

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Halton College

May 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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CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	3
Responsiveness and range of provision	12
Governance and management	23
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	34
Teaching and the promotion of learning	42
Students' achievements	58
Quality assurance	70
Resources	77
Conclusions and issues	90
Figures	

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 25/97

HALTON COLLEGE
NORTH WEST REGION
Inspected April-December 1996

Summary

Halton College is a general further education college based in Widnes, Cheshire. The college targets two distinct markets. Its local community is Runcorn and Widnes. It has also developed a national role in the provision of work-based training. The college is very responsive to the needs of industry. It has developed a partnership approach with schools and a range of other organisations. Governors and managers share a clear vision, which has been effectively communicated to staff. There is some good teaching, especially at advanced level. Work-based training is well supported by the college learning consultants. Comprehensive advice and guidance is available for students. The college's extension of its dispersed provision has been at the expense of quality in some areas. The college has made substantial investment in information technology to support the curriculum. There are problems in curriculum management. Many local courses have poor attendance and punctuality and low retention rates. Students' achievement of qualifications on the work-based programmes is slow. The college does not sufficiently monitor its guidance services. There is insufficient sharing of good practice in teaching and learning and an inconsistent approach to the development of students' key skills across the college. Quality assurance systems do not always lead to effective action.

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

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing (including dispersed provision)	3	Health and care, hairdressing and beauty	3
Engineering (including dispersed provision)	2	Dispersed health and care provision	2
Business studies (including dispersed provision)	3	Art and design	3
Hotel and catering	1	Humanities	3
Dispersed hotel and catering provision	4	Adult basic education	2
		Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (including dispersed provision)	4

INTRODUCTION

1 Halton College was inspected between April and December 1996. A team of 26 inspectors spent a total of 131 days in the college and at dispersed work sites. Catering provision was inspected April to June. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in September. Other curriculum areas were inspected in October and November and aspects of cross-college provision in December 1996.

2 Inspectors visited 222 classes in the college and 69 dispersed work sites, which included industrial and commercial companies, public sector organisations and the armed services. They examined students' written work and a wide range of college documentation. At dispersed sites they spoke to trainees, assessors and employers and examined students' portfolios. In the college meetings were held with governors, college managers and staff, students, parents and representatives from the local authority, North and Mid-Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), employers, schools, universities, the careers service and community organisations.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Halton College is a further education college in the Halton area of Cheshire which comprises the two industrial towns of Runcorn and Widnes separated by the River Mersey. Its main site is at Kingsway in Widnes. The population of the area is 126,000. This figure is expected to rise over the next few years. Minority ethnic groups account for approximately 1 per cent of the population.

4 The college targets two distinct markets. Its local community is Runcorn and Widnes. In recent years it has also established a national presence in the delivery of work-based training. This dispersed provision is undertaken largely with industrial/commercial clients, although there is some work with organisations which provide for people with learning difficulties.

5 Largely as a result of the growth of its dispersed provision, the college has grown from 454,621 funding units in 1993-94 to almost 1.5 million units in 1995-96. Local programmes account for 20 per cent of units. In addition to Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programmes, the college provides courses of higher education, and adult education funded by the local education authority (LEA). In 1995-96, the college enrolled 37,957 students, of whom 7,560 were from its local catchment area. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

6 Halton Borough is an economically disadvantaged area, characterised by high unemployment and poverty. Adult unemployment is 12 per cent overall and much higher in some wards. Nearly a third of the unemployed are aged between 16 and 24. Only 63 per cent of 16 year olds continue in full-time education. Many adults do not possess formal qualifications of

any kind. The local economy is dominated by the manufacturing and chemical industries. There are a few large companies which provide employment for 80 per cent of those in work, whilst the majority of employers are small to medium enterprises. Many of the smaller companies do not have a strong commitment to training.

7 There are six 11 to 18 schools and three 11 to 16 schools in the district as well as a sixth form college. Four other FEFC-funded colleges are within close travelling distance. Halton College provides vocational and academic programmes for the 16 to 18 age group but 90 per cent of its students are adults. Many of the more academically able young students opt to stay in the sixth forms of local schools, go to the sixth form college or travel out of the area for their secondary education. The college has worked in partnership with a number of secondary schools to help them establish vocational programmes aimed at the 16 to 19 age group. It also works with primary schools to promote family learning.

8 The college has established links with over 14 higher education institutions for a variety of franchised programmes which it teaches locally. Most of these courses last for two years in the college, followed by two years at a university. Some provide progression routes for part-time students in employment. Higher education provision by the college is full time, sandwich, part time and work based.

9 The college mission is 'to challenge and change'. It embarked on national work-based training in response to a decline in its traditional markets and as a means of contributing to the national targets for education and training. Demand from employers for support with training was greater than the college anticipated. It now works with a range of clients, from large national companies to small local organisations.

10 The structure of the college has changed on a number of occasions since incorporation. The college believes it has to be adaptive and that structures need to be fluid to meet the requirements of an ever changing environment. At present, its programmes are delivered through four faculties. Two faculties concentrate on serving the local community; these are subdivided into schools. The other two faculties deliver programmes to the dispersed customers. To further this work, the college has created the role of learning consultant in the dispersed faculties to provide training, act as internal verifiers and monitor quality in work-based provision. In addition to the four faculties, the Research and Development Function is responsible for programmes that are in their design stage and/or involve applications of computing, as well as managing special projects and development grants. Other central functions include marketing, customer services, management information systems, finance, estates and personnel.

11 In 1995-96, the college employed 542 full-time equivalent staff of whom 19 per cent were part time. Three hundred and forty-three full-time equivalent staff were either involved in or supported direct

learning. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

12 Halton College is responsive and offers a wide range of general education and vocational courses in all 10 of the FEFC's programme areas. Over the past two years, the number enrolled at the college has more than doubled to about 38,000. This rapid growth is due to the provision of education, training and consultancy services to employers and their employees in the workplace. This dispersed provision is offered nationwide and the college has been successful in attracting custom from large private and public sector employers. In 1995-96, 74 per cent of the college's students were work-based trainees. This provision offers opportunities for education and training to many people who would not otherwise take part.

13 The college is responsive to employers' needs and is keen to work in partnership with them. Services offered through the dispersed business include the opportunity to achieve nationally-recognised qualifications such as national vocational qualifications (NVQs), training for assessors and verifiers, company specific training, consultancy, and open learning programmes. The majority of the dispersed provision is in engineering, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, catering and hospitality, health and social care, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, retail, business, and cleaning services. The college also has productive links with local employers. Last year local employers provided work experience placements for 536 of the college's students. Employers speak highly of the college. Each faculty takes its own approach to developing and maintaining these extensive links; there is limited co-ordination across the college.

