

REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE

**City of
Stoke-on-Trent
Sixth Form
College**

June 1996

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

By June 1995, some 208 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 208 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-95

	Inspection grades				
Activity	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	60%	28%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	13%	51%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	11%	56%	29%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 87/96

CITY OF STOKE-ON-TRENT SIXTH FORM COLLEGE

WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Inspected April 1995-March 1996

Summary

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College provides mainly for full-time students aged 16 to 19. The corporation, senior managers and the staff are strongly committed to maintaining this position whilst carefully extending the curriculum and recruiting from a wider cross-section of the community. The college is adding to its wide range of GCE A levels by introducing evening provision for adults and has launched some GNVQs. The college has grown steadily in recent years despite strong competition from other local colleges and schools. Standards of teaching are high. Examination results are good in the majority of subjects. The college benefits from expert and experienced governors and effective leadership. Strong partnerships have been forged with local organisations which enable the college to play a valuable part in developments within the local community. Staff are dedicated and experienced; they provide a supportive and caring environment for students. The college's self-assessment report is perceptive and thorough. There has been considerable investment in renovating and improving the college buildings and facilities. To continue the progress that has been made since incorporation, the college should: ensure its growth and curriculum objectives are closely linked to resource development strategies; make improvements in library provision; take action to reduce overcrowding in some areas; continue to improve those parts of the accommodation which are in poor condition; fully implement staff appraisal; and further develop some aspects of personnel management.

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

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science	2	Art and design	1
Mathematics	2	English	2
Business studies	1	Modern languages	2
		Other humanities	2

INTRODUCTION

1 The inspection of City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College took place between April 1995 and March 1996. The curriculum was inspected in April and November 1995 and aspects of cross-college provision in March 1996. Enrolment and induction were inspected in August and September 1995. The inspection team spent a total of 60 days in the college. Inspectors observed 133 teaching sessions, examined students' work, and held discussions with students, staff, and members of the corporation. They also met parents, employers, head teachers of local schools, and representatives of the community, higher education, and the Staffordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation including the college's strategic plan, its self-assessment report, policy statements and a variety of committee minutes.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College is one of the largest sixth form colleges in the country. It opened in 1970 in purpose-built accommodation situated in a spacious and green area in the potteries. Students are drawn from a wide geographical area: the majority are from the North Staffordshire conurbation. The college was planned initially for 700 students. On 1 November 1995, the college had 1,646 full-time students and 183 part-time students. The majority of students are full time and aged between 16 and 19. The number of students from minority ethnic groups has increased steadily to just under 11 per cent of the 1995-96 enrolment. This figure is well above the percentage of people from minority ethnic groups in Stoke-on-Trent. Enrolments by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

3 Levels of educational achievement at 16 and of post-16 participation are lower in Stoke-on-Trent than in Staffordshire as a whole and nationally. The college is a key participant in local initiatives to raise aspirations and achievement. In particular, it is keen to improve the educational performance of 16 to 19 year olds and to encourage more young people to participate in further education. Participation rates have risen from just under 30 per cent in 1989 to 52 per cent in 1995. The college's mission is to provide high-quality education in a supportive community, where all students are encouraged to achieve their full personal and academic potential.

4 The college has links with 21 partner schools which cater for pupils aged 11 to 16. There are three Catholic 11 to 18 schools within the area. Outside the conurbation all schools have sixth forms. There are three other further education colleges in North Staffordshire and two universities nearby.

5 Stoke-on-Trent has a population of approximately 250,000. Manufacturing remains an important activity. The country's major producers of pottery and allied ceramic ware are located in the city and account for over half of manufacturing employment. There are other large national and multinational employers in businesses such as tyre manufacturing and mechanical engineering. The recent improvement in employment opportunities comes largely from the distribution and service sector. The city has recently been successful in bidding for a number of regeneration grants.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 In developing its strategic plans, the college has taken account of the work of other post-16 providers and has developed a distinctive role for itself within the community. The emphasis upon full-time 16 to 19 provision has been discussed fully by corporation members and staff, and curriculum development work has been undertaken with this clearly in mind. The diversification that has occurred in opening the college in the evenings and extending the general education provision to adult students has been thoroughly discussed and does not conflict with the college's main purpose. The development is seen by staff as a welcome addition to the college's activities, reinforcing its role within the community and assisting the organisation to realise its vision of promoting education throughout life.

7 Students attending the college full time can study from a range of over 50 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level), and 35 GCE advanced supplementary (GCE AS) subjects. GCE A levels are increasingly being introduced as modular programmes. The college offers 25 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) have been phased in and are available in five vocational areas. The GNVQs at foundation, intermediate and advanced level were introduced for students who wanted a vocational education. The availability of vocational qualifications was also seen as an opportunity to contribute to the national targets for education and training by attracting more students, and from a wider cross-section of the community. The college's 'entitlement' policy enables students to build individual learning programmes. Timetabling is driven by students' choice of subjects. In addition to their main programme of study, students participate in a range of enrichment activities which include music, physical and leisure activities, languages and work experience.

8 The college enjoys good working relationships with local high schools which provide education for 11 to 16 year olds. Over the last two years, substantial research and action planning have contributed to improve communication between the college and schools. During the inspection, school representatives spoke favourably about the work of the liaison tutors allocated to their schools. They made appreciative comments about college tutors' efforts to promote greater participation in further education

by involving pupils from their schools in activities at the college. For example, students from several schools regularly attend a mathematics quiz designed and hosted by the college. To assist a smooth transition to post-16 education, the college has improved the range and presentation of subject-specific information available in the schools. Senior managers from the college participate in the Stoke 14 to 19 curriculum group, a forum that discusses progression. Schools have welcomed teacher exchanges as a means of promoting a mutual understanding of curriculum issues. Those introducing GNVQs in schools have benefited from the experiences of the college, and college staff are interested in exploring issues concerned with accreditation of students' prior learning. The college works closely with a local special school to provide opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to take up college courses. These students are integrated with other students on mainstream provision and provided with appropriate additional support.

9 There is close co-operation between the college and two local universities. The Keele Access Programme and the Priority Application Staffordshire scheme are both initiatives which have encouraged progression to higher education. University representatives spoke highly of the support given by college staff to students applying to their institutions, and welcomed developments such as university tutors being invited into the college to exchange information about curriculum developments, particularly GNVQs.

10 College staff have forged valuable partnerships with local organisations and the principal encourages staff to participate in community work. The college is a partner in a project aimed at helping residents within a disadvantaged area of the city to improve their skills, qualifications and suitability for employment. Representatives of community organisations, schools and local businesses are enthusiastic about the college's academic success and its willingness to become involved in city-wide developments. One example frequently cited was the involvement of the college as a sponsor and participant in the Aiming High project. The three-month project was aimed at raising the aspirations of school pupils in year 9. It involved sponsorship from leading national, regional and local companies, and included school-based projects and visits by speakers of international renown. The college has recently appointed a community links organiser specifically to develop work within the immediate vicinity of the college. The college had a float in the Fenton carnival and several fundraising events involving students have taken place. GCE A level theatre studies students spoke favourably about the benefits they derived from the college becoming a touring venue for regional and local theatre groups.

