

**REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE**

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# **Bicton College of Agriculture**

**June 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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## **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 80/97

**BICTON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE**

**SOUTH WEST REGION**

**Inspected May 1996-March 1997**

## Summary

Bicton College of Agriculture in Devon provides a wide range of courses to meet the changing needs of land-based industries. There are strong links with employers and the college is well supported by its governing body. Teaching and learning in most practical sessions are effective and there are good relationships between teachers and students. Prospective students receive extensive information and advice. There is a wide range of specialist equipment and resources to support learning; and good sporting and social opportunities for students. The self-assessment report presents a largely accurate picture of strengths and weaknesses. The college should: increase the effectiveness of management and internal communications; improve results and retention rates on some courses; improve the quality of some teaching and learning, especially in theory work; ensure greater consistency in tutorial practice; improve the quality assurance system; improve the co-ordination of student support services; develop provision for additional learning support; monitor more effectively the implementation of policies; and improve access to accommodation for people with restricted mobility.

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	3
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	4
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	3

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Agriculture	3	Outdoor recreation and leisure	2
Horticulture, estates and countryside management	3		
Equine studies	3		
Animal care	3		

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1 Bicton College of Agriculture was inspected between May 1996 and March 1997. Thirteen inspectors spent 50 days in the college. They visited 78 classes, inspected students' work and college documentation. They attended governors' meetings and met with employers, parents, governors, students, staff, training providers, and with representatives of the local community, the British Horse Society, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners' Association, the Women's Farmers Union, the Devon and Cornwall Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), Cornwall and Devon Careers Limited and the Devon Young Farmers Clubs.

## **THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS**

2 Bicton College of Agriculture was established in 1947 to provide education and training for land-based industries in Devon. The college is situated nine miles south east of Exeter. It has 186 hectares of farmland. The Grade I parkland surrounding Bicton House has a large number of specimen trees planted in the last century. The ornamental gardens and garden centre are an established local attraction during the summer in this popular tourist area. Over 250 students live at the college. The college also uses centres throughout Devon and at Dorchester, Taunton, Weston-super-Mare and Sturminster Newton, in adjoining counties.

3 There has been substantial growth in the number of part-time students at the college in recent years. The college has been successful in fulfilling its aim to provide part-time courses for students who cannot afford to attend full time. Eight hundred and seventy-eight full-time and 2,298 part-time students enrolled during 1995-96. Student numbers by age, by level of study, and by mode of attendance and curriculum area, are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3.

4 The senior management team comprises the principal, deputy principal and two directors of operations. Each director of operations manages four academic divisions and has other cross-college responsibilities. Responsibility for teaching and learning rests with the eight division managers. Catering, buildings and equipment, student services, the farm, the gardens, and employment-based training are managed by service managers who report to the directors of operations. Finance, marketing and management information service managers report to the deputy principal. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

5 There are six further education colleges in Devon, some of which offer recreation and leisure courses. The principal represents the further education colleges of Devon on the county council's education committee. The nearest agricultural colleges are Cannington College in Somerset, Kingston Maurward College in Dorset and the Duchy campus of Cornwall College, and are all about 50 miles away. In 1996, approximately 60 per cent of the college's full-time students came from Devon. Students also

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come from other parts of the United Kingdom, from the Irish Republic and a few from other countries.

6 The college's mission is to provide education and training of high quality, which is effective and relevant to agriculture, its allied industries and other land-based activities, and which enhances the economic development of Devon and the wider rural community, whilst ensuring the continuing prosperity of the college.

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

7 The college provides a wide range of full-time vocational courses. Students who are successful in these courses may progress to higher education or to relevant employment. The college has diversified its curriculum in recent years to reflect the changes in the rural economy, while continuing to meet the needs of traditional agricultural industries. The college offers: national diploma courses in agriculture, countryside management, agricultural engineering, equine studies, animal care, horticulture, outdoor leisure and floristry; one-year, full-time national certificate courses in agriculture, horticulture, countryside-related studies, management of horses, and farm secretarial studies; advanced national certificate courses in agriculture, equine business management and farm machinery and mechanisation; courses leading to City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) qualifications at all three levels in outdoor recreation; and courses which prepare students for the veterinary nursing examinations of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and provide others with preliminary training in veterinary nursing. It is difficult for students to transfer from national certificate courses to national diploma courses in agriculture. There is no national certificate course in animal care, but the college plans to provide one from September 1997.

8 In 1996-97, the college piloted the new general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) at intermediate level in land and environment. The course, reflecting national trends, recruited low numbers and the first diploma courses which it replaced in agriculture, countryside, equine studies and horticulture are to be reintroduced. The college has continued to provide first diploma programmes in animal care and agricultural engineering. Over 100 full-time students aim to take courses leading to additional qualifications such as pesticide spraying certificates or general certificate in secondary education (GCSE) English and mathematics.

9 The college offers a substantial range of over 50 part-time courses. Nineteen of these courses lead to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1, 2 and 3. Two hundred and forty-five students on the college's employment-based training scheme are following courses which lead to NVQs. The college trained the first modern apprentice in agriculture in the country. There are 44 trainees on the college's modern apprenticeship scheme in agriculture and they represent about 10 per cent of all modern apprentices in agriculture in the country. The college provides training

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for students who are supported financially by the National Trust; their course includes preparation for NVQs in landscapes and ecosystems at levels 2 and 3. Other vocational programmes include: courses leading to NVQs in agriculture, floristry and horticulture; courses leading to British Horse Society awards; and courses leading to the certificates of the appropriate regulatory bodies in pesticide application, kayaking, and sailing. Courses in horticulture, floristry, beekeeping, business and information technology are held at 12 widely-distributed centres in Devon, East Dorset and Somerset. These courses are based in appropriate centres, such as a commercial garden centre, a stately home and local authority gardens. Modes of attendance for these courses vary. Students attend classes during the day, in the evening, at weekends or through block release. Few of these courses have a structure which allows students to study individual modules. The college has no arrangements or facilities for open learning whereby students may work by themselves, at times of their choosing, on course materials tailored to their individual needs.

10 Useful links have been developed with higher and further education establishments in the region. A higher national diploma course in countryside and recreational management, and the foundation year of a bachelor of science course in extended engineering (land-based industries) are run with the University of Plymouth. A course leading to a higher national diploma in land-based enterprise validated by the University of Bournemouth, starts in September 1997. East Devon and Exeter colleges contribute to the teaching of college courses in agricultural engineering and countryside recreational management courses. Highlands College in Jersey uses the college's schemes of work for horticulture and animal care programmes of its own.

