

Bicton College of Agriculture

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
2000-01

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) 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 inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate 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.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1999-2000, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	6	44	44	7	0
Cross-college provision	9	45	38	8	0

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report*

Sample size: 112 college inspections

Note: percentages subject to rounding

Student Achievements

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

- as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1996, would appear in the results for 1997-98 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included.

Summary

Bicton College of Agriculture

South West Region

Inspected October 2000

Bicton College of Agriculture is the major provider of land-based courses in Devon. The self-assessment process involved contributions from staff at all levels and from governors. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but found others that had been omitted. Some of these were significant. Not all judgements in the report were supported by clear evidence. Inspectors agreed with two of the three grades for curriculum areas and with three of the five grades for cross-college provision.

The inspection covered work in agriculture and countryside management, animal care, recreation and outdoor leisure, and aspects of cross-college provision. There have been improvements to the estate and facilities since the last inspection. The newly refurbished learning centre provides students with a good learning environment. High-quality specialist resources enable students to develop up-to-date knowledge and professional skills. The estate and farm are used effectively to support teaching and learning. The college has strong links with schools, employers and the local community. Students undertake well-organised work placements that are effectively linked to their programme of study. Full-time students receive good support but the quality of support

for part-time students is uneven and generally less satisfactory. Most students who complete their courses move on to employment or further study. The standard of teaching and learning has improved since the last inspection. A minority of lessons are less well planned and do not meet the needs of students. Retention rates are good in most subjects, whereas pass rates on some level 2 and 3 courses are consistently below the national average and declining.

There are significant weaknesses in management and governance, particularly in strategic, operational and financial planning. In addition to these weaknesses the college should improve: some aspects of teaching and learning and quality assurance; guidance and support for part-time students; the effectiveness of some managers; and other important aspects of governance and management.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Agriculture and countryside management	2	Support for students	3
Animal care	3	General resources	2
Recreation and outdoor leisure	2	Quality assurance	3
		Governance	4
		Management	4

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Bicton College of Agriculture was established in 1947 to provide education and training for the land-based industries in Devon. It is situated in a rural setting approximately 9 miles from Exeter. The college estate includes 190 hectares of farmland. The college's buildings are located in grade I listed landscaped parkland, among gardens and sports fields. The specimen trees planted in the nineteenth century, and the ornamental gardens and garden centre are a popular local attraction for tourists. The college farm is used primarily as a teaching resource, but is also managed as a commercial enterprise. The college estate provides facilities for woodland and countryside management, outdoor leisure and recreation activities, environmental and conservation studies, horticulture, floristry and the development of equestrian skills. Bicton House, a grade II* listed building, accommodates offices, catering facilities, residential accommodation for students and some teaching rooms. Specialist accommodation includes stabling for 40 horses, an animal care centre and a purpose-built veterinary nursing unit, and workshops for engineering and farm mechanisation. The horticulture and floristry section has access to a large walled garden and glasshouses. The college has residential accommodation for 300 students.

2 The college traditionally provided courses in agriculture and related industries. Since incorporation, the range of provision has increased to meet the needs of the local community and of those employed in the land-based industries. The college's main specialist programmes are: agriculture; countryside management; veterinary nursing; animal care; equine studies; floristry; horticulture; mechanisation and engineering; outdoor recreation management; and business management. Higher education programmes are delivered in partnership with the University

of Plymouth, Bournemouth University, and the University of Exeter.

3 The college attracts students on a regional and national basis. The numbers of part-time and higher education students have increased steadily, but full-time further education student numbers have declined. At the time of the last inspection in June 1997, there were 878 full-time students and 2,298 part-time students. In 1999-2000, 769 full-time and 4,242 part-time students were enrolled on college courses; 78% were aged 19 years or over. The majority of students are on courses leading to vocational and professional qualifications. Full-time students can undertake additional activities and qualifications alongside their main course of study to enhance their employment prospects. About 60% of full-time students come from Devon; 20% come from elsewhere in the south west; the remainder are from elsewhere in the United Kingdom or from overseas. Many part-time courses are offered on a block-release basis. The college is the sole national provider for students supported financially by the National Trust and the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. In 1999-2000, 60% of students who completed their courses went into employment and 31% continued in education. The college employs 153 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 57 are teachers and a further 36 directly support learning.

4 Devon is a rural county with its population concentrated in a few urban centres in the south, north and east. Poor transport and long travelling distances are barriers to participation in education. Devon has a high proportion of small rural businesses involved in agriculture. Although there has been a decline in the number of people directly employed in agriculture, the county still has a higher level of employment in agriculture than most other regions. Many farms have diversified into new enterprises in recent years, including leisure and tourism, and food processing and retailing.