11 There has been increased dialogue with Staffordshire TEC following the college's introduction of vocational qualifications. The TEC has funded a careers convention and a student tutoring project and it supports the college in working towards the achievement of Investors in People.

Funding through the Further Education Development Agency has promoted the development of GNVQ programmes and helped the college respond effectively to the specific learning needs of the students recruited. Links with employers have been developed primarily through the work experience module accredited by the open college. This is taken up by over 100 students each year. The college has completed an audit of the range of employers with which it has developed links and the nature of the work involved. This information will be used to construct a database for informing future planning. A business and community links group has recently been established with a wide remit and diverse composition. As it develops, there will be a need to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of tangible outcomes and benefits to the college.

12 The marketing function of the college is recently established. The appointment of a senior postholder in June 1995 to take a strategic overview of this work has added momentum to an area of the college's work that was acknowledged in the strategic plan as requiring development. Attention is now being given to the potential use of market research to inform curriculum planning, the co-ordination of promotional events and activities, and the projection of a corporate image. The college has devised a marketing plan containing key tasks, actions and targets. Organisational issues affecting the relationship between central and departmental activities have yet to be worked through.

13 The college's equal opportunities policy is being reviewed by the equal opportunities committee. Implementation of the existing policy is monitored as part of subject review and evaluation procedures. Community languages are being used in the most recent promotional literature, particularly prospectuses advertising the adult and community programme. The college recognises and celebrates major Islamic and Hindu festivals.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

14 The corporation of the college is well led and functions effectively. It has 16 members, including the principal. There are 10 business members who have a wide range of experience at senior level in finance, manufacturing, property development, education, law, health care, and public services. The chairman is the chief executive of the chamber of commerce and also the TEC nominee. The board also has a member nominated by parents, a member nominated by the college staff, a member nominated by local headteachers and two co-opted members. A significant proportion of board members are women and there are also members from minority ethnic groups. Two student representatives attend meetings as observers. Members are highly committed to the college and have made a major contribution to raising its profile in the local community. Their expertise has been particularly valuable in fostering a high quality of committee work. There are committees covering academic planning and quality; audit; finance and general purposes; land and premises; and remuneration. Terms of reference have been fully discussed and agreed.

15 Governors have an understanding of the distinction between governance and management and are careful not to trespass on the work of college managers. The corporation takes a strong lead on strategic planning and development. Governors have a good command of strategic issues and have reached a keenly debated consensus on the strategic direction of the college. They attend meetings regularly and give valued support at college functions. Meetings include regular reports from the principal and there are often presentations by college staff on such matters as marketing and quality. Governors take a particular interest in curriculum issues and give thorough consideration to students' achievements and to improving the performance of the college. Although the corporation has determined a wide range of college policies, it has not given sufficient attention to monitoring their implementation.

16 The college's finances are scrutinised by the finance and general purposes committee. The committee has looked at income and funding allocations, expenditure, cash flow projections, and balance sheets. The finance and general purposes committee discusses current expenditure but receives full reports on only one or two occasions each year. The committee has recently adopted a revised format for reports on income and expenditure and has decided to consider these more regularly. Minutes of meetings sometimes do not reflect the attention given to financial reports received.

17 Since incorporation, the college has been well led and staff have developed a positive outlook on change. The senior management team meets once a week to plan and review college business. There have been regular discussions and improvements in the way the team works and management development opportunities have been used to build up general management skills. The management structure is understood by staff and serves the college well. There are 27 staff with middle management responsibilities as heads of subject. Some adjustments to this structure may be needed as the college develops. Management papers often indicate that action is required in particular areas but they have not always defined the task, allocated the person to be responsible for it or established the deadlines within which such action should be completed.

18 Responsibilities for policies on health and safety, equality of opportunity, quality, information, students' support and environmental issues are clearly allocated. There are a number of publications, including the college's own version of yellow pages, which list the staff in charge of each area of the college's work.

19 Revisions to the college's strategic plan are being carefully organised. A weekend conference has been held recently for governors and senior managers to consider the revisions. All staff have been involved in the early stages of formulating the new plan. Full-day meetings have given them opportunities to comment on the future direction of the college and to consider ways in which they can build on their strengths. Curriculum

areas and cross-college services have used the outcomes of these meetings to assist in setting their own aims and objectives. The original strategic plan has been regularly revised to secure a balanced development of all the college facilities. In determining the revised strategy, the corporation and senior managers should continue to give close attention to the relationship between their overall priorities and the development of appropriate resources.

20 Careful attention is paid to efficiency. The college has recently used consultants to analyse its income and costs in comparison with those of other colleges. Its costs were found to be tightly controlled and, in many areas, lower than average. Managers and curriculum leaders understand the basis on which capital and recurrent funds are allocated. Staff hours are monitored and some information on unit costs has been produced.

21 The college relies heavily on a single source of funding. It receives 96.6 per cent of its funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and is seeking ways of reducing this degree of dependence. In 1994-95 the college's average level of funding was £18.81. The median for sixth form colleges was £19.89. The FEFC's publication, *Funding Allocations 1995-96*, shows that the total allocation of recurrent funding for 1995-96 is £4,208,987 to fund 227,664 units of activity. The average level of funding for the college is £18.49 per unit. The median for sixth form colleges is £19.37. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

22 Computerised management information can be produced quickly and accurately in response to requests for information from external organisations such as the FEFC. The college has been a pilot site for the development of the individual student record and the staff individual record. Managers have contributed to developing the manual needed for maintaining the two records. At present, the college is developing a strategy for improving the management information available for internal purposes. Management information relating to enrolments, staff, and students' achievements is readily available. The computerised system does not provide information on student attendance though the college has well-developed plans to improve the system.

23 Enrolment targets are set but they are not related to specific curriculum areas. Managers have decided that it is more appropriate to concentrate on the number of enrolments expected from each partner school. Senior managers monitor the number of enrolments from these schools and take action when required. The college exceeded its growth target for enrolments in 1993-94 and 1994-95.

