

# **Fircroft College of Adult Education**

**REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE  
1999-00**

**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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# Contents

Paragraph

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## Summary

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### Context

The college and its mission	1
The inspection	7

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### Curriculum areas

Mathematics, science and information technology	11
Humanities, including social studies	18

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### Cross-college provision

Support for students	25
General resources	34
Quality assurance	39
Governance	46
Management	53
Conclusions	60

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### College statistics

## 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 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	10	53	30	7	–
Cross-college provision	14	54	23	7	2

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*  
Sample size: 104 college inspections

## Student Achievements

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

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

# Summary

## **Fircroft College of Adult Education**

### ***West Midlands Region***

#### **Inspected February 2000**

Fircroft College of Adult Education is one of the six long-term residential colleges in England designated, under section 28 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, as eligible to receive financial support from the FEFC. It provides residential and non-residential learning facilities and is situated in an attractive setting in south-west Birmingham. The college provides adult learners, most of whom lack formal qualifications, with an opportunity to return to learning. It has anticipated the need to develop and diversify its curriculum and respond to the inner city and region, through a number of innovative collaborative projects. College development reflects a strong commitment to inclusive learning and significantly contributes to widening participation.

The college carried out its first self-assessment in preparation for the inspection. The report was comprehensive and self-critical. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the report and by the time of the inspection, progress was being made to address some weaknesses. Teaching is imaginative and of a high quality. Students' achievements are high and progression rates are good. Mathematics teaching for students with few skills and confidence is particularly effective. The curriculum is well managed and the college has successfully developed a comprehensive range of external accreditation. A key feature of the college is the high-quality residential learning environment. Good working relationships between staff and students and a shared enthusiasm for learning are a strong feature of the college. There is a productive working relationship between governors and senior staff. The college is managed in an open, accessible

style. There is strong leadership and effective management with a genuine interest in improvement. A highly responsive system of support provides an environment in which students learn effectively. IT facilities have improved since the last inspection and performance indicators now provide a framework for quality assurance. Governors and staff have been active in strategic planning and college development. At the time of the inspection, the college was in the middle of a 'transition', to shift the balance between its long and short course programme, reducing numbers on the long course and making a corresponding increase in targets for short course provision. This has resulted in difficulties for second-year part-time students, completing the long course. Staff are aware of these and strategies are in place to address them once the transitional period is complete. There are some serious delays with the accreditation of short courses and students' receipt of their results. Though these delays are outside the control of the college, they have a serious effect on progression opportunities for students. The college should improve: accreditation arrangements with external bodies; learning resources, including their integration with IT; staff development and appraisal; quality assurance; its long-term estates strategy; and management information. Governors need to give further attention to systematic long-term planning concerning financial issues.

# Summary

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

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Cross-college provision</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Mathematics, science and information technology	2	Support for students	2
Humanities, including social studies	2	General resources	3
		Quality assurance	3
		Governance	3
		Management	2

## The College and its Mission

1 Fircroft College of Adult Education was founded by George Cadbury in 1909 as an educational charity, to provide higher and general education in a residential environment, initially for men. Since 1980, the college has included women on all its courses. The college is situated in an early twentieth-century large family residence set in 6 acres of gardens and grounds in Selly Oak, in south-west Birmingham.

2 The college has a long history of enabling adult learners to have a second chance of education. Many students come to the college seeing it as their last chance of education, having had a number of unsuccessful and alienating learning experiences during, and after, leaving school. Students come with a wide range of learning and support needs as well as underdeveloped interpersonal and group skills. Many also come from a disadvantaged social or economic background. To help these students successfully move on to the next stage in their lives and to meet the college's mission 'to promote social justice by providing adults with an excellent learning environment for personal, professional and political development', college staff all work together to offer supportive residential educational provision. This provision is offered to resident and non-resident students alike and over the last few years the college has reached out to communities in the inner city and increasingly across the West Midlands region.

3 The college offers a range of programmes and learning opportunities. 'Fircroft studies' is a one-year full-time, or two-year part-time access course known as 'the long course', which is validated by the National Open College Network (NOCN), and offers a three-stage unitised programme with key skills as a core and units on humanities, social science, mathematics, science and information technology (IT). There is a programme of weekday and weekend residential short courses, including return to

study, women's studies, moving on in mathematics, African-Caribbean history and IT. There are also community-based projects and courses which are based at the college and off-site in the inner city and have residential elements as an integral part.