Context

5 The college has productive links with local schools and colleges. It has established effective collaborative partnerships with industry and has a range of training contracts with the Devon and Cornwall Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), including delivery of modern apprenticeships and New Deal options. 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'.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in the week beginning 9 October 2000. Inspectors had previously examined the college's self-assessment report and studied information about the college held by other directorates of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). For 1998 and 1999, inspectors used data on students' achievements derived from the college's individualised student record (ISR) returns to the FEFC. The college's data on students' achievements for 2000 were checked by inspectors against primary sources, for

example, class registers and pass lists issued by awarding bodies. These data were found to be accurate. The college was notified in August 2000 of the sample of provision to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by eight inspectors and an auditor, working for a total of 32 days. They observed 33 lessons, and examined samples of students' work and a variety of college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students. The Training Standards Council (TSC) also inspected one occupational area during the same week. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC inspection framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000. Of the lessons inspected, 64% were judged to be good or outstanding. This is above the average for all lessons observed by inspectors in 1999-2000. The profile has improved since the last inspection when 59% of the lessons inspected had more strengths than weaknesses.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
All lessons	4	17	10	2	0	33
Total (No.)	4	17	10	2	0	33
Total (%)	12	52	30	6	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1999-2000 (%)	17	45	31	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report*

Note: percentages subject to rounding

Context

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000. Attendance during the inspection was well above the national average for all colleges in 1999-2000.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Bicton College of Agriculture	15.2	88
National average, all inspected colleges 1999-2000	10.3	76

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Agriculture and Countryside Management

Grade 2

9 Eleven lessons were observed. Inspectors broadly agreed with the college's self-assessment report, although they identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good-quality teaching
- strong links with employers
- the effective use of the college's farm
- the wide range of practical resources and equipment
- consistently high retention and achievement rates on certificate courses
- good progression to higher level courses or employment

Weaknesses

- declining retention rates on the diploma in agriculture course
- low pass rate on the diploma in rural studies course
- weaknesses in course management

10 The college has successfully developed specialist provision that meets local and national demand. There are both full-time and part-time courses at levels 1 to 4, and the range of learning opportunities for new entrants to agriculture is good. Part-time courses provide technical updating for those already employed in the industry. The newly introduced pre-foundation course in land-based studies gives students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities the opportunity to develop the confidence and competence to work with a range of plants and animals. The college farm

provides students with relevant work experience through a comprehensive schedule of routine practical duties. Teaching and learning in college is supplemented by work placements on local farms and visits to environmental sites such as local bat and otter sanctuaries. As the college's self-assessment report recognises, links with industry and student work placements are a strength.

11 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that teaching is generally good. Teachers provide students with a wide range of learning activities and appropriate support. Activities are varied to maintain students' attention and provide opportunities for them to work together in pairs and small groups. Frequent references are made to industry practice, as well as to the teachers' and students' own experience. Teachers set out clearly the links between theoretical concepts and practical activity. New technical terms and ideas are explained carefully. Practical classes involve exercises that enable students to apply the theory they have recently learnt. For example, in a lesson on the maintenance and use of farm machinery, students successfully applied health and safety procedures to their work. Some teachers fail to provide work that is relevant or sufficiently demanding for students. In an information technology (IT) lesson, students were given general, not farm-related, data to wordprocess. There are a number of shortcomings in course management. Managers do not check on actions agreed to address weaknesses. Course teams do not always monitor or record students' progress clearly.

12 Pass rates on most courses are good. Pass and retention rates on the national and the advanced national certificates in agriculture are consistently well above national averages. The 100% retention rate on the advanced national certificate in 1998, 1999 and 2000 is outstanding. Pass rates on the national diploma in agriculture have improved from 70% in 1999 to 100% in 2000. However, pass rates on the

Curriculum Areas

national diploma in rural studies declined from 100% in 1998 and 1999 to 58% in 2000. Retention rates on both national diploma courses are below national averages in 2000. The retention rate on the national diploma in agriculture has declined from 85% in 1999 to 73% in 2000. Retention on the national diploma in rural studies, although below the national average, has improved from 63% in 1998 and 76% in 1999 to 79% in 2000. Students' attendance and punctuality during the inspection was good. Most students' work is of a good standard. Of the total number of students, 90% progress to employment or higher level courses.

13 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report that teachers are appropriately qualified and many have

substantial industrial experience. Students are highly appreciative of the support they receive from staff. Good use is made of the wide range of livestock and arable enterprises on the college farm. Students undertake many of the planning and practical activities on the farm. There are over 20 conservation sites on the estate that are developed and maintained by students. For example, there are tree and hedge plantings, wetland habitats and a wild flower meadow. The machinery and estate workshops are well equipped. An extensive range of modern tractors is available for use by students. The college acknowledges that the farm buildings and equipment used for livestock require modernisation. The college plans to rebuild the dairy unit by the end of 2000.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in agriculture and countryside management, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
National certificate agriculture	2	Number of starters	18	24	26
		Retention (%)	94	92	100
		Achievement (%)	100	95	96
National diploma agriculture	3	Number of starters	23	26	22
		Retention (%)	83	85	73
		Achievement (%)	94	70	100
National diploma rural studies	3	Number of starters	19	17	19
		Retention (%)	63	76	79
		Achievement (%)	100	100	58
Advanced national certificate agriculture	3	Number of starters	16	16	7
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	75	81	86

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

Curriculum Areas

Animal Care

Grade 3

14 Inspectors observed 12 lessons, covering courses at intermediate and advanced level. They agreed with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, some of the strengths were overstated and some weaknesses were overlooked.

