

Bexhill College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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 according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

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

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

Retention and Pass Rates

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

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

Summary

Bexhill College

South East Region

Inspected January 1998

Bexhill College is a sixth form college in East Sussex. The self-assessment process was managed largely by the former principal and vice-principals. Governors' involvement in the process was limited to the approval of the final document. Inspectors concurred with most of the findings in the self-assessment report, but considered that strengths were overestimated and the significance of some weaknesses was not recognised, particularly in aspects of cross-college provision. Action plans did not systematically arise from the self-assessment. Inspectors chose a sample of the college's work on which to base their validation of the self-assessment report. This included provision in five of the FEFC's programme areas.

The college's main provision is in academic courses for 16 to 19 year olds, for which it has a high reputation. The college also offers an expanding vocational programme, among which the range of care courses is of particular note. The college has close working relationships with its partner schools. Standards of teaching and learning on most courses are high. Examination results have been consistently good in most subjects for the last three years. The college's work in art and design, media and performing arts is outstanding. The college has a strong pastoral ethos with well-planned student review

and effective tutorial systems. Students participate actively in the life of the college and are consulted extensively. Investment in staff development has increased. Governors are committed to the success of the college and have a wide range of expertise. The college has consistently achieved its growth targets. Communication between senior managers and staff has improved, and most curriculum areas are effectively managed. Improvements have been made to the accommodation but it remains poor. The college should address: its inadequate accommodation strategy; the lack of access to, and use of, IT; the arrangements for students who need literacy and numeracy support; its slow progress in developing quality assurance and self-assessment processes; its weak financial strategy; its management of policies, especially health and safety and equal opportunities; and its unclear strategic direction.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	2	Support for students	2
Business	2	General resources	4
Health and social care	2	Quality assurance	3
Art and design, media and performing arts	1	Governance	3
Sociology, psychology, politics and law	3	Management	3

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Bexhill College is a sixth form college, formed in 1978 as a result of post-16 reorganisation in East Sussex. The college occupies a single site in the north of the town. Bexhill and the Rother District is a predominantly rural area and many students have lengthy journeys to college. Bexhill has one of the highest proportions of elderly people in Europe and the Rother area has one of the fastest rising populations of schoolchildren in the county. There is a small manufacturing base. Caring services are the major source of employment in the town. Other work includes distribution and retail services, leisure and tourism, and banking. Rates of pay are below the national average. Three of the wards in Bexhill are defined as social and economic stress areas, one of which is in the worst 10 per cent nationally. Male unemployment is 20 per cent in some areas.

2 The college works with four partner schools and several other maintained schools. An increasing proportion of the college's students come from outside the immediate area and from independent schools. The proportion of students in the area staying in full-time education after the age of 16 exceeds 80 per cent. There are three other further education colleges and several schools with sixth forms within easy travelling distance from Bexhill. The local education authority (LEA) is considering a bid for an additional joint school sixth form in Hastings.

3 On 1 November 1997 the college had 1,135 full-time students, two-thirds of whom were between 16 to 18 years old, and 434 part-time adult students. Most of the full-time students were on general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) programmes. The number of students studying general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects is decreasing. The college began to offer vocational courses 12 years ago. Twenty-

five per cent of students are now enrolled on vocational courses leading to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at either intermediate or advanced level. The range of provision for adult students has expanded to include provision leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and access courses.

In November 1997, the college employed 98 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 28 full-time equivalents were support staff. At the time of the inspection, the college was divided into two curriculum areas, arts and science, subdivided into 10 teaching departments.

4 The college's mission is to provide all its students with the curricular opportunities and high quality of teaching and pastoral support needed to develop their individual potential. Fourteen objectives clarify the means of fulfilling this mission and emphasise the importance of the individual student in her/his transition to adulthood.

The Inspection

5 The college was inspected during the week beginning 19 January 1998. The principal, who had been in post for one term, and the governors had decided to defer any structural reorganisation until the end of the inspection. Modular examinations and GNVQ tests affecting three of the curriculum areas being inspected were taking place during the week of the inspection. The inspection team considered the self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 which were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies.

6 The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected approximately two months before the inspection. Some of the college's provision was not covered by the

Context

inspection. This included: mathematics and computing; hotel and catering studies including leisure and tourism; English; modern languages; and humanities subjects. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors and an auditor, working for a total of 37 days. Inspectors observed 72 lessons, including tutorials and learning on work placements, and examined students' work and college documents. They consulted employers and parents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students, including officers of the students' council.