4 In 1998-99, the college enrolled 841 students, of whom 70 were studying on the long course (48 full time and 22 part time), 593 were on short courses and 178 participated in community-based projects. Of the students, 67% were female, 54% were from a minority ethnic background, 25% had a disability, 34% were over 40 years of age, 65% were unemployed or unwaged and 53% had either no qualifications or a national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 1 equivalent. An analysis of the student profile on the community-based projects show the college's clear commitment to achieving its mission. For example, 94% of students on the projects are from a minority ethnic background and 100% of the 'science in the garden' project students have a disability. In addition, an analysis of the students funded through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) demonstrated a 'widening participation uplift' of 4.6% for 1998-99.

5 The college has been successful in its collaborative work and bidding for a range of non-FEFC funding. This funding contributes to the financial stability of the college, supports its community and childcare provision and helps develop the core curriculum. There is a strong focus on community building programmes which have attracted Single Regeneration Budget and European Social Fund funding. Lottery and European Union funding has been gained to meet the needs of students with specific learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college was one of the first recipients of funding from the Adult and Community Learning Fund for an innovative partnership of adult and further education, community health and drama which meets the needs of women returners.

# Context

6 The college employs 51 staff: 23 teaching staff, eight administrative staff, 13 household staff, three support workers and four managers. Staff work on a range of full-time, part-time and fractional contracts and this equates to 35 full-time equivalents.

## The Inspection

7 The college was inspected in February 2000. Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report, reviewed information about the college held by the FEFC and used college data for students' retention and achievements. Although the college is not currently within the individualised student record (ISR) data collection system, it was able to present its internal data using the ISR framework. Inspectors found the data to be reliable. Data matched primary sources such as lesson registers and provide the college with a good basis for entering the ISR return system. However, NOCN records did not include final confirmation of accreditation results and verification of achievement on the Fircroft studies programme was completed on receipt of records from NOCN. A large number of accreditation results for the short course programme are still outstanding from the NOCN.

Out of a total 577 (1998-99), 195 students are still awaiting credits. As a result, a table of retention and achievement rates for the short course programme has not been included in this report, although it is a significant part of the college's curriculum.

8 The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 30 days. Inspectors observed 21 lessons. They examined students' work and documentation relating to the college and its courses. Meetings were held with members of the Croft Trust, governors, managers, teachers, residential support staff, current students, former students and representatives from collaborative projects.

9 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the 21 lessons inspected, 76% were good or outstanding. No lessons were less than satisfactory. This profile is better than the sector profile for colleges inspected during 1998-99.

### Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
Access to higher education	4	12	5	0	0	21
Total (No.)	4	12	5	0	0	21
Total (%)	19	57	24	0	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

# Context

10 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

## Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Fircroft College of Adult Education	10.3	87
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

*Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

# Curriculum Areas

## Mathematics, Science and Information Technology

### Grade 2

**11 Inspectors observed 10 lessons including two different modules of the Fircroft studies access course, mathematics at level 2, and mathematics, science and IT, a short course 'Introduction to the Internet', a learning support session and the 'science in the garden' course for adults with specific learning difficulties. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college self-assessment report. They also identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- well-planned lessons
- extensive individual student support outside normal teaching hours
- above average levels of achievement in general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) equivalent mathematics course
- rigorous monitoring and recording of students' achievements
- good increase in the number of courses, especially in IT
- good provision of modern computers for students

#### Weaknesses

- adverse effect on students' progression of delays in accreditation
- insufficient work at intermediate levels on the long course
- poor punctuality of some students

12 All students on the full-time access course take a unit 'Mathematics – confidence building' and two units of IT during their first term. Then, depending on their attainment and learning goals, they take either three level 1 credits in essential mathematics or a 'GCSE equivalent'

course in mathematics. All students also follow a new course which leads to two credits at level 3. The content of this course includes scientific method, the validity of data, social and political aspects of science and a student investigation. The number of short courses in computing and mathematics has grown from four in 1996-97 to 13 in 1998-99. Twenty are planned this year, including newly developed Internet courses. In 1998-99, a quarter of all students on the long course had progressed from one of the short courses.

13 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the high quality of mathematics teaching is a significant strength. Imaginative lessons ensure that students make rapid progress in this subject, often from a low baseline. IT is used effectively to extend students' learning in mathematics, especially on the level 1 course. Students' work contained computer-generated pictograms, pie charts and graphs. In a few lessons, students were late and so missed valuable links with previous work. Inspectors agreed that the new mathematics, science and IT course contained stimulating cross-cultural and social issues that helped to sustain students' interest. In one lesson, students watched a video which described recent discoveries in tissue engineering for organ replacement. The teacher deftly drew all students into a discussion about the ethics of organ transplant and encouraged them to substantiate their opinions. In a later lesson, students embarked on the major investigative project which is a central part of this level 3 unit. Unfortunately, only one project involved taking accurate measurements of scientific data and the students wasted time in searching for appropriate materials.