Key strengths

- strong emphasis on vocational relevance in teaching
- consistently high achievements on the national certificate course
- good support from industry for teaching and learning

Weaknesses

- failure to meet the needs of some individual students
- low retention rates
- low achievements on the diploma courses

15 The full-time courses cater for a broad range of student experience and ability. Many students continue their studies at the college. Full-time students have good opportunities to study for additional qualifications in a wide range of subjects, including IT and customer care. Many students achieve these awards. The range of part-time and short courses has recently been extended to include provision for those employed in the industry and for students interested in developing their specialist subject skills further.

16 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that students benefit from the college's strong links with industry. Employers provide effective support for teaching and learning. Local animal sanctuaries, zoos,

catteries, kennels and the college's livestock units are used for visits and students' work. All full-time students benefit from well-managed arrangements to gain work experience. The activity is well documented. Assignments are carefully structured to ensure students gain benefit from their placement. Representatives from industry are involved in course reviews and make presentations to students on specialist topics.

17 In most lessons, teachers use well-chosen examples to emphasise the relevance of theory to vocational practice. For example, teachers make good use of a range of animals familiar to the students to illustrate different behavioural characteristics. Lesson topics are developed logically. New technical terms are clearly explained. Students gain knowledge and understanding by working on realistic assignments. In most cases, students are given detailed feedback on the completion of each task, which helps them to make improvements in their work. In the weaker lessons, teachers take too little account of the wide range of students' experience and ability. Students are not always able to contribute to discussions. Teachers make poor use of teaching aids. The length of time taken to record notes by students who work slowly prevents them from concentrating fully on the lesson. The quality of marking by some teachers is poor and some students receive insufficient feedback. Key skills are not integrated with vocational units and assignments. Teachers do not always deal effectively with students who arrive late. The college's self-assessment report omitted some of these weaknesses.

18 Most students' assignments are well researched and clearly presented, but in some cases the work is incomplete. Written comments by teachers on students' work are positive and encouraging, though at times they give too little detail. There are well-developed arrangements for students to meet regularly with the course manager as a group, and with

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the personal tutor individually. These meetings are used to monitor student progress and the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Pass rates on the national certificate are consistently high, at 94% in 1998 and 93% in both 1999 and 2000. At first diploma level, pass rates are below the national average: only 67% of the students achieved the award in 1999 and 2000. Students' achievements on the national diploma course are also below the national average. Retention rates on all full-time courses are below national averages and declining. The college underestimated the weaknesses in students' achievements.

19 There have been significant improvements in the specialist resources for animal care since

the last inspection. Arrangements to ensure the welfare of the animals are effective. However, as the college acknowledges in the self-assessment report, there remain weaknesses in the accommodation for, and provision of, animals. For example, the layout and small scale of some of the accommodation and equipment restricts the range of practical work that can be carried out on site. These limitations are to some extent overcome by careful planning and the use of a wide range of off-site facilities. There is no clear strategy or action plan to address the pressure on resources caused by recent increases in student numbers.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in animal care, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
First diploma animal care (one-year course)	2	Number of starters	25	13	26
		Retention (%)	88	69	69
		Achievement (%)	100	67	67
National certificate animal care (one-year course)	2	Number of starters	18	29	35
		Retention (%)	89	97	77
		Achievement (%)	94	93	93
National diploma animal care (two-year course)	3	Number of starters	40	33	31
		Retention (%)	73	79	71
		Achievement (%)	100	88	77
Pet store management (one-year course)	4	Number of starters	*	*	24
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	42

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Recreation and Outdoor Leisure

Grade 2

20 Inspectors observed 10 lessons in recreation and outdoor leisure. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report but found some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- much effective teaching
- a wide range of provision
- high levels of technical expertise displayed by students
- good students' achievements on most courses
- well-planned and well-managed work experience
- the high standard of outdoor education resources
- well-developed and effective links with employers

Weaknesses

- a number of poorly planned lessons
- some inadequate indoor sporting facilities
- a few teachers' lack of specialist qualifications for some subjects

21 There is a wide range of outdoor leisure courses and opportunities for progression from foundation to higher education. The college offers City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G), national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and national diploma qualifications in sport science, recreation and leisure and outdoor education. Students have good opportunities to study for

additional qualifications to improve their future employment and progression prospects. For example, students are able to study for sports coaching awards. Work experience is well managed and valued highly by students. Teachers have extensive contacts with relevant companies and professional organisations, which provide good opportunities for students' work placements and the use of specialist facilities. For example, a large employer in the outdoors activities industry offers students international work placements. Employers' views are sought on the college provision and they are involved with curriculum development. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that links with the outdoor leisure industry and students' work placements are a strength.

