

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Vocational Higher Education in the Further Education Sector

National Survey Report

November 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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The Further Education Funding Council 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 every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

The inspection grades referred to in this report are all based on these descriptors.

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SUMMARY

Vocational higher education is an integral part of the provision offered in many further education colleges. The great majority of the programmes are for part-time study by mature people who are in jobs and are seeking to develop professionally. The widespread availability of these vocational higher education programmes in further education colleges, and the flexible way in which they are taught, are essential features of the drive to achieve the national targets for lifelong learning. The quality of teaching and learning is good in most subjects, with the professional experience of students contributing to lively and relevant education. Standards are more evidently secure in the larger centres, where the inspection grades achieved for quality assurance are significantly better than elsewhere.

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funded about 90,000 higher education students in further education colleges in 1994-95, amounting to 4 per cent of all provision funded by the FEFC. In addition, 100,000 higher education students in further education colleges were funded directly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), indirectly through franchising agreements with higher education institutions, or by other bodies such as companies. Higher education students made up around 5 per cent of the 3.2 million students in the further education sector in 1994-95.

More than 90 per cent of the sector's higher education students who are funded by the FEFC are on part-time courses. Business and engineering programmes account for 70 per cent of the higher education places funded by the FEFC. Two-thirds of higher education students in the sector are over the age of 25, and 60 per cent are men. Thirty per cent of students aim to achieve a higher national certificate, 20 per cent a higher national diploma, and a further 14 per cent a national vocational qualification (NVQ) at levels 4 or 5. The typical higher education student studying in a further education college is a mature person in employment seeking to develop professionally.

Higher education in the sector has grown at around 6 per cent a year in parallel with further education. It is evenly distributed throughout the country except in Greater London and the East Midlands, where there are more universities. The provision allows students to progress according to their employment needs, without travelling long distances to study. Further education colleges' rapidly improving support for students, including resources to enable them to study on their own, is of particular help to part-time students and to those who need childcare at college. Courses are often delivered flexibly to match students' individual circumstances or local business conditions such as shift work.

The quality of teaching and learning on higher education programmes in colleges is good. The profile of inspection grades awarded to higher education teaching sessions is generally similar to that for further education. The exception is in engineering where the inspection grades

for higher education sessions were appreciably lower than for further education sessions. The Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) confirms that there is no discernible difference between the standards of higher national certificates taught in the further and higher education sectors. Student retention rates and examination pass rates are good. In the better classes, the professional experience of students, their access to technical facilities at work, and the support with learning materials provided by professional awarding bodies leads to lively and relevant education. Colleges often fail to make the best use of professional practitioners working as part-time lecturers, neglecting to integrate them as members of teaching teams or to develop their teaching skills.

Colleges and validating bodies are creative in providing qualifications which encourage lifelong learning. Difficulties can arise when a college seeks to meet the needs of students by offering a full-time higher national diploma or degree funded by the HEFCE to follow a higher national certificate funded by the FEFC. This is because the growth of full-time higher education places has been subject to restraint in recent years whereas the development of part-time higher education has been encouraged.

Further education colleges that offer substantial amounts of higher education often benefit from contact with higher education institutions and professional validating bodies by developing good internal mechanisms for quality assurance. Colleges which are major higher education providers achieve 20 per cent more inspection grades 1 and 2 for quality assurance than other general further education colleges. The wide variety of courses, levels, and validating bodies is a source of difficulty for colleges, which often have to satisfy the procedures and standards of several external bodies. The relationships with these differing bodies can influence the curriculum. For example, there is some evidence that higher national certificates designed by universities and taught in colleges are more theoretical than those devised by colleges themselves and approved directly by a validating body. The differences in assessment procedures between the various validating bodies and the complexity of some of the procedures tend to obscure responsibility for standards.

Higher education funded by the FEFC and taught in further education colleges offers significant cost advantages. Colleges which offer a substantial amount of higher education are often better equipped than others. Whether or not all students benefit from these superior facilities to progress through lifelong education depends on the extent to which colleges have resisted the temptation to regard higher education as separate provision offering institutional prestige, and have taken instead, positive steps to integrate further and higher education resources.

