

Governor Training Materials

Curriculum and quality

**Further
Education
Funding
Council**

June 2000

www.fefc.ac.uk/documents/othercouncilpublications

For suggestions on how to get the most out of these self-study materials, see the section on Using the materials.

Introduction

This module looks at your responsibilities as a governor in terms of the core business of your college: the curriculum, and the quality of delivery of all aspects of college activity including the curriculum. It is aimed at all governors, including new governors and those who have been governors for some time but who wish to check and extend their knowledge in these areas.

An important aim of all colleges is to offer a range of courses closely matched in nature to the needs of the communities they serve; an equally important and closely related aim is to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning on those courses is high.

There are nine sections in this module. Sections 1 to 4 cover the curriculum, and sections 5 to 9 cover key aspects of quality for governors: target setting, inspection and self-assessment.

Curriculum

The first part of the module focuses on curriculum issues. We use the term curriculum to refer mainly to the course programme and qualifications offered by a college. In practice the concept is often extended to include other college activities that enhance learning, including cultural and sports opportunities, libraries and learning centres.

Under the articles of government the governing body has a responsibility to determine the educational character and mission of the institution, and for oversight of its activities (discussed in *Module 2 Strategy and educational character*). Governors therefore have strategic oversight of curriculum and quality issues.

Governors are expected to have an overview of the curriculum offer and curriculum strategy, the admissions policy, and the responsiveness of the college to local and regional learning needs. Your strategic overview could helpfully extend to the college's contribution to the national agenda, including government targets for economic revitalisation, and social inclusion.

Quality

The second part of this module focuses on the quality of delivery of the curriculum, together with a wider range of quality issues. Raising the quality of teaching and learning, and thus the achievement levels of students, is a primary goal of all colleges. We examine how the quality of teaching and learning is assessed and how your college uses those assessments, together with strategies such as benchmarking, target setting and external inspection reports, to plan improvements to the college's service to its students.

In the context of governors' responsibility to take a strategic overview of quality issues, you will want to assure yourself that the college has developed and implemented effective systems for monitoring, assuring and raising the standards of service delivery to students.

Two important processes – the college's self-assessment review, and external inspection – require the participation of governors. However, these processes involve governors in taking a view that goes beyond the curriculum into all aspects of college activity. Self-assessment and inspection include the governance function itself.

Aims

By the end of this module you should be able to:

- describe the variety of learners and learning opportunities at your college and explain how these relate to the communities your college serves, and national policies
- describe the characteristics of effective teaching and learning
- engage in strategy discussions about curriculum and quality and contribute to decisions required of governors
- discuss and approve your college's targets, based on comparison with information from national sources, from similar colleges and from within your own college
- describe the range of inspection arrangements including the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) processes of self-assessment and inspection.

Contents

Mark the sections you want to study and tick them off as you complete them.

To do Done

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 1 National and local factors that influence curriculum strategy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 2 The students who come to your college and the courses they study |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 3 Current curriculum trends and initiatives |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 4 Why effective teaching and learning is important |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 5 Your role in target setting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 6 How to assess proposed targets |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 7 The framework for inspection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 8 The FEFC inspection framework: self-assessment and inspection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Section 9 The FEFC inspection framework: inspection grades |

Working on the self-study activities

These materials have been designed for flexible use, so that you can work through sections and activities in your own time and at your own pace if you would find it difficult to attend organised training sessions. Governors who have tested these materials point out how valuable it is to work on at least some of the suggested activities together with another governor or group of governors, as there is such potential to learn from each other's experience. For suggestions on how to organise this kind of support for yourself, see the section on *Using the materials*.

What you will need

To complete activities in this module you will need to get hold of the following documents from the clerk:

- relevant principal's reports to governors
- curriculum reports to governors or the academic board
- the most recent targets for recruitment, retention and achievement sent by your college to the FEFC
- your college's most recent FEFC inspection report

- a list of non-FEFC inspections that apply to your college – you should be able to get this from your clerk
- a copy of your governing body's most recent self-assessment report
- a copy of *The College Governor* published by the FEFC.

If you intend to work through Sections 7, 8 and 9 on inspection, you may find it valuable to do this with another governor who has first-hand experience of the inspection process.

Section 1 National and local factors that influence curriculum strategy

The curriculum offered by a college is influenced by a number of national and local factors.

