

City of Sunderland College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	-
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	-

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

City of Sunderland College

Northern Region

Inspected November 1998

City of Sunderland College is a recently established tertiary college resulting from the merger of Monkwearmouth and Wearside colleges in August 1996. It is one of the largest colleges in the country and operates from four main sites and a number of centres in Sunderland. The college prepared a thorough and comprehensive self-assessment report on its strengths and weaknesses. The process of self-assessment was well designed. It involved governors, staff at all levels and students. Since the report was written, the college has addressed most of the identified weaknesses. Some of these remedial actions are already showing positive results. Inspectors agreed with the majority of the strengths and weaknesses in the report, and with all the grades suggested by the college.

The merger was well planned and well managed. Considerable changes since the merger were planned carefully and have been largely successful. Major alterations and improvements have been effected to the college's estate. High-quality, well-resourced learning centres and lecture theatres have been opened on each site. Average class sizes have been increased. Cohesive teaching departments have

been formed which generally manage their provision well. New teaching and learning methods have been introduced. Most teaching is good. Students' achievements in 1998 were better than in 1996. The college's corporation worked closely with managers through the merger. Governors take a full part in setting the strategic direction of the college, and monitor the college's progress under its strategic plan carefully. The college is financially sound and has good financial management. Constructive partnerships with external bodies have helped to create a network of outreach centres and widen participation. The quality assurance system has yet to complete a full cycle but aspects of its operation have already brought about measurable improvements. Students are well supported in their entry to the college and whilst they are on their courses. The college should: work on strategies to improve poor retention; address some less effective teaching; put more emphasis on judging students' achievements; improve the quality of some students' tutorials; improve the utilisation of its accommodation; make more timely returns to the FEFC; and improve shortcomings in the clerking of the audit committee.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Biology, chemistry and physics	2	Support for students	2
Computing and information technology	2	General resources	2
Construction	3	Quality assurance	2
Business studies and professional courses	2	Governance	2
Childcare and health care	2	Management	2
Performing arts, media and music	2		
Languages	2		
History, psychology and sociology	2		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 City of Sunderland College is a recently established tertiary college resulting from the merger of Monkwearmouth and Wearside colleges in August 1996. Both these colleges were previously inspected in 1994. In these inspections, the colleges were awarded a total of one grade 1, 11 grade 2s, and two grade 3s for cross-college aspects. The grade 3s were in an aspect of resources in each college. Across the two colleges, one curriculum area was awarded a grade 1, 17 awarded grade 2, and four awarded a grade 3. No cross-college aspect or programme areas was awarded a grade 4 or 5. The new college is one of the largest further education institutions in the country.

2 The college operates on four major sites and a large number of centres in the local community. It plans to develop a new major centre in the town of Washington which lies within the city boundaries. During 1997-98, the college enrolled 3,512 full-time students and 18,649 part-time students. About 95% of the full-time students, and 13% of part-time students, were aged 16 to 18. The college directly employs a total of 778 staff, 515 as full-time employees and 263 part time. These totals include 367 teachers of whom 286 are employed full time. Approximately 90 other part-time teachers are provided through an agency. The college offers a wide range of courses covering all of the 10 programme areas designated by the FEFC.

3 The college serves a community characterised by historic and continuing involvement in manufacturing industry. Today, three of the four largest employers are concerned with the manufacture or sale of motor vehicles. Education institutions, health services and public administration also employ large numbers and there is a significant service sector. Unemployment in Sunderland varies considerably from ward to ward. The overall male unemployment rate is almost 1.7 times the

national average. The city has a higher proportion of unskilled and partially skilled workers than exists nationally.

4 The proportion of young people in Sunderland aged 16 who stay in full-time education is 52% compared with a national average of 67%. In Sunderland schools, 32% of pupils gained five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above compared with a national average of 46%. The majority of secondary schools in the city take pupils from age 11 to 16, but there are three Roman Catholic schools and a private school which have sixth forms. Four other further education colleges lie within five miles of the city boundaries.

5 The college is managed by an executive comprising the principal, deputy-principal, four vice-principals, and a director of resources. The four vice-principals have responsibility for student support, quality assurance, learning resources and policy analysis, respectively. Each also acts as head of one of the major college centres. The vice-principals and the director of resources have teams working under their direction to manage cross-college functions. There are nine teaching departments. Each teaching department has a senior head responsible for academic leadership, a head responsible for resource management and the validity of departmental data, and a learning resources co-ordinator.

6 The mission of the college is to promote access to a comprehensive range of high-quality learning opportunities to residents of the City of Sunderland and the wider north-eastern region. Through this mission the college seeks to:

- 'enable individuals to achieve their potential
- encourage organisations to provide employment opportunities in the city
- promote the economic and social development of the city and the wider region'.

Context

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during the week beginning 30 November 1998. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and reviewed the information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. Inspectors were unable to use students' achievements data produced by the FEFC and based on returns of individualised student record (ISR). Attempts had been made to merge the data from the constituent colleges for 1996, but the results had a large number of inaccuracies. The ISR used for calculating the 1997 students' achievements data was based on an early return from the college which was later realised to have errors. Accurate ISR data were not available in time to inform the inspection. The college submitted students' achievements data from internal records for 1997 and 1998 which were validated before the inspection

against primary sources, such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected approximately two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by 14 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 56 days. They observed 116 lessons and they examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff, students, a representative from the City of Sunderland Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and others with interests in the college.

8 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons observed, 72% were judged good or outstanding and 3% were less than satisfactory. This is an appreciably better profile of grades than the national profile in 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	10	17	11	3	0	41
GNVQ	5	9	4	1	0	19
NVQ	0	7	4	0	0	11
Other vocational	5	17	7	0	0	29
Other, including higher education*	5	9	2	0	0	16
Total (No.)	25	59	28	4	0	116
Total (%)	22	51	24	3	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

*includes two tutorial sessions from curriculum areas which were not inspected

Context

9 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The average class size is considerably above the national. The attendance rate is around the national average. The highest attendance rates were in sciences and humanities courses.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
City of Sunderland College	15.2	78
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

Curriculum Areas

Biology, Chemistry and Physics

Grade 2

10 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in biology, chemistry and physics at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and GCSE. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good management
- carefully planned and well-organised lessons
- variety of appropriate teaching methods
- excellent resources

Weaknesses

- some low pass rates and poor retention
- undemanding targets

11 All of the GCE A level subjects in the sciences attract large and increasing numbers of students. The number studying GCSE subjects has declined as the college has introduced alternative courses at this level. Members of the management team work well together and ensure that budgetary control is tight. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. The team spirit is strong and staff feel involved in the many developments taking place. Staff have concentrated on developing teaching and learning methods to ensure that new ways of teaching the curriculum are implemented successfully. This teaching model involves half-day sessions where lectures to large classes are interspersed with periods in the learning centres where students complete set work. Teachers have been trained in the new model but a minority remain uncomfortable with it. They use central and locally collated data thoroughly and extensively to review students' and their own performance. Targets are set for pass rates and retention for each course. In some cases,

these are below what has already been achieved.

