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# CIRCULAR

**THE  
FURTHER  
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**SELF-ASSESSMENT AND  
INSPECTION**

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**To**

Principals of colleges  
Others with an interest in the  
sector

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**Circular type**

Guidance

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**Summary**

Guidance to colleges on the  
process of self-assessment and  
how self-assessment reports will  
be used by the Council during  
inspection activities

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Reference number: 97/13

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**97/13**



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# SELF-ASSESSMENT AND INSPECTION

## INTRODUCTION

1 This circular provides guidance to colleges on the process of self-assessment and indicates how self-assessment reports will be used by the Council's inspectorate to help determine the scope of inspection activities. It reviews the ways in which colleges have used self-assessment to improve quality and outlines the role of self-assessment in future arrangements for inspection. As such it supplements Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment* which sets out the framework for assessing quality in the further education sector from September 1997.

## BACKGROUND

2 The first four-year cycle of inspections was carried out in accordance with the framework set out in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The framework included self-assessment as a part of inspection by requesting colleges to produce a brief self-assessment report based on the findings of their own quality assurance procedures. In their reports, colleges were asked to evaluate those aspects of provision included in the inspection framework, stating their own assessment of their strengths and weaknesses with supporting evidence. The first reports were received by inspectors in September 1994, one year after the inspection cycle commenced. By the completion of the first cycle of inspection in July 1997, the Council's inspectorate will have assessed over 300 self-assessment reports.

3 In order to review the inspection framework, the quality assessment committee asked the chief inspector to chair a consultative group, comprising college representatives and others with an interest in the sector, to consider how the assessment of quality in the sector might be carried out in the future. One of the terms of reference of this group was to encourage colleges and training providers to take more responsibility for their own quality assurance. The group were aware of the government's wish to achieve convergence between the methods and procedures adopted by all those responsible for assessing the quality of post-16 education and training. They were also aware that

many colleges had developed comprehensive arrangements for quality assurance during the first inspection cycle.

4 In Circular 96/12, *Review of the Further Education Funding Council's Inspection Framework*, the Council presented proposals for an inspection framework which placed greater reliance on college's self-assessment reports in determining the agenda for inspections. Over 95 per cent of the responses to the consultative circular supported this approach but requested more guidance on:

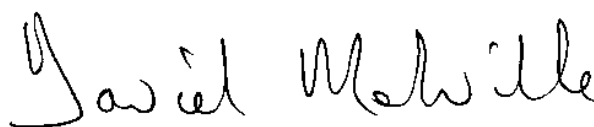
- a. the processes underpinning the production of self-assessment reports;
- b. the contents and format of reports.

## GUIDANCE ON SELF-ASSESSMENT

5 The guidance on self-assessment is based upon the following principles:

- the prime responsibility for quality rests with colleges
- self-assessment provides the impetus for quality improvement and is most effective when it is structured, rigorous and continuous
- both self-assessment and external inspection should focus on the same criteria, at the forefront of which are the quality of teaching and learning and students' achievements.

6 The guidance has been developed in consultation with the Further Education Development Agency and has drawn extensively upon the lessons learned from the first cycle of inspections. The enhanced role of self-assessment in the revised arrangements for inspection is outlined in the annex to this circular, which contains guidance on the process of self-assessment, the college inspector's role, the content of self-assessment reports and the use of self-assessment reports by the Council.



## **GUIDANCE ON SELF-ASSESSMENT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

1 The revised framework for inspection recommended by the quality assessment committee and agreed by the Council is set out in Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. This was drawn up following consultation with the sector and will be introduced from September 1997. The inspection framework is intended to ensure that the Council can fulfil its obligation under the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* to ensure that satisfactory arrangements exist to assess the quality of education provided by colleges in the further education sector.

2 Self-assessment by colleges of the quality of their provision is central to the revised inspection framework. It is seen as a powerful tool by which all colleges, regardless of size and type, can critically review their provision in order to improve the quality of students' learning experiences.

3 This guidance on self-assessment has been drawn up in response to comments received during consultation on the revised framework; advice received from the consultative group set up to assist the chief inspector in the revision of inspection arrangements; and analysis of self-assessment reports produced by colleges during the first cycle of inspections. The guidance, which may be reviewed in the light of experience, is intended to help colleges develop self-assessment to meet the requirements of inspection and to respond to developments in the sector.