National influences

National influences on the curriculum of colleges include:

- 1 Government policy on widening participation
 - *Helping disadvantaged people to take part in education and training is a top policy priority. Examples of specific initiatives to widen participation include New Deal for unemployed people, and an expansion in childcare places for college students.*
- 2 Government policy on raising standards
 - *Improving the quality of teaching and learning, and thus ensuring that more learners achieve the qualifications they seek, is a top policy priority. The Standards Fund, for example, represents new resources aimed at supporting quality improvement and the dissemination of good practice.*
- 3 Changes in the nature of the economy
 - *Increasingly it is the skill levels and capabilities of the workforce that determine the success, prosperity and competitiveness of our national economy. Colleges have an important role to play, therefore, in helping people become highly skilled employees.*

- 4 Policy emphasis on collaborative working styles and partnerships
 - *Increasingly colleges are expected to take part in local and regional partnerships (with schools, industry, community agencies, other colleges) to decide the best arrangements for planning and delivering the right programme of excellent learning opportunities for the communities they serve. Local Lifelong Learning Partnerships are one example of such arrangements.*

Key changes

Recently the government has significantly improved the resources going to colleges. In return, colleges are expected to:

- improve the quality of service delivery and thereby raise the achievement levels of learners
- respond to skills needs and shortages in the present and future economy
- include more people in learning and the benefits it brings, especially people from disadvantaged groups
- use electronic technology to support people's learning.

Local influences

Local factors that influence the curriculum include:

- 1 Employment opportunities, current and future
 - *It is common practice for colleges to use information about employment opportunities (both local and national) to inform the development of vocational programmes.*
- 2 Skills shortages, current and future
 - *Colleges have an important role to play in regional economic regeneration. One aspect of this role is their contribution to planning and delivering training opportunities appropriate to that revitalisation.*
- 3 Social and economic characteristics of the local community
 - *Each college serves a unique community, the social and economic characteristics of which (rurality, high unemployment, ageing population are just three examples) play a part in shaping the learning needs of that community.*

- 4 Ethnic profile of the local community
 - *Minority ethnic communities may have particular learning needs. For instance, colleges commonly offer English classes to people from communities where languages other than English are spoken in the home.*

- 5 Partnerships and working relationships with other agencies and providers
 - *The Local Learning and Skills Councils scheduled to come into existence in April 2001 are aptly named: one of their responsibilities will be to plan the links between learning opportunities and skills needs. This is an important example of the kind of arrangements aimed at bringing together employers, community interests and education providers for the purpose of collaborative planning and delivery.*

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is the body responsible for publicly funded qualifications. It has three key responsibilities:

- the design and development of a framework of qualifications which addresses national post-16 education and training needs
- the criteria for admitting individual qualifications to that national framework. The aim of this process is to maintain consistent quality standards, and to decide which awards should be eligible for public funding
- approval and monitoring of awarding bodies – to determine which organisations should have approval to award qualifications.

Activity Find out more about the influences on your college

Work through the questions below to find out more about how your college decides which courses to offer. The information should be found in the principal's reports to the governing body, and in the records of your college's key curriculum group.

- 1 How is intelligence gathered in your college about job opportunities and skills shortages in the area that your college serves? What are the main messages of that intelligence currently?

- 2 Which groups in the locality have been targeted by your college as part of its commitment to widening participation?
- 3 Identify one initiative in your college aimed at raising student achievement.
- 4 How does the college participate in local partnership arrangements?

Viewpoint

We hope this activity helped you to understand how your college decides which courses to offer and which groups of learners to target. Local circumstances vary widely so here are some examples of different colleges' experiences – there are no right or wrong answers.

- 1 Two examples of local employment trends might be a shortage of qualified computer technicians or a shortage of nurses.
- 2 A college could seek to widen participation by subsidising transport to and from college for people from relatively remote rural areas, or by providing people with severe physical disabilities with a home computer personalised to their needs.
- 3 Initiatives to raise student achievement could include a classroom observation project aimed at helping teachers to reflect on and analyse their teaching practice and to set themselves targets for improvement.
- 4 An example of a local partnership might be an arrangement between a college and an employer whereby, on the employer's premises, the college works with employees to update and improve their skill levels.

Section 2 The students who come to your college and the courses they study

A striking characteristic of the further education curriculum is its diversity. Nationally, colleges offer a wide range of courses and qualifications at different levels (Table 1). Students study full-time or part-time, on college premises or in other environments such as the workplace, home or community centres. Part-time study is a broad category, ranging from a year's course of study to a single attendance at a one-day workshop.

Table 1 Broad distinctions between the course offer of different types of colleges

College type	Course offer/age of students
General further education and tertiary colleges	Offer a wide range of vocational, academic and professional courses for full-time and part-time students of all ages.
Sixth-form colleges	Offer mainly full-time courses for students aged 16–19.
Agricultural and horticultural colleges Art, design and performing arts colleges	Offer full- and part-time courses for adults in these specialist vocational areas.
Specialist designated institutions	Make provision for adults, sometimes on a residential basis. These colleges may be highly specialised (e.g. the National Sea Training College) or may offer a broad range of courses.

Categories and levels of qualifications

There are three broad categories of qualifications offered by colleges, at six different levels. Table 2 uses a wide range of examples to illustrate what we mean by a category of qualifications, and what each of the levels signifies.

