

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Fircroft College of Adult Education

February 1997

**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 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-96

| Activity | Inspection grades | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Programme area | 9% | 59% | 29% | 3% | <1% |
| Cross-college provision | 14% | 50% | 31% | 5% | <1% |
| Overall | 12% | 54% | 30% | 4% | <1% |

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 08/97

FIRCROFT COLLEGE OF ADULT EDUCATION

WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Inspected September 1995-November 1996

Summary

Fircroft is a small adult residential college situated in south-west Birmingham. It recruits nationally as well as locally. The college has experienced a period of financial difficulty owing to its lack of assets and reserves which followed a reorganisation in 1980. Governors, managers and staff share a deeply held commitment to the ethos and mission of the college. It is successfully achieving its mission to provide learning opportunities for adults from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. It offers a coherent and distinctive range of programmes which meet the needs and interests of these students. There is significant partnership work with community groups and a strong commitment to equal opportunities. The standard of teaching is generally high and most students achieve their intended goals, including progression to higher education. Students are well supported by teaching and non-teaching staff. Appropriate attention is given to efficiency measures. Few formal policies are in place and strategic planning is not yet sufficiently developed. Standards for quality assurance and performance indicators have only recently been established for some areas. The college should: improve the progress being made by a minority of its students; review the teaching of core skills; improve careers guidance and learning support; strengthen the analysis of data on students' achievements and destinations; improve the quality of some equipment; and continue to upgrade accommodation.

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

| Curriculum area | Grade | Curriculum area | Grade |
|--------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Mathematics and science | 2 | Personal and community development | 3 |
| Humanities and social sciences | 2 | | |

INTRODUCTION

1 The inspection of Fircroft College of Adult Education was planned for the academic year 1995-96. Procedures for the enrolment and induction of new students were inspected in September and October 1995. After a request from the college, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) agreed to postpone the inspection of the curriculum till the summer term 1996. The inspection was completed in November 1996. Five inspectors spent a total of 29 days in the college. The team visited 35 classes, examined students' work and consulted a range of documentation. They met with governors and attended two meetings of the governing body. They interviewed staff and students and talked to representatives from a wide range of outside bodies, including neighbouring colleges, the local education authority (LEA), the West Midlands Open College Network, community groups, the careers service, the Open University, City Challenge and the Birmingham Settlement.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Fircroft College of Adult Education is one of six residential colleges in the United Kingdom designated, under section 28 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, as eligible to receive its financial support from the FEFC. The college was founded in 1909 as an educational charity to provide higher and general education within a residential environment for men. Alongside this work, the college also offered some short courses for women. In 1980, the college started to recruit women to the full-time residential course. The college is situated in an early twentieth-century large family residence set in six acres of gardens and grounds in Selly Oak, in south-west Birmingham.

3 The college is a member of the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges. This includes a college of higher education (Westhill), and a number of other colleges and teaching units whose courses are largely international in character, covering mission studies, world religions and development studies. Through the federation, students gain access to a range of sports and social facilities. The federation will be opening a new £5.5 million learning resource centre in September 1997.

4 The college founders were inspired by the Danish folk high schools, a unique system of Danish residential colleges. Some distinctive features of Fircroft College of Adult Education have derived from this source. In particular, the college offered no external accreditation until it was required to do so by the FEFC as a designated institution. It is now completing the process whereby its original aims can be pursued within an academic framework of accreditation.

5 The college mission is to provide:

- a residential learning environment combined with a highly-qualified teaching staff

-
- opportunities for personal development, progression to higher education and professional development for mature adults from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds
 - adult education programmes for individuals and groups to promote effective citizenship.
- 6 In 1995-96 the college provided residential and day learning facilities for 448 adult students. There were 42 full-time resident students, 32 full-time non-resident students and 374 part-time students. The college recruits its resident students nationally and regionally and there are a small number of international students. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. The college has a total of 31 full-time equivalent staff, including administrative and residential staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.
- 7 The college is situated in a large conurbation where there has been much industrial and social change over recent decades. There are areas of high unemployment, particularly affecting minority ethnic groups. Against this background, African-Caribbean and Asian communities make a strong contribution to the life of the region. The college aims to recruit adults from minority ethnic groups in partnership with the local community.
- 8 The college offers the following programmes:
- a. Fircroft studies: a one-year full-time, or two-year part-time course validated by the West Midlands Open College Network which consists of a core foundation studies element and 26 modules;
 - b. short courses: a programme of day and residential courses which include a return to study course and courses entitled moving on in mathematics, African-Caribbean history and culture, and women's changing lives;
 - c. community-based projects and courses which are based both at the college and off-site in the inner city and have residential elements as an integral part, including;
- community capacity building programmes funded through the single regeneration budget which focus on building skills in local communities and voluntary organisations
 - 'firmnet', a collaborative programme funded by City Challenge in inner-city Birmingham
 - 'reachout', a partnership with the Open University and other Birmingham institutions centred around removing barriers for disadvantaged groups to enter higher education
 - 'transcap', a transnational exchange programme, funded through the European Social Fund to create opportunities for voluntary groups in four European countries to share skills and experiences.
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9 The college offers conference facilities to groups, mainly in the voluntary sector, whose work reflects the priorities in the college's mission.

10 At present, in common with other long-term residential colleges, the college is not included in the FEFC funding methodology. Funding allocations have been based on a 'roll forward' formula, adjusted for growth, efficiency and inflation. In 1995-96, the college received an allocation of £443,646 for 89.8 target residential full-time equivalents. This was based on a targeted growth of 4 per cent; the college actually achieved a 6.5 per cent growth. Excluding capital grants, FEFC recurrent funding amounts to 46 per cent of the college's income. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

11 The college has a management team of four: the principal, director of studies, finance officer/bursar and registrar. The management of teaching and learning in the college is through programme and curriculum teams, led by co-ordinators and reporting to the academic management group and director of studies.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

12 The college is successfully achieving its mission of providing learning opportunities for adults from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. In 1994-95, 59 per cent of students had no qualifications when they enrolled on the Fircroft studies course and this rose to 66 per cent in 1995-96. Over half the students are unemployed before starting the course. The college has been successful in recruiting increasing numbers of students from minority ethnic groups onto the Fircroft studies programme. In 1993-94, 20 per cent of students were from minority ethnic groups, rising to 37 per cent in 1996-97.