14 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the majority of students are enthusiastic about their studies. A group of students following the GCSE equivalent mathematics course were calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient for sets of data in order to determine if there were any relationship between

# Curriculum Areas

them. This was one of many instances where details of both the theory and the practical task were given to students on professionally prepared handouts. The theory lesson was taught with humour and pace. Students then worked effectively in pairs to produce a scattergram of the data, calculate the coefficient and then give a presentation of their conclusions to the group. Inspection of students' assessed work and interviews with students indicated that too little attention had been paid to students' previous experience of the subject. Many found the level 1 course too easy and believed that they would have gained more benefit from an intermediate level course.

15 Enthusiastic staff provide much individual student support outside normal timetabled hours. Some of the students on a level 1 Internet three-day course arrived early and their teacher immediately came to assist them. Each student was using a computer and gaining confidence in the use of web browsers and search engines. Later in the session students excitedly shared the information they had gleaned from the Internet. Students are assisted by rigorous monitoring and recording of their achievement but individual action-planning is still underdeveloped for short courses.

16 Pass rates on the GCSE mathematics equivalent course at 65% and 67% for the last two years are above the national average of 50% for adult students. Pass rates on the access course mathematics, science and IT units show significant improvement from 52% in 1998 to 85% in 1999. The college self-assessment report recognised the high achievement in mathematics. Retention rates are around the national average. Students' work was not displayed on the walls. Student progression rates are good with over 50% of students progressing to a university course.

17 Twelve networked computers, with a further four available in the library for students' use, is a particular strength.

# Curriculum Areas

## Humanities, including Social Studies

### *Grade 2*

18 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering the humanities and social studies units of the Fircroft studies 30-week access certificate, key skills and a sample of short course provision. Inspectors judged that the self-assessment report was comprehensive and agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses which had been identified.

#### **Key strengths**

- the good quality of teaching and learning
- high achievement rates in the full-time Fircroft studies access certificate
- detailed assessment and monitoring of students' progress
- innovative and responsive curriculum
- well-planned system for key skills teaching

#### **Weaknesses**

- impact of delays in short course accreditation on achievement and progression
- failure of transition arrangements to meet the full range of students' needs

19 Humanities and social studies are two of the three curriculum areas on the Fircroft studies 30-week access certificate. In humanities, there are units on African and Caribbean history, literature and cultural studies, philosophy and utopias. In social studies, units are taught on community organisation, economics, politics, sociology, race and ethnicity and women's studies. The college has reviewed the Fircroft studies provision and, from this year, the course has been changed from a modular to a unitised curriculum. The course is now run with fewer students and a

smaller core staff. The short course provision has been expanded and many of the courses in this area are planned and run with health professionals, community workers and teachers in higher education. As the self-assessment report identifies, these links are effective in promoting access to education. In 1998-99, eight of the 46 students on the full-time Fircroft studies had progressed from short courses provided by the college.

20 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teaching is a significant strength. The teaching is well planned and documented. Learning objectives are made clear at the start of lessons and are carefully designed and included within the lesson plans. Handouts and lesson materials are of a high quality and promote students' interest and participation in the work. A wide variety of teaching methods are used, some of them innovative. For example, in one short course run in conjunction with the Family Support Unit, students used drama to explore issues about being a young parent in order to develop scenes for use in a peer education project about parenting. In another two-day residential course, students explored and recorded their specific and transferable skills in order to begin to create a curriculum vitae. In both sessions, tutors quickly established a supportive atmosphere that enabled students to express themselves with increasing confidence and achieve the planned learning outcomes. Teaching on the Fircroft studies access course is also varied and interesting. Discussion, class and group work are all used effectively to promote and sustain students' interest. The unit on utopias uses literature, history and politics to analyse and explore theories of perfect societies. In one session, the origin and sources of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech were explored using contemporary film and tapes. In another, the similarities and differences between a wide range of ideal political systems were explored. Teaching in both of

# Curriculum Areas

these lessons was supportive to students but also demanding.

21 Students' written work is thoroughly assessed, monitored and recorded and detailed feedback is provided through assessment sheets. However, some students expressed confusion over the details of assessment criteria. Key skills are separately marked and recorded by specialist key skills staff. Additional help with key skills is available for students, but is not compulsory. In lessons, students who performed well in oral work often experienced difficulty in understanding and analysing written material. This reflects the wide range of learning needs and the low level of key skills competence amongst some students.

22 As identified in the self-assessment report, achievement on the full-time Fircroft studies access course is good. Targets set for achievement have been exceeded and 97% of students achieved the access certificate in 1999, although retention fell by 22% to 63%. In the part-time, two-year Fircroft studies course, achievement fell by 33% to 67% with retention rising from 68% to 91%. The college has recognised in its self-assessment report that a significant weakness of the short course provision is the serious delay in providing accredited qualifications to students. Whilst these delays have been outside the control of the college, they do have an impact on achievements and progression opportunities for a considerable number of students. In lessons, students were well motivated and interested in their studies. There were some examples of high-quality written work where students had researched topics using a wide variety of resources.