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INTRODUCTION

1 This report is based on a survey of higher education provided in further education colleges and funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The purpose of the survey was to assess:

- the nature of the higher education provision funded by the FEFC
- the amount and distribution of this provision
- the intentions of further education colleges in developing higher education courses
- the quality and standards of the provision.

The survey included direct observation of classes carried out both as part of the normal schedule of college inspections and specially for the purpose; consultation with college staff and students and other interested parties, for example validating bodies; and a review of the various reports and literature on the subject.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

2 Higher education, or advanced further education as it was previously known in the non-university sector, has long been an important element of the provision offered by further education colleges. Many of the local education authorities (LEAs) responsible for funding both non-advanced and advanced further education saw them as a seamless robe of educational opportunities. The intention was that together the two elements of further education would meet the educational and training needs of students after the age of 16 from, for example, national diplomas and certificates through to degrees, at locally-controlled institutions within reasonable daily travelling distance from their homes. Non-advanced further education included technician and craft qualifications, the general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and national diplomas validated by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). Advanced further education included higher national diplomas validated by BTEC, degrees validated nationally by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and a variety of awards validated by professional bodies in, for example, engineering and accountancy.

3 The money distributed by LEAs to support advanced further education was drawn from what is now the Department for Education and Employment. Arrangements that were made to control the expenditure, size and nature of advanced further education included those through which colleges and polytechnics had to gain administrative approval to run new courses before they could begin academic validation. The growth of advanced further education was tightly constrained, to the extent that

England had a lower level of participation in higher education as a whole, than was found in almost every other industrialised country. Patterns of local and regional provision also sometimes lagged well behind the needs of students because of the length of time required for, and the uncertainties associated with, the systems for gaining course approval.

4 The *Education Reform Act 1988* (the 1988 Act) established a new nationally-funded polytechnics and colleges sector, concentrating mainly but not exclusively on offering advanced further education. Many of the institutions included in this sector subsequently became self-validating universities under the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*. The intention, which has been successfully achieved, was to increase greatly the number of places available in advanced further education, as part of a wider national programme of educational, technological and economic improvement.

5 Under the terms of the 1988 Act and the administrative regulations issued the following year, advanced further education was 'prescribed' in a schedule of courses which were to be funded nationally through the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), and subsequently through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Prescribed courses include higher and first degrees, higher national diplomas, diplomas in higher education (DipHE), diplomas in management studies and other advanced provision leading to qualification as, for example, a teacher. Non-advanced further education became known as 'non-prescribed' provision which, under the terms of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, is mainly funded through the FEFC rather than LEAs. Most is provided in further education colleges which, like the polytechnics before them, are now incorporated bodies responding directly to the needs of students without the delays associated with external planning constraints. As with advanced courses, the successfully-realised intention has been to secure growth in the availability of study places. Non-prescribed courses comprise all the provision previously classified as non-advanced, and some which is advanced but which is omitted from the schedule in the 1988 Act. This includes, for example, the part-time higher national certificate validated by BTEC, the certificate in management studies and a wide range of awards which are validated by professional bodies and are often sought by graduates in pursuit of advancement at work.

6 There are courses which were not specifically mentioned in the schedule in the 1988 Act, where the FEFC and HEFCE have to exercise discretion to ensure that one or other of them provides continuing support. Among these courses are full-time higher national diploma programmes which were once funded by LEAs, for which the FEFC provides funds to support only the number of students that were enrolled when the colleges were incorporated in 1993. In a few cases where courses were new and were recruiting students to the second year of a two-year course for the first time, for example, colleges were left without funding for them.

7 Both prescribed and non-prescribed advanced courses are now known as higher education. The amount of higher education funded by the FEFC is substantial, amounting to 90,000 places in 1994-95 or about 4 per cent of all provision in the further education sector. In addition, further education colleges also provided 100,000 higher education places in 1994-95 which were funded directly by the HEFCE, from the HEFCE through a franchising arrangement with a local higher education institution, or from other bodies such as companies. These additional higher education places brought the total proportion of higher education in further education colleges to about 5 per cent of their 3.2 million students in 1994-95.