14 The provision in health and social care is a good example of the training offered through the dispersed business. The college has a contract with 80 organisations to provide training for about 1,200 care staff on 230 sites throughout the country. A wide range of options is available in social care at NVQ levels 2 and 3. Training and assessment take place on the employers' premises with effective support from college staff who also provide training for work-based assessors and verifiers. Supervisors and candidates are kept in touch with the college through video conferencing and a monthly newspaper. Flexible learning materials and tutorial support are being used by 350 employees in the local process plant industry to gain nationally-recognised qualifications from foundation level to higher education. The college is working with the Royal Air Force to help service personnel achieve NVQ awards based on their working skills and experience.

15 The two college-based faculties provide courses for a variety of students and clients. Provision includes general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) in 28 subjects; general certificate of education advanced

level (GCE A level) in 18 subjects; and a wide range of NVQs and general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs). Other vocational awards are available, for example, in performing arts, multi-media and conservation. There is a small provision in construction and horticulture. There are good progression routes from foundation to advanced level courses in a number of areas including science, catering, computing, engineering and English. There are a few limitations in the range of courses offered but these are often for sound reasons, such as local competition. Course teams and heads of faculty continually review the provision. The academic board formally considers the college's portfolio at least once a year and makes decisions on major changes. For example, the now popular multi-media courses are in the second year of operation while motor vehicle provision has been significantly reduced.

16 Partnership arrangements with universities enable students to study at the college for the early stages of degree courses in science and humanities; this is particularly welcomed by students unable to travel away from home. Currently about 170 students are enrolled on these programmes. There is also an access to higher education programme which has 11 main pathways organised in a modular programme.

17 The college has good links with the local authority, schools, higher education institutions, community and voluntary groups and North and Mid-Cheshire TEC. It is well represented on numerous boards and committees, such as the Halton Anti-Poverty Forum, and makes good use of such links to create effective partnerships. The college runs a TEC-funded managing agency, Forward Training. This year's contract is for around £500,000. The college has been successful in its bids for external funding through the TEC and from other sources. More than £3.5 million has been allocated to a variety of projects, many of which are concerned with widening participation and making the college more accessible. One example of the college's responsiveness to the needs of the local community is the secondment of a member of staff to work with groups of local people using the Open University's 'build on your skills' package. When they have successfully completed the course, some of the trainees will themselves become trainers. The college offers a LEA-funded adult education programme in eight schools and in community centres in Runcorn and Widnes; this attracted 1,400 students in 1995-96.

18 The college makes good use of technology to reach students who cannot attend the college on a regular basis. It has won awards for a variety of initiatives. Video conferencing has been used to offer language and basic skills tuition to pupils and their parents in local schools and community centres. Staff equipped with laptop computers have provided information technology training to 300 parents in 17 primary schools in Runcorn. A drop-in centre for local employers is equipped with access to the Internet and video-conferencing facilities. Last year, 239 companies registered to use the centre, of which 78 were new contacts.

19 Despite the competitive environment, the college has formed successful partnerships with some of the local secondary schools. In 1993, it established the Route 19 initiative with three of the nine local secondary schools and is holding discussions with another two of them. The aim is to encourage young people to continue their studies at 16 by providing flexible programmes to suit their needs. Some students from the schools attend the college for one day a week as part of their vocational sixth form curriculum. Schools report increased motivation from students taking part, some of whom progress to the college to take advanced courses. Two learning support assistants employed by the college are based in the schools to assist sixth form students to develop information technology skills. Link programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are offered in conjunction with seven local special schools.

20 Staff and students take part in international visits and overseas students spend time at the college. External funding has supported a number of projects and exchanges. Staff have visited China, the United States of America, Denmark, Belgium, Libya, the Czech Republic, Finland and Greece to explore good practice, to make presentations, provide training courses or to promote the college. Students have taken part in exchange visits with their counterparts in France, Denmark and Portugal. The college's video-conference facilities have been used in joint projects with students in Denmark, Holland, New Zealand and Australia.

21 The college's corporate marketing department provides effective services and support for the four faculties. The four faculties are responsible for marketing their own courses. The labour market intelligence provided by the marketing department is valued by the faculties who find it useful in making decisions about the courses they offer and their promotion. Course teams design their own publicity materials but these are not all of the same high standard as the college prospectus.

22 There is a strong commitment to providing equality of opportunity for the college's clients. The policy and supporting guidelines are well thought out. The statement in the students' handbook gives a clear message about unacceptable behaviour and attitudes. Implementation of the policy is monitored at all levels. There is much good practice. So far this year the college has provided 103 students with financial support for childcare. Course monitoring includes a review of materials used in teaching to check that equality is promoted.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

23 The board of Halton College comprises 17 members. There are 13 members experienced in the areas of business, industry, management and local government directly relevant to the college's activities, a representative of the TEC, the principal, the vice-principal and a staff member. Governors are supported by the college secretary who acts as clerk and provides advice on a range of issues. Governors readily

participate in the activities of the college and take part in regular meetings and training events alongside staff. The board's committee structure makes full use of individual governors' expertise. Meetings of the board and its committees are generally well attended. In their regular review of their performance and training needs, governors have identified a need for further briefings on legal and financial matters and other details of their responsibilities.

24 Governors are well aware of the distinction between governance and management. They have been fully involved in the strategic planning processes of the college and, in particular, in the development of the college's recent innovations in dispersed provision. The college's strategic and operational planning is informed by the acknowledgement that the aims of the local and dispersed provision are different. By risk-taking and innovation in the latter the college has broken new ground. It has tested government policy, helped formulate FEFC thinking, offered a new model for the delivery of training and courses to other colleges and secured its financial future in the short term.

25 Well-documented and clear management structures exist both for local and dispersed provision and communication is given a high priority. The college's senior management team comprises the principal, the vice-principal, four faculty heads, and five function heads. Faculty and functional heads and heads of schools, divisions and sectors are clear about their roles and responsibilities and provide strong leadership to their staff, although some role descriptions lack detail. Staff meetings at all levels have agendas and usually produce recorded points for action. Many meetings are supported by comprehensive briefing papers.

26 There is emphatic staff support for the current vision and mission of the college. This is reflected in faculty and school documentation of aims and objectives and in operational planning documents. A major feature of the strategic planning process, which involves governors and staff at all levels, is the effective communication of the college's vision and mission by means of training days, a 'futures day', 'coaching' by senior managers, prominent displays of the mission and vision statements in corporate literature and regular reminders during planning meetings. The change of practices to follow the vision is inevitably slower, particularly in areas of college-based provision.