24 Information on the number of students on courses at any given time can be obtained from the management information system. Retention rates are calculated and used for some course reviews when these are a cause for concern. The production of formal reports analysing retention was under consideration at the time of the inspection. The college monitors

the destinations of students and carries out surveys after they have left the college. Thorough reports on destinations for students leaving the college in 1994 and 1995 have been prepared and discussed by the senior management team and the corporation. The college fulfils its statutory obligation under sections 44 and 45 of *The Further and Higher Education Act 1992* by providing opportunities for religious education and worship.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

25 Students from partner schools benefit from helpful recruitment arrangements and are well prepared for entry to the college. Liaison tutors visit partner schools and get to know pupils before they start at the college. Prospective students have their initial interview with the liaison officer in their own school. Likely GCSE results, probable choice of courses to be taken, and any need for learning support are explored at this first interview. Students recruited from other 11 to 18 schools are interviewed in the college. A second interview is held with the majority of applicants as soon as possible after the publication of GCSE results and individual learning programmes are then drawn up.

26 Induction is carefully planned. Each new entrant attends one of the college familiarisation half days, held in August. After this, induction continues in tutor groups. The college's policy on induction includes guidance notes for teaching staff. Evaluation of enrolment and induction procedures is based on responses to separate questionnaires completed by teachers and students. The overall evaluation of the admissions process resulted in an action plan for improvements in 1996.

27 The college is strongly committed to providing a structured and caring environment for its students. Each student receives sustained support through the tutorial system and has a clearly identified personal tutor. Each student sees his or her tutor daily and has regular individual tutorial support. Group tutorials follow a common tutorial programme aimed at providing careers advice, developing social and life skills, and encouraging students to contribute to the life of the community.

28 A student wishing to change course may do so with the agreement of the appropriate senior tutor. Students report that, in most cases, transfer is accomplished without difficulty. Any case of a student withdrawing before the end of a programme is scrutinised carefully; exit interviews are conducted by the relevant senior tutor to identify the reasons for withdrawal. A detailed statistical analysis is carried out of the number of students leaving early and their reasons for doing so.

29 The college is extending its learning support services and has recently opened a well-organised learning resources area. Basic Skills Agency screening is used for all students with GCSE grade E or below in mathematics or English. Additionally some referrals for learning support come from subject tutors; in other cases, students themselves elect to receive support. Many students confirmed that their confidence had been

increased as a result of the additional help given. Although support is provided in communications and numeracy, information technology support has not yet been fully implemented. English language support is provided for any students whose progress in their GCE A level programmes is held back by language difficulties.

30 Students value the college's counselling service. The counselling rooms are located in the learning resources area, and although screens are used to conceal the entrances, some students feel inhibited by the lack of confidentiality. The principal counsellor is professionally qualified. There are established links with over 40 statutory and voluntary sector organisations to whom students may be referred for expert help. Advice on careers and higher education is provided by the careers co-ordinator. A comprehensive careers library including university prospectuses is located in the library. Each careers guidance interview results in an action plan being written, copies of which go to the senior tutor. Progress towards the targets set in the action plan is monitored by the careers co-ordinator.

31 Students' progress is carefully reviewed, recorded and communicated to parents. Periodic progress reviews take place for all students and interim records of achievement are produced at the end of the first year and at the end of the second term of the second year for two-year students. Action plans resulting from these reviews need to be more detailed. Interim records of achievement, which build on previous records brought by students from their former schools, ensure that early leavers have something to take away with them. Daily monitoring of students' attendance ensures that prompt action can be taken with regard to absences which have not been notified.

32 The system for students' guidance and support has been devised and developed to meet the needs of the full-time 16 to 19 year old population. The recent introduction of a pilot programme of evening courses for a largely adult population has not yet been matched by an equivalent support system. The extent of subject tutorial support for GNVQ students and others who come to the college to take courses outside the established GCSE and GCE A level curriculum should be given further consideration.

33 Students are strongly encouraged to participate in college committees. Several committees, including health and safety, equal opportunities and catering have student members. There are also some student committees, for example a social and entertainment committee and a student council. The student handbook is a helpful document which informs students of their rights and responsibilities. It includes lists of corporation members and of staff, a summary of the college charter and information on where the full charter may be found.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

34 Of the 133 sessions inspected, 77 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses. This compares favourably with the average of approximately 64 per cent identified in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report, 1994-95*. In 3 per cent of the sessions weaknesses outweighed the strengths. The following table shows the grades awarded as a result of the inspection.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	25	48	16	4	0	93
GCSE	4	14	9	0	0	27
GNVQ	5	5	1	0	0	11
Other	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total	34	68	27	4	0	133

35 Courses are well organised. Schemes of work generally follow a college checklist. Most are detailed and thorough; a few consist only of a list of syllabus topics. In the majority of subjects, there are lesson plans setting out the aims and objectives of the lesson, the methods of teaching and learning and the resources to be used. Students' handbooks and learning packs include syllabuses, schemes of work, examples of assignments, assessment policies and schedules. Although students know their assignment schedules in advance they sometimes find that competing deadlines make demands which are difficult to meet, particularly when assignments involve the use of information technology. Marking schemes are carefully explained to students and, in some subjects, work is marked by two teachers to ensure that standards are consistent.

36 The quality of teaching is generally high. Teaching aids are used well. Teachers establish and maintain productive working relationships with students which help to promote effective learning. In most lessons, students experience a friendly but rigorous classroom regime. Many teachers show a keen awareness of their students' different levels of ability and attainment; the tasks set are appropriate and succeed in bringing the best out of all members of the class. In some lessons, teachers fail to take adequate account of the range of students' abilities. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive sensitive support but assistance is not always available when it is required. Some students taking GCSE courses have learning difficulties which stem from poorly-developed core skills.

37 Much of the teaching in science is good. Teachers use an appropriate range of teaching methods and make good use of handouts and visual aids. Lessons and assignments for GNVQ science reflect good practice in vocational science teaching. In biology, teachers are sensitive to the varying

needs of students, particularly in the GNVQ programme. Students' work is marked fairly using stated criteria. Assignments are returned promptly.

38 In mathematics, all classes are planned as part of the scheme of work for the year and individual lesson plans show how students' own work contributes to their learning. Classes are professionally managed and competently taught. Homework is set regularly, is marked to a high standard and returned promptly. This provides students with continuous feedback on their progress. Students have a high level of motivation. Their interest is sustained despite the lack of variety in methods of teaching and learning.

39 Business studies teachers maintain consistently high standards. Well-organised lesson plans, with clearly-stated aims and objectives, are available for each class. Teachers employ a wide range of methods of working. Creative use is made of case studies to encourage group discussion and individual commitment. Classes are well managed and there is good attention to core skills, including presentational skills, which are developed as integral elements of students' studies.

40 Students on GNVQ and GCE A level courses benefit from a variety of teaching styles. Study programmes provide additional learning in general studies or business skills. Core skills are successfully developed in the intermediate GNVQ both in design and art. Numeracy, for example, is being successfully integrated with other aspects of work on the GNVQ programme through a design technology assignment. Teaching and learning are well planned in both subjects and the work is challenging. All lessons in art begin with a short introduction to provide a context for the work. Good use is made of visual aids. Assignments are carefully scheduled and work is returned to students within stated deadlines. Students' progress is regularly monitored and appraised. Assessments are fair and students understand the marking. Art students benefit from location work and visits to museums and galleries; design technology students benefit from work experience in industry.

