Braintree College

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 92/95

BRAINTREE COLLEGE
EASTERN REGION
Inspected September 1994 – March 1995

Summary

Braintree College works closely with local schools and community groups and has successfully established its role as a new tertiary institution. There is imaginative leadership from senior managers and teaching and support staff work effectively in teams. A wide range of general and vocational courses are available for school leavers and provision for adults is being increased. Teaching and tutorial support for students are well integrated and students achieve good examination results on many programmes. The main college site has been attractively redeveloped and students benefit from a high standard of accommodation and information technology resources. Links with employers are limited. The tutorial system does not fully meet the needs of adult students. There are poor rates of retention on a few programmes and uneven support for students with additional basic skills needs. Staff are strongly committed to improving quality but systematic procedures for course monitoring and evaluation are at an early stage of development.

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

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics, sciences and computing	2	Creative and performing arts	2
Business and management	2	Humanities and languages	2
Hotel and catering Leisure and tourism	2 2	Basic education	2
Health and social care	2		

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INTRODUCTION

1   Braintree College, in Essex, was inspected between September 1994 and March 1995. Enrolment and induction were inspected in September, curriculum area inspections were carried out between December and February and cross-college aspects were inspected from 27 to 31 March 1995. Ninety-five days were used for the inspection. A total of 215 teaching sessions were observed. Inspectors scrutinised samples of students' coursework and held discussions with staff, students, members of the corporation and representatives from local schools, industry, the Essex Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), the community and higher education.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2   Braintree College is a tertiary college which opened in September 1992 following the reorganisation of post-16 education in the town. As a result of the reorganisation the three 11-18 secondary schools in Braintree discontinued post-16 provision and the college of further education closed. The tertiary college opened on the site of the former further education college with new and refurbished accommodation. Full-time staff from the former college and some staff from school sixth forms were brought together in the new college.

3   There are no other post-16 education establishments in Braintree town. In 1994, almost 75 per cent of the year 11 students from the three 11-16 partner schools enrolled as full-time students at the college. There are three other further education colleges located within a 15 mile radius of the college: Chelmsford College; The Sixth Form College, Colchester; and Colchester Institute.

4   Essex has the largest school population of any county in England and Wales with 103 secondary schools. There are 12 secondary schools within north-west Essex, the wider catchment area in which the college is situated. Seven of these have sixth forms. The percentage of post-16 year olds continuing in full-time education has increased significantly in Essex from 54 per cent in 1990 to 71 per cent in 1994. There are wide variations within the county. Brentwood and nearby Chelmsford have the highest participation rates with 75 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively. In the district of Braintree it is 70 per cent.

5   In the 1991 census, the population of the Braintree district was recorded as almost 120,000. The population of the county of Essex was recorded as just over 1.5 million. By the year 2015, it is predicted that the population of the county will grow by 125,000, with an increase of almost 40 per cent in those under the age of 20. In 1991 the resident minority ethnic population in Braintree was 1.3 per cent, the largest group being of Indian origin.

6   Braintree has a tradition of local employment in engineering, construction, manufacturing and agriculture. Over a third of local

residents commute to work, for example, to Greater London and Stansted airport. During the recent economic recession the area served by the college has experienced a rise in unemployment in common with the rest of the south of England. In October 1994, the unemployment rate in Braintree district was 6.9 per cent. This was lower than the average rate of unemployment in the county of 7.7 per cent. A 1993 survey by Essex TEC predicted rising employment in manufacturing, services, retail and distribution and a reduction in the proportion of the population commuting to London.

7   At the time of the inspection in March 1995, the college had 3,842 enrolments. Of these, 1,313 were full-time students and 2,529 were part time. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2. The curriculum of the college covers eight of the Council's programme areas. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3. There were 95 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 63 full-time equivalent support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents is shown in figure 4.

8   The college's mission is to provide high-quality education and training for school leavers, adults and corporate clients. The strategic plan for 1994-97 places great emphasis on the role of the college as an educational resource for the local community and on the objective of increasing access for groups who have not normally entered further education.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

9   Since its formation, Braintree College has successfully achieved its first main objective of expanding provision for 16-19 year olds in order to establish its reputation as a new tertiary college. Full-time students have the choice of a wide range of general and vocational programmes. The college offers 32 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) and 10 GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects. Many subjects have been introduced which were unavailable before tertiary reorganisation. There is a wide choice of modern foreign languages including French, German, Spanish and Portuguese and the opportunity to specialise in theatre studies, dance, music and physical education. The range of full-time vocational provision includes: catering and hospitality; computing; manufacturing; engineering; performing arts; art and design; leisure and tourism; business studies; business administration; nursery nursing and social care. There are General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes at intermediate and advanced level, Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first and national diplomas and some National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programmes.

10   There have been significant changes in the portfolio of courses offered since 1992. Some programme areas such as construction have closed completely and new courses have been developed in performing arts. In many programme areas, full-time students have a wide choice of options. For example, in art and design there are vocational courses at foundation,

intermediate and advanced level, GCE A level and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). In other programme areas full-time students have less choice. For example, in computing there are only four courses on offer; GCSE information systems, GCE A level computer science, the BTEC first diploma in information technology and the BTEC national diploma in computing. The range of courses on offer to part-time students also varies between programme areas. There is a choice of 24 GCSE subjects and a good selection of business, accounting, secretarial and counselling courses. In contrast, there are no part-time leisure and tourism programmes.

11   Many full-time programmes are timetabled on a modular basis. This enables students to take additional studies to supplement their main programmes. For example, students on the advanced GNVQ leisure and tourism course can gain awards as community sports leaders or take an NVQ in travel services. It is also possible to combine the study of GNVQ with an appropriate GCE A level or GCSE English or mathematics, but few students have chosen this combination. The development of a modular curriculum is also designed to enhance access for adult students during the day, but few adults have enrolled on this basis.

12   Adults are well represented on some specialist programmes. For example, in health and social care over 100 adult students are enrolled on BTEC continuing education units in counselling. There is also an access to higher education programme and a wide range of non-vocational courses which attract nearly 1,000 adults. The college assists adults to study during the day through the provision of a 25-place playgroup. In addition to its own provision, the college sponsors Braintree Adult Community College which has four local centres. The college also shares sponsorship of East Essex Adult Community College with another institution.

