

# Abingdon College

**REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE  
1997-98**

**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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### College statistics

## Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.  
Sample size: 122 college inspections

## Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

# Summary

## Abingdon College

### *South East Region*

#### **Inspected April 1998**

Abingdon College is a general further education college in southern Oxfordshire. The college produced its first self-assessment report in preparation for the inspection. The report is detailed and covers most of the college's operations. All staff were involved in its preparation. Since the report was written the college has made progress in addressing some of the weaknesses it identified. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made in the self-assessment report, but they considered that data available in the college could have been used to better effect.

The college offers courses in nine of the FEFC's 10 programme areas and has a large adult education programme. The inspection covered provision in four programme areas and aspects of cross-college provision. Governors put their range of experience and skills to good use in the outstanding governance of the college. There are good arrangements for the appraisal and development of all staff. There are effective consortium arrangements with the three secondary schools in Abingdon which widen the choice of GCE A levels available to pupils and students. The college has good links with

employers. The proportion of lessons graded good or outstanding has risen since the last inspection and is now above the national average. The inclusion of part-time students in the assessment of basic skills is good practice. The college buildings are well maintained. The quality assurance arrangements have led to improvements in most areas of the college. Students' achievements are satisfactory or better on most courses. To improve further, the college should improve the speed of take up of basic skills support for those students identified as having difficulties, and improve attendance, retention and achievement rates in some areas.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Cross-college provision</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Engineering	2	Support for students	2
Business studies	2	General resources	2
Art, design and performing arts	2	Quality assurance	2
Humanities	2	Governance	1
		Management	2

# Context

## The College and its Mission

1 Abingdon is a small market town in Oxfordshire with a population of 32,000. It is close to a number of scientific research organisations including the Rutherford-Appleton Laboratory, AEA Harwell and the Joint European Torus at Culham. Abingdon College is located on three sites close to Abingdon town centre. The college recruits most of its full-time students from southern Oxfordshire, which has a population of about 200,000. Part-time students attend the college from a wider area extending to Wiltshire, Berkshire and north Oxfordshire. For some courses, the college recruits nationally and it also has a small number of overseas students.

2 Oxfordshire has one of the highest economic growth rates in the country. A report on the local labour market by the Heart of England Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) predicts further growth in high technology manufacturing industries, retail and tourism and business services. The motor vehicle industry, although still a major employer, has experienced a decline in the number of people employed. Unemployment in the area is less than 2 per cent.

3 The proportion of young people continuing in full-time education in the area served by the college has remained stable at just over 70 per cent since 1991. There are nine secondary schools in the area, each with a sixth form. The college and the three Abingdon town secondary schools have formed a consortium to offer a common general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) timetable. Students from each institution are able to study GCE A levels in any of the other three institutions. The college's mission is 'to provide accessible education and training of undisputed quality to the people of southern Oxfordshire and beyond'.

## The Inspection

4 The college was inspected during the week beginning 27 April 1998. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held in other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected about two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 40 days. Inspectors observed 56 lessons, and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, staff and students.

5 Of the lessons inspected, 64 per cent were judged to be good or outstanding and 7 per cent were less than satisfactory. This compares with 61 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1996-97 according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance during the inspection was 78 per cent. The following table shows the grades awarded to the lessons inspected.

# Context

## Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	0	7	4	2	0	13
GNVQ	4	4	5	0	0	13
NVQ	1	4	3	2	0	10
Other vocational	6	10	4	0	0	20
Total	11	25	16	4	0	56

# Curriculum Areas

## Engineering

### Grade 2

6 Fourteen lessons covering electrical, electronic, mechanical and motor vehicle engineering were inspected. The college's self-assessment was comprehensive and clearly identified the strengths and weaknesses of the provision. Inspectors agreed with most of its findings, but judged that it had underestimated the strength of students' achievements.

#### Key strengths

- well-planned practical teaching
- good retention and achievement rates on most courses in 1997
- well-planned exchange scheme with Germany

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient use of teaching aids
- poor retention and pass rates on foundation courses
- outdated mechanical workshop resources

7 Schemes of work have been prepared for all engineering courses but these give no indication of the learning objectives or the proposed activities. Most students preferred the practical aspects of engineering and the most effective learning took place during workshop and laboratory sessions. Teachers made good use of well-prepared handouts in these sessions. The practical work was well organised and the students developed appropriate skills and understanding. Careful attention was paid to health and safety in the practical work areas. In some lessons, teachers used the whiteboard when overhead projector slides or handouts would have been more effective. Some theory teaching failed to interest students. The college's self-assessment recognised that the

teaching of practical aspects of engineering is more effective than the teaching of theoretical aspects.