PATTERN OF PROVISION

8 The proportion of higher education varies among the different types of college in the further education sector. Most of the provision is in general further education colleges, where 163,000 higher education places in 1994-95 constituted 6 per cent of enrolments. In specialist colleges of art and design, enrolments were relatively few in number at about 3,000 in 1994-95, but they are proportionally significant, comprising 20 per cent of study places. In sixth form colleges, higher education provision is at present negligible, but inspectors have noted the launch of some degree provision in these colleges; a development envisaged as becoming more significant in Sir Ron Dearing's report (1996), *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*. At present, this provision is known as 'year zero', the first year of a four-year degree programme.

9 Higher education funded by the FEFC is distributed reasonably evenly across the country, rather than being clustered in industrial centres. Inspectors examined data from the 50 colleges with the largest FEFC-funded higher education enrolments, 45 of which are general further education colleges, and five of which are tertiary colleges. Their distribution among geographical regions is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of colleges offering higher education courses funded by the FEFC

<i>Region</i>	<i>Number of colleges</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Number of colleges</i>
North West	8	Eastern Region	8
Northern Region	4	South West	5
West Midlands	6	South East	8
East Midlands	1	Greater London	6
Yorkshire and Humberside	4		

Base: the 50 largest providers of higher education among further education sector colleges.

The anomalies in the pattern appear to be the paucity of higher education provision in the East Midlands and in London, and the substantial amount of higher education provision in the Eastern Region. The reasons remain conjectural, but may reflect the distribution of universities and other higher education institutions, which are numerous in London and the East Midlands, and far apart in East Anglia in the Eastern Region.

10 There is higher education provision in all the FEFC's programme areas but the proportion varies widely. The most significant provision is in business and management and in engineering, which together account for 70 per cent of the higher education places funded by the FEFC. There are approximately 550 different qualifications available, a quarter of them in business alone. The number of qualifications is growing, with no indication yet that the advent of the national vocational qualification (NVQ) at levels 4 and 5 is playing a significant role in rationalising awards for this advanced vocational work. Fourteen per cent of students are working towards NVQs; 50 per cent are studying for higher national certificates and higher national diplomas; 5 per cent are studying for continuing education certificates and diplomas; and 5 per cent are working towards professional qualifications.

11 In areas such as accountancy, administration and management, occupational standards have been established up to NVQ level 5. The availability of these standards has, in some cases, complicated the choices available to students. For example, the development of management standards by the Management Charter Initiative has extended the range of management qualifications. Many colleges now offer students the opportunity to pursue management courses at certificate and diploma level, with or without an associated NVQ award at level 4 or 5. Achievement of the certificate or diploma is based upon college assessments, moderated by the examining bodies. To gain the NVQ award, students have in addition to provide a portfolio of evidence demonstrating competence in performing management tasks at work. Inspectors found that few students had chosen to pursue an NVQ. There were three main reasons for this. First, many students found it difficult to satisfy the evidence requirements for NVQs because they did not have access to assessment at work. Secondly, many employers were more familiar with existing qualifications and did not insist that their employees gained the NVQ. Thirdly, students intending to continue to higher degrees at universities elected to follow the certificates and diplomas because of their emphasis upon knowledge rather than competence.

HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES IN COLLEGES

12 College managers remain committed to the concept of the seamless robe of further and higher education courses. The governors of the new further education corporations have usually placed at the heart of college

missions a commitment to promoting smooth progression for students through a lifetime of learning. Lifelong learning is a central aim of the national targets for education and training drawn up by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and endorsed by government. For reasons which align well with national policy, therefore, higher education provision in the further education sector has grown, with colleges planning further growth of 20 per cent between 1994-95 and 1997-98. This amounts to about 17,000 additional full-time and part-time study places to be funded by the FEFC, if colleges realise the predictions in their strategic plans. Predictions of growth in vocational higher education run parallel to the growth in further education.

