Amersham and Wycombe College

Contents

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.*

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
	%	*%*	*%*	*%*	*%*
Curriculum areas	10	53	30	7	–
Cross-college provision	14	54	23	7	2

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report
Sample size: 104 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- *as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification*

- *as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification*

- *as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included.*

Summary

Amersham and Wycombe College

South East Region

Inspected May 2000

Amersham and Wycombe College is a general further education college with three main sites in south Buckinghamshire. The college produced its fifth self-assessment report for the inspection. Each curriculum area and some cross-college areas produced full self-assessment reports from which summaries were drawn for the whole college self-assessment report. The report was externally validated. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but judged that some strengths were overstated, particularly those relating to teaching and learning and students' retention and achievements. Some additional strengths and weaknesses were identified. Inspectors judged that the college had over graded a number of areas in their self-assessment report.

The college provides courses in 10 of the programme areas funded by the FEFC. The inspection covered provision in four of the programme areas together with basic skills and aspects of cross-college provision. The college has undergone a period of significant change since the last inspection. A new principal was appointed in August 1998 and the management of the college has recently been reorganised. It is too early to judge fully the effectiveness of the changes, but staff are positive about them. The proportion of teaching judged to be good or outstanding was the same as the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99 and was higher than at the last inspection. Prospective students are well informed about the range of courses and opportunities available. Tutorial support for full-time students is effective. Students have good access to IT. The college has a clear commitment to improving standards. Many of the quality assurance procedures have recently been revised and their effectiveness has not yet been tested. Governors have a wide range of skills which are used effectively to carry out corporation business. The college should address: low students' achievements at levels 2 and 3; the decline in student retention; attendance which is below the national average; aspects of teaching and learning; the overgenerous assessment of lessons observed; the lack of overall co-ordination of basic skills; the evaluation of the impact of learning support; unreliable data on students' retention and achievements; low space utilisation; governors' slow progress in monitoring the college's academic performance; and the slow response to declining financial performance in some areas. The weaknesses relating to poor students' retention and achievements, learning support and the unreliability of data were identified at the last inspection and have yet to be addressed.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Computing and information technology	3	Support for students	3
Health and social care and counselling	2	General resources	2
Hair beauty and holistic therapies	3	Quality assurance	3
Art and design	2	Governance	2
Social sciences	3	Management	3
Basic skills	3		

The College and its Mission

1   Amersham and Wycombe College is a general further education college with three main campuses at Amersham, High Wycombe and Chesham. It was established in 1972 as Amersham College of Further Education and Art and Design. The college's wide catchment area includes Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Harrow, but it draws 45% of its students from Wycombe postcode areas. The college attracts a diverse range of students from pre-entry to degree level. In April 2000, 6,471 students were enrolled of whom 29% were full-time students.

2   Following a recent reorganisation, the curriculum offered is managed within three faculties: visual and performing arts; business and technology; and community and general education. Work-based training and day-release provision for national traineeships, modern apprenticeships and New Deal are provided in partnership with Thames Valley Training and Enterprise. Higher education programmes are offered in collaboration with Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College.

3   The college operates in an intensely competitive environment where selective education prevails. All of the local secondary schools provide extensive academic and vocational courses for sixth form students. Four other further education colleges operate in close proximity to the college as do a number of adult education and training providers. The college's response to the competition has included the development of specialist programmes of education and training, and the establishment of a leading role in strategic partnerships.

4   Recent innovations and projects include: IT 2000, which is aimed at developing computing skills with parents and teachers; Cheshire CATTs (College Access Through Technology) in collaboration with the Leonard Cheshire Foundation to provide remote information technology (IT) training through the Internet to home-based learners; a motor project for young people in partnership with the local authority and well-known international motorcycle and car manufacturing companies; and basic skills summer programmes for local schools and social services. A significant aspect of the college's work is a major contract with the Home Office for the provision of education and training services in 14 prisons in the South East region.

5   Buckinghamshire has much economic prosperity and minimal unemployment. However, there are small areas of relative deprivation and social exclusion, especially in the High Wycombe and Chesham areas. These include populations of high ethnic and cultural diversity. Working closely with community leaders and local agencies, the college has developed provision to meet the needs of the community. The commitment to inclusivity is also reflected in the recent growth of opportunities for supported education and training for learners with specific learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

6   The college has recently reviewed its vision and mission statements, which now include explicit reference to quality as a key objective. The college's mission is 'ensuring achievement through quality education and training'.
Eight key commitments mark the way to the achievement of the vision and mission.
These are: effectiveness; quality; efficiency; responsiveness; innovation; access; equality; and partnership.

The Inspection

7   The college was inspected in May 2000. Inspectors had previously analysed the college's self-assessment report and information provided by other directorates of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Inspectors used data on students' achievements taken from the college's individualised student record (ISR) returns to the FEFC for 1997 and 1998. The college submitted its own data on students' achievements for 1999. The data for 1999 were checked against college registers and awarding body pass lists. Significant amendments had to be made once it was found that students were not always withdrawn from registers when they left courses. As a result of this, and additional work by the college, retention rates were lower than initially reported, and there were some changes to data for earlier years. The inspection was carried out by 12 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 45 days. Inspectors observed 70 lessons and some additional tutorials, which were not graded. They scrutinised students' work and a range of college documents. Meetings were held with

students, governors, managers, teachers and support staff. In the same week as the FEFC inspection, eight inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) inspected provision in retailing and customer service, business administration including IT, motor vehicle engineering, social care and childcare, and foundation for work (English for speakers of other languages). TSC inspectors interviewed 83 trainees and 22 employers, examined trainee progress reviews, scrutinised portfolios from all occupational areas and visited 21 work placements. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

8   The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the lessons inspected, 65% were rated good or outstanding and 4% as less than satisfactory. These figures are almost identical to the national average recorded for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	2	5	7	0	0	14
GNVQ	5	3	4	2	0	14
NVQ	0	1	3	1	0	5
Other vocational	5	13	3	0	0	21
Other	2	9	5	0	0	16
Total (No)	14	31	22	3	0	70
Total (%)	20	45	31	4	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

Context

9   The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Attendance during the inspection was 3% below the national average for all colleges in 1998-99.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Amersham and Wycombe College	9.6	75
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

Computing and Information Technology

Grade 3

10   Inspectors observed 11 lessons including a group tutorial in computing and IT. They agreed with many of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report but considered the significance of poor retention and achievement to be understated.