27 Rapid expansion of the dispersed provision has had some adverse effects on curriculum provision in the college. A majority of the curriculum areas inspected were judged to have some weaknesses in curriculum delivery. In some schools there has been insufficient time for curriculum managers to monitor academic standards as well as managing complex administrative arrangements. The thinking which informs the dispersed developments has so far had limited impact on provision in the college. For example, links with industry are rarely used in the design of college-based courses.

28 There is an ethos of teamwork about which staff speak positively and enthusiastically. Good examples exist of effective teamwork which supports innovation. Changes have been managed by restructuring the staffing of the college; all staff except one are now working on new contracts. Staffing is tightly controlled, and currently accounts for 58 per cent of the college's income.

29 Systems for budget setting and the prioritisation of expenditure are transparent and are considered by managers to be fair. Unit costs are calculated and financial modelling is a feature of the budget setting process. The college has calculated the risks involved in the development strategy which it has adopted and these have been considered and approved by governors.

30 For 1996-97, the college's average level of funding is £15.78 per unit. The median for further education and tertiary colleges is £17.97 per unit. The college is dependent on the FEFC for 82 per cent of its income. As a result of the increase in dispersed provision, funding allocations to the college have climbed sharply since 1993. The college made a surplus on its accounts of £666,636 in 1995-96, and has still to finalise its funding claims for this year. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

31 Policy statements are in place relating to equal opportunities, health and safety, human resources, quality assurance, accommodation, fees, communication, technology and the learning vision. Responsibility for these policies has been recently reviewed and determined, and a calendar and schedule for their annual review agreed.

32 Management information is produced centrally to respond to the FEFC's reporting requirements. Faculty heads have been encouraged to develop their own systems to monitor their performance. These systems produce reports which managers regard as useful. For the local provision, faculties set and monitor targets for enrolment and rates of retention. Performance failures have been identified from the data but action on these has yet to show positive effects in some instances. For example, the college continues to have poor retention rates. It is difficult and challenging to monitor and assess the quality of the dispersed provision, but systems have now been set up and are beginning to operate effectively.

33 Although faculty and school-based data exist, inspectors discovered some problems in producing accurate data for aggregated college reports. A particular problem exists in the monitoring and recording of student destinations.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

34 The college provides a co-ordinated approach to the recruitment process. It encourages all members of the local communities to take advantage of its provision. The summer promotional campaign uses advertisements in newspapers and on buses to increase awareness of the

college in the area of Widnes and Runcorn. Opportunities are provided throughout the summer for prospective students to seek advice on enrolling on programmes. Services exist to provide customers with guidance and support to enable them to make an informed choice, but there is only limited analysis of the effectiveness of the guidance and enrolment process in placing students on appropriate programmes.

35 Support and guidance services are centralised in the 'welcome centre', an attractively refurbished area, conveniently placed between the main entrance at the Kingsway site and college refreshment facilities. Its comprehensive service is well used and valued by many students. Help available ranges from financial assistance with course-related costs and childcare to information on grants, student loans and accommodation. There is access to a health adviser, a personal counselling service and careers and higher education guidance from a trained careers officer employed by the college. In addition, the college receives an agreed level of support from the local careers service which is beginning to result in more structured careers education and guidance for students on courses. Seventy-four group sessions and 251 individual interviews have been conducted since August.

36 Recruitment to work-based training is generally well organised. Opportunities are advertised within the company concerned, followed by an awareness-raising presentation for possible candidates. There is good supporting documentation which explains NVQs and college services. Individual guidance sessions are conducted in most programmes for those who wish to take part, using a checklist to confirm candidates' understanding of what is available and what it entails. Assessment of students' prior learning and skills is not fully developed in all programme areas as some staff are not yet appropriately qualified to undertake the assessment. Support for work-based students during their programme is provided by an assessor and the college learning consultant. They also have access to college support services including a telephone helpline, although few use this service. During specialist inspections students in some dispersed provision were meeting too infrequently with their assessor and this hampered their progress. Following criticism by inspectors, the initial guidance given to prospective students in the hotel industry was significantly improved.

37 Induction programmes for full-time students are devised to college guidelines. Through this process students are informed about the college charter, assessment appeals, complaints and disciplinary procedures and are provided with a well-produced and useful student handbook. A personal tutor ensures that students are aware of the opportunities to change programmes and organises appropriate guidance should it be needed. Some of the induction sessions observed were effective but many were poor; insufficient attention was paid by staff to presentation and methods of teaching and some took place in rooms that were not suitable. Some matters were covered twice by different members of staff. While the

college is aware of these issues, there has been no thorough review of induction. Most students based in the workplace are given clear information about their rights and entitlements and are aware that they are Halton College students.

38 A new pastoral system has been introduced this year in an attempt to address problems of retention on many courses. Full-time, first-year students receive pastoral support from a specialist group of personal tutors who have little academic teaching responsibility. Students also have an academic tutorial with one of their teachers. Second-year full-time students and part-time students are continuing with the 'old' system of having a personal tutor from within their curriculum area. The new system has clear aims which focus on helping students to remain on the programme. However, some of the new tutorial sessions observed were poorly planned and delivered and many students are not clear about the relationship between personal and academic tutorials.

39 Academic tutors record students' attendance and problems are reported to the student's personal tutor. In some cases, poor attendance is not noted or acted on and there is some poor practice in following up 'cause for concern' forms. Students are encouraged to maintain their records of achievement but most do not use it to support discussion of their progress at their personal and academic tutorials. Students do not generally value the process of action planning as practised in personal tutorials.

40 All full-time, first-year students are screened in basic literacy and numeracy to identify needs for additional learning support. However, many students who have been offered additional support are not attending sessions. Absences from learning support sessions are routinely reported to personal tutors for action but retention is not analysed systematically. In engineering, the college is evaluating an alternative screening process which has been piloted this year in an attempt to define students' needs more accurately. A programme of key skills leading to the diploma of achievement was offered to GNVQ engineering students during the first six weeks of their course. Early indications are that it has provided a sound preparation for GNVQ work.