41 Teachers in the English department have devised interesting and stimulating learning activities using schemes for individual and group work. Various approaches are used to ensure that students understand the texts being studied. In one lesson, students were working in groups, reading extracts from a play which was a set examination text. Each group recorded a summary of their extract on a flipchart sheet; these were then arranged in columns to represent the passage of time. Students worked enthusiastically on this exercise which was extremely effective in promoting their understanding of the text. Lessons are well planned and well organised and the work is suitably demanding. Classroom displays are used effectively to reinforce learning. There is a comprehensive marking scheme which is explained to students during induction. A resource room has been set aside, for students to use at times of their own choosing, as part of the department's strategy for providing learning support. Resources, many of them produced by teachers, are available to

provide help with the planning of essays, punctuation, and grammar and with selected texts. Links between the English department and the college's learning resource were strengthened in the period between the specialist and cross-college inspections.

42 Students of modern foreign languages are offered a good range of teaching and learning methods. Lessons are well planned and well structured. Effective use is made of exchange students and other native speakers who work alongside teachers as teaching assistants. Teachers use the language being studied as the medium for teaching. Students use the language unselfconsciously and often fluently. Many of the teaching materials, including an entire audio-lingual course in Russian, have been produced by teachers themselves. In a minority of classes, too much of the work was being done by the teacher. An oral skills activity failed to involve students, partly as a result of poor lesson design and partly as a result of technical problems with the language laboratory. Language classes are smaller than average for the college and the low numbers in some classes restricted the range of learning activities. Students studying Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Punjabi receive support and are entered for the examination although these languages are not formally taught.

43 The programme of work in physical education provides a good balance between theory and practice. There are schemes of work for all of the components of the taught programme and the aims of individual sessions are precisely detailed. The department's work is thoroughly planned and organised. There is a strong and cohesive staff team which provides good support to students with learning difficulties. Staff work to a common marking policy and feedback on students' written work is constructive and thorough. Opportunities to direct and train students in the observation of each others' work are not fully exploited in practical sessions. Students' work shows good skills development.

44 Lessons in history, politics and law are planned and delivered in ways appropriate both to the most able and the lower achievers. The history section has a particularly effective strategy for recognising and managing differences in students' ability. This includes oral reporting and homework assignments of varying difficulty. Marking is standardised. Teachers make helpful comments on students' written work. The process of setting learning targets and reviewing progress means that students know how they are doing in their work. Some teaching lacks variety. For example, students are sometimes required to spend most of the lesson taking notes.

45 The general studies programme is carefully arranged to meet the needs of students and the requirements of examination bodies. Topics are effectively linked both to one another and to other subjects and areas of work. Lessons are well planned and methods of teaching and learning are appropriate and varied. Good use is made of audio-visual aids, structured discussion and other forms of group exercise.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

46 Students are appreciative of the recognition that they receive as mature learners. The rapport that they develop with staff is important in promoting their learning. They enjoy their studies and acknowledge the quality of the teaching and the helpful and friendly attitudes that they experience on joining the college. They can speak and write about their studies knowledgeably and effectively. Students are tested regularly to ensure that they develop appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding and that they are able to apply their knowledge appropriately. The college has a strong commitment to improving levels of achievement. This is reflected in its use of the Advanced Level Information System to provide an analysis of the value added to students' achievements at college by comparing their actual performance at GCE A level with their predicted performance, based on GCSE achievements.

47 The 655 students aged 16 to 18 entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1994-95 scored, on average 4.6 points per entry. This places the college among the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, based on the data in the 1995 performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment. An almost identical result was reported in the 1994 tables. Despite improvements in the proportion of students achieving grades A and B in the majority of subjects in 1994-95, the college's overall GCE A level pass rate has declined slightly to bring it just below the average for sixth form colleges. There were significant falls in the number of students gaining grades A and B in chemistry and general studies.

48 Vocational courses were first offered by the college in 1993 and intakes are still relatively small. The first set of results were good, with 79 per cent of the intermediate GNVQ students gaining the full qualification and 32 per cent gaining merits or distinctions in the four programmes offered in 1994-95. From the whole intermediate cohort of 49 students, 32 continued in further education during 1995-96 and nine went into employment. Also in 1995, a pilot group of three students taking advanced level GNVQ in business were all successful in gaining the award.

49 The college has identified that many physics students have difficulties with mathematics and has taken action to address this problem in a way that benefits all science courses. There is scope for further development of core skills in other subjects, for example, in the use of information technology in biology. There are only a few subjects in which computers are used extensively in coursework. In GCE A level work the majority of assignments are handwritten. Students taking vocational courses develop their information technology skills well. Wordprocessing enhances the quality of foundation GNVQ assignments. The use of computers is integral to work in geography, and also in GCE A level physical education where students use specialist software and have a weekly period of wordprocessing.

50 Group work is used to good effect in English, business studies and in many practical subjects. Students pursue their practical work competently. In physics and chemistry, students work mainly, but not exclusively, in pairs and this co-operation helps to ensure that they carry out work effectively and safely. Students in design technology develop good practical skills and have a keen awareness of health and safety requirements.

51 Examination results in science are highly satisfactory. Pass rates, at grades A to B and grades A to E for GCE A level chemistry, have been near to or above national averages for sixth form colleges over the past three years. Good pass rates are achieved in GCE A level biology. Passes at grades A to E in GCE A level physics have been close to the national average for the last three years. The college has carried out detailed analysis of the Advanced Level Information System data for physics since the specialist subject inspection. The percentage of students achieving grades A to C in GCSE chemistry has varied between 59 per cent and 79 per cent and in GCSE physics between 55 per cent and 65 per cent. These are high for the sector. The physics department has had notable successes in the British Physics Olympiad with three bronze awards in 1994-95 and a gold award in the previous year.

52 Students' assessed work for GCSE mathematics is generally satisfactory and, in some cases, good. Written work for internal assessment is usually of a high standard. Achievements in external examinations are more varied. In GCSE mathematics resits, most students improve their performance by one grade but a significant minority fail to show any improvement. The 1994 November examination resulted in a grade C or above for about 60 per cent of the students who had previously gained grade E or below. In the summer examinations results varied between 30 per cent and 43 per cent. With the exception of 1994, the percentage of students achieving grades A to C in GCSE mathematics has been significantly below the national average for sixth form colleges for the last four years. The GCE A level results for further mathematics are notably good with 100 per cent pass rates in each of the last four years. Pass rates between 77 per cent and 92 per cent for mathematics with mechanics and for mathematics in the schools mathematics project syllabus, have been in line with national averages. Achievements in examinations for mathematics with statistics and for statistics have been less satisfactory; pass rates have been between 60 per cent and 70 per cent and there has been a significantly lower proportion of successes at grades A to B. A modular scheme has been introduced aimed at improving the results for mathematics with statistics, and preparation for the separate statistics paper is no longer offered.