8 All full-time students have work experience during their courses. This provides them with relevant experience and, in some cases, leads to an offer of employment. Students on the national diploma course take part in a well-planned exchange with German students. Students from each country spend two weeks doing project work and going on industrial visits.

9 Retention rates on many courses were poor in 1996, but improved in 1997. Pass rates on intermediate and advanced vocational courses have improved over the last three years. Retention and pass rates for students following the national diploma in engineering are now good. Students following the Engineering and Marine Training Association apprenticeship training scheme have achieved 100 per cent retention and pass rates for the last two years. Although student numbers have been small, there have been poor retention and pass rates on the manufacturing and motor vehicle foundation courses in the last two years. The instances of poor retention and low pass rates are acknowledged in the college's self-assessment.

10 Assignment and practical briefs are good and the grading criteria clear. Much of the work produced by students is of a good standard. Their practical and written work in tests, project reports and portfolios is good. The standard of portfolios produced by students following the Engineering and Marine Training Association apprenticeship is outstanding. Teachers mark students' work carefully and provide clear and helpful written comments to help them improve.

11 The engineering study area is generally well managed. Study area meetings are held at regular intervals but the minutes of these lack detail and do not identify what action is to be taken. Courses are well organised and



# Curriculum Areas

managed. The college's self- assessment identified inadequate staffing of the motor vehicle section, and action was taken before the inspection to address this weakness.

12 The engineering staff are well qualified. All teachers have training and development lead body assessor qualifications and one has the internal verifier qualification. In its self- assessment the college identifies the need to keep teachers abreast of the rapid developments taking place in engineering. The engineering study area is generally well equipped. It has its own computer laboratory with 20 of the latest computers and appropriate software. The motor vehicle section has a good selection of modern cars, some acquired as a result of a valuable relationship with a leading motor manufacturer. Many of the machines in the mechanical engineering workshop are near the end of their working life. With the exception of those relating to motor vehicle work, the range and quality of engineering books in the library is poor.

## Examples of students' achievements in engineering, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	100	65	96
	Pass rate (%)	69	76	80
NVQ level 2 and C&G	Retention (%)	84	76	83
	Pass rate (%)	49	32	69
Other intermediate vocational	Retention (%)	78	14	80
	Pass rate (%)	59	67	75
NVQ level 1	Retention (%)	67	100	60
	Pass rate (%)	50	33	33

Source: college data

# Curriculum Areas

## Business Studies

### Grade 2

**13 Inspectors observed 14 lessons covering most business and administration courses. The college's self-assessment report identifies most key strengths and weaknesses but inspectors concluded that it pays inadequate attention to weaknesses in teaching and learning.**

#### Key strengths

- effective organisation and management of the curriculum
- good teaching
- good achievement rates on advanced business and full-time administration courses
- rigorous internal verification
- good computer hardware and software

#### Weaknesses

- poor students' achievements on general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate business and part-time administration courses
- insufficient recent commercial and industrial experience among teachers

14 The business and administration courses are managed separately in two college study areas. Most full-time business students are 16 to 19 years old and are following GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses; a small number study GCE A level business. Enrolments on these courses have fallen in recent years, largely as a result of competition from local schools. The part-time day and evening BTEC national certificate also runs with low numbers but a higher national certificate in business has been successfully introduced recently. Full-time administration courses lead to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at

levels 2, 3 and 4, and the RSA Examinations Board (RSA) diploma, advanced diploma and higher diploma in administrative procedures. These courses recruit large numbers of mature students. Enrolment for the large number of part-time administration courses is also buoyant.

15 Courses are well organised and managed. Heads of study are ably assisted by teachers who all act as course leaders and tutors. Teachers work well together, pay appropriate attention to course planning and review, and maintain detailed records of students' progress. Course teams produce schemes of work, detailed assessment programmes and course handbooks. They meet regularly to deal with full-time courses, but infrequently for part-time courses. Minutes of most meetings are detailed but some pay insufficient attention to the agreed actions and responsibilities. The self-assessment report did not identify this weakness. Reductions in the number of full-time teachers have led to increased reliance on hourly paid teachers. The college recognises that the level of attendance at meetings by part-time teachers is inadequate.