Key strengths

- well-planned, good teaching with effective practical work
- good achievement on a number of IT courses
- good IT hardware and software resources
- innovative developments to extend IT into the community

Weaknesses

- poor retention on some courses
- low achievement on general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) computing and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced IT
- restricted range of library resources
- some practical constraints in using computers

11   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college offers a broad range of courses in computing and IT. Full-time courses ranging from GNVQ foundation IT through to higher education courses are offered at the Amersham and High Wycombe campuses. Part-time day and evening courses are offered at all three college sites, and at a number of locations in the community. There is no substantial part-time course for computing professionals. The courses are administered well and communications are good across the sites.

12   Teaching was good or better in the majority of lessons. Most lessons are well planned with detailed schemes of work. Lesson plans have clearly stated objectives, shared with students. Various teaching methods were used effectively including exposition, question and answer, individual exercises and whole-class work. Practical lessons developed programming and technical skills effectively, as well as office skills. In one GNVQ intermediate IT lesson, students connected two networked computers by null modem cable, set the protocols on each machine and communicated each way. In most lessons, students were involved and interested. Most assessments are set as tasks related to professional practice. A few weaker lessons were poorly planned. Teachers failed to check that all students were learning and less responsive students were not encouraged to participate. Students on computing and IT courses are well supported by teachers and tutors. In one GNVQ foundation assessment and guidance session, two tutors worked together. One supported students with assignment work and portfolio building while the other met students individually to discuss attendance, progress made and agree action plans.

13   In one evening class, a group of parents and staff from a local school worked on databases. The school is one of 44 taking part in the IT 2000 initiative. The aim is to progress participants through four levels of the Pitman's qualification. The college is in partnership with a software manufacturer and a national charity to offer computer literacy and information technology through distance learning to unemployed people with physical disabilities. This project has its own website which enables students to communicate with their tutors and other students in a virtual classroom. Students' work is transmitted by electronic mail. In the cyberskills centre at the Chesham campus, part-time evening students successfully created their own web pages as part of a lesson in global communications.

14   Students' retention and some achievements are below the national average. This significant weakness was not adequately recognised in the self-assessment report. For example, achievement on the GCE A level computing and GNVQ advanced IT are well below the national average. There are good achievements on GNVQ foundation IT, national diploma and computer literacy and information technology. Retention is low on all courses but is particularly poor on GCE A level computing, GNVQ advanced IT, and the national diploma in computer studies. Portfolios for GNVQ students are well organised. Students on the national diploma in computer studies have a period of work experience but GNVQ IT students do not. Staff do not have enough links with industry.

15   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the hardware and software resources for computing courses are good. Computing students have access to an appropriate level of specialist IT equipment and software. However, the facility to save work in user areas is not available across all sites. Staff cannot readily release computer-based learning materials to students as the staff and student networks are separate. In computer rooms the tables provide little room for students' folders between workstations. Cable management is poor. Technical support is adequate. Computing resources are good at the Chesham campus which is a learndirect learning centre of the University for Industry. The college has learning centres on all sites with computers available for open access by students. These centres are often crowded and noisy. There are not enough textbooks available, especially for advanced level computing students who are researching specialist topics outside the scope of the core units. Periodicals are few and not always on display.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in computing and information
technology, 1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
Computer literacy and information technology	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	492 87 73	447 92 70	282 79 91
GNVQ foundation IT	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	19 89 65	22 64 33	36 69 92
GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	38 79 57	44 88 29	34 71 67
GCE A level computing	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	11* 73* 50*	27 88 47	30 57 24
National diploma in computer studies	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	23* 74* 59*	21* 33* 100*	22 59 92
GNVQ advanced IT	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	27 52 86	34 62 55

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*college data
+course not running

Health and Social Care and Counselling

Grade 2

16   Inspectors observed 14 lessons covering the total range of courses, on all three sites. They also observed four individual tutorials. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but not with the weightings allocated to some strengths.

Key strengths

- excellent pass and retention rates on some courses
- good-quality teaching and learning
- thorough monitoring of students' progress
- effective support of students
- good communication between all sites

Weaknesses

- lack of provision at foundation and intermediate levels
- declining retention rates on childcare courses

17   Although the college offers a wide range of courses, both full time and part time, many have failed to recruit. In particular, the lack of provision for full-time students at foundation and intermediate levels limits opportunities for progression. An innovative new programme to develop childminding practice has been introduced successfully. A good range of additional courses is available to enhance full-time students' qualifications, although the community sports leadership award is not popular with students. Counselling courses have expanded successfully and offer good progression routes from level 1 through to the diploma accredited by the British Association for Counselling. This year has been devoted to consolidating the new school of health and care

and counselling. The training and enterprise council (TEC) funded provision, inspected at the same time by the TSC, does not involve any of the health and care staff in the school. Effective communication ensures that students' experience is similar across the three sites.

18   Inspectors agreed that the quality of teaching and learning is good, although lessons observed by inspectors were not graded as high as those seen by the college's internal audit team. Schemes of work are thorough and comprehensive. Lesson plans are prepared for each lesson. In the best lessons, teachers reminded students of the content of the previous lesson and took steps to revise and reinforce their learning. Objectives were shared with students at the beginning and an evaluation carried out at the end. Expectations of students were high. Teachers set demanding tasks, and used a variety of appropriate activities to keep students engaged and motivated. They drew extensively on students' placement experiences and visits. In a lesson on methods of monitoring the healthy functioning of the body, the teacher began by recapping what they had already covered on the cardio-respiratory system. This was followed by information on variations of the pulse rate. Students practised taking their own pulse and that of a partner. Then working in pairs they recorded each other's pulse after gentle exercise and after strenuous exercise and the time needed for the pulse to return to normal. The results were shown in graph form. Tight deadlines were set and adhered to. The teacher constantly checked students' knowledge and understanding which was of a high standard. At the end of the lesson the teacher effectively summarised the content. In some lessons in counselling and childminding teachers were equally effective in giving students practical activities which provided them with relevant experience.

19   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that students are well supported on their courses and that their progress is thoroughly

monitored. Detailed records of tutorials are kept and actions agreed. Progress made on these actions is addressed at the beginning of the next tutorial. Part-time students have timetabled tutorial periods with a named teacher, which they value. Students' work is well presented and much is of a high standard. Good use is made of IT. Teachers' comments are thorough and constructive.

20   Retention and achievement on GNVQ advanced health and social care are above the national average. Pass rates on the two childcare courses also significantly exceed the national average, but retention rates on both are declining. Retention rates on the diploma in nursery nursing course dropped to the national average in 1999, but the national diploma in childhood studies course fell to 59%, significantly below the national average. Current indicators are that this decline has been arrested on both courses. Retention and pass rates on the access certificate course are at, or above the national average. One of the part-time evening access classes this year has lost a lot of students. Retention and pass rates on the introductory and intermediate level counselling courses are at, or slightly above, the national average. Those for the diploma in counselling, although improving in 1999, are below the national average. In January 1999, the college introduced a new two-year course in counselling, where retention remains high.