11 The college has successfully developed specialist full-cost courses and assessment services for various organisations. A dog handlers course, which is run jointly with the police and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, is the only one of its kind in the country. Courses are also run for the Animal Medicines Training Regulatory Authority. The college provides courses for fertilizer salesmen and pest control officers employed by firms and some airlines. Business staff train assessors and carry out consultancy work.

12 A range of courses run in conjunction with collaborative partners takes place at 11 centres, mainly in Devon. There are currently 327 enrolments on these courses mainly in outdoor recreation, horticulture and food hygiene. The college's collaborative provision includes some programmes which are not offered directly by the college on its own, such as NVQ level 1 in horticulture.

13 The college has innovative overseas links through the Bicton Overseas Agricultural Trust. This charity selects people from developing countries to visit Devon and study agricultural techniques which can be used in their home countries. The trust is supported by both local organisations and by the Voluntary Services Overseas organisation. Over three years,

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20 students from Thailand, India, China, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, The Gambia and Kenya have been trained at the college. Staff will provide advisory services for Tengeru College in Tanzania as a result of a formal link which has been established with that institution.

14 The college has a positive working relationship with Devon and Cornwall TEC. The TEC considers that the college is responsive and alert to new developments. TEC funding of £25,000 is being used to develop multimedia facilities in veterinary surgeries for the on-site training of veterinary nurses. The college has been awarded £177,000 from the TEC's competitiveness fund to build a new national training centre for veterinary nursing and animal care. A survey of the training needs of staff on 100 farms in Devon, carried out at the request of the TEC, showed that many respondents saw the college as an important provider of training.

15 College marketing is effective. Promotional material is generally clear and informative. A briefing day for schools' careers advisers is held annually and a Saturday morning careers event is held at Bicton and Plymouth each term. Forty-seven per cent of those interviewed following attendance at careers events accept provisional offers of a course place. College staff make over 100 visits to secondary schools each year. Pupils from schools regularly visit the college. 'Open afternoons' are held every week for prospective students and their parents. The college is regularly represented at events such as the Royal Bath and West Show and the National Veterinary Nursing Congress. Statistics are available which show how many of those who make initial enquiries about courses, take up places at the college. The college does not, however, take these statistics into account in its evaluation of its marketing activities.

16 Employers give the college strong and enthusiastic support. The college has good links with most of the industries it serves. Employers on the college's area advisory committees see the college as responsive to changes in their respective industries. For example, they see the college's introduction into its courses of technological advances and conservation aspects as an appropriate response to current industrial trends.

17 The college is generally responsive to the needs of individual students. On some programmes, such as that leading to an NVQ level 3 in agriculture, students are exempt from some parts of their course as a result of the accreditation of their prior learning and experience. Staff work closely with five schools for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who make regular visits to study at the college. Although the college supports individual students with disabilities, it does not take strategic measures to ensure that its accommodation is easily accessible to these students or that they receive the support they need.

#### **GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

18 The 14 governors understand and support the college well. They have wide experience and expertise in agriculture, and individual governors have particular understanding of business, estate management

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and finance. There are seven independent members, a nominee from the TEC, a member of staff, a member of the local community, the principal, two co-opted members and a student member. One member is a woman. Governors are involved in strategic planning and regularly discuss issues such as students' recruitment. Specific meetings and training days are arranged to give them a clearer understanding of the work of the college. Governors have good links with staff, students and parents. They do not use performance indicators to measure the college's performance.

19 The governing body meets four times a year and meetings are well attended. There is an appropriate range of subcommittees and each member belongs to at least one of them. Governors receive minutes and papers in good time to allow them to study these fully before meetings. There is a code of conduct and a register of interests. Training is offered to new governors who are also allocated a mentor from among the existing governors. The corporation is beginning to monitor and review its own performance.

20 In July 1996, the college reviewed its strategic plan for the period 1994-97. The addition of a risk analysis has improved the plan which has been discussed by governors and the academic board. External agencies including the TEC, Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, the National Farmers Union and Cornwall and Devon careers service have commented on it. The link between the college's strategic objectives and those of the divisions is not always clear. Many staff are unsure of their role in the strategic planning process. There has been little staff-development activity related to strategic planning.

21 Some college policies do not meet the current needs of the college. There is an equal opportunities policy, but the college takes no specific action to monitor the effectiveness of its implementation. Few reports on equal opportunities issues have been submitted to governors. The extent of awareness of the equal opportunities policy among staff varies. There is no environmental policy. Personnel policies and procedures are incomplete. The college's safety adviser provides an annual report for governors. This report does not contain sufficient information to enable governors to monitor effectively the implementation of the health and safety policy.

22 The college's management structure limits the extent to which the expertise of some staff can be used to best effect. For example, the deputy principal has to manage a wide range of staff and functions with the result that he can only devote a limited amount of time to his strategic responsibilities. The roles and responsibilities of some post holders are unclear to staff. For example, the relationship between the directors of operations and the divisional managers is not well understood. There is wide variation in the quality of management and of working practices between the operational and divisional areas. Some divisions have a clear sense of identity; they are effectively led and meetings of their staff are held regularly. However, some staff teams work in isolation. There is

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little dissemination of good practice across operational and divisional areas.

23 Although there is effective informal communication between staff, formal systems of communication within the college are inadequate. Communication between divisions and across divisions and operational areas is unsatisfactory. There are no regular meetings of the two directors of operations and all the divisional managers. Meetings at course team and divisional level are not systematic and are called only for specific purposes. Minutes are not always kept. The principal issues a termly news bulletin. There is an annual staff meeting and notes from the weekly senior management team meeting are distributed to staff. The academic board meets four times a year, but many staff do not regard it as an effective forum for academic debate.

24 Financial reports are produced regularly and staff consider them reliable. Budgets for consumable items and part-time staffing are devolved to the directors of operations and divisional managers. Some divisional staff have little understanding of the criteria used to allocate budgets. Budget holders receive monthly reports of their expenditure. The college does not calculate the cost of individual courses.

25 The management information system provides an increasingly wide range of internal and external reports on finance, students, staff, timetables and course registers. Students' records include data on applications, enrolments and achievement. Comprehensive information about full-time students is recorded from the point when they make their initial application for a course. Comprehensive information about part-time students is recorded once they enrol. Staff have increasing confidence in the reliability of data on students. The college recognises the need to make better use of the data from the management information system in its strategic planning.