23 The full-time Fircroft studies course is well managed with staff meeting regularly to review the curriculum. The clear link between the college's strategic plan and curriculum development is recognised as a strength in the self-assessment report. A significant weakness of the curriculum organisation and management is

that, at present, the unitised course does not provide sufficient flexibility for students already competent in an area to progress through individual learning at a faster pace than the course prescribes. There is an emphasis on equal opportunities and cross-cultural perspectives are integrated with the curriculum. Short courses are frequently aimed at under-represented groups in further education such as lone parents.

24 Staff are well qualified and display a thorough and wide-ranging knowledge of their subjects. Most teaching rooms are adequate but the Fircroft studies course is frequently taught in a large room with poor acoustics and layout. The library has an adequate range of humanities and social studies books and materials.

# Cross-college Provision

## Support for Students

### *Grade 2*

**25 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but judged that some strengths had been understated and one weakness, connected to changes made since the report was prepared, had not been identified. Considerable progress had been made to address weaknesses by the time of the inspection.**

#### **Key strengths**

- effective recruitment and assessment procedures
- comprehensive induction
- effective range of support systems
- comprehensive childcare support for short courses
- systematic access to good guidance about careers, employment and higher education
- imaginative community-building programmes

#### **Weaknesses**

- lack of guidance on progression for all short course students

26 The residential environment is key to the provision of highly supportive learning. Residential arrangements are well managed and staff create a welcoming environment for students, many of whom lack family support. Inspectors judged that the college had underestimated this strength. Evidence provided by the value-added analysis at the end of the course demonstrates the great distance travelled by many of the students, their impressive achievements and the enormous value they place on the residential context for their development. During inspection a group of

former students reflected on how the quality of the residential experience at Fircroft College of Adult Education had enhanced their lives and effectively prepared them for higher education.

27 At the centre of the highly responsive system of support, is the encouragement given to students to play a full part in the life of the college community. This includes full involvement of students in the running of the college through membership of college committees, and a weekly common room meeting, which not only addresses issues of immediate student concern but also provides opportunities for them to develop public speaking and presentational skills. The student union is active in the social life of the college and provides support for students in difficulty.

28 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that it is effective in promoting inclusive learning. Provision of a variety of recruitment, induction and support structures meet a range of student needs and ensure suitable conditions in which students can achieve their learning goals. Prospective students are well informed about the college and its courses. College information material is efficiently distributed through professional networks throughout the country. Present students include some recruited through careers officers in Kent, Coventry and Lincoln as well as the local Birmingham-based service. Advice on alternative provision is offered to ensure that students make appropriate decisions. A written assignment is the first step in diagnosing individual students' needs for language support. This process is refined and developed during the five-week induction period. There is no assessment of numeracy during the selection process since the college is aware that many students come with a negative attitude towards mathematics.

29 Considerable progress has been made in the provision of support services since the last inspection. Personal counselling is available at a

# Cross-college Provision

neighbouring college; the service is well publicised on noticeboards and in the student handbook. Study support provision has been increased to help students' achievements and to ensure that they are retained on courses. The retention rate on the long course at the time of the inspection was 100%, though there had been a decrease in retention last year. Full-time students have a regular session with personal tutors, which includes action-planning and feedback. In addition, one-to-one contact with personal tutors and key skills and other support staff often amounts to several sessions a week. The residential environment means that much informal support is available. The college recognises that much of this support is unrecorded. However, effective monitoring of individual students' progress occurs at the weekly 'student issues' meeting. Here informal support is registered, further action identified and outcomes reported. Tutorials are well documented. Attendance and lateness is monitored daily and followed up at the weekly review meeting. Swift follow-up has been instrumental in identifying students 'at risk' and remedial action is quickly implemented.

30 Short course provision has increased substantially, from 204 students in 1997-98 to 577 students participating in programmes in 1998-99. Support systems for short courses are developing. Students on a short course on the use of electronic mail appreciated the small size of the group and one student valued the advice she had been given to take a basic computer literacy course before being enrolled. A partially sighted student was provided with a large screen for her computer and given enlarged handouts, as well as preparatory information on audiotape. Short courses are part of a new recruitment strategy for the long course and are already proving effective in this respect.

31 The previous inspection report noted the lack of systematic guidance offered to students. Much progress has been made with the appointment of a qualified member of staff.

Improved contacts with the local careers service ensure that students receive high-quality advice. A careers officer who specialises in advising adults participates in the first week of the Fircroft studies course to outline the service available. The service has not yet been extended to all students on short course provision; this was recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report. On site, the tutor librarian provides comprehensive advice to those wishing to proceed to higher education. The list of destinations and courses for last year's students shows a wide range of subjects, with students going to higher education throughout the United Kingdom.