16 Most lessons observed by inspectors were good or outstanding; practical teaching was especially effective. In many lessons, the objectives were clearly communicated to students, skilful use was made of a variety of tasks and teaching methods, drawing on students' own experiences and the lesson was drawn effectively to a conclusion. Some lessons would have been more effective if there had been more directed questioning to all students to check their understanding, and if better quality overhead projector transparencies had been used. The self-assessment report suggests that students are set realistic and relevant assessments that test their vocational skills and understanding. Inspectors confirmed this judgement. Internal verification is well organised and effective. The teaching of key skills is successfully integrated with other aspects of the courses. Full-time students

# Curriculum Areas

undertake work experience, but the college recognises that this needs to be more vocationally focused for GNVQ students. These students also benefit from European residential visits and successfully participate in the young enterprise scheme.

17 The quality of most students' written work is good. It is well organised and frequently produced using information technology (IT). Teachers mark and comment on students' work with care, making helpful suggestions for improvement. Overall, students' achievements in examinations have been good over the last three years. Advanced vocational business results have consistently been at or above national averages. Retention has also been good. As the college acknowledges in its self-assessment report, the GNVQ intermediate pass rate has declined over three years to a low level in 1997. The action plan put in place to improve achievements has improved retention and achievements in 1998. Results for full-time administration courses are often well above national averages. Achievements of part-time students are generally good, although results in

NVQ level 2 administration, wordprocessing and keyboarding have been variable. Possible reasons for these poor results are not discussed in the college's self-assessment report.

18 Teachers are well qualified but, as the self-assessment report recognises, some have had no recent industrial or commercial experience. Most teaching rooms are adequately furnished but few have projection screens. Most of the rooms used for administration teaching have good-quality practical facilities. The business base rooms provide a suitable environment for workshop activities. Other rooms used for business studies have no business-related displays. Students and teachers have good access to modern computer hardware and software. Business and administration teachers work closely with library staff. The library has an adequate range of printed materials and other resources in business-related subjects.

## Examples of students' achievements in business studies, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
NVQ level 4 administration	Retention (%)	79	100	78
	Pass rate (%)	91	92	71
NVQ level 3 administration	Retention (%)	94	93	79
	Pass rate (%)	81	62	73
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	100	69	82
	Pass rate (%)	97	92	83
NVQ level 2 administration	Retention (%)	88	95	94
	Pass rate (%)	82	72	94
GNVQ intermediate	Retention (%)	72	79	77
	Pass rate (%)	92	61	29

Source: college data

# Curriculum Areas

## Art, Design and Performing Arts

### Grade 2

**19 Inspectors observed 15 lessons covering full-time and part-time courses in art and design, media and performing arts. The findings of the inspection generally support the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- well-led teaching team
- good achievement rates on most courses
- a wide range of courses to suit students of different abilities
- use of current topics as the basis for assignments

#### Weaknesses

- some poor attendance, punctuality and retention
- insufficiently-precise grading criteria

20 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the standard of teaching in art and design courses is generally good. Teachers plan their lessons well. Their handouts are of good quality. They use an appropriate variety of activities such as talks, videos, demonstrations, group work and individual work. They set assignments based on current topics which students find realistic and relevant. Performing arts teachers draw on their own experience for the benefit of their students. The students perform in a variety of settings outside the college and this work develops their confidence and skills. In contrast, some of the college-based work is slow and fails to maintain students' interest.

21 The standard of students' portfolios and their work in studios and workshops is good.

Staff employ a range of appropriate assessment methods. All assignment briefs include time deadlines and grading criteria, but the latter are insufficiently precise. Students' achievements are generally good. Retention rates were good on most courses in 1995 and 1997, but poor in 1996. They are low again on some courses in 1998. These variations were commented on in the college's self-assessment report. With the exception of general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), pass rates on most courses are good. The rate of progression to higher education is also good. Seventeen students who achieved the GNVQ advanced in art and design in 1997 gained a place in their first choice of higher education institution.

22 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the study area is well led and that teachers work effectively in teams to provide a good learning experience for students. In recent years, student numbers have increased and new courses have been developed. The range of courses includes full-time GNVQ advanced and intermediate art and design; diploma in foundation studies in art and design; national diploma in performing arts; and GNVQ advanced and intermediate in media, communication and production. A good range of related GCE A level, GCSE and City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) courses is also provided.