13   As an associate college of Anglia Polytechnic University, the college has gained validation for some university degree and higher diploma modules. Through the university's credit accumulation scheme, students can gain credit for modules completed at college and continue on to degree and higher diploma courses at the university. At the time of the inspection, there were 221 part-time students studying for higher level qualifications, such as the NVQ level 4 for accounting technicians and the BTEC higher national certificate in social care (childhood studies). The progression to higher education of full-time GNVQ students is also facilitated through the 'Anglia Compact', an arrangement by which students register an interest in undertaking university courses. In return, the university offers a series of taster days and recognises student achievement in GNVQ core skills units for the purpose of university entrance. At the time of the inspection, 33 GNVQ advanced students had made a compact commitment with the university.

14   There is limited provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The main full-time course, the 'bridge programme' is designed

for school leavers and includes basic skills and work experience. Since 1993, only one student has progressed from the 'bridge programme' to mainstream courses. There is no part-time provision for adult students with severe learning difficulties and very few full-time students with moderate learning difficulties are integrated on mainstream vocational programmes.

15   Close links have been forged with local schools and community organisations through some innovative projects. One example is a scheme entitled 'Class 2000', launched in September 1994, which is charting the progress of 600 ten year old pupils from Braintree primary schools until they enter further education in the year 2000. To start the project a 'time capsule' containing information on all the children was buried in the college grounds. It will be dug up and opened in 2000. The college runs French classes on Saturday mornings for children aged 5-11. Another unusual initiative is the establishment of a Saturday programme for high-achieving pupils from the local schools. The programme includes a mathematics master class, creative writing and problem solving investigations in science. There are also activities for senior citizens such as 'the Riverside Club', whose members enrol as college students and attend classes on Friday afternoons. The calendar of events includes talks, social activities and classes in art, bridge, French and calligraphy.

16   The senior management team regards marketing as central to the achievement of strategic objectives and takes collective responsibility for it. There is no separate marketing function or marketing officer but the emphasis placed on achieving marketing goals is illustrated by the inclusion of marketing as a standing item on the weekly management team agenda. The principal and other members of the senior management team take a lead in promoting the college by participating in open evenings at local schools and other events. These receive substantial press coverage and are well regarded by careers teachers. However, there are no operational targets, estimates of expenditure or other means of evaluating the effectiveness of marketing. The development of new courses has not been closely linked to the identification of market needs.

17   Contacts with industry are based primarily on links gained through the supervision of student work placements and the use of advisory panels in two curriculum areas: business studies and health and social care. There is potential to improve the range and number of contacts. The provision of full-cost courses is very limited and relies heavily upon initiatives by individual groups of staff. Contracts with Essex TEC are restricted to a youth training contract for special training needs and a project on adult guidance.

18   Staff within the college are aware of equal opportunities issues and management commitment is evidenced by the recent appointment of a college co-ordinator for equal opportunities and special needs. There is an equal opportunities policy, but there are no standards to guide practice nor any monitoring procedures to evaluate the extent of implementation.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

19   Tertiary reorganisation in 1992 provided the opportunity to develop new structures for managing the college. A principal and two vice-principals were appointed before the new college opened. Staff from the former college and school sixth forms were appointed to new roles. Many distinctive features of governance and management have resulted from the approach adopted in managing this change. There is a flat management structure, with few tiers of decision making and a strong emphasis on decision making by teams at every level of the organisation. Communication of management decisions is facilitated by common membership of overlapping teams.

20   The corporation has 11 members. Members decided to limit their numbers to facilitate the development of a team approach and to assist in rapid decision making. The principal and the two vice-principals, collectively referred to as the principalship, are members of the corporation, the two vice-principals as co-opted members. There are five independent business members. They have expertise in private enterprise, banking, local government and personnel management. One of the members is the nominee of Essex TEC. Community interests are covered by a member who is the chair of governors of one of the partner secondary schools. There are two female members. All of the independent members have had a long association with the former college of further education. There are currently no members drawn from higher education or the student body. At the time of the inspection there was one vacancy. Members of the corporation were seeking to fill the position having identified the need to widen the range of expertise and to increase the number of female members.

21   The corporation delegates matters of detail to five subcommittees: audit, buildings and physical assets, employment policy, finance and remuneration. Most members of the corporation are members of at least two committees. The principalship are members of all the committees except the audit and the remuneration committees. The overlapping membership enables quick decision making without constant referral to other committees. Strategic decisions are made by the full corporation.

22   The members of the corporation have a strong commitment to the development of the college and to the advancement of students. Committee meetings are well attended and members devote considerable time to their responsibilities. They continually seek improvements to the way the college functions. For example, they have recently examined and requested changes to personnel and financial procedures and practices. Day-to-day management of the college and the details of curriculum delivery are regarded as the responsibility of the principalship. The corporation has not yet formally reviewed its own effectiveness, including its membership. It has established a review policy but this has not been implemented. Some of the performance targets it employs are too descriptive to assess the extent to which strategic objectives have been achieved.

23   The management of the curriculum and pastoral support are closely integrated at every level. One of the vice-principals has direct responsibility for teams of staff who deliver the curriculum and the other vice-principal has responsibility for support staff and financial resources. In addition to the principalship, the senior management team includes a director of resources, who has day-to-day responsibility for the management of learning resources across the college, and a director of staff and student services. Prior to the opening of the college, this team worked closely together on the design and development of the new institution. The senior management team provide clear strategic direction and promote values that are shared by the rest of the college. Staff exhibit a positive attitude to the challenges facing the college and welcome the opportunity to be involved in its development.

24   Curriculum delivery is the responsibility of seven curriculum teams. At the time of reorganisation, a decision was taken to avoid the establishment of a departmental structure which had existed in the former college of further education. Within each team, there is a senior tutor who has responsibility for pastoral support and deputises for the team leader. The structure is kept under review and this has resulted in some recent changes. In September 1994, two of the curriculum team leaders were allocated cross-college roles with responsibility for curriculum development and quality control. These responsibilities are in addition to their existing roles. At the time of the inspection little progress had been made in formally assessing the additional workload of these managers or the additional resources needed to discharge these functions effectively.

25   Strategic and operational planning is well developed at college level and supported by the use of a computer-based model. The strategic plan effectively links together curriculum planning, staffing and accommodation. There are explicit performance targets at college level for enrolment, retention and examination performance. The updating of the strategic plan is based upon the mid-year reviews of curriculum area plans produced by curriculum team leaders. The level of detail in these plans is variable and targets and developments are not always explicit. The college is developing the concept of an annual contract for each curriculum team that clearly specifies staff resources, performance requirements and required curriculum developments.

26   Internal communication is promoted through overlapping membership of the curriculum and support teams. There are regular meetings at all management levels and well-developed disciplines for the preparation of agendas, minutes and follow-up. The college makes use of task groups to take forward college-wide initiatives. For example, there is a task group on core skills which has developed a proposal to introduce a core-skills programme for full-time GCE A level students. Task groups provide valuable opportunities for staff to contribute their skills and abilities to wider developments. However, the terms of reference and

reporting requirements of task groups are often unclear. Their accountability to line mangers and the academic board are often not defined.

