

REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE

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# Aquinas College

May 1997

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THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL

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***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

*The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.*

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

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# CONTENTS

	<b>Paragraph</b>
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	3
Responsiveness and range of provision	7
Governance and management	19
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	31
Teaching and the promotion of learning	41
Students' achievements	50
Quality assurance	64
Resources	74
Conclusions and issues	82
Figures	

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### **GRADE DESCRIPTORS**

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

*The descriptors for the grades are:*

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

*By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.*

#### **College grade profiles 1993-96**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Inspection grades</b>				
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

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# FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 47/97

AQUINAS COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected July 1996-January 1997

## Summary

Aquinas College in Stockport is a Catholic sixth form college which provides students with a supportive learning environment based on Christian values and beliefs. Students enjoy their studies and generally achieve good results. The college offers a wide-ranging curriculum for full-time students and for adults who attend college mainly in the evening. Links with secondary schools, particularly partner Catholic high schools, are strong. The college is heavily oversubscribed. The college has well-qualified and experienced teaching staff who are committed to their work and to the well-being of the students. The quality of teaching is good and examination results in GCE AS/A level examinations have been consistently high over the last three years, placing the college among the top 10 per cent in the sector, according to tables published by the DfEE. The college has an experienced and committed governing body. There is good leadership and management. The college's accommodation is too small for the number of students enrolled. In order to improve further the quality of its work the college should: offer a wider range of provision at foundation and intermediate levels; improve some of the management at departmental level; strengthen those aspects of the GCSE and GNVQ programmes that are weak; monitor more carefully students' withdrawal from some GCE A level subjects; and improve the monitoring of the college's response to its charter commitments.

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

<b>Aspects of cross-college provision</b>		<b>Grade</b>
Responsiveness and range of provision		2
Governance and management		2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		1
Quality assurance		2
Resources:	staffing	1
	equipment/learning resources	2
	accommodation	3

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Science	2	English, communication studies and languages	2
Mathematics and computing	2	History, geography and theology	2
Business	3	Sociology, psychology and law	2
Art, design, creative and performing arts	2		

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1 Aquinas College in Stockport was inspected in three stages. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in July and September 1996. Specialist subject areas were inspected in November 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in January 1997.

2 Fifteen inspectors visited the college for a total of 62 days. They observed 120 classes and examined students' written and practical work. They scrutinised a wide range of documentation including the college's strategic plan and self-assessment report. Inspectors held meetings with governors, and observed a meeting of the full governing body and of the audit committee. They also held meetings with the governors' clerk, the principal and all senior managers, teachers and other staff, parents and students, the college chaplaincy team and youth worker, engineers from local industry, head teachers from partner high schools, representatives from Stockport and High Peak Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and the careers service.

## **THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS**

3 Aquinas College opened in 1980 to provide further education for Catholic students aged 16 to 18 in the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport, Greater Manchester. It works in close partnership with four Catholic high schools, three in the borough and one in the neighbouring town of Buxton in Derbyshire. In 1993, the college became a designated college of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) under the trusteeship of the Diocese of Shrewsbury. It retains close links with its former local education authority (LEA) in Stockport and makes use of some of the authority's educational and administrative services.

4 The college occupies a compact site one mile south of Stockport town centre and is well served by public transport. The great majority of college students live in Stockport but significant numbers now travel from the neighbouring counties of Cheshire and Derbyshire, and from Manchester, Tameside and Trafford. The Metropolitan Borough of Stockport has a population of 285,000. Unemployment in the borough has usually been lower than the national average, and is currently around 5.8 per cent; in 1994, almost one-third of the unemployed were in the 25 to 34 age group. The proportion of 17 year olds remaining in post-16 education (60 per cent) is higher than comparable figures for Manchester (42 per cent), the North West Region (52 per cent) and England (57 per cent).

5 The college competes for students with other providers. There are three other further education sector colleges, including a large further and higher education college, in the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport. There are two other Catholic sixth form colleges less than 10 miles away in Manchester, and a further 10 sixth form colleges and 12 general further education colleges within reasonable travelling distance of Stockport. The college, which has received a surge in applications in recent years, is

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increasingly oversubscribed and has significantly exceeded its enrolment targets in each of the last four years.

6 The college's statement of purpose, vision and values places an emphasis on the Christian faith and 'the Gospel spirit of freedom, justice and love'. The college gives expression to this faith by 'affirming and valuing each member of the college community, recognising the dignity and unique nature of each individual, whether student, support staff or teacher'. It fosters these values through the development of a college community with a clear identity, a common sense of purpose and strong personal relationships. Although providing mainly for Catholic students, the college welcomes others who wish to share its Christian ethos. About half of the students are Catholic; the remainder are from other Christian denominations and from other faiths, or have no religious affiliation. The admissions policy guarantees places to pupils from partner high schools and other Catholic schools, and also to the brothers and sisters of present or former students. The remaining places in the college are allocated strictly in the order in which the applications were received. The college is non-selective; it accepts students irrespective of their previous academic performance, providing that there is a place available for them on an appropriate course and that they satisfy the minimum entry criteria for the level at which they wish to study. The college governors place a high priority on meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

#### **RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION**

7 The college offers a wide range of subjects for full-time students who choose to follow programmes of general education. Since 1993, it has also offered a variety of courses for adults who attend the college mainly in the evening. The portfolio of courses includes:

- 38 general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects, of which 10 are also available as GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects; seven subjects are offered in the evening as well as during the day
- 13 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects, including mathematics which is also offered in the evening
- courses in business at intermediate and advanced level that lead to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs)
- a full-time life skills course for students with moderate to severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- short courses in business and information technology leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and qualifications awarded by the RSA Examinations Board (RSA)
- classes for adults in basic literacy and numeracy
- a range of non-vocational evening courses to enable adults to broaden their interests and develop new skills.

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8 In November 1996, the college had 1,143 full-time students aged 16 to 18 drawn from 40 secondary schools and from other colleges, and over 600 adult students enrolled on evening courses. The increase in full-time students taking advanced level courses largely accounts for the growth in student numbers over the last three years. Over 90 per cent of full-time students follow GCE A level or advanced GNVQ courses. Most students take three or four GCE A level subjects, excluding general studies. Over 40 students have chosen further mathematics as their fourth GCE A level subject. Some students choose mixed programmes of two or three GCE A level and one or two GCSE subjects. Of the 68 students taking a course leading to the advanced GNVQ in business, 23 are also studying a GCE A level subject. Almost without exception, students are able to study the courses and subjects of their choice. Modular courses are offered only in science, mathematics and psychology.

9 There is a narrow range of provision at foundation and intermediate levels for students who do not have the entry qualifications needed for advanced level courses. At the time of the inspection, 30 students were following courses leading to foundation or intermediate GNVQ qualifications in business and 44 students were taking a full-time programme of GCSE subjects. The college offers courses in a range of GCSE subjects depending on demand. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

10 The college has succeeded in introducing a range of courses in business and information technology that appeals to a wider community than traditional sixth form students. For example, adults are able to attend the college at times which suit them, mostly on Monday and Tuesday evenings, or Saturday mornings, or occasionally during the day, to develop information technology skills and achieve RSA qualifications. Over 200 adults enrolled for these courses in the autumn term of 1996, more than double the corresponding figure for the previous year. Only 65 adults enrolled for the GCE A level and GCSE courses which the college offers in the evening. A lack of space in classrooms prevents adults from joining most daytime GCE A level classes. The college has a relatively small range of learning materials which adults use to study by themselves at home, attending college to receive guidance and support from teachers. There are attractive leaflets promoting adult education provision but the college has not yet developed a formal marketing plan or a strategy to attract more adult students to the college.

11 In addition to their main programmes of study, most full-time students are able to benefit from a range of activities that offers many opportunities for enrichment. They are expected to attend a weekly class in religion and philosophy, and usually participate in at least one other activity selected from the college's programme of complementary studies. Most courses within this programme allow students to develop their skills and interests.