22 As noted in the college's assessment report, most teaching is good. The curriculum is well organised. Staff meet regularly to monitor and review performance. Effective individual support is given to students both in lessons and through the tutorial system. Lessons are generally well structured. Most assignment briefs are clearly written and vocationally relevant, and tasks and assessment criteria are concise. Most learning materials are of a good standard. Teachers successfully attract students' attention and maintain their interest. There is an appropriate balance of theory and practical activities. Frequent references are made to industrial practice, and students are encouraged to contribute from their own knowledge to lessons. In an outdoor leisure class, students were able to apply the knowledge gained on work experience to their studies of human resource management. This stimulated lively discussion and helped students to understand the concept of conflict in the workplace. In a lesson on adventurous activities, the teacher used a practical demonstration to explain how trust can be developed with clients. Opportunities for students to develop key skills are frequently incorporated into coursework and

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class work. In a few lessons, teachers did not involve students in relevant activities and the content of the lesson was not linked to the overall scheme of work.

23 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that students' work is of a good standard and presented well. Students develop a good range of skills relevant to industrial practice. Pass rates on most full-time and part-time courses are consistently good. The 100% pass rate for the small number of students on the national diploma in sport science in 1999 and 2000 is outstanding. Full-time students on the national diploma in outdoor leisure studies and part-time students on the C&G recreation and leisure course have achieved pass rates and retention rates well above the national averages in 1998, 1999 and 2000. However, retention rates on the national diploma in sport science and pass rates on the C&G level 1 progression award have declined to 50% in 2000. There is good progression to

employment in the industry and related higher education courses. Some students' work experience placement results in permanent employment.

24 The college offers a wide range of adventurous activities. The lake is used to introduce students to water activities on site. More advanced sailing skills are taught at the University of Plymouth's Cox Side Sailing Centre. The college's two indoor climbing walls are used during inclement weather and for teaching school parties. The outdoor heated swimming pool is currently being refurbished. There is a good range of weight training and cardio-vascular equipment, but it is poorly accommodated. Resources for the teaching of anatomy and physiology are scarcely adequate. There are inadequate indoor facilities for the teaching of ball games. The students have regular access to modern computers. Most teachers are appropriately qualified and have good experience in recreation and leisure.

Summary of retention and achievement rates in recreation and outdoor leisure, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
C&G progression award	1	Number of starters	*	29	22
		Retention (%)	*	100	95
		Achievement (%)	*	93	50
NVQ adventurous activity	2	Number of starters	*	*	11
		Retention (%)	*	*	82
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73
C&G 4810 part 3 recreation and leisure industries	3	Number of starters	20	18	18
		Retention (%)	100	100	93
		Achievement (%)	100	83	93
National diploma leisure studies (outdoor leisure)	3	Number of starters	54	46	39
		Retention (%)	89	82	79
		Achievement (%)	93	94	97

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

*course not running

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Support for Students

Grade 3

25 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in support for students which were identified in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good links with schools and employers
- effective guidance, admissions and induction arrangements for full-time students
- strong tutorial support for full-time students
- effective systems for dealing with full-time students' additional support needs
- the extensive range of sporting and recreational activities

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped procedures for monitoring the quality of tutorial provision
- the uneven quality of pre-course guidance for part-time students
- weaknesses in support arrangements for part-time students
- shortcomings in general careers education and guidance

26 Links with local schools are productive. Headteachers meet regularly with the deputy principal at the college to share information. The farm, workshops and horticultural units are used by school pupils for practical activities. Liaison tutors visit schools regularly, offering advice and attending parent and open evenings. The college's excellent relationship with local industry provides good opportunities for

students' work experience and the use of specialist facilities off-site. Students enjoy the practical activities they undertake outside the college and gain work-based experience which is of considerable value to them in obtaining employment.

27 There are effective procedures for informing potential full-time students and their parents about the college's courses. As the self-assessment report identifies, students receive clear information before and on entry to the college to enable them to choose the appropriate course. The college produces attractive and informative prospectuses supplemented by an Internet website. Well-attended open days and 'taster' days raise the awareness of young people and ensure that information about the college's provision is available to those of school-leaving age. Prospective students can receive an advisory careers interview with college staff before applying for a specific course. The college is careful to include the parents of younger students in interviews. Full-time students are generally satisfied with the guidance they receive from the college. The arrangements for supporting part-time students are less well developed. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that there is inconsistency in the quality of support and information for part-time students.

28 As the self-assessment report states, full-time students are provided with a carefully structured induction which helps them to settle in quickly and start their course with an understanding of what is expected. All students receive a handbook and diary which contains essential information about the college and informs them about their rights and responsibilities. The college's self-assessment report recognises the need to address weaknesses in induction for part-time students.