26 The college achieved its target of funding units in previous years and expects to do so again in 1996-97. The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £18.59 per unit. The median for agriculture and horticulture colleges is £22.86 per unit. 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**

27 There is a comprehensive programme of pre-entry information and advice for prospective students. A liaison team visits schools and careers conventions. Through a series of well-publicised and regular events at various locations, prospective students can receive advice on courses, employment-based training and financial support. Applicants considered themselves to be well informed about the college's provision. Prospective full-time students receive a thorough interview and a tour of the college. Interview records do not fully record all the guidance given to students or the action taken to ensure that their needs are met. Many tutors ask students to complete forms, some of which duplicate the information already collected.

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28 Full-time and residential students receive a thorough induction to the college and their course. They receive a students' handbook and a copy of the college's charter. Part-time students are offered a copy of the college's charter. A modified charter for students on courses run by collaborative providers lists appropriate contacts through which students may obtain help and support. The college has not taken specific action to ensure that students on these courses receive the same level of support as those on courses run by the college itself. The quality of induction programmes and course handbooks provided for students is variable. Some handbooks are informative but others are too complicated in their structure and language to be useful to students. Some induction sessions are unimaginative.

29 The additional learning support needs of all new full-time students are assessed during induction. The learning support service is developing steadily. It has a high profile in college and course literature. Almost all the students who have been identified as being in need of support receive help in class, in weekly one-to-one sessions, or on an occasional basis, as appropriate. However, there is only 60 per cent attendance at the weekly learning support sessions. Many course managers fail to take prompt action after receiving notification from learning support staff that students have been absent from sessions. Materials to support this work are limited in scope and are not geared to the requirements of particular courses. Part-time students are invited to identify their learning support needs on their enrolment form. The learning support co-ordinator is not, however, informed of the needs of these students. No part-time students are currently taking advantage of the learning support service.

30 The college provides support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to enable them to learn successfully with other students on the college's main courses. The learning support co-ordinator does not visit special schools. She responds to requests for support which are made on behalf of individual students by the schools liaison team, or which prospective students make on their application form. Currently, 54 students funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) are provided with additional support. They include students with moderate learning difficulties and students with hearing and visual impairments. Students and their parents speak well of the support offered by the college.

31 Tutors establish good relationships with their students, and particularly with full-time students. Tutors receive little guidance on how tutorial time should be used and do not meet to identify and share good tutorial practice. Full-time students have a minimum of two individual tutorials each term when their tutor formally monitors and records their progress. On most courses, students also have group tutorials in addition to their two individual tutorials. The principal or deputy principal conducts interviews with all full-time students at least once a year in order to discuss their progress; students value these interviews. Many tutorial records are insufficiently detailed. They contain little record of plans to improve

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students' performance, or of the advice tutors give. Many tutors do not fully understand how the students' national records of achievements should be maintained. The tutorial system for part-time students on employment-based training is highly effective. Students' work is systematically reviewed. The review process includes the planning of action to improve students' performance, and the setting of targets against which students' progress may be measured. Students on other part-time courses are entitled to a tutor but some do not have one. The college has not established systematic tutorial practices, or determined the level of tutorial support, for part-time students, other than those on employment-based training courses. There is an effective system for monitoring attendance. Personal tutors monitor attendance on a regular basis. A minority of students consider that their tutors are not active enough in following up unauthorised absences.

32 Provision of student support services is fragmented. There is an effective and well-organised warden service for residential students. A student welfare officer offers general advice to all students. The student services team consists of the students' services manager, the senior warden, the catering manager and the welfare officer. The team is concerned largely with practical matters regarding catering and accommodation and does not liaise with the careers service or with learning support staff. Medical cover is provided by local doctors who provide surgeries in the college. Residential students value the support offered by student services staff.

33 Most students receive good careers advice from their personal tutor. The college makes no specific statement of commitment to providing students with careers education. Students on some courses visit job fairs. On other courses, students receive visits from local employers who talk about their industries. The college has recently appointed a careers assistant to develop the careers library. The careers adviser from Cornwall and Devon Careers Service visits the college for half a day each week. Some students do not feel adequately informed about employment opportunities and some students are not well prepared to apply for higher education courses.

34 The college places a high priority on helping students who need financial assistance in order to study. The college applies for European Social Funding and disburses this to students. Currently, 63 students are receiving European funding. A further 40 students receive college bursaries, funded by employers, industry and agricultural charities, to help finance their courses. Others are assisted through the college's welfare and access funds. The college has taken action to minimise the cost of travel to and from college for students. For example, it has successfully negotiated with local authorities providing public transport to use routes on which the homes of some students are situated. Some courses are specifically timetabled in order to keep the number of days students need to be in college to a minimum; such timetabling arrangements also

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enable students to earn money through part-time employment on the days when they do not have to attend college.

35 Good social and sporting activities are available for students. There is an active students' association which arranges social activities. Transport is provided for residential students to visit local towns at weekends. There is a lively and successful sports programme. Teams and individual competitors have been successful in sports events both locally and nationally. Former students readily involve themselves in the life of the college, raise funds for it, and are invited to comment on college developments. The Old Bictonian Association has over 2,000 members. It runs social events and produces an annual magazine. Students are closely involved with the local community and organise regular social and community activities.

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

36 Fifty-nine per cent of lessons had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses. Five per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. These figures compare with 63 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. The average attendance of students in the lessons observed was 81 per cent. The following table summarises the grades given to the lessons 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>
NVQ	2	1	0	0	0	3
Other vocational	8	35	28	4	0	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>78</b>

37 Courses are generally carefully planned. Many schemes of work are thorough and they are shared with the students. Others are insufficiently detailed. The college has established a format for lesson plans but this is not always used. Some lesson plans, and especially those for long theory sessions, contain insufficient detail and do not indicate the purpose of the range of learning activities to be used.

38 Teachers have good working relationships with students. Some teaching is effective and purposeful. Most teachers expect students to carry out practical activities at a suitably rigorous pace. Students complement their practical studies with work experience, work on the college's estate, and by performing routine farm duties. Some teachers, however, missed opportunities to use the college's farm and estate as learning resources when it would have been appropriate. In some lessons, learning activities were insufficiently varied and the students did not find them demanding enough. In theory lessons, many teachers failed to make sufficient use of appropriate visual aids and information technology.

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In many theory lessons, students spent too long copying notes. In some instances, some students failed to take in what the teacher was saying and valuable lesson time was lost as students fell behind in their copying and the rest of the class had to wait for them to catch up.

39 Most teachers set their students realistic assignments which involved work on the college estates. Students were given background information and clear guidance on how they were to complete the tasks. However, in some instances, teachers gave students insufficient information on how the assignments would be assessed. A few of the assignments set were too easy for the students. Written comments from teachers on students' performance in assignments were often insufficiently detailed to give students help on how they might improve their work. Teachers did not always give students sufficient reasons for the marks they had awarded.