7 Of the lessons inspected, 75 per cent were rated good or outstanding and 4 per cent were less than satisfactory. According to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*, 61 per cent of all lessons inspected for the year 1996-97 had strengths which outweighed weaknesses, and 8 per cent of lessons had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. The average level of attendance was 82 per cent; this compares with 84 per cent recorded by inspectors for sixth form colleges in 1996-97, according to the same report. The following table shows the grades awarded to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	9	21	11	3	0	44
GCSE	2	2	0	0	0	4
GNVQ	4	3	1	0	0	8
Other vocational	4	9	3	0	0	16
Total	19	35	15	3	0	72

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 2

8 Inspectors observed 15 classes covering chemistry, physics and biology courses at GCE A level and GCSE. Inspectors agreed, in most cases, with the college's identification in its self-assessment report of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

Key strengths

- good teaching and practical work
- good examination results
- thorough assessment of students' work
- responsiveness to students' needs

Weaknesses

- lack of challenge to more able students in some lessons
- low retention in some subjects
- some poor teaching accommodation
- little use of information technology (IT)

9 Students enjoyed their studies, and spoke highly of the support given by staff. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the standard of most theoretical and practical work was good. Lessons were well planned. Teachers responded sensitively to students' questions. In the best lessons, teachers shared the learning objectives with students and reviewed the learning achieved at the end. Practical work was safe and risk assessment is routine. Technical support is of a high quality. In some lessons, students spent too much time copying notes from the whiteboard or overhead projector. The pace of work was slow and this restricted the progress of the more able students. In other lessons, insufficient planning for the preparation of equipment meant that students could not achieve the intended learning objectives. Teachers did not always check what students had learned.

10 Science is located in two separate departments: physics and chemistry in physical sciences and biology in life sciences. The science teams meet regularly to review courses and plan the curriculum. The effectiveness and recording of these meetings vary. Examination results are analysed, but the use of value-added data is in its infancy. Some schemes of work are merely a list of topics to be covered, a weakness which was not identified in the self-assessment report.

11 GCE A level results in physics and chemistry and biology have been at or above the national average for sixth form colleges for the past three years. GCSE results in physics and science were also above the national average in 1997 but in the same year pass rates for GCSE biology were poor. Retention rates for GCSE physics are excellent but those in all GCE A level courses are poor. Progression from science courses to higher education courses is strong.

12 The equipment in the laboratories is old but adequate. Accommodation is unattractive and, in some cases, poorly decorated. The preparation rooms in chemistry and biology are too small and have insufficient storage space. The physics classrooms are austere in appearance and the fixed benches in chemistry and biology restrict the range of teaching methods. The use of IT is limited.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in science, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level physics	Retention (%)	51	76	68
	Pass rate (%)	100	86	92
GCSE physics	Retention (%)	100	+	100
	Pass rate (%)	91	+	100
GCE A level chemistry	Retention (%)	49	81	60
	Pass rate (%)	77	94	90
GCE A level biology	Retention (%)	75	70	58
	Pass rate (%)	89	100	91
GCSE biology	Retention (%)	87	100	78
	Pass rate (%)	39	92	15
Other GCSE	Retention (%)	86	95	86
	Pass rate (%)	33	38	48

*Source: college data
+course not running*

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 2

13 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering most of the business courses offered. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective curriculum organisation and management
- good teaching
- good pass rates in many external assessments
- high standards expected of students

Weaknesses

- poor retention on some courses
- inadequate provision of computers for business courses
- slow growth of courses for part-time students

14 Most students on business courses are full time and the majority are on GCE A level courses. Some study GCE advanced supplementary (AS) accounts. Vocational courses are well established but recruit fewer students. Growth of courses for part-time students has been slow and only GCE A level business studies and word/text processing are operational. Courses are well organised and effectively managed. Teachers work well together and produce common schemes of work, assignment programmes and course handbooks.

15 Inspectors agreed with the strengths of teaching identified in the self-assessment report. Most lessons observed were good or outstanding and had a clear sense of purpose. Teaching is based on good lesson planning and clear objectives which teachers communicate to students. Lessons in secretarial and

administrative studies are particularly well planned and presented. Teachers require high standards of their students and set them realistic but demanding tasks. Work experience provided for vocational students is increasingly valuable. Employers assist students with research projects and visit the college to talk to students. Internal verification of vocational course assessments is systematic, but the moderation of marking of students' work has only just begun. Key skills are being taught on vocational courses, but they are not tackled systematically on GCE A level programmes which make little use of IT. In some lessons, teachers failed to vary the work appropriately and did not direct questioning to individual students in order to check their understanding of the work. They did not make effective use of the overhead projector.