Table 2 Categories of qualifications – examples of qualifications at six levels

Category of qualifications	Entry level	Foundation level	Intermediate level	Advanced level	Level 4	Level 5
Occupational	Entry-level qualifications do not vary between qualification families. They provide a basis for progression to qualifications across the framework at foundation level.	Level 1 NVQ	Level 2 NVQ	Level 3 NVQ	Level 4 NVQ	Level 5 NVQ
Vocationally related		Level 1 GNVQ	Level 2 GNVQ BTEC First	Level 3 GNVQ BTEC Nat Dip		
General		GCSE grades D–G	GCSE grades A*–C	A level AS level		

Of the three types of qualifications, the **occupational** category has the strongest occupational focus, and the **general** category the weakest. Occupational qualifications are frequently based on occupational standards developed by the industry itself. For example, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are developed by National Training Organisations (NTOs). The six levels differ in the degree of knowledge, skills and independence demanded by the qualification. The majority of college students study at entry, foundation, and levels 2 and 3. A minority study at degree level – levels 4 and 5.

If you think of the different levels of qualifications as a ladder that students may climb, it becomes clear that for people whose earlier achievement has been low, the bottom rungs – entry, foundation – are important for getting started on their climb. Similarly the availability of higher-level qualifications – the top rungs of the ladder – can lift students' aspirations and encourage their motivation.

In the next activity you will build your knowledge of your college's learners and courses.

Activity Know who your students are and what courses they study

It will be helpful to you in your work as a college governor if you have a broad understanding of the student groups who come to your college, the courses they study and the qualifications they hope to gain. If you have worked through *Module 1 Introduction* and *Module 2 Strategy and educational character* you may have already drawn together some of this information. If not, the principal's reports to governors will contain the information you need to answer the question below.

- 1 How many learners will come to your college in the current college year? Include all enrolments, from those attending full-time to those attending college for one day only.
- 2 How many of those learners are between 16 and 19 years old?
- 3 What proportion of those 16–19-year-old students study full-time?
- 4 How many adult (aged over 19) students study in your college?
- 5 What proportion of those adults study part-time?
- 6 What proportion of all learners are studying at entry level?
- 7 What proportion of learners are studying at degree level – levels 4 or 5?
- 8 Identify the two or three largest vocational areas in your college (in terms of numbers of learners).

Viewpoint

This activity should give you a broad picture of your college's learners and what they study. Consider this in the context of what you know about the community your college serves (including the information you found out in Section 1). Note down any questions you may want to raise the next time the governing body discusses curriculum strategy.

Section 3 Current curriculum trends and initiatives

In this section we discuss a number of national curriculum initiatives that are likely to have a significant impact on your college. These initiatives arise from national policies aimed at:

- developing a lifelong learning culture whereby people continue to learn throughout their lives, for a wide range of purposes
- ensuring that young people's learning enables them to develop broad capabilities and key skills
- encouraging more people of all ages to take part in learning and thereby enjoy the benefits of qualifications and improved knowledge and skills
- raising the skill levels of the workforce, and ensuring that there are opportunities for individuals to gain the skills for working in the modern economy.

Some of the key initiatives which have emerged from these policy goals are outlined below. It will be helpful for your work as a governor to know what these initiatives involve and how your college is responding to them.

Curriculum 2000

Curriculum 2000 refers to a set of reforms linked to A levels, GNVQs and key skills. The intention is to make post-16 study broader and more flexible, and to encourage young people to study more subjects over two years. The reforms are designed to make it easier to combine academic and vocational study and encourage young people to take a new qualification in key skills. For courses starting from September 2000:

- A levels will generally be based on six units of approximately equal size
- a new Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification will consist of three units and will constitute the first half of an A level course, as well as being a qualification in its own right
- a new six-unit GNVQ qualification will be available
- in some vocational areas a new three-unit GNVQ will be available
- GNVQ qualifications have been improved
- a new qualification based on the key skills of communication, application of number and information technology will be available.

The new unit structure of these qualifications is intended to provide flexibility for colleges and their students to put together the learning programmes appropriate to individual needs.

Key skills

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority defines key skills as ‘those general skills that help you to improve your own learning and performance. They are relevant to what you do in education and training, work and life in general’. People with key skills use them in different contexts, and are able to carry them into new situations.

There is a long-standing debate about just which are the key skills, but the QCA has identified six:

- communication
- application of number
- information technology
- working with others
- improving own learning and performance
- problem solving.

A single key skills qualification will be available from September 2000.

Learning opportunities for adults

The 1999 White Paper *Learning to Succeed* asserts that ‘The needs of adults are different. They are more likely to be motivated by being able to take small steps towards a qualification...’.

The reality of adults’ lives – a skill needed for a job, a shortage of time owing to childcare or work, a personal development goal – is such that adults’ learning needs are often best served by short episodes of learning rather than by a long course or a whole qualification. Creating easy-to-access opportunities to learn is central to promoting lifelong learning and encouraging more people, especially under-qualified adults, to engage in learning.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Further Education Funding Council are working together to determine how the national qualifications framework (see Section 2) can enable adult learners to participate in learning flexibly, to fit in with the demands of their lives.