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Some are linked to extra-curricular activities organised by the college, particularly sport, music and drama. There are regular fixtures for football, hockey and netball. Over 50 students are developing their rock-climbing skills and about 60 students are in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. During the period of the inspection, the college orchestra and student performers were rehearsing for an ambitious musical production to be staged later in the year. Only a few courses in the complementary studies programme allow students to gain qualifications. Some students are unable to take their first choice of activity either because classes are oversubscribed or take place at times when they have other commitments.

12 There are well-established arrangements to provide full-time students with a vocational dimension to their programmes of study. Opportunities for students to undertake planned work experience have been provided by the college for about 10 years. For the last three years, almost all students in their first year have taken up a work placement in May that has lasted for one week. In 1996, there were 400 placements. All students taking the life skills course have work experience during both years of their course. Teachers usually visit students on placements but only a few departments, such as science, technology, economics and business, have strong links with local employers and use them to enrich their courses.

13 The college's relationship with Stockport and High Peak TEC is cordial and productive. Bids to the TEC for funding are well structured, fully developed, and consistent with college aims. For example, the college has used funds allocated by the TEC to enhance full-time students' programmes of study. They attend a six-week introductory course to develop their information technology skills and have the opportunity of gaining an appropriate qualification. The college is also developing links with local companies, to help to identify the training needs of employees and to provide suitable courses for them. Between July and November 1996, training in information technology skills was provided for nine companies. There is, as yet, no database of all the employers with whom staff are in contact either through work placements or in other ways.

14 The development and maintenance of links with the four partner Catholic high schools is a priority for the college. The principal meets the head teachers regularly and senior managers each work with a partner school to co-ordinate liaison activities. An assistant principal is responsible for liaison with other high schools in the locality. Science and technology teachers from the college have worked with teachers from Catholic primary and secondary schools, with LEA staff and Neighbourhood Engineers to raise pupils' awareness of engineering and the work of engineers. Fourteen primary and three secondary schools sent teams of pupils to the college to participate in an engineering challenge competition. The event was successful and another is planned for 1997. Many departments have curricular links with local universities. These links are effectively used to enhance students' understanding of the opportunities available to them in higher education. The college is also conscious of its role in the local

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community and works hard to maintain good relations with its neighbours. For example, the college publishes a bulletin which it distributes to local residents to inform them of college developments and of activities such as open evenings or sporting events which may affect the life of the neighbourhood.

15 The college has established extensive international links which enrich the students' experience. Exchanges with students from colleges in France, Germany and Spain enable students to meet native speakers of their own age and to practise their communication skills. About 75 college students took part in student exchanges during 1996. All students are eligible to participate in their exchanges with schools and colleges in the Netherlands, Italy and Romania, and they benefit from the cultural links that are forged between the college communities. During the period of the inspection, about 30 Romanian students were visiting the college as part of the year's exchange programme; over 20 college students had already visited Romania in autumn 1996.

16 The college satisfies the requirements of sections 44 and 45 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* by making provision for collective acts of worship. Mass is celebrated once a week by the college chaplain. Each morning before classes begin, there is an opportunity for students and staff to meet together to say prayers. All students attend an assembly at least once a fortnight and there are four special assemblies: at the beginning of the year, at Christmas, at Easter and at the end of the summer term. These occasions contribute to the development of a strong community spirit amongst students and staff. Students' attendance at the classes for religion and philosophy has been poor but there are now clear procedures to follow up students who do not attend. The scheme of work for religion and philosophy is full and detailed, and recognises that not all students are from Catholic backgrounds.

17 Staff and students are keen to demonstrate their commitment to the college's mission by raising funds to support charities and the wider community. For example, in 1995 the college raised almost £7,000 to purchase resources to support the teaching of English in Romania. In 1996, over 200 boxes were filled with Christmas gifts and sent to children in Armenia, and in addition, students raised £920 for national and local charities.

18 There is a firm commitment in the college's statement of purpose, vision and values to equality of opportunity for all students and staff. This has been developed into a separate equal opportunities policy which lists the objectives to which the college is committed. Students and staff are aware of the policy. Individual departments, for example, have taken initiatives to try to correct traditional gender imbalances in recruitment to courses. There is a higher proportion of students from minority ethnic groups in the college than in the local population. There is no formal action plan for the further development of equality of opportunity in the college; nor are there systematic arrangements to monitor the extent to which current objectives are being achieved.

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## GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

19 There are 18 members of the governing body, comprising 10 foundation governors appointed by trustees of the Diocese of Shrewsbury, a representative of the TEC, a parent governor, two co-opted governors, two elected members of the college staff, the president of the student council and the principal. Five governors are women. Governors take a close interest in the college's activities and are fully committed to maintaining the Catholic and Christian ethos of the college. They take an enlightened view of the college's mission and recognise and value the contribution of those of other faiths to the life of the college. Governors work well to further the interests and well-being of the college and to ensure its continuing and successful growth. They recognise the constraints within which the college is operating and express a high level of confidence in the leadership and management of the college. There are good relations between governors and college staff. Many staff accept the opportunity to meet governors at informal sessions before each meeting of the governing body.

20 Governors bring a good range of experience to their work, including expertise in secondary, further and higher education, law, business and property management, finance, local government, the social services and the priesthood. Their professional skills generally help the college, and they work well in partnership with the senior staff. The governors contribute to the college's strategic planning process through their work as members of subcommittees of the governing body. The detailed work of the subcommittees makes an important contribution to the effectiveness of the governing body. Governors maintain an appropriate overview of religious education in the college as required by the articles of government. They receive regular reports from the principal and curriculum heads but the routine circulation of committee papers and supporting documentation could be improved. Individual governors visit and occasionally contribute to the work of college departments; this helps them maintain an overview of the college's educational character and mission, and of the work being done by students. Governors receive information on students' achievements by subject in a form which allows comparisons to be made with achievements in the previous academic year.

21 Some aspects of the work of management, internal audit and the audit committee were highlighted by FEFC auditors during their consideration of internal control arrangements within the college in May 1996. The governing body and its audit committee have now considered and taken action on many of the issues identified by auditors. An officer of the LEA acts as an independent clerk to the board and to the audit committee. The clerk maintains attendance records. A register of governors' interests and statements of eligibility have been introduced. Governors have approved the quality assurance policy and, in general, they are adequately informed on the quality of provision in the college. Governors might wish to consider the introduction of arrangements to review and evaluate both their own performance as a board and the work

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of their subcommittees. Such activity could further improve the effectiveness of their meetings and provide information about the future training needs of governors.

22 The college is well led and well managed. There is a senior management team comprising the principal, two vice-principals, four assistant principals and a director of administration. The principal, vice-principals and assistant principals are all directly involved in the support and counselling of students. Each vice-principal takes overall tutorial and pastoral responsibility for the students in a year group. Assistant principals all act as senior tutors and there are teams of tutors who are responsible to them for the day-to-day care and support of students. The college curriculum is managed by 24 heads of department. Each head is responsible for: establishing the curriculum framework in a subject area; managing the supervision of students; and maintaining the quality of teaching and learning, and students' achievements.

23 All teachers are members of at least two teams: a departmental team and a tutor team. There are clearly-defined lines of responsibility to their head of department and senior tutor, respectively. These arrangements are viewed by the college managers primarily as a source of support for teachers rather than as a means of maintaining control and accountability. The college's middle management group is a curriculum steering group with an open membership. It includes all heads of department, the learning resources manager, information systems manager and members of the senior management team. As the college has increased in size, the membership of this group has also grown and it is now too large to be wholly effective. A smaller curriculum group was established in mid-1996 and this has become the main forum for curricular debate in the college. A quality group was established in 1992. A senior tutor group co-ordinates the tutorial programme and the work of tutors in the college. Each of these groups plays an important role in the life of the college.

24 The style of management in the college fosters a shared, collective commitment and responsibility, and a spirit of trust and openness in all aspects of the college's work. This approach is valued by staff and is seen as making a positive contribution to the success of the college. There is co-operation and respect between staff. They support the mission and ethos of the college, understand the targets that indicate success and are generally aware of the college's strategic objectives. In most departments, the roles of staff are clearly defined. The effectiveness of departmental management varies; the good practice in some departments should be shared across the college.