16 The quality of most students' written work is good. Teachers' comments help students to improve their performance. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the quality of assignments used for the GNVQ courses is high. Students' achievements in GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses have been consistently well above the national average. Retention has been good on the intermediate level course but less good on the advanced course. Pass rates and the proportion of students gaining grade C or above for GCE A level business studies are well above the average for sixth form colleges. The college acknowledges as a weakness the marked decline in retention on GCE A level courses in 1997. The pass rate for GCE AS accounts fell to about the national average in 1995 and to well below in 1997. No students achieved the RSA Examinations Board (RSA) diploma in administrative and secretarial procedures; and only three received the certificate. Pass rates for the RSA single subject secretarial qualifications are good.

17 Not all teachers have recent industrial and commercial experience but some are undertaking a programme of updating.

Curriculum Areas

Teaching rooms are pleasant and adequately furnished, though few have whiteboards. Inspectors agreed with the college's view that the department's computers cannot support business standard software. Access for students to the computers in the better-resourced learning support centre is severely limited and some newly-purchased software cannot be used. Library resources are adequate and there are good learning materials available within the department.

Examples of students' achievements in business, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Intermediate vocational	Retention (%)	93	94	89
	Pass rate (%)	86	80	88
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	65	45	69
	Pass rate (%)	82	89	100
GCE A level business studies	Retention (%)	67	73	43
	Pass rate (%)	100	96	96
GCE AS accounts	Retention (%)	90	97	82
	Pass rate (%)	70	64	50
NVQ level 2 administration and secretarial	Retention (%)	100	93	+
	Pass rate (%)	85	100	+

*Source: college data
+course not running*

Curriculum Areas

Health and Social Care

Grade 2

18 The inspection covered GNVQ courses in health and social care at intermediate and advanced level, childcare courses and NVQs in care. Inspectors observed 18 lessons. They largely concurred with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but considered some strengths were overestimated and a few weaknesses were omitted.

Key strengths

- the range of courses
- good teaching
- the high levels of support given to students
- good examination pass rates
- well-managed internal assessments

Weaknesses

- failure of teachers to explore theory sufficiently in some lessons
- too few staff with experience and qualifications in social care
- few opportunities to develop skills in IT
- poor access to the specialist resources collection

19 Inspectors agreed that the college provides a good range of vocational programmes in health and social care, and is responsive to the needs of local employers. It has developed a reputation for being able to provide what employers require at short notice. The curriculum is well organised and well managed. Teams meet regularly and meetings are minuted. The views of students are taken into account in course planning.

20 Lessons are well planned, with clear objectives. Inspectors confirm the college's assessment that most teaching is good or

outstanding. In the best sessions, staff were confident in their subject knowledge and worked imaginatively within a clear lesson structure. Students were involved in the work throughout and they understood clearly what was expected of them. Course tutors readily make themselves available to provide additional help to students. Work experience placements are well managed and monitored. There were lessons in which teachers relied too much on whole class discussion, and others in which too much time was spent by students copying notes from the board. In some lessons, teachers did not have enough knowledge or experience to explain the theory adequately or relate it to professional work. Teachers provide too few opportunities for students to develop and use IT skills during their courses. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

21 Teachers take particular care to assess the suitability of students for care work. The college has a high expectation of its students, and examination pass rates in the health and social care area are better than the national average. However, student retention rates at advanced level are poor. The college reports that students leave courses either because they gain employment or because they find that care work is not for them. Student attendance at lessons is good. Nearly all students who complete full-time advanced programmes progress either to employment or to higher education.

22 Teaching rooms are attractive and well equipped. Teachers have developed a good departmental collection of resources for students, but students cannot use this collection easily outside timetabled lesson times. There are too few specialist books and journals in the library. There are too few staff with a social science qualification and experience of social work and social care. This affects the quality of some teaching.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in health and social care, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Intermediate vocational	Retention (%)	59	100	83
	Pass rate (%)	96	64	84
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	62	76	71
	Pass rate (%)	100	90	98

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design, Media and Performing Arts

Grade 1

23 Inspectors observed 15 lessons, covering art and design, media and the performing arts at GCE A level. GCSE is a small part of the provision. In most cases inspectors agreed with the college's assessment of key strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- much outstanding teaching
- consistently excellent GCE A level examination results
- effective management of media and performing arts courses
- a vibrant environment

Weaknesses

- lack of detail in some feedback on students' work in art and design
- barely adequate equipment for media studies

24 The subjects inspected are located in two separate departments; art and design, and English, media and performing arts. The second of these is particularly well managed and led. Sound analysis of both data and practice informed the team's self-assessment report. The report is self-critical and has provided a focus for staff to improve the provision further.