Basic skills

A 1999 government report on improving literacy and numeracy defined basic skills as ‘the ability to read, write and speak in English, and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general’.

The report described how approximately 20% of adults – that may be as many as 7 million people – have problems with basic skills, in particular with what is generally called *functional literacy* and *functional numeracy*. Furthermore, only 1 in 20 of that 7 million seeks to improve their basic skills.

The challenge for colleges is to reach people who lack basic skills with high quality provision, in contexts that feel friendly and comfortable to these learners. For this purpose the national basic skills strategy includes:

- free provision of basic skills for those who need it
- better funding for basic skills at work (in many instances work-based basic skills training will be delivered by a college) and more day-release opportunities
- increase in the proportion of qualified, full-time teachers working in basic skills
- clear definition of the skills an adult will acquire as he/she moves from being illiterate/innumerate to possessing basic skills capability
- more family literacy and numeracy
- a common inspection framework for basic skills.

University for Industry and LearnDirect

The University for Industry (Ufi) is a public–private partnership set up to increase the competitiveness of business and the employability of individuals. It will work with businesses and education providers to make learning available at a time and place to suit the learners. It has a brief to make maximum use of modern technologies to achieve this goal.

LearnDirect is the name of Ufi's network of learning centres which are developing a new approach to the delivery of flexible learning, in friendly, easy-access locations such as sports and shopping centres, community centres, churches and libraries.

Activity Review your college's response to these curriculum initiatives

- 1 Identify two or three ways that your college caters for the needs of adult students.
- 2 What provision does your college make for people who lack basic skills?
- 3 How will Curriculum 2000 change the curriculum offer in your college for 16–19-year-old students?
- 4 What links has your college established with the University for Industry/LearnDirect?

Viewpoint

This activity should have given you a good idea of how your college is responding to key national curriculum initiatives. As a governor you need to be aware of national trends and initiatives as you may be involved in overseeing the college's strategy to respond to them. To this end, there is more on setting targets and reviewing progress in Sections 5 and 6.

Section 4 Why effective teaching and learning is important

Several references have been made to the importance of high-quality teaching and learning. Governors will wish to be confident that their college is working effectively to raise standards and is addressing any weaknesses in this area. An awareness of the characteristics of high-quality teaching and learning will help governors to consider this important issue.

Effective teaching and learning is characterised by:

- 1 Engaged and motivated learners
 - *Good initial counselling ensures that learners follow the course that is right for them. A range of teaching styles and strategies maintains the engagement and enthusiasm of learners.*
- 2 Well-planned learning programmes and lessons
 - *Careful planning (by a team where appropriate) of what students will learn, how they will learn, and how different aspects of the course link together aids high standards of delivery.*
- 3 Good teaching
 - *Lessons have clear aims, and are supported by good resources. Teachers employ a variety of teaching styles, strategies and resources to engage all learners in rich learning experiences. Students are encouraged to take an active part in the learning process.*
- 4 Monitoring and review of students' learning
 - *Recording progress and discussing this with students checks that learning is taking place and encourages students to take responsibility for their progress.*
- 5 A stimulating and well-managed learning environment
 - *An interesting, well-maintained, attractive environment establishes a college ethos that encourages learning and respects staff and students.*
- 6 Appropriate learning materials and equipment, including modern technology
 - *The right materials and equipment complement the skills and knowledge of the teacher and enrich learning. Opportunities to develop and improve electronic technology skills are available through access to up-to-date technology and software.*

- 7 Appropriate learning support for individual student needs
 - *Learners vary in their individual needs. Students benefit from arrangements aimed at meeting their individual needs. This is a key principle of inclusive learning. Examples of individual support needs include appropriate equipment or arrangements for those who have a physical disability; support for students who need to improve their key skills; English workshops for students for whom English is not their first language.*
- 8 Relevant vocational learning
 - *Where students have chosen a vocational course, what they learn will be realistic, up to date, and informed by links with industry.*
- 9 Course planning and management taking full account of the college's equal opportunities policies
 - *Equal opportunities policies are a helpful source of guidance and ensure that all members of the college community are respected and included, and that diverse needs are recognised.*
- 10 Well-managed assessment of learning
 - *Students are well informed about how their learning will be assessed, and well-managed arrangements aid their success.*
- 11 Good levels of student retention and achievement
 - *Teachers/course teams set demanding targets and effective strategies for minimising the number of students who drop out of learning, and maximising the number who successfully gain their qualification. They achieve – or are visibly on the way to achieving – these targets.*
- 12 Continuous improvement
 - *Teachers and managers reflect on their practice and, through that process of review, set targets and development strategies for improvement.*

Your college will have an internal quality assurance system in place. One aspect of that system is the process for reviewing the quality of teaching and learning across the college, and analysing practice in terms similar to those summarised above. That analysis will inform decisions about targets, and strategies for quality improvement. The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) has published a comprehensive set of standards for supporting teaching and learning.