25 Effective channels of communication, both formal and informal, exist within the college. The senior management team meets each week and this meeting is usually followed by a staff briefing. A meeting for the whole staff takes place twice each term. These meetings are usually attended by all teaching staff; support staff may also choose to attend if the topics being

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discussed are of particular interest to them. All staff may suggest items for discussion. Minutes of all major meetings are circulated to all staff, with copies also available in the staff room. Staff are well informed about the activities of the college, and this helps to foster a commitment to the college and a conviction that the contribution of all staff is valued by managers.

26 The college's strategic plan was jointly developed by senior staff and governors, and has been agreed by the governing body. Governors have approved policies on a range of issues including the appointment of staff, admissions, finance, health and safety and equal opportunities. There is a well-established annual planning cycle which links with the college's strategic planning, financial and budgetary activities, and the proposed numbers of students to be admitted each year. The college is oversubscribed and recruitment continues to be buoyant. The levels of recruitment are tightly controlled by managers within the policy agreed by governors, and are monitored by the general purposes committee of the governing body. The substantial and sustained growth of the college has generated additional income which has been prudently managed to provide a reserve of funds to contribute to building costs.

27 Teaching departments play a part in the college's strategic planning process through the construction of their annual development plans. The quality of these plans is variable. Those produced by some departments are weak. They fail to include specific targets and timescales, and sufficient precise criteria for success. The monitoring and review of plans at college level should be strengthened, both to improve their consistency and to provide clearer evidence at departmental level of the setting and achievement of agreed targets.

28 The computerised management information system in the college is well managed. It operates effectively on a similar, but separate, network to the one used to support teaching. The system is both secure and familiar to the staff. Approved users have good access, and the system is increasingly being used by managers and other staff to produce regular reports to support the management of many of the college's activities. A computer software package, to help monitor students' attendance, has recently been installed and this is now starting to be used effectively across the college.

29 The college has sound systems for the management of its financial affairs. Income and expenditure are carefully monitored; regular monthly reports are provided to budget holders and senior staff, and management accounts to governors. Arrangements for allocating budgets to heads of department and other budget holders are open and effective. The college's strategic planning objectives guide the internal allocation of funds. Funding allocations are regularly reviewed. Staff understand the broad principles underlying the distribution and are generally satisfied that curriculum needs across the college are being supported fairly and equitably.

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30 The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 was £19.29 per unit compared with a median of £19.73 for sixth form colleges and a median of £18.99 for all colleges. The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £18.95 per unit. The median for sixth form colleges is £19.36. Nearly 9 per cent of the college's income comes from sources other than the FEFC; the comparable average for all sixth form colleges in 1994-95 was 7 per cent. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

### **STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT**

31 There is a strong commitment across the college to provide a supportive environment in which students can achieve their full potential. Teachers are caring and generous with their time. The arrangements for the support of students are set out in a series of leaflets contained in an information pack which is given to all potential students. They cover: the procedures for applying to the college; induction and enrolment arrangements; tutorial support; assessment procedures; and the pastoral support system, including the additional support available for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A student council provides a forum to debate issues that are of concern to students. The student council president, who is a governor of the college, is able to present any matters that arise from these debates to the governing body.

32 A well-organised programme of pre-enrolment information and guidance is available for prospective students. College staff regularly visit local secondary schools to talk to pupils. Open evenings at the college are well attended and offer helpful information to prospective students and their parents. The college's schools liaison team works with teachers in the four partner high schools and other schools to smooth students' transition from school to college. Students receive constructive and impartial advice about the courses available to them. They are provided with leaflets which outline the qualifications that are required to take individual courses and which also recommend that students obtain further information from the college's learning resource centre. A two-day induction course is held in July each year for students who intend to enrol at the college. At this event, students receive further information and advice on the college's activities, and are able to sample classes across a range of subjects to help them decide on their choice of studies. Parents of new students are invited to attend an information session in the evening. The atmosphere at the college is welcoming and helpful; staff and current students are available to give advice and guidance. New students generally speak highly of their experience of these two days.

33 Several aims underlie the arrangements for the enrolment and induction of students: to provide them with an initial insight into college life; to convey the college's mission and ethos; and to encourage all students to take responsibility for their work and their conduct while at the college. Enrolment arrangements are well planned and administered, and staff

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generally have a clear understanding of the necessary procedures. The process is relatively informal, and staff are as attentive and helpful to individual students as is possible. Induction continues as part of the tutorial and subject sessions during the first weeks of the autumn term. Students are given specific information on their courses of study, informed of their rights and responsibilities and reminded of the academic and pastoral support services available in the college. They are provided with a student 'organiser' which includes a diary and information on the facilities and help available to them. A well-designed and well-presented 'student survival guide', written by a current student, provides a lively overview of life at the college from the students' perspective. There were some aspects of enrolment and induction which could be improved. Better planning would reduce the need for students to move frequently between rooms. A few sessions lacked substance and failed to give students sufficiently clear guidance and information. In the main, however, students spoke positively about induction and commented on its success in helping them to settle quickly into college life.

34 Students are supported during their time at the college by a well-structured tutorial system. They are allocated a personal tutor who is normally one of their subject teachers. Students value the good working relationships with tutors and the direct, often immediate, access they have to them. Groups of tutors are guided and supported by a senior tutor with whom they meet regularly to plan the tutorial programme and to discuss informally the work of students. The responsibility for maintaining an overview of students' progress is shared between personal tutors, senior tutors and members of the senior management team. This shared responsibility and provision of support for students are strong features of the college, successful because of the good informal links which exist between staff at all levels. Tutors give freely of their time but some are under considerable pressure because of the large number of students for whom they have responsibility.

35 Students meet once each week for timetabled tutorial sessions. A planned programme for these sessions is decided by senior tutors at the beginning of the year. The programme covers a wide range of topics and activities including, for example, careers advice, applications for work experience placements and information on opportunities in higher education. Students value the regular contact with their tutors. However, they do not always recognise or appreciate the activities in the planned tutorial programme. Some of the tutorial sessions observed by inspectors lacked appropriate pace and focus.

36 Students benefit from arrangements which make it straightforward for them to transfer between courses. They are well supported by tutors while they are making their decisions. The college has sound arrangements for recording students' achievements. About 95 per cent of the 1996 entry of students are maintaining their national records of achievement within a scheme established by the Stockport Local Authority. These records are

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used by students and their tutors to help plan work and set targets against which subsequent progress can be measured. Tutors make constructive use of value-added analyses to help individual students to plan and set targets. Students receive regular feedback on their progress. Students' parents are kept well informed; the parents of students on a two-year course are sent three written reports during this period. On consultation evenings, parents can meet tutors individually to discuss the progress of their son or daughter. Parents speak highly of the information and guidance provided by the college.

37 Careers education and guidance is readily available. The college has a service agreement with the careers service, and careers officers attend the college on a regular basis. They make an effective contribution to the tutorial programme. All students receive helpful guidance on careers and opportunities in higher education through a well-planned programme of talks, visits, individual interviews and other events. During the three-month period from October to December 1996, over 200 students had individual interviews with the careers officers and many more students made use of the careers information in the learning resource centre. The college also provides guidance on personal finance, and on the grants and loans available to students. Events designed to inform students about particular issues are also held in the college. For example, during the period of the inspection the Stockport Health Education Trust provided a display to brief students on the practical support available to those who have asthma or related conditions.

38 The college is continuing to develop its learning support systems. All enrolment cards are now scrutinised as a matter of routine to identify students with GCSE scores which indicate that additional help may be required. The college accepts students with a wide range of ability. However, there has been no systematic screening of those students who are initially perceived as being likely to need additional support in numeracy. In both literacy and numeracy some students ask for additional learning support during the enrolment process; others are identified by their tutor or from information provided by their secondary school. Tutors usually rely on their ability to identify students' additional learning needs during normal teaching activities and assessments. For some students, this could involve considerable delay before their particular needs are identified and met. The college provides study skills workshops in mathematics and English. About 40 students are receiving additional support.