53 Business studies has grown by 72 per cent since 1991. Retention rates are good (approximately 90 per cent) and there has been consistent success in examinations. For two consecutive years, three students from the section were awarded certificates of excellence by the Oxford and

Cambridge Schools Examination Board for their performance in GCE A level business. Three other students, entered as a team for the Young Consumer of the Year 1995, won through to the national final. The business studies GCE A level has been taken by large numbers of students as part of the general education programme. In 1993-94 there were 146 entries; in 1994-95 248 entries. In 1993-94 and 1994-95, 47 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively, gained A to C grades and 84 per cent and 77 per cent, respectively, gained a pass grade.

54 Students in design technology and art produce work of a high quality. In art, students' drawing and painting is based on the development of good observational skills and shows excellent and consistent understanding of the use of tone, colour and composition. The 100 per cent pass rate in GCE A level art for 1995 was a marked improvement on previous years. The successes in national examinations and in national competitions by design technology students is outstanding despite a fall in the overall pass rate for GCE A level in 1995. Students' work has been entered for national competitions. These include: Young Engineer for Britain; the Engineering Education Scheme; Women in Science and Engineering; Design Council Project 2045; and a railway sculpture project. Students have been finalists in the Young Engineer for Britain for five consecutive years.

55 Year-on-year comparisons, show that students' achievements in GCSE English, in GCE A level English language and in English language and literature have steadily improved. The proportion of students achieving grades A to C in GCSE English literature is higher than the national average. The English department presents statistical analyses of grade improvements for GCSE candidates who resit examinations in June and November. In 1994, 68 per cent and 76 per cent, respectively, of the students entered in these examinations improved their grades. The overall pass rate and the percentage of students gaining grades A to C for GCE A level history are above the national average. Detailed investigations have been carried out to identify the cause of low retention and high absence rates in history and dropout has declined. A high proportion of history students progress to university. Some students are dissatisfied with the general studies course which is a major part of the college's general education programme. The overall pass rate for GCE A level general studies was well above the national average from 1992 to 1994 but results for one of the two syllabuses fell significantly in the 1995 examinations. The college has analysed progression data and shown the value of general studies for students seeking university entrance. It is attempting to influence students' attitudes through its findings. The numbers of students in the physical education department has grown steadily over the past five years. In 1995-96, there were over 200 students taking GCSE or GCE A level courses. Students' attainments in external examinations are good. GCSE results have been consistently high in years other than 1995.

56 Data on students' destinations are collected and subjected to year-on-year analysis. The majority of GCE A level students progress to higher education. As a percentage of the overall number of students who complete a two-year programme this has declined slightly over two years from 72 per cent to 67 per cent. There has been a steady increase in the number of students retained after a one-year programme and the number of students retained after completing an initial two-year GCE A level programme. In 1995, 658 students completed a two-year programme. Of these, 66.7 per cent went on to higher education, 13.6 per cent continued in further education, 13.7 per cent entered employment, 3.6 per cent were seeking employment and 2.4 per cent decided to take a year out. Twenty-one students who had taken a year out during 1994-95 entered higher education.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

57 The college's strategic plan emphasises quality education in a caring environment and the corporation and management are committed to the continuous improvement of quality. The academic planning and quality committee of the corporation has evaluated the college charter, the quality mission statement and the staff-development programme. It considers examination pass rates in relation to targets. The mission statement emphasises that responsibility for quality assurance is shared by all college staff. There is continuing attention to the FEFC's six performance indicators.

58 A quality manager was appointed in 1994. The quality plan is being progressively implemented over three years. The first phase concentrated on raising awareness and gathering evidence and the second on the development of a college-wide quality committee and various quality groups. The third phase involves developing the overall plan and a manual of college wide standards. Detailed procedures have been built up in many areas and these help to ensure a widespread support for quality assurance. The cross-college group, established in February 1995, has been helpful in evaluating quality issues and making recommendations for improvement. Reports on quality assurance have been produced for the last two years. They have analysed many issues thoroughly, indicating the action points agreed and the targets achieved. Areas identified for development include the capacity of the management information system to ensure the prompt supply of relevant statistical information.

59 The setting of standards and the review of targets have now become widespread. Reviews include analysis of examination results, the outcomes of departmental planning and review, responses to surveys of student opinion, and outcomes of tutorial reviews. Quality standards and targets have been developed in careers, counselling, and administrative support. There are targets for careers interviews, the forwarding of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications from the college, and response to requests for counselling support. The failure to

computerise the library has limited its capacity to gather statistics to judge its effectiveness. Information system managers have set and reviewed their standards of service. They supply useful statistical information on, for example, achievements, retention and attendance. Staff are highly appreciative of this support. As the college has not yet fully implemented its quality policy it is not in a position to review progress towards the achievements of all its targets, although this is the intention.

60 Documents have been developed to help ensure that quality assurance procedures are implemented effectively. These include: staff handbooks containing college policies, action plans and analyses of examination results, which also act as a manual of departmental procedures; the students' handbook; the college charter; and a range of quality documents for support services including material on reception procedures. The documentation varies in quality.

61 Well-designed surveys of students' perceptions include questions on the general college environment, students' services, the role of the tutor, the library and information technology support. Response rates to these surveys are high. Results are analysed and key issues for action are identified. Other questionnaires have focused on induction, parents' views on the quality of college information and support, and issues such as the college day and the quality of catering.

62 Examiners' and moderators' reports are considered by subject and course teams. GNVQ verifiers' reports, which have largely been favourable, have been carefully analysed and action plans developed. Subsequent reports have noted action taken, for example, the value of the new learning resource area in extending students' opportunities to use information technology.

63 Each departmental team produces an annual plan. These vary in content but may include information on recruitment, retention, efficient use of resources, the adequacy of students' performance and accommodation, staffing and equipment issues. A careful review of each department is undertaken by assistant principals. An annual analysis of examination results, carried out by subject heads, explores reasons for success and failure and, where necessary, identifies points for action and targets for improvement. Reviews feed into college-wide discussion of issues such as the reasons for the overall decline in college examination achievements in 1995. All departments make thorough use of the Advanced Level Information System in analysing examination performance. Improvements in grades are also analysed for students resitting GCSE examinations. The review process produces quick and useful informal feedback. It permits rapid action to be taken, for example, on the adoption of a new syllabus, changes in teaching methods or responses to resource issues. Staff said that they found the reviews helpful in enabling them to focus upon key issues and in promoting effective dialogue between senior and middle management. More could be done to

promote consistency and the sharing of best practice by departments in, for example, the departmental planning processes and the ways in which subject staff evaluate students' level of satisfaction with provision.