21   The committed and enthusiastic staff team work well together. Accommodation is good. Each course has a base room. Posters and displays relevant to the themes being taught enhance all rooms. Books, journals, IT and other specialist equipment are in good supply and readily accessible.

Curriculum Areas

A summary of retention and achievement rates in health and social care and counselling, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
CENTRA introductory counselling	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	143 86 91	119 97 84	148 88 96
CENTRA intermediate counselling	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	54 87 87	108 94 89
Diploma in counselling	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	34 82 67	27 78 50	10 80 88
GNVQ advanced health and social care	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	53 85 82	27 81 91	21 71 87
BTEC national diploma in childhood studies	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	53 96 94	24 75 100	22 59 92
CACHE diploma in nursery nursing	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	87 91 93	78 88 88	59 76 91
Access certificate (caring professions)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	51 86 73	50 90 56	50 72 83

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Hair, Beauty and Holistic Therapies

Grade 3

22   Inspectors observed 11 lessons in hair, beauty and holistic therapies. They agreed with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but considered that some strengths were overstated, particularly the quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a broad range of courses
- good standard of practical and coursework on many programmes
- effective entry, guidance and induction processes
- good-quality and modern specialist accommodation

Weaknesses

- some poor achievement
- poor retention in reflexology
- insufficient work experience for full-time students
- insufficient opportunities for students to develop and apply IT skills

23   The college offers a wide range of provision, including national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in hair and beauty and courses in aromatherapy, epilation and reflexology. Short courses are offered in hair, nail care and make up. A full-time holistic therapy course and the schools' progression award in beauty therapy have further extended provision. The NVQ level 3 hairdressing course has not recruited for two years. All the Easter school provision was cancelled this year due to low numbers, attributed to late publicity. Students speak highly of the quality of pre-course guidance and induction. Full-time

students are interviewed and attend an induction week before starting their programme. Part-time students are telephoned by tutors to discuss course content and requirements.

24   The college overstated the strength of well-planned teaching and learning in the self-assessment report. Inspectors judged the proportion of good or outstanding lessons as less than the national average for the programme area. In the majority of lessons, schemes of work were insufficiently detailed and lesson plans did not reflect the delivery proposed in the schemes. In some lessons teachers failed to involve all the students. In one lesson, students reviewed colour tones and depth of shades for hair colouring treatments. The teacher relied on question and answer techniques to revise the topic but failed to direct questions to specific individuals. As a result, a number of the students in this mixed ability class did not participate in the work. Learning objectives were not always reviewed at the end of lessons. In the best lessons, all students were fully engaged in the learning. For example, in a reflexology lesson the tutor provided a variety of models of the foot and hand for students to revise from whilst waiting for their clients to arrive. Key skills have been implemented this year but are in an early stage of development. Timetable changes, intended to improve efficiency, have disadvantaged some students. For example, hairdressing students studying IT key skills do not have additional lesson time but use an hour and a quarter from a practical commercial lesson for this purpose. This limits their opportunities for practical assessment.

25   Work experience is not compulsory on full-time programmes. As a result, most students do not have the opportunity to experience the pressures and time constraints of commercial practice. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report. In two lessons observed by inspectors there were insufficient clients for the number of students. In these

lessons the work lacked pace and was not demanding enough for the students. Some full-time students attend college for only two days a week. They do not gain sufficient structured work experience and their opportunity to practise their practical skills to an industrially viable standard is limited. The college has not participated in a national competition this year, although students visit national exhibitions.

26   Data produced by the college were not reliable, and trends have been identified from revised data. Retention and achievement are broadly similar to the national average on NVQ level 2 hairdressing. On NVQ level 2 beauty therapy, retention is good but achievement is well below the national average. On NVQ level 3 beauty therapy and NVQ level 1 hairdressing both retention and achievement are at, or above, the national average. On the diploma in holistic therapies course achievement is well below the national average while in reflexology achievement is good but retention is below the national average. The standard of practical work is good and reflects the commitment and professionalism of the staff. Portfolio presentation is outstanding in reflexology and aromatherapy. Students' written work is effectively marked and teachers give constructive comments to suggest how students might improve their performance. Internal verification takes place but it is inconsistent and lacks overall co-ordination. Inspectors agreed that there is good feedback to students, parents and carers, on the progress made by students.

27   Staff are appropriately qualified and most have assessor awards or are working towards them. Hair and beauty staff do not regularly visit local salons and opportunities to network and market the college's provision are missed. Poor industrial links are not recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report. The accommodation is of a high standard, reflecting commercial practice, and includes a specialist theory room. Information and learning technology is not yet integrated with the curriculum. The reception area has no computerised till facility, but this is planned.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in hair, beauty and holistic therapies,
1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
NVQ hairdressing (one-year course)	1	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	19 100 94
NVQ hairdressing (two-year course)	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	52 60 61
NVQ beauty therapy (one-year course)	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	42 90 53
NVQ beauty therapy (one-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	20 83 86	23 83 80
Reflexology (one-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	+ + +	28 75 90
Diploma in holistic therapies (one-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	+ + +	+ + +	15 80 67

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*data unreliable
+course not running

Art and Design

Grade 2

28   Inspectors observed 12 lessons and one tutorial in art and design. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good teaching and learning
- a wide range of courses offering good access and progression opportunities
- excellent specialist accommodation and equipment
- strong collaboration among staff

Weaknesses

- insufficient methodical development of drawing skills
- GCE A level achievement significantly below national average
- underdeveloped action-planning procedures

29   The college has a long and successful record as a provider of specialist art and design education. In recent years the range of courses has been extended. Students can now progress from level 1 to level 4 within the college. Much work has gone into developing flexible modes of attendance which have widened participation for adults of all ages and educational backgrounds. All full-time students can extend their learning experience through a range of additional studies.

30   Students value the commitment and enthusiasm of teachers. All staff teach on a range of courses. A tradition of sharing expertise and collaboration has developed, which benefits students. Course team meetings are held monthly. These are often poorly minuted and action plans are rarely formulated.

There is little evidence of information flowing from one management level to another, although the lines of management within the school are well defined. Student handbooks are produced for all full-time courses but are not written in a style appropriate to the needs of students.

