data relating to students' achievements.

7 The inspectorate published 92% of college inspection reports within 10 working weeks of the end of inspection, exceeding its target of 85%. Colleges accepted the great majority of judgements made by inspectors. There were appeals against 29 (2.5%) of the 1,184 grades awarded for curriculum and cross-college provision. This compares with an appeal rate of 4.1% in 1998-99. Of the grades subject to appeal, 18 (62%) were against awards of grades 2 and 3. Four grades were modified after a review of the underlying inspection evidence.

8 All colleges were asked to evaluate their inspection and to grade and/or comment on the organisation and conduct of the inspection. Evaluations are collated for inspections carried out during the previous year and presented to the quality assessment committee. The most recent analysis, for 1999-2000, shows that 94% of responses from colleges indicate that their inspection was satisfactory or better. This compares with 95% in 1998-99, and confirms that inspections are generally well received by colleges.

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The quality assessment committee

The quality assessment committee oversees the work of the inspectorate and provides advice to the Council on matters of quality. The committee meets three times a year and has a membership drawn from education and industry. Members include a representative of students in the sector.

Members of the quality assessment committee in 1999-2000

Chairman

Sir Bob Reid	Deputy Governor, Bank of Scotland
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Education members

Reginald Chapman OBE	Principal, Blackpool and The Fylde College
Richard Dimpleby	Principal, Bournemouth and Poole College
Maggie Galliers	Principal, Henley College Coventry
Colin A Greenhalgh OBE DL	Principal, Hills Road Sixth Form College
Jenny Fitton	Principal, Taunton's College
Ruth Silver CBE	Principal, Lewisham College

Employer members

Dick Coldwell	Consultant, National Grid
Alan Dick	Managing Director, Alan Dick Engineering Ltd
Howard Higgins	Managing Director, BG Storage
Brian Lindop	Manager, Educational Affairs, Vauxhall Motors (retired December 1998)

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