64 The college is committed to achieve the Investors in People award by December 1996. An approved action plan has been drawn up. In 1994, the college identified lack of in-service training as a weakness in its strategic plan. The college aims to spend 1 per cent of its budget on this activity and this has almost been achieved. The college's staff-development policy applies to all staff. A staff-development programme is drawn up in the light of individual and college needs. Members of staff have interviews with their line managers to discuss professional development needs. The staff-development plan is closely related to strategic planning priorities and sets out criteria for improvement, for example, on information technology, team building and subject updating. The commitment to publish the plan in advance of the academic year has not so far been achieved. The staff-development committee is considering improvements to existing application and evaluation forms. Staff development, both external and in-house, has included subject updating, senior and middle management training, opportunities for staff to spend time in industry and teacher training. There has been specific staff development aligned to the introduction of GNVQ courses. All staff-development activities are evaluated to assist senior management in judging value for money. A programme of induction for all new staff was introduced in the autumn term of 1993.

65 The college charter was developed by a charter group and approved by senior management. It contains clear statements of the services the college offers to students and the expectations which the college has of students. The primary emphasis is on effective support for students' academic and personal development, the provision of accurate information, the commitment to equality of opportunity and the development of contacts with the local community. The charter includes some performance targets relating to students' references, careers interviews and the size of tutor groups. Students are alerted to complaints procedures. Tutors were advised on how to explain the charter to students and a summary is given to all students. In 1995, two periods of consultation in tutor groups enabled students to bring forward suggestions for improving the charter. The college has carried out a survey to determine the extent to which charter standards have been met.

66 All staff are appraised on a two-year cycle. The performance of senior staff is reviewed annually by the principal. The college has a target date of December 1996 for the completion of the first cycle. However, appraisal of middle managers has just begun and so far only 15 staff have been appraised. The principal aim of the appraisal policy is to support professional development and to improve teachers' effectiveness in their work. All staff have participated in awareness raising activities and appraisers and appraisees have received training. Appraisal includes

observation of teaching or, in the case of non-teaching staff, of other forms of work. Staff commented that they found the approach to appraisal helpful in enabling them to set targets and in giving sharper focus to their professional development.

67 The college produced a self-assessment report in May 1995. An action plan subsequently led to an updated report which has been reviewed by the academic planning and quality committee. There has also been some development of self-assessment at the subject level, notably in areas not inspected. The self-assessment report is being linked to the college's quality assurance arrangements. The report follows the framework of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It contains clear judgements expressed in terms of strengths and weaknesses. All relevant areas have been graded. In most respects, the findings in the report are in accord with those of the inspection team.

RESOURCES

Staffing

68 Staff are dedicated, experienced and well qualified. Ninety-five per cent of academic staff have degrees, 20 hold masters degrees or doctorates, and 93 per cent are teacher trained. Twelve staff have Training and Development Lead Body qualifications and eight are being trained for them. Support staff are highly qualified, up to degree level in some cases. Opportunities for NVQ accreditation in business and administration are available to support staff within the college. Over 70 per cent of teachers have more than five years experience. Many are involved with examining boards, in some cases at a senior level. Managers are aware that teachers from minority ethnic groups are under represented on the staff and there has been some recruitment of such teachers over the last two years.

69 The number and distribution of academic and support staff is sufficient to deliver the college curriculum. With 82 per cent of its staff on full-time contracts and a low staff turnover there is only a small amount of flexibility to respond to new initiatives. Short-term contracts are used effectively.

70 Policies and procedures for staff recruitment, induction, development, and appraisal are in place and have been widely disseminated. Some aspects of personnel management require further development. The effectiveness of job analysis is limited because there are no formal records of the findings from interviews held with staff when they leave the college. There has been no formal skills audit to enable managers to assess gaps in expertise in order to plan the development of staffing resources.

Equipment/learning resources

71 Comprehensive processes and systems are in place for the purchase and replacement of equipment. All purchases are considered in relation to the strategic plan. However, the college lacks an overall policy on capital

equipment. For example, there is no specific reference to it either in the strategic plan or in the operating statements.

72 The library has been poorly funded. In most specialist subjects bookstocks were inadequate, and this was particularly true in recently developed curriculum areas. The budget for 1994-95 of around £5,000 was very low. This has been increased for 1995-96 to £26,000 which is an improvement but does not make up for under funding in previous years. The library is overdue for refurbishment and the introduction of computerised stock control systems. The learning resources area has considerably improved open learning opportunities for students. Taken together, the curriculum-based learning resource areas, the learning resources area, and the library provide sufficient study spaces to meet current students' needs. The separation of the learning resources area and the library is inconvenient for students who need to use these resources simultaneously. The college has recognised the need to increase its staffing in these areas.

73 Levels of equipment for programme areas are generally adequate. A particularly distinctive feature is the stage and its lighting. Other positive features include the good range of power machinery and tools in the wood and metal workshops and the equipment in the science laboratories. There are ample and appropriate stocks of curriculum area textbooks and learning aids.

74 The college has a long-established information technology policy. There are 157 workstations for students' use throughout the college, which represents a ratio of approximately 10 students to every workstation. Opportunities for students to use workstations are good. For example, of the 40 in the new learning resource area, 20 are available at all times and 20 have a teaching priority but can also be booked in advance. Forty-five compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) are available to students in the learning resources centre. Use of CD-ROM databases is now increasing within curriculum areas such as design and media. Most of the hardware and software is of industry standard. There are firm plans to replace obsolete equipment during 1996 and to extend computer networking.

Accommodation

75 The college's main accommodation comprises two linked multi-storey blocks, with a detached gymnasium and boiler house. In addition, there are four temporary buildings which are in a satisfactory condition. The growth in student numbers has led to pressure on accommodation. The strategic plan, supported by a comprehensive accommodation strategy, identifies the need to modify, improve and extend the accommodation. There has been substantial investment in the buildings, including an attractive new reception area, opened in 1994, and an attractive learning resources area, opened in 1995. Further improvements are scheduled for summer 1996. There are plans to make the accommodation more appropriate to the college's needs; a new sports

complex, which will include other needed facilities, is planned to be completed within two years.

76 College managers have effectively tackled significant defects in the accommodation. Substantial sums of money have been earmarked for a 10-year planned maintenance programme. Re-roofing and specialised treatment of concrete and brickwork have been particularly costly. Through these efforts, the buildings are now in satisfactory external condition. However, the internal condition of the buildings varies. There are excellent features, such as the theatre. The college's rolling programme of redecoration, renovation and reorganisation has resulted in considerable improvements to some areas. Other areas remain drab and are generally in poor condition. There are displays in most classrooms and corridors which help to create a stimulating learning environment. Cleaning, recently put out to contract, is generally in need of improvement. Litter builds up as the day advances.