31   The quality of teaching and learning is significantly above the national average for the programme area. This strength was understated in the self-assessment report. There is a purposeful working relationship between teachers and students. In a practical fine art lesson, students worked independently on final projects. The work was varied in style and content and used a wide range of media. Students are encouraged to work on their own and there is no attempt to enforce a house style. The teacher spoke with each student individually, discussing progress and promoting experimentation and creativity. Students are encouraged to be constructively critical of their own and each other's work. Inspectors observed GNVQ intermediate students engaged in a group critique of project work. Students were concentrating well, and their values and judgements were respected. Their knowledge of design issues was extended through careful questioning by the teacher. Students enjoy their studies and in most lessons there was a high level of engagement in the learning tasks set. Work in three dimensions is strong.

32   Teachers were particularly sensitive in supporting students across a wide range of abilities and ages. Where necessary, additional support in literacy and numeracy is provided. For three hours each week, the GNVQ intermediate tutor is supported by a teacher of mathematics who helps to design and deliver projects involving application of number. Students produce computer-generated tables and graphs to illustrate their findings. Learning support is also available to adults on the access to higher education course. In the minority of less effective lessons, teachers failed to ensure that some students were involved in the work

and, as a result, they remained on the periphery of the lesson. In some coursework folders it was not clear how ideas had been developed and problems solved. There is insufficient evidence to show that drawing is being systemically developed.

33   Arrangements for monitoring students' progress work well and students benefit from an effective tutorial system. Progression rates are good and a high proportion of level 3 students go on to higher education. Students' retention and achievements are close to the national averages for most courses. Achievements on the access to higher education course have been some 20% above the national average for the last three years. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that retention and achievements for the diploma in foundation studies are consistently above the national average. GCE A level achievement in fine art, photography, graphic design and printmaking has remained below national averages. Students' achievements at GNVQ intermediate level have improved significantly. The City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) photography course is offered to part-time students and as an additional qualification for full-time students. Retention and achievements are stated to be at the national average. However, inspectors found that students who had ceased to attend were not being withdrawn from the registers.

34   Staff are well qualified with expertise in all major vocational specialisms. The college has made a substantial investment in computer equipment and appropriate software. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that accommodation is good. Studios are well lit and provide flexible space for a variety of activities. Workshops are well equipped for advanced work in wood, metals, ceramics, printmaking and photography. There is good technician support and all students benefit from a policy of open access. The range of books in the learning centre is good, covering all major art and design movements. However, there are few publications on contemporary visual art.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in art and design, 1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
C&G 9231 in photography	1	Number of starters	245*	149	176
		Retention (%)	94	98	73
		Achievement (%)	14	39	38
GNVQ intermediate in art and design	2	Number of starters	25	38	39
		Retention (%)	60	86	62
		Achievement (%)	87	74	87
GNVQ advanced in art and design	3	Number of starters	102*	79	51
		Retention (%)	92	80	78
		Achievement (%)	87	94	78
Diploma in foundation studies	3	Number of starters	94	94	92
		Retention (%)	89	91	92
		Achievement (%)	100	94	100
Access to art and design	3	Number of starters	41	33	14
		Retention (%)	66	91	79
		Achievement (%)	81	88	82
GCE A level art studies/fine arts	3	Number of starters	50*	35	30
		Retention (%)	95	57	61
		Achievement (%)	67	67	61

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*college data

Social Sciences

Grade 3

35   Inspectors observed 12 lessons and one tutorial covering government and politics, psychology, sociology and citizenship. They broadly agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but identified one additional strength and several further weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good achievements on one-year GCE A level psychology

- improved retention and achievement on access to higher education courses

- effective teaching of subject-specific skills

Weaknesses

- poor retention on two-year GCE A levels in social sciences

- some inadequate initial guidance and assessment

- little variety in teaching and learning methods in some lessons

- some inappropriate curriculum and resource planning

36   Provision is limited to GCE A levels and the access to higher education in social sciences and humanities courses. In addition to a good range of daytime provision in all subjects, a two-year evening course is offered in psychology with a GCE advanced supplementary (AS) examination after one year. GCE A level sociology is only available in the evening as a one-year course. Psychology and sociology are timetabled on the same evening and this restricts students' choice. This year's compulsory addition of GCE AS citizenship for all full-time GCE A level students is now recognised as inappropriate. On the access to higher education course, arrangements for the teaching of study and IT skills are inadequate. Many of these weaknesses in curriculum planning were not recognised in the self-assessment report. Lines of management are clear. Communications and teamwork are good. Regular team meetings are held and issues relating to the team's action plan are addressed.

37   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some students receive inadequate initial guidance. Some students who have enrolled on the GCE A level evening courses have previously received only the information in the college publicity material. Without a guidance interview they are not fully aware of what the courses entail and how demanding the work is. Inspectors agreed that there is good tutorial support for full-time and part-time day students.

38   The proportion of lessons judged as good or outstanding was low compared with the national average for the programme area. Where teaching was most effective, learning objectives were clearly stated. These were linked to a variety of well-planned activities in which all students participated. Students were challenged to exercise higher levels of thinking. For example, in a one-year GCE A level psychology lesson, small groups of students delivered previously prepared presentations of the humanist, behaviourist and psychoanalytical perspectives used in psychology. The presentations were designed to test students' ability to evaluate as well as understand material. Students had prepared effectively and were confident in applying their knowledge. In some less successful lessons, teachers firmly directed most of the work. Insufficient attention was given to the needs of individual students and students' learning was not checked. The use of resource-based learning and the way information and learning technology can offer students alternative experiences of learning were overlooked. Many sociology and psychology students display a good command of the subjects and effective powers of argument.

Teachers emphasise the importance of the progressive development of subject-specific skills, including the ability to understand, apply and evaluate relevant information. The level of attainment in these skills is clearly highlighted in the marking of students' written work. This strength is not recognised in the self-assessment report.

39   Overall attendance at social science lessons was low at 69%. However, attendance was better for first-year full-time students at 85%, and this is partly attributed to more rigorous monitoring of attendance. In 1998 and 1999, retention and achievement on two-year GCE A level psychology courses were below the national average while on one-year courses they were mostly at, or above the average. The GCE A level sociology two-year courses had low levels of retention in 1998 and 1999 but achievement was at, or above, the national average. On one-year sociology courses retention and achievement were both above national averages in 1999 but achievement had been very low in 1998. On the access to higher education course retention and achievement were good in 1999. Most students completing the access to higher education course progressed to university. Inspectors agreed that a large number of GCE A level students were successful in gaining offers of university places in 1998 and 1999. There are no examination results available in citizenship or government and politics until the current cohorts complete.

40   Teachers of psychology and sociology are well qualified. Inspectors agreed that the subject expertise of staff is a strength. Most teaching takes place in well-lit, spacious classrooms. Little has been done to stimulate students' interest by attractive wall displays. The learning centre has an inadequate range of books in GCE A level subjects. Students have recently begun to use the Internet for individual research. Many find the learning centre too noisy.