12 Lessons are well planned and well managed. Schemes of work in biology are of particularly high quality. Students of biology are issued with a guide to each module of the course. These guides contain the teacher's notes for the course as well as a calendar showing when each topic is to be covered and how it is to be taught. In all subjects, lesson plans include references to the work to be carried out by students in the learning centres and to information available on the internet. A good variety of appropriate teaching methods is in use. Group work and scientific games are used effectively. Teaching is lively and enthusiastic and this is appreciated by students. Good humour is used effectively in lessons. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that students' interest and motivation are maintained. Lectures to large classes are introduced to students through an induction booklet. They are delivered successfully by most teachers but students are sometimes allowed to group at the back of the lecture theatre and take little part in the lesson.

13 Students work well in lessons and in the learning centres. They have good practical skills which are used safely. Instruction in learning techniques, such as taking notes during lectures, forms part of students' tutorial work. Teachers mark and return students' work promptly with appropriate comments and guidance on how students can improve their work. In a number of courses, students are not handing in completed work on time. The examination results for GCE A level students are in line with those predicted for them from their GCSE results on entry to the course. They are achieving pass rates which are above the national average for further education colleges. Inspectors and the self-assessment report identified that retention rates are below the average for the sector. The pass rates for two of the four GCSE subjects are poor. Only two students out of the 23 who

Curriculum Areas

completed these courses attained a grade better than D. A considerable number of students are studying science subjects at a distance using learning materials provided by the college. The success rate on these courses is low.

14 Science subjects are taught on three of the college's sites and teachers spend considerable time travelling between them. Inspectors and the self-assessment report identified that teachers are well qualified. All have an appropriate degree and almost all have professional teaching qualifications. Technical support staff have been reduced dramatically in number since the merger; three technicians now support 12 laboratories across the three sites. They work effectively and are highly valued by teachers. The college has invested heavily in specialist resources to support learning. Laboratories are of high quality. All rooms have good teaching aids. Students have good access to modern computers, appropriate software, CD-ROMs, the internet and books in the learning centres. Materials which are specific to the courses and produced in the college are of good quality and are increasingly available on the college's computer network.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in biology, chemistry and physics, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE biology, human biology, chemistry and physics	2	Expected completions	*	*	262
		Retention (%)	*	*	56
		Achievement (%)	*	*	34
GCE A level biology, chemistry and physics	3	Expected completions	*	*	293
		Retention (%)	*	*	77
		Achievement (%)	*	*	84

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Computing and Information Technology

Grade 2

15 Sixteen lessons were observed over a wide range of courses from introductory to higher level in computing and information technology (IT). Inspectors largely agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective teaching
- good pass rates
- broad curriculum and good progression opportunities
- high-quality, standardised learning materials
- plentiful industrial standard hardware and software

Weaknesses

- some poor retention rates
- underdeveloped initial guidance for some students

16 Staff have developed a coherent curriculum in computing and IT which seeks to widen students' participation through a range of accessible courses. Students can enrol on a specially designed 'computing for absolute beginners' course at all the main college sites and at a number of the centres used by the college. The provision offers opportunities at each level, including higher education. Problems associated with operating across many sites were recognised in the self-assessment report and are being given careful attention. Current student enrolments are almost double the combined total in the final year of the constituent colleges. Significant numbers of students have been enrolled on inappropriate courses. The prior achievements of full-time

students are now being assessed more carefully on entry, and entry requirements have been raised. Part-time students are not always enrolled on courses which properly meet their needs. The increase in student numbers has led to a substantial increase in the use of part-time teachers; high-quality learning materials have been developed and training undertaken with full-time and part-time teachers to help assure a consistent learning experience for all students.

17 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the quality of teaching is good. The majority of students study at their own pace, using well-designed learning materials and appropriate computer software applications. Tutors provide individual support to students, test their progress frequently, and mark their work in ways that encourage improvement. Some students expressed their pleasure and surprise at what they had achieved in a few weeks. They were keen to progress to more advanced programmes. One student was simultaneously studying four courses. A member of staff had adjusted computer filing arrangements to facilitate access to all his course materials from any of the college sites.

18 Pass rates are generally good. In 1998, all students who completed courses in the higher national certificate in computer studies, the diploma in IT at level 2, the national diploma in computing studies and the national certificate in computing studies were successful. Pass rates in GCE A level computing and GCSE IT in 1997 were well above the national average, though both declined somewhat in 1998. The pass rate in the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate has been low during a period when a new curriculum was being piloted. Retention rates are sometimes poor, and this weakness was identified in the self-assessment report. In 1997-98, retention on the higher national certificate course was 34% and GNVQ courses had retention rates of between 49% and 73%. In the lessons observed, attendance varied widely. In some part-time courses, only half of the students on

Curriculum Areas

the register attended; in other lessons, all students were present.

19 Staff are well qualified and experienced. A substantial investment has improved accommodation for computing courses at all major sites. Computing rooms are open plan, attractively decorated, and contain appropriate office furniture. Much of the specialist equipment is new and uses industrial standard software. These strengths were highlighted in the self-assessment report. In the department, access to computers is excellent. There is one

modern workstation to every 2.5 full-time equivalent students. About 260 departmental workstations, over the four main sites, can be connected to the internet. On all sites there is little use of wall displays to convey subject identity to students and to offer specialist and progression information. The centres used by the college in the community are well equipped and provide accessible IT courses to many students throughout Sunderland. For example, in the city centre alone, nearly 2,000 part-time students attended IT courses in 1997-98.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in computing and information technology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE IT	2	Expected completions	*	*	42
		Retention (%)	*	*	62
		Achievement (%)	*	*	88
Computer literacy and and IT	2	Expected completions	*	*	255
		Retention (%)	*	*	93
		Achievement (%)	*	*	68
Diploma in IT	2	Expected completions	*	*	648
		Retention (%)	*	*	86
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
GCE A level computing	3	Expected completions	*	*	115
		Retention (%)	*	*	88
		Achievement (%)	*	*	61
GNVQ advanced IT	3	Expected completions	*	*	39
		Retention (%)	*	*	49
		Achievement (%)	*	*	68
Higher national certificate computer studies	4	Expected completions	*	*	15
		Retention (%)	*	*	34
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Construction

Grade 3

20 Inspectors observed 15 lessons covering GNVQ courses, national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses in the main construction crafts, and higher level courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- broad range of courses with good opportunities for progression
- good teaching in practical lessons
- excellent pass and retention rates on advanced craft and higher national courses

Weaknesses

- some poorly maintained workshops
- uninspiring teaching in theory lessons
- poor pass rates on foundation craft and GNVQ advanced courses

21 The wide range of construction courses includes higher national certificate in building studies, GNVQs, and NVQs in brickwork, wood occupations, painting and decorating, electrical installation and mechanical engineering services. Opportunities for progression, including those to higher education, are good but there are no courses at foundation level for part-time students. Specialist short courses for gas installation meet a specific industry need. However, overall, links with industry are weak. The construction curriculum centre successfully promotes the industry to schools by supporting aspects of the national curriculum; the college offers GNVQ intermediate courses in conjunction with two schools. The departmental management team is new and course management is yet to become fully effective. As the self-assessment report acknowledged,

enrolment, retention and achievement targets are not adequately monitored by course teams.