40 Teachers of agricultural subjects explained and developed topics well in lessons, although they did not always summarise them effectively. They made frequent and appropriate reference to relevant commercial practice. Most practical lessons were well structured and teachers demonstrated practical techniques well. For example, in a lesson which took place in the outdoor pig unit, the teacher showed the students the skills of docking pigs' tails and clipping their teeth. The students then practised these skills themselves under close supervision by the teacher. The teacher made good use of the location of the lesson to discuss a range of relevant topics related to pig farming. In many lessons, however, teachers take insufficient account of the range of students' abilities and, in particular, fail to meet the needs of the less able students. Students carry out routine duties on the college farm. Through these, they can develop their practical skills under realistic working conditions, and gain experience of a wide range of working practices. The staff on the college's farm provide students with good support in their practical work. They often contribute to the assessment of students' personal qualities.

41 On animal care courses, students benefit from being taught by veterinary nursing staff and veterinary surgeons who have current experience of industrial practices. Teachers made good use of students' own work experience to illustrate points in lessons. In some lessons, the activities were varied and imaginative. For example, a group of students moved from the classroom to the animal house in order to test particular points of theory against practice. They then returned to their classroom to develop the points further in discussion. In another lesson, five students played the role of different amino acids and linked themselves in different sequences. The content of the lesson and the role-play activity helped them to understand how a small number of amino acids can combine to form many different proteins. In many lessons, however, teachers talked too much and did not provide students with a sufficient variety of worthwhile activities. Teachers seldom illustrated points by making reference to the practical work of the animal care unit. The students' workload of assignments is unbalanced and, for many students, it is too heavy.

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42 In horticulture and floristry, lessons were well planned and effectively managed in the classroom. Handouts and worksheets were well presented. Teachers were skilful at explaining complex topics in gradual stages. They drew on students' experiences well to illustrate points in their explanations of topics. A variety of suitable teaching aids and methods were used. The staff used the extensive plant collection well in their teaching of plant identification. However, in some lessons, teachers allowed the more articulate students to dominate discussion and they failed to ensure that all the students had a chance to voice their opinions. In some classes, students working towards the national certificate in horticulture are combined with those working for the national diploma in horticulture. Some of these lessons were insufficiently demanding. Assignment briefs are clear and well presented. Assignment work, however, is set at too low a level and is undemanding. For example, a plant identification exercise for first-year diploma students was, in part, more suitable for students taking an NVQ at level 1.

43 Teachers of estate and countryside management identify and meet the individual needs of their students. They use appropriate teaching methods. They ensure that students who need more help with numeracy or literacy receive this, or that students who have physical impairments are provided with the special equipment they require. On the NVQ course, individual students received good support from their teacher and this enabled them to complete their portfolios of work. The teacher gave each student a short individual tutorial. Good use is made of the college's estate for practical work. In a few sessions, teachers did not relate theory to practice sufficiently. Teachers have clear assessment schemes. However, when marking assignments, teachers provided students with little written comment on the quality of their work. In a few cases, errors went uncorrected.

44 Teachers of equine subjects draw on their extensive commercial experience in order to make learning lively and relevant. In the better practical lessons; students improved their skills quickly and teachers expected them to learn at a demanding pace. In one particularly successful practical lesson, the students learnt how to fit a bridle. The lesson began in the classroom and the teacher gave the students an informative handout on the topic. The students then went to the indoor riding school where they were given a good demonstration of how to fit a bridle. The students then broke into groups and practised bridle fitting skills on a number of horses in the stables. High standards of horsemanship are expected of the students. All students carry out yard duties and these give them the experience of working in a realistic commercial environment. Many theory lessons were dull and unimaginative; teachers made little use of visual aids and required students to spend most of the time copying notes. The assignments which teachers set were relevant to the aims of the course, but they did not make significant demands upon the students to produce original work, use skills of investigation, or make use of the equine facilities.

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45 Teachers of outdoor leisure and recreation courses make good use of the excellent range of local outdoor amenities. Students are taught to become proficient and self-reliant through challenging practical work. Safe working is encouraged. Students are correctly dressed and equipped. Work locations and the times of students' return from them are properly posted. For example, a five-hour mountain craft exercise on Dartmoor was well planned. The students arrived to find the moors in mist, with the result that the exercise became even more challenging for them. Discreetly supported by the teacher, the students carried out the task successfully and safely, exhibiting good navigation skills and drawing on their classwork and previous experience. Some theory teaching was not of a high standard. Students were required to spend a great deal of time taking notes.

### **STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

46 Some students produce written work of a high standard. Their assignments are well researched and they draw sound conclusions. The quality of other written work, particularly from students on diploma courses, is more variable. Some assignments illustrate students' weaknesses in applying knowledge and drawing secure conclusions. Students seldom use information technology to improve the presentation of their assignment work. The work of a significant minority of students is impaired by weaknesses in numeracy.

47 Students generally demonstrate good practical skills and pay careful attention to health and safety procedures. Well-monitored work placements on the farm and college estate, or neighbouring farms, give many students experience in a wide range of commercial settings. Some agriculture and equine students benefit from study tours abroad which give them an international perspective of farming. Outdoor recreation and leisure students show self-confidence and self-reliance in tough outdoor environments.

48 Students perform well in national competitions. Floristry students won sufficient individual prizes at the Birmingham Spring Floristry Event in January 1997 to gain the College of the Year award. Students on the farm secretaries course are often successful in the national Farm Secretary of the Year competition. One student recently gained the Veterinary Nurse of the Year award. A group of agricultural engineering students was runner up in the Royal Mail Young Exporter of the year award in 1995-96 for its prototype fern crushing machinery.

49 In 1996, 81 per cent of the 77 students, aged 16 to 18, in their final year of study on advanced vocational courses achieved their intended qualification, according to the tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). This places the college in the top third of colleges in the sector, on this performance measure. Fifty-seven per cent of the 61 students, aged 16 to 18, in their final year of intermediate vocational courses achieved their intended qualification according to the

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1996 tables published by the DfEE. This places the college in the middle third of colleges on this performance measure. Students' pass rates on NVQ courses have been approximately 50 per cent in recent years, but they fell to 30 per cent in 1995-96.

50 Students on agricultural courses work well together during their practical farm duties. They have a good awareness of farming practice. Full-time students frequently gain additional qualifications in such subjects as chemical spraying. Results on some full-time agriculture courses have been variable. For example, only 39 per cent of students who began the national diploma in agriculture in 1992 successfully completed the course in 1995. This proportion rose to 79 per cent in 1996. The pass rate on the one-year advanced national certificate course was 83 per cent in 1996. Most students are well motivated and responsive, particularly in practical classes.