13 Over 90 per cent of the FEFC-funded provision and most of the predicted growth are in part-time courses. Between 1994-95 and 1997-98, full-time higher education places are forecast to increase from 5,400 to 6,900, and part-time higher education places from 80,100 to 95,800. The relative increase varies widely among the FEFC's programme areas, from a 7 per cent growth in full-time numbers and a 9 per cent growth in part-time numbers in engineering, to a growth in full-time numbers of more than 80 per cent in construction and humanities and of over 150 per cent in part-time numbers in agriculture and art and design. The highest rates of growth are found in small provision.

14 The majority of courses are intended to support professional development among people who are already employed. Patterns of attendance vary considerably according to the needs of students and local employers, and the development of vocational higher education provision is benefiting from the greater flexibility which colleges are introducing for all their students; for example by improving childcare services and independent study centres. Most part-time higher national certificate programmes in engineering are taught on a day and evening release basis, often at times which match shift patterns in local firms. The certificate in management studies is available typically by part-time day or evening study. Short intensive full-time and part-time courses are offered in many disciplines. Many colleges are developing open learning and flexible study, whereby students negotiate an individual study pattern to suit their working or domestic arrangements, with the college providing open or timetabled access to selected resources and staff. The learning resources that are available include information technology facilities, study packages for students to work on by themselves, and access to the college through the Internet. There is a well-established market in textbooks and study guides which cover the material needed to prepare students for the external examinations of the professional bodies. A few colleges also offer residential revision courses before examinations. These alternative modes of teaching and assessment are most common at the advanced and final stages of professional examinations such as those of the Institute of Legal Executives and the Institute of Chartered Secretaries, where student numbers for traditional day release or evening classes are often small.

15 Two-thirds of the students taking vocational higher education courses in further education colleges are over the age of 25; 60 per cent are men and 82 per cent are white. The steady reduction in student grants, a demand for better qualifications to enter and prosper in the job market, and insecurity in employment are all factors that have convinced colleges of the desirability of offering local access to both further and higher vocational education. Young people, and particularly those now staying in education after the age of 16 who come from backgrounds not previously associated with further and higher education, often cannot or will not move away from home. Access to higher education programmes are particularly successful in promoting progression among adults who return to study. Many mature students find it difficult or impossible, for financial or family reasons, to travel more than a few miles to take higher education courses. Further education colleges often feel an imperative to satisfy the demand for vocational higher education which their own courses have opened up. They do so as part of a wider strategy of flexibility and responsiveness, which inspectors have found to be among the most successful aspects of modern further education.

16 The 452 further education colleges are well placed to provide readily accessible higher education throughout the country. Many of them have several major sites in different towns, and outreach centres. For example, a college to the west of London has three main sites which offer a good deal of duplicated provision in Langley, Windsor and Maidenhead; training centres at each end of the 'M4 corridor' at Heathrow airport and Treforest in South Wales; and neighbourhood study facilities for, among others, minority ethnic groups. Colleges seek to use this costly investment in buildings to provide localised access to a full range of vocational opportunities.

17 Qualifications are normally designed to be steps on ladders of awards which offer the prospect of progression, either in unbroken sequence or over time. The higher national certificate can be used either as part of a long-term sequence of part-time studies or as part of a full-time two-year higher national diploma course. The continuing education diploma validated by BTEC and funded by the FEFC, is usually planned to follow a higher national diploma as a vocational alternative to a one-year 'top-up' programme leading to a degree. But it is sufficiently flexible to follow an academic degree in, for example English, to introduce the professional skills of editorship and publishing.

18 Such complex patterns of qualification follow increasingly complex patterns of lifetime employment. Where part-time study is concerned, these complexities belie any simple notion of FEFC-funded further education following compulsory schooling, and HEFCE-funded higher education following further education.