77 The college does not have an adequate plan to provide access for wheelchair users. Despite some improvements, access is largely limited to ground floor areas and a quick exit from some areas in an emergency would be difficult for these students. The student common room is large and has recently been refurbished. Kitchens and catering area renewals will follow shortly. Students expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of all these facilities. A private space is set aside for students who are taken ill but its existence is not well known by students.

78 The appropriateness of the size and layout of the accommodation varies. Some rooms are not large enough for the size of groups using them. Some teaching rooms are approached through other classrooms which disrupts teaching. The gymnasium is too small and has a detrimental effect on some aspects of students' work. The use of city council sports facilities enables the college to offer an appropriate range of sports training. There is an attractive staff common room and an adequate number of staff workrooms. College managers have undertaken regular and comprehensive space utilisation surveys. These link to the flexible timetabling arrangements and efficient room allocation systems. Close attention has been paid to control of energy costs.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

79 The main strengths of the college are:

- the excellent community links and valuable partnerships with local organisations
- a wide range of GCE A level subjects and a broadening curriculum
- an effective and committed governing body which concentrates on the strategic development of the college
- effective leadership with a strong focus on managing change

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- well-organised support and pastoral care arrangements for students
 - high standards of teaching
 - good examination results in the majority of subjects
 - perceptive and thorough self-assessment
 - the comprehensive quality plan and the commitment of the staff and the corporation to high standards
 - a well-qualified, dedicated and experienced staff
 - the determined efforts being made to improve and renovate the college's buildings and facilities.

80 If it is to build on these strengths, the college should:

- ensure its growth and curriculum objectives are more closely linked to strategies for developing resources
- make significant improvements in library provision
- take action to reduce overcrowding and continue to improve those parts of the accommodation which are in poor condition
- fully implement its staff-appraisal scheme
- further develop some aspects of personnel management.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1995-96)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)

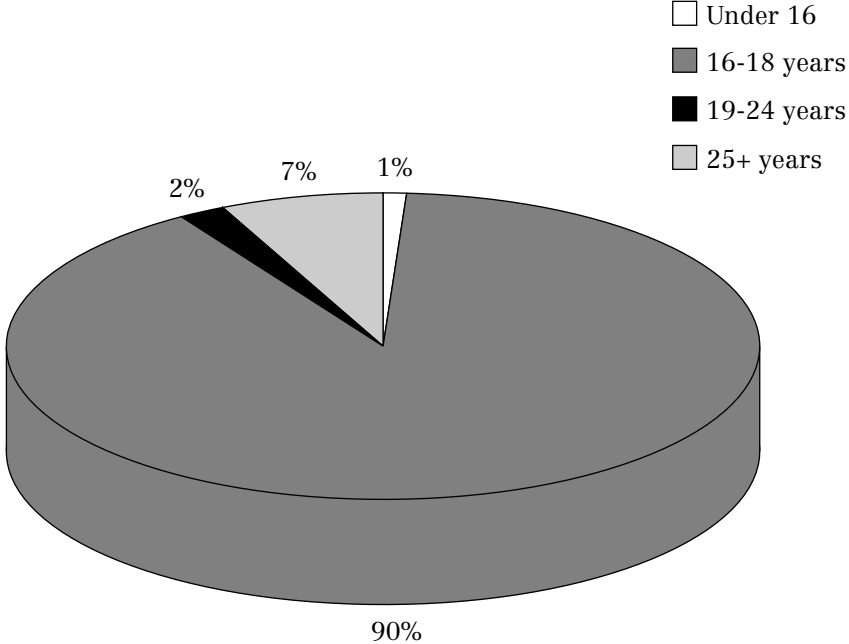
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

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

Figure 1

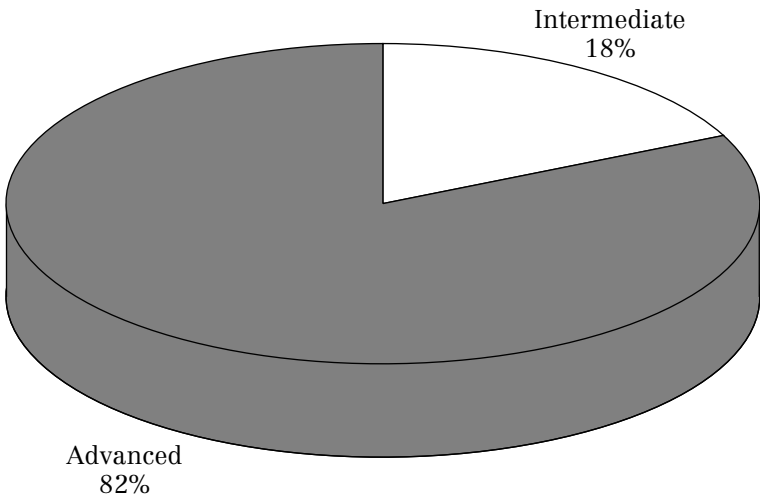
City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)



Enrolments: 1,829

Figure 2

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)



Enrolments: 1,829

Figure 3

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)

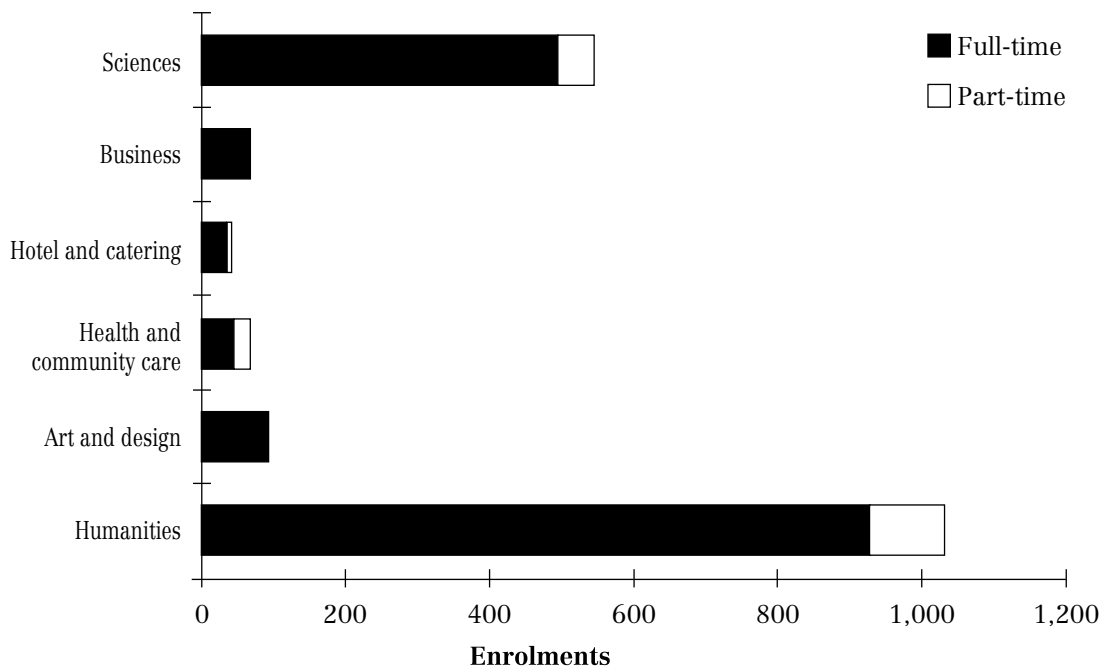


Figure 4

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)