51 The work of students on estate and countryside management courses is generally satisfactory. The work portfolios and diaries of students sponsored by the National Trust on NVQ courses were well above the required minimum standards. These students have made rapid progress. Their work is well organised. Students on national diploma courses produce much good written work. However, the written work of some students on national certificate courses is poor. Examination results on the first diploma course in rural studies have improved over the last three years; the pass rate has risen from 72 per cent in 1994 to 86 per cent in 1995 and 1996. Pass rates on the national diploma course in countryside management have declined over the last three years from 69 per cent in 1994 to 51 per cent in 1996.

52 Horticulture and floristry students have acquired a wide range of practical skills through work in realistic environments. Part-time adult students in floristry work confidently on the NVQ course and are keen to progress to a higher level. Horticultural students successfully carry out major design projects for local schools and other organisations. Students on the first diploma course in horticulture have achieved very good results, but recruitment for this course has been low. The numbers of students who have enrolled on this course was 10 in 1994, four in 1995 and only one in 1996. All were successful. Results on the national diploma in horticulture course have been poor. In 1994, the proportion of students enrolling on the course who obtained the diploma was 65 per cent; this proportion fell to 23 per cent in 1995 and to 21 per cent in 1996. The proportion of students who obtained the national certificate in horticulture was 60 per cent in 1994, 64 per cent in 1995 and 63 per cent in 1996.

53 There are significant differences between the results of students on animal care and veterinary nursing courses. Most students on the preliminary veterinary nursing programme progress to the full veterinary nursing course. Pass rates on veterinary nursing courses have been consistently well above the national average. Most students who complete

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the course are successful in obtaining appropriate full-time employment. Pass rates for students who enrolled on the national diploma course in animal care have shown a slight downward trend over the past three years from 82 per cent in 1994 to 72 per cent in 1996. Pass rates for students who enrolled for the first diploma course rose from 85 per cent in 1994 to 93 per cent in 1995 and fell to 70 per cent in 1996. Of the eight students who progressed from the first diploma course to the national diploma course in 1996, three have subsequently left college. Few students progress from the national diploma course to higher education.

54 Many students on equine studies courses achieve high standards of equitation and find employment in the industry. They are enthusiastic about their courses. Most students on the advanced national certificate course in equine business management successfully complete the course. Pass rates were 83 per cent in 1994, 100 per cent in 1995 and 80 per cent in 1996. On the national certificate course in the management of horses, pass rates have declined from 82 per cent in 1994 to 63 per cent in 1996. Students also do well in their British Horse Society examinations. Students on the national diploma course in horse studies achieved poorer results; pass rates were 54 per cent in 1995, and 39 per cent in 1996. On the first diploma course in horse studies pass rates have declined from 88 per cent in 1994 to 33 per cent in 1996.

55 Outdoor recreation and leisure students enjoy their studies, especially their practical work. Many have acquired relevant experience and skills before coming to college. Their training enables them to develop further and acquire communication, interpersonal and teamworking skills. The results in the national diploma in outdoor recreation and leisure have been generally good over the last three years. Seventy-six per cent of students who enrolled for this course achieved the qualification in 1994, 63 per cent in 1995 and 79 per cent in 1996. Pass rates for the C&G diploma course in outdoor recreation were 67 per cent in 1994, 87 per cent in 1995, but only 49 per cent in 1996. Students obtained good results on the GNVQ intermediate course in leisure and tourism which was run in 1995; 92 per cent of students were successful. Pass rates on the instructors' training certificate course have varied between 75 per cent in 1994 to 94 per cent in 1995 and 69 per cent in 1996. Almost all students progress successfully from these courses to employment, or to further or higher education. Forty-seven per cent of national diploma students went on to higher education and 35 per cent entered employment in 1996. All those on the instructors' certificate course went into appropriate employment.

56 The college has inadequate records of students' destinations. Students completing courses in agriculture, equine studies and outdoor recreation are often successful in obtaining employment. Information on the destinations of students on the countryside and estates management courses is particularly sparse.

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## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

57 The college has a procedure for course review but no policy on quality assurance or a procedural manual. No individual member of staff is specifically responsible for quality assurance. There are some quality assurance procedures for full-time courses but there are few for part-time courses, support services, or courses run by collaborative providers. The academic board is responsible for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning but it has not done this effectively. The board has not considered the results of course reviews and there has been little discussion of students' achievements at board meetings. The remit of the academic board is currently under review. It is the college's intention to strengthen the role of the academic board in relation to quality assurance and the monitoring of the college's charter.

58 The review procedure for full-time courses is understood by staff and implemented across the college. A standard questionnaire is answered by full-time students in the autumn term. This is followed by a course review meeting in the spring term. A consultative meeting about the college's courses is held in the summer term which is usually attended by staff, past and present students, governors and representatives of external organisations. An annual course report is then produced under standard headings, and this includes an action plan for the improvement of provision. The findings of this report are considered by course teams and the divisional manager. In some cases, action is taken to secure improvements in the way courses are structured or taught. Annual course reports are not considered by individuals or groups outside the division. There are no divisional reports on the quality of provision which contain aggregated information from annual course reports.

59 The questionnaire to students asks them to grade the content, assignments and delivery of each course module on a five-point scale. Students interpret these three headings in different ways. Students also grade and comment on other aspects of provision, such as learning support, and facilities such as residential accommodation, the refectory and social amenities. The questionnaire does not require students to evaluate tutorials. The methods of aggregating information from this questionnaire for the annual course reports vary across the college and, as a result, it is not easy from this information to make clear comparisons between the quality of provision in different parts of the college. The information on cross-college facilities and services is not aggregated and little use is made of it. Some course leaders feed back the results of the questionnaire survey to students.

60 Course review meetings provide an opportunity for staff to discuss the findings from questionnaires and to gather feedback from former students and employers. Meetings do not specifically focus on quality assurance procedures or students' achievements. Annual course reports vary in quality. They include results, but do not compare students'

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achievements, attendance or retention rates against targets. The reports do not include information on students' destinations. Action plans seldom refer to ways of improving teaching and learning or students' achievements.

61 Quality assurance arrangements for part-time courses and courses offered by collaborative providers are inadequate. Part-time students respond to various questionnaires, but there are no formal reviews of part-time courses. College staff visit collaborative providers three times a year to observe classes, talk to staff and students, and look at resources. Records of these visits are often incomplete.

62 Procedures for the internal verification of the college's courses are clearly set out. Internal verification operates effectively in all divisions. External verifiers' reports are passed to course team leaders.