39 Following the six-week introductory course in information technology, students have access to further guidance through open 'drop-in' sessions, available throughout the working week. Some students who study at college during the day also attend twilight and evening sessions to improve their information technology skills, gain qualifications or work on their course assignments. A revision programme in information technology is being introduced to help those students who need to



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consolidate their existing skills. The demand for tuition in information technology is greater than anticipated and the college is now providing more staff to meet the demand. In most subject departments, the teachers run study workshops to provide additional help for weaker students and for more able students who wish to broaden their knowledge of the subject. Study workshops are usually provided only during a part of the academic year. Outside this period, students may sometimes need to rely on the individual help given by tutors.

40 The chaplaincy team includes both ordained and lay members and makes an important contribution to the work of the college, helping to create the ethos within which Christian values are able to flourish. The college youth worker is a member of the chaplaincy team and arranges many extra-curricular activities for students. Overseas visits and liturgical retreats have been organised for the benefit of students and staff. The chaplaincy team helps students to organise and run holidays for people with disabilities. Although it was not inspected, the college has a unit which caters for the needs of a small group of students with moderate to severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A few of these students are able to join some of the mainstream classes in the college.

#### **TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING**

41 A total of 120 teaching sessions were observed. Of these, 68 per cent had strengths which outweighed weaknesses compared with the average figure of 63 per cent recorded in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. The weaknesses outweighed the strengths in 7 per cent of sessions. The following table shows the grades awarded for the teaching sessions inspected.

##### **Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study**

<b>Programmes</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Totals</b>
GCE AS/A level	24	44	22	7	0	97
GCSE	1	5	5	1	0	12
Other*	2	6	2	1	0	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>120</b>

*\*includes vocational and non-schedule 2 courses.*

42 The average level of student attendance for the teaching sessions inspected was 83 per cent of those enrolled. The highest average attendance in a subject area was in art, design, creative and performing arts, at 93 per cent. In all other subject areas, the average attendance was 80 per cent or better. Attendance at GCSE classes (67 per cent) was much lower than on other courses. An average of 14 students were present in the classes inspected, ranging from an average of 16 students in mathematics and computing, and business studies, to 12 students in science.

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43 In science, lessons were generally well prepared and resourced. There was a variety of activities to engage and sustain the interest of students. Teachers were confident and had a good understanding and knowledge of their subject areas. Carefully-developed schemes of work identified the aims and objectives of courses, provided schedules for the assessment of students' work and ensured that practical work complemented the teaching of theory. Information technology was frequently used to enhance both teaching and learning, but the limited information technology skills of some students restricted the effectiveness of practical sessions. Homework was set on a regular basis and marking was of a high standard. Work in class was challenging but little account was taken of the differing abilities of students or of their prior learning. Students were sometimes reluctant to answer questions from their teachers, or to take the initiative themselves during class activities and ask questions.

44 In mathematics, most courses were well structured. Teachers were in command of their subject and the lessons were well prepared. They introduced new topics in a logical sequence, and most, but not all, systematically checked that students had understood previous topics. In most classes, teachers gave good support to their students and assessed their progress regularly using formal tests and homework. Written work was carefully marked, and students were encouraged to present logical solutions to questions and to use correct terminology and notation. In computing, the teachers were knowledgeable and experienced, and possessed complementary strengths. Students experienced an appropriate mix of theoretical and practical work. Lessons were stimulating. Illustrations were up to date, and computer technology was used to explain concepts and applications. Assignment work reflected modern developments in information technology. Students were appropriately challenged in class and demonstrated good skills and knowledge in their practical work. Opportunities for group work were limited, as most practical activities were designed to be undertaken individually using a computer.

45 In business studies, well-prepared schemes of work and a good range of teaching and learning strategies were used. Most students were attentive, keen to learn and willing to participate in class activities but a significant number had a more negative attitude. Many GCE A level lessons combined well-focused presentations by teachers with questions that challenged students' understanding. A wide range of work packs had been developed by teachers to allow individual students to progress at their own pace. These were used to support many of the activities in GNVQ lessons including the development of students' information technology skills on all business courses. Teaching sessions often included examples taken from real business situations and these provided a stimulating context for students' learning. On some occasions, some GCE A level students' learning was restricted by an excessive use of past examination

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questions as topics for assignments. In some GNVQ classes, well-prepared assignments included opportunities for students to draw up action plans, to evaluate their own work, and to help in recording evidence. In other GNVQ classes, however, too little was expected of students.

46 In art, design, creative and performing arts the teaching was generally sound. In most classes teachers took particular care to maintain a judicious balance between practical and theoretical studies and to provide their students with work which was both interesting and challenging. Nevertheless, in a few art classes the slow pace of work and the lack of stimulation restricted learning. Students worked on their own with relatively little guidance and the lack of structure in these sessions left less able students with insufficient support. Assignment work in all areas of art, design, creative and performing arts, including work originating from the students themselves, was well conceived, carefully executed and led to some imaginative and thought-provoking activities. Teachers frequently assessed the students' learning and provided a sound base from which students were able to establish their own targets and plan their work. The teaching styles adopted in both design and technology and theatre studies involved students and tutors working together in partnership, and this significantly enhanced students' learning.

47 Teachers' relaxed and tolerant approach and the good rapport established between teachers and students enabled the teaching of English to flourish. Students knew that their opinions and experience were valued and they contributed well in class. Teaching was knowledgeable, well prepared and purposeful. Teachers' enthusiasm for the subject helped their students to learn and the best lessons were both challenging and enjoyable. In a few lessons, time was wasted. There were some inconsistencies in the marking and evaluation of students' work. Modern language teachers were knowledgeable about cultural matters and current affairs. Some are native speakers. All used the foreign language with confidence as the main means of communication in class. Care was taken to choose work that best suited the ability of students. Great attention was paid to the accuracy of students' speech and writing. Students were encouraged to read widely outside the basic requirements of the course to develop a better understanding of the language and culture of the country. Most lessons were appropriately paced, although students were sometimes given too little time to answer questions. In a few lessons, teachers provided too much information for the students to assimilate. Teaching aids to support learning were used infrequently. The college does not have a language laboratory. This is inhibiting the development of some aspects of language teaching.

48 The quality of much of the teaching and of students' own work in geography, history and theology was good. Teaching methods placed particular emphasis on small group discussion and the use of aids such as television programmes and video recordings to enhance students' learning. Students were well informed about the aims of sessions, and this helped to

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provide them with a clear focus for their learning. In geography and history, the lessons were well prepared, based upon clear schemes of work and focused on topics which teachers had jointly planned. In theology, the scheme of work had only recently been developed and made little reference to teaching methods and the need to develop materials to take account of the differing abilities of students.

49 In sociology, psychology and law the standard of teaching was generally good. Staff displayed a sound knowledge of their subject areas. Schemes of work and work evaluation sheets ensured an adequate coverage of topics and the specified competencies. In the best sessions, the brisk pace and variety of planned activities, supported by good-quality overhead projector transparencies and handouts, motivated students to learn effectively. Teachers were aware of the differing abilities of their students and often introduced subtle variations in the language they used to suit the level of understanding of particular students. Poorer sessions were ineffectively planned or managed; students were insufficiently challenged and there was too little review or consolidation of learning. Assessments were at an appropriate standard. Teachers kept careful records of students' work and sometimes used their records to encourage students to reflect on their progress and personal targets. The marking of some work was inconsistent. Students' files and notebooks were mostly well organised. In law, students were encouraged to seek information from a variety of sources which fostered the skills required to enable them to learn effectively on their own. Classroom teaching was supplemented by regular visits to magistrates courts, crown courts and to Parliament. The students also took part in competitions related to their studies, for example, mock trials. These activities added context and realism to their studies, and reinforced their interest and commitment.