Curriculum Areas

**A summary of retention and achievement
rates in social sciences, 1997 to 1999**

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	**1998**	**1999**
GCE A level psychology (one-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	25 84 65	29 79 78	24 63 80
GCE A level psychology (two-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	64 84 76	96 46 66	83 63 63
GCE A level sociology (one-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	22 77 24	27 74 65
GCE A level sociology (two-year course)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	17 41 71	19 58 73
GCE AS psychology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	37 86 47
Access certificate to higher education in social science and humanities	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	12 50 83	12 58 71	14 71 90

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
***data unreliable**

Basic Skills

Grade 3

41   Inspectors observed 10 lessons across the college's range of basic skills provision. They agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some strengths were overstated and identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a wide range of provision
- effective and contextualised development of basic skills in some areas
- clear initiatives to improve teaching and learning
- improved student progression through the integration of basic skills with vocational provision

Weaknesses

- no overall co-ordination of basic skills provision across the college
- insufficient attention to individual needs and aspirations
- over-reliance on worksheets in teaching and learning
- little use of realistic and relevant materials to reinforce students' learning

42   The inspection included basic skills provision within the teaching of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), the adult and youth community education programme, which is mainly for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and GNVQ foundation courses. It also included cross-college study support in basic skills. The college's main emphasis is on basic skills to enable students to achieve their primary learning goals, although some students achieve specific basic skills qualifications. Inspectors observed a small number of ESOL students working towards accreditation in Wordpower or Numberpower, in addition to their ESOL qualification. The college is exploring options for the most appropriate basic skills qualifications for pre-vocational and vocational courses. They are currently using the Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) basic skills award in some community education entry programmes while in GNVQ foundation IT students are working towards a certificate of achievement in English.

43   Inspectors did not agree with the college's self-assessment report that there is generally a high standard of teaching and learning. Fewer than half the lessons were considered good and none were outstanding. Planning for the development of individuals' skills within group lessons is poor. On some courses students' individual strengths and weaknesses are comprehensively assessed, but the findings are rarely used as the basis for planning work. Consequently, students do tasks which are too easy, lack relevance, or which do not build on previous knowledge and skills. Students were frequently occupied with worksheets and exercises that did not promote learning. The completed worksheets did not clearly indicate any improvements made by students and were not relevant indicators of achievement. One ESOL student who competently uses a clock completed a worksheet on identifying times which was quite inappropriate as a learning activity.

44   There is much effective contextualised and integrated development of basic skills particularly in the lower entry range of courses and in ESOL provision. In one pre-entry class, students who were largely speakers of other languages, successfully developed their word and symbol recognition. They examined symbols on household products to determine usage and identify danger signs. Some students' work shows considerable achievement. In ESOL, a comparison of pieces of students

writing at early and later stages clearly demonstrated progress. Work at GNVQ foundation level demonstrated significant improvements in the development of vocabulary, written expression and presentation. Attendance is good on ESOL and integrated community programmes but is poor in dedicated literacy and numeracy lessons for GNVQ foundation students. The low attendance at workshops by students below level 2 was not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

45   Initiatives within the college to improve the teaching of basic skills, include an assessment of the learning styles of students studying GNVQ foundation IT. This has resulted in a change in the format of assignments and in the presentation of written materials so that they take account of the needs of students more closely. A 'buddy' system for supporting the development of reading skills, with accreditation for 'buddies', is being established in the community education provision.

46   Provision has expanded in all areas and there are now good opportunities for progression to foundation level courses. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that basic skills provision is effective in enabling students to make good progress in their learning. Many students achieve their primary learning goal, which may be an ESOL qualification, pre-vocational, or vocational qualification. In the community education programme an increasing number of students are progressing from the 'Focus' programme to other college courses at foundation level. Progression is particularly good from GNVQ foundation to GNVQ intermediate. In 1998-99, 70% of the students on GNVQ foundation programmes went on to level 2. An achievements table has not been produced as basic skills is largely used to support primary learning goals and there are few separate achievements.

47   The management of basic skills and liaison within programme areas is effective. Liaison within ESOL provision is more difficult because it is spread across a number of sites. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the lack of an overall co-ordinator for basic skills across the college is a weakness and has hindered the planned development of provision. Systems for monitoring the effectiveness of basic skills teaching and support are underdeveloped as a result of its dispersed nature and the lack of co-ordination.

48   Some staff have specialist qualifications and provide effective support, but many have only initial training in basic skills. Most rooms are adequate and comfortably furnished. There are displays of students' work on the walls. However, there are no relevant everyday materials to reinforce learning in numeracy and literacy. There are few books, leaflets, magazines, manuals, photographs and three-dimensional mathematics materials for students to explore and use. Access to IT is poor for ESOL students as much of the provision is in schools or other community sites in High Wycombe. The college has partially addressed this by taking some groups by college minibus to the main site once a week.

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 3

49   Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report but identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- effective pre-entry guidance, admissions and induction processes
- well-structured and effective tutorial programme
- good counselling and welfare support services
- well-managed student services provision

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of data to evaluate effectiveness of learning support
- slow progress in improving student retention and achievement
- insufficient opportunities for personal and social development activities

50   Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the arrangements for initial guidance are comprehensive and effective for most students. Prospective students can gain information and impartial guidance through a range of sources including a college web page, guidance evenings and open days. The college also organises 'taster' weeks during the summer. These are valuable for introducing students to the college and provide an early opportunity to improve IT skills. The college also offers high-quality information and advice through its guidance shop in the centre of High Wycombe. Publicity materials are of good quality.

51   The admission and enrolment procedures for full-time students are thorough. Some part-time students experienced delays in enrolling on to college courses. Induction policies and procedures are comprehensive and effective in introducing students to the college. Students receive handbooks and are generally well informed of their rights and responsibilities. The college recognises its weakness in establishing effective financial support procedures. Students' awareness of the funds available to help in cases of financial hardship or for childcare costs is uneven. The process of granting such funds is slow.

52   All full-time students undergo diagnostic assessment to identify additional learning support needs in literacy and numeracy. The approach is uniform and not differentiated by level. It is not therefore appropriate for all students. Students may also identify their needs through the application process or use additional learning support on a 'drop-in' basis. There has been a large increase in students using additional learning support services since the last inspection. However, a significant number of students identified as needing additional support are not reached by this service. The college recognises that it needs to establish clearer measures to assess the effectiveness of this service both in terms of meeting the learning support needs of all identified students and the role this plays in improving retention and achievement. The college has begun to collect data on the take-up of learning support but has not, as yet, extended this analysis to assess its impact on poor retention rates. Inspectors agreed that where learning support is provided it is of high quality.