25 Many of the lessons observed were outstanding. Teaching was based on thorough lesson planning. Students are given challenging work and their learning is extended through a wide range of activities. Teachers make effective use of students' own experiences and develop their confidence through appropriate encouragement and support. Many teachers are skilful in using questioning techniques which

enable students to form conclusions for themselves. Students are well motivated and able to work on their own initiative. They take a pride in their work and their presentation skills are consistently high.

26 Students' written, practical and personal studies are thoroughly researched. The work in media and performing arts is wide ranging and well marked, and teachers provide many constructive comments to enable students to improve their performance. Productions are mounted both in college and in the town, and a student exchange trip to Moscow takes place annually. Inspectors agree with the college that practical work in the performing arts is of a high standard and demonstrates students' self-discipline and commitment to regular practice. The art and design work is based on core studies in drawing, a good understanding of colour, and the use of a variety of media. Teachers' marking in art and design is not always detailed enough to help students improve their work. Textile work is especially vibrant and vigorous and students have a strong appreciation of colour. They are encouraged to develop an area of personal interest over an extensive period of time. In photography, much work is of a good standard and covers a wide range of sophisticated projects. Not enough attention is given to developing students' technical knowledge and skills so that they can work on their own more. Pass rates on GCE A level courses, in all subjects, are consistently at, and above, the national average. The two largest groups, art and media studies, have achieved outstanding results over the past three years and improving retention rates. Film studies has grown and, although the pass rate fell in 1997, the retention rate improved to 100 per cent. Analysis of student transfers and non-completion is thorough.

27 A number of teachers are moderators or examiners for examination boards. Teaching areas are lively and bright; the display of students' work indicates a vital learning

Curriculum Areas

environment. Resources are well managed, but are only just adequate for media studies.

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

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level art	Retention (%)	73	85	91
	Pass rate (%)	100	98	100
GCE A level media	Retention (%)	71	87	87
	Pass rate (%)	95	97	98
GCE A level film studies	Retention (%)	73	89	100
	Pass rate (%)	100	100	83

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Sociology, Psychology, Politics and Law

Grade 3

28 Inspectors observed 12 classes in psychology, sociology, politics and law. The inspection did not cover history, geography and economics. Inspection evidence confirmed that the college's self-assessment report omitted some weaknesses and overestimated some strengths.

Key strengths

- well-planned and presented students' work
- good students' achievements in some subjects

Weaknesses

- some poorly-structured lesson plans
- insufficiently-detailed comments by teachers on students' work
- some poor retention rates

29 The standard of teaching and learning is sound and in most lessons there is a purposeful atmosphere. In some subjects, students are provided with helpful printed materials. When required to do so, students demonstrate knowledge and understanding of their subjects. Relationships between staff and students are good and students are well motivated to succeed. However, some lesson plans are poorly structured and the outcomes for students are not clear. Students do not always receive copies of schemes of work which would help them with planning their learning. Some teachers do not check that students have understood the lesson. In some lessons the range of learning materials available for students is too small, especially when students have differing abilities and learning needs. In most lessons, teachers provide little opportunity for students to learn on their own. These weaknesses were not identified by the college's self-assessment.

30 Students' work is generally carefully presented and achieves an appropriate standard. Teachers mark students' work regularly but their comments on the work are not always detailed enough to enable students to improve it. Most of the examination results in the subjects inspected are at or above the national averages for the further education sector. In psychology, there are good pass rates at GCE A level, but retention is poor and in 1997, the proportion of students achieving grades C or above, was low. In GCE AS psychology pass rates are poor as are retention rates in some years. In GCSE psychology, pass rates are satisfactory. In sociology, achievements are generally good but retention at GCE A level is poor. In law, GCE A level pass rates and the proportion of students achieving grade C or above were above the national average in 1995 and 1996, but below in 1997. Retention in law was low in 1997. In politics, examination results are at or above the national average and retention is generally good. The college recognises the need to address the varied pass rates in these subjects and to improve retention.

31 Much of the teaching takes place in huts, which restrict the range of learning activities possible. The library stock for sociology is thin. The development of IT and key skills is not incorporated into the curriculum. Staffing has been disrupted in recent years, and this has had an adverse effect upon the organisation and management of the curriculum. In some areas, course management and teamwork has been ineffective. The college is aware of this.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in sociology, psychology, politics and law, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS level psychology	Retention (%)	57	76	57
	Pass rate (%)	85	88	64
GCSE psychology	Retention (%)	87	73	77
	Pass rate (%)	66	68	56
GCE A/AS level sociology	Retention (%)	43	66	63
	Pass rate (%)	72	87	92
GCSE sociology	Retention (%)	69	85	65
	Pass rate (%)	80	85	64
GCE AS politics	Retention (%)	100	75	100
	Pass rate (%)	82	83	90
GCE A/AS law	Retention (%)	81	89	44
	Pass rate (%)	74	81	75

Source: college data

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

32 The strength of the college's guidance and pastoral support for students was recognised during the last inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the college's assessment of key strengths and weaknesses, but considered that the lack of provision of learning support was a significant weakness.