32 Inspectors judged as a strength, the role of the full-time community tutor in residence who works to develop a supportive community. Group activities have included an expedition to a youth hostel in Snowdonia. The tutor also plays a part in short courses: at weekends he hosts quizzes, a valuable opportunity enabling long course residents to mix with short course participants. Informal conversations in this context are important in helping short course members consider enrolling on the Fircroft studies course.

33 There is comprehensive childcare support during evenings and weekends for short courses. Part of the college premises is licensed by the local authority as a place for the care of children. Students value the high quality of childcare and the opportunity this service offers; without this support many would not be able to pursue their education.

# Cross-college Provision

## General Resources

### Grade 3

#### 34 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

##### Key strengths

- good residential learning environment for students
- efficient use of accommodation
- good facilities and work areas for staff

##### Weaknesses

- inadequate library and learning resources
- some accommodation in need of refurbishment
- lack of long-term estates strategy

35 The college estate consists of four buildings on one site of six acres. The two main buildings are an Edwardian residence, and two buildings date from the 1960s. The college site includes extensive grounds and gardens. The buildings and grounds together provide a residential environment that encourages learning. This strength was understated in the self-assessment report. Students with restricted mobility do not have access to some of the accommodation, including the first and second floors of the main house. One room is provided for students' recreational use, in addition to the students' common room. Students have access to a range of recreational facilities that are nearby, but off-site. These include a sports hall, swimming pool and a football pitch. The college has good car parking facilities. The college uses other premises for its community provision. These include a building on the Selly Oak College campus, a teaching centre in Aston, and other rented accommodation. The college estate includes a house adjacent to the other buildings that is currently occupied by the principal.

36 The college does not own any of its

buildings; they are leased from a separate charitable trust. This trust does not own the freehold itself, and leases the grounds and buildings from another trust. In 1979, the college acquired a 21-year lease that was due to expire in September 2000. The college prepared an estates strategy document in 1994 that has only recently been updated. The new strategy is an interim statement pending further consideration of the college's strategic direction. College governors have agreed a new one-year lease for the buildings and grounds that will expire in September 2001. The lack of a long-term estates strategy is a weakness that was partly identified in the college's self-assessment report. In other ways, the college manages resources effectively. There is a shortage of space at peak times and a room policy sets out criteria for the allocation of rooms. Room utilisation is monitored and college data indicate efficient use of accommodation. Using the standard further education measure, room utilisation was 69% in 1998-99. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there is effective use of rooms. A computerised room booking system is being introduced to improve further room scheduling, especially for the increasing number of short courses.

37 The college has 43 bedrooms for students. Most of these study bedrooms are adequately furnished and maintained. One bedroom is adapted for use by students with restricted mobility. The college recognises that one residential block requires further refurbishment. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that this was a weakness. The main building has some difficult design features. These result in some creative use of space such as photocopiers being placed by the entrances to toilets. There is a maintenance programme for the buildings. In recent years, this has included improvements to fire doors, replacements of ground floor doors to enable access for students in wheelchairs, and upgrading of bathrooms for resident students. All full-time teachers have a

# Cross-college Provision

computer terminal that is linked to the college network. There are good facilities and work areas for teachers and support staff. Inspectors agreed that this was a strength. The college has an assets register and a plan for replacing equipment. Staff employed by the college provide domestic services, including catering, cleaning, maintenance and gardening. The cleaning of some parts of the buildings was inadequate during 1998-99 and the college recognised this in its self-assessment report. Action has been taken to address this.

38 The college acknowledges that library resources are inadequate, and inspectors agreed that this was a weakness. The library is open 24 hours every day, but has an insufficient stock of about 5,000 books. The budget for the library was £3,000 in 1998-99, amounting to about £28 per full-time equivalent student. There are 15 study spaces for students in addition to four personal computers. There is a small and inadequate supply of other learning resources, such as CD-ROMs, videos and audiotapes. Students have access to the Birmingham University Orchard resource centre which is located nearby. Some students value this resource and make good use of it, while others rarely use it. The college's IT centre has 11 computers of a good standard and the college has effectively upgraded IT facilities during the last three years. The college has a good ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students; the ratio was 1:7 in 1998-99. Students cannot use the IT centre late at night and during parts of the weekends. Students have 24-hour access to four computers in the library. The college has yet to develop an Intranet, or to integrate IT resources with library or other learning resources.