53   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the tutorial system is well structured and effective. It is organised through lead tutors who are based in the three main college faculties. Lead tutors work successfully alongside course tutors to help students review their progress. They monitor and follow issues arising from tutorials carefully. Progress on agreed actions is regularly reviewed. Students find this service valuable and of high quality.

The college has introduced procedures to reduce absence. Lead tutors and teachers identify students who are a cause for concern and concentrate support on them. In addition, the college has recently established retention action teams to monitor and implement strategies to improve student retention, which has declined at all levels. Although progress is slow, there are some early indications by comparing in-year retention this year with the same time last year that improvements are being made. College figures show an improvement of 4%. This is still below the national average for retention on level 3 courses and some inaccuracies of recording student withdrawals from registers were discovered by inspectors.

54   Students receive good careers advice and support for entry to higher education from both college staff and Buckinghamshire Careers Service. Student aspirations are sensitively and professionally supported. The college has contracted work experience arrangements to the local Education Business Partnership. The college estimates that over 50% of full-time students participate in this scheme, although there are still some students on vocational courses who do not have adequate opportunities for work experience. Data collection and analysis on the effectiveness of this service and the work experience provided are not fully developed.

55   The part-time counsellor has effective strategies to deal with large numbers and a wide range of students through an appointment system or on a 'drop-in' basis. Inspectors found this service to be responsive and in touch with students' needs. There are good referral arrangements and partnerships with relevant local agencies. The college is developing and implementing an innovative way to maintain discipline and enhance recreational and social activities through a youth and security service. It is still too early to judge the effectiveness of this measure. Inspectors found insufficient opportunities for recreational and social

activities across the sites. The students' union is developing social activities to meet the needs of all students across the whole college but particularly at the High Wycombe campus where it is most needed.

56   The student services team is well managed and the whole team shares a common approach of placing the needs of the student at the centre of their work. Student services staff are self-critical and this has helped to promote a responsive and effective service to students.

General Resources

Grade 2

57   Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the college's self-assessment report, but considered that some strengths were overstated and a number of weaknesses omitted.

Key strengths
- well-maintained college buildings
- excellent specialist facilities in some vocational areas
- significant investment in computing facilities
- good refectory facilities on all main sites

Weaknesses
- poor space utilisation and timetabling
- some poor access for students with physical disabilities
- underdeveloped student intranet

58   Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that all campuses are well managed. The buildings at each campus are of sound construction and regularly maintained to a high standard. The college adheres to a planned maintenance policy. Most standard maintenance work is undertaken by

the college's own team. Health and safety procedures are clear and well monitored.

59   The college has approximately 35% more space than it needs. All three campuses are located on greenbelt land, which restricts the opportunity to develop or sell any part of the estate. The original accommodation strategy, to maintain and improve present estates, has been completed. The Chesham campus is increasingly used for administration, rather than teaching, and a clear strategy for the future of the college estates is now urgently needed. Timetabling problems at the Amersham campus have resulted in overcrowding in communal areas. The college is piloting new software to resolve the problem but this has not yet had an impact.

60   The reception areas at the Amersham and High Wycombe campuses are welcoming, and guidance and support areas are close at hand. Internal and external directional signs are good. All corridors and rooms are clearly labelled. Corridors are wide and some sections of the Amersham campus are attractively decorated with students' work. The majority of the teaching spaces are large, with good lighting, but the walls carry few displays of work. Most standard teaching rooms are adequately equipped but few have IT resources. The specialist resources for art, design, media, hair and beauty courses are excellent. Future plans include the enlargement of the media production studio and the space for the performing arts.

61   The college uses other premises for community work and leases an industrial unit on the Cressex Industrial Estate for training purposes. Short courses related to motor vehicles, electrical installation and gas fitting are taught at this centre. The space is small and students do not have access to IT facilities, although they may use college facilities. The college guidance shop in the centre of High Wycombe is well used.

62   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there has been significant investment in computing facilities. This is underpinned by a well-written IT strategy. There are 517 computers of good specification for students' use. This results in a good ratio of full-time equivalent students to computers of 5:1. All computers are networked and have full Internet access. Students' access to the Internet is carefully monitored. The college has made considerable progress in developing a common network for both staff and teachers. The inability of teachers to access the student network from staff computers is impeding the development of the student intranet. Problems are caused by slow response times in some cases and by the failure to ensure that all students have the appropriate passwords. The number of computers available in staff work areas is good and technician support is adequate.

63   The learning centres are satisfactory. At the Amersham and High Wycombe campuses, the downstairs areas are primarily for private study with the mezzanine floors for computer usage. Some staff who supervise work in the learning centres are not sufficiently skilled in the use of IT. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that this is a weakness. The upstairs open access computer areas are often used for group sessions. Some students complain of the high levels of noise and the lack of quiet study areas. There is little course material available or software to assess or support students' learning. The self-assessment report did not identify this as a weakness. The overall range of resources is satisfactory although there are shortages in some curriculum areas. Links between learning centre staff and curriculum teams are good. All of the books are electronically catalogued and the college operates an effective inter-site loan service. The annual learning resources budget is £40,000. It represents approximately £15 for each full-time equivalent student. The reprographics unit is efficient and responsive.

64   Student social areas are satisfactory. Refectories are bright and clean and offer a good range of food at reasonable prices. Small student common rooms adjoin refectory areas. At the Amersham campus, the college plans to build a conservatory to provide extra space. Each campus has a sports field, which is rarely used. There are few other recreational areas for students. A well-established playgroup operates at the Chesham campus and a crèche is planned for the High Wycombe campus.

65   Some areas of the college remain inaccessible for students with restricted mobility. Even where ramps exist, many corridors and entrances have heavy doors. The college has made some improvements, including a lift into the learning centre and new paths at the High Wycombe campus. Progress is slow. This weakness is not given sufficient weight in the self-assessment report. Car parking at all centres is good. Travelling to the campuses by public transport can be difficult. The college provides a minibus service at the High Wycombe campus to help alleviate the problem.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

66   Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but also identified additional weaknesses. Some strengths identified in the self-assessment report were actually actions taken to address previous weaknesses.

Key strengths
- clear commitment to quality assurance and continuous improvement
- clear links between quality assurance, self-assessment and strategic planning
- detailed internal quality review process
- effective staff development

Weaknesses
- insufficient impact of quality assurance on retention and achievement rates
- overgenerous self-assessment
- overgenerous grading of lesson observations
- underdeveloped service standards in support areas

67   In the last year, the college has made good progress in improving its quality assurance policies and procedures. These include procedures for self-assessment, lesson observations, surveys of students' views and internal and external verification. The quality assurance committee structure has been revised to improve the monitoring of policies, procedures and actions. Some staff roles and processes are new or in the process of change. As a result, there are few reliable measurable outcomes, particularly relating to students' retention and achievements. Students' achievements declined in 1998 for students at all three levels. While 1999 shows some improvement, levels 2 and 3 are still below the national average. Retention rates are declining at all three levels. College figures suggest that retention may have improved for the current year 1999-2000, although this still leaves retention at level 3 below the national average.