Key strengths

- a well-structured admissions system
- a well-developed system of guidance for higher education
- a well-planned student review system
- an effective tutorial system
- students' active participation in the life of the college

Weaknesses

- lack of systematic provision for learning support
- lack of system to monitor achievements and retention at college level
- lack of facilities for adults

33 Experience of the college begins for the majority of full-time students with 'taster' days at the end of the summer term in their penultimate year at school. These are valued by students in preparing for college life, but last year two of the partner schools were unable to participate. Inspectors agree that considerable care is taken at every stage of the admissions process to help students find a programme which appropriately takes into account their ambitions and abilities. Parents are frequently involved. Students on GCE A level programmes are required to commit themselves to four subject blocks on the timetable, which they may modify later. Twelve per cent of students beginning a programme of four GCE A level subjects complete it.

34 Different aspects of student support are managed by the two assistant principals. A pastoral committee brings together principal tutors and guidance staff. Students are assigned a personal tutor once their programme of study has been agreed and, in almost all cases, the tutor is one of the student's teachers. A well-planned induction programme helps students to find their way around college and to settle quickly into their studies. This forms part of the combined tutorial and personal and social education programme, planned to meet the differing needs of the courses in the principal tutor teams. There are mixed perceptions among tutors and students of the value of some activities.

35 Inspection evidence confirms that principal tutors and personal tutors give strong individual support to full-time students. A recently-revised and well-planned system of student review and action planning is linked to twice-yearly parents evenings. Parents appreciate the opportunity to be involved in this planning and monitoring activity. They are encouraged to contact the college at any time and many talk of the speedy response they receive if, and when, they do. Principal tutors are closely involved with monitoring individual action plans and target-setting. A system to check progress against college-wide targets for achievement and retention, identified as a priority in the college strategic plan, has not been developed.

36 Tutors deliver an effective programme of higher education guidance for students on advanced level courses. The college works closely with careers advisers from the local careers service who provide a valuable series of presentations and group work sessions on careers education and guidance. Further development is needed for the support of advanced level students intending to go into employment.

37 The college acknowledges that it has no formal system for responding to identified individual learning support needs. At the time of the inspection, no arrangements had been

Cross-college Provision

made to replace the manager for learning support, who had left six months previously. Testing of students in 1995 and 1996 revealed over 200 students in need of literacy and/or numeracy support. Some support for literacy and numeracy is given by staff in the English and mathematics departments, but there is no overview of this provision. At the time of inspection, only six students were recorded as receiving such support. The college identified some students as dyslexic, but has failed to provide appropriate specialist support for them.

38 The college has extended the provision for student counselling without incurring additional costs. The quality of counselling has increased demand and the college acknowledges that the service is stretched. The college says it does not offer adults the same kind of support as that given to 16 to 19 year old students, though adult students speak highly of the individualised attention they receive. The strong contribution made by the elected officers of the student council to the ethos of the college was identified in the last inspection and continues to be a strength. As well as successfully organising social activities, they gain valuable experience in determining the use of funds to support services for students.

General Resources

Grade 4

39 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report, but considered that some weaknesses were omitted. In a few cases, although improvements have been made since the last inspection, they do not yet constitute strengths.

Key strengths

- improved access for students with restricted mobility
- good range of sports facilities

Weaknesses

- poor accommodation overall
- inadequate accommodation strategy
- poor access to IT for students
- small library budget and lack of central record of bookstock

40 The college occupies a large single site. The main building was erected in 1930. Thirteen hatted classrooms have been added over the years, some of which are more than 25 years old. Most of the buildings, which were inherited in a neglected state at incorporation, are single storey and require constant, extensive and expensive maintenance. Much of the accommodation needs radical improvement in order to provide a good-quality learning environment. Inspectors concur with the college's assessment of the huts that although considerable refurbishment of some has been undertaken, almost all remain poorly heated, generally poorly furnished, and are prone to leaks. The college does what it can to contend with these deficiencies. Surveys of students' opinions indicate that they are not deterred from attending the college despite the condition of the buildings. Inspectors agree with the college that the changes to the exterior of the main building and the conversion of formerly inadequate accommodation for the arts and computing areas have improved these areas since the last inspection. However, much remains to be done and some areas continue to be in a poor condition.