## Quality Assurance

### Grade 3

**39 Inspectors agreed with most of the key strengths and weaknesses identified by the college in its self-assessment report, but identified an additional weakness.**

#### Key strengths

- clear and explicit quality assurance procedures
- regular and timely reporting arrangements
- well-established, effective arrangements to ensure feedback from students

#### Weaknesses

- staff development and appraisal not linked to quality assurance process
- underdeveloped use of benchmarking data to determine standards
- insufficient clarity about relationship of quality assurance procedures to external projects
- lack of awareness by some staff of the new quality assurance framework

40 The college has within the last 12 months introduced a clearly documented quality assurance framework. It is based on Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. Inspectors agreed that it reflects a high level of commitment to the improvement of the quality of courses. Each of the college's teams sets targets and produces an annual report. The report includes judgements on strengths and weaknesses, a grade and action points. Reports are reviewed by the self-assessment review committee and lead to an annual report which is submitted to governors. The management group formally reviews the progress made to achieve annual objectives three times a year, and then reports progress to governors. Most staff

# Cross-college Provision

recognise the value of the new quality assurance system in formalising and bringing a structure to the earlier informal system. However, not all staff are fully aware of the framework and the ways in which its components fit together. There is no evidence yet that the use of this framework has had any effect on students' retention. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the relationship of quality assurance procedures to external projects needs further clarification.

41 The college produced its first self-assessment report in September 1999. This was updated for inspection in January 2000. It includes a summary of the progress made since the last inspection in October 1996. It draws on the views and experience of college staff who were involved in the agreeing of standards, performance indicators and evidence. The process of self-assessment has produced accurate and reliable statements by the college on its performance. Inspectors' judgements closely match those of the college. College lesson observation grades are slightly lower than those given by inspectors. A lesson observation pack is based on self-assessment and gives good, detailed guidance to the observer.

42 The college's student charter identifies standards of service and is understood by students. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are extensive opportunities for students to feed back issues and concerns through a network of committees and meetings. Academic issues are fed back through interim and final course evaluations. Tutors receive detailed summaries of feedback from evaluation forms. Students are also able to raise academic and residential issues directly with personal tutors who are often available during evenings and weekends. The student union provides another forum for student views. Changes have occurred as a result of feedback from students, for example, in the organisation of examinations and the provision of extra support sessions. The few formal complaints receive a prompt and appropriate response.

Catering staff receive many compliments on the quality of their service.

43 There are performance indicators for all areas of the college's activities. Though this is identified as a strength in the self-assessment report, inspectors could not wholly agree with this. Most staff recognise their role in quality assurance and improvement. Performance indicators are closely linked to the college's mission statement. They are used to inform the reports on quality presented to governors. The quality assurance framework suggests that performance indicators should be 'provocative and suggestive', but this is not always the case. A number of performance indicators, though expressed in percentages, would be hard to measure. For example, one performance indicator is 'to work effectively in group and in subgroups' (80%) and another is 'to produce quality, useful reports from the food committee,' (80%). Others lack quantifiable measures. Targets for long and short courses are detailed and realistic. There is a timetable for reviewing targets and a clear monitoring and reporting procedure. Some targets, such as returning marked work within 10 days are regularly exceeded. Not all targets have associated performance indicators. Performance indicators for support services are at an early stage of development.

44 The college has begun to compare its provision against other residential colleges but acknowledge that this is still incomplete. Some comparison of enrolment, retention and achievement information statistics has begun, but this has not yet informed the college's own target-setting process.

45 Staff development and appraisal are not yet linked to the quality assurance process. This is a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. Currently, there is no consistent approach to appraisal. The college plans to introduce a new appraisal model for all staff. Most academic staff development is through

# Cross-college Provision

individual research activities. In the past there has been no requirement that these should be linked to the college's strategic objectives. This is slowly changing. A skills audit has recently been conducted to identify existing skills and development needs amongst teachers for the extended range of short courses. Staff development activities are not yet formally evaluated.

## Governance

### *Grade 3*

**46 Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report but considered that some strengths were overstated and that some weaknesses were not recognised.**

#### Key strengths

- effective involvement in strategic planning
- commitment to the mission of the college
- effective action to secure governor appointments from nominating bodies
- systematic review of governing body effectiveness
- skills and experience of governors

#### Weaknesses

- no formal adoption of revised and reconciled instrument and articles of government
- insufficiently regular consideration of management accounts
- inadequate arrangements for the recording and reporting of some committees
- insufficient formal attention to academic issues

47 Following a review by the FEFC's audit service in the autumn of 1998, where significant

weaknesses were identified, the governing body has worked well with senior staff to put in place a range of new procedures. Governors are strongly committed to the college mission and this informs the strategic planning. Inspectors and auditors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors actively contribute to the college's strategic planning. Governors receive regular reports on the achievement of corporate objectives and consider the applicability of annual objectives for the coming year. A strategy day was held jointly with the Croft Trust to consider educational and funding issues. Governors have considered in depth the future direction of the college. The governing body has systematic procedures for reviewing its own effectiveness. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. Governors complete evaluation questionnaires at each governing body meeting to assess the effectiveness of individual contributions. Performance indicators have been established to measure the effectiveness of the governing body and governors receive an annual report on performance.