68   The college has a commitment to improving quality. This is reflected in the recently revised mission statement. Curriculum teams review their work three times each year in November, February and July. Reviews begin at school level and include all full-time and part-time courses. They include an evaluation by each course team of its work and include external verifier reports, students' views and comparisons with college and national benchmarking data. They also review progress made towards achieving the self-assessment action plans and faculty development plans. The outcome of each review is a school and

faculty report with a plan for action. Some action plans do not provide sufficient detail and lack timescales and responsibilities. The report in July informs the self-assessment report. The faculty development plan is then produced which includes actions from both the strategic plan and the self-assessment action plans. The links between strategic planning and quality assurance are clear. The faculty development plan is monitored through the tri-annual reviews.

69   The college produced its fifth self-assessment report for inspection. Judgements in the self-assessment report are based on the tri-annual review, course data, internal reviews, and surveys of student satisfaction. Some curriculum sections did not place sufficient emphasis on students' retention and achievements as measures of quality. In some curriculum sections, insufficient emphasis was given to weaknesses in teaching and learning. Some action plans failed to address the weaknesses identified.

70   In revising the committee structure for monitoring quality, the college established new subcommittees of the academic board. These have a more rigorous approach than their predecessors. The 'quality standing committee' reviews and monitors tri-annual reviews, self-assessments, and quality assurance policies and procedures. The 'academic monitoring committee' reviews students' retention and achievements by course and compares performance against national averages and college targets. The corporation has only recently established a 'planning and monitoring committee' to review the college's academic performance. Governors monitor key aspects which include retention and achievement, customer satisfaction, financial factors and student satisfaction. Staff morale is monitored through surveys.

71   Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that it is committed to staff development. Training needs are identified

through appraisal and team training plans are produced and acted upon. The college spends about 1.5% of its income on staff development activities. Appraisal is carried out annually but completion of the appraisal cycle has been slow.

72   Inspectors agreed that service standards for support areas are at an early stage of development. Draft standards for management information systems and learning support have been produced. These contain measurable performance indicators. There are plans to produce standards for the other business support areas. Support areas carry out a review of the service they provide three times a year. This review informs the self-assessment report for each service area, and contributes to the relevant cross-college section of the self-assessment report.

73   The college carries out detailed internal quality audits. For curriculum areas these include classroom observations, analysis of retention and achievement data and review of curriculum management and resources. Each curriculum area is audited on a two-year cycle. Internal audits are also carried out for each of the business support areas and include direct observations of activities and the monitoring of quality standards, if they are in place. The grading of lesson observations carried out during the quality audits was considerably more generous than the grading by inspectors. The number of lessons graded good or outstanding by the college was 19% more than the number graded by inspectors. Individual teachers who perform poorly during the classroom observation scheme are not identified and, consequently there is no system to ensure that such teachers receive support to develop their teaching skills. Lesson observation reports do not feed into the appraisal process for teachers. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

Governance

Grade 2

74 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report. Some of the weaknesses were beginning to be addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths
- successful transition to new governance arrangements
- effective clerking and administration of corporation business
- high levels of attendance at corporation meetings
- rigorous operation of audit and finance committees

Weaknesses
- late establishment of committee to monitor academic performance
- insufficient regard to the equal opportunities policy and its implementation

75 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors have constructive working relationships with college managers. Governors are supportive of managers but, where appropriate, are prepared to challenge their decisions. As identified in the self-assessment report, governors understand the distinction between governance and management. Attendance at corporation and committee meetings is good, averaging 88%. Governors have a wide range of skills, which are fully used in carrying out corporation business.

76 The corporation has an appropriate range of committees. The committees effectively inform the business of full corporation meetings. Minutes of committees, together with an executive summary of the key issues arising

from their meetings and the actions required, are provided to the board. The audit committee acts substantially in accordance with Council Circular 98/15, *Audit Code of Practice*. The committee produces an annual report to the corporation covering its activities for the year and monitors the performance of both the college's internal and external auditors. The finance committee meets every two months and closely monitors the management accounts. The committee questions judiciously the assumptions underlying the college's forecast out-turn.

77 Governors are appropriately involved in strategic planning and participate in away days with senior managers to review the strategic plan and approve key strategic objectives. As identified in the self-assessment report, governors have not given sufficient attention to the monitoring of the college's non-financial performance and the progress made against operational objectives. A new committee for planning and monitoring these has only just been established and it has yet to finalise its remit. Analysis of the college's average achievement rates is still at an early stage of development and there is little awareness that the college's average performance at levels 2 and 3 are deteriorating and are below national averages. Governors do not seek sufficient corroborative evidence on progress made against operational objectives.

78 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 membership of the corporation comprises five business, three co-opted, one local authority, two staff, one student and two community members, and the principal. There are currently three vacancies.

79 The search committee operates a formal and open appointment process. The committee

was highly effective in ensuring the corporation's smooth transition to the new instrument and articles of government. Its work has been informed by a comprehensive skills audit to identify areas where additional skills would be beneficial to the college. Having identified the skills it requires of new governors they are then sought through public advertisements. The selection process is rigorous. There is an induction pack for new governors and appropriate guidance for the student member. The corporation has also conducted a skills analysis of its members and training needs have been identified. As identified in the self-assessment report, governors have few links with curriculum areas in the college. To begin to address this, governors intend to forge additional links with specific curriculum areas in order to understand more fully the core business of the college. Curriculum managers are presenting details of their areas to governors at the beginning of corporation meetings.

80   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that clerking arrangements are highly effective. Agendas, papers and minutes, except for confidential items, are prepared promptly and are available for public inspection. All governors and senior staff annually update a register of interests. The corporation has adopted sound policies for openness and accountability. It has established a range of clear policy documents, including standing orders, a code of conduct and a public interest disclosure policy. It has been prompt in considering and acting upon initiatives in good practice in governance.

81   Appropriate equal opportunities procedures are applied to students' admissions and staff recruitment. There is a full-time member of staff and a part-time assistant who are responsible for equal opportunities practices at the college's three sites and the 14 prisons with which the college has contracts. The self-assessment report identifies the need for a

formal review of the equal opportunities policy. There is an equal opportunities group, which meets regularly and minutes are sent to the academic board. The college acknowledges that more guidance is needed for teachers in applying equal opportunities principles in their teaching, though some innovative assignments and induction activities for students have been developed. While the minutes of the group's meetings go to the academic board, there has been no discussion of the equal opportunities policy or monitoring of its implementation by the corporation.