27   Many college policies such as quality assurance, equal opportunities and health and safety are relatively new. There has been limited development of systematic procedures to support effective implementation. Plans vary in terms of their detail and measurable objectives, and in the way team responsibilities are defined. There are few documented processes to identify how information should flow between teaching and support staff or between senior management and formal committees.

28   In 1994-95 the average level of funding is £19.05 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £18.17 per unit. The colleges' income and expenditure for the 16 months to July 1994 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

29   The corporation and senior management team receive monthly reports of income and expenditure. The allocation of financial, accommodation and staff resources to support learning is based upon the assessment of need and the priorities of curriculum team leaders. Curriculum teams have delegated budgets for part-time staff and consumables and some discretion in the pattern of expenditure. For example, in art and design more teaching hours are used in the autumn and spring terms so that students can complete their portfolios before the summer. In catering, students are taught in large groups for theoretical sessions to free staffing resources for close supervision of students' practical work.

30   The management and use of information systems to support decision making is not well developed. There is a range of manual and computerised systems in use. Student data on applications, enrolment, retention and examinations are recorded on the college management information system. The system does not provide comprehensive information to teaching staff, for example to support the recording of attendance or timetabling. Controls over the integrity of information are not yet established. Few curriculum managers have access to on-line information. The college has recently appointed a qualified information systems manager and two management information officers, who are identifying current processes and developing an information systems strategy

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

31   Pastoral and academic support for students are closely linked. There is a senior tutor within each curriculum team to co-ordinate guidance arrangements. Virtually all full-time staff act as personal tutors to full-time students and there is a comprehensive range of student services available through the central admissions and guidance unit. Staff from this unit specialise in school liaison, continuing education, work experience, student liaison, welfare and publicity.

32   There is an effective process of transition of students from local 11-16 partner schools to the college. Designated staff from the college visit schools for open evenings to inform pupils and their parents about courses and careers. All pupils are offered an initial guidance interview to identify which programmes are most suitable. These interviews are held in the schools and parents are encouraged to attend. The college has become accepted as the normal destination for local school leavers.

33   The central admissions system provides clear and impartial advice to all full-time students at the commencement of their courses. There is comprehensive publicity material available such as the information sheets on GCE A level and GCSE subjects. The 1995-96 prospectus contains a concise explanation of the different vocational routes. Staff from the admissions unit maintain comprehensive records of full-time students as they progress through the college. The details of each student's learning programme, examination results and other achievements are held in central files. Advice is given to students wishing to change course or leave the college, through a system of tutor referral to the admissions staff.

34   Procedures for accrediting the prior learning of students are available for some NVQ programmes, such as business administration, but are underdeveloped in most areas. The college is involved in a project with partner schools in Braintree to encourage school pupils at the age of 14 to develop a portfolio containing evidence of their core skills so that they can be accredited and linked to future programmes of study. If successful, this will widen the scope for the accreditation of prior learning.

35   There are comprehensive college guidelines for the induction of first-year full-time students. Students are given information about the college and their chosen course. There is a college student handbook which provides an outline of student services, and separate handbooks for each course which provide details of the content and assessment of each programme. The effectiveness of student induction is evaluated by curriculum teams through an analysis of student views gathered through a common college questionnaire.

36   Initial guidance for adults, particularly evening students, is not well developed. While students aged 16-18 are familiar with the range of student services described in the student handbook, some adult students are unaware of what is available to them. The Essex TEC is funding a college project on adult guidance which aims to tailor initial guidance, induction programmes and tutorial support to the needs of adults.

37   Full-time students are well supported by the tutorial system. They have a weekly tutorial period in groups and are also seen individually by their personal tutor. There are detailed tutorial programmes for each course and a college tutor handbook which contains a clear definition of the role of a personal tutor and an explanation of tutor tasks. The handbook also includes clear advice on how tutors should respond when presented with problems which require referral to experienced counsellors. The

activities of personal tutors are co-ordinated by the senior tutor in each curriculum team. Parents and students speak highly of the quality of student support. Tutorial support for part-time students is less well developed. For example, students studying GCE A levels and GCSEs in the evening do not have personal tutors.

38   Records of achievement are maintained for all full-time students and they are encouraged to update them using a computer database. The involvement of students in identifying their learning objectives through action plans is a positive feature of guidance, particularly for students on GNVQ programmes.

39   There is a wide range of specialist student services including educational and careers advice, welfare and counselling. The college welfare officer deals with travel arrangements, awards and accommodation. There is a student liaison officer who shares an office with the president of the student union and provides advice on student activities including events and entertainment. With her assistance a student committee produces a regular newsletter, 'The Voice'. Advice on applying to higher education is an integral part of the tutorial programme and a college handbook, 'Course Finder 2000' provides students with further information about the range of choices. Students have access to professional careers advice through the Essex Careers and Business Partnership. At present, information on careers is dispersed. Software packages, for example, are located in a computer room away from the college reception area and their use by students is limited. A new location for careers information is planned which will enable all resources to be centralised.

40   Initial diagnostic assessment to identify full-time students' needs for additional basic literacy and numeracy support is conducted at the beginning of the academic year. In 1994-95, approximately 6 per cent of full-time students were identified as requiring significant literacy support and 8 per cent as requiring numeracy support. One-to-one support for students is available in 'the Base', a recently refurbished workshop offering specialist individual support. Support for groups of students is also available through the communication and numeracy workshops. There is poor monitoring of student attendance at these sessions. Procedures for reporting absence are unclear and many students referred to specialist staff for individual support are not receiving it. The college recognises that the overall co-ordination of additional support is not effective.

41   Data collected about student utilisation of student services are not systematically analysed and used to inform planning. For example, the pattern of attendance at careers interviews by students from different tutor groups varies and attendance records are not routinely presented to senior tutors. For some aspects of student services, there are no systematic procedures for collecting data. For example, there is no central system for collecting information on students' actual destinations to employment or higher education.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

42   Most of the teaching is of a good standard. In 67 per cent of the sessions inspected the strengths outweighed the weaknesses. In 6 per cent of the classes the weaknesses outweighed the strengths. Consistently good practice was found on the access to further and higher education programmes for adult students. The following table summarises the grades given for the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		6	32	20	2	0	60
GCSE		6	9	8	1	1	25
GNVQ		13	16	6	3	0	38
NVQ		3	12	8	2	0	25
Vocational diploma and certificate		9	8	10	1	0	28
Other		17	13	6	3	0	39
Total		**54**	**90**	**58**	**12**	**1**	**215**

43   In mathematics and science the teaching of modular GCE A level courses is supported by comprehensive schemes of work which indicate the sequence in which specialist topics are taught. The schemes are also cross-referenced to the course textbook and assessment tasks. Work is regularly set, marked and returned to students with helpful comments. Schemes of work and assessment tasks are less detailed for the GCSE subjects. Science teaching takes place in well-equipped laboratories and students are able to analyse experimental data with the aid of information technology facilities. Most teachers demonstrate good specialist knowledge and present subject matter in a stimulating way. In a small number of classes, the quality of students' experience was limited by poor management of groupwork. In these, the majority of students remained silent while a small number dominated discussion.