### **LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIRST CYCLE OF INSPECTIONS**

4 During the first four-year cycle of inspections, colleges were required to produce brief self-assessment reports. In these, colleges were asked to comment on those aspects of provision included in the inspection framework, stating their own assessment of their strengths and weaknesses with supporting evidence. The first reports were received by inspectors in September 1994, one year after the inspection cycle commenced. From this time, inspectors assessed the effectiveness and accuracy of each college's self-assessment during inspection, and reported their conclusions in a paragraph in the inspection report published by the Council. In addition, the inspectorate has analysed

over 250 self-assessment reports in order to identify the best practice developed by colleges.

5 Many colleges strengthened their existing quality assurance procedures in order to produce their self-assessment reports. A number of strategies were adopted for carrying out self-assessment and reporting on its outcomes. The inspectorate found that effective self-assessment:

- encouraged teaching, service and management teams at all levels in the organisation to evaluate their performance and identify actions for improvement
- was structured and managed to allow all those involved to recognise their contribution to the process
- drew upon existing quality assurance procedures to provide reliable and accurate data
- dealt adequately with all aspects of the organisation's activity and, in particular, the quality of students' experiences and the standards they achieve
- used agreed criteria for identifying strengths and weaknesses and for measuring performance
- included procedures to ensure that judgements were supported by robust evidence accessible to external scrutiny
- ensured that actions for improvement fed into the college's normal reporting and planning cycle.

6 The most effective self-assessment reports received by the inspectorate:

- were presented in a clear, consistent format
- followed the headings used in the inspection framework
- were evaluative, identifying strengths and weaknesses, rather than providing descriptions only
- dealt even-handedly with weaknesses as well as strengths
- addressed adequately the key areas of teaching and the promotion of learning, and students' achievements
- contained judgements which were referenced to robust evidence and data, including findings from classroom observations

- included an agreed action plan with measurable targets, deadlines and nominated responsibilities
- arose from a comprehensive self-assessment system which involved teaching, support and functional teams, their managers, senior managers of the college, and governors.

7 In contrast, reports that were purely descriptive, or dealt with the strengths of provision but not the weaknesses, were of limited use to inspectors as an aid to inspection. Where the college's assessments were not supported by clearly referenced and located evidence, inspectors were unable to rely on the judgements reached by colleges and required additional information in order to reach objective judgements about provision. In many cases, inadequacies in addressing teaching and the promotion of learning, and students' achievements, indicated that the college's quality assurance processes failed to deal effectively with these important aspects of provision. In some cases, it was clear that the production of the self-assessment report was not linked to the college's quality assurance procedures. Few staff contributed to the report so that the report was not representative of a college-wide assessment of provision.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE REVISED ARRANGEMENTS FOR INSPECTION**

8 Circular 97/12 provides overall guidance on the role of self-assessment in inspection. It states that self-assessment should be integral to strategic and operational planning and other quality assurance arrangements; that it should involve consultation with external groups, governors, staff and students; and that it might be overseen by a college self-assessment review group, which might include external members.

9 College self-assessment reports should be assessments by the college of the quality of students' experience, the standards achieved and the effectiveness of governance, management and quality assurance arrangements, taking due account of the college's mission, aims and objectives, within the context of national aims and objectives for further education.

- 10 Such reports should:
- a. be comprehensive and evaluative;
  - b. incorporate an action plan to address weaknesses in provision;
  - c. be concise and written under the headings in the appendix to the inspection framework.
- 11 Additionally, they should:
- a. be integral to strategic and operational planning and other quality assurance arrangements;
  - b. address students' learning experiences;
  - c. identify strengths and weaknesses in provision;
  - d. evaluate and take full account of students' and other customers' views;
  - e. be based on evidence which is explicitly referenced and includes internal and appropriate national performance indicators.
- 12 With regard to the role of self-assessment in inspection, the circular states that:
- a. all colleges will be required to produce a self-assessment report before a team inspection;
  - b. the college's self-assessment report will help to determine the scope of the college's inspection by informing a joint planning meeting normally involving the reporting inspector, the college inspector and the college, during which the inspection programme will be finalised. This meeting will be assisted by information received from other divisions of the Council;
  - c. the inspectorate will assess the process of self-assessment and the main aim of inspection will be to validate a college's self-assessment;
  - d. the self-assessment report will provide the starting point for inspection and be referred to in the inspection report.