63 The staff-development plan is linked to staff appraisal, but not clearly related to the strategic plan. It does not show who has responsibility for staff development in the college; specify a timescale within which the staff-development plan must be implemented; or review ways in which staff-development needs are identified and met. Managers are unable to ascertain the extent to which staff development is helping the college to meet its strategic planning objectives. Approximately 1 per cent of the staffing budget is spent on staff development. The college is committed to achieving the Investor in People award by the end of 1997. Full-time teaching staff, support staff and part-time staff who have substantial teaching commitments, are appraised annually. After being appraised, staff draw up a personal development plan. They record their professional development objectives which are agreed with their line manager. Staff-development activities in the college are provided to help staff meet these objectives. In 1996, the college introduced a practice whereby teachers have their teaching observed by senior staff. However, their teaching is not evaluated and used in the appraisal process. A mentoring scheme has been introduced for new staff, but there is no formal induction for them.

64 The college's charter has appropriate content but is poorly presented. Some of its commitments are clear; others are vague. Few students, employers, or representatives of outside bodies are familiar with it. Support staff were not involved in its preparation. The charter sets out the college's complaints procedure and gives a commitment to respond in writing within 10 days to someone who makes a formal complaint. The complaint form, however, does not have a space for the date. It is therefore difficult to know from a scrutiny of complaint forms, whether or not the college honours its commitment to respond to complainants within this time limit. Between September 1996 and March 1997, there were seven formal complaints. Of these, two complainants received written replies and the remainder were followed up formally and personally to the satisfaction of the complainants.

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65 The college's self-assessment report follows the headings in the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It provides a realistic assessment of the college's strengths and weaknesses. Although the report does not allocate grades, its judgements are generally in line with those of the inspectors. It was produced following wide consultation among the teaching staff. All divisions produced self-assessment reports which informed the college's self-assessment report. The report includes an overview of the quality of the college's provision, evidence for the judgements made and a clear statement of strengths and weaknesses. The report concludes with an action plan which allocates responsibilities and sets target dates.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Staffing**

66 Staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the college and its students. There are 50 full-time teaching staff and 37 part-time staff who have substantial teaching programmes. There are 62 full-time and 30 part-time support staff, including farm and estate staff. Teaching and support staff work well together. Support and administrative staff are suitably qualified, although there are no professionally-qualified personnel staff. There is sufficient technician support, except in computing and science.

67 Most staff have relevant vocational qualifications and have had appropriate experience for the work they undertake. Only 54 per cent of full-time teachers hold teaching qualifications. Staff are encouraged and helped by the college to gain such qualifications. Each year, the college pays for four members of staff to attend a part-time certificate in education course. Forty per cent of full-time teachers have vocational assessor qualifications and a further 20 per cent are working towards obtaining them. Fourteen full-time staff are qualified as verifiers and four are qualified to advise on the accreditation of students' prior learning. The number of part-time staff with training and development lead body awards is insufficient.

68 Staff have good contacts with industry. Some staff are well known to employers who respect them for their professional expertise. In a few areas of the college's work, some staff lack recent industrial experience. Staff are encouraged to update their technical and vocational skills, but there are no formal arrangements which enable them to spend a period of time in industry. Some part-time teachers work in specialist industries. Their knowledge of current commercial and industrial practices is a valuable asset to the college, and it is of benefit to the students whom they teach.

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### **Equipment/learning resources**

69 Most classrooms are well equipped with overhead projectors and screens. Video equipment is located centrally and is transported to classrooms when it is required. Laboratories are adequately equipped. Specialist equipment is generally good. When equipment becomes old or out of date, it is replaced. The number and range of machines for agricultural practical work are adequate. The range of equipment available has been extended through the acquisition of new horticultural machinery such as strimmers, mowers and cultivators. Students are taken on visits to see equipment and resources for land-based industries which are not available on the campus. There are sufficient handtools in horticulture and agriculture. There is a wide range of well-maintained equipment for outdoor leisure courses. Good use is made of the extensive plant collection. There is a suitable range of horses for riders of differing abilities. There are sufficient animals for animal care courses. Some equipment for veterinary nursing is dated. There is an efficient reprographic service for staff and students.

70 The library is well managed and has an adequate stock of books. It is open throughout the week on Monday to Friday from 08.45 to 20.00 hours, and on Saturday mornings. The range of magazines and journals for students studying animal care is small. Liaison between the library and the curriculum areas is effective.

71 Students have difficulty gaining access to computers. There are too few computers for the number of students in the college. The library facilities do not include computers. A new library and resources centre will be ready for September 1997. Standard office, and specialist farm management and agricultural software is available.

### **Accommodation**

72 Bicton House is a Georgian building set amid the college farm, estates and parkland. The adjoining range of modern and converted older buildings provides most of the teaching areas, including animal care and veterinary nursing facilities, workshops, glasshouses, social areas and residential accommodation. The college farm includes a wide range of husbandry and arable enterprises typical of the locality. The college parkland, listed as Grade I, includes unique features, such as the 500 metre Monkey Puzzle (*Araucaria*) avenue. The size, layout and decorative state of most of the classrooms are adequate. There are sufficient laboratories which are well kept. Classroom and laboratory accommodation is efficiently used.

73 The accommodation strategy establishes clear priorities for the maintenance and improvement of the college's buildings, and it specifies a timescale for their completion. The college has fulfilled its first priority, which was the building of a new residential block. This has 112 study bedrooms with en-suite facilities and is an excellent addition to the college's accommodation. The college is currently building a new learning centre

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and library. The good equestrian facilities at West Park are being improved further to enable the college to close down the poor facilities for equine work at Home Farm. Space in the animal care unit is restricted and the amount and nature of practical work that can be undertaken there are limited. There is a planned maintenance programme. The residential accommodation on the second floor of Bicton House is poorly decorated and furnished. The dining room has recently been refurbished and is large enough for the number of students using it. The snack shop located in the cellar area is drab and frequently untidy. There are good facilities for most outdoor sports. The college has a well-equipped gymnasium and heated swimming pool.

74 Access to the accommodation for people with restricted mobility is a major problem. Most of the college's buildings are not easily accessible. Many rooms are either inaccessible, or can be reached only with considerable difficulty. For example, the entry to the gymnasium and snack shop is difficult for students with restricted mobility. Only one teaching room in the college has a ramped entrance.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES**

75 The strengths of the college are:

- a wide range of courses in land-based industries
- strong links with employers
- effective teaching and learning in most practical lessons
- good relationships between teachers and students
- committed, experienced and supportive governors
- extensive information and advice for prospective students
- a largely accurate self-assessment report
- a wide range of specialist equipment and resources to support learning
- good sporting and social opportunities for students.