### **STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

50 Students are enjoying their studies and generally are reaching good levels of achievement. They respond well to teaching and produce mostly sound, sometimes exceptional, work. Most students who complete GCE A level courses proceed to higher education. Of the 360 upper sixth students who left the college in June 1996: 288 students (80 per cent) are on degree courses in higher education; seven students are on higher national diploma courses or other higher education courses; eight students are on art foundation courses; and 11 students are doing voluntary work or travelling abroad before taking up places in higher education. Other notable achievements include:

- the involvement of over 60 students in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. They undertake a range of activities such as community service, charity and conservation work, physical recreation and outdoor pursuits, and the development of their personal skills

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- many successes in team and individual sports, including students who represent Stockport, Greater Manchester or Cheshire in soccer, rugby union, athletics, hockey and netball
  - 13 students who won gold, silver or bronze certificates in the National Mathematics Contest, with two students progressing to the first round of the Mathematics Olympiad
  - 12 students who were offered places at Oxford or Cambridge for September 1997.

51 The overall results in GCE AS/A level examinations have been consistently high over the last three years. In 1996, students aged 16 to 18 who entered for at least one GCE AS/A level examination scored on average 5.4 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2). In each of the last three years the college has been among the top 10 per cent of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, according to the tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

52 The college's figures for students who entered for GCE A level examinations over the last three years show:

- pass rates (grades A to E) of 100 per cent in at least two of the three years in art and design, design and technology, further mathematics, history and the appreciation of music, physical education and Spanish
- pass rates of at least 90 per cent in each year in English literature, German, government and politics, history and psychology
- year-on-year improvements in the pass rates in biology, chemistry, computing, design and technology, economics, English literature, German, history, psychology and theatre studies
- a modest year-on-year decline in the pass rates in business studies, French, and theology.

53 In 1996 there were 1,211 entries for GCE A level examinations in 32 subjects. The average pass rate at grades A to E was 87 per cent, 3 per cent higher than the 1995 national average for 16 to 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. The college's figures for students who entered for GCE A level examinations in 1996, by comparison with the 1995 national averages (the most recent available at the time of the inspection), show:

- pass rates at grades A to E equal to or above the national averages in over half of the subjects offered
- pass rates at grades A to E of 90 per cent or better in half of the subjects offered
- pass rates at grades A to E which are 10 per cent or more below national averages in business studies. This was also the case in home economics and Spanish, subjects in which the college has very small numbers of candidates.

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54 Achievements in the 1996 GCE A level examinations at the higher grades (A to C) are generally better than the 1995 national averages for 16 to 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. In over 40 per cent of the subjects offered by the college the pass rates are at least 10 per cent higher than the 1995 national averages.

55 In 1996, the college entered 19 students for GCE AS examinations. Pass rates of 100 per cent were achieved in German, mathematics, psychology, physics, statistics and information technology, mostly on the basis of an entry of only one candidate. Overall, there were 10 passes at grades A to C.

56 The college subscribes to an independent, external service which provides an analysis of the value added to students' achievements by comparing their actual performance at GCE A level with their predicted performance which is based on GCSE achievements. Data for 1996 were not available at the time of the inspection.

The report for 1995 indicates that:

- students performed significantly above expectations in business studies (GNVQ advanced), chemistry, communication studies, design technology, geography, geology, physics, physical education, psychology and sociology
- in GCE A level business studies, French and general studies the results were below those predicted.

57 The college offers GCSE courses in 13 subjects for a one-year, full-time programme. Students can choose either five or four GCSE subjects. In 1995, there were 339 entries, falling by 7 per cent to 315 in 1996. Overall, the college results are at least as good as the national average for sixth form colleges. Most subjects enrol small numbers of students, with the exception of English language (63 entries in 1996) and mathematics (122 entries). Many of the students who enter are resitting their GCSE examinations to try to improve the grades which they achieved in secondary school; the great majority succeed in this aim. In 1996, 49 per cent of the grades were at C or above (an increase from 45 per cent in 1995), which is the same as the 1995 provisional national average for 16 to 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. There were 314 grades (99 per cent) at grade G or above compared with the national average of 93 per cent.

58 The analysis of students who complete the one-year, full-time programme of GCSE subjects and progress to more advanced studies is affected by the low numbers of students involved. Although the programme is generally successful, there are nevertheless some weaker aspects. Only 71 per cent of those enrolled on a programme of four GCSEs entered the examinations. None of the students who entered for five GCSEs gained five grades at C or above and 72 per cent achieved two or fewer. Only 4 per cent of those who entered for four GCSEs gained grades at C or above in all subjects; 92 per cent achieved two or fewer and nearly half of these (44 per cent) did not gain any grades at C or above.

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59 The college's GCSE results in individual subjects present a mixed picture. In 1995, college students achieved grades at C or above in 12 subjects that were equal to or better than the 1995 results for 16 to 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. By contrast, the proportion of students achieving grades at C or above were at least 10 per cent below the corresponding national average in six subjects.

60 The college offers vocational courses leading to GNVQ awards in business studies. Tables published by the DfEE in 1996 show that out of the 19 students in their final year of courses leading to intermediate vocational qualifications, 63 per cent achieved their qualification, which is comparable with the national average of 60 per cent. Eight of these students gained a distinction or merit. This places the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. Of the 18 students in their final year of courses leading to advanced vocational qualifications, eight students (44 per cent) achieved their qualification compared with the national average of 60 per cent. This places the college in the bottom 10 per cent of colleges on this performance measure. However, all eight students who achieved their qualification gained a merit or distinction.

61 For the GNVQ business studies course at intermediate level enrolments have increased over the last three years from 18 to 29 students. However, the proportion of students completing their courses has fallen dramatically each year, from 100 per cent in 1993-94 to 62 per cent in 1995-96, whilst the pass rate has fluctuated. The advanced level course was introduced in 1993 and two cohorts of students have completed the course. Enrolments have increased, from 29 to 33 students but retention has fallen slightly, from 76 to 73 per cent. The pass rate has also fallen slightly, from 41 to 38 per cent.

62 The business and information technology department offers courses leading to RSA and Pitman examinations in a range of office skills. These include text processing courses in French and German, and wordprocessing courses for students interested in a career in the medical profession. In 1996, of the 81 students taking such courses, 66 (81 per cent) passed and, of these, 46 students (57 per cent) gained either a distinction (RSA) or a first-class pass (Pitman) in their examinations.

63 The college has a policy of allowing GCE A level students to enrol on more courses than they intend to continue, to provide an opportunity for them to sample different subjects before making a final choice. Students have the option of relinquishing one or more courses, or making other changes if they wish to do so. As anticipated, a significant number of students reduce their GCE A level programme from four to three, or from three to two subjects, or choose other options such as GNVQ courses. College figures show an overall drop-out rate from two-year courses between November 1995-96 of 18 per cent. This is the same figure as that for 1994-95 and a figure 3 per cent lower than for 1993-94. Within these overall figures, however, the 'drop out' from individual GCE A level courses

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varies considerably. For instance, in 1995-96, the 'drop-out' rate in four subjects was 10 per cent or lower; a further 16 subjects had 'drop-out' rates of between 15 and 25 per cent; and there were 'drop outs' of over 25 per cent in six subjects, mostly on the basis of one or two students leaving small class groups.

#### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

64 The college's commitment to maintaining and improving the quality of its provision is expressed in its mission statement and strategic plan. The staff are aware of the need to maintain quality, particularly with regard to the individual care, guidance and support of students, and the standards of academic work. The college's strategic plan identifies the further development of the quality control systems as a priority so that they can continue to meet the needs of both the college and its partners. There is a clearly-written and succinct policy on quality assurance, and a framework within which this policy is implemented. The framework does not refer to quality standards, nor to the timescale over which the regular review of quality issues will take place.

65 An assistant principal has overall responsibility for quality assurance in the college and chairs the quality group which was established in 1992. This group comprises an open forum of interested staff with a general remit to develop policies to support quality improvement. It has provided many useful suggestions and recommendations to the college management team. Issues relating to the quality of provision are considered as a matter of routine by course and curriculum teams. There is a strong commitment to improving arrangements for quality assurance in the college but further work is needed if the arrangements already introduced are to be consistently applied across all areas.