44   There is a successful balance between theory and practice in computing courses. For example, in GCE A level computer science students design a computer programme as part of their assessed project work. The practical application of the projects are demonstrated by students in class using a good range of graphical techniques. In more formal classroom teaching, the extent of students' understanding was not checked by direct questioning of individual students. The development of craft skills is central to the styles of teaching employed on engineering courses. Students are able to handle machinery skilfully to develop vocational competencies. However, students' problem solving skills are not fully developed because teachers do not provide sufficient guidance on the application of standard engineering practices to project work.

45   Teaching and assessment are generally well matched to student needs on the GNVQ and NVQ programmes in business. Students work independently in the training office and the information technology resource centre with the aid of well-designed study packs. Assessment criteria are explicit and understood by students who work co-operatively in groups to complete their assignments. Teachers employ case studies to demonstrate the application of economic, legal and accounting principles in the teaching of GCE A level and professional courses, but many students are passive in class and teachers do not always draw upon their work experience. Students on the NVQ level 3 programmes undertake secretarial tasks for college managers. They also manage the training office efficiently to gain supervisory skills and broaden their knowledge of business administration.

46   Adult students work well with younger students completing practical tasks in the kitchen and restaurant areas on the NVQ hotel and catering courses. Staff carefully monitor students' progress with the aid of comprehensive assessment documentation. Students are given the opportunity to develop specialist catering skills, for example in cake decoration and chocolate moulding. On the GNVQ leisure and tourism programmes, students are able to specialise in sports, leisure or tourism. Relevant work experience and industrial visits are linked carefully to realistic assignment tasks.

47   The learning experience of full-time nursery nursing and health and social care students is enriched through specialist inputs from qualified social workers and counsellors pursuing part-time courses at the college. These enable the full-time students to gain an insight into contemporary social issues while providing part-time students with a valuable opportunity to develop their presentational skills. Role-play is also used effectively in class to encourage participation and enliven learning. Teachers successfully engage students' interest. However, the range of assessment methods employed on the GNVQ programmes is limited. Assessment criteria are often unclear. There is too much use of lengthy written reports as assignment tasks. Other tasks are often too simple and do not stretch the more able students.

48   A variety of teaching methods is used in art and design including studio practice, video presentations and one-to-one teaching. Students are given clear project briefs which enable them to extend their knowledge of contemporary materials and techniques. Prompt feedback is given by tutors on the quality of completed work. Critical and historical studies are not given enough emphasis in the teaching of GCE A level art. Students on performing arts and drama courses experiment with make-up, costumes and masks to develop their stage skills and to gain an appreciation of the role of masquerade in theatrical production. In the GCSE dance classes there is an opportunity for students to practice solo, pair and group routines. In a few sessions observed in performing arts, the aims of sessions were unclear and there was little use of visual aids.

49   In English, communications and history the teaching is carefully planned. Student participation is strongly encouraged, sometimes through imaginative teaching methods. For example, in a GCE A level communications class, the teacher devised a role-play in which Bulgarian was spoken for several minutes to demonstrate to students how much meaning is conveyed through non-verbal cues. In sociology and psychology group work is used extensively. For example, in GCE A level sociology students frequently analyse source material from newspapers and other media. Students participate willingly in this activity, but often draw upon their general knowledge rather than applying concepts from the subject when analysing text. In modern foreign languages, teaching is well structured but teachers do not follow a consistent policy on the use of the foreign language in oral work. In some sessions, students were not given sufficient time to respond in the foreign language before the teacher translated or provided a model answer.

50   The teaching of adults on access to higher education programmes is of a consistently high standard. Students are lively and committed to the course and the teaching draws effectively on their work and life experience. Students gain confidence through teaching which is sensitive to their needs. They are encouraged to lead sessions through presenting papers at seminars. This develops their oral skills and builds their self-esteem. Adult students are also well supported on the adult basic education programmes in mathematics and English.

51   There is limited integration of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on mainstream courses. Initial diagnosis of students' needs for support is not systematically organised and subject teachers are not always fully briefed about the nature of students' learning difficulties. There are well-established separate specialist courses for students with moderate learning difficulties, such as the 'bridge programme'. Many of these are designed to prepare students for employment and include a period of work experience. Teachers provide students with challenging tasks and constructive feedback is given to students about their progress, often through individual tutorials.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

52   Students enjoy their studies and speak about their work with enthusiasm. They are encouraged to identify their own targets for learning and assessment. On many courses, they work independently using self-study materials located in resource centres linked to curriculum areas. The involvement of students in the assessment process is a positive feature of many NVQ and GNVQ programmes. Students work closely with tutors to agree learning objectives and monitor their attainments against these objectives. For example, students on the NVQ business administration programmes gather together evidence of their accomplishments in well-organised portfolios. These are presented to independent assessors who carefully check whether appropriate standards have been achieved.

53   Most students who entered in 1994 for the awards in vocational courses offered by the college achieved the qualification they were seeking. Ninety per cent of students aged 16-18 in their final year of study were successful on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education's 1994 performance tables. This places the college among the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this measure. The degree of student success varied between programmes. One hundred per cent pass rates were achieved in the BTEC national diploma in travel and tourism, the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) craft catering courses and the National Nursery Examinations Board (NNEB) diploma. Pass rates at intermediate level in computing, engineering and business studies were much lower. For example, in the BTEC GNVQ intermediate in business the pass rate was 58 per cent and in the BTEC first diploma in engineering it was 33 per cent. Pass rates in the external GNVQ tests are high and over 85 per cent of students who sat these tests in January 1995 were successful.