29 The college undertakes diagnostic testing to identify the level full-time students have achieved in basic skills. Course tutors and

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learning support tutors work effectively together to address any needs identified through these tests. A high proportion of those students identified as requiring learning support receive it. Students' progress is regularly assessed and communicated to course tutors. Full-time students consider the support to be good, but some part-time students do not receive the support they need if they are to make adequate progress. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are appropriately supported. Some specialist equipment has been purchased to assist students with learning difficulties.

30 Inspectors found much effective tutorial practice, particularly for full-time students, who speak highly of the support they receive. All full-time students have personal tutors. There is a useful handbook for tutors, who plan the tutorial programme in conjunction with the students. The attendance of most students at tutorials is good. The college acknowledges that procedures for evaluating and monitoring the quality of tutorial support are underdeveloped.

31 Students value the high level of curriculum-related support they receive from teachers. They also receive considerable help with their applications for entry to employment or higher education. However, there is no effective mechanism for developing and monitoring the general careers curriculum. Some vocational course teams make little use of the careers service.

32 Personal support services for students are good. The counselling and welfare service offers students effective financial and personal advice. Students are kept well informed of the range of services available. Systems for monitoring and supporting the welfare of residential students are equally effective. A team of wardens provides pastoral care and support for the substantial number of students who live in college accommodation. The college offers a wide range of curriculum-related activities for students, and they can take part in recreational

and sporting activities held during the week and at weekends. Students appreciate these opportunities to broaden their experience and understanding. Communications between staff and students are good. Students make a strong contribution to the ethos of the college. The student association takes an active role in representing the views of students to management and governors. The president, who is granted a sabbatical year, is also a governor. A student committee organises social, sporting and fund-raising events.

General Resources

Grade 2

33 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. Some strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- effectively maintained buildings and attractive grounds
- good-quality learning centre
- easy access for students and staff to modern computers
- good range of social and outdoor sports facilities

Weaknesses

- some poor-quality accommodation
- lack of access to some areas for people with restricted mobility

34 Bicton College of Agriculture estate is attractive, well maintained and provides a pleasant working environment for staff and students. It is a valuable resource used by students for practical activities, assignments, commercial farming experience and for recreation. The facilities are also widely used by the general public, schools and a range of

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other organisations. This generates income for the college. The parkland which surrounds Bicton House includes unique features, such as the 500 metre avenue of 'monkey puzzle' trees (araucaria), a Victorian arboretum, and the national collections for pittosporum and agapanthus.

35 The college has a range of accommodation. It has 120 buildings spread across the site, which vary greatly in age, size and quality. Bicton House has an attractive entrance hall. It contains some teaching rooms, administrative offices, catering facilities and residential accommodation for students. Practical units with adjacent classrooms are located in separate buildings within easy walking distance of Bicton House. Most of the college's buildings are in a good condition and well suited to their purpose; some are of a poorer standard, notably a number of the temporary classrooms, teaching staff offices and student hostels.

36 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that the college has continued to improve its accommodation since the last inspection. The accommodation strategy establishes clear priorities for the maintenance and improvement of the college's building stock, and specifies a timescale for the completion of each project. For example, the new learning centre and the new veterinary nursing centre were completed in 1998 and 1999, respectively. There is a well-developed maintenance plan. Day-to-day maintenance requests are dealt with efficiently.

37 The learning centre offers a range of accessible resources to support learning, including the library, IT facilities, learning support services, classrooms and laboratories. It is an excellent addition to the college's accommodation. The centre is open for 60 hours a week, including Saturday. It is well used by students and staff. The library is light and spacious with a satisfactory provision of books, journals and videos. However, information held on the computerised issue

system is not used in planning, and expenditure on books is low compared with other specialist colleges. Links between the library staff and some curriculum areas are underdeveloped.

38 Availability of computers for student and staff use is good. The computers are modern with a wide range of up-to-date software and access to the Internet. Students report little difficulty in accessing machines for individual use. The college has introduced an information learning technology strategy that entitles all students to acquire skills in using IT as an integral part of the learning process. Students using the library and the IT suite expressed their appreciation of the useful advice the librarians and IT staff provide. A college-wide intranet is being developed. Teaching staff have adequate access to computers in their offices.

39 The teaching rooms across the college vary in quality. Classrooms in the learning centre and the three science laboratories are well equipped. However, as the self-assessment report acknowledged, 12 of the temporary classrooms are inadequately heated and ventilated. Most classrooms lack displays of students' work and other materials.

40 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that there are good sport, recreational and social facilities for students. The restaurant offers a wide variety of foods, including vegetarian. A snack bar serves food throughout the day and in the evenings. Both services are popular with the students. A small college shop sells stationery and other useful items. A bar, snooker room and a well-equipped gym are available to students. Facilities for outdoor sports are good, but there are insufficient resources for indoor sporting activities.

41 Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that the quality of all of the residential accommodation is good. Half of the accommodation consists of 112 en-suite rooms which are of good quality. The rest of the rooms

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are of poorer quality, small and sparsely equipped. The common room in some hostels is too small. There are no childcare facilities.