66 The college and individual departments use questionnaires systematically to obtain the views of students and staff. Students complete a college questionnaire after induction has ended. Departments use individual questionnaires to seek students' views during their course. An exit questionnaire provides information on students' perceptions of their time at the college, including their views on the quality of teaching and the support they have received. These questionnaires are fully analysed. The outcomes are used to identify any aspect of provision which needs to be improved; they also contribute to the process of course review and evaluation. For example, the arrangements for the induction of students are to be amended following comments by students and staff. Students value these opportunities to express their views, and speak positively of the college's efforts to improve the quality of their education. They consider that the concern which the college shows for their well-being constitutes an important indicator of the quality of provision in the college.

67 Course review and evaluation is an important aspect of quality assurance in the college. Course teams give considerable attention to the



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reports they receive from the independent, external service which provides an analysis of the value added to students' achievements while they are studying at the college. Information from the service is used: to predict the grades expected of individual students; to set targets during the course which will help students achieve or improve upon the predictions; and to establish a basis for analysing the overall performance of the whole student year group once all examination results have been received. Course files held in departments include all appropriate information relating to quality assurance issues. These files are regularly monitored by the quality manager. Several good examples were observed of course review and evaluation in departments. Many have subsequently led to quality improvements including changes in teaching methods. However, there were a number of instances where the review of courses lacked rigour and critical evaluation, and where there was little action that would achieve improvements. Across the college, the outcomes of course evaluation and review are not systematically used to improve quality or to inform departmental and college planning. The use of performance indicators is inconsistent.

68 Staff development is well established and successful. The staff-development policy is set out clearly in the staff handbook. It identifies the aims and objectives of staff development, indicates the staff who have overall responsibility for the programme and outlines the range of activities that are available. Staff at all levels in the college are eligible for staff development and almost all participate. In 1995-96, in addition to the whole-college training days, which all staff attend, the majority of teachers took part in development activities. Seventy per cent of support staff also undertook some development and training activities. Individual staff members can suggest preferences for their training and development. Course teams and senior managers also identify individual or group training needs which meet the college priorities listed in the staff handbook. There is a good match between the curricular needs of departments and the development activities undertaken by staff. There are three whole-college training days each year based around the suggestions of staff. For example, one area of priority which has already been suggested is a need to develop further the management skills of staff at all levels. The college is also committed to the success of the GNVQ business programmes and has made a significant investment in staff development. Arrangements for meeting internal verification requirements are generally effective. All seven teachers associated with the programme have gained internal verifier awards.

69 Staff-development activities are properly evaluated. One outcome of this evaluation, for example, is that the college has recognised the need to define further its training objectives so that clearer targets for staff-development activities can be established. It is anticipated that this improvement will establish a more accurate evaluation of staff development within the college's quality assurance system. The budget

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for staff development represents about 1 per cent of the college's total staffing costs. About 40 per cent of this budget is allocated to subject-based staff development, and the remainder to activities that affect aspects of provision across the whole college.

70 Opportunities are available for teachers to undertake work placements, and make short visits to industry or to commercial organisations. In 1995-96, six teachers took part in visits and placements related to their teaching and to their responsibilities in the college. Activities included visits to food manufacturers, a newspaper publishing office, a cathedral and the county record office. Seven members of staff took part in a European educational project with partner institutions in the Netherlands and Germany. They were able to share experiences with other teachers from abroad and jointly to develop teaching materials and activities with a European theme that were related to the subjects they taught.

71 The college's appraisal schemes for teachers and support staff were established five years ago and are based on appraisal models developed by Stockport LEA. The teacher appraisal scheme operates on a two-year cycle and involves interviews between the member of staff and the appraiser. Two sessions are spent observing classroom teaching and there can be observations of others tasks where this is appropriate. The teacher being appraised can suggest the aspects of work to be observed and is able to select the appraiser from more senior colleagues in the college. The outcomes of appraisal are: agreed targets for development; individual action plans; and an outline of future training needs. The college appraisal scheme does not yet contribute to strategic planning at departmental level, nor to the quality review process. The appraisal of support staff takes place annually and includes observation during normal duties. All college staff, with the exception of teachers appointed within the last year, have been appraised at least once. There is a well-established induction process for new teaching and support staff. This includes a mentoring scheme under which more experienced staff provide informal help and guidance to new staff members. Although most staff are content with their induction, some felt that it had not fully met all their needs. The procedures for the recruitment, selection, induction and development of staff have helped the college to achieve the Investor in People award.

72 The college charter, which is linked to the college's quality assurance policy and processes, has been developed mainly by staff involved in the quality group. The parent governor also contributed to the latest revision. The charter describes: the college's policies and procedures; the services provided; and the commitments which students and the college jointly undertake as part of the student agreement. The significance of the charter and the student agreement are discussed with all new students during a group tutorial period early in the academic year. There is a separate charter for adult students who are attending evening programmes. Parents also receive a copy of the charter when they attend college open evenings.

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Students are aware of the clearly-written procedure for complaints. The procedure is mentioned in the student agreement and details are posted in the reception area and on other noticeboards in the college. The extent to which the college is meeting its charter commitments is not yet fully monitored.

73 The college produced a self-assessment report to support the inspection, based on the headings listed in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The report provides a useful commentary on college provision and sets out the college's achievements against external indicators. However, it does not include an analysis of work at departmental level nor are aspects of provision graded. The report lacks critical evaluation; it does not include some of the weaknesses identified by inspectors.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Staffing**

74 The college has sufficient well-qualified and experienced staff to teach the courses it offers. There are 59 full-time and 10 part-time teachers who teach during the day, including the principal and two vice-principals. A further 19 part-time teachers are employed on adult courses in the evening. There are three language assistants, 25 support staff including technicians and 22 catering and cleaning staff. Over 90 per cent of teachers hold degrees in relevant subjects; 88 per cent have a teaching qualification, and those teaching GNVQ courses hold internal verifier awards. All of the part-time teachers are graduates and hold a teaching qualification. The majority of staff are Catholics but this is not a requirement for appointment to a post other than at senior level. The college has adopted a prudent policy to cope with the large increase in enrolments over the last five years. New appointments have been made in key areas but the overall ratio of students to staff in the college has been gradually allowed to rise, leading to corresponding increases in the size of many teaching groups.

75 The deployment of teachers is effective. They work in small subject-based teams. This encourages teamwork, close co-operation and shared development of teaching materials. In areas where part-time staff are employed, their contribution is well integrated with that of the rest of the team. The timetabling of teachers is carefully managed. The number of technician and support staff is adequate across the college, and has been increased in all areas to cope with the increase in students. Their support is particularly effective in areas such as information technology, science, design technology and the running of the learning resource centre. The teaching of foreign languages is supported by assistants in French, German and Spanish; there is also a Japanese language assistant.

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### **Equipment/learning resources**

76 The range and quality of the equipment and materials available to departments are adequate to support the teaching programmes, and the allocation of resources takes account of student numbers and the cost of operating each subject area. Additional funds are available to support bids for particular purposes. Students are provided with essential textbooks and often with stationery and equipment. The departments support students' project work by purchasing special items as they are needed. There is no evidence that cost has placed undue limits on the range of project work which students are able to undertake.

77 The new learning resource centre is an attractive addition to the college and is well used by both students and staff. Books and other resources are housed on the lower floor, and the upper floor provides a quiet study area with 150 places. This area is often crowded and sometimes noisy but it is popular and well used by students for private study. Much of the bookstock in the college has been transferred to the centre, although some stocks of books and other resources are retained for immediate use by departments. There is a single catalogue of acquisitions. All bookstock is readily available and is generally adequate to support the teaching programmes. Teachers and the staff of the centre work together to ensure that the bookstock is kept up to date and continues to meet the needs of students. The centre houses: an extensive range of over 85 periodicals, video and audio recordings; resource packs supplied by teachers; and a comprehensive careers library. There are six computer workstations linked to the college's computer network and a workstation which provides access to the Internet. Staff of the centre have designed and introduced a range of useful information services for teachers and students, for example, lists of new acquisitions and brief summaries of articles in recent journals. In some subject areas, teachers have provided the centre with details of the assignments which have been set for students. This allows the centre's staff to anticipate the heavy demand from students for resources, and to manage their response so that all students have access to the texts and other materials that are required. Staff of the centre also provide students with helpful advice and information on study skills, and guide them in their research into particular topics.