76 If the college is to build on its strengths it should:

- increase the effectiveness of management and internal communications
- improve results on some courses
- improve the quality of some teaching and learning, especially in theory work
- improve retention rates on some courses
- ensure greater consistency in tutorial practice
- improve the quality assurance system
- improve the co-ordination of student support services

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- further develop the provision for additional learning support
  - monitor more effectively the implementation of policies
  - improve access to accommodation for people with restricted mobility.

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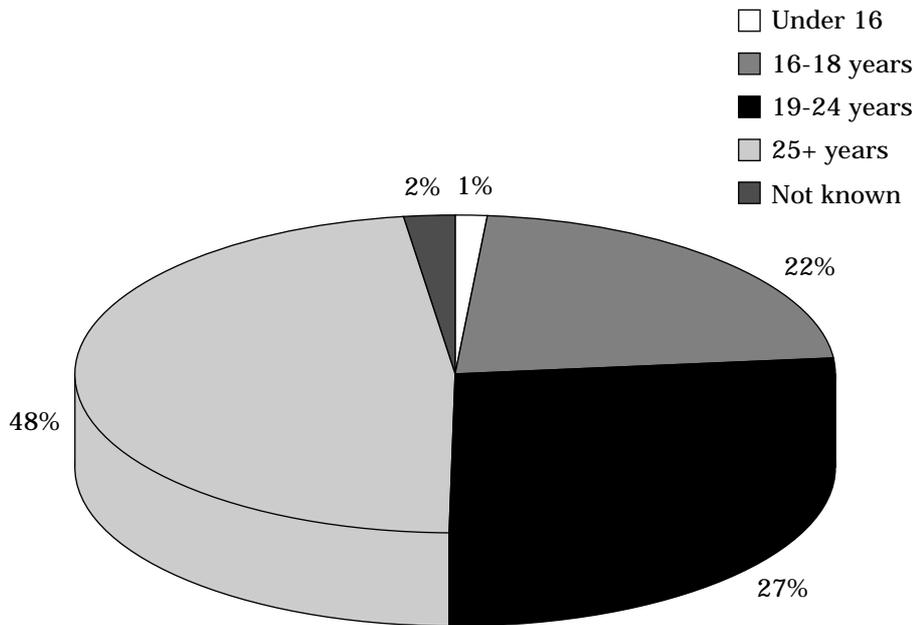
**Note:** the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