Activity What inspectors say about teaching and learning in your college

For this activity you will need to consult the college's most recent inspection report. Read those sections of the report that cover the curriculum areas offered in your college. Make a note of comments (particularly in the short summaries of strengths and weaknesses) that make reference – positive or negative – to the points above.

Viewpoint

This activity should have helped you to reflect on the nature of good learning experiences. If the inspection report suggests some major weaknesses, you may want to check that these have been addressed.

Section 5 Your role in target setting

This and the following section look at governors' role in target setting. Target setting is a key activity in the drive to raise standards or to maintain existing high standards. Targets in themselves cannot guarantee that standards will be raised to – or maintained at – a high level, but they can provide a focus for effort by all college staff.

Here we focus on the target-setting processes to meet the requirements of the FEFC. If you want more detailed information on the process, you could look at the detail and format of targets set out in FEFC Circular 00/01 *Quality Improvement: Target Setting 1999–2000*. At that stage you could also ask your clerk to let you see papers on any additional targets that the governing body may approve for use within the college to raise quality and standards.

Colleges are required to set targets in four main areas:

- student retention – the extent to which students complete the course for which they initially registered
- student achievement – individual and aggregated student results
- wider participation – to meet wider government objectives, targets must also focus on the extent to which student participation is widened, to include those who are poorly represented in the student body of the college
- student progression – the extent to which students progress from one level of study, or from one course, to another.

Activity Review the most recent targets approved for your college

Get hold of a copy of the most recent targets approved for your college and read them through rapidly.

Viewpoint

Reviewing your college's targets will help you to relate the discussion in this section to how your own governing body approaches its role in target setting.

Part of your role as a governor is to discuss and approve with your fellow governors the targets proposed to you by college management. After you have approved the targets, they are forwarded to the FEFC each March. The chart below shows the steps in this process.

The process of setting targets

Step 1 College managers discuss targets for the year ahead. This discussion takes place at subject, at departmental and at faculty or divisional level. Participation, retention, achievement and progression are all considered at this level.

Step 2 Senior management oversees the aggregation of these targets. Managers may talk to the College Inspector to obtain a further professional view on the proposed targets.

Step 3 The proposals are presented to the appropriate committee of the governing body (often called the 'standards', 'quality and standards' or 'quality and curriculum' committee). This committee considers the proposals in some depth to establish whether:

- they are realistic and challenging
- they address weaknesses
- they seek to maintain existing high standards.

When considering these proposals, the committee also takes a view on college performance against previous targets.

Step 4 The proposed targets are then presented to the whole governing body with a recommendation that they be accepted and forwarded to the FEFC, who collate and use target information from all colleges as part of their role in raising achievement.

As a governor, you are not expected to be involved in preparing the details of a target unless there is a known, specific area of weakness within the college that is way out of line with the rest of college performance. Even then, although you might ask for more detail about the construction of a target and the plans to achieve it, you would still not be expected to be familiar with all the details. This is the difference between governance and management. Governors, though, need to be assured that college targets are 'owned' at all levels of the college. The governing body will want to consider how its own commitment to these targets can be made known throughout the college. As well as being involved in annual target setting, governors also need to review progress through the year, particularly if action plans have been introduced to address weaknesses.

Activity Your role in target setting

Read the case study below and answer the question which follows.

You attend a governing body meeting that includes 'Target approval' as an agenda item. One proposal is for a retention target of 78% for students on level 3, long courses. Actual retention rates in the two previous years are stated as 75% and 77% against targets of 76% and 77%.

What sort of issues are likely to be raised during discussion of this proposal?

Viewpoint

You may have noted that, although the target set is greater than previous achievement, the rate of improvement is limited. The information given to governors in this case study does not include how the college targets compare with national data. This is an obvious question for governors to ask.

You could also ask if specific action plans existed to support previous targets and if a plan has been prepared to implement the current proposal. It would be inappropriate to enter into detailed examination of management action plans but you could ask if they include a specific focus and individual responsibilities to improve retention.

Section 6 How to assess proposed targets

To assess whether proposed targets are realistic and challenging in the four key areas of retention, achievement, participation and progression, governors need data on:

- the current college position
- trends in college performance
- national comparisons
- comparisons of similar colleges
- expectations for improvement.

Establishing the current position

You need to know what the current position is before you can assess targets for progress. The start point for this is the individualised student record (ISR) data for your college.

Establishing trends

Next, you need to know whether or not the current position you have identified is part of a trend of improvement in your college. College management information should provide performance data for previous years. If there is no accompanying information on trends, or if that information is not presented clearly, part of your role as a governor is to insist upon such information before you will discuss or approve targets.