13 The following sections amplify the requirements and recommendations set out in the revised inspection framework, and indicate the way in which self-assessment reports will be used by the inspectorate.

### **PROCESS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT**

14 It is not the Council's intention to prescribe colleges' quality assurance arrangements or the methods by which self-assessment is carried out. Nevertheless, in order to make self-assessment consistent and effective, colleges may wish to pay particular attention to:

- a. developing a programme to raise awareness about the objectives and procedures associated with self-assessment;
- b. ensuring that the criteria to be used for identifying strengths and weaknesses are agreed and understood;
- c. making arrangements to ensure that evidence supporting judgements is reliable and clearly referenced;
- d. establishing procedures which allow the organisation to monitor the progress of action plans which arise out of self-assessment;
- e. seeking the views of external organisations such as their local authority and training and enterprise council, which they may wish to contribute to their self-assessment.

15 Colleges may choose to identify a group, perhaps developed from an existing committee, which meets on a regular basis to oversee the process of self-assessment and ensure its objectivity and rigour. Arrangements for this group are for each college to determine. Colleges may wish to consider:

- assigning a senior manager to chair the group
- allocating to the group a measure of executive authority in matters of self-assessment
- including at least one member with appropriate expertise who is not employed by the college.

### **College Inspector's Role**

16 The general duties of a college inspector are set out in the framework for inspection. These are to:

- build up an in-depth knowledge of the college and its local context
- act as a first point of reference for the college with the inspectorate
- establish, with others, the college's inspection programme
- monitor the college's response to the issues raised in inspection reports.

17 In order to undertake these roles, college inspectors will be involved in the following activities:

- a. inspection of college provision;
- b. occasional attendance at meetings, including those dealing with self-assessment;

- c. assessment of evidence used by the college to identify strengths and weaknesses in provision, including validation of data related to students' achievements and scrutiny of other college documentation.

18 Responsibility for the quality of a college's self-assessment process clearly lies with the college. The validation of self-assessment will be undertaken through the inspection process as a whole. College inspectors will not, by themselves, approve or validate the process of self-assessment or its outcomes. However, at appropriate times agreed with the college, the college inspector will provide feedback to those responsible for self-assessment.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT**

19 To plan an inspection, the inspectors will need access to the college's self-assessment report. In some instances, colleges will choose to produce a report specifically for inspection, in others they will choose to use their most recent annual self-assessment report. Where a college considers this report needs some updating, it is free to provide additional information as it sees fit.

20 A college's self-assessment process might involve the production of a series of reports which contribute to a college-wide report covering all aspects of provision. These contributory reports could take the form of course reviews, annual monitoring reports, curriculum audit reports or self-assessment reports produced for specific curriculum areas, services or functions. Colleges might wish to adopt similar structures for both contributory and college reports.

21 Whichever pattern of internal reporting is selected, for the purposes of inspection, colleges are asked to provide a self-assessment report containing four sections:

- a. an introduction;
- b. the main findings;
- c. an action plan;
- d. appendices.

### **Introduction**

22 The introduction to the report provided for inspection should incorporate a reference to the college's mission and a description of the context within which it operates. This might include information about:

- the structure and staffing of the college
- an overview of its curriculum and enrolments
- a summary of the main features of the local community
- procedures for self-assessment
- major developments since the last inspection
- role of governors/academic board in approving report.
- findings from staff surveys
- analysis of employer surveys
- written contributions from external organisations
- performance measured against the national targets for education and training (NTETs)
- analysis of data on students' achievements
- performance measures over time and compared with other colleges.

### **Main Findings**

23 Self-assessment reports, provided for inspection, should list strengths and weaknesses under the headings of the inspection framework. While colleges will wish to consider all aspects of the guidance included in the appendix to the inspection framework, it should be remembered that the guidance is not intended to be exhaustive nor prescriptive. Colleges are therefore expected to decide how best to apply the guidance to their own provision. For example, a self-assessment report written by a functional team would only address those areas of the framework thought to be relevant to the team's work. In some cases, the inspectorate may request colleges to pay particular attention to certain aspects of provision, for example, if there is an issue arising out of previous inspection.