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**Figure 1**

**Bicton College of Agriculture: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)**

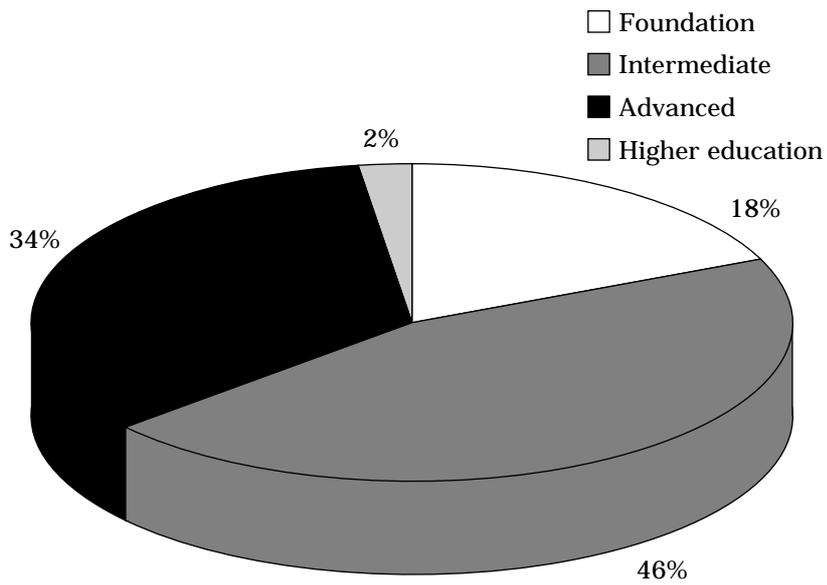


Student numbers: 3,176

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**Figure 2**

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



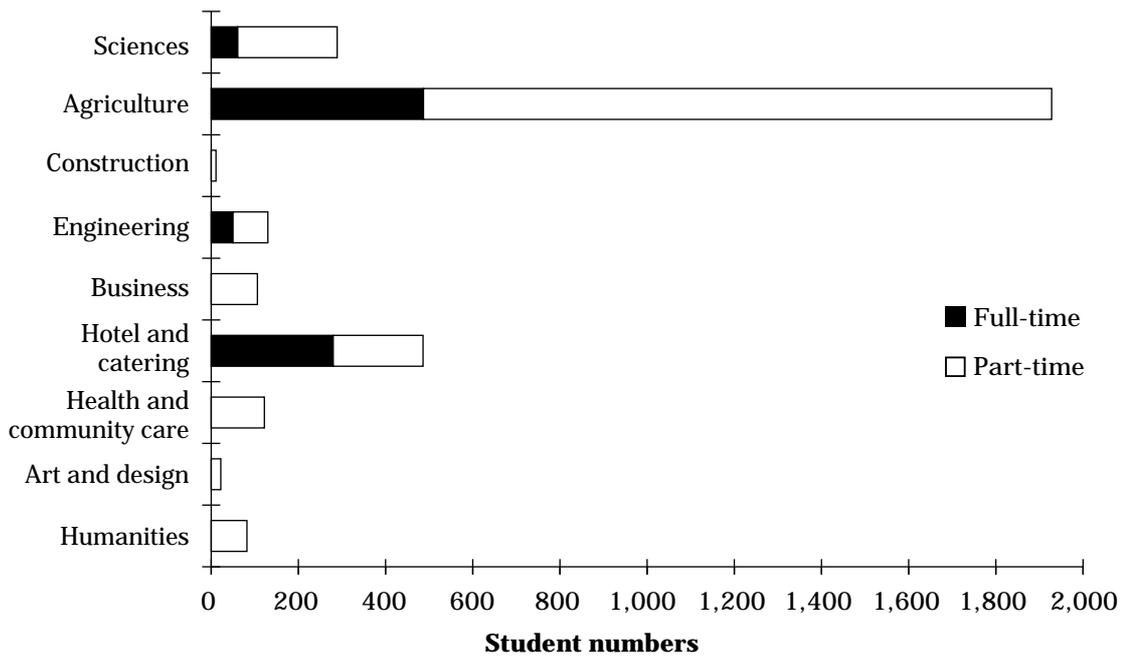
Student numbers: 3,176

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**Figure 3**

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

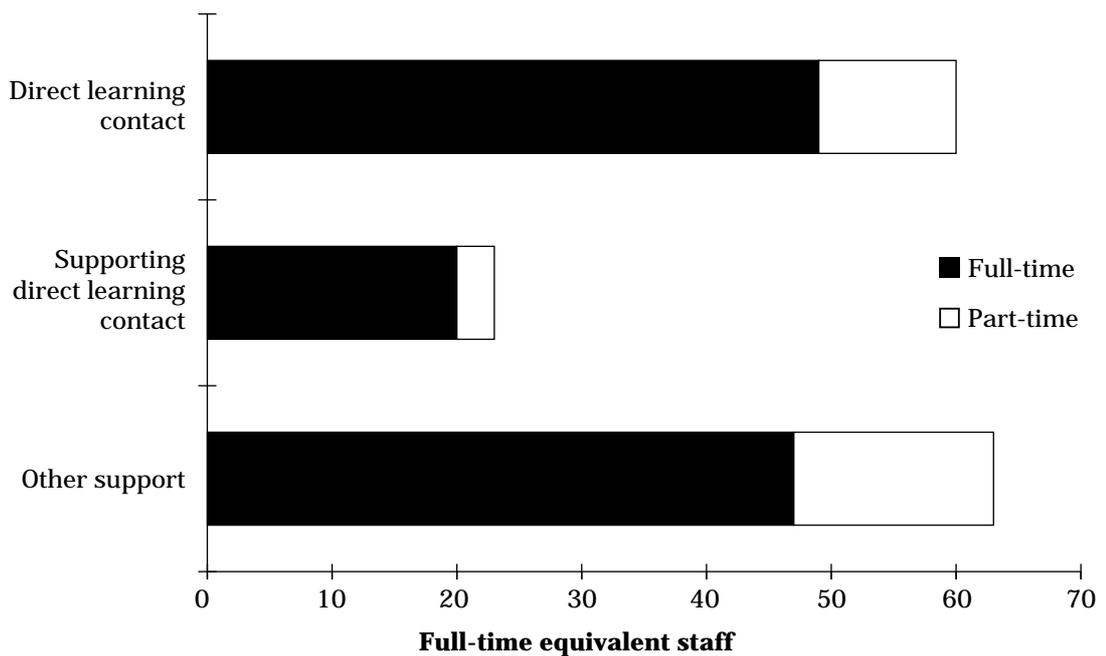


Student numbers: 3,176

**Figure 4**

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**Bicton College of Agriculture: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)**



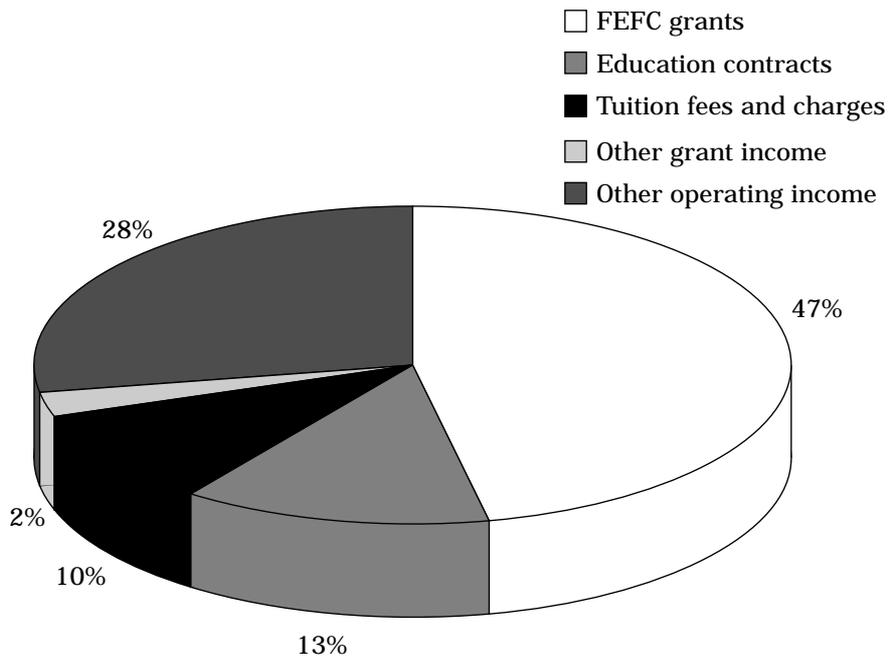
Full-time equivalent staff: 146

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**Figure 5**

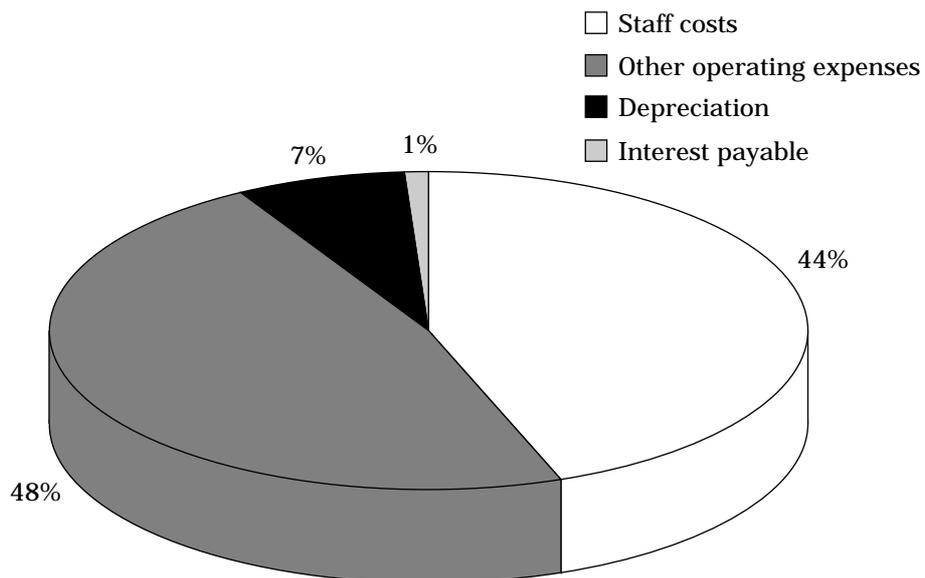
**Bicton College of Agriculture: income (for 12 months to July 1996)**



Income: £5,610,000

**Figure 6**

**Bicton College of Agriculture: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)**



Expenditure: £5,796,000

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