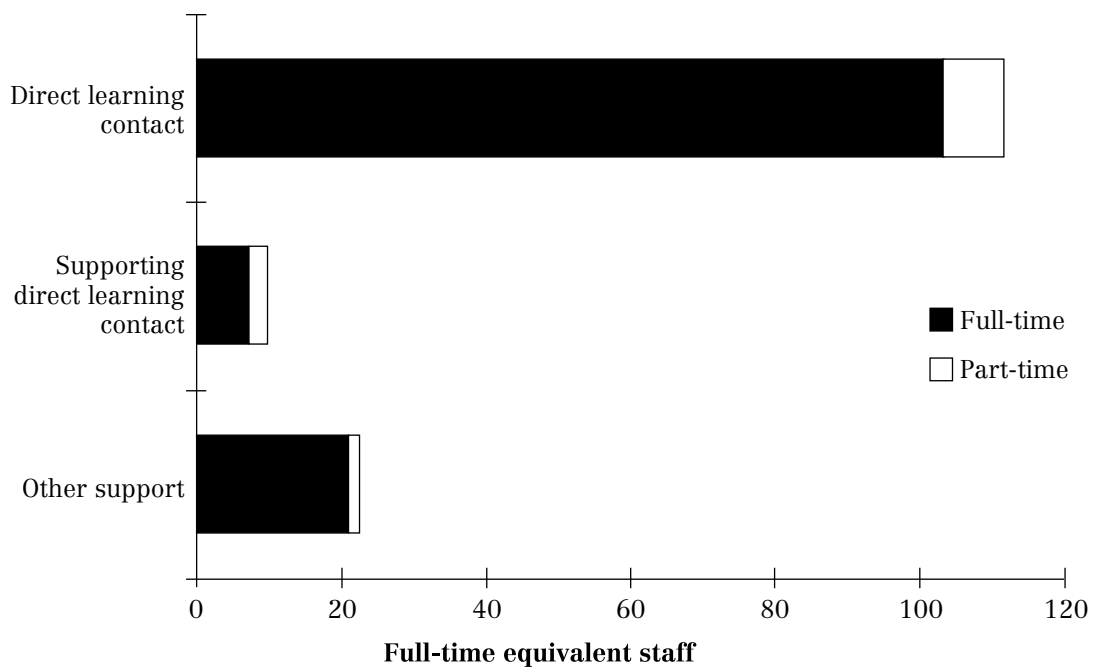
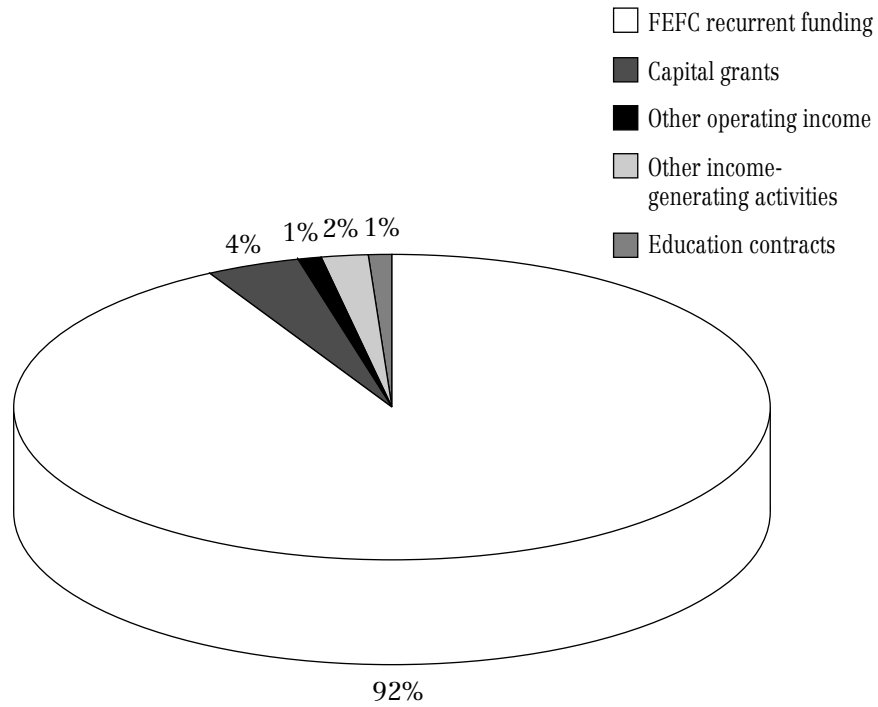


Figure 5

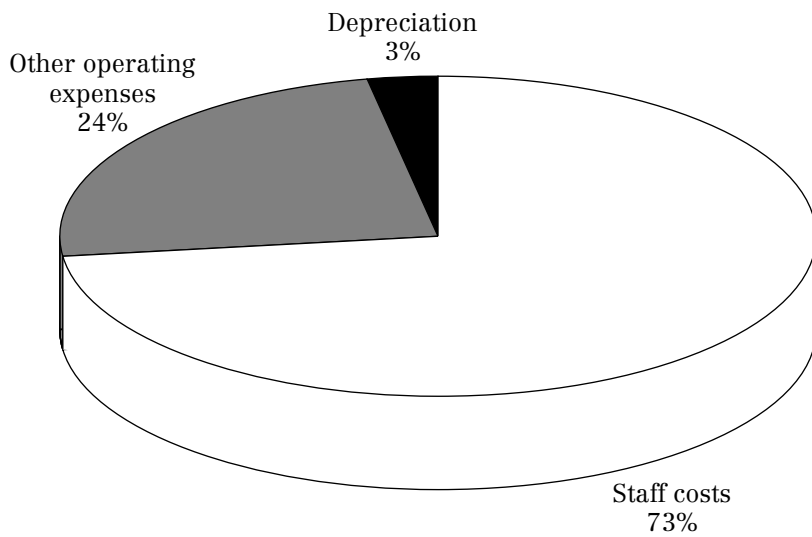
City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £4,407,000

Figure 6

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £4,223,000

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