24 The self-assessment report should deal in detail with the quality of provision in each programme area. This should include an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning; students' achievements; curriculum content, organisation and management; and staffing and other specialist resources. Colleges with substantial provision in particular programme areas are free to subdivide them in order to provide a report which accurately reflects the pattern of provision.

25 Evidence to support judgements about strengths and weaknesses should be factual, objective, and quantified where possible. It might include:

- analysis of labour market research
- findings from surveys of students and other users
- evaluations arising from lesson observations
- analysis of student enrolment, attendance and retention rates

26 Further sources of evidence are indicated in the guidelines associated with the inspection framework.

27 Colleges should consider how best to present the main findings of their self-assessment, taking into account the reporting requirements set out in the inspection framework, their own priorities for development and the requirements of other bodies which assess the quality of the college's provision. In order that findings are conveyed as concisely as possible, colleges are asked to avoid extensive prose. Tabular forms and notes are likely to be most useful in providing information useful to inspectors. Colleges might consider the example given in the appendix to this annex, but should not feel constrained to using this format if another is considered more appropriate.

28 Colleges are asked to grade all aspects of provision, including support for students; cross-college/general resources; governance; management; and quality assurance. In addition, colleges are asked to grade all programme areas or substantial curriculum areas which they have included in their self-assessment report. Programme grades should be based primarily on the quality of teaching and learning and students' achievements, and should also take account of curriculum content, organisation and management, and staffing and specialist resources. Inspectors will also award grades as a result of their inspection activities.

### **Action Plans**

29 If it is to be effective, self-assessment must lead to actions which improve quality. All self-assessment reports should include an action plan which is clearly related to the findings of the self-assessment. Colleges are asked to consider adopting a tabular format for action plans, showing:

- a. actions to be taken, and a broad indication of their relative priority;
- b. who is responsible for each action;
- c. appropriate targets or performance indicators;
- d. deadlines for action to be completed;
- e. appropriate review dates to check on progress;
- f. references to strategic or operational objectives, as appropriate.

### **Appendices**

30 Colleges are asked to include in an appendix a list of the key documents and other sources of information which contain the evidence used to corroborate the judgements. This might also incorporate the college's full mission statement and analyses of enrolment data and students' achievements. Colleges are reminded that inspectors have access to all data held by the Council.

### **Report Length**

31 The Council does not wish to restrict the length of self-assessment reports produced for the purposes of inspection. Nevertheless, colleges are urged to keep their reports concise and, in this regard, it is envisaged that they will be no more than 50 pages, including appendices.

### **USE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORTS BY THE COUNCIL**

32 In preparation for inspection, each college will be asked to forward two copies of its college self-assessment report to the senior inspector responsible for inspection in the college's region. Self-assessment reports forwarded to the Council will be treated in confidence by Council staff. Colleges will be notified in writing of the date that their self-assessment report is due.

### **Inspection Planning**

33 The Council's inspectorate will use self-assessment reports to help determine the scope of inspection required to validate each college's self-assessment. The college inspector, in conjunction with the reporting inspector and specialist inspectors, will consider issues identified by the college through its self-assessment report. They will also take account of the inspectorate's own

priorities and data provided by other divisions of the Council in determining the scope of inspection activity.

34 Before each team inspection, a meeting will be held with the college. This will normally be attended by the reporting inspector and the college inspector. The aim of the meeting will be to confirm that the scope and coverage of the inspection will enable the inspectorate to reach judgements about the accuracy and rigour of the college's self-assessment.

### **Team Inspections**

35 During team inspections, the inspectors will take as their starting point the college's self-assessment report. They will review the evidence used by the college in arriving at its own assessment. Verification will be provided through: observations of teaching and learning; scrutiny of student's work and other documentation; and meetings with staff, students and others involved with the college. Inspection will focus on activities which will provide a basis for assessing the quality of the college's work and the effectiveness of its self-assessment. The evaluation contained in the college's self-assessment report will be compared with that of the inspectorate.