13 The college offers a distinctive range of courses which meet the college's mission and the needs and interests of students. Most courses are in the social sciences, humanities and community education areas but there are also some courses in mathematics, science and performing arts. New course developments are under way in health and social care and there is scope for the curriculum to be extended in mathematics, science and computing. Provision ranges from introductory courses to access to higher education courses. Where appropriate, there are clear progression routes for students. For example, the Fircroft studies course prepares students for higher education and specific pathways within this course link with professional training in social work and youth and community work. All college courses include work on aspects of citizenship, for example understanding how to participate in society.

14 The college's portfolio of courses is reviewed on a regular basis and this has led to some impressive curriculum developments. Examples are the African-Caribbean studies courses and the community-based 'reachout' programme which provides flexible forms of study for students

who want to move on to higher education but are not able to attend a college. The college has recently developed some short courses in science and horticulture for students with learning difficulties. Courses are available through a wide range of modes of study. One-year and short residential courses, part-time and full-time day courses lasting one year as well as short courses are offered. Several courses combine day study and residential study. Little use is made of distance learning options.

15 The college has established a flexible modular framework for its curricula, and introduced open college network accreditation for most modules. The framework is well suited to the spread of courses offered and to the developments which are planned. Existing modules are regrouped and new modules developed as appropriate in constructing new courses. An example of this is the 'working with people' course (part of the firmen programme), which comprises community organisation, black studies and core studies modules from the Fircroft studies course together with a newly-developed module of supported and assessed community work placements. The college is exploring other kinds of accreditation alongside open college network credits for some of its provision; for example, national vocational qualifications (NVQs) or other qualifications for care courses and for the community capacity building courses.

16 The college has successfully attracted external funding for new courses. Funding has been used to enable significant developments in the college's community-based provision over the last three years. Courses are carefully designed to meet the needs of community groups and local residents.

17 The college is responsive to new community needs and initiatives which lie within its mission. Outside agencies praised the college for its integrity and genuine commitment to working in partnership. Beneficial liaison exists with agencies ranging from the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges and other further and adult education colleges and universities, to local authorities and central government agencies such as the Task Force and City Challenge. The college has close and effective links with various community organisations, particularly in some inner-city areas of Birmingham. Some international links are well developed; for example, with black adult educators in South Africa through a British Council exchange programme. Some students have participated in trans-European seminars in Spain and England on community development.

18 The college has developed effective approaches to marketing which have recently been reviewed and put into a marketing strategy with the help of a specialist consultant. The identification of needs for community-based provision is particularly thorough and systematic. The development of the Fircroft studies course is generally informed by the needs of existing students and the views of the staff rather than analysing external factors such as trends in the labour market. The publicity methods used are

appropriate for the different kinds of courses. For example, local neighbourhood promotions and the development of word-of-mouth networks are used to publicise community-based provision. Other publicity methods include local and national newspaper advertisements, the use of radio and display stands and printed brochures and leaflets distributed to agencies which may refer students. Publicity is carefully aimed at adults who have been educationally disadvantaged. For example, advertisements are placed in local newspapers in areas of England with the highest levels of unemployment. A travelling display was used in Cornwall and in other areas of rural isolation where there is a low skills base, and where access to local further education colleges is difficult. The effectiveness of the publicity methods used is carefully reviewed and attention given to their cost effectiveness.

19 The college is highly committed to ensuring equal opportunities. There is much effective practice aimed at promoting equal opportunities and addressing discrimination. Students applying for the Fircroft studies course are informed of the college's equal opportunities commitments when they are interviewed and students participate in useful group exercises to explore stereotyping and prejudice and ways of ensuring fair treatment of the people at Fircroft. Guidelines for teachers help to make sure that teaching methods promote equality and there is a system for observing classes which focuses on student interaction in relation to gender and race. The equal opportunities policy covers most areas of college life but it is not comprehensive. It does not, for example, cover learning support or deal specifically with harassment. The college has recently adopted a useful disability statement but it is not clear from the statement who has responsibility for monitoring its implementation. Aspects of equal opportunities, for example the gender and ethnicity of students, are reported on systematically. However, there is no overall system for monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of the equal opportunities policy.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

20 The college has been through a period of financial difficulty. For complex historical reasons it did not have any reserves or assets since a reorganisation in 1980. The assets reside with a body called the Croft Trust. Development funding of £142,000 made available by the trust had to be reallocated to address urgent statutory health and safety requirements. The underlying financial vulnerability remains but governors and managers have taken a number of effective measures to address the situation.

21 Governors are highly committed to the college and work well with the principal. They have a range of educational and business expertise and demonstrate an awareness of the risk factors arising from the lack of assets. Staff and students are well represented on the board. After careful consideration of the options, governors took an important decision in

February 1996 to end uncertainties about the immediate future of the college by reaffirming college values and pursuing a development strategy. The board has conducted an analysis of its own structure, role and monitoring mechanisms. It has revised its committee structure and terms of reference, and has recently approved a code of conduct and register of interests. The full board meets termly and receives a comprehensive financial report at each meeting. Committees meet at least once a term and more regularly when necessary. Clerking functions are carried out effectively. In order to monitor curriculum developments, two governors are members of the academic board.

22 The board has 26 members, including some who are nominated by various organisations. Four of these organisations have withdrawn their members from the board and they cannot be replaced as the college is bound by its charitable scheme which specifies the governing body's membership. Work has started to investigate with the Charities Commission the implications of making changes to the composition of the board. Governors have not yet conducted a formal audit of their collective skills but some gaps in expertise have already been identified. Two members from minority ethnic groups have been co-opted to the board and a search committee has been established to find new members where actual vacancies occur. The board has recently introduced a training programme for members, developed a useful induction pack and started to discuss ways of measuring its own effectiveness. It is also considering the drawing up of its agenda and attempting to clarify its reporting cycle.