41 There are good links with local health agencies, social services and schools which form a basis for establishing the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and easing their transition to the college. However, insufficient use is made of the outcomes of initial diagnostic assessment to provide appropriate provision and support for students. For example, there was insufficient information about the support needs of a student with a visual impairment. Four weeks into term, appropriate equipment to help the student had not been provided by the college. Neither the prospectus nor the charter are easily accessible to students with learning difficulties. The college does not provide sufficient specialist advice and guidance at dispersed centres to help students with learning difficulties make an appropriate choice of programme.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

42 Of the 222 lessons inspected, 54 per cent had strengths outweighing weaknesses and 34 per cent had a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Weaknesses clearly outweighed strengths in 12 per cent of the lessons. Teaching is satisfactory in the majority of college-based lessons. The best lessons observed were in GNVQ and other advanced vocational and NVQ level 2 courses. Overall, the profile of the college's lesson grades is not as good as the average for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspectors's Annual Report 1995-96*. The average attendance rate for classes observed was 72 per cent; the lowest rates were in mathematics and hairdressing/beauty therapy courses (64 per cent) and humanities (65 per cent) and the highest was in catering (82 per cent). The following table summarises the grades awarded to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE A level	0	6	3	1	0	10
GCSE	2	3	6	1	0	12
GNVQ	6	14	11	6	3	40
NVQ	7	18	16	0	0	41
Other vocational	8	28	17	5	0	58
Access	1	5	2	0	1	9
Basic education	1	9	6	7	0	23
Other	3	9	15	1	1	29
Total	28	92	76	21	5	222

43 In catering, the standard of teaching and learning was high. Practical work took place in realistic situations and in theory lessons there was a balance of lectures and students' involvement in learning activities. In the better lessons in health and social care teachers provided a review of previous learning and a suitable range of learning activities and made frequent checks on students' understanding. However, students were not given sufficient opportunities to acquire key skills. Some schemes of work were just a list of topics and some activities and assignments were pitched at the wrong level. Some lessons in hairdressing and beauty therapy were effective but generally students were not sufficiently challenged by the work. There was insufficient encouragement of key skills, with the exception of information technology. Some students were not given sufficient opportunities to carry out practical tasks and to complete assessments. There were few study packs that students could use to follow up work on their own.

44 There was effective teaching in many business studies lessons. The time was well planned and students' understanding was developed by group work, question and answer sessions, note-taking and discussion. In poorer sessions objectives were not clear, little account was taken of students' prior knowledge, skills and experience, and the teacher spent long periods writing on the board. Few classes were given regular homework. Generally, assessments were well structured and at an appropriate level but in marking students' work some teachers did not apply the assessment criteria consistently. A simulated-working environment helped students to develop practical skills but timetabling difficulties meant it was not always available. This limited the opportunities available for the assessment of students' practical work.

45 Engineering staff used their industrial knowledge to enliven their teaching and put learning in context. They often negotiated lesson plans with students and modified assessments to match students' interests. They discussed individual learning needs and offered refresher sessions to mature students. Many lessons were interesting and challenging and teachers took good account of the level and abilities of the students in the group. In most cases, practical work was carried out effectively and there was good attention to health and safety. In a small number of lessons, appropriate equipment was not provided. Some students did not arrive punctually for lessons. Due to recent refurbishment, students had limited practical work for the first six weeks of term.

46 Science lessons varied in their effectiveness. In some lessons, teachers used methods which ensured that students understood and remembered work taught in earlier sessions and practical assessments were well carried out. Some students gained experience of small team projects which required the use of a range of skills. In other lessons, teachers took insufficient account of students' different abilities, made little use of teaching and learning aids and made no use at all of information technology. Assessments were generally of an appropriate standard but teachers' comments on students' work were minimal. In computing, the overall quality of teaching was good. Teacher explanations were clear, there was good-quality hardware and software and self-study materials were well used. Mathematics teachers were skilled at providing everyday applications to help students learn. They made good use of information technology in lessons to stimulate students' interests. Homework was set regularly and marked and returned promptly. However, both computing and mathematics classes had high levels of absence and late arrivals.

47 In humanities the standard of English and modern languages sessions was higher than those in sociology and psychology. The standard of teaching and learning was consistently good in English lessons. The level of academic rigour was high and staff displayed a contagious enthusiasm for literature. Teachers' explanations were clear, informative and entertaining and students were encouraged to put forward views and defend them. Modern language lessons were well structured and

video-conferencing facilities were used to provide live links with other countries. In a few instances the pace of the session was slow. Teachers did not always take sufficient account of different levels of student ability in the same class.

48 In the best sociology and psychology sessions students were challenged, encouraged to use appropriate terminology and substantiate their views with evidence. Others lacked structure and the weakest sessions did not have appropriate standards of academic rigour. Links between topics were not made. Some activities were pointless, for example copying from a board when information was on a handout. Generally in sociology and psychology study skills were not being systematically developed. There were examples of poor classroom organisation. There was no consistency in correcting English errors in students' work. Marked work did not have enough teacher comment and, in some instances, too much credit was given for regurgitating information.

49 Adult basic education classes were well planned and organised. They generally achieved a good balance between individual and group work. In some classes information technology skills were being developed.

50 Art and design and performing arts teachers set clear objectives. Lessons involved students in group work and a range of media stimulated discussion. There was little integration of key skills, especially numeracy and information technology, with the work. Teachers did not always fully understand the requirements of external validating bodies.

51 Formal teaching was not a feature of much of the dispersed work. Selecting a representative sample of work for the inspection team was difficult because the numbers enrolled fluctuated as some companies or centres left the programme and new ones came on stream. Visits were made to 69 centres representing approximately 30 different companies or organisations. Inspectors saw a total of 577 trainees, including some assessors who were being trained by the college. Where possible, inspectors observed training sessions, tutorials and portfolio building sessions, some of which were specially organised to take place during the visit. Additional evidence was gathered by interviewing employees on the programme, assessors and employers.

52 A number of good features were observed in the dispersed provision. Learning programmes were generally well structured and supported by thorough documentation. Students and assessors generally felt well supported by the college's learning consultants. High-quality learning materials were produced by the college and sometimes used effectively in the centres. Record keeping of students' progress was generally good.

53 In health and social care the college is trying to address some variations in the teaching and learning experienced by students across different sites. In some centres, students have access to a range of materials and learning opportunities, rooms for training have been set up and assessors or learning consultants have put on training courses to deliver

basic knowledge. In two of the nursing homes visited, the schedule of training courses included HIV awareness, lifting, special diets and a study of the range of equipment and aids available to help elders. There were many examples of appropriate assignments being set. Where necessary, the college was able to arrange visits to another workplace to ensure coverage of particular NVQ competences. In a few cases, assessors were concerned that they were not able to offer enough assessment opportunities for their students to progress. A minority of students were unclear about the operation of the NVQ system. In one home, where there was little access to learning materials and none to training courses, students reported that they had learned little from the NVQ programme.