23 The staff are all appropriately qualified and some continue to practise in their specialist area of expertise. Appraisal has identified a need for industrial placements to update the skills and knowledge of those who no longer practise. All teachers have internal assessor awards and some are training as internal verifiers. The study area is generally well equipped and has good accommodation. The development of specialist computer facilities is a valuable resource. The library provides appropriate learning resources.

# Curriculum Areas

## Examples of students' achievements in art, design and performing arts, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A levels	Retention (%)	100	67	95
	Pass rate (%)	84	100	89
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	100	59	89
	Pass rate (%)	85	80	82
GCSEs	Retention (%)	100	57	61
	Pass rate (%)	0	0	31
Intermediate vocational	Retention (%)	77	79	90
	Pass rate (%)	55	68	68

*Source: college data*

# Curriculum Areas

## Humanities

### Grade 2

**24 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in English, law, psychology, sociology and study skills on access to higher education, GCSE and GCE A level courses. Inspectors generally agreed with the college's judgements but some strengths were overstated and some weaknesses not recorded in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- well-planned courses and lessons
- effective teaching in English and sociology
- good pass rates in GCE A level English and sociology
- good students' achievements on the access to higher education course
- useful subject reviews of students' progress

#### Weaknesses

- wide variation in the quality of course documentation
- poor teaching on some part-time courses
- some poor GCE A level examination results in law and psychology
- low rates of retention on some courses

25 The college offers a range of humanities subjects including French, German, geography, history and general studies in addition to the subjects inspected. All are offered at GCE A level and some at GCSE level. The college has arrangements with the three secondary schools in Abingdon that allow college and school students to study at any of the four institutions and choose combinations of subjects that would otherwise not be possible. The access to higher education course is organised in such a way that

students can study full time or part time in the day or the evening.

26 Most courses and lessons are well planned. While most teachers work closely with colleagues in their subject area to share good practice, some do not. Consequently, there is variation in the quality of course documentation and in practice. The better schemes of work include comprehensive information about teaching and assessment methods and lists of resources. Lesson plans do not always identify the skills and knowledge to be developed. Some teachers explain the syllabus, schemes of work, methods of working and other course details to students, but others do not.

27 Teaching in English and sociology, and on the access to higher education course is good. The self-assessment report indicates that students experience a variety of teaching and learning approaches and this was true in many of the lessons observed. Relations between teachers and students are good and students are attentive and responsive. On the access course, teachers take particular care to develop students' confidence. Although there is no policy on setting and marking work, the majority of teachers set regular assignments and mark students' work thoroughly. The marking is sensitive and constructive and provides guidance on how students might improve their work. Teachers conduct regular reviews of students' progress; strengths and weaknesses are recorded and actions identified. In a minority of lessons, teachers do not make the best use of time and students undertake tasks that could more appropriately be carried out during private study time. On some part-time courses, teachers do not check that students understand the topic being studied.

28 Inspectors did not agree with the college's self-assessment that examination results for full-time students are very good. Pass rates in GCE A level English and sociology are consistently above national averages, but the same is not

# Curriculum Areas

true in law and psychology. Students' achievements on the access to higher education course are good; many achieve the qualification and progress to higher education. The college has recorded in its self-assessment report that retention is poor on some courses. In 1997, over one-third of students on the first year of the full-time GCE A level course did not progress to the second year. Action has been taken and fewer students have dropped out from the first year in 1998. Retention is also poor on some part-time evening courses and is declining on full-time access courses.

29 Meetings of course teams are minuted and responsibilities for taking forward actions are clearly recorded. Courses are evaluated. As a result of the quality review of the GCE A level course undertaken in the summer of 1997, targets for retention and for students' achievements in examinations have been set.