48 The charitable scheme of the college prescribes the nomination of the majority of governors. This has led to difficulties in the past in achieving a full complement of governors. Governors have been active recently in canvassing nominating bodies to secure appropriate candidates for appointment. They acknowledge the need to improve the gender and ethnicity balance of the governing body. The governing body has a wide range of skills and knowledge of the sector which is used to good effect, particularly in strategic planning and in developing lifelong learning. A detailed skills audit has been undertaken to identify current skills and competences and to identify training needs. This has not yet been linked to a formal training programme. However, governors have attended a number of training events. A governor job description and person specification has been developed. The governing

# Cross-college Provision

body meets termly. Attendance at governing body meetings is reasonable. Meetings are quorate. The principal has been appraised. The senior postholders have not.

49 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The governing body substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government and charitable scheme. It substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. The college is governed primarily by a charitable scheme but defers to the standard instrument and articles of government on issues where the scheme makes no provision. The instrument and articles of government have not been formally adopted by the governing body either in the original form or as recently amended. The college does not own the grounds or building from which it operates. The building and grounds are leased from a separate charitable trust, the Croft Trust. The formal accountability of the college to the trust is through the conditions of the lease. However, the trust provides considerable financial support to the college over and above the lease arrangement and the trustees have firm views as to the purpose of the college and the type and manner of education it should provide.

50 Arrangements for the clerking of corporation business are satisfactory. The clerk's knowledge and experience is highly valued by governors. The clerk is a member of the management team and has significant management responsibilities. The clerk has a detailed job description which is separate from the management post. The clerk attends all meetings with the exception of the remuneration committee for which no minutes are prepared. Governors approve a schedule of meetings for the year. The schedule does not include the audit or remuneration or personnel committees. Personnel committee meetings are held on the same day as governing body

meetings and the business of the committee reported orally to the governing body. The self-assessment identifies as a weakness the lack of recent consideration of educational issues by the governing body. Reports to governors on students' retention and achievements have been on an annual basis.

51 Auditors considered that the college has introduced satisfactory procedures for openness and accountability. Codes of conduct for governors have been adopted. A 'whistleblowing' procedure is in place. A register of interests for governors and staff with financial responsibilities is updated annually. The register of interests and minutes and papers of meetings are available for public inspection. Procedures for confirming the eligibility of governors have been recently adopted. The college does not have a confidentiality policy. Governors monitor the financial position of the college through scrutiny of management accounts at finance and executive committee and governing body meetings.

52 Governors receive monthly management accounts independent of the cycle of committee meetings. However, neither the finance and executive committee nor governing body consider management accounts during the autumn term and the frequency of scrutiny of accounts falls below the required minimum. The first committee consideration of management accounts is six months into the financial year. The infrequency of governors' monitoring of college finances is not sufficiently recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

# Cross-college Provision

## Management

### *Grade 2*

**53 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. Many of the issues identified in the first self-assessment report had been addressed by the time of the inspection. Inspectors identified an additional weakness.**

#### Key strengths

- effective leadership
- good communications
- successful initiatives for widening participation
- effective financial management reporting
- good implementation of equal opportunities

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient long-term contingency planning and risk assessment
- insufficient health and safety reporting
- underdeveloped management information

54 The college has a clearly defined mission. The wording of the statement has recently been changed as a result of student sensitivity. It now emphasises 'social justice' rather than the 'disadvantages' of students. The college is successful in achieving its mission of offering good-quality programmes of learning to adults who have few previous qualifications. Staff and students understand the mission. Inspectors agreed that this is a strength. There is strong leadership. There was a change of principal 18 months before the inspection. During that time the senior management team worked effectively with the governing body to reposition itself in response to changing external circumstances. The senior management team has been successful in changing the college so that staff

in all sections concentrate more effectively on continuous improvement. Staff and students find the college friendly and responsive. They speak highly of the changes made and understand the reasons for them. The college achieved its annual enrolment target on the long course and exceeded its targets on the short courses. The results show improvement in achievement over the past three years.

55 The strategic planning process is becoming increasingly specific and measurable. The annual operating plans include specific performance indicators. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. The progress made against annual objectives is monitored three times a year, and detailed explanations given of any variances. The three-year strategic plan has been reviewed, and targets revised in response to these variances. Staff are involved in the process and feel that their views are respected. The current annual plan is based on marketing information from a variety of sources, including community contacts and local labour market information. The annual planning is effective. The senior staff receive management information sufficient for their needs, but the management information system is underdeveloped and student records are not kept consistently or coherently. The college has plans to address this and acknowledges that this is a weakness.