23 Governors, managers and staff all share a deeply held belief in the ethos and mission of the college. Teaching and non-teaching staff are clearly committed to the two main purposes of the college, that of working with adults who are disadvantaged and the provision of a residential setting for learning.

24 Against the background of uncertainty about the future direction of the college, the board did not set objectives for the college in 1995-96. Strategic objectives have been set for 1996-97 and both governors and staff were involved in the strategic planning process. Some of the college's objectives are general statements of intent. There is a lack of details about targets and the criteria for success. Previous targets that have not been met have sometimes been altered without explanation. The college is still exploring how to integrate plans for its well-established full-time course (Fircroft studies) and its more recent community-based initiatives.

25 There are few formal policies and a continuing uncertainty about which areas of policy must be developed. Responsibility for implementing and monitoring the policies which do exist is generally clear.

26 Management of change produced some tensions within the institution during the last academic year. The uncertain financial situation led senior managers to spend much of their time attempting to identify new areas of development and funding and this created a view amongst some academic

staff that the traditional work of the college was being undervalued. Staff now feel that recognition of the need to clarify management roles and line management structures, particularly as they affect the teaching staff, together with the governors' decision on the future development of the college, have improved the situation. It is a testament to the college that the commitment of staff, managers and governors has continued to provide a settled environment for the students during this period.

27 The college is developing a new management structure. As yet it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness. There are some areas of overlap between the academic board and the academic management group which the college is still trying to solve. The curriculum is generally effectively managed by staff who have responsibility for particular programmes and for subject specialisms.

28 A comparison of costs with those of other similar adult residential colleges has been undertaken in order to make efficiency gains where possible and there have also been successful attempts to diversify sources of funding. A 'benchmarking' exercise was carried out to judge the value for money of some of the residential services. Efficiency gains have been made through a joint purchasing arrangement. For example, gas costs have been reduced by 50 per cent, a saving of £4,000. The college has now built up a reserve of £33,000 and the 1996-97 budget projects a £20,000 surplus. Initial work has been carried out to determine the cost effectiveness of the teaching of courses but further analysis is still required. The allocation of budgets and monitoring of spending is clearly understood. Devolved budgets are in place. A bidding process was built into the setting of this year's annual budget to allow staff to consider how to spend development money.

29 Appropriate priority has been given to financial control in the development of management information systems and performance indicators are in place for some, but not all, of the other functions of the college. There is inadequate collection and analysis of information on programmes other than Fircroft studies at senior management and board level.

30 Enrolment targets have been set and achieved, including targets for gender and ethnicity. Retention on the Fircroft studies course is closely monitored and relevant action taken when required, but retention on the other courses is not systematically monitored.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

31 The college is responsive to the needs of adults, many of whom have not studied since leaving school. Students are well supported and encouraged to learn. A particular strength of the college is the extensive personal support provided formally and informally by teachers, and non-teaching staff, not only during the working day but also in the evening and at weekends.

32 Adults who are interested in the Fircroft studies course are helped to make informed decisions about attending the college through short courses and a well-planned interview and admissions day. Admissions procedures are fair and thorough and the criteria for acceptance are clear. The criteria include the college's perception of a candidate's need for Fircroft in particular and the students' readiness to benefit from study, to contribute to the college and to work co-operatively with others. Students receive helpful information before they arrive at the college, much of it provided in a comprehensive student handbook. They are also invited to undertake some preparation work.

33 Induction for the Fircroft studies course is well organised, generally effective and thoroughly evaluated. It involves an impressive range of study and social activities. The college takes care to ensure that non-residential students have equal access to the induction programme. All students receive helpful advice and guidance on choosing their learning programme and they can change their programme over the first three weeks, if they wish. Students' learning and personal support needs are identified as part of the induction process. Throughout the induction programme students are successfully encouraged to work together and to support each other. For example, two students anxious about their spelling and writing worked privately together to proofread each other's work. Some students find the information on the credit system and structure of the course confusing. A minority of students feel unprepared in moving from induction to the first module of the course in week four, finding the sudden intensity of the coursework too much of a challenge.

34 The accreditation of students' prior learning is at an early stage of development. Application forms and interviews supply the college with extensive information about students and their background but no member of staff is trained in accrediting students' prior learning. Core skills are assessed early on in the course, allowing credits to be achieved quickly by some students.

35 Students on all programmes have a personal tutor. On the Fircroft studies course, students see their personal tutor for individual tutorials frequently during the induction programme and subsequently at least twice for each module of the course. Tutorials are well planned and well structured. They offer opportunities for students to review their personal learning plans and evaluate their progress with strong support from the tutor. Tutors are always available if students request a meeting and students appreciate this. One student who felt that he could not manage the course was seen immediately by a member of staff and his confidence was sufficiently restored to enable him to complete the course successfully. A regular weekly meeting enables personal tutors and module tutors to discuss every student individually and to keep each other informed. These meetings are followed by action notes which provide information for those unable to attend. Students on programmes other than Fircroft studies also have individual tutorials which provide effective support for their learning.

36 Contact with a careers adviser has proved of value to students in choosing their modules on the Fircroft studies course and students generally welcome the advice on higher education opportunities provided by the librarian. However, no member of staff is formally qualified to offer careers advice and there is no service agreement with the local careers service to assist in developing careers education. Some tutors are not well informed about career options and students require more extensive guidance than is provided. Careers resources for higher education are satisfactory and are generally well used. The college term starts in late September, and given the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) deadlines, some students wishing to go on to higher education felt that they did not have enough time to make a choice about their potential studies at university.

37 Arrangements for counselling are newly established and well advertised, but not yet well used. Students can make direct and confidential contact with an independent counsellor employed by the college on a part-time basis. The counsellor is qualified and experienced. Students can undertake stress and time-management training before their examinations.

38 Childcare facilities are offered by the college through the Federation nursery. It is not well used, except by students on short courses some of whom may have their nursery expenses met by the college. It is recognised that absence of inexpensive childcare may prevent some people applying for a place. The college is welcoming to students' families. There are no residential guest room facilities but considerable effort is made to accommodate family members if necessary. Childcare and help with transport costs is provided on all community-based projects and courses.