19 This interweaving of further and higher education, academic and vocational study, full-time and part-time attendance, and provision for those in or out of jobs, means that colleges earn their funding from many sources. Most large further education colleges draw money from the FEFC,

from the HEFCE directly or through a franchising higher education institution, from LEAs, from training and enterprise councils (TECs), from commissioning bodies in the public sector such as the prison service and hospital trusts, from individual private customers, and from companies which require training courses for their employees. Many colleges welcome plurality of funding because it reduces dependency on any single agency. Difficulty can arise, however, when a college needs to introduce, for example, a full-time higher national diploma to follow a higher national certificate, because HEFCE funding for full-time courses is restricted as a matter of national policy, whereas the FEFC is encouraging growth.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

20 In the two college years 1994-95 and 1995-96, the FEFC inspectorate observed 691 higher education teaching sessions in further education colleges. The profile of inspection grades is shown in table 2.

Table 2. Teaching session grades for higher education provision compared with all provision in further education colleges, (percentages) 1994 to 1996

	<i>Grade 1</i>	<i>Grade 2</i>	<i>Grade 3</i>	<i>Grade 4</i>	<i>Grade 5</i>
Higher education provision (%)	18	45	32	5	<1
All college provision (%)	19	44	30	7	<1

Sessions graded 1 and 2 in higher education were 63 per cent of the total, the same as the average for all provision in the further education sector. The average higher education class had 11 students; exactly the same as the sector average. Average attendance was 78 per cent, compared with 76 per cent for all classes.

21 In 1995-96, sufficient classes from which to derive judgements about the relative standards of vocational higher education provision were inspected in four of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. The results as percentages are set out in table 3.

Table 3. Teaching session grades for vocational higher education provision in further education colleges, by programme area, (percentages) 1995 to 1996

Programme area	<i>Grade 1</i>	<i>Grade 2</i>	<i>Grade 3</i>	<i>Grade 4</i>	<i>Grade 5</i>
Science	27	29	41	2	1
Construction	4	52	32	12	<1
Engineering	8	38	43	10	1
Business	18	39	38	4	1
All college provision	20	43	29	7	1

Only in engineering did inspectors find significant differences between the standard of teaching and learning in higher education sessions compared with further education provision in the programme area. Of the higher education sessions inspected, 46 per cent were graded 1 or 2, compared with 62 per cent for all engineering sessions.

22 The great majority of students who begin vocational higher education courses in further education colleges complete them. The average retention rate on two-year higher education courses in engineering, for example, is 78 per cent. Pass rates among those who stay the course average 82 per cent. These figures compare very favourably with further education courses in engineering. The main reasons for the good retention levels are that: most of the awards contribute directly to success at work; most students are at work and are expected by their employers to attend college just as they would attend work; and the nature of the study is relevant and interesting because it relates to work. Student withdrawals usually coincide with a change of job or redundancy.

23 In many of the teaching sessions observed by inspectors, teachers drew upon the work experience of students and the expertise of local employers to enliven learning. For example, in one college, two employers from the local branch of the Institute of Personnel and Development organised a business game during an evening class for part-time students on a personnel management course. Competing teams of students were asked to design a simple product. They had to analyse data on human and physical resources, work to an agreed budget and present their proposals to a panel consisting of tutors and employers. Students participated enthusiastically and learnt about the importance of cost constraints and human factors in decision-making.

24 Some of the professional examining bodies, such as the Institute of Personnel and Development, the Chartered Institute of Marketing and BTEC assist colleges by developing good teaching and assessment materials, publishing good practice guides, and running annual conferences for course tutors which focus upon teaching and assessment.

25 Good practical laboratory and workshop activities which relate to the industries in which they are employed are provided for part-time students on higher education courses. Where employed part-time students are taught alongside full-time students, the part-time students frequently stand out because of their experience. In some instances, they repeat in college the routines which they perform daily at work, but with the introduction of theoretical underpinning. Where good links exist between college staff and employers, some project work takes place at work and industrial supervisors often take an active part in assessment of the student's performance. The range of facilities available to students is supplemented by using the machinery at work which is often more modern and more closely related to volume production than anything that colleges are able to provide.