Establishing national comparisons

Having established the position within your college, you need to be able to compare it against national data. The process of using data and other information collected from within and outside the college and comparing them with current provision – with the intention of achieving future improvement in college performance – is called benchmarking. The data collected and used in the process provide benchmarks.

The FEFC collects this kind of data and publishes them annually in a document called *Benchmarking Data*. When discussing proposed targets, you may want to ask senior managers what attention has been paid to targets where the college's current position is at or below national averages.

Establishing comparisons specific to your college

Data from other colleges that are considered similar to your college or that offer identical specialist courses can also be used as a benchmark. In this way you can compare performance in your college with performance in like colleges. It would be useful at a governing body discussion of college targets to ask if a group of like colleges has been identified for benchmark purposes, to suggest that this be done, or to ask how such information is used in the target-setting and approval process.

Establishing expectations for improvement

You will need to have an idea of the extent of improvement that can reasonably be expected. The Chief Inspector's Annual Report suggests that:

- even in colleges that are doing well, improvements of around 2% in terms of retention and 3% in terms of achievement are possible
- even when course pass rates are at the 80% level, it is reasonable to seek to improve them
- colleges where a considerable improvement is required can, realistically, seek 10% improvements provided the correct supporting plans are put in place.

Repeated year-on-year increases in targets become more difficult to achieve, so do interpret the 'potential for improvement' statistics quoted with some care. Remember that the college inspector can advise both governors and college management on targets to be set for the college.

Activity Analysing benchmarking data

Read the case study below and answer the questions which follow.

You receive papers for a forthcoming board meeting. There is an agenda item on target setting. You notice that at general further education (GFE) colleges national qualification achievement rates are 62% (at the 25th percentile), 70% (at the median) and 79% (at the 75th percentile).

How would you respond to a proposed target for your college of 75%?

How would your response differ if the achievement rate at your college seemed to be 'flat'?

How would your response differ if the benchmark derived from a group of 'like' colleges selected for comparative purposes by your own college showed qualification achievement rates of 71%?

Viewpoint

National benchmark data suggest your college is comfortably in the 'above-average' group. However, your college is outside the top 25% group; there is some way to go in improving achievement. More worrying is the unchanging nature of qualification achievement rates at your college. You might question whether there is a drive to improve. Being out of the top 25% and not improving qualification rates would be two reasons not to view the comparison with the selected benchmark group of colleges as cause for satisfaction. On the basis of this indicator alone (remember there will be many others) you might want, on another occasion, to explore whether the selected benchmark group had been correctly chosen or was of real use to your college in seeking improvement.

Section 7 The framework for inspection

In this section we will be looking at the range of inspection arrangements that might apply to your college. The main ones are listed below.

- 1 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC): inspection of all aspects of college provision; applies to all colleges that receive funds through the FEFC. We will focus on the FEFC framework in Section 8.
- 2 Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA): inspection of higher education programmes funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).
- 3 Training Standards Council (TSC): inspection of Training and Enterprise Council-(TEC-) funded training.
- 4 Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED): inspection of any childcare provision made by the college.
- 5 Awarding and validating bodies: inspection to ensure that courses comply with awarding body regulations; assessors, verifiers and external examiners visit the college to 'inspect' the courses concerned.

Only the FEFC inspection framework applies to all college provision across curriculum and non-curriculum areas.

Activity Review the inspection arrangements at your college

For this activity you will need the list of non-FEFC inspection frameworks that you obtained from your clerk before you started the module.

On a separate sheet note down details about the inspection arrangements under the following headings:

Name of inspection framework	Nature of inspection regime
(e.g. QCA, TSC)	<i>add a note to indicate which aspect or aspects of college activity is inspected – use the list above to help you if you need to</i>

Viewpoint

This activity should have helped you become more aware of the range of inspection arrangements that apply to your college and how they can help the college to raise and/or maintain quality. It is important for you to be aware of the different types of inspection and what the inspectors will be looking for.

Section 8 The FEFC inspection framework: self-assessment and inspection

The FEFC inspection framework is intended to assess the quality of provision as a whole. This section describes the arrangements that will apply to inspections up to Summer 2001. A revised framework will be introduced from September 2001.

The current inspection framework consists of:

- regular visits to the college by a designated college inspector who assists the development of the college in the period between formal inspections
- a four-year inspection cycle leading to published reports
- the mandatory production by the college of a self-assessment report, which is used to determine the scope of the inspection and is also taken into account in the judgements made by the formal inspection when it takes place
- the inclusion of a college nominee in the inspection team
- the inclusion of full- and part-time inspectors in the inspection team
- the assignment of inspection grades.

Self-assessment

As a governor, you will hear and read many references to ‘self-assessment’. Self-assessment is the cornerstone of the FEFC’s inspection framework. It is a rigorous process by which colleges carry out a regular critical review of their provision in order to improve its quality, standards and achievement. It does this by providing:

- a regular opportunity to review quality
- the basis for action plans to tackle weaknesses, drive up standards, or maintain high standards.