42 It is difficult for staff and students with restricted mobility to reach some areas of the campus. The first floor of Bicton House and many of the outlying classrooms and facilities are not accessible to wheelchair users. In most cases, lessons are located in rooms that provide easy access for students with restricted mobility. The college has installed a hearing loop in some classrooms and additional lavatories for people with physical disabilities. Most staff areas are of adequate size, but some are crowded and there is insufficient space for part-time staff to work comfortably.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

43 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses recognised in the self-assessment report, but identified other significant strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- improved teaching and learning since the last inspection
- clear quality assurance policy and procedures
- systematic collection and analysis of students' views
- effective internal verification
- good induction and support for new staff

Weaknesses

- quality assurance not fully implemented across the college
- insufficient monitoring of self-assessment action plans
- unsubstantiated judgements in some course self-assessment reports

- little use of lesson observations in monitoring quality
- inadequate monitoring of staff appraisal activities

44 The college has addressed significant weaknesses in quality assurance arrangements that were identified in the last inspection report. It has made good progress in developing quality assurance procedures and processes. However, as the self-assessment report indicates, the system is still evolving. Although the quality assurance system covers all aspects of the college's work, it has not yet been fully implemented in some non-teaching areas. The college obtained the Investor in People award in 1998.

45 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that there are clearly defined procedures and responsibilities for quality assurance which have led to improvements. The quality of teaching and learning has improved. At the last inspection, the profile of lessons observed was below national figures for the sector. At this inspection, the profile was above national figures. Retention rates have improved to above or equal to the averages for the sector for the past three years. While the revised quality assurance process has resulted in a sharper focus on student retention and ways of improving it, there is not the same clarity about target-setting for students' achievements. Pass rates on level 2 and 3 courses have been below national averages since 1997 and are declining.

46 Management responsibility for quality assurance is clear. The deputy principal has responsibility for strategic developments. The quality assurance manager deals with operational matters. Three committees effectively monitor and oversee quality assurance. Quality issues are first considered by the curriculum development committee, then

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by the academic board, and finally by the governors' curriculum and standards committee.

47 The self-assessment process is clearly documented and well structured. It encompasses all staff in both teaching and non-teaching areas. Staff teams develop draft end-of-year self-assessment reports in their respective areas of work. Students' feedback, lesson observations, reports from external verifiers, minutes of team meetings, evaluation of students' achievements and course reviews contribute to the development of judgements. Some of the self-assessment reports give a thorough account of how courses and services are implemented and they include a detailed action plan for improving provision. Others are brief, insufficiently self-critical and evaluative, make insufficient use of quantitative data to assess performance, and fail to address important issues such as poor pass and retention rates. The reports do not always make clear the grounds on which judgements are made and grades awarded. Associated action plans to improve provision in each area were developed by each teaching and non-teaching team. Progress in implementing these action plans is not regularly monitored. Where action points have been addressed satisfactorily, this is not always recorded. The self-assessment report recognises that the quality of the self-assessment reports is inconsistent.

48 The quality procedures used in non-teaching areas and with franchise partners are not as comprehensive as those used in teaching areas. Non-teaching areas have yet to develop criteria for quality and performance measures. Quality assurance for the college's franchised provision is insufficiently rigorous. The franchise partners for the college had not been visited for a year at the time of the inspection, although regular visits had taken place in previous years. The process for monitoring quality assurance procedures is not

always effective. College managers acknowledge that overall monitoring and reporting arrangements need to be improved.

49 The college has developed an effective system for internal verification, which made a valuable contribution to the preparation of the self-assessment report. The college has not yet developed an effective programme of lesson observations to support the process of quality assurance.

50 Arrangements for the induction and support of new staff are good. The staff appraisal policy is clearly set out. Staff are appraised by their line manager, and all appraisers and appraisees are trained. All full-time and most part-time staff are entitled to an annual appraisal, but at the time of the inspection some staff had not been appraised for over a year. The staff development programme reflects the training needs of individual staff identified through the staff appraisal process. However, it has not, until recently, reflected strategic objectives. There is no record of staff appraisal activities which allows senior managers to identify whether all staff have a fair share of development support. There is no effective monitoring of staff appraisal and staff development training.

51 The college makes good use of surveys of students' perceptions. Their views on the quality of the college's provision are obtained at course meetings and tutorials, and through students' responses to termly questionnaires which are effectively monitored and carefully analysed. Student feedback contributes to course reviews and self-assessment. Students express confidence that issues raised would produce a response. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that action has been taken and improvements made in response to students' comments. The achievement of the college charter commitments is carefully monitored through surveys of students' views. Complaints are dealt with appropriately.

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Governance

Grade 4

52 Inspectors and auditors agreed with some of the strengths in the self-assessment report, but considered that these were outweighed by weaknesses. Some aspects of governance identified in the report as strengths are normal practice.