26 Teaching is often less lively on professional courses such as accountancy. Many of these courses are taught during the evening and many colleges rely upon part-time teachers. While students benefit from current business experience, there is a tendency for part-time teachers to rely upon a narrow range of teaching techniques, such as dictating notes. It is rare for teams of part-time and full-time teaching staff on professional courses to get together to build a co-ordinated approach to teaching and assessing students. Teachers sometimes regard a course as a collection of individual examination subjects to be passed, rather than a collective programme of study involving a community of students.

STANDARDS

27 The FEFC inspectorate is not in a position to compare standards in the further education sector with those in the higher education sector. However, a survey by BTEC of 65 higher national certificates in engineering and art and design taught in 16 further education institutions and 12 higher education institutions, has found that there is no discernible difference between the quality profiles found in the two sectors. These quality profiles are based on evaluations made by external verifiers of resources, assessment procedures, and assessment quality and control. BTEC's review of higher national certificates suggests that they are taught in a more innovative and flexible manner in further education than in higher education institutions.

28 The continuing quality of courses is guaranteed increasingly by formal quality assurance procedures. The effectiveness of these procedures is growing in the further education sector and there is evidence that colleges with significant amounts of higher education provision have more advanced arrangements than those in which work is centred more on further education. Of the general further education colleges inspected between 1993 and 1996, only 44 per cent were awarded grades 1 and 2 for quality assurance. In contrast, 64 per cent of the 28 colleges inspected which had more than 500 higher education students supported by the FEFC, were awarded grades 1 or 2 for quality assurance.

29 It is likely that this marked superiority in quality assurance arrangements is the result of close contact at the curriculum level with external validating bodies which set out detailed procedures for quality assurance, and with higher education institutions, many of which were themselves once subject to external validation. Some confirmation of this view is provided by the fact that just 28 per cent of sixth form colleges inspected between 1993 and 1996 were awarded grades 1 or 2 for quality assurance. Until recently in sixth form colleges, most of the curriculum has been examined externally by GCE boards which made no requirement for internal quality assurance.

30 Colleges' internal validation procedures provide some assurance of the quality of courses. In addition, the external agencies such as BTEC,

validating higher education institutions and professional bodies carry out their own procedures which often include a contribution from experienced assessors from industry and from education. The degree of control imposed by external validating and professional bodies nevertheless varies. Some professional bodies set examination papers which are externally marked. Other validation agencies play a much more active role in the preparation of teaching materials and schemes of work for the qualifications they approve. A number of further education colleges have procedures which are sufficiently robust to gain them recognition as accredited centres by BTEC, or by higher education institutions with which they have a formal relationship. In such cases, the responsibility for standards rests more firmly with the college.

31 The great variety of provision in most of the larger further education colleges carries problems of quality assurance in its wake. Such a college, offering further and vocational higher education programmes, may have to devise quality assurance arrangements which satisfy the different requirements of one or more higher education institutions, of BTEC and other national validators, of TECs, and sometimes of specialist bodies such as the International Standards Organisation. In some professional disciplines such as business and management, there are many awarding bodies competing with each other. There is often considerable overlap between their syllabuses, yet each body maintains its own market niche and route for occupational progression. There have been many attempts to rationalise quality assurance by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), by the professional bodies using tactics such as the merger between the Institute of Personnel Management and the Institute of Training and Development in 1994, and by colleges when they introduce modularisation. Most colleges, however, still offer the awards of several different professional bodies, often with few students on each course, and there are inevitable difficulties in seeking to assure consistent standards across comparable levels.

32 Appropriate staff development opportunities are often difficult to provide, especially for those colleges which teach small amounts of vocational higher education. To deliver courses which are validated by professional bodies, staff are normally expected to have the relevant professional qualifications themselves and these cannot normally be provided through staff development programmes. Small centres may find it difficult to recruit appropriately-qualified staff, or to deploy them efficiently once appointed. Validation panels from higher education establishments often place considerable emphasis on postgraduate qualifications, staff research, consultancy and scholarly activity, even though their relevance to teaching vocational higher education courses is unproven. It is increasingly difficult for college managers to provide time and resources to match the raised research aspirations of teachers. There is little evidence that institutions have assessed the value of scholarly activity in improving vocational teaching, so that they are able to pitch their level of support for it on a rational basis, and insufficient emphasis is

placed on raising the quality of teaching in staff development programmes.