22 Schemes of work are mostly lists of topics but individual practical lessons are well planned. Teachers have clear criteria for the marking of students' work. They provide useful written comments to help students improve. In the better lessons, teachers use their own and students' experiences to give realism to topics. Relationships between staff and students are good and this promotes learning. Teachers display good subject knowledge. Few lesson plans identify the teaching methods and materials to be used, or address the individual learning needs of students. Teaching methods used in theory lessons lack variety. Teachers do not always question students effectively to ensure that they have grasped the main points of the lesson. They make little use of visual aids. There is a lack of site visits to extend the understanding of full-time students. Key skills for craft students are not developed effectively; for example, IT is not taught on craft courses. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge this weakness.

23 Most craft students produce good practical work. They work well on their own and in groups but they do not always appreciate the safety risks associated with workshop activities. Technician students present their assignments well. The self-assessment report identified that pass and retention rates on higher national certificate courses and advanced level craft courses are good and inspectors agreed with this. For example, all brickwork and plumbing students who completed their NVQ level 3 courses in 1998 achieved the qualification. Pass rates for the higher national certificate have been above the national average for the last two years. However, the pass rate for the GNVQ advanced in construction and the built environment fell from 90% in 1997 to 25% in 1998. No students completed their basic craft skills courses in plastering or woodworking in 1998.

Curriculum Areas

24 Teachers are appropriately qualified and many have recent industrial experience. Most have additional assessor and verifier qualifications. The college has introduced curriculum support officers to supervise students undertaking practical activities outside of formal lessons but it is too early to assess their effectiveness in construction. Accommodation for brickwork and the wood trades allows teachers to create realistic working situations. Management of the carpentry and joinery stores is exemplary; issuing and use of tools and equipment are carefully monitored. The

plumbing workshop is small and its layout makes it difficult for teachers to supervise students adequately. Workshops are often untidy. The self-assessment report recognised this weakness. Classrooms are of an appropriate size, well decorated and equipped but teachers make little use of wall space to display students' work. There is a wide range of text-based learning materials in the learning centre. Students have good access to computers. The computer-aided design centre has up-to-date, industrial standard software.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in construction, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Foundation vocational (craft)	1	Expected completions	*	*	87
		Retention (%)	*	*	61
		Achievement (%)	*	*	0
Intermediate vocational (craft)	2	Expected completions	*	*	72
		Retention (%)	*	*	78
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
Advanced vocational (craft)	3	Expected completions	*	*	75
		Retention (%)	*	*	89
		Achievement (%)	*	*	94
Advanced vocational (technician)	3	Expected completions	*	*	18
		Retention (%)	*	*	78
		Achievement (%)	*	*	79
Higher vocational (technician)	4	Expected completions	*	*	21
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies and Professional Courses

Grade 2

25 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering business studies, management and professional courses. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report but considered that it gave insufficient emphasis to retention rates and

Key strengths

- good retention on GCE A level business
- good pass rates on management courses
- much high-quality teaching
- well-managed provision
- innovative course design
- good specialist learning resources

Weaknesses

- poor pass rate on GNVQ advanced business
- poor retention rates on some accounting courses
- narrow range of professional courses

examination results.

26 Business provision in the college extends from foundation to higher level and is mostly based at three of the main sites with a small amount offered at other centres. Few professional courses are offered other than in accounting. An innovative approach to course design has increased class sizes, and new teaching and learning methods involving more use of IT have been adopted. Course teams have developed standard schemes of work and course materials and this results in a high degree of consistency in the teaching across all centres. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. Syllabuses across courses have been mapped to identify modules

with common content and these are taught in classes of students from different courses in shared lessons. One successful lesson on quality management was attended by students taking three different management qualifications. Similar joint lessons were observed on GCSE, GCE A level and GNVQ courses. Courses are well managed and staff and students are kept well informed. Target-setting and monitoring is undertaken at course level. Delegation of funding targets encourages course teams to determine the most effective means of ensuring students complete their course successfully.

27 There is much stimulating teaching. In the lessons observed, teachers made good use of computer-based presentations, video case studies, students' work experience, role-play exercises and a range of well-presented overhead projector slides and handout materials. Lessons drew heavily on examples of developments in local businesses. Students participated well in class discussion. In the few poorer lessons, teachers gave insufficient attention to ensuring that all students participated in the work and made too few checks on students' understanding. Some materials used were of poor quality. In lectures, teachers clearly indicated what work was expected of students in their allocated time in the learning centres. Detailed schemes of work show that students are prepared well for examinations through an increasingly intensive workload of case studies. The department's learning resource co-ordinator supports teachers well in assisting in the design and development of learning materials for use in lessons and the learning centre. Tutorial lessons are successfully used to monitor the performance of full-time and most part-time students. All GNVQ students undertake relevant work experience. Overseas residential visits are features of these courses.

28 The self-assessment report gave insufficient attention to retention and pass rates. In 1998, the level of retention was above the national average in the well-subscribed GCE A level

Curriculum Areas

business course, but significantly below the national average in the courses leading to GCSEs in accounting and business and to NVQ levels 2 and 4 accounting. With some important exceptions, most pass rates are good or close to the national average. The supervisory management certificate course and diploma in management studies are particularly successful with pass rates at 87% and 100%, respectively, in 1997-98. GCSEs in accounting and business, NVQ levels 3 and 4 accounting, higher national certificate in business and GCE A level business have pass rates around the national average. The pass rate in GNVQ advanced business is poor at 48% in 1997-98, well below the national average of 73%. Students' written work is of a good standard and is well presented. Teachers provide good written feedback on students'

work pointing out how they might improve their performance.

29 Teachers are appropriately qualified. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the shortage of teachers of accounting and the small amount of recent commercial experience amongst teachers are weaknesses. Commercial updating of teachers is being provided through a series of work placements. The department's operational plan highlights the need for teachers to improve their IT skills and this is also being addressed. Specialist resources are good. Students have good access to modern computers and a dedicated business learning centre provides resources of outstanding quality in a range of media. Classrooms are well decorated and many have appropriate wall displays.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in business studies and professional courses, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ accounting	2	Expected completions	*	*	52
		Retention (%)	*	*	63
		Achievement (%)	*	*	42
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	*	*	76
		Retention (%)	*	*	71
		Achievement (%)	*	*	48
GCE A level business, management and office studies	3	Expected completions	*	*	121
		Retention (%)	*	*	91
		Achievement (%)	*	*	78
Higher national certificate business, and business and finance	4	Expected completions	*	*	84
		Retention (%)	*	*	66
		Achievement (%)	*	*	89

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Childcare and Health Care

Grade 2

30 Inspectors observed 16 lessons across a range of courses and levels in health and social care, early years care and education and counselling. The self-assessment report was comprehensive and inspectors agreed with most of its judgements.