39 A residential community tutor encourages full-time and part-time students to take advantage of the social and personal development opportunities offered either at the college or as part of the Federation's facilities. There is an active student union.

40 Learning support is developing in response to need but the college has no overall strategy. Students' basic mathematics requirements are assessed in a thorough and systematic way. Students' English needs are broadly identified at induction and through personal tutorials. Some students whose first language is not English are referred for assessment to the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges' English department and may choose thereafter to attend an LEA centre for help. There is no organised provision of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at the college. Most teachers have received no training in helping students with learning difficulties, students who require additional support with basic skills or students who require ESOL support. Students in community-based courses benefit from an ESOL tutor and a basic skills tutor working as part of the team.

41 Students' records of achievement are not well developed. Students prepare portfolio work for their accreditation but it is not the kind of record of achievement which they can show to potential employers.

42 Students' attendance is carefully monitored. Those who fail to attend are contacted. Staff approach this issue in a friendly and supportive way and students appreciate their concern. Students are well informed of their rights and responsibilities.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

43 The profile of the college's lesson grades is better than the average for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, as recorded in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Strengths clearly outweighed weaknesses in 71 per cent of the sessions inspected. During the inspection, the average level of attendance at each class was 90 per cent and some students were absent because they were attending higher education interviews. Lessons did not always get off to a prompt start because of students' late arrival and occasionally students did not settle quickly at the start of lessons. The following table summarises the grades awarded to the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

| Programmes | Grade | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Totals |
|----------------------------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|---------------|
| Access to higher education | | 2 | 18 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 26 |
| Other | | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 9 |
| Total | | 3 | 22 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 35 |

44 In mathematics and science, there were good relations between staff and students and the teaching was effective. Work was conducted at an appropriate pace and students were encouraged to build up their mathematical and scientific concepts. In one mathematics session on the reasons why a minus times a minus makes a plus, students engaged in lively discussion of their own theories and explored the problems they had experienced in trying to learn mathematics before they came to the college in order to develop a sound understanding of topics. The technical content of lessons was appropriate to the level of the subject being taught and there was regular reinforcement of basic concepts. The few more able students, however, were not always sufficiently challenged. There was inadequate use of information technology in teaching both mathematics and science. On a short science course for students with severe learning difficulties the students explored scientific principles using the college gardens and vegetable plot. This was an effective way of teaching the basic principles of science and many of the students were able to understand parts of the lesson. The college recognises the need for more staff training to enable them to develop further work with students with severe learning difficulties.

45 In humanities and the social sciences, the quality of teaching had many strengths. Course documentation was thorough and sessions were well prepared. The work was generally pitched at an appropriate level for the students. Teachers were willing and able to respond effectively to students' questions. They were skilled at valuing students' contributions and challenging them to develop their ideas further. Students generally responded well. Teaching aids were well used and key information was presented clearly and helpfully in most cases. Teachers tried hard to link the different parts of the course and to make helpful cross-reference to other topics. Seminars and academic tutorials were productive in helping students to discuss and understand the topics raised in lectures. However, the purpose of lectures was not always clear in terms of what the students were meant to learn and by what method. In one lecture, unstructured discussion caused some confusion. In another, students spent too much time taking dictation and copying notes from the overhead projector. Some lecturers provided notes in the library in advance of their lectures to help students prepare and this was useful. In a minority of sessions, the methods of teaching and learning were inappropriate or teachers used complex language and failed to check whether students understood the point being made. On a few occasions, students' behaviour was immature and this adversely affected learning.

46 In personal development, core skills and community-development courses, sessions were well planned. Teachers shared their learning objectives with students and provided them with helpful handouts. There were positive relationships between tutors and students and one-to-one support helped students to learn. In the more effective sessions, tutors used a suitable range of methods of working, including learning from theatre productions, work in pairs and groups, role-play and well-managed class discussions. Often, tutors made helpful links with other subject areas, such as the social sciences, to enable students to develop interdisciplinary perspectives and understanding. They also make good use of the Birmingham area as a teaching resource. For example, on a community-development course, students examined the development of vigilante groups and then analysed power and equality issues within a local community and within Fircroft College of Adult Education. In some of the weaker sessions, the teaching lacked variety and failed to sustain students' interest, and in a number of cases students' work was not marked consistently or with sufficient rigour.

47 Although much of the work in personal development, core skills and community development was good, there were a number of weaknesses in course organisation. The optional core skills programme was not well attended, despite staff and students agreeing on the need for students to develop core skills. Sometimes students did not know when core skills sessions were running. Some students did not know that they were expected to attend community research modules rather than to carry out their own private research and, as a result, they missed valuable teaching.

The 'community organisation' module is being restructured and at present lacks coherence and does not operate within a suitable theoretical framework for an access to higher education level course.

48 In addition to formal lessons, residential students benefited from the support they were able to give each other, for example, by discussing assignments and in developing study skills. They also benefited from informal learning through activities such as the common room meeting facilitated by the residential community tutor. This weekly meeting of students and staff is chaired and minuted by students. It is businesslike, short and effective and all students are encouraged to contribute.

49 Students invite speakers into college and organise other events. Theatre productions have led to an exploration in classes of the themes of power and violence in society. Students have been helped to start their own interest classes in areas such as photography, aerobics and juggling, and this in turn has enabled them to develop skills relating to planning, finance and management. The college has undertaken preparatory work for the introduction of work placements into the Fircroft studies course. Placements are used on the community-based 'working with people' programme to help students reflect on the effectiveness of different types of community organisation in relation to the theoretical perspectives in the course.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

50 Students enjoy their studies and the majority are successful in achieving their intended goals. For those enrolled on the Fircroft studies course the most common outcome is progression to higher education. Outcomes from the other programmes are more varied and include skills acquired by individuals and groups that will help their work in local communities. Students are clearly adding value to their achievements when these are measured against their qualifications on entry to the college.