78 There has been a significant recent investment of £250,000 over three years in the college's information technology suite which is situated on the top floor of the main teaching block. The college computer facility for academic use comprises 82 networked personal computer-based workstations including the six located in the learning resource centre. Most workstations are housed in three teaching rooms in the information technology suite. There is a small support room in the suite which is staffed throughout the day, mainly by technicians who are available to assist students in their work. A particular strength of the college's information technology facilities are the robust and well-managed computer networks which have separate academic and administrative

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components. The academic network provides access to an extensive range of business and other computer software packages which are of industrial standard. There is also a facility which allows immediate access from any workstation on the network to information held centrally on 28 compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases.

### **Accommodation**

79 The college premises were originally built as a secondary school in 1956 and include playing fields, a main hall, a gymnasium and other specialist facilities designed for the use of school pupils. The main accommodation for the college is in the buildings of the former school. To cope with the needs of a sixth form college the original accommodation was modified and has been supplemented by a further permanent building and three temporary buildings which provide additional classrooms. There is still a need for further specialist accommodation. The college has developed an information technology suite which has been in operation for three years. The purpose-built learning resource centre was opened two years ago. The accommodation is used effectively but there is still considerable pressure on space. The buildings are too small for the number of students enrolled at the college despite the ingenuity with which rooms are timetabled and monitored. The goodwill of staff and students ensures that learning is not seriously affected by the shortage of accommodation but shortage of space impairs the full development of the college's provision. The college leases space in an adjoining building and keeps laboratories open into the evening to allow students to complete their project work. Evening opening also provides an opportunity for students to remain in the college to study. Staff experience difficulties because of the shortage of accommodation. Most teachers share workrooms and tutors do not usually have ready access to rooms in which they can meet their students individually and in private. There are particular difficulties for those subjects which require specialist facilities such as laboratories. Technicians lack adequate space in which to prepare materials for teaching. There is no student common room; the refectory in the college hall is barely adequate; and there is a general shortage of circulation areas and social spaces.

80 The college has a well-developed accommodation strategy which is revised and updated each year and which forms a sound basis for planning both the maintenance of existing buildings and new developments. The college aims to overcome the limitations of its present accommodation by further new building and the refurbishment of existing rooms. The next phase is the construction of a new classroom and office block. The college then plans to build a new sports facility.

81 Despite intensive use, the college maintains its accommodation in generally good condition and students take good care of the buildings. The ambience of many rooms and corridors is enhanced by attractive displays of students' artwork or other work they have produced as part of

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their studies. There is no lift and the nature of the buildings makes wheelchair access to upper floors impossible. However, the college has adapted all ground-floor areas to make them accessible to wheelchair users, and has adopted timetabling policies which help to ensure that students with restricted mobility are able to participate fully in the curriculum.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES**

82 Governors and staff of Aquinas College work hard to help their students to succeed. The strengths of the college include:

- a supportive learning environment based on Christian values and beliefs in which individuals are valued and their achievements celebrated
- the wide range of subjects available to full-time students and the variety of courses offered to adults
- well-established arrangements to provide full-time students with a vocational dimension to their studies
- strong links with secondary schools, particularly the four partner Catholic high schools, with partner institutions in Europe, and with the local community
- a firm commitment to equality of opportunity for all students and staff
- a governing body with commitment and an appropriate range of experience
- good leadership and management
- staff who support the college's mission and ethos, and understand its strategic objectives
- teaching which is of a good standard
- students' high levels of achievement
- well-qualified and experienced teaching staff committed to their students
- the contribution of the chaplaincy team
- a new learning resource centre and a well-developed information technology facility.

83 If the college is to continue to raise the standard of its work it should:

- offer a wider range of provision at foundation and intermediate levels
- improve the management of some departments
- improve teaching and learning on the GCSE and GNVQ programmes
- improve the monitoring of the response to commitments in the college charter
- continue to develop and improve the college buildings.

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## FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

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  - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)

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  - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)

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  - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at September 1996)

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  - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

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  - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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**Note:** the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

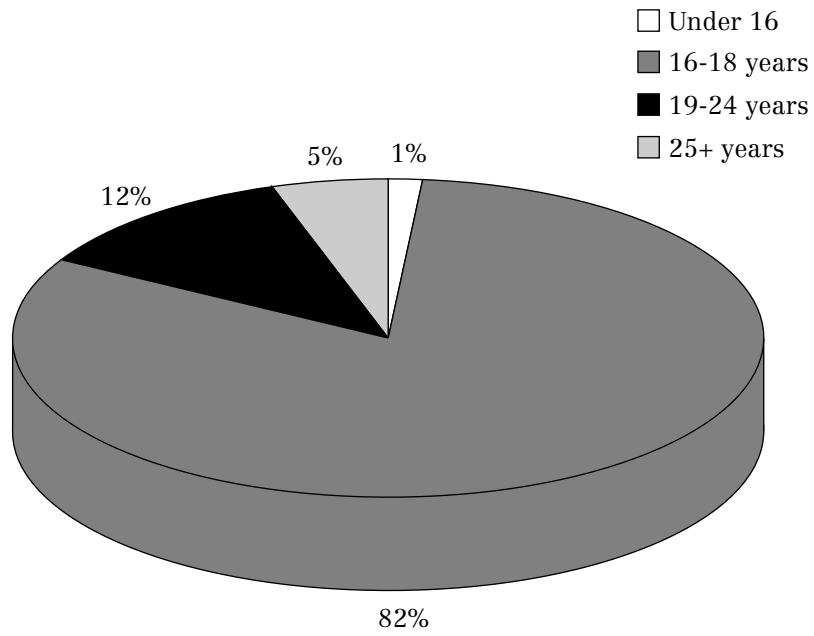
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**Figure 1**

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**Aquinas College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)**



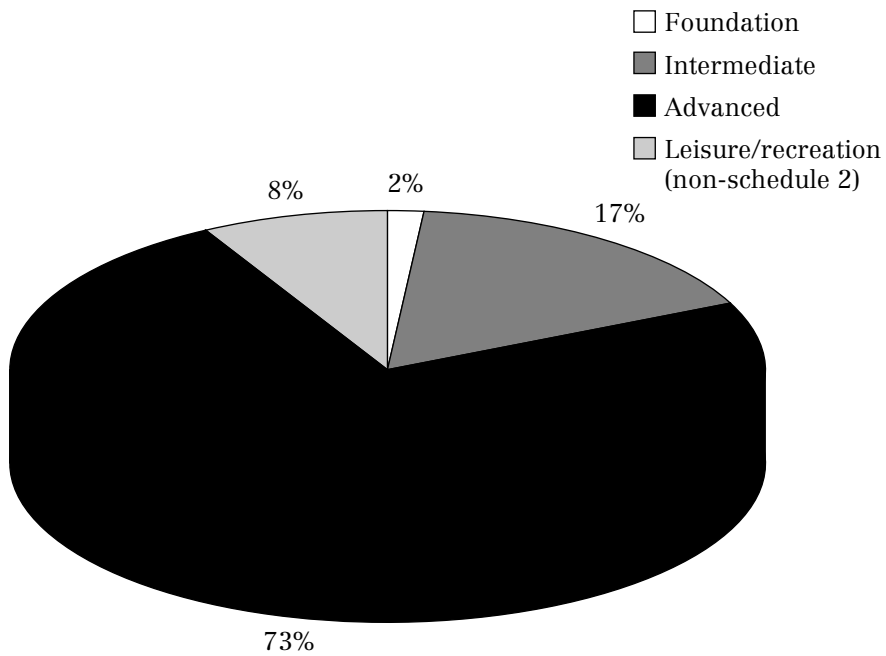
Student numbers: 1,164

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**Figure 2**

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**Aquinas College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)**