Key strengths

- wide range of provision
- effective systems for supporting and monitoring students' progress
- good teaching on most courses
- successful development of students' ability to learn on their own
- well-taught key skills
- good achievements on a majority of courses

Weaknesses

- lack of appropriate detail in some lesson plans and schemes of work
- poor achievement on the certificate in childcare and education course
- lack of vocational identity in some teaching rooms

31 Students are offered a range of provision at foundation, intermediate, advanced and higher level across the areas of health and social care, early years and counselling. Many students progress to courses at a higher level at the college. The college has recently expanded its range of courses in nursery nursing, and NVQs in care, and advice and guidance, in response to demand. Courses are generally well managed. Effective systems are used to record and monitor students' progress. Course leaders successfully co-ordinate the delivery of programmes at two sites. The combination of classes to improve efficiency is not always

appropriate. In one mixed class of 27, almost half the students had been identified as requiring additional support and the teacher could not meet their needs.

32 Most teaching is good. Teachers show confidence in their subject and draw on their vocational experience in their lessons. In many lessons, teachers maintain students' interest and motivation by frequent changes in activities. In one successful lesson, the teacher creatively used role-play of a child using building blocks. Students worked in pairs with one student carrying out a detailed observation of the manipulative movements of the other student. The teacher expertly extended students' learning during the feedback from the activity. However, some lesson plans lack sufficient detail and schemes of work are often lists of topics without reference to the learning activities which will be carried out. In a significant number of lessons, inspectors observed students merely copying notes from the overhead projector screen. Tutorial sessions are used to provide good support for individual students' learning.

33 The self-assessment report identified students' inability to study on their own as a weakness, but inspectors concluded that teachers have made good progress in encouraging students to learn on their own effectively, and this is now a strength. Students were prepared well during formal lessons and when they moved to the learning centre for their own studies a tutor provided useful support. The training needs of staff in the use of resources from which students can learn on their own are being addressed. Key skills are integrated successfully with courses, especially the GNVQ. Vocational tutors teach key skills well and students are aware of their relevance. Work experience is available to all full-time students and is organised well by work placement officers. It is monitored effectively and is integrated with other aspects of the courses.

Curriculum Areas

34 Inspectors agreed with the findings in the self-assessment report that achievement rates are good on most courses. Pass rates on the diploma in nursery nursing, GNVQ intermediate and GNVQ advanced are well above the national average. The pass rate on the certificate in childcare and education is poor and has declined from 50% in 1997 to 41% in 1998. Retention rates on most courses are around the national average. The written work produced by students was appropriate to the level of course which they were studying. They responded well to assignments which encouraged creativity and communication skills.

35 As noted in the self-assessment report, staff have relevant vocational experience and qualifications. Almost all teachers have professional teaching qualifications and assessor awards. Courses are supported by a range of good resources, including practical care equipment and early years materials, and the learning centres provide excellent support for students learning on their own. The rooms provided for early years programmes are stimulating learning environments with extensive displays of students' work. The rooms used by care and counselling programmes do not have displays and lack a vocational identity.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in childcare and health care, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ foundation health and social care	1	Expected completions	*	*	13
		Retention (%)	*	*	61
		Achievement (%)	*	*	68
GNVQ intermediate health and social care	2	Expected completions	*	*	45
		Retention (%)	*	*	83
		Achievement (%)	*	*	88
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education certificate in childcare and education	2	Expected completions	*	*	29
		Retention (%)	*	*	73
		Achievement (%)	*	*	41
NVQ care	2	Expected completions	*	*	88
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	64
GNVQ advanced health and social care	3	Expected completions	*	*	39
		Retention (%)	*	*	89
		Achievement (%)	*	*	95
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education diploma in nursery nursing	3	Expected completions	*	*	60
		Retention (%)	*	*	88
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Performing Arts, Media and Music

Grade 2

36 Inspectors observed a total of 14 lessons on courses in performing arts, media and music. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified a few additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- consistently good teaching
- flexible curriculum design
- excellent accommodation, equipment and resources for most courses
- good development of students' specialist and study skills
- strong commitment to independent learning
- good achievement and progression on several programmes

Weaknesses

- lack of emphasis on good vocational practices
- poor retention on some courses
- inappropriate use of some accommodation

37 The provision is extensive and well planned. It provides opportunities for students to study either separate vocational or academic programmes, or a combination of the two. Teachers are well deployed so that small group specialist subjects such as dance, music theory and instrumental tuition run concurrently with more popular courses. Resources are managed and adapted to encourage students to study on their own. Several of the lower level courses have small numbers enrolled.

38 As recognised in the self-assessment report, teaching is consistently good. Most schemes of work and lesson plans are of a high

standard and some teachers publish objectives and plans of lessons for their students. In some lessons, teachers follow their explanations of the main content of a lesson by effectively questioning students to make sure that they have understood the topic. In other lessons, teachers concentrate on addressing individual students' learning needs. Teachers make excellent use of transparencies relating to the visual arts to support the teaching of dance, and they use stimulating exemplars to illustrate the quality of lyric writing in popular music. Staff are overtolerant of practices which do not meet appropriate professional standards. Students were observed incorrectly attired for some practical lessons and staff were unaware that they could insist on minimum standards appropriate to the vocational nature of their course. Staff sometimes ignored basic health and safety practices in relation to food and drink in teaching rooms. Assignment briefs are generally well written but the use of generic grading criteria sometimes leads to inaccurate grading and does not provide detailed help to students on how they might improve their performance. Theatre and cinema visits, and overseas study trips, further enrich the students' experiences. The self-assessment report identified as a weakness the lack of opportunities for students to acquire and develop a wider range of performance skills through a more imaginative choice of productions and collaborative projects. Opportunities to develop projects with prestigious local venues have not been fully explored.

39 The self-assessment report recognised the students' outstanding achievements in GCE A level drama, GCE A level dance, and the national diploma in performing arts. Progression from both the national diploma in performing arts and GNVQ advanced in media to courses in higher education is common. Retention rates in the national diploma in performing arts (popular music) and the GNVQ advanced in media, and in the first diploma in

Curriculum Areas

performing arts, are acknowledged as a weakness. Initiatives designed to improve retention, attendance and punctuality have been implemented with some success. Students demonstrate good specialist practical skills, particularly in popular music. Media students produce a college magazine of high quality. Students develop good oral communication skills but they make insufficient use of IT in written assignments. They successfully develop good study skills to support their learning, particularly with regard to note-taking.