54   Students' achievements at GCE A level are generally good. In 1994, full-time students achieved 100 per cent pass rates in GCE A level biology, chemistry, theatre studies and German. Pass rates were above the provisional national averages for GCE A level in law, business studies, economics, art, English language, English literature, French, general studies, history and psychology. In mathematics, computer studies and philosophy, pass rates were below the national averages. Students aged 16-18 entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1993-94 scored an average of 4.2 points per subject entry (where A=10, E=2). This places the college among the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, based on the data in the 1994 performance tables published by the Department for Education. The average point score for candidates aged 16-18 taking two or more GCE A levels was 14.6. Using this measure the college was ranked amongst the top third of colleges in the further education sector.

55   The college's GCSE results were above the national average in most subjects. For example, 79 per cent of the 72 students entering for English achieved a grade A-C compared with a provisional national average in 1993 for students aged 16-18 in further education colleges of 46 per cent. Thirty-five per cent of the 51 students aged 16-18 obtained grades A-C in mathematics compared with a provisional national average in 1993 of 28 per cent. In GCSE dance there was a pass rate of 100 per cent.

56   Adult students achieved good results on the access to higher education, GCE A level and GCSE programmes. Of the 68 full-time students aged 19 or over entered for GCSE subjects in 1994, 56 obtained a pass at grades A-C, a pass rate of 82 per cent. The quality of written work of adult students following GCE A level subjects demonstrated a high level of the analytical skills needed for progression to higher education.

57   Student retention rates vary significantly between programmes. There were generally high rates of retention in art and design, leisure and tourism and performing arts, where retention rates for vocational courses and GCE A level subjects were above 90 per cent in 1993-94. Retention rates were also high on the access to higher education programme. In contrast, there were low rates in first year GCE A level computer science with 75 per cent retention and in GCE A level business studies where the retention rate was 68 per cent. Retention rates were also low on the BTEC GNVQ advanced course in health and social care with only 61 per cent of first-year students continuing to the second year. The college has set an 85 per cent retention target for all courses in 1994-95. There has been a detailed analysis of the reasons for the departure of full-time GCE A level students in 1993-94. It indicates that 40 per cent of students who withdrew from GCE A level subjects took up employment or transferred to other courses in the college.

58   Core skills in communication and information technology are taught as an integral part of the curriculum on GNVQ programmes and are timetabled as an additional element on some NVQ programmes. For example, on the GNVQ and NVQ courses in catering, students work independently in the information technology resource centre using wordprocessing, database and spreadsheet applications. The use of information technology is contextualised through well-designed vocational assignments. The development of numeracy skills is less effective as students are often presented with numerical tasks which are unrelated to subjects or occupational areas. Core skills are not yet part of the programme of study of full-time GCE A level students, although there are plans to introduce them in 1995-96. In some GCE subjects the absence of core skills teaching inhibits students' progress. For example, in first-year GCE A level mathematics, many students lacked familiarity with basic algebraic and mathematical functions. This resulted in a slow pace of teaching which inhibited the progress of more able students.

59   Full-time students are given the opportunity to improve their examination technique. For example, second-year GCE A level students sit mock examinations over a five-day period to gain an appreciation of the pressure of coping with intensive formal tests. Estimated grades are collated for each student and reported to them by personal tutors. Where students are perceived to be under performing, additional personal and subject guidance is provided.

60   Practical work is generally well organised and appropriate. Student portfolios in art and design contain many examples of imaginative projects, particularly in photography and sign writing. In motor vehicle and engineering workshop classes students handle specialist equipment skilfully to required industrial standards. Science students conducting experiments in the well-equipped laboratories develop a good standard of written reporting skills in their assessed work.

61   Students participate in a wide range of complementary activities which provide opportunities to develop new skills and sometimes lead to supplementary qualifications. On the leisure and tourism courses, many students gain awards as community sports leaders. Students pursuing courses in music and the performing arts frequently take part in concerts, recitals and theatrical performances and have a good record of success in local music and drama competitions. During national science week, GNVQ health and social care students took part in a national competition which involved the design of safety devices for the elderly.

62   There are good rates of progression to further education, higher education and employment in many curriculum areas. For example, over 90 per cent of students attending the access to higher education programme in 1993-94 continued on to degree or higher diploma courses. Over 50 per cent of students who successfully completed a GCE A level in modern foreign languages went on to study a degree involving further language study. Most students completing vocational programmes at foundation and intermediate levels continue in further education. Over half of the students completing advanced vocational courses, such as BTEC national diplomas went into employment. Records of intended student destinations are collected by tutors and collated centrally. Actual student destinations are reported annually with the publication of information about examination results.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

63   There is a commitment in the college mission statement to improve the quality of learning. From the inception of the new college, the senior management team has strongly encouraged a regard for quality based upon the questioning of existing practice and a search for improvement. A customer care policy has been developed which includes a system for responding to suggestions for improvement from students, employers and staff.

64   Centrally administered student questionnaires are used to gather feedback from students about the quality of provision. These are completed by students at the start, mid-way through and at the end of their courses. There are many examples of improvements in response to students' criticism. These include the building of a new common room, the redesign of induction programmes and the extension of refectory opening hours. However, analysis of the questionnaires is slow and there is little feedback to students. The college is investigating the use of optical mark readers to speed up analysis

65   The targets for recruitment, retention rates and students' achievements within the strategic plan form the basis of monitoring and review. While these targets are well understood by managers, more comprehensive performance indicators have not been developed and teaching staff are unclear what standards are required. The academic

board has been slow in developing a role in reviewing standards and debating quality issues. It considered the pattern of students' achievements for 1994-95, but its evaluation was not linked to clear criteria or performance indicators. Value-added approaches which measure students' examination performance in relation to prior qualifications have been piloted in GCE A level English, but this has not yet informed other curriculum areas. The college is addressing this and has recently joined the Advanced Level Information System and appointed a GCE A level co-ordinator to undertake more systematic analysis of the GCE A level programme.

66   Procedures for review and evaluation at programme level are underdeveloped. Curriculum teams undertook annual reviews of subjects and courses for the first time in 1994-95. The resulting reports provide a summary of developments but lack self-critical comment or information on the performance of students through an analysis of retention rates, completion and examination results. The quality manager, appointed in September 1994, is establishing a common framework for review and evaluation.

67   As part of its response to inspection requirements, a self-assessment report was produced by the college under the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. This provides an overview of progress achieved against the objectives set when the college opened. Where appropriate, cross-reference is made to the strategic plan and other management documents. Evidence is also drawn from the annual reviews undertaken by curriculum teams.

68   The self-assessment report is clearly presented and highlights perceived strengths such as the good relationships with local schools and the effectiveness of teamwork throughout the organisation. It also identifies areas for development such as the need to increase links with employers and to improve opportunities for the accreditation of prior learning. Many of the judgements in the report concur with the findings of the inspection team.