30 Teachers are well qualified. Staff and students have access to a suitable range of books and audiovisual aids. Students on the access to higher education course make

appropriate use of IT. Students on the full-time GCE A level courses undertake a course in IT, but they do not subsequently make sufficient use of IT in their main subjects. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

## Examples of students' achievements in humanities, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level English	Retention (%)	96	77	66
	Pass rate (%)	92	84	92
GCE A level sociology	Retention (%)	98	89	62
	Pass rate (%)	85	67	79
GCE A level law	Retention (%)	100	50	93
	Pass rate (%)	25	47	63
GCE A level psychology	Retention (%)	88	43	62
	Pass rate (%)	76	70	43
Access to higher education, full time	Retention (%)	82	69	59
	Pass rate (%)	73	81	92

Source: college data

# Cross-college Provision

## Support for Students

### Grade 2

**31 Inspectors confirmed the college's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of support for students.**

#### Key strengths

- the positive atmosphere provided for students
- consortium arrangements which ensure breadth of choice and impartial guidance
- the inclusion of part-time students in the assessment of basic skills
- effective support for students with disabilities
- standards set for tutorial support
- high-quality counselling service

#### Weaknesses

- lack of some students' knowledge of complaints procedure
- slow uptake of basic skills support
- underdeveloped careers education programme

32 Full-time students say that while they have been at the college they have experienced a growth in confidence and self-esteem. Many part-time students feel sufficiently positive about the college to recommend it to others. The college has an overall guidance policy which incorporates policies on advice, counselling, careers and higher education guidance. There is a disability statement and an equal opportunities policy which are actively implemented. Consortium arrangements and links with the careers service ensure breadth of choice and impartiality of guidance for school-leavers. Links with schools beyond the consortium have been extended. The college

uses a variety of mechanisms to disseminate information about its provision to a wide audience.

33 The admissions process is generally well organised, and especially effective for those who identify themselves as in need of additional support. However, some aspects of the admissions process do not meet the minimum standards set by the college. Information leaflets vary in quality, content and presentation. Inspectors agreed with the college that procedures for the accreditation of prior learning are not consistently applied across all study areas. Induction programmes for full-time students generally provide a useful introduction to their courses and some include examples of imaginative practice. For example, in health and social care, students took part in well-planned exercises that helped them to get to know one another and at the same time introduced skills to be developed during the course.

34 At the beginning of their courses all full-time students are assessed using the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) tests for literacy and numeracy skills. Recently, these tests have also been applied to a substantial proportion of part-time students. The quality of support for students in numeracy and literacy is good, as is that for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Of particular note is the work with students with dyslexia and anaphylaxis (students who suffer a severe allergic reaction). However, many students identified as needing additional literacy or numeracy support do not take up the support quickly enough for it to be fully effective.

35 During the autumn term, the college produced a tutors' handbook, which set out minimum standards of practice for the support and guidance of students from pre-entry to exit. Inspectors confirmed the college's judgement that tutorial practice is good in most study areas. There is a particularly effective



# Cross-college Provision

programme for GCE A level students which includes a diploma of achievement. The college recognises in its self-assessment report that tutorial support for part-time students is not always up to the same high standard. It also identifies the need to systematise the processes for the completion and use of records of achievement. Students are made aware of the college's charter, but some did not know how to proceed with a complaint if they reached an impasse. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

36 The college has a partnership agreement with the local careers guidance service. An adviser has recently been appointed to work with adult students. The careers adviser conducts a large number of guidance interviews. The programme for students wishing to progress to higher education is thorough and a high proportion of applications lead to offers of places. However, there is no careers education programme which extends across the college.

37 The central student services unit is responsive to students' needs. Advice on matters relating to finance and accommodation is delivered sensitively. The counselling service is highly regarded by students and is of high quality. The nursery enables some students with young children to attend college who would not otherwise be able to do so. A range of sporting and recreational activities is offered but not all students who wish to participate are able to do so because of conflicting timetable commitments.

## General Resources

### *Grade 2*

**38 Inspectors confirmed the college's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of its general resources. Considerable investment has been made in this area since the last inspection.**

#### **Key strengths**

- well-maintained accommodation
- recent improvements to buildings
- good access for students with physical disabilities
- good computing facilities and access to them

#### **Weaknesses**

- a small proportion of poor classrooms
- inadequate social areas for staff and students
- insufficient library books in some subjects

39 The college operates on three sites close to the town centre. The main site, at which the majority of the teaching takes place, consists of numerous buildings ranging in age from four to 35 years. The accommodation has been improved since the last inspection. For example, the refectory has been extended, the engineering area refurbished to a high standard, and a new recreational and sports building provided. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that most teaching rooms on the main site are welcoming, well decorated, well lit and clean. A large proportion of the rooms are carpeted and contain modern furniture. The small number of hatted classrooms are poor.