40 The specialist accommodation is excellent for all subject areas except popular music. This accommodation is adequate but lacks sufficient soundproofing. The dance studio which has a barre, sprung floor, mirrored walls and good audio facilities is particularly impressive. The noisy heating system in the studio disturbs

acoustic and aural activities. Teaching is fully supported by ready access to high-quality projectors, video-recorders, instruments and public address systems. Some large spaces used for teaching are not always available because they are also used for whole-college purposes. Accommodation is not always appropriately or fully utilised. Small classes sometimes study in large performance spaces. The learning centre provides excellent resources and is fully appreciated by students and staff. The considerable strengths in the accommodation and resources were included in the self-assessment report. Teachers are well qualified and take part in extensive staff development activities. Some part-time teachers bring valuable experience from their current professional practice.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in performing arts, media and music, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate media	2	Expected completions	*	*	15
		Retention (%)	*	*	60
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
GCE A level dance and drama	3	Expected completions	*	*	29
		Retention (%)	*	*	76
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
National diploma in performing arts (popular music)	3	Expected completions	*	*	12
		Retention (%)	*	*	41
		Achievement (%)	*	*	75
National diploma in performing arts	3	Expected completions	*	*	14
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
GNVQ advanced media	3	Expected completions	*	*	13
		Retention (%)	*	*	68
		Achievement (%)	*	*	85

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Languages

Grade 2

41 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Greek. They agreed with the findings of the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- exceptionally high numbers of students following language courses
- thriving home-study provision
- consistently good results in Spanish
- effective management based on consultation
- excellent learning centre facilities

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on GCSE courses
- decline in 1998 examination results on the majority of courses

42 The college offers an extensive range of courses in 12 languages at beginners, intermediate and advanced levels. There are currently 1,466 students studying a foreign language in the college. These include 1,239 part-time students, 67 full-time students and 160 students who are studying distance-learning courses in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Greek from their homes. Students on these home-study courses live as far afield as Edinburgh and London. They include a professional composer learning Italian and a shift worker who was unable to attend regular lessons. The department and courses are managed effectively.

43 As the self-assessment report acknowledged, teachers ensure that lessons contain a variety of well-planned activities. They include an appropriate balance of individual work, work in pairs and whole-class work. Tutors are skilled at preparing

worksheets to supplement tasks from course books and examination papers, and in creating original learning materials in minority languages. Good listening practice was evident in all lessons observed and teachers demonstrated expertise in helping students to gain confidence. The pace of teaching was appropriate. It ranged from the slow, deliberate teaching in a French lesson for beginners which took students confidently and reassuringly through the stages of asking for and giving directions, to the brisk and challenging delivery of an advanced lesson conducted entirely in Spanish. Video was appropriately used in an advanced French lesson with effective use of the freeze-frame facility which enabled the teacher to check students' understanding and to write new vocabulary on the board. In the best lessons teaching was characterised by good use of the language students were learning. In a GCE A level German lesson, the teacher built up from easier exercises to an advanced task in which students had to justify their reason for choosing an assignment topic through structured work in pairs aided by a handout with key questions. The thorough preparation for the task elicited a high level of response from the students who were able to converse confidently in German about their chosen topic. In several lessons, teachers made excessive use of English for basic communication and instruction and so failed to expose the students effectively to the language they had chosen to learn.

44 Students' achievements in Spanish are consistently good across all levels. In 1997, pass rates were above the national average in GCE A level French and German but they declined in these subjects in 1998. Retention for intermediate and part-time courses is below the national average and this was acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Exceptionally large numbers of students are successful in the foreign languages at work courses. Almost 450 students successfully completed courses at various levels in this programme in 1997-98.

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All students observed were enthusiastic learners of their chosen languages. Students worked confidently with the facilities in the learning centre: some were wordprocessing in French; others watched satellite television in German and researched *Le Front National* on the internet using a French-language internet search facility. Students from local secondary schools also come once a week to the learning centre. They use the languages IT facilities as part of a collaborative project designed to raise school achievement and form a bridge between school and further education.

45 Staff are well qualified and are strongly encouraged by department managers to improve their teaching and language skills through

attendance at external courses and study visits abroad. Specialist resources, in teaching areas and in the learning centres, are excellent: the stock of books, dictionaries and magazines is extensive; facilities such as CD-ROMs, individual listening tasks on audio cassette and study guides for French, German, Spanish and Italian which students can use on their own are readily available. Specialist rooms are equipped with mounted video recorders, overhead projectors and listening stations attached around the wall which enabled individual listening practice. The department is particularly successful in integrating IT with other aspects of the languages curriculum.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in languages, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE French, German, Spanish, Italian	2	Expected completions	*	*	70
		Retention (%)	*	*	64
		Achievement (%)	*	*	54
GCE A level French, German, Spanish, Italian	3	Expected completions	*	*	74
		Retention (%)	*	*	87
		Achievement (%)	*	*	74

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

History, Psychology and Sociology

Grade 2

46 Inspectors observed 15 lessons in history, psychology and sociology. They agreed with most of the findings of the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- high standard of teaching
- integration of supported study in learning centres
- innovative expansion into non-traditional subjects
- good use of IT

Weaknesses

- poor retention
- insufficient use of a variety of appropriate methods in some teaching

47 The department is well managed. Managers share responsibility for quality and strategy and are fully informed about college matters and the curriculum in their care. Responsibilities are well defined. These strengths were identified in the thorough self-assessment report. Recruitment to the GCE A level subjects is buoyant and class sizes are large. The decline in recruitment to the GCSE programmes reflects the college's increasing provision of alternative courses at this level. The college is successfully expanding the provision into non-traditional areas; new courses include local history, criminal psychology and genealogy. These accredited courses increasingly take place at centres away from the main college sites. A recently introduced model for teaching the curriculum combines a lecture, given to one or more classes, follow-up sessions as separate classes and individual study in the learning centre supported by a teacher.

48 As the college identified in its self-assessment report, teaching is of high quality. Students are fully informed about the timing and content of their studies through clear course information sheets and detailed schemes of work which are written to a common, comprehensive format. Teachers manage large classes well and deliver challenging and structured lectures. In one lesson in a lecture theatre, 80 students attending a psychology lecture each received useful handouts. The teacher was able to direct questions to individual students, despite the large size of the class, and these were answered confidently. Tutorial work on study skills develops students' ability to take notes. Following lectures, the separate classes divide for discussion and consolidation of their knowledge of the lecture content. In some of these follow-up sessions, teachers provided entertaining, bravura performances which were enjoyed by the students. Some teachers fail to vary sufficiently the methods they use in these sessions and continue to teach the students as a whole class. On one occasion, where group work was used to good effect, students were encouraged to draw on their own thought processes to help them to understand cognitive behaviour therapy. Study guides and handouts are well produced and informative: in psychology, students are given all essential notes in this form and are no longer issued with textbooks. In some lessons, teachers fail to differentiate the work sufficiently to take account of the needs of students of various abilities. In a small minority of lessons, teachers neither demonstrated nor demanded sufficient intellectual rigour.

49 In psychology and sociology, achievement rates have improved over the last two years and pass rates are above the national average. In psychology in 1998, over half of the 173 students who sat the examinations achieved grade A to C. The pass rate in GCE A level history showed a decline in 1998. It is now slightly below the national average but the proportion of students achieving grade A to C increased to 29%. Achievement at GCSE in all

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three subjects exceeds the national average. The self-assessment report acknowledged that many retention rates are poor. Students of GCE A level history and on the short courses produce work of a high standard in response to the interesting and demanding assignments they are set.