51 External accreditation based on open college network credits was introduced for the Fircroft studies course in 1993 and the college has started to extend accreditation to its short courses. In 1994-95, 74 per cent of the students who completed the Fircroft studies course (59 per cent of initial enrolments) obtained the certificate and 82 per cent were offered higher education places. Fifteen students, of whom 12 left during the first term, did not complete the course. The college's analysis suggests this was brought about mainly because there was too much emphasis on assignments before students had acquired sufficient skills. There were also some exceptional personal circumstances. Sixty-seven per cent of those who left in the first term were non-residents.

52 In response to the levels of non-completion, the college has changed accreditation requirements in the first term to lessen the immediate pressure. In the 1995-96 session, the retention rate improved

considerably. The overall pass rate was 75 per cent. Seventeen students completed the course but did not gain full accreditation, although some gained a significant number of credits. Fourteen of the 17 were non-residents. In response to the lower rates of achievement amongst non-residents, the college has laid more stress at interview on counselling students about problems associated with non-residency. It has also appointed a personal tutor to work specifically with non-resident students. Seventy-one per cent of those who completed the course in 1996 were offered a place in higher education. This represented 94 per cent of those who actually achieved the certificate.

53 Of the 47 students who enrolled on the four short courses that were accredited in 1995-96, 89 per cent achieved credits and 36 per cent progressed to the Fircroft studies programme. Of 22 students enrolled on the 'working with people' community-based programme, eight accumulated credits and two students progressed to the Fircroft studies programme. Other destinations included employment and voluntary community work.

54 Generally, there is inadequate formal analysis of students' achievements and destinations as a means of informing planning. Information has been provided by the college piecemeal in a response to inspectors' requests. Nevertheless, there is much informal information about past students, some of which is recorded. The college encourages past students to remain in contact and there is a former students' guild.

55 The majority of students' work examined during the inspection showed that students were making good progress. A significant minority were achieving standards comparable with those in higher education by the second term of the course. Some students were able to use and explain complex language and concepts. Their presentations and assignments were of a high quality; they showed evidence of research skills and the ability to organise and communicate information. Many students were successfully developing the skills of academic debate. In seminars, some showed evidence of wide reading and gave knowledgeable and perceptive answers. The majority listened well to other points of view and were able to work efficiently in groups. In mathematics, a significant number of students achieved a level equivalent to general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) grade C or above. A few were still making basic numeracy errors.

56 A minority of students were making little progress. Some had poorly-developed oral skills; they read out notes word for word and could not explain salient points. Inappropriate language and basic grammatical errors appeared in a number of written assignments. Some students could not analyse information objectively. Occasionally, students appeared to have little previous knowledge of the subject being studied, despite being asked to prepare in advance, and their level of understanding was superficial. The majority of students leave the college with inadequate information technology skills.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

57 Existing components of quality assurance at the college are not well integrated. The college establishes a range of standards but there is little indication of the rationale behind these. Responsibilities for different aspects of quality assurance are shared between subcommittees of the board of governors. The finance and executive committee is responsible for resources and the academic board for academic quality. At present, these different strands are not drawn together to provide an overview of quality. Performance indicators for measuring the college's effectiveness, produced after a governors' training day led by an external consultant, have recently been agreed by the board.

58 The college carries out regular and effective reviews of its courses. There are clearly-established quality assurance procedures for the Fircroft studies course. Careful attention is given to the monitoring of attendance, retention and students' progress. The staff involved in teaching the course meet on a weekly basis to review how the course is progressing. At the end of each module, the course committee produces evaluation reports, incorporating feedback from students, which are passed to the academic board via the academic management group. Appropriate action points for improvement are recorded and action is monitored. Examples include the re-ordering of content in some modules and the addition of new content in others. External moderators receive module evaluation reports and examination results for each module before they proceed through the various college committees. The inputs from moderators have led to reviews of accreditation procedures and the format of examinations.

59 Short and community-based courses, which are either separately accredited or incorporate Fircroft studies modules, are included within the same pattern of review and reporting. Innovative projects are usually reviewed at their conclusion. Reviews have also been carried out on residential facilities and student levels of dropout, leading in each case to action and improvement. Students contribute to the end-of-year reviews which cover all aspects of the college's services and activities.

60 Copies of the college charter are widely available. The charter is revised annually by staff and students. It lays down commitments and standards in academic and non-academic areas. Specific aspects, including course applications, the marking of work, examination results and finance, are regularly monitored and there are annual evaluation reports which cover all aspects of the charter. Students receive full information on the college's complaints procedure. The college has not set up a procedure for the recording and monitoring of all complaints. In practice few have been received. Many issues are raised and dealt with speedily by personal tutors at their weekly meeting or at the weekly common room meeting.

61 The college does not yet have a comprehensive staff-appraisal system for teachers. A pilot staff-development and appraisal scheme was

introduced during 1995-96 for academic staff. This included elements of self-assessment, classroom observation and peer review, all of which were well received. The pilot scheme has been reviewed but the full scheme has not yet been implemented. Administrative staff have a separate appraisal scheme based on self-appraisal and interview. Housekeeping staff do not have an appraisal scheme. An external consultant has been employed to undertake an analysis of staff-training needs to provide a basis for planning.

62 There is no stated staff-development policy although many staff-development activities have taken place. Historically, the emphasis has been on research; approximately £20,000 was allocated to research and £1,500 to other staff development in 1996 (a total of 3 per cent of the staffing budget). There is a policy on research which is broadly defined to cover activities which improve professional skills, explore educational needs and develop new programmes and teaching techniques. Staff submit proposals for specific projects to the academic board. The college's own staff offer a regular staff-development programme on teaching and curriculum development. Outcomes include the publication of articles and books and some curriculum revision and development. There is no formal training for the role of personal tutors. Mentors appointed to induct new staff also receive no training.

63 Administrative staff have received training, for example, on information technology, in response to needs arising through the appraisal process. Housekeeping staff have received training on health and safety matters, on issues of race and ethnicity and on widening the range of cooked dishes.

64 In accordance with the requirements of the inspection process, the college has produced a self-assessment report to which both staff and students contributed. The report uses the inspection framework of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement* to identify strengths and weaknesses and provides an action plan, with targets, to remedy weaknesses. Each of the sections is supported by a comprehensive listing of documentary evidence. The college's judgements accorded with those of the inspectors in most cases and, where they differed, the college judged itself more harshly than the inspectors.