40 There are refectory services at both annexes. One of the annexes, Northcourt House, is a listed building and is used mainly for professional courses. It is an attractive building, but expensive to maintain. Its rooms are too

# Cross-college Provision

small to accommodate large groups. The second annexe is the least satisfactory of the college's buildings. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that its facilities are not up to industry standards.

41 The accommodation for teaching and support staff is generally good. Most teachers' work rooms have good facilities. They are equipped with computers but these are not connected to the computerised management information system and so are not able to provide teachers with up-to-date information about their students. The student common room facilities are inadequate, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. Most of the teaching rooms on the main site and all at the second annexe are accessible to students with restricted mobility. The hutted classrooms and Northcourt House are not.

42 The library is equipped with 23 computer workstations and a range of other learning materials including audio and video tapes, CD-ROMs and teletext. It has 80 study spaces. A small learning resource centre is located next to the library. This provides an extensive range of audio and video material for use by teachers and students. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that the collection of 11,100 books is insufficient in number and range. Library funding has fallen this year and is insufficient to maintain and upgrade the range of books and equipment. The librarian holds regular meetings with course teams and attempts to prioritise purchases in shortage areas, and to ensure that there are sufficient books to support new courses. Additional learning material is located in some study areas which improves the resources available to students.

43 Since the last inspection in 1993, the college has increased the number of computer workstations by almost 70 per cent. There are now over 300 modern machines, most of which are networked. This represents a good ratio of computers to students of approximately 1:6.

Most of the computers are located in a number of adjacent rooms at the main college site. The remainder are either in individual study areas or at the two annexes. Students are able to get access to computers when they need to use them. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that there is a good range of industrial-standard software for use by students in most study areas. The college has a networked computer management information system. Teachers do not have direct access to the network but the college plans to improve this.

## Quality Assurance

### *Grade 2*

**44 The college's self-assessment report was thorough and clearly presented. Inspectors agreed with its judgements. Some weaknesses identified in the report had been addressed before the inspection.**

#### Key strengths

- comprehensive quality assurance framework leading to improvements in most areas of the college
- commitment to continuous improvement
- well-documented and understood quality assurance procedures
- effective staff development and appraisal

#### Weaknesses

- lack of a performance indicator for attendance
- insufficient feedback to students and staff of outcomes of quality reviews
- failure to make effective use of data from quality assurance process in self-assessment

45 The mission of the college is 'to provide education and training of undisputed quality'. A 'quality framework' provides the means through

# Cross-college Provision

which the college assures the quality of its provision. There is a strong commitment to high quality and continuous improvement throughout the college, the framework is understood and supported by staff and governors. Some parts of the framework have yet to be fully implemented and some need modification but the college is aware of this and is taking action to improve the system.

46 The college has a planning cycle linking strategic planning to operational and study area plans and quality improvement. College performance indicators and targets are set annually. There is a sensible approach to setting course targets that takes into account both previous performance and, wherever possible, national data. The college does not use attendance as a performance indicator.

47 The quality and review committee, a subcommittee of the academic board, is responsible for monitoring the quality assurance procedures. It does this effectively. It is also the forum in which new developments in quality assurance are discussed before consideration by the academic board. The outcomes of the committee's reviews are not always fed back to staff and students to keep them informed.

48 The college has a well-documented and generally effective course review and evaluation system. Students' perceptions of their courses and their general college experience are surveyed three times each year. The findings from these surveys, together with external verifier reports, and data on students' achievements, retention and destination, are used to review each course. Some course review groups have student representatives and improvements have resulted from their contributions.

49 The vice-principal meets heads of study and other managers individually to review study area development plans and monitor courses. Actions and timescales for further improvement are agreed. Actions from the previous meeting

are checked. These meetings are an important aspect of the quality improvement process.

50 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that staff development and appraisal are effective. Staff development supports the aims of the strategic and operational plans. In some cases it is mandatory, for example this year managers have been required to undertake training leading to NVQs in management, and other staff have undertaken IT training. Attendance at staff development events is recorded and their outcomes monitored. All full-time staff are appraised annually but the same is not true for part-time staff. This weakness is acknowledged in the self-assessment report and action is now being taken to overcome it. Classroom observation has been introduced for both full-time and part-time staff. There are clear guidance notes for observation but the outcomes have not been incorporated into the appraisal system. The college has been awarded the Investor in People award and has the Positive About Disabled People and the BSA awards.