41 Since the last inspection, a chair-lift to the library has been installed, and additional internal and external ramps have been constructed to help students with restricted mobility. All but two areas on an upper floor of the main building are now accessible for wheelchair users, but the huts remain inaccessible. There is no social area for students other than the canteen. This is barely large enough for the growing number of

Cross-college Provision

students using it. There is no designated social area for adult students.

42 The college's self-assessment report acknowledges the poor departmental and general storage facilities, old furniture and fittings which need replacing, and a heating system in urgent need of improvement. Although there are more staff work rooms than at the first inspection, some of them are too small. This is not included in the self-assessment report.

43 The accommodation strategy does not consider all the options available to the college. It lacks a sufficiently wide-ranging evaluation of needs, and a detailed enough analysis and account of options, costings, priorities and plans. The college recognises this and is embarking on the preparation of a more radical building strategy. There is a 10-year planned maintenance programme. The premises are generally clean.

44 The college has increased the number of computers since the last inspection. There are now 120 computers, a modest ratio of one machine for every 10 full-time equivalent students. Just 38 machines are on open access for students. Most of these are in the learning support centre. Half of them are used for class teaching purposes, so that students sometimes find it difficult to gain access to computers. A newly-constituted IT planning group has been formed, but its terms of reference and a new IT policy have yet to be devised. There is no clear system for the repair of general teaching resources. Weaknesses in the number and quality of teaching resources are not included in the self-assessment report.

45 The library has been relocated, there are more CD-ROMs, and there is now a computerised catalogue and a security system. The library budget has been improved, though this is still low at £8,000. It amounts to £6.80 per full-time equivalent student. The bookstock in the library is small. Books are also held in departments but these are not centrally

catalogued. There is no means of knowing what the college's total bookstock is or where texts are held. These departmental stocks are not accessible outside lesson times and not accessible to all students across the college. Some books in the library are out of date. There is little formal liaison between library staff and teachers from curriculum areas. The staffing level in the library is low.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

46 Progress in the development of a quality assurance policy and procedures has been slow since the last inspection. Inspectors consider that the college's assessment of quality assurance overstates its strengths. They also identified some weaknesses not included in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good staff development practices
- impact of consultations with students
- departmental action plans well founded in course review

Weaknesses

- no clearly-stated quality assurance procedures
- no designated management responsibility for quality assurance
- lack of rigour in application of self-assessment procedures

47 A college quality assurance committee of four heads of department was convened for the first time in September 1997 and agreed broad priorities for action. Records demonstrate that it has initiated quality assurance procedures for college services, but these are at a very early stage of development. A pilot quality audit has been carried out but standards and procedures

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have yet to be established. The college mission and strategic plan make commitments to improving student performance in examinations and student retention rates. There is no quality assurance policy which reflects these commitments and no mention of them in the annual operating statement. Management responsibility and the organisational structure for implementing quality assurance policy or procedures is unclear and needs to be addressed urgently. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

48 The college quality assurance procedures are based on review and evaluation of courses. Course reviews include analysis of student examination pass rates and of a number of separate discrete questionnaires to students on a subject basis, and to staff. On vocational courses, reviews are also informed by reports from external verifiers. The lack of co-ordination in the distribution and content of questionnaires prevents the production of an overall analysis to inform college planning. Students are consulted extensively. Inspectors agree that departments are responsive to students' views and experiences. For example, in response to students' views, in one subject, the sequence of topics introduced to students has been rearranged; in another, the course structure was altered; in a third the phasing of modular assessments was changed. Students' GCSE examinations achievements are recorded when they enrol, but these are not yet used systematically as a base from which to measure students' subsequent performance. Some course reviews are more analytical than others, but few reports include any specific targets for improvements in performance. Departmental action plans arising from reviews are prepared under standard headings; the majority include targets for improvements in student performance.

49 The college charter meets the requirements of the national charter and the college's commitments are published in a separate document. They are not included in the college

student handbook and diary which are distributed to students. No complaints have yet been lodged under the formal procedure, but students feel confident about taking up any problems.

50 The self-assessment report was collated largely by the previous principal and two vice-principals, who retired in August 1997. The self-assessment process involved staff at departmental level in producing reports on curriculum areas based upon evidence from course reviews. This part of the process lacked the value of lesson observations as a contribution to the assessment of teaching and learning. Assessment and grading of curriculum areas was related to the teaching department in which they were located, although these did not always coincide with FEFC programme areas. Judgements on aspects of cross-college provision were not informed by any existing quality assurance procedures. Governors had very little involvement in the self-assessment process, except to approve the finalised version. The self-assessment report is comprehensive in its coverage, but the self-assessment process does not yet link formally with strategic and operational planning. Actions planned to build on strengths and remedy weaknesses did not systematically arise from the assessments made in the report.