50 All staff are appropriately qualified. The emphasis in staff development is on acquisition

of the necessary IT skills to support the curriculum; this is in response to a weakness included in the self-assessment report. All students have easy access to IT and make good use of the college's computer network to obtain lecture notes and work set by teachers. Lectures take place in excellent purpose-built lecture theatres, but some classrooms are not large enough for the size of classes.

Examples of achievements and retention rates in history, psychology and sociology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE history, psychology and sociology	2	Expected completions	*	*	214
		Retention (%)	*	*	58
		Achievement (%)	*	*	63
GCE A level history	3	Expected completions	*	*	101
		Retention (%)	*	*	75
		Achievement (%)	*	*	62
GCE A level psychology (one-year)	3	Expected completions	*	*	77
		Retention (%)	*	*	30
		Achievement (%)	*	*	83
GCE A level psychology (two-year)	3	Expected completions	*	*	243
		Retention (%)	*	*	72
		Achievement (%)	*	*	89
GCE A level sociology (one-year)	3	Expected completions	*	*	35
		Retention (%)	*	*	63
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73
GCE A level sociology (two-year)	3	Expected completions	*	*	81
		Retention (%)	*	*	62
		Achievement (%)	*	*	76

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

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Support for Students

Grade 2

51 Inspectors observed 12 tutorial sessions. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-developed links with schools and other external organisations
- effective induction arrangements for full-time students
- helpful and informative students' charter and handbook
- extensive welfare services
- good support for students applying to higher education institutions

Weaknesses

- some poor-quality tutorials
- insufficient pre-enrolment advice and guidance to part-time students

52 Effective liaison between the college and its feeder schools helps prospective students make an informed choice about the programmes available at the college. The college's school liaison staff work positively to raise the aspirations of pupils, many of whom do not view further education as a natural goal. The self-assessment report recognised that some of the materials provided to inform prospective students about individual courses are of poor quality.

53 The college organises an extensive range of events to inform school pupils about the opportunities available to them in the college. Members of the college's educational guidance team interview all prospective students who are unsure about which full-time course they wish to follow. Students who have definite views about their choice of course are referred directly to the appropriate department and do not

receive this impartial advice and guidance. Students applying for part-time courses receive insufficient help in making an informed choice of course.

54 The induction programme for students is generally well planned. In some departments, the induction process is not sufficiently specific to meet the needs of particular groups of students. The college charter provides useful information to help students understand the service they can expect from the college. This is supplemented by a detailed handbook which students find useful as a reference document. The student entitlement policy includes an explanation of the support students can expect. Full-time students are entitled to 30 hours a week supported study at the college and the details of their individual programmes are negotiated with tutors. Their agreements specify how much time is expected in formal lessons and how much is expected to be in the learning centres. The entitlement is well understood by students and is often referred to by them.

55 Students are entitled to a weekly class tutorial and tutors are each allocated an additional hour in which they see students individually. Inspectors agreed with the weakness identified in the college's self-assessment report that the quality of tutorials is too dependent on individual tutors. Students are able to make appointments to see a careers officer but in some departments their access to careers education is small. The work of the careers service is supplemented by the college's educational guidance team. Students are given helpful support when applying to higher education institutions.

56 The literacy and numeracy skills of full-time students are screened on entry to the college. When required, specialist diagnostic assessments are undertaken by an educational psychologist who is employed part time by the college. Learning support is provided to meet the needs and preferences of individual

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students. Support can include individual tuition, additional staff support in classes in which several students are identified as needing support and additional help in the workshops and learning centres. The management of additional support systems is effective.

However, inspectors agreed with the college's judgement in the self-assessment report that the implementation of the systems within departments is not always effective. Support for students who have behavioural difficulties is underdeveloped.

57 The college provides a wide range of welfare services which are well managed by the welfare services unit. Staff have developed appropriate policies and provide specialist advice and guidance on students' welfare rights and benefits. They arrange support for students who require childcare facilities, either through the college's nursery and creches or through the provision of funds for childminding services. The college employs three trained youth workers who are based in the main student social areas. They provide effective support for students, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and supervise, monitor and organise activities in these social areas. Students have access to a confidential, professional counselling service. Officers of the students' union executive play a role in helping staff develop policies which is valued by both students and staff. There are student members on the academic board and departmental boards of study. The college recognises that few extra-curricular activities are offered to students.

58 Action has been taken to address low attendance which was identified as a college-wide concern in 1997-98. Initial attention has been concentrated on students of GCE A level subjects, but this is now being extended to vocational areas. Improvements are already noticeable. Although inspectors of vocational curriculum areas reported low attendance in some classes, the average attendance in the observed classes was 78%. This compared with

68% recorded during the college's internal lesson observation programme during 1997-98.

General Resources

Grade 2

59 The self-assessment report provided a detailed assessment of the college's general resources. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the report. They considered that a few weaknesses were omitted.

Key strengths

- significant investment in the college's estate
- innovative development of centres in the community with partners
- development of high-quality learning centres
- welcoming reception and circulation areas
- rapid and effective development of IT resources

Weaknesses

- some areas in need of refurbishment and improved utilisation
- ineffective control of heating and ventilating

60 The college inherited a large and complex estate. Substantial investment has considerably improved its accommodation and learning facilities, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. The college has disposed of one major site which had inherent problems and was not appropriately located. The external appearance of two of the main sites has been dramatically improved through major structural alterations and additions. One of the main sites which principally houses construction and engineering studies is underused and no longer

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meets college needs; a major building on another site is in need of overall refurbishment. The college is aware of these issues and will determine its actions relating to these sites when the results of a current planning application are known. All main sites are well signposted and good car parking and security arrangements are provided. They are near main bus routes.

61 Entrances and reception areas at the major centres are welcoming and attractively designed. Most circulation and teaching areas are carpeted and recently decorated. General teaching rooms are usually well furnished and have teaching aids such as overhead projectors. New, large lecture theatres on each main site contain the latest presentation equipment. The college is committed to improve energy conservation but many rooms have inadequate controls for heating and ventilation. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

62 Well-designed learning centres have been developed rapidly on all main sites. They bring together IT, teaching and library facilities and study areas, and significantly increase the amount of space provided for students to study on their own. The centres provide good environments for study but can be noisy and distracting at peak times. Separate quiet study areas are available. Support staff operating in the centres are valued highly by the students and staff. They keep in close contact with teachers in the curriculum areas through regular meetings and ensure that they are aware of developments, and that stock is appropriate and up to date. The learning centres have generous opening hours including Saturday. The high quality of the learning centres was identified as a strength in the self-assessment report.

63 The college has worked hard, in partnership with numerous organisations, to establish centres with new learning facilities in areas of the city isolated from the main college sites. These centres have helped attract people

who would not normally return to study or attend college, or who would find regular attendance at a main site too difficult. For example, a centre has been developed within the transept of Sunderland Minster in partnership with the diocese and contains high-quality specialist IT equipment. It can be reached through a popular cafe which is operated by a second partner.