36 Published reports will incorporate the college's own statement of its mission and describe the agenda followed by inspectors to validate self-assessment. They will include an overall judgement about the effectiveness of a college's self-assessment which will be based on:

- a. the comprehensiveness of the self-assessment;
- b. the consistency with which self-assessment has been carried out;
- c. the rigour of the arrangements to assure the college's procedures for self-assessment;
- d. the accuracy of the findings expressed in the report;
- e. the effectiveness of the action plan in building on strengths and remedying weaknesses in provision.



## EXAMPLE OF PART OF A COLLEGE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

**Example showing the findings which might be part of a science and mathematics team self-assessment report which contributes to an institution's corporate self-assessment. The example indicates the aspects of provision assessed, strengths, weaknesses and evidence which is summarised and referenced to source. The findings are introduced by a statement linking the assessment to the institution's operational plan.**

### Background

During the last teaching year, the college operational plan prioritised the need to include a programme for the development of students' key skills on the GCE A level and GCSE programmes.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING: Science and Mathematics

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching schemes and assignments for each GCE A level and GCSE science subject have been revised to incorporate a more explicit development of students' IT, communication and problem-solving skills</li> <li>• All new full-time students are required to attend a 10-week basic computer literacy programme during the first term with the opportunity to gain an external qualification</li> <li>• Students needing further support with essay writing and study skills are referred by tutors to specialist staff in the communication workshop</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of teaching schemes and assessment in biology, chemistry and physics (see course monitoring and review report, document reference: Dept./sci/97.5, and minutes of subject team)</li> <li>• 150 students were successful in passing stage 1 of the external qualification by the end of the first term (see document reference: Exams./IT/ 97.7)</li> <li>• 40 first-year GCE A level and 30 GCSE students were referred by personal tutors to the communication workshop (see document reference: Comm/WS record/97.8)</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student attendance on the 10-week IT courses has been poor (average of 55%)</li> <li>• 10-week computer literacy courses do not take into account students' existing computing skills, and there is no procedure for diagnosing students' IT and other key skills during induction</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Registers for the IT literacy programme indicate uneven and declining attendance patterns over the term (see document reference: Reg/record/97.12)</li> <li>• Individual personal tutor records from student interviews indicate dissatisfaction expressed by some students about the elementary level of the IT courses (see document reference: Sci/tutor files)</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

**Example showing the main findings which might be part of a corporate self-assessment report for two aspects of quality assurance. The example indicates the aspects of provision assessed, strengths, weaknesses and evidence which is summarised and referenced to source.**

<b>QUALITY ASSURANCE: Charter</b>	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most full-time students are aware of contents of college charter and complaints procedures</li> <li>• Charter gained DfEE award</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of students in December 1997 showed that 85% of full-time students were aware of charter and 70% aware of complaints procedure (see document reference: QA/stud/97.1)</li> <li>• Copies of charter available in library and posters reminding students in main common areas</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low level of awareness of charter and complaints procedures amongst part-time students</li> <li>• No employers' charter issued, as yet</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of students in December 1997 showed that 20% were aware of complaints procedure (see document reference: QA/stud/97.1)</li> <li>• Employers' charter behind schedule set out in operational plan (see charter committee minutes and operational plan)</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
<b>QUALITY ASSURANCE: Staff appraisal and professional development</b>	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A successful and well-established staff appraisal system is in place for full-time lecturing staff and business support staff</li> <li>• The observation of teaching has been introduced as an important element of the appraisal of teaching staff</li> <li>• The staff development plan reflects curriculum priorities, for example the need to ensure more consistent approaches to assessment on vocational programmes particularly on GNVQ courses across the college</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 91% of staff expressed satisfaction with the appraisal system, compared with a target of 90% satisfaction for the first year (see data from staff surveys 1996-97, document reference: QA/staff/97.4)</li> <li>• 85% of full-time lecturers observed by their line manager and teaching sessions were evaluated in accordance with the appraisal form agreed by the staff development committee (see minutes of staff appraisal working party 1996-97, document reference: QA/staff/97.6)</li> <li>• GNVQ co-ordinators have attended five training sessions on assessment and standards and adopted a common set of procedures for internal verification (see course files; internal and external verifier reports 1996-97, document reference: QA/cls.ver/97.5)</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow progress in introducing staff appraisal of part-time lecturers</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 22% of part-time lecturers appraised since the beginning of the teaching year against a target of 33% (see personnel records file, document reference: P/appr/97.15)</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

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