RESOURCES

Staffing

65 Teachers are generally well qualified. Governors have set performance indicators for teaching staff which require that each member of staff should have at least two of the following four components: a good degree; a minimum of three years' teaching experience in adult education; a postgraduate qualification; and ongoing professional activity. Currently, 90 per cent of teachers satisfy these criteria. The majority have a first degree and teaching qualification and many have a higher degree. Staff

working with community groups have appropriate qualifications or experience. A small number of academic staff lack experience in teaching and in the requirements of accreditation.

66 Staffing levels are appropriate and workloads are monitored carefully to ensure that staff are deployed effectively. There is a low rate of staff turnover. Since the number of staff relative to the range of tasks is small, this means that staff often have to fulfil many roles. Some report increased levels of stress as a result of new demands placed on the college since designation. Managers have a range of relevant experience between them, including qualifications in finance, personnel and the law. Outside consultants are occasionally used where expertise is lacking.

67 Most residential housekeeping and administrative staff have suitable qualifications or experience. Many have worked at the college for several years. Personnel policies and procedures are in place and all staff have contracts of employment. Those for academic staff are currently being renegotiated.

Equipment/learning resources

68 Teaching rooms are generally well equipped with whiteboards, flipcharts and overhead projectors. The college has a wide range of audio-visual equipment. Videos and camcorders are readily available on request. A hearing loop is installed in the main lecture hall and a portable hearing loop is available on request. Other equipment to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is available through the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges. Occasionally, equipment is not kept in good repair.

69 The library has an adequate stock of some 20,000 volumes. Books are not up to date in a few subject areas and there are too few copies of key texts. The library has no computers. There is close liaison between the librarian and tutors for selecting new purchases but the library budget is small. The library is open for 24 hours a day but it is only staffed for around 12 hours a week. There are sufficient study spaces in the library for a residential college. Arrangements for students on community-based courses to have access to library resources are underdeveloped.

70 Arrangements have been made for students to use the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges' libraries, two of which are a few minutes walk away. They have extensive bookstocks, periodicals and some computerised resources relevant to Fircroft's courses, especially in youth and community work. The Federation of Selly Oak Colleges is building a new learning resource centre at the neighbouring Westhill College which is due to open in September 1997. Fircroft students will have full access to this up-to-date computerised centre. Staff acknowledge the need to upgrade the library at Fircroft but they are waiting until final decisions are made about stocks in the learning resource centre to ensure no unnecessary duplication of resources.

71 The college has recently improved its out-of-date computing equipment and this now provides a sound facility for students' use. The student to computer ratio is 7:1 and students can use computers for most of the day and evening. Students make good use of the equipment outside of taught classes. There are compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database facilities in the computer room and a small selection of CD-ROM disks. Some students are not aware of these facilities. Students do not have access to the Internet. There are too few printers for the number of workstations. The college recognises that staff rarely use computers to improve teaching and is planning relevant training. Students on community-based courses generally do not have access to computers.

72 The college has a small budget for equipment and sets priorities carefully. All groups of staff contribute to annual reviews of equipment needs and bidding for resources. The college has an assets register which includes the annual costs for replacing equipment. However, the current estimated cost of replacing equipment each year, without any new purchases, is more than double the college's budget for equipment. Managers are reviewing the overall budget for equipment and considering adjustments in the replacement schedule.

Accommodation

73 The college occupies an Edwardian mansion built in 1902, which was originally the home of George Cadbury (the younger) whose family founded the Cadbury Enterprise, and several more modern buildings dating from the 1960s. The college does not own the buildings but leases them from the Croft Trust. Fircroft College of Adult Education is situated within a larger campus which includes other colleges in the Selly Oak Federation. The latter has created a number of central teaching and research departments which are to some extent used by the college. Teaching accommodation at Fircroft is in four main rooms and the residential accommodation has 46 rooms available for 55 students. The college is set in six acres of landscaped gardens and grounds, including woodland.

74 Rooms used for teaching are fit for their purpose, as is the accommodation used for outreach work. There is little display of students' work in classrooms.

75 The college has a well-managed cleaning, decoration and maintenance rota system which has just started. It ensures that there is constant improvement to buildings. The college is also responsive to students' requests for improvements.

76 Most study bedrooms are adequately furnished and maintained, although many require decorating, new furniture and carpets. One bedroom and toilet/bathroom is specially adapted for use by a student with a physical disability. Although significant investment has already been made, a few study bedrooms require upgrading. This is one of the

college's three accommodation priorities. Some rooms are shared and it is the intention to upgrade these to single study rooms when resources allow. The college is well maintained and cleaned on a daily basis, and provides an acceptable level of support for students studying away from home.

77 Students appreciate the building and its environment and find the grounds relaxing. The gardens and woodlands are starting to be exploited for learning purposes and a feasibility study on ecology and environmental related courses has been undertaken recently. A recreational room is provided at the college and students use the Federation swimming pool and local sports and leisure facilities.

78 Physical access to and around the site is not good. For example, there is no access to the first and second floors of the main building and no toilet facilities for students with restricted mobility. However, a strategy for improvement is in place and some minor works have created ramps and parking spaces for students with restricted mobility.

79 The college's accommodation strategy involves the monitoring of room use. There is a detailed plan for development, when funds allow, which includes increasing the number of teaching rooms, improving the whole site for students with restricted mobility and rationalising the layout of bedrooms, the kitchen, offices and teaching rooms.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

80 The college is making good progress towards meeting its mission. Its main strengths are:

- a deeply-held belief in the ethos and mission of the college which is shared by governors, managers and staff
- a distinctive range of programmes which meet the needs and interests of students
- significant partnership work with community groups and a strong commitment to equal opportunities
- normally high standard of teaching
- generally good levels of students' achievements
- a high level of student support from teaching and non-teaching staff
- clearly-established quality assurance procedures for the Fircroft studies course
- well-qualified staff
- appropriate attention given to efficiency measures
- a realistic self-assessment report
- improved computing equipment.