51 Staff development practices changed in September 1997 when the college budget for staff development was doubled to £14,000. However, this represents only 0.5 per cent of the college's income. A college-based staff development programme was launched following a survey into the training needs of individual staff. Each member of staff has a personal action plan for staff development. This links the outcomes of appraisal to staff development needs, and takes account of the college's strategic priorities and departmental development plans. Inspection evidence confirms that participation in the programme has been high and staff are enthusiastic about

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the increased opportunities available to them. The college was assessed for an Investor in People award in December 1997 but there was insufficient evidence that training had resulted in the level of improvement required to merit the award. The college is confident that it will achieve the award in the summer of 1998.

52 The college's revised appraisal scheme includes a lesson observation by a manager but also allows for an ungraded observation by a colleague who acts as a mentor. It is intended that the outcomes of lesson observations will be used to inform future self-assessment reports.

Governance

Grade 3

53 Inspectors and auditors considered that the college's assessment of governance overstated some strengths and omitted some significant weaknesses.

Key strengths

- governors with a wide range of expertise
- well-planned committee structure and meeting cycle
- effective working relationship between chairman and principal

Weaknesses

- lack of forward-looking approach to strategic planning
- continuing delays in addressing expenditure issues
- governors' lack of knowledge of the general life of the college
- no action plan to address weaknesses

54 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. 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. Membership of the corporation includes the principal, two members of staff, and a student governor. Inspection evidence confirms that governors bring a wide range of skills and expertise to the corporation and attendance at both corporation and committee meetings is high. The chairman and the principal meet weekly and have established an effective working relationship. The corporation has a register of interests to cover governors and senior members of staff who have a significant responsibility for financial matters. However, not all governors have submitted a return for inclusion in the register and some returns are incomplete.

55 There is an appropriate committee structure. Committees operate within clearly-defined terms of reference which are substantially in accordance with current best practice. Meetings are scheduled to ensure that decisions can be made at the appropriate time. The corporation and its committees have good administrative support. Agendas and supporting papers are submitted to governors well in advance of meetings and minutes contain clear and concise records of business. The corporation has no formal policy on attendance at meetings or on access to minutes. The code of conduct for governors is out of date and there are no standing orders that regulate the conduct of meetings. These weaknesses are not referred to in the self-assessment report. The clerk to the corporation is also the college's financial controller. There is a separate job description for each role and no indication of any conflict of interest between them.

56 Governors' involvement in strategic planning has been limited. They received the most recent review of the plan only for final approval. The plan does not address all the issues facing the college; but governors perceived it as an interim measure to give the

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new principal time to develop his own ideas and to prevent undue disruption to the college in the lead up to inspection. Governors are aware that the college faces a number of serious financial challenges and that both the internal structures of the college and its strategic aims need to be revised. Few strategies, other than maintaining the college's current operational status, have been considered. There is no formal procedure in place for governors to assess the performance of the principal. The college has introduced a policy of affiliating governors to specific areas in the college so as to inform them about the general life of the college. There is little evidence, however, to indicate that the policy has been put into practice.

Management

Grade 3

57 Inspectors considered that the college was overgenerous in its assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of management. Some weaknesses identified by inspectors were not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- consistent achievement of growth targets
- good management information systems
- improved communication between senior managers and staff
- effective management of the curriculum in most cases
- efficient procedures for allocating and monitoring cost centre budgets

Weaknesses

- failure to remedy weaknesses in management identified in the last inspection
- reduction of expenditure on staffing not addressed in strategic plan

- unsound principles underpinning restructuring
- inadequate implementation and monitoring of some policies
- underdeveloped management of space utilisation

58 At the time of the inspection, temporary management arrangements were in place following the retirement of the former principal and two vice-principals in August 1997. The governors and the new principal decided that organisational restructuring should wait until after the inspection. The principal's committee consists of the principal, the deputy principal, two assistant principals, the financial controller and the registrar. They meet weekly and minutes are published to staff. Staff generally agree that communication with senior managers has improved. There has been little planned action to remedy the weaknesses in management identified in the last inspection. These were not referred to in the self-assessment report. In cross-college areas, lines of management and communication are unnecessarily complex and staff are not always deployed effectively and efficiently. The available teaching space is underused, primarily because of the length of the college day.