54 There were fewer examples of detailed learning programmes in hotel and catering. There was no clear link between company training sessions and the NVQ programme and there was insufficient monitoring of trainees' guided learning hours. There was limited formal planning of the teaching and learning of the theory needed to support practical activities. Some trainees were dissatisfied with the organisation of the programme and the lack of sufficient assessment opportunities. However, relationships between college staff and trainees were generally good. There were some well-organised training sessions, where good use was made of appropriate visual aids, the work was well paced and students' learning was checked by well-directed questions.

55 In cleaning services provision, effective demonstrations were observed of how to use cleaning equipment. Additional support was provided for those for whom English is not the first language. In engineering and business studies, candidates welcomed the opportunity to learn in the workplace and to gain accreditation of the skills developed in their work. Trainees commented on the useful support given by college staff in helping them to understand programmes and sustain their efforts. In engineering, some also spoke of good peer-group support; this and self-learning were reported as the primary means of developing skills and knowledge.

56 In business studies, and some other programme areas, students are not given sufficient time in the workplace to devote to their studies. Some are working in isolation and have little opportunity to share their learning. In all the programme areas, most assessors had good occupational knowledge but some lacked broader teaching skills and were unable to communicate at an appropriate level for the individuals in the group; on occasions some students did not understand what was being asked by assessors. Opportunities were missed to develop students' understanding and knowledge beyond basic requirements. In cleaning services there were some inconsistencies in the standards accepted by different assessors.

57 Provision for students with learning difficulties in the college and in dispersed work is characterised by positive relationships between students and staff but poor-quality teaching and learning. Students do not have

individual learning programmes and many sessions are not meeting their needs. In many sessions, the focus is on completing tasks rather than learning skills or acquiring knowledge.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

58 Many students approached their studies diligently and with enthusiasm and enjoyment. This was particularly noticeable in science, cleaning services, engineering, health and social care, some catering and adult basic education. Humanities students worked hard often writing at length, although much was copied from sources rather than their own work. All students worked well together in groups. They had good awareness of health and safety issues in all areas.

59 Most students showed an appropriate level of understanding and knowledge for their courses. However, their development of the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information technology was poor in many areas, including science, art and design, performing arts, health and social care and the humanities. Information technology was used effectively by engineering students. Administration students were able to apply their knowledge well to the practical situation of the training office. Some health and social care students made mature and perceptive contributions to discussions. College-based catering students had a professional and careful approach to their work. In hairdressing, although some students exhibited high standards of professional competence, some did not. There were some poor responses to tasks by students on GCSE mathematics courses. Many students with learning difficulties were unable to work independently often because they did not understand the task set.

60 Low retention rates on a significant number of GCSE courses affect the level of students' achievements when it is measured by the number or percentage of students who successfully complete the course. For example, in GCSE mathematics 191 students were enrolled by November 1995, but only 98 were still on the course in May 1996; of these 38 achieved grades A* to C giving a successful completion rate of only 20 per cent. In GCSE English language, English literature, psychology, sociology, accounts and all sciences, retention rates have declined over the last three years. In humanities subjects, those who do take the examination do well. The proportions of students achieving A to C grades in English, psychology, sociology and languages courses are high. For those who complete courses in GCSE mathematics and accounts, results are in line with national averages. All science GCSE subjects have results below national averages.

61 On one-year GCE A level courses there are some poor retention rates; it was as low as 34 per cent in psychology. None of the six chemistry students enrolled completed the course. Only English courses have improving retention rates. In English, the pass rate and proportions of students achieving higher grades were well above national averages in the past three years. In 1996, pass rates in psychology, sociology, and business studies were above the national averages. The college only started to run

two-year GCE A level courses in 1994. Again, low retention rates affected successful completion. There were some good pass rates for students who completed the courses. English and psychology both had 100 per cent pass rates and in sociology 78 per cent of the students passed.

62 Although there were good levels of achievement for students completing access to higher education courses, retention rates are a cause of concern, with as few as 43 per cent of those enrolling completing a course in sociological perspectives. Those who completed access to computing and access to mathematics courses did well, but only two-thirds of those enrolled completed these courses in 1996. In 1995, only 19 per cent of mathematics students successfully completed the course. For those completing English and social science access courses their achievements are in line with the mean for the Open College of the North West and science results were good with 88 per cent of students gaining the qualification.

63 College-based provision includes many one, two and three-year vocational programmes ranging from basic skills courses to higher national diplomas. In all, except some engineering courses, poor retention rates lower the successful completion rates. For example, in 1995, of the 16 students enrolled on a GNVQ intermediate information technology course only eight completed the course, with only five of them obtaining the qualification. Some areas have good pass rates for those who complete courses:

- in engineering, achievements are generally good with many courses having 100 per cent pass rates
- the certificate of personnel practice courses have had a 100 per cent pass rate for two out of the last three years
- in catering, there was a 90 per cent pass rate for NVQs in hotel reception and 82 per cent for the GNVQ intermediate
- 68 per cent of students on adult basic education courses were entered for accredited qualifications in 1996 and all of them were successful.

64 Pass rates on other courses were more variable. Sometimes there was great variety within the same curriculum area. In many stage 1 administration courses students' results were good, but on the higher level courses in administration students were not as successful. There were poor results on the GNVQ advanced business course in 1996. Pass rates on most health and social care courses were in line with national averages. Only three of the seven students completing the national diploma in health studies course in 1996 gained their qualification. Achievements in hairdressing and beauty courses were generally poor. Many students do not achieve their qualification within a reasonable time of starting the course; for example, only 73 per cent of students had achieved NVQ level 2 after studying for two years. There are poor results on some part-time

engineering courses; for example, only 26 per cent of students passed the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) maintenance course.

65 Students with learning difficulties on separate specialist provision achieved a variety of national awards and units in 1995-96. However, the learning programmes which led to these awards did not constitute a coherent or relevant learning experience. The replacement of many of these awards by vocational access certification, coupled with wordpower and numberpower, is placing pressure on students to gain accreditation and may therefore be detracting from their learning needs.

66 The data on the college's achievements in the performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment reflect the achievements of a small minority of the college's students, as 93 per cent of students are aged over 19 and many are undertaking qualifications not covered by the official tables. GCE A level results for 16 to 18 year olds have improved from the bottom 10 per cent of further education colleges in 1994 to the bottom third in 1995. In 1996 the average points score (where grade A=10 points, E=2) for the 14 students taking two or more GCE A levels was 11.4. It was in the bottom third of all colleges for vocational qualifications for students aged 16 to 18 in 1994 and the top third in 1995. In 1996 of the 130 such students 49 per cent gained intermediate level vocational qualifications and 71 per cent gained advanced level qualifications. The former figure is well below the national average, but the latter is nearer to the national average.