69   Common procedures are being developed to check the consistency of internal assessment on NVQ and GNVQ programmes. In recognition of the variability of current practice a uniform approach to internal verification has been drawn up by the college quality assurance committee. External moderator and verifier reports indicate that assessment standards are appropriate.

70   The college charter is a well-produced and detailed document. Some staff are starting to use it as a framework for quality which defines the standards of service provided. First-year full-time students were introduced to the charter as part of induction and several have used it to articulate complaints. Not all part-time students are aware of the charter commitments. The college has not yet undertaken steps to review the charter and to promote its further development.

71   There is a strong commitment to staff development for all teaching and support staff. This is reflected in an allocated budget for 1994-95 of £34,500 to fund staff attendance at conferences and other external events. There is also an allocation of 6 per cent of total teaching hours to curriculum team leaders to support specialist curriculum development. The college has expressed its intention to work towards the achievement of the Investors in People standard but has not yet made a formal commitment to Essex TEC. Progress in training staff for the competence standards of the Training and Development Lead Body has been slow. At the time of inspection 16 staff had gained assessor qualifications and no member of staff has been accredited as an internal verifier. A number of staff were well advanced in completing assessment for these awards.

72   The college has a well-designed appraisal system which has been introduced for all full-time teaching staff and on a voluntary basis for support staff. Staff are very positive about the scheme. There are plans to extend the scheme to part-time staff and to introduce an element of classroom observation.   The outcomes of appraisal are not yet systematically linked to staff development. The college has a published policy for the induction of new staff but its implementation is organised at curriculum team level and this leads to variation in the quality of guidance for new appointees.

RESOURCES

Staffing

73   There is a full-time equivalent staff of 95 teachers and 63 support staff. Of the 78 full-time teaching staff 15 were recruited from schools and the rest have a background in further education or are recent recruits from industry. Teachers are well qualified for the teaching and course development they undertake. The majority have a degree or higher professional qualification and 22 have post-graduate degrees. Over 90 per cent of teachers and five support staff have a formal teaching qualification. Part-time staff teach 30 per cent of the total teaching hours. In most curriculum areas there is a good balance of full-time and part-time staff but in a few areas, an over-reliance on part-time staff is inhibiting the range of courses offered to students. In computing, where there are only two full-time staff supported by eight part-time staff, the range of qualifications and experience of the staff group has constrained curriculum development.

74   Most teaching staff have appropriate vocational skills and a good range of work experience. In a few vocational areas staff lack recent industrial experience. In leisure and tourism and engineering, experience of current industrial practice is limited. There are few full-time staff with recent social work experience on the health and social care programmes. Many staff have good information technology skills but in modern languages and performing arts, staff are not sufficiently familiar with recently-installed specialist equipment to make full use of it.

75   Staff working in administrative, clerical and technical capacities work closely with teaching staff. Technical services staff are well qualified. They are centrally managed and this has led to their flexible deployment across curriculum teams. For example, technicians specialising in chemistry and physics also support the communications and numeracy workshops. There is a resource-based learning team to support student learning in the library and other resource centres. They are actively involved in assisting students and teachers with project work and independent study. There are good working relations between support and teaching staff.

76   A human-resource policy forms part of the strategic plan. There is a comprehensive staff handbook for full-time staff which is systematically updated. Part-time staff receive a separate handbook, designed to meet their needs for basic information on teaching and administration. There are job descriptions for all staff and these are reviewed and amended as job roles change.

Equipment/learning resources

77   The college is generally well equipped and resources are effectively deployed. The level of specialist equipment is appropriate in most areas. Some curriculum areas, such as nursery nursing and history, have developed base rooms which provide a distinctive subject ambience through the use of displays. A travel office, for use by students pursuing leisure and tourism courses, is well sited in the foyer but contains only a limited range of travel brochures. The specialist performing arts, dance and drama studio and lighting rigs in the hall allow students to stage ambitious productions. Science laboratories are well maintained with up-to-date scientific equipment. The motor vehicle workshop has insufficient space for the cars which students work on. There is a lack of modern equipment for engine management and advanced braking systems.

78   There is a strong commitment to develop learning-resource centres, linked to each curriculum area, to enable students to work independently using open-learning materials and information technology equipment. The extent of the development of resource-based learning varies between subjects. In modern languages, the availability of satellite television and new audio-visual resources has expanded the range of learning methods. In health and social care, the resource base contains few facilities. In addition to the resource bases for curriculum areas, there are workshops for information technology, communications and mathematics which can accommodate large groups of students and are well served by teaching and technical staff.

79   The library provides a welcoming environment and has spaces for both group work and private study. It is supplemented by an attractive quiet study room which can accommodate 40 students. There is a range of books, periodicals, audio-visual, and computing resources and these

are well used by students. In most curriculum areas there are enough books for the number of students, but in tourism, sports studies and history the current stock is inadequate. The college purchases essential textbooks for students aged 16-18 and curriculum teams are allocated a budget for this purpose. The future role of the library as a general learning resource has not been evaluated in the light of the separate development of the learning-resource centres.

80   There has been substantial investment in the provision of information technology. There are about 150 computers available for student use which gives a student to computer ratio of approximately 10:1. The majority of computers are modern with an appropriate range of software. An efficient booking system allows good access for groups of students as well as individual students who make use of the workshops on a drop-in basis.

Accommodation

81   The main campus is situated on a pleasant 4.2 hectare site adjacent to a rural area on the outskirts of Braintree. It is bounded on one side by a conservation area and the grounds are attractively landscaped with a variety of established trees and shrubs. There is car parking for approximately 390 vehicles. The site accounts for 98 per cent of total college accommodation and contains a variety of buildings constructed mainly in the 1960s and early 1970s. Two large extensions were completed in 1992 as part of a £6.5 million building and refurbishment programme funded by Essex County Council. The reception and foyer areas are well sited and provide a welcoming atmosphere. Staff and students are complimentary about the standard and quality of the college environment. The refectory and adjoining common room provide a good central social focus for students. Careful consideration has been given to the needs of those with restricted mobility, hearing or sight impairment. Ramps provide wheelchair access to all buildings and lifts have Braille operating buttons and a voice message which announces floor numbers and warns of doors opening and closing.

82   There are eight mobile classrooms of varying standard on the site. Two of these have been converted for use as a 25-place playgroup. There is also a sports hall on the campus but its accommodation and facilities are of a low standard. The heating and ventilation systems are inadequate and changing and shower facilities are limited. The college also owns a sports field (2.3 hectares) which is located approximately half a mile from the main campus. The college makes use of a local sports and leisure centre to ensure that students have access to good facilities. A small second site, the Courtauld Road annexe, is situated half a mile away. It is used on a regular basis for performing arts and yoga but its overall use for general teaching is low. The building is in need of refurbishment and in 1993-94 was used mainly for examinations.