Action planning is an outcome that must follow the self-assessment process.

Self-assessment is an annual exercise. Governors should approve the self-assessment report annually and they should also approve any report submitted to an inspection team. Governing bodies are expected to comply with these requirements.

This drive for self-assessment and improvement through the FEFC inspection framework complements a number of other initiatives that are together referred to as the Quality Improvement Strategy. This strategy is part of the national drive to raise educational standards. Within this strategy there is attention to benchmarking, college retention and achievement data, guidance on target setting and the extension of re-inspection arrangements in cases where provision is found to be unsatisfactory. Governors need a broad grasp of the elements of the Quality Improvement Strategy and a clear understanding of their responsibility to ensure that quality and standards are continually improving in their own college.

The Quality Improvement Strategy includes ‘accreditation’. This enables colleges to benefit from a ‘lighter touch’ inspection process. Colleges seeking accreditation need to meet five broad performance criteria detailed in FEFC Circular 98/22 *Accrediting Colleges*. At this stage, you should ask your clerk if your college is accredited and, if not, whether the board has considered this option.

The self-assessment process focuses on curriculum and cross-college provision.

Curriculum areas

Curriculum (or programme) areas are looked at whenever the college is subject to an inspection visit in the four-year inspection cycle. The content and grouping of curriculum areas vary from college to college.

Cross-college provision

Cross-college provision includes:

- support for students
- general resources
- quality assurance
- governance
- management.

Self-assessment and the governance function

Note that governance is listed above as a specific and separate area of college activity. This means that governors:

- have to assess how well they are carrying out their own duties. This extends beyond the conduct of governing body and committee business. It includes the impact of that business on college activities such as raising standards and quality issues
- consider the full self-assessment report that embraces all of the curriculum and cross-college activity.

Self-assessment has to be objective. This means that it is carried out against a series of performance indicators, targets and plans discussed and set at the start of the assessment period. Judging how well a function has been carried out also demands that evaluation be made against a basis of evidence rather than intuition or perception. Even with the presence of hard evidence, it is not easy to assess things you have done yourself. Those undertaking the evaluation could co-opt others who are not directly involved but who have an informed view. The viewpoint reached by this evaluation forms, in turn, the basis on which to formulate and propose action plans that will lead to improvement in the future.

First-hand experience of self-assessing the governance function can help governors when they come to look at the self-assessment report for the whole college.

Activity Review your governing body's self-assessment report

Read through your governing body's most recent self-assessment report and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 Does it refer to agreed performance indicators, targets and plans?
- 2 Is there factual evidence of achievement against these targets?
- 3 Does it come to sound, informed and widely based judgements?
- 4 Does it include plans to do better in the future?

Viewpoint

Your answers will be specific to the situation in your own college. These questions may have made you aware of gaps in the report, or possible areas for improvement. If so, note down any questions that you would like to follow up and talk to the clerk or chair.

Once self-assessment has been completed for all the curriculum and cross-college provision areas, including governance, the governing body has to consider the whole college. It may do this either at the end of the annual self-assessment process or before.

Inspection

This is the process through which the FEFC inspectors form an external judgement on:

- the accuracy of the college's self-assessment report
- the quality of provision as seen by the inspectors.

There is more on the process of inspection in Section 9.

Re-inspection

Re-inspection happens after a full inspection if there are areas of college activity that have been found to be less than satisfactory or poor. The process of re-inspection is identical to the process for a full inspection but it only applies to the specific areas that have been deemed below standard.

Activity Review your college's self-assessment and inspection

If you haven't already seen it, read the summary of the most recent FEFC inspection report on your college. Also read the summary of your governing body's most recent self-assessment report. Work through the questions below to help you focus on the governor's role in these processes.

- Does the inspection report make any comments on the curriculum or quality of college provision that surprise you?
- Were any areas of provision found to be unsatisfactory or poor? If so, has re-inspection taken place? Find out from the clerk or chair what the outcome of re-inspection was.
- What does the report say about the quality of the college's self-assessment?
- What action planning accompanied the college's self-assessment report?
- Do you know what progress been made in achieving the action proposed?

Viewpoint

Doing this activity may make you aware of issues or questions about the self-assessment and inspection process in your college that you would like to follow up. If so note them down and plan to discuss them with the clerk.

Section 9 The FEFC inspection framework: inspection grades

When they look at the quality of provision in your college, FEFC inspectors summarise their judgement by giving a 'grade' to each curriculum or cross-college area. They use a five-point scale with grade 1 representing the highest quality and grade 5 the lowest. Table 3 summarises what the different grades and terms mean.