Key strengths

- governors' strong commitment to the college
- good links with staff and students

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to strategic planning
- inadequate monitoring of the college's performance
- insufficient challenging of unrealistic financial information
- an underdeveloped self-evaluation process
- unsystematic approach to training of governors

53 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The corporation does not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also does not substantially fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

54 The corporation has 14 members. At the time of the inspection, there was one vacancy. As identified in the college's self-assessment report, governors bring to the corporation a range of professional expertise. A revised corporation membership and committee structure has been approved to meet the

requirements of the amended instrument and articles of government from August 1999. However, the search committee has not provided appropriate advice on appointments.

55 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that the governors demonstrate a strong commitment to the college. They take an active part in college life and apply their skills and experience to the benefit of the college. Governors visit curriculum areas to meet with staff and students, take part in advisory panels, provide work placements, and regularly attend presentation evenings and other important college events. Staff and students report that they appreciate the interest shown in them and the college by governors.

56 Governors do not play a full role in the preparation of the strategic plan. They do not monitor the achievement of strategic objectives sufficiently closely to form an accurate view of the college's performance. These weaknesses were not recognised in the self-assessment report. There is little evidence of an informed debate by governors to determine priorities for the college and its managers. Governors have not established clear targets against which the execution of the strategic plan can be monitored. The corporation is not systematically provided with written reports on the college's progress in meeting its strategic objectives. It does not receive regular reports on students' achievements, retention or the range of provision, and those it does receive are inadequate. Data on students' achievements are received by the curriculum and standards committee and by the corporation, but there is little evidence of detailed analysis by governors to form an accurate view of the standards achieved by students. Governors do not make effective use of performance indicators to evaluate students' performance.

57 The corporation has not fully met its statutory responsibilities in relation to the financial health of the college. The financial

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performance in 1998-99 and 1999-2000 reflects some unsatisfactory practice. Inadequate financial forecasts and budgets have been approved. The corporation has approved annual estimates based on unrealistic funding unit targets that the college has subsequently failed to achieve. The finance and general purposes committee, which meets every other month, has not met its remit to monitor the college's financial position effectively and provide appropriate advice to the corporation. Governors have only recently begun to question with rigour the college management's budgetary assumptions.

58 The corporation has established an appropriate range of committees. All have terms of reference and they meet regularly according to an annual cycle. Reporting of the proceedings of these committees to the corporation is timely. Clerking arrangements for the corporation and its committees are appropriate. The clerk to the corporation is also a member of the college management team. Separate job descriptions apply to each role. There is a set of standing orders covering the conduct of meetings. The register of governors' interests is updated annually. A code of conduct has been agreed by the corporation. Corporation and committee minutes are available to the public. Governors clearly understand the distinction between governance and management.

59 There is no systematic approach to the training of governors. New members receive an induction pack of relevant information and briefings from college staff, but thereafter governors receive little training. There has been no formal assessment of individual governor training needs and no formal training programme. There is a lack of awareness of good practice on governance and clerking matters. These weaknesses are not identified in the college's self-assessment report.

60 The self-assessment report on governance is based on governors' views obtained through questionnaires and a seminar. However, members of the corporation do not set, or monitor themselves against, individual and corporate targets. This weakness is acknowledged in the self-assessment report. The chair of the corporation appraises the principal, but no report is made to the remuneration committee.

Management

Grade 4

61 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, they considered that the college underestimated the significance of key weaknesses.

Key strengths

- strong links with a wide range of organisations
- open management style
- successful commercial use of estate and facilities
- wide range of promotional activities

Weaknesses

- weak strategic and operational planning
- failure to achieve key college targets
- insufficient management accountability
- little use of targets and performance indicators
- weak financial management
- poor management of franchised provision

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62 Following the last inspection management was restructured. The new college management team, consisting of the principal, deputy principal and 12 teaching and support staff managers, has widened involvement in decision-making and contributed to improved communications. The management structure is clear and is understood by staff. The college has recently strengthened its senior management team by appointing a director of curriculum. Communication between senior managers and staff is satisfactory. Staff appreciate the open and approachable management style.

63 Strategic planning is acknowledged as a weakness in the self-assessment report. There is no clear strategic planning process or planning cycle. The allocation of resources is not linked to strategic priorities. The college failed to meet its enrolment targets in 1998-99 and 1999-2000. In part this was due to factors outside the college's control, but the targets were overoptimistic. Prior to 2000, staff had insufficient involvement in planning. Early in 2000, curriculum teams were consulted on strategic issues but a draft strategic plan had not been completed by the time of the inspection in mid-October. Many staff, at all levels, are unsure of the college's strategic priorities.

64 The planning framework supporting strategic objectives is inadequate. There is no college operating statement. There is no systematic monitoring of departments' activities. Unsatisfactory variations in practice between the three teaching departments are not identified and resolved. Managers are not sufficiently accountable for their actions or for the performance of students. The use of targets and performance indicators by departments and course teams is underdeveloped. Targets are agreed for retention and achievement, but performance against these targets is not systematically reviewed, either by course teams or senior managers. Some staff are unaware of the targets for their courses.