67 The college collects information on students' destinations at course level but this is not sufficiently aggregated and analysed to give a clear pattern of students' progression routes. Published information may give a misleading impression as it includes students already in employment when commencing their course.

68 Many students in dispersed provision take a great deal of time to achieve their qualifications, even taking into account difficulties associated with work-based provision. The main exceptions to this are in NVQs in social care and NVQs in engineering. Sixty-seven per cent of those who had started an NVQ course in social care in November 1994 had achieved their qualification by the time of the inspection. The slow achievement of qualifications is a cause for concern in many areas. For example, from a cohort of 865 candidates who started NVQ level 1 in cleaning building interiors in May 1995, only 16 per cent had achieved their qualifications by October 1996. On many business courses the rate at which students achieve their qualifications is slow and, on some courses, the number of students withdrawing is high. There are also slow achievement rates for students on catering courses which are exacerbated by poor retention rates. The college can demonstrate that, in many cases, the reasons for students withdrawing from the course are because of their employers' actions. However, even when these figures are excluded from the analysis, results are poor. Only 10 per cent of those enrolled between November

1994 and November 1995 have achieved an NVQ level 1 or 2 catering qualification. Occasionally employers are holding up the achievement of engineering qualifications, for example by using the one day a month students have to put together their portfolios for other purposes.

69 Some of the achievement data held on students following dispersed courses designed for those with learning difficulties are unclear. Some who were working competently within practical sessions had little evidence to indicate that their skills and knowledge had increased significantly through their college programmes of study. On two sites, students were doing the same work that they had been doing prior to the college's involvement which meant that, although they were now able to gain accreditation for their work, they had made no real progress.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

70 The college is committed to continuous improvement and states this in its quality assurance policy. College quality assurance procedures were first introduced in 1987 and are evolving in response to changes in the college's market. Some aspects of quality assurance are relatively new, reflecting the fast pace of change within the organisation. Functional areas in the college are in the process of setting quality standards but these do not yet have an impact on the delivery of services. There is clear procedural documentation, organised in manuals, which reflect the differences between the local and dispersed provision. Staff generally understand these procedures, but the commitment to continuous improvement is not yet embraced by them all. The college has not considered the possibility of links between quality assurance systems of companies in dispersed provision and those in the college.

71 Curriculum provision is reviewed regularly, culminating in an end-of-year review. The impact of these reviews on quality are variable. Much information is collected, but it is not always well used to inform future developments and action planning. Performance indicators used in reviews cover the areas of enrolment, retention, customer satisfaction, students' achievements and their destinations. The targets which are set are not common across the college. The basis for setting individual targets is not apparent. In some cases, unrealistic targets are set. For example, the retention target for part-time access to higher education courses in 1995-96 was set at 60 per cent; they actually achieved only 55 per cent but the target was then increased to 65 per cent for 1996-97. It is not always clear what sanctions apply for areas which do not achieve targets. External verifiers' reports are generally complimentary about both local and dispersed provision. The college uses these reports in its own review and planning processes.

72 Action plans include identified issues and the action required and most also include who is responsible for the action and a target date for its achievement. However, action plans vary in terms of their details and quality and some are vague. Occasionally, they are too focused on defining

problems rather than finding solutions. Explicit action required to effect improvements is not always evident. However, swift action was taken in response to poor achievements in dispersed catering provision. Detailed and efficient monitoring systems were put in place; extra learning consultants were appointed to speed up assessment and the number of trainees entering the programme was severely cut back. Although it is too early for these actions to have fed through into improved achievements, these measures indicate that quality is being taken seriously. The monitoring of action plans has largely been undertaken by those who set them. The college has recently established a full-time auditing team of three people aimed at improving the monitoring of standards and with a brief to focus more on students' experience of the learning process. The audit team will undertake the monitoring of action plans in the future. The team is too new to have had any considerable impact on performance.

73 The college regularly seeks the views of students and other customers. There is a system of questionnaires at three intervals during the year. In the first survey of students' opinions this academic year, a high proportion of students returned completed forms. There are curriculum areas which either do not receive a good number of responses or do not then feed their results into the college system. The return of questionnaires from students on dispersed provision is predictably low, but the college makes great efforts to find out students' views in other ways, for example, by having meetings with them to discuss their views in 'focus' groups. One area has introduced sending students a pre-paid envelope to return their reply which has improved the return rate from 13 per cent to 30 per cent. Learning consultants also regularly meet with the employers to gain their views. Course teams do include students and employers as members.

74 The college charter is clear and concise. There is a copy in the student handbook. The charter is regularly reviewed and monitored. Some local students are unaware of the implications of the charter for them. Some students on dispersed provision are not well informed about the charter or their entitlement to an individual learner agreement.

75 There is a clear system for identifying needs, through annual staff-development interviews, for all staff who work more than six hours a week for the college. For those who work fewer hours, such interviews are optional. Individual development needs are prioritised in line with the college's strategic intentions. Training activities are supported by a realistic budget; approximately 1.5 per cent of staffing expenditure is spent on external activities and the cost of activities held in the college increases this fourfold. College staff have received good support in achieving training and development lead body qualifications. There has been a slower achievement of such qualifications by assessors in dispersed provision. This has slowed down the speed of assessment as both assessors and students were enrolled at the same time. There has been insufficient emphasis on the development of teaching skills and the promotion of learning, apart from that provided for those who are new both to the

college and to teaching. There are limited arrangements for assessors in dispersed provision to develop their skills through the sharing of good practice and resources.

76 The college's self-assessment report effectively involved all sections of the college in the process of its development. The report was based on the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement* and identified strengths and areas for improvement and any action being taken. Many of the areas for improvement lacked detail. There was no cross-referencing of strengths to evidence. No grades were offered in the self-assessment report. The area which was most accurate in its assessment was responsiveness and range of provision. Curriculum reports included observation of teaching and learning. Although there are criteria for these observations, they are too vague and have led to inconsistency in the quality of reports. However, in one curriculum area which did poorly on internal observations, a system of support was instigated and this area had improved its performance by the time of the inspection.

RESOURCES

Staffing

77 Staff are hard working and committed to their students. The majority have adapted well to the rapid changes in their work. Recent appointments have created a high level of credibility with industrial partners. In most areas where industrial experience is necessary, there are enough staff with the relevant experience.