81 Its main weaknesses are:

- the relative lack of formal policies and underdeveloped strategic planning
- problems with retention and achievement for non-residents on the Fircroft studies course
- the lack of progress made by a minority of students
- the unsuccessful optional core studies programme
- underdeveloped strategies for careers guidance and learning support
- the lack of a full staff-development and appraisal system
- quality standards and performance indicators which have only recently been established in some areas
- some inadequate equipment and accommodation
- inadequate formal analysis of students' achievements and destinations.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at October 1996)

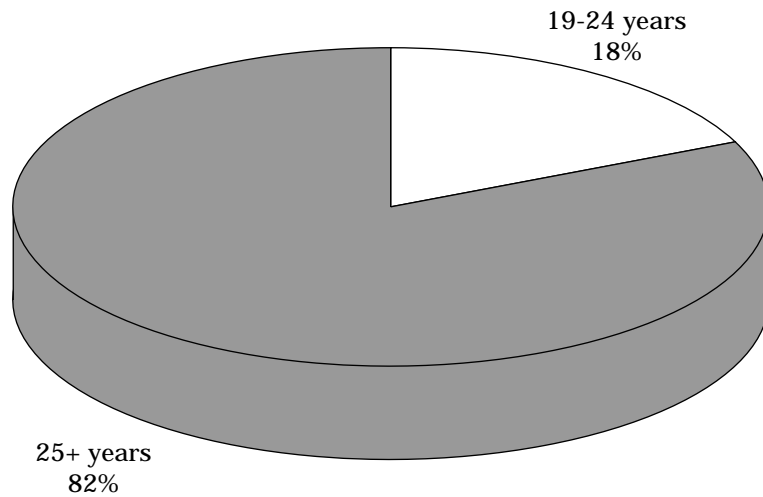
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

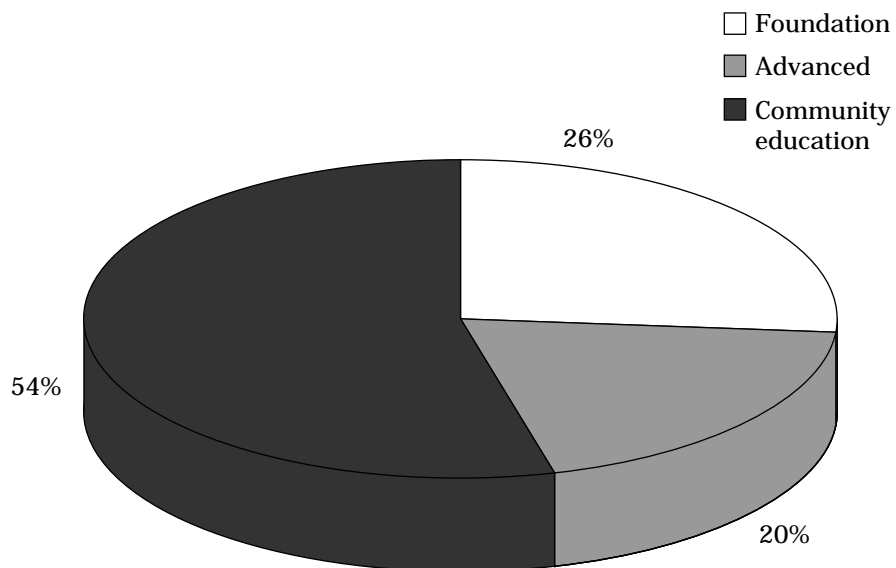
Fircroft College of Adult Education: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 448

Figure 2

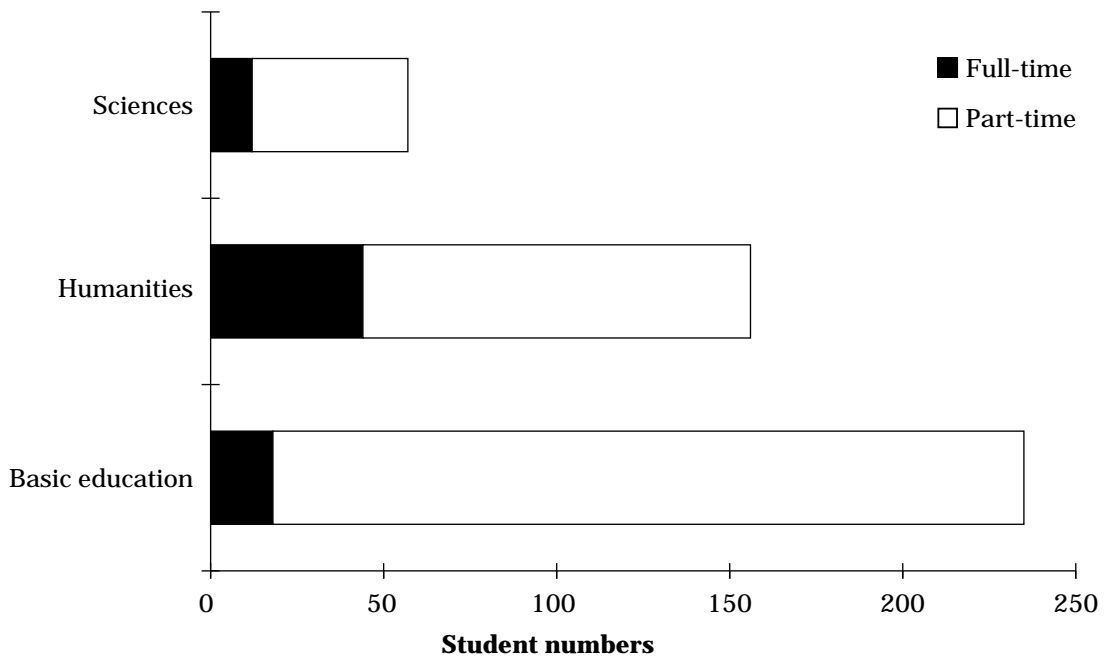
Fircroft College of Adult Education: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 448