65 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. The college has failed to achieve target funding units in each of the last two years. The college's financial forecasting has been ineffective. Budgets for the last two years were based on unrealistic assumptions about the college's future income. Managers were slow to recognise the true picture and to take action to reduce costs or increase income. Senior managers have not monitored the college's overall financial position. They are expected to review management accounts on a monthly basis, but no accounts have been produced since May 2000. At the time of the inspection in October, the draft year-end accounts were still being prepared. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

66 In some areas, the college has made good progress since the last inspection. It has increased the volume of full-cost work, recruited more higher education students to a wider range of programmes, increased income by the successful use of the estate and its facilities, and improved its framework of policies and procedures. There are appropriate human resource policies, but the equal opportunity policy is ineffective. Its operation relies on an equal opportunities co-ordinator, but this post does not exist. There has been no equal opportunities training and no monitoring. Some action is taken to promote awareness of equal opportunities. It is a regular agenda item at course team meetings, and the guidelines for lesson observation require observers to ensure there is no discriminatory practice in language and teaching materials.

67 The college's strong links with schools, universities and other outside bodies are identified in the self-assessment report. Employers are well represented on active advisory panels. The principal represents the college and the agricultural sector on a wide range of regional and national bodies. The

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corporate image of the college is effectively presented at promotional events and in college publicity materials. The new college website has had numerous visits. There is some evaluation of the impact of press advertisements and other marketing activities, but the college does not carry out market research, it makes little use of labour market information and it lacks a marketing plan.

68 The college management information system has the capability to provide useful reports for college managers. Regular updates of applications compared with targets are produced, but managers and staff request few other reports. Enrolment data held on the system for full-time students are reliable and the achievement data used for inspection were generally accurate. However, poor communication between the teaching departments and information managers causes some part-time course data to be omitted from the system. Systems managers are sometimes unaware that a course has started until months after the start date. For many part-time courses, central records of enrolments do not match the number of students in class. This weakness was partially recognised in the self-assessment report.

69 Of the total college provision, 4% is franchised. This provision is poorly managed. Contracts for 1999-2000 were not signed until February 2000. The franchise partners achieved less than 60% of contracted units. There are no links between teachers in the college and in the partner organisations. Managers are unaware of the achievements of the students at each partner. Targets for the current year have not all been finalised and contracts have not yet been signed.

Conclusions

70 The inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. However, some sections were more detailed and rigorous than others. Insufficient use was made of lesson observations. Weaknesses, particularly those relating to course pass and retention rates, were understated. Inspectors were able to agree with some of the conclusions reached in the report. In two of the three curriculum areas inspected, inspection findings were broadly in accord with the self-assessment grades. In one area, inspectors considered the standards of some students' achievements and the quality of teaching and learning were overestimated. Inspectors agreed with all but two of the cross-college grades in the self-assessment report. The impact of some significant weaknesses in governance and management was underestimated.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 2000)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	2
16-18 years	20
19-24 years	21
25+ years	57
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 2000)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation) and entry level	27
Level 2 (intermediate)	44
Level 3 (advanced)	18
Level 4/5 (higher)	3
Level (not specified)	8
Non-schedule 2	0
Total	100

Source: college data

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

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision (%)</i>
Science	118	685	16
Agriculture	422	1,626	41
Engineering	30	16	1
Business	0	335	7
Hotel and catering	199	973	23
Health and community care	0	478	9
Humanities	0	129	3
Total	769	4,242	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1998-99 ISR data, the college recruited 5% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (October 2000)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	43	10	4	57
Supporting direct learning contact	29	2	5	36
Other support	40	8	12	60
Total	112	20	21	153

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1998	1999	2000
Income	£6,009,000	£5,578,000	£5,647,000*
Average level of funding (ALF)	£16.95	£16.70*	£17.08*
Payroll as a proportion of income	46%	50%	53%*
Achievement of funding target	99%	94%	90%*
Diversity of income	55%	57%	57%*
Operating surplus	£20,000	-£27,000	-£202,000*

Sources: Income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999), college (2000)

Payroll – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Diversity of income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Operating surplus – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

*provisional data

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1997	1998	1999	1997	1998	1999
1	Number of starters	62	262	255	n/a	6	113
	Retention (%)	84	89	96	n/a	100	99
	Achievement (%)	81	81	89	n/a	100	97
2	Number of starters	266	316	599	371	153	239
	Retention (%)	79	82	77	87	88	85
	Achievement (%)	48	63	65	29	78	69
3	Number of starters	137	239	199	140	211	186
	Retention (%)	81	92	93	84	86	81
	Achievement (%)	64	48	66	57	66	69
4 or 5	Number of starters	n/a	n/a	2	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	50	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	50	n/a	n/a	n/a
Short courses	Number of starters	1,138	2,352	1,690	236	435	459
	Retention (%)	99	100	100	100	100	100
	Achievement (%)	81	99	89	92	99	96
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	25	88	53	11	2	2
	Retention (%)	100	100	100	64	100	100
	Achievement (%)	52	95	83	64	100	95

Source: ISR

n/a not applicable

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