78 Flexibility in staff contracts has enabled the college to provide good support for learning. There is sufficient administrative and technical support in all areas except computing, where there is a local skills shortage. Learning consultants appointed to liaise with employers in the dispersed provision are enthusiastic about their work. They have worked quickly to implement the new dispersed arrangements and monitor their success. In general, their numbers have increased so that sufficiently frequent visits can be made as student numbers have grown. Part-time teaching staff are not always kept well informed of their responsibilities, although some schools make significant efforts to involve them.

79 There is monitoring of the staff profile for gender, ethnicity, and disability. There are approximately equal numbers of men and women, and they are evenly distributed in most faculties and functions. The exceptions are corporate business services, where male staff predominate, and customer services and the national training services faculty where staff are mainly female. Fewer than 1 per cent of staff are from minority ethnic groups, but this reflects the local population mix.

80 The deployment of staff is tightly managed and generally effective. Exceptions are art, where the match between staff deployment and the

skills needed is not well managed, and hairdressing, where rapid staff changes have created discontinuity in students' learning. Too few staff teaching students with learning difficulties have specific experience and qualifications. The learning consultants in this area do not have sufficient expertise and experience.

81 College records show that 84 per cent of lecturers have a teaching qualification. This includes the C&G teaching certificate and training and development lead body awards. Sixty-six per cent of learning consultants have at least one training and development lead body award. Sixty-seven per cent of full-time teaching staff, and 37 per cent of part-time teachers are fully qualified. An additional 16 per cent of full-time staff are undergoing teacher training, in accordance with the policy of encouraging newly-appointed teachers to train. Thirty-eight per cent of all staff have a professional or higher technical qualification.

Equipment/learning resources

82 Teaching rooms generally have appropriate furniture and basic equipment such as whiteboards and overhead projectors. Most courses are well served by up-to-date and sufficient specialist equipment. Science laboratories are very well equipped; students have access to advanced instrumental techniques and there is an interesting display of historical science equipment and artefacts. Equipment in the beauty salon is of industrial standard. Music is well resourced with sound, recording and electronic keyboard hardware. Specialist engineering equipment is generally good.

83 There is a wide range of audio-visual teaching aids. There were examples of the effective use of teleconferencing and video-conferencing facilities to improve teaching and learning methods in modern languages, in partnership work with schools and to support dispersed work. In some curriculum areas, staff are not yet making use of the equipment available.

84 The college is investing substantial resources in information technology to support the curriculum, including the development of a multi-media centre. The ratio of computers to students is 1:7. However, technical difficulties arising out of recent initiatives to upgrade systems have caused problems of access for students. Some students complain that they do not have sufficient opportunities to use hardware and software. Students have free access to the Internet and to the college intranet information system but overuse by some students has increased access problems. The new systems being installed are designed to provide facilities such as videos 'piped' into all classrooms at the main site, an extensive compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database service and electronic mail service for students and staff. Relocation of library facilities to house computers has caused further problems as reference material has been separated from the items for borrowing and there are high noise levels in the area that now houses computers and some books. The college

is aware of these problems and has organised a meeting with students to discuss the issues and has agreed measures to improve the situation, such as additional technical support staff and a further reorganisation of library resources. Students not based at the main college site are not as well served for library and information technology facilities.

85 The supply of books and other learning materials for many courses, for example, in humanities and computing, is good. Some mathematics and science courses are not well supported by learning materials. Many written materials for students with learning disabilities are not well matched to the ability of students. The college produces good-standard materials for its dispersed work, but availability at centres varies.

Accommodation

86 Most accommodation is well matched to students' learning needs. Students study in three distinct types of accommodation; at the four sites of the college in Widnes, locally within community buildings such as libraries, and at the workplace on employers' premises. The college has plans to consolidate its local provision onto two sites in Widnes and Runcorn and is in the process of applying for funding for a proposed new site. It is refurbishing the main site at Kingsway in Widnes, but limiting expenditure on other sites where few students are now based. The refurbishment has been well planned and so far has led to improved accommodation for student services, students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, engineering laboratories, some toilet facilities and a new coffee bar. The vast majority of the accommodation at Kingsway is accessible to wheelchair users. New automatic doors have been installed at most exits. Lifts have Braille labels on buttons and an announcement of arrival at each floor. The other sites in Widnes do not have such good facilities. However, the accommodation has been organised to limit the difficulties that it could cause students. Some community accommodation allows easy access for wheelchair users and some does not.

87 Most specialist accommodation is appropriate for the courses being taught. Hairdressing and beauty salons, training offices and training kitchens and restaurants provide realistic-working environments for students in college. Although engineering workshops in the college are of a good standard they are not always suitable for the new multi-skilling courses. The room used for dance is inappropriate. Some rooms used for humanities and engineering suffer from noise from adjacent areas. A few rooms are hot and stuffy. Most accommodation at Kingsway and Broseley House is clean and tidy. At the two other local sites, accommodation is older and some of it has an untidy appearance, for example, in art and design. Offices for staff on all sites are good, but a few have an untidy appearance. Very few areas on any site have displays of students' work or stimulus materials making classrooms, in particular, look bare and uninviting.

88 Most accommodation on employers' premises is of a good standard offering students the opportunity for work-place assessment. Some also have an appropriate area for them to study and work on their portfolios. Occasionally, accommodation for study is inappropriate and noisy. Some of the dispersed work for students with learning difficulties has poor accommodation. For example in a drama class, students who were already self-conscious were taking part in discussions and role-play against a background of activity and conversation from people using a business practice area or using the area as access to an office.

89 The college has a range of learning resource areas on the Widnes sites; these include workshops for literacy and numeracy skills, information technology and multi-media as well as more traditional library provision. Many of these areas are noisy and too small for the number of students using them. There is limited study space. There is a student canteen on each site as well as the coffee shop at Kingsway. The canteens are basic and, in the case of Kingsway, can be crowded, untidy and smoky. There are no other social areas for students.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

90 The main strengths of the college are:

- its wide range of provision and extensive work-based programmes
- successful partnership work with schools and other organisations
- a clear vision, effectively communicated to staff
- some good teaching, especially at advanced level
- dispersed provision which is well supported by learning consultants and thorough documentation
- a comprehensive advice and guidance service available in the welcome centre
- major investment in information technology.

91 Its main weaknesses are:

- over extension, at the expense of quality, of its dispersed provision in some areas
- problems in curriculum management in local provision
- poor attendance, punctuality and retention on many courses
- slow achievement of qualifications by students in much dispersed provision
- insufficient monitoring of guidance services
- insufficient sharing of good practice in teaching and learning
- an inconsistent approach across the college to the development of students' key skills
- quality assurance systems which do not always lead to effective action.