Management

Grade 3

82   The college self-assessment report for management included aspects of quality assurance and staff development. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses relating to management and identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths
- clear roles and responsibilities in the new management structure
- strong team ethos among senior managers
- timely production of management accounts

Weaknesses
- inadequacies in collecting and reporting data on students' retention and achievements
- slow response to declining financial performance in some areas
- insufficiently clear strategy and responsibility for marketing activities

83   The management structure of the college was reorganised in September 1999. Curriculum areas were combined into three

faculties. Within the faculties four new cross-college functional roles have been created. It is too soon to gauge fully the effectiveness of these arrangements, although staff understand the new roles, and the need for accountability. Most agreed that the lines of reporting and communication are clearer than formerly. Inspectors agreed that the college's values and mission are understood and supported by full-time and part-time staff. Generally, staff speak positively about the opportunities they have had to comment on the strategic plan and to participate in the operational planning process.

84   The principal and directors are senior postholders. There is a strong team ethos among senior managers. The senior management group comprises the principal, four directors, the three heads of the newly created faculties and the assistant director of information and quality. This group meets to discuss and agree college policies and strategies. There is also an operational management group to implement the decisions of the senior management group, which has the same membership but excludes the principal. The third senior grouping is the planning and business development committee, comprising the senior management group and the corporate development manager. This group plans its meetings specifically to lead preparations for self-assessment and planning and ensures that both activities are co-ordinated into one annual cycle. Although there is some duplication of discussion, the relevant committees are able to give timely emphasis to emerging or routine strategic and management issues. The college does not have fully delegated budgets. However, the process for allocating budgets is clear and understood by staff.

85   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that communication in the college is good. There is a regular information document, 'Newslink', which staff value. The principal attends faculty or school meetings at various sites and holds meetings with groups of staff. Special briefings are held on Saturdays once a term for part-time staff unable to attend the college on weekdays. Heads of faculty hold regular meetings with heads of school which include disseminating information and discussing issues first raised at senior level. These discussions are then relayed to school and course level. However, some staff report that they are unaware of any feedback from senior management meetings. Course and team meetings are held regularly, though not all are adequately minuted. The college does not yet have an intranet for use across the three main sites, and interim arrangements to communicate information electronically to the sites have had mixed success.

86   The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. A qualified accountant leads the finance team. Key objectives and targets to be achieved by the finance department are set at the start of each year and are monitored. Monthly management accounts are produced promptly and are reviewed in detail by the senior management group before being provided to all governors and budget holders. The content of these accounts accords with current good practice and provides detailed information. The budget profiling and presentation of some of the information provided, however, has hindered managers' and governors' ability to monitor accurately the achievement of the budget. Some key financial ratios have declined in the current year. Pay expenditure as a percentage of income has increased and cash days in hand have fallen. This reflects the non-achievement so far of some income and expenditure budgets, which is only now starting to be addressed. The financial regulations have been updated and reviewed by the finance committee prior to being approved by the corporation. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college has consistently met external deadlines for submission of accounts and returns.

87   There is a draft marketing action plan and some additional detailed marketing objectives which are intended to contribute to the achievement of the college's strategic plan but there is no marketing policy. Marketing matters should be discussed at the academic board's students committee, but there is no record of this. Several cost recovery courses have failed to run and it is unclear whether market research has been undertaken prior to planning a potential course, and who is accountable for it. Some full-time courses are not meeting recruitment targets. It is unclear whether responsibility for this is with the schools or marketing and hence it receives little systematic action. This confusion is not identified in the self-assessment report.

88   There are weaknesses in the college's procedures for collecting, checking and reporting data on students' retention and achievements. Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that its management information system and procedures were a strength. Inspectors found numerous errors in the 1999 data during a check prior to the inspection. This indicated that the college's student retention rates were lower than initially reported. The college checked all the data on students' retention and achievements for the areas being inspected against information on registers and awarding body pass lists and made corrections. This exercise enabled inspectors to use the data for the inspection. The areas not being inspected were not checked and the college recognises work needs to be done to correct student data. Changes have been made to procedures since September 1999 to improve accuracy.

Conclusions

89   The self-assessment report provided an effective basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the report but judged some strengths to be overstated and

identified some additional strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors considered that the college had over graded four curriculum areas and three cross-college areas.

90   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 (April 2000)

Age	%
Under 16	2
16-18 years	24
19-24 years	15
25+ years	57
Not known	2
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (April 2000)

Level of study	%
Level 1 (foundation)	43
Level 2 (intermediate)	24
Level 3 (advanced)	16
Level 4/5 (higher)	5
Non-schedule 2	12
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (April 2000)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	299	1,248	24
Agriculture	37	0	1
Construction	0	40	1
Engineering	99	90	3
Business	135	1,699	28
Hotel and catering	99	58	2
Health and community care	171	580	12
Art and design	612	255	13
Humanities	263	500	12
Basic education	149	137	4
Total	1,864	4,607	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 4% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (May 2000)

	Perm-anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	187	86	2	275
Supporting direct learning contact	29	0	2	31
Other support	119	0	7	126
Total	335	86	11	432

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£12,275,000	£12,569,000	£13,382,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£18.89	£17.88	£17.09
Payroll as a proportion of income	68%	70%	70%
Achievement of funding target	101%	100%	99%
Diversity of income	33%	36%	40%
Operating surplus	£127,000	£242,000	£70,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)
ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999)
Payroll – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)
Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
Diversity of income – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)
Operating surplus – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Expected completions	450	571	629	689	1,261	678
	Retention (%)	89	88	82	89	94	92
	Achievement (%)	55	85	45	49	84	52
2	Expected completions	1,182	1,422	1,487	854	1,151	1,194
	Retention (%)	86	86	82	89	85	91
	Achievement (%)	42	76	48	41	83	49
3	Expected completions	1,761	2,197	1,797	945	1,178	1,112
	Retention (%)	87	89	80	83	85	83
	Achievement (%)	56	70	40	46	60	40
4 or 5	Expected completions	19	12	14	206	434	358
	Retention (%)	95	100	88	93	90	83
	Achievement (%)	0	8	64	58	80	47
Short courses	Expected completions	156	888	2,102	3,231	4,064	7,031
	Retention (%)	92	97	99	97	91	95
	Achievement (%)	64	84	52	46	84	60
Unknown/ unclassified	Expected completions	901	2,596	4,402	422	1,295	3,153
	Retention (%)	96	96	87	95	95	93
	Achievement (%)	30	93	45	29	90	43

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

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