51 The college's approach to self-assessment was thorough and systematic and all staff and governors were involved in the process. Teachers were required to contribute to the self-assessment of their study area and all staff were given the opportunity to contribute to the cross-college assessments. The final report was presented to the corporation for approval. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report. However, the report did not make effective use of the data used to support the college's quality assurance processes.

# Cross-college Provision

## Governance

### Grade 1

#### 52 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment of its strengths and weaknesses in governance.

##### Key strengths

- commitment, experience and expertise of governors
- effective procedures for the recruitment of new governors
- efficient clerkship
- good arrangements for the appraisal and development of senior postholders

##### Weaknesses

- delay in reporting findings of internal audit to the board

53 The corporation has a membership of 17. There are currently nine independent members. The principal, two staff and a student are among the other members. The corporation benefits from the considerable expertise and experience of its members. These include finance, human resource management, property management, learning resources management and local government. A new member will provide an independent educational perspective on academic issues. The board has decided to defer filling one vacancy until the outcome of the government's consultation on accountability is known. Recently, the board had the task of replacing members whose term of office had expired. This was well managed using advertisements and an interview. There are well-established arrangements for the induction of new governors and regular training opportunities are provided for serving governors, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. The governors are knowledgeable about central government and FEFC policies, and have a good understanding

of their role and of the challenges facing the college and the further education sector as a whole. Attendance at board and committee meetings is good.

54 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. The corporation has established committees with appropriate terms of reference for finance, employment policy, audit, remuneration, and nomination of new governors. These committees are operating effectively. However, the audit committee has not given timely consideration to, nor effectively reported to the corporation on, the annual internal audit report and internal audit planning. The board has procedures for creating temporary working groups to address specific tasks. The effective discharge of corporation business is greatly assisted by efficient clerking arrangements. There is a calendar of meetings and standing agenda items for each term's meetings. Papers are concise, informative and well presented and include guidance on whether they are for information, debate or decision. The board has a well-established code of conduct. A register of interests of governors is effectively maintained, but has not yet been extended to senior staff with significant financial responsibility.

55 Governors play an active role in the strategic planning process and scrutinise closely the financial implications of any proposals. Throughout the year they monitor the performance of the college against the objectives in the annual operating plan. The board recently initiated a review of the mission and strategic direction of the college, in the light of changes in the pattern of educational provision in the area and government initiatives. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-

# Cross-college Provision

assessment that this is a timely and sensible initiative. The exercise involved all the governors and senior managers in an examination of key issues. Draft proposals will be put to all staff before a decision is taken later in the year.

56 The governors have ensured that there are effective arrangements for the appraisal of the principal. The process is managed by the chair of the corporation and members of the remuneration committee. The appraisal leads to the setting of personal targets for the principal, but these are also related to the college's strategic objectives. Progress is reviewed mid-year. There are similar arrangements for the one other senior postholder. Governors are concerned to ensure the professional development of the principal and other senior managers, all of whom are engaged in an accredited programme of training and updating.

## Management

### *Grade 2*

**57 Inspectors were in general agreement with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report and noted that some of the weaknesses had been remedied before the inspection as a result of the management action plan. However, some weaknesses in the management of study areas were not identified in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- good management practice throughout the college
- clear lines of communication and accountability
- sound financial management
- effective market research
- well-deployed staff
- productive partnership with local schools

#### Weaknesses

- failure to meet full-time enrolment targets over three years
- some inconsistent management of curriculum areas
- small size of some teaching groups

58 The college is well managed. There is a college executive group of five, comprising the principal and vice-principal, and three directors who are responsible for finance and administration, client services, and student programmes. Minutes of the executive group meetings are detailed and have clear action points which are reviewed at each subsequent meeting. Heads of the eight study areas and heads of administrative and support sections report to designated members of the executive group with whom they have fortnightly progress review meetings. The management structure provides clear lines of communication and accountability. Staff understand their roles and are appraised annually against comprehensive job descriptions and agreed targets. The management of most study areas is good, but in some the management is too informal, standard college practices are not adhered to, and meetings are inadequately minuted.

59 The college's strategic planning process is thorough; a strength identified in the self-assessment report and confirmed by inspectors. It involves all staff through study area and section development planning. Senior managers work closely with members of the corporation as the plan is taken through key stages of drafting. Despite thorough planning, the college has not met its target for full-time enrolments for the past three years, a weakness acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Last year more comprehensive market research enabled the college to set more realistic targets. Consequently, the college is close to achieving its full-time enrolment targets for the current academic year. During the same three-year

# Cross-college Provision

period, an analysis of adult education and training needs in the community resulted in the steady growth of part-time enrolments which have partly compensated for the shortfall in full-time students. The college's average level of funding for 1997-98 is £16.44 per unit. The median for general further education colleges is £16.72 per unit.