64 The college has invested significantly in IT to support learning, and this strength was identified in the self-assessment report. It is establishing high-capacity computer networks across and between all main sites. Not all staff can yet access the network. The college provides over 1,200 modern computer workstations for students' use. These are situated in the learning centres, other areas and at nine community-based centres. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is 1:6 and this is exceptional for this size of college. A central unit produces high-quality printed materials. Student access to text-based learning materials, multimedia resources and the internet is good. The college is developing arrangements to prevent improper use of the internet but these are not fully operational. Although computer facilities in learning centres are often used heavily, those in other areas are sometimes underused. The college is considering how it may improve its monitoring of the use of its extensive hardware and software resources.

65 All main learning and social facilities are accessible to persons with restricted mobility. Most full-time and part-time staff have good work areas and staff rooms. Although poor social facilities for students were identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report, action has been taken to remedy this and they are now generally good. Refectory facilities are spacious, clean and pleasant; they are popular with students. There are comprehensive sports, leisure and fitness facilities for students at one of the main sites.

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Quality Assurance

Grade 2

66 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report on quality assurance. A few additional weaknesses were identified.

Key strengths

- wide-ranging structures for monitoring quality
- systematic process of internal validation
- effective programme of internal lesson observation
- extensive and evaluative self-assessment report
- strong emphasis on staff development

Weaknesses

- quality assurance mechanisms at an early stage of development
- insufficient separation of audit and quality assurance functions
- insufficient attention to students' achievements

67 The previous inspection reports commended the strong commitment to quality assurance in each of the constituent colleges. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that this commitment is present in the new college. A vice-principal and senior department managers have specific responsibilities for quality assurance. The strategic plan sets out in detail how the quality assurance framework is to be developed and the related processes implemented. Wide-ranging structures for the monitoring of quality at curriculum level have been established. A unit for quality comprises the managers responsible for quality audit, quality assurance and data support. The academic board and two of its subcommittees meet regularly to discuss quality

assurance matters. Minutes of departmental boards of study and course assessment boards also routinely include discussion of quality and performance issues.

68 A well-designed course validation procedure includes detailed reference to retention and achievement rates, and teaching and assessment methods. At the time of the inspection, all full-time and 82 part-time courses had been successfully validated. Following validation, course specifications are produced from which compliance can be measured. These specifications allow prospective students an insight to the structure and purpose of a course. Specifications had been produced for a significant number of the major courses by September 1998. Inspectors agreed with the claim in the college's self-assessment report that monitoring of the quality of teaching has been given a high priority. The internal inspection team inspected all departments in the college in 1997-98. A large number of lesson observations were undertaken. The profile of lesson observation grades from FEFC inspectors in each programme area was similar to that resulting from the internal observation programme. Judgements in the internal inspection reports about students' achievements are less detailed.

69 Achievement rates in the new college exceed those resulting from the final year of the constituent colleges. Pass rates in intermediate level vocational courses for students aged 16 to 18 showed a 46% improvement in 1997, after the first full year of the new college's operation, compared with 1996. This placed the college in the top third of colleges nationally according to tables produced by the Department for Education and Employment. In advanced vocational courses, a 20% improvement is recorded. Levels of achievement in 1998 have declined in many of the major programmes but are still largely above those achieved in 1996.

70 Because of the newness of the quality assurance structures a number of developments

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relating to quality are still in their early stages. The college has established a quality audit function to monitor compliance with quality assurance procedures. The self-assessment report acknowledged that audit has been too reactive and not based on a planned programme. The audit function is combined with a responsibility to co-ordinate the internal inspection programme and this does not provide sufficient independence of audit from quality assurance. The college has made a commitment to develop service standards in all the main functional areas and these will also be subject to a validation process. Currently, about half of the functional areas have approved standards. For example, managers of the learning centres have developed a range of quantified service standards with success targets for the current academic year.

71 The production of the college's first self-assessment report encompassed all aspects of the college's operations and involved all staff. Course self-assessment reports produced by the teaching teams formed the basis of departmental reports. They were informed by the internal inspection reports and by surveys of students' perceptions obtained through regular questionnaires. The judgements in the component reports were checked by senior heads of department, where appropriate, and then by a panel of senior managers. Governors played a key role in providing external advice at all stages of the process through a self-assessment working party. Overall, the sections on cross-college aspects are extensive and evaluative. The curriculum sections provide good evidence for the judgements reached under teaching and learning; there is less comprehensive analysis of students' achievements. Inspectors largely agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report on curriculum areas and aspects of cross-college provision. Action plans were developed which address identified weaknesses, and build on strengths. Considerable progress has been

made in achieving the targets in these action plans.

72 A high priority is afforded to staff development activities. The staff development plan for 1997-98 outlines priorities for training which are closely linked to the strategic plan. The priorities for activities have been on changing methods of teaching, developing the IT skills of staff and assisting teachers in their teaching of key skills. An accredited management development programme involves a significant number of senior and middle managers. A monthly staff development review provides a digest of training events and is also used to disseminate the outcomes of both external and internal activities. A staff appraisal policy has been agreed and all appraisers will have been trained by the end of 1998. The self-assessment report recognises that the first cycle is not yet fully complete. It is planned that all staff will have been appraised by July 2000. The college intends to link its application for Investor in People status to the completion of the appraisal cycle.

Governance

Grade 2

73 Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that some weaknesses had been overlooked.

Key strengths

- wide and appropriate range of experience and expertise of governors
- strong working relationships between governors and senior managers
- clear strategic direction provided by governors
- close monitoring by governors of the strategic plan

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- active involvement of governors in the college community

Weaknesses

- inconsistent clerking of governors' meetings
- underdeveloped review by governors of their own performance
- low attendance at some corporation and committee meetings

74 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under its financial memorandum with the FEFC.

75 The corporation has 20 members and there are no vacancies. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the corporation has a membership with a broad range of experience and expertise, often at a senior level, within the public and private sector. The college makes full use of governors' expertise and position in the community. Governors are committed to ensuring the welfare of the college. A search committee meets as necessary and open advertising is now central to recruitment. Induction for new governors is not undertaken systematically.

76 The corporation meets at least six times a year. Each of the seven committees of the corporation has a defined membership and clear terms of reference which have been approved by the corporation. The cycle of corporation and committee meetings is appropriate. Meetings of the corporation and its committees are sometimes poorly attended and business members are sometimes in a minority at corporation meetings. Two recent planned meetings of the finance and general purposes committee were unable to go ahead because of

inquiry. Committee business had to be dealt with by the corporation. Difficulties in attendance are recognised by the corporation, but attendance targets are not set. Governors and senior managers take seriously their statutory responsibilities for health and safety. The outcomes of safety audits and the deliberations of the health and safety committee are properly considered by the environment committee.