83   There is an extensive accommodation strategy which includes a planned and costed maintenance schedule. A recent needs analysis has identified the changing demands for accommodation and has led to improved utilisation. For example, a former woodshop was converted to a flexible art and design studio and a mechanical engineering room to a multi-skill workshop. All specialist and general purpose rooms are allocated centrally and utilisation is monitored against explicit criteria. Priority is given to students with restricted mobility.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

84   The college has made significant progress towards achieving its mission. Its strengths are:

- a wide range of programmes with clear progression routes for most students

- excellent links with local schools and the community

- strong leadership from senior management

- effective teamwork throughout the organisation

- good integration of pastoral and academic support for students

- a comprehensive range of student services

- firm commitment of staff to improving quality

- high standards of teaching in many curriculum areas

- high levels of student achievement and good examination results in most areas

- strong commitment to staff development

- well-qualified and motivated teaching and support staff

- appropriate and well-maintained accommodation.

85   If it is to build upon its existing strengths the college should address the following:

- the narrow range of provision in some curriculum areas

- the limited links with employers

- the lack of systematic procedures to support the implementation of college policies

- the poor rates of retention on some programmes

- the uneven support for students with identified basic skills needs

- the underdeveloped guidance system for adult students

- the inconsistent development of resource-based learning

- the lack of an established system for programme monitoring and review.

FIGURES

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

Figure 1

Braintree College: percentage enrolments by age (as at March 1995)

Under 16
2%

16-18 years
28%

25+ years
51%

19-24 years
19%
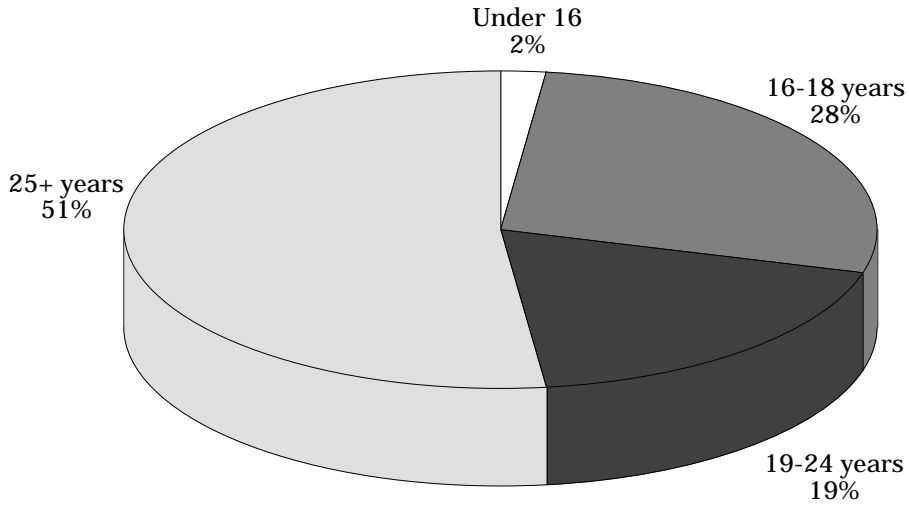
Enrolments: 3,842

Figure 2

Braintree College: percentage enrolments by level of study (as at March 1995)