59 Inspection evidence confirms the college's assessment that most of the 10 teaching departments are well managed. Departmental meetings are held regularly. Some are more formal than others and proceedings are not always minuted. Minutes of some cross-college committees are concise and record clearly decisions and actions; others do little more than detail the contributions of individual members. The college's committee structure is complex and the college recognises the need to review it in the light of an imminent new management framework.

60 Governors and senior managers understand the need to reduce staffing costs,

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which currently account for 78 per cent of income. Targets for savings over the next three years have been set but no detailed measures to achieve them have been proposed. Careful analysis of the principles on which the review of staffing and of the organisational structure will be conducted shows that staffing costs are more likely to increase than decrease, a factor not recognised by the college in its self-assessment report. The college's average level of funding in 1996-97 was £18.37 per unit compared with the median for sixth form colleges of £19.34 per unit.

61 Contributions to the current strategic plan were invited from heads of department and their resource implications were considered carefully. Staff otherwise had little involvement in the process. Some departmental development plans did not have enough detail to be useful. Most lack measurable targets. The strongest part of the needs analysis in the strategic plan relates to the growing number of full-time students aged 16 to 19 who are likely to attend the college. The college has been successful in meeting its own growth targets for full-time and part-time students, and has achieved some diversification of provision. However, the strategic plan makes no reference to the needs of part-time students, and contains only cursory consideration of the local labour market. These omissions fail to reflect the college's intention, in partnership with other colleges or local agencies, to meet the needs of a wider range of students. The college recognises the need to raise income from sources other than the FEFC, as well as reducing staffing costs. The unsustainable high cost of maintaining poor buildings and severely inadequate heating require prompt and radical measures.

62 Procedures for the allocation to cost centres of budgets for educational supplies and staff development are efficient and well understood. Inspectors and auditors agree with the college that financial reporting and monitoring are effective. The FEFC's audit service concludes

that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college's management information system is generally effective. It produces timely reports and is networked to most senior and middle managers.

63 The college has policies for equal opportunities and for health and safety. Both policies need to be updated. At the time of the inspection, the equal opportunities committee had only recently been reinstated after not having met for two years. The nominated health and safety officer is not qualified and has not attended training sessions for updating purposes. No health and safety committee meetings have been held since June 1997; there was only one fire drill in the last academic year, and one to date in the current academic year. These matters require urgent attention.

Conclusions

64 The self-assessment report was largely produced by the previous principal and two vice-principals. The format for the recording of assessment of the curriculum was based on the 10 teaching departments, which did not always coincide with the FEFC programme areas. These factors made the report more difficult to use in planning and carrying out the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the findings in the self-assessment report, but considered that the strengths were overestimated in many areas. They also judged that the significance of some weaknesses was not recognised, and that some weaknesses were omitted from the report. This resulted in overgenerous grading, particularly of aspects of cross-college provision. Inspectors considered that the college's judgements on the curriculum were more rigorous and based on sound evidence, although the college has not yet developed methods to provide reliable information about the quality of teaching and learning. The college intends to build the self-assessment process and report into an effective planning tool.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (November 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	69
19-24 years	7
25+ years	23
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	1
Intermediate	30
Advanced	69
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	46	4	3
Business	77	76	10
Hotel and catering	82	10	6
Health and community care	125	186	20
Art and design	3	0	0
Humanities	794	158	60
Basic education	8	0	1
Total	1,135	434	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (November 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	64	6	0	70
Supporting direct learning contact	7	0	0	7
Other support	21	0	0	21
Total	92	6	0	98

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£2,739,000	£2,995,000	£3,076,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£18.20	+	£18.37
Payroll as a proportion of income	80%	79%	78%
Achievement of funding target	104%	+	102%
Diversity of income	3%	5%	*
Operating surplus	£4,000	£41,000	-£5,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

*data not available

+agreed data not available

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	337	378	347
	Average point score per entry	5.5	5.3	4.9
	Position in tables	top 10%	top 10%	top third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	27	55	60
	Percentage achieving qualification	85%	89%	95%
	Position in tables	top third	top third	top 10%
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	61	65
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	67%	95%
	Position in tables	*	middle third	top 10%

Source: DfEE

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

College Statistics

Three-year Trends *(continued)*

Students' achievements

		<i>1994-95</i>	<i>1995-96</i>	<i>1996-97</i>
Advanced academic	Pass (%)	93	83	80
	Retention (%)	57	64	51
Intermediate academic	Pass (%)	48	60	55
	Retention (%)	100	99	100
Advanced vocational	Pass (%)	94	94	97
	Retention (%)	94	93	95
Intermediate vocational	Pass (%)	59	81	78
	Retention (%)	90	92	93

Source: college data

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