33 There is some evidence that the method a college chooses to guarantee its standards affects the nature of the curriculum. For example, some general further education colleges have decided to offer BTEC higher national certificate programmes designed by local universities. The universities have independent awarding powers delegated to them by BTEC and often plan courses to be compatible with their own degree schemes. There are benefits for students in the further education college, because such arrangements facilitate progress to university courses. However, the content of these courses is sometimes more theoretical than comparable provision devised by further education colleges and validated by BTEC directly. The emphasis shifts from an advanced vocational programme to a course which is essentially the initial stage of a degree.

34 The widely differing methods of student assessment imposed by external validators even within the same curriculum area, complicate the process of guaranteeing standards. The way in which students are assessed varies from one professional body to another, even where the same NVQ is offered. For example, both BTEC and the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) offer accountancy programmes at NVQ level 4. The BTEC programmes are examined through college-based assessment, which is moderated by a BTEC external verifier. The AAT, which is regarded as the industry standard by most employers, uses a mixture of assessments devolved to colleges and assessments administered by the association itself.

RESOURCES

35 There is a cost advantage in offering appropriate higher education programmes in further education institutions. The HEFCE has noted in its report (1995) *Higher Education in Further Education Colleges: Funding the relationship* that the courses it funds in further education colleges are cheaper than those in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the average annual funding provided by the HEFCE for a student on an engineering programme in a further education college is £2,208, while a higher national certificate course in engineering funded by the FEFC and taught in a further education college attracted a median level of support of £1,937 in 1995-96.

36 There are wide differences in the effectiveness with which vocational higher education and further education are integrated to provide proper opportunities for students to progress. There have been pressures historically to separate further and higher education provision; for example, under earlier staff conditions of service, teachers who spent most of their time working on higher education courses enjoyed significant advantages of pay and promotion. Some colleges have evolved separate sites or buildings for higher education. At several colleges further education is poorly accommodated, while higher education in the same

subject is in excellent modern buildings. There has been a tendency to regard higher education as a separate 'flagship' provision, introducing distinctions which interfere with progression and notions of lifelong learning.

37 Colleges with substantial provision in vocational higher education tend to be better equipped than those which offer further education alone. For example, a college which has about one third of its courses in higher education has a relatively generous annual library budget. However, the management of this resource for the benefit of all students presented significant problems because the budget was delegated to subject areas. In health and social care, almost all the budget had been spent on periodicals of interest to higher education students and staff, with little left for the larger numbers of further education students. A specialist college had two comparable jewellery workshops; one for further education and the other for higher education. Lack of contact between the separate curriculum teams teaching the same subject at different levels often meant that one workshop stood empty, while the other was so crowded as to threaten safe working practices. There are many instances where further education students benefit from using equipment purchased for vocational higher education courses and from observing higher education students at work. However, in other cases it is questionable whether the presence of better equipment derived from higher education provision brings real benefit to the work of the college as a whole.

38 In the best practice, resources are provided to support the full curriculum. Students have access to whatever they need in order to learn effectively. Where integration of resources occurs the benefits are plain in terms both of promoting students' progression to work of steadily-increasing complexity, and of efficient use of expensive equipment.

CONCLUSION

39 Vocational higher education is an integral part of the provision offered in many further education colleges. The great majority of the programmes are for part-time study by mature people who are in jobs and are seeking to develop professionally. The widespread availability of these vocational higher education programmes in further education colleges, and the flexible way in which they are taught, are essential features of the drive to achieve the national targets for lifelong learning. The quality of teaching and learning is good in most subjects, with the professional experience of students contributing to lively and relevant education. Standards are more evidently secure in the larger centres, where the inspection grades achieved for quality assurance are significantly better than elsewhere.

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