FIGURES

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- 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 July 1996)

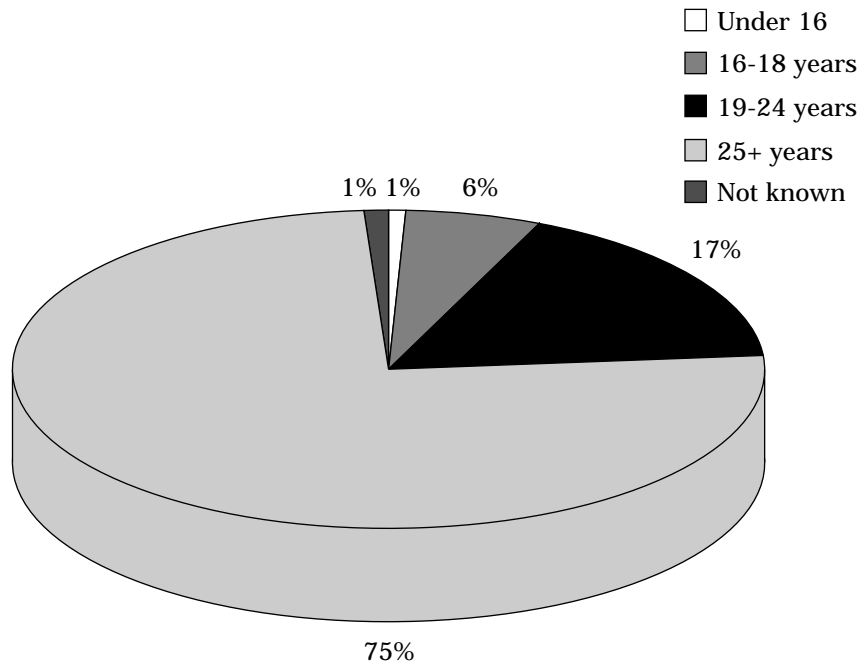
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 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

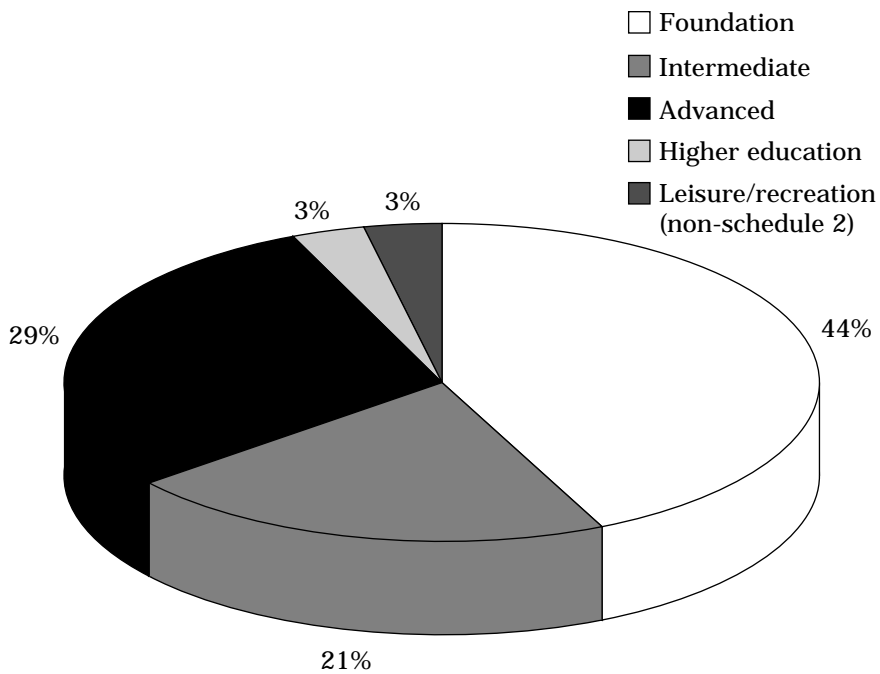
Halton College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 37,957

Figure 2

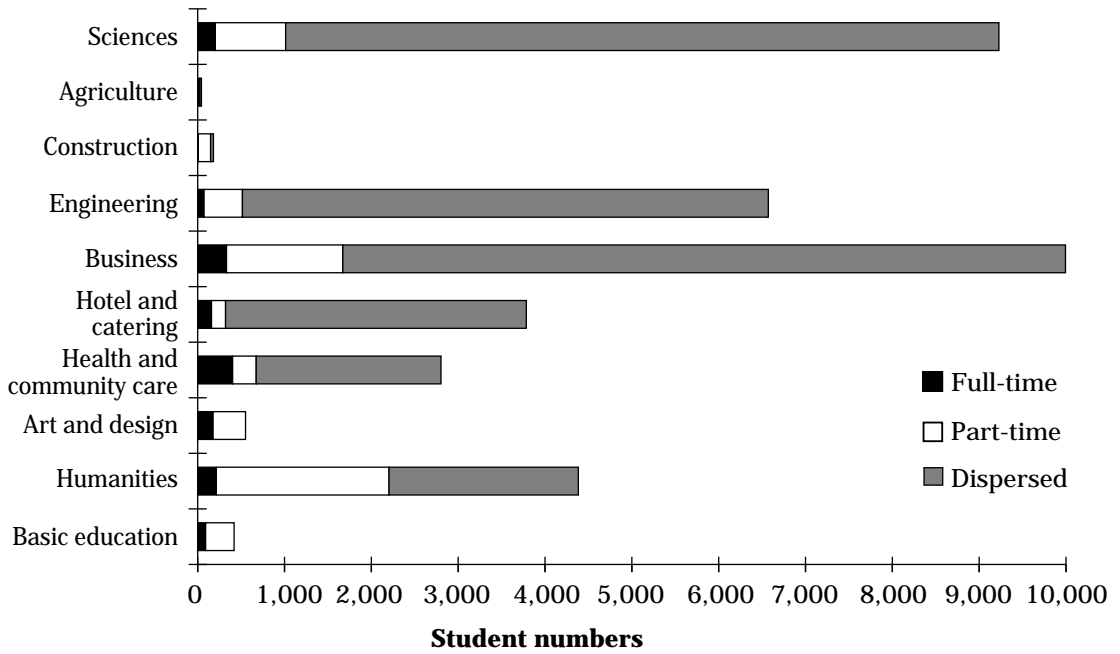
Halton College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 37,957

Figure 3