56 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that communication is good. Staff speak highly of the approachability of senior staff. There are weekly meetings for students and staff, where issues of concern are discussed and addressed. All staff are members of teams and have regular meetings with their line managers. The committees and their remits have been revised to reflect changes in the curriculum and governance. Students are represented on these committees, as appropriate. There is a clear reporting structure in place to ensure that issues raised in meetings or with line managers are followed up. This is mainly the responsibility of

# Cross-college Provision

senior managers, who either chair or attend the college meetings and committees and raise any issues at weekly senior management meetings. There is a health and safety committee which meets regularly. It does not provide reports to the governing body. This weakness is not identified in the self-assessment report. The senior management team comprises the principal and three staff with respective responsibility for the management of finance and residence, the registry, personnel and student support, and the curriculum. The roles are clearly defined and managers have considerable autonomy in leading these functions. The college has recently improved its electronic communications and the majority of staff now have access to electronic mail.

57 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The head of finance is a qualified accountant and part of the management team. Management accounts are produced monthly to an agreed time target and considered by the management team. The management accounts comply with good practice and variance reporting usefully distinguishes between timing issues and those with a year-end effect. The forecast year-end position is updated monthly. Reports to budget holders do not include committed expenditure. The budget-setting process is clearly understood by budget holders. Financial and statistical returns to the FEFC are timely. Financial regulations have been recently reviewed and meet with best practice. Revised financial procedures are awaiting governor approval. Internal audit has not raised any significant weaknesses in internal control. External audit has drawn attention to the college's financial position and possible vulnerability because of the absence of a long-term estates strategy. The risk assessment and contingency planning does not address these issues sufficiently.

58 The college's implementation of equal opportunities is a strength recognised in the

self-assessment report. Since the last inspection the college has improved the balance of the staffing profile. The college analyses student data by race, gender and disability and sets recruitment improvement targets which it has met. Statistical data include a value-added analysis, which shows the distance travelled by students. The college deals appropriately with issues that arise at the college such as homophobic discrimination. The college has recently updated its equal opportunities policy to include the disability discrimination act. The college values its staff and has a group looking at the prospects for staff when projects finish.

59 The development of community contacts and partnerships is a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. The college is a partner in a wide range of widening participation projects, providing residential weekends in many of them. The projects include access programmes for women from minority ethnic groups, confidence building for people with recently acquired disabilities, return to learning for people with learning difficulties and community building for voluntary groups in rural communities. Partners speak highly of the college's contribution and its inclusive approach to learning. The projects have involved 1,000 students and bring considerable benefits to the college community by widening its representation. The college now provides childcare. Some students have placements in some of the projects. The majority of students progress to some form of learning, either within the college or colleges elsewhere. Of the students on the long course, 25% progressed from community-based projects.

## Conclusions

60 The inspection team found the college to be open and committed to self-assessment. The report provided a reliable basis for planning the inspection. It reflected the views and experience of staff and governors and presented a clear and

# Cross-college Provision

comprehensive evaluation of the college's work.

It was supported by good evidence and the action plan linked to judgements provides a challenging agenda for college development.

Inspectors agreed with all of the college's judgements and all of the grades awarded by the college.

61 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 (1998-99)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	0
16-18 years	0
19-24 years	11
25+ years	84
Not known	5
Total	100

*Source: college data*

## Student numbers by level of study (1998-99)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation)	18
Level 2 (intermediate)	33
Level 3 (advanced)	13
Level 4/5 (higher)	0
Non-schedule 2	36
Total	100

*Source: college data*

## Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1998-99)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	16	306	38
Humanities	32	487	62
Total	48	793	100

*Source: college data*

## Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1998-99 ISR data, the college recruited 58% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

## Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1998-99)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	7	5	0	12
Supporting direct learning contact	2	1	0	3
Other support	17	2	1	20
Total	26	8	1	35

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

# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends

### Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£1,145,000	£1,221,000	£1,400,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Payroll as a proportion of income	48%	47%	46%
Achievement of funding target	104%	101%	130%
Diversity of income	58%	63%	53%
Operating surplus	£47,000	-£1,000	-£18,000

*Sources: Income – college (1997,1998 and 1999)*

*ALF – not applicable*

*Payroll – college (1997, 1998 and 1999)*

*Achievement of funding target – college (1997, 1998 and 1999)*

*Diversity of income – college (1997, 1998 and 1999)*

*Operating surplus – college (1997, 1998 and 1999)*

### Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998
3	Number of starters	78	72	68
	Retention (%)	82	85	72
	Achievement (%)	77	81	89

*Source: college*

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