Leisure/recreation
(non-schedule 2)
26%

Foundation
5%

Higher
education
6%

Intermediate
42%

Advanced
21%
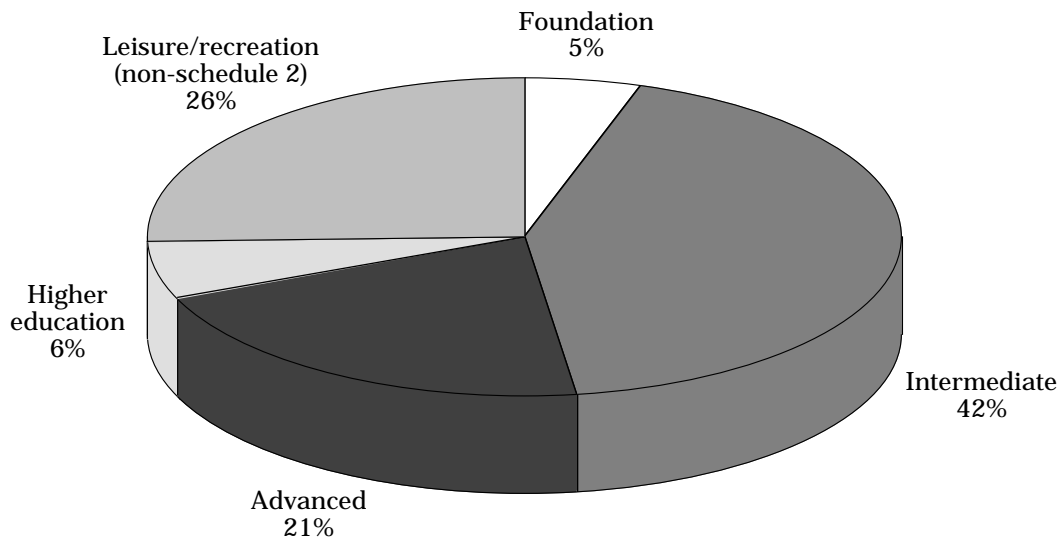
Enrolments: 3,842

Figure 3

**Braintree College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area
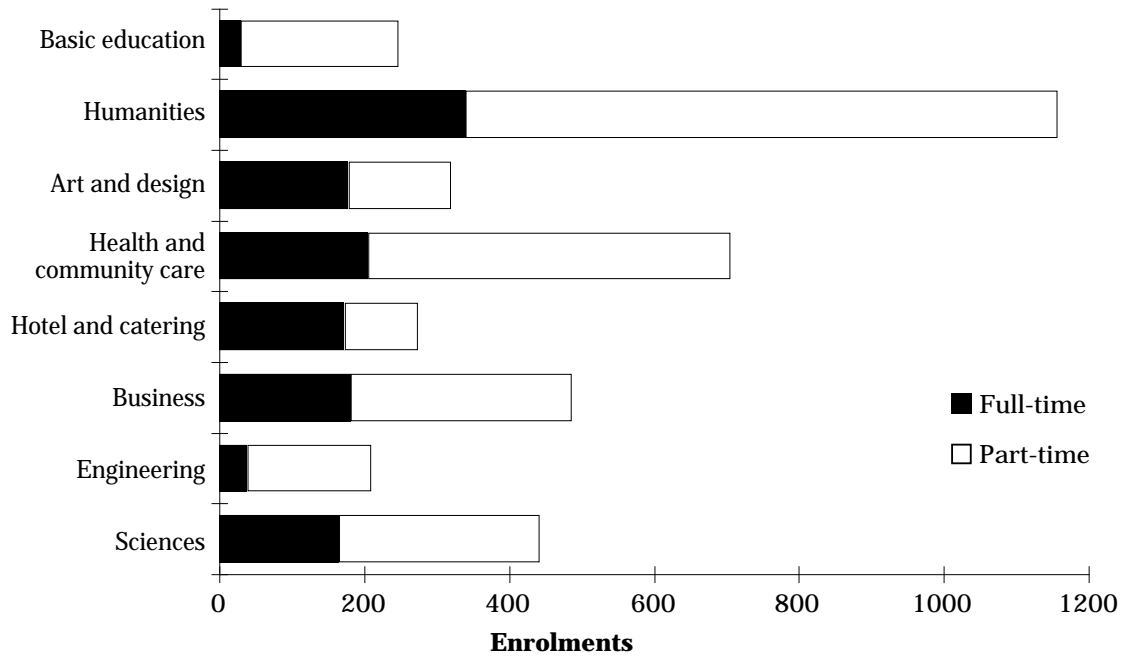(as at March 1995)**

Enrolments: 3,842

Figure 4

**Braintree College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents
(as at March 1995)**

Full-time equivalent staff: 158
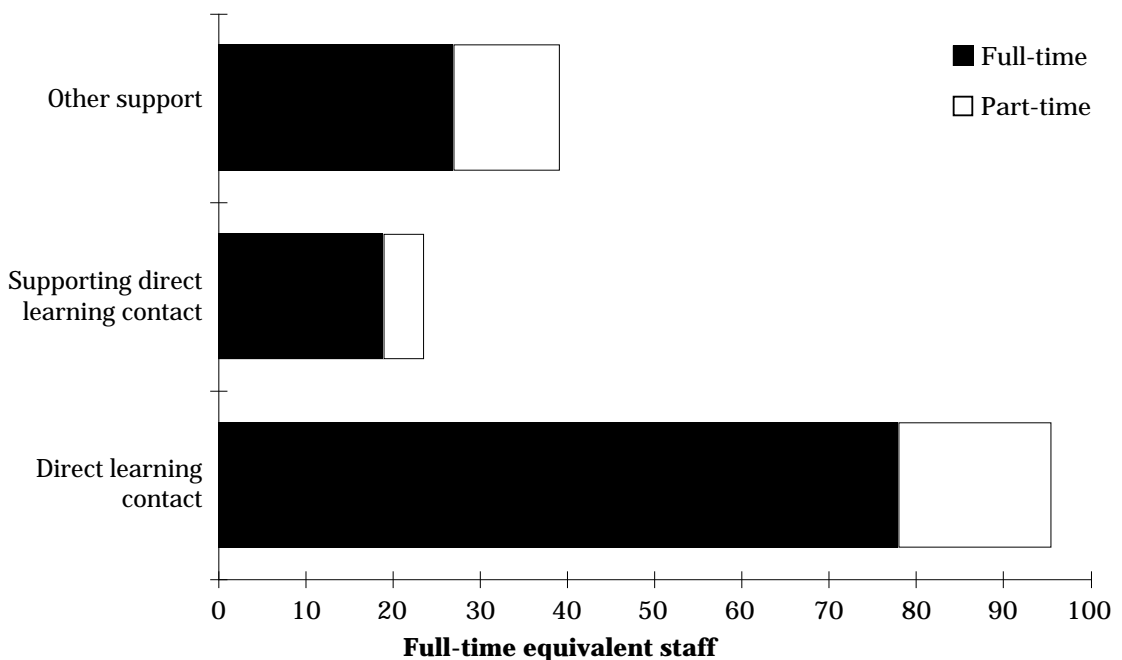
Figure 5

Braintree College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)

☐ FEFC recurrent funding

◼ Capital grants

◼ Education contracts

☐ Tuition fees

◼ Other grant income

☐ Other operating income

◼ Other income-
generating activities

2% 6% 3% 1% 3% 2%

83%
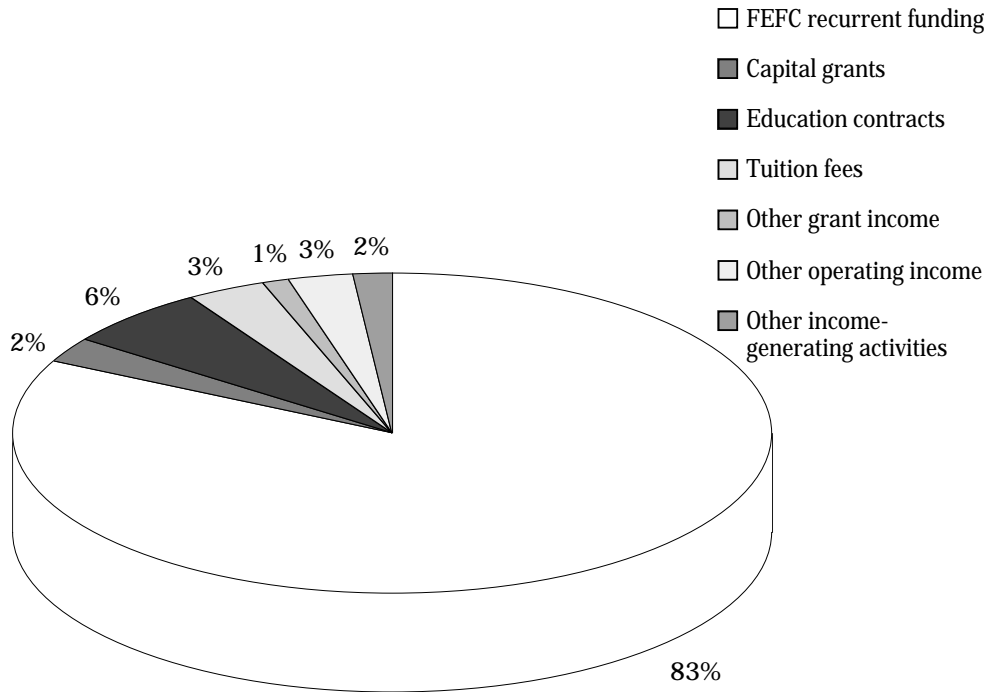
Income: £7,436,882

Figure 6

Braintree College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

Depreciation
8%

Other
operating
expenses
23%

Staff costs
69%

Expenditure: £5,975,601

26