60 The college is in a sound financial position. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. Financial management information is timely and regular, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. It comprises income and expenditure information, a balance sheet, a cashflow forecast to the end of the financial year, and a commentary. The information would be enhanced if it included a cashflow forecast covering the forthcoming 12 months. The finance team is appropriately qualified and experienced. The policy and procedure for the allocation of budgets to cost-centre managers is well established and understood. All full-time teachers and support staff are employed on flexible contracts. The small size of some classes results in some inefficiency in staff deployment. The college plans to reduce its overall staffing costs from 70 to 68 per cent of total income by the end of the current academic year. Personnel and equal opportunities policies have been updated over the past four years and are systematically monitored throughout the year. Records of these reviews are exemplary. The college's health and safety policy was updated and approved by the corporation at its last meeting.

61 The comprehensive management information system is networked to all managers. It provides up-to-date information on students, staffing, timetables and finance. In 1997, the college's internal auditors judged that controls for validating student data were inadequate. Steps were taken to remedy this weakness and, on their recent visit, auditors confirmed that improvements have been made.

At the time of the inspection, the college has not submitted individualised student record returns for 1997-98.

62 In July 1997, the college undertook a comprehensive staff opinion survey. One of the findings was that staff considered communication between managers and themselves to be unsatisfactory. The action plan to remedy this weakness has been successful and staff now consider that communication is much improved. Senior managers, in particular, are perceived to be more accessible and supportive. Summaries of senior management meetings are published, there is an excellent weekly bulletin and briefing sessions about key issues or developments in the college are held regularly.

63 The college has established good links with employers, the local community, other further education colleges, adult education providers and the local TEC. It has a long-established and effective partnership with three local schools, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. These arrangements and their continuing development are managed through a liaison group which includes senior managers and governors of the four partner institutions. An interesting feature of this partnership is that students who pursue their studies in more than one institution tend to achieve better results than their peers who study in only one.

## Conclusions

64 The college's self-assessment report was honest and evaluative. It provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. Most of the findings were in agreement with those of the inspection team. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths but found some additional weaknesses that had not been identified by the college. At the time of the inspection, action to address some of the weaknesses identified through self-assessment had already taken place.

# Cross-college Provision

65 Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

# College Statistics

## Student numbers by age (July 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	14
19-24 years	10
25+ years	70
Not known	5
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	11
Intermediate	31
Advanced	21
Higher education	2
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	35
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	87	1,142	17
Agriculture	0	36	0
Engineering	78	286	5
Business	187	1,005	16
Hotel and catering	57	1,186	17
Health and community care	157	642	11
Art and design	142	950	15
Humanities	112	1,133	17
Basic education	13	175	2
Total	833	6,555	100

Source: college data

## Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (April 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	70	29	0	99
Supporting direct learning contact	7	0	0	7
Other support	58	1	0	59
Total	135	30	0	165

Source: college data, rounded to nearest full-time equivalent



# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends

### Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£4,872,000	£5,037,000	£4,984,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£16.50	£16.47	£16.78
Payroll as a proportion of income	68%	70%	71%
Achievement of funding target	96%	96%	99% (est)
Diversity of income	22%	17%	21%
Operating surplus	£307,000	£33,000	-£340,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), college (1996-97)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

### Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	100	79	77
	Average point score per entry	4.3	3.1	4.5
	Position in tables	top third	bottom third	top third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	141	124	155
	Percentage achieving qualification	79%	54%	86%
	Position in tables	middle third	bottom 10%	top third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	128	115
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	69%	79%
	Position in tables	*	top third	top third

Source: DfEE

Note: the majority of the college's students are 19 years of age or older

The achievements of these students are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

\*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends *(continued)*

### Students' achievements

		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Advanced academic	Pass (%)	91	86	86
	Retention (%)	100	70	83
Intermediate academic	Pass (%)	80	65	52
	Retention (%)	93	80	73
Advanced vocational	Pass (%)	80	67	75
	Retention (%)	99	58	71
Intermediate vocational	Pass (%)	87	95	57
	Retention (%)	90	95	63

*Source: college data*

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