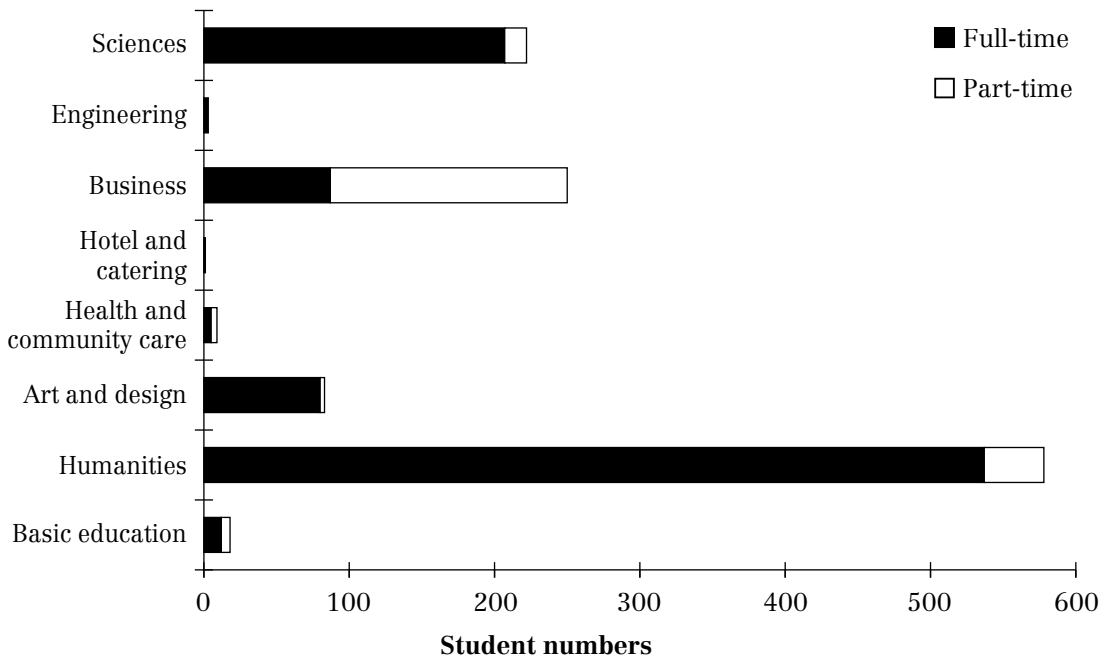
Student numbers: 1,164



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**Figure 3**

**Aquinas College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)**

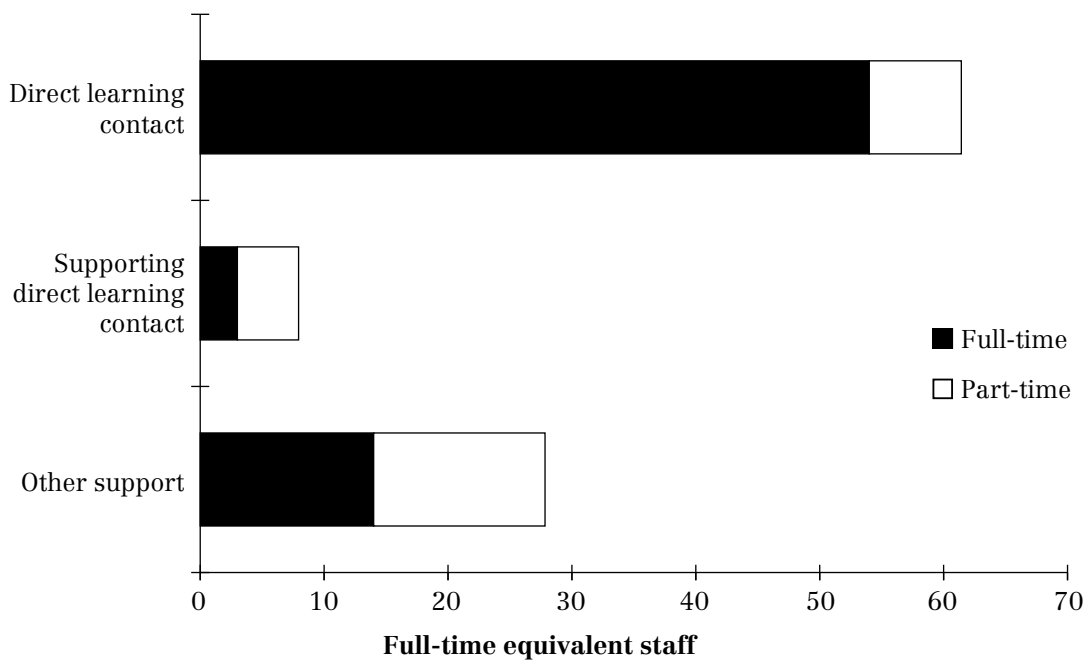


Student numbers: 1,164

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**Figure 4**

**Aquinas College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at September 1996)**



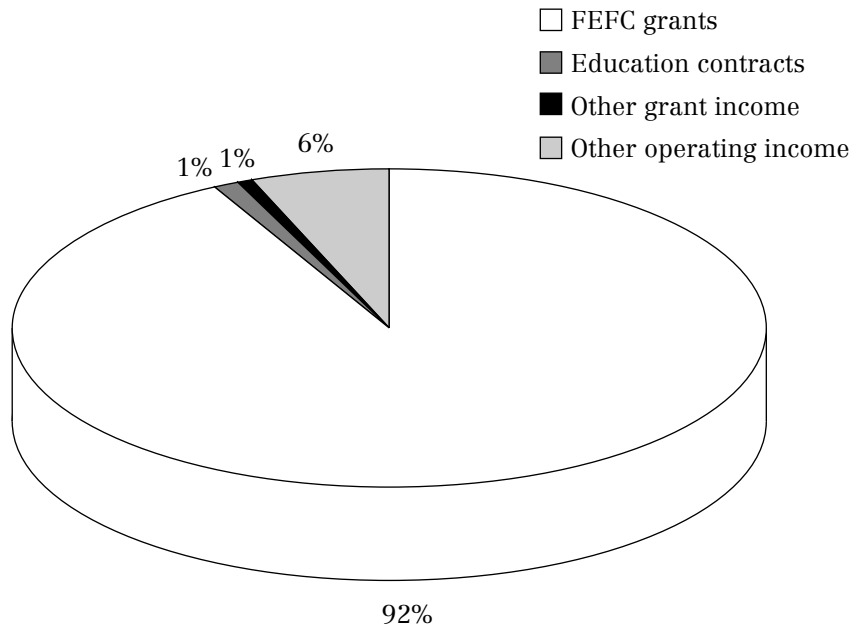
Full-time equivalent staff: 97

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**Figure 5**

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**Aquinas College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)**

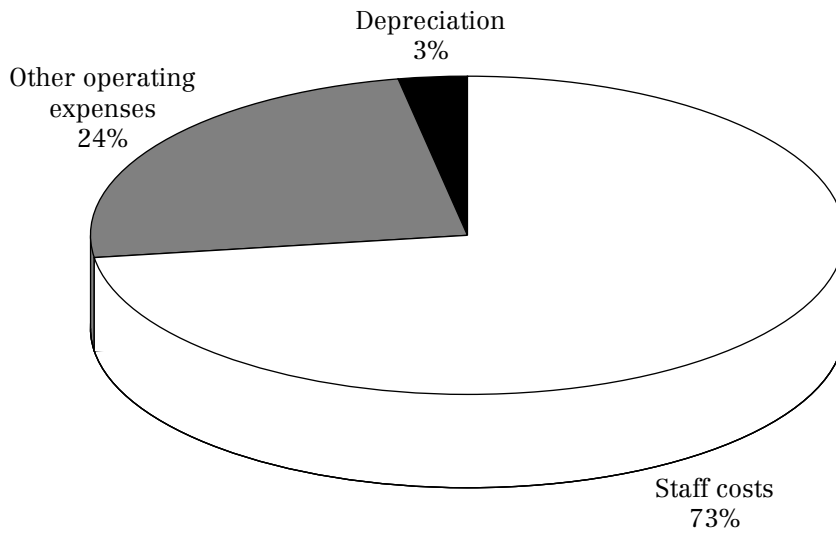


Income: £2,961,000

**Figure 6**

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**Aquinas College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)**



Expenditure: £2,886,000

Published by the  
Further Education Funding Council  
May 1997