Table 3 Summary of FEFC grading system

Grade	Term used	Explanation
Grade 1	Outstanding provision	There are many strengths and few weaknesses.
Grade 2	Good provision	The strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses.
Grade 3	Satisfactory provision	There are both strengths and weaknesses.
Grade 4	Less than satisfactory provision	The weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths.
Grade 5	Poor provision	There are few strengths and many weaknesses.

To make their judgement, inspectors look at the balance of strengths and weaknesses for each area inspected. They do this by:

- looking at the evidence used by the college in the self-assessment process
- validating the data related to students' achievements and retention
- scrutinising college documentation.

In the light of that evidence, the inspectors plan what to look at and whom they will seek views from while they are in the college inspecting. 'Evidence' is required that demonstrates strengths or weaknesses and 'judgements' are drawn from that evidence.

As far as self-assessment evidence and college judgements are concerned, inspectors pay particular attention to how a college's situation compares with published guidelines for self-assessment and inspection. These guidelines are in FEFC Circular 97/12 *Validating Self-assessment*. Subsequent FEFC guidance, especially that setting out the need to raise standards and achievement and the role of governors in that task, has added new emphasis to this circular.

Activity How was your college graded by inspectors?

From the most recent FEFC inspection report, find out how your college is graded. Note down the grades your college has received for:

- curriculum areas
- cross-college provision
- governance.

The inspection report contains aggregated grades for curriculum areas and cross-college provision for a sample of colleges. Find the section with these comparisons and check your own college's standing in comparison with the national picture.

- 1 Grades claimed during self-assessment and awarded during the inspection often differ. Is there a difference between the self-assessment and inspection grades for your college?
- 2 If so, how does your college compare with the national picture?
- 3 If there is a difference, what do you think the governing body should do about it?
- 4 If the grade for the governance function is 3 or below what do you think the governing body should do to tackle the weaknesses?

Viewpoint

This activity should have given you an idea of how your college rates in terms of the quality of its activities, including governance. To find out what your governing body did to address any weaknesses in the quality of the college's governance, talk to the clerk and ask for relevant documents recording the governing body's response and/or action plan.

As a governor, it is important for you to have a sense of where your college stands so that you can help to review progress, identify areas for improvement, and generally contribute to an 'improvement culture'. The questions you asked yourself in this activity will help you make an effective contribution at governing body meetings.

Module review

This module has looked at your role and responsibilities as a governor in terms of two key aspects of provision: curriculum and quality. If you have worked through the whole module you should now be confident that you can:

- describe the variety of learners and learning opportunities at your college and explain how these relate to the communities your college serves, and to national policies
- describe the characteristics of effective teaching and learning
- engage in strategy discussions about curriculum and quality, and contribute to decisions required of governors
- discuss and approve your college's targets, based on comparison with information from national sources, from similar colleges and from within your own college
- describe the range of inspection arrangements, including the FEFC processes of self-assessment and inspection.

If you are not sure that you have achieved a particular goal, look back at the list of contents at the beginning of the module. You may find it useful to re-read the relevant section.

Summary of key learning points

Governors have a key role in raising or maintaining high standards in the curriculum and college provision in general.

The curriculum offered by a college is influenced by a number of national and local factors.

A college's offer should reflect the college's mission and values; it should be determined by the needs of students and the communities it aims to serve, and must take account of current government policy initiatives.

Effective teaching and learning is a top priority and governors will want to be confident that their college is striving for continuous improvement and seeking to address any weaknesses in this area.

Target setting is a key activity in the drive to raise standards or to maintain existing high standards. Targets are in four main areas: student retention, student achievement, wider participation and student progression. They

should be assessed in relation to the current position, trends in performance, national and 'like' comparisons, and expectations for improvement.

Colleges are subject to a range of inspection arrangements, including FEFC inspection.

Self-assessment is a crucial element of the FEFC inspection process.

Inspection grades provide quality judgements on the performance of a college in curriculum areas and cross-college provision.

Governance itself is subject to self-assessment and inspection.

Where next?

You have now completed work on *Module 3 Curriculum and quality*. If there are areas in which you need more guidance or information, they may be covered in other modules. Turn to the section *Check your current knowledge and skills*. This self-assessment questionnaire will help you to decide which modules or sections of modules may help to fill these gaps. Tick the useful sections for further study.

If you cannot find the information you need, turn to the *Action planner*. Note down what further information, support or guidance you would like. The *Action planner* gives advice on who may be able to help, and how.

Putting it into action

We hope that working through this module has raised useful questions, increased your awareness of issues and given you ideas for practical action that you would like to follow up. *The Action planner* contains a section where you can note down any questions or action points that you want to follow up within your own college.

© FEFC 2000

Published by the Further Education Funding Council.
Extracts from this publication may be reproduced for non-commercial
education or training purposes on condition that the source is
acknowledged.

The Further Education Funding Council
Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT.

Telephone 024 7686 3265
Fax 024 7686 3025

E-mail fefcpubs@feffc.ac.uk