Figure 3

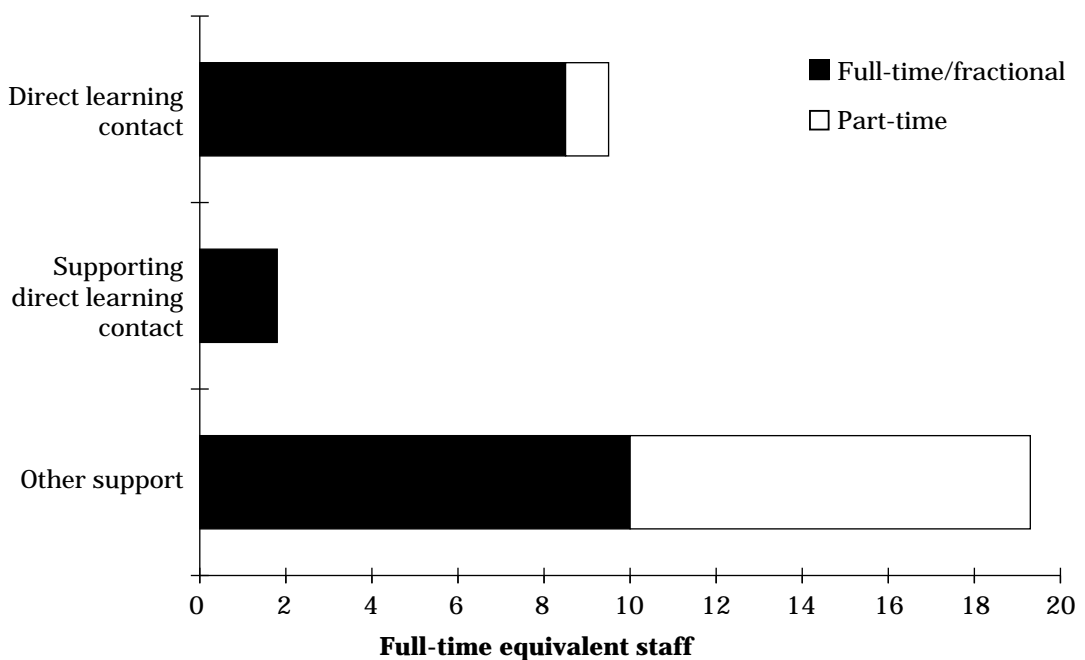
Fircroft College of Adult Education: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 448

Figure 4

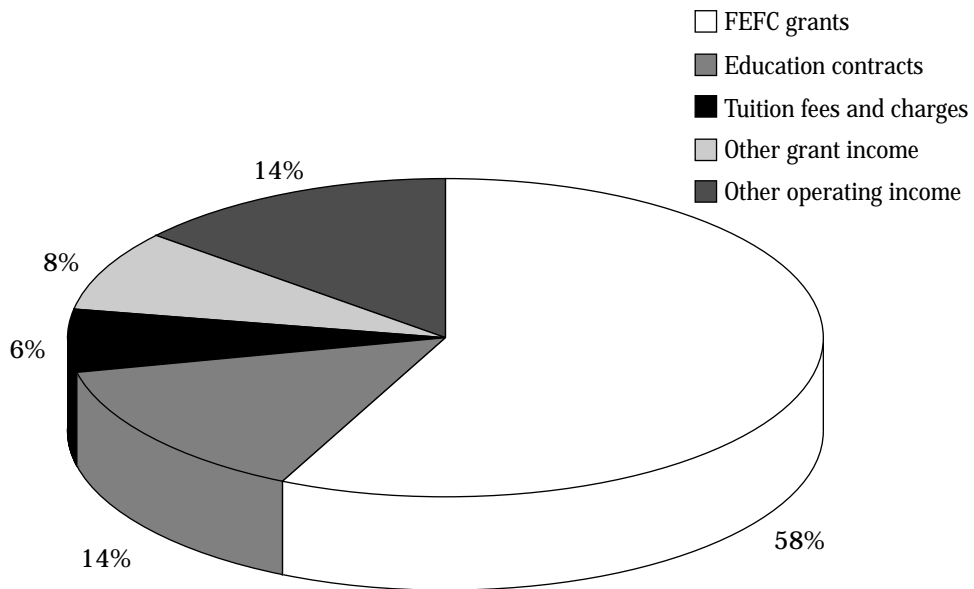
Fircroft College of Adult Education: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at October 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 31

Figure 5

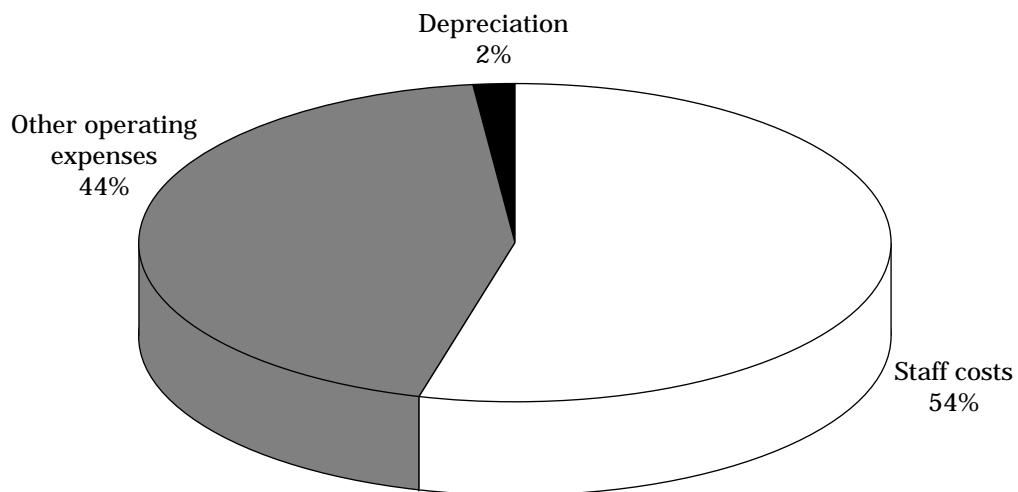
Fircroft College of Adult Education: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £976,000

Figure 6

Fircroft College of Adult Education: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £950,000

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