77 The governance section of the college's policy unit supports governors and organises their business; it has enabled governors to deal effectively with a large quantity of business since the merger. The corporation pays especial attention to operating with maximum probity: corporation and committee minutes are publicly available in the college learning centres and this is clearly advertised; the corporation has appropriate standing orders, including a complaints procedure; there is a code of conduct and a register of interests; a 'whistleblowing' policy has been agreed and is awaiting the formal approval of governors; the corporation operates in an open manner and the governance section of the policy unit does not, for reasons of probity, support the audit or remuneration committees which are supported by the clerk. Clerking arrangements make use of both college resources and an external provider. They are not always effective: the quality of the minutes of the audit committee are sometimes poor and important recommendations from this committee have been unduly delayed.

78 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors have a clear understanding of the issues which influence the future of the college and provide clear strategic direction. Their meetings constantly relate developments to strategic objectives. The corporation had a pivotal involvement in determining the strategy and direction of the new college. Members have a clear understanding of curriculum issues. The corporation requires regular reports from the

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principal which include appropriate indicators of enrolment, retention and achievement, and which enable comparison with similar institutions.

79 The chair of the corporation meets regularly with the principal to provide support and to monitor progress towards key objectives. The well-conceived system of pre-meeting briefings for governors who chair corporation committees provides ample opportunities for additional discussion. The self-assessment report indicated that systems for the appraisal and development of senior staff were not yet in place. However, at the time of the inspection, rigorous and thorough arrangements had been made. The principal has been appraised by the chair and vice-chair of governors, largely using targets derived from the strategic plan. The appraisal of the other senior postholders using the same guidelines is now complete. The governance section of the self-assessment report was the first detailed evaluation of the corporation's performance by governors and it provides a sound basis for future reviews.

Management

Grade 2

80 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. It accurately reflected the strengths and weaknesses in management.

Key strengths

- well-planned and well-executed merger strategy
- successful management of change
- open, consultative management with varied and successful channels of communication
- good financial management
- the wide range of successful collaborative ventures

- inclusive strategic planning

Weaknesses

- some late and inaccurate data returns to the FEFC
- poor quality of some departmental operational plans

81 The merger was well planned. It was executed in an open and consultative manner and all staff were fully involved. Clear transitional plans embraced the continuation of existing principalship arrangements until September 1996, current management arrangements in a confederation of the two constituent colleges until August 1997 and new academic structures to be determined and implemented by September 1997. The college's mission, explicitly related to the new institution, is developed through the three key objectives of widening participation, providing a broad curriculum and promoting quality.

82 Successful initiatives in widening participation are central to the college's strategy and to its management arrangements. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that a major strength of its work is an extensive range of collaborative partnerships. Strategic partnerships, particularly with the local education authority (LEA), have facilitated many developments, including the college's new responsibility for managing the city's community education service in over 50 local centres. There are good and productive working relationships with the City of Sunderland TEC.

83 The college executive has been in place since June 1996. Members meet to discuss policy and strategy every other week. Other regular meetings of members of the executive and other appropriate managers address operational details, and concentrate on academic matters and the management of resources. These arrangements are clear and

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work well. Actions and responsibilities are recorded and ongoing business is automatically reviewed at the next meeting. Vice-principals have responsibility for ensuring that departmental managers operate in accordance with college strategy. Targets in the annual operating statement are routinely monitored and progress is reported at each corporation meeting. The college has significantly improved its efficiency since 1996, partly through the voluntary redundancy of some 100 staff, and met its targets for funding. Pay as a percentage of income has now fallen to 65%.

84 Management at all levels is good. Staff and managers understand roles and responsibilities. Job descriptions are up to date. A variety of communication methods with staff on all sites are generally effective. There are regular section and departmental meetings, centre/site meetings and newsletters as well as the use of electronic mail and the computer network. Staff value the open and consultative style of management. They understand and support the college's mission and corporate objectives. Cohesive departments have been successfully created from staff originating from different colleges and based at different sites.

85 The college's self-assessment report recognised the strength of strategic planning. All staff, students and others with interests in the college are appropriately involved. There is an extensive programme of meetings and consultation, directed by a strategic planning timetable. Some of the operational plans produced by departments in support of whole-college plans are inadequately detailed and lack clear targets.

86 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The college has reduced its average level of funding from £18.11 in 1996-97 to £16.86 (funded) in 1998-99. This is slightly above the median for general further education and tertiary colleges of £16.48. The college has an appropriately qualified finance

team. Financial objectives are clearly defined in the financial forecasts and progress against targets is closely monitored by the management team. The college is in a strong financial position and its large cash reserves are positively managed and have generated significant investment income. The financial regulations are clear and concise and are regularly updated. Detailed management accounts are prepared monthly and are supported by a good standard of commentary.

87 The college's self-assessment report recognised the problems which the college has faced with its computerised management information system. Action is being taken to improve the quality and use of data. Problems of consistency between central management information systems and information held in departments are being resolved. Returns to the FEFC relating to the ISR have not been submitted on time due to problems related to the merger of two separate systems. Initial returns have sometimes been incorrect. These difficulties were in part responsible for the inspection team being unable to use students' achievements data derived from ISR returns.

88 The college has taken a measured and systematic approach to the development of formal statements of policy to underpin its operations. At the time of the inspection, the implementation of agreed policies was not fully effective across all areas of the college. Monitoring the implementation of policies is still at an early stage of development. The equal opportunities policy relating to students was formally approved by the corporation in May 1998. The strategic plan addresses a range of equal opportunities matters in relation to widening participation.

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Conclusions

89 Inspectors found the self-assessment process to be particularly effective. It formed part of the first full quality assurance cycle in the new college. Inspectors agreed with the great majority of the strengths and weaknesses included in the self-assessment report. The process of internal inspection, which informed self-assessment, concentrated on the quality of the students' learning experiences. The profile of lesson observation grades awarded by inspectors is similar in each curriculum area to that produced through internal inspection. Inspectors agreed with all the college's self-assessed grades both for curriculum areas and aspects of cross-college provision.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (October 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	23
19-24 years	12
25+ years	65
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (October 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	51
Intermediate	26
Advanced	19
Higher education	4
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (October 1998)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	450	5,368	24
Agriculture	0	42	0
Construction	78	561	3
Engineering	106	996	5
Business	274	2,476	11
Hotel and catering	239	283	2
Health and community care	429	1,218	7
Art and design	346	1,896	9
Humanities	538	8,028	36
Basic education	36	762	3
Total	2,496	21,630	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 51% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (October 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	286	27	0	313
Supporting direct learning contact	86	6	0	92
Other support	196	32	0	228
Total	568	65	0	633

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	*	£24,462,000	£23,200,000
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£18.78	£18.48	£17.20
Payroll as a proportion of income	*	71%	65%
Achievement of funding target	98%	100%	97%
Diversity of income	*	20%	18%
Operating surplus	*	£33,000	£20,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Diversity of income – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

**prior to college's formation*

FEFC Inspection Report 32/99

**Published by the
Further Education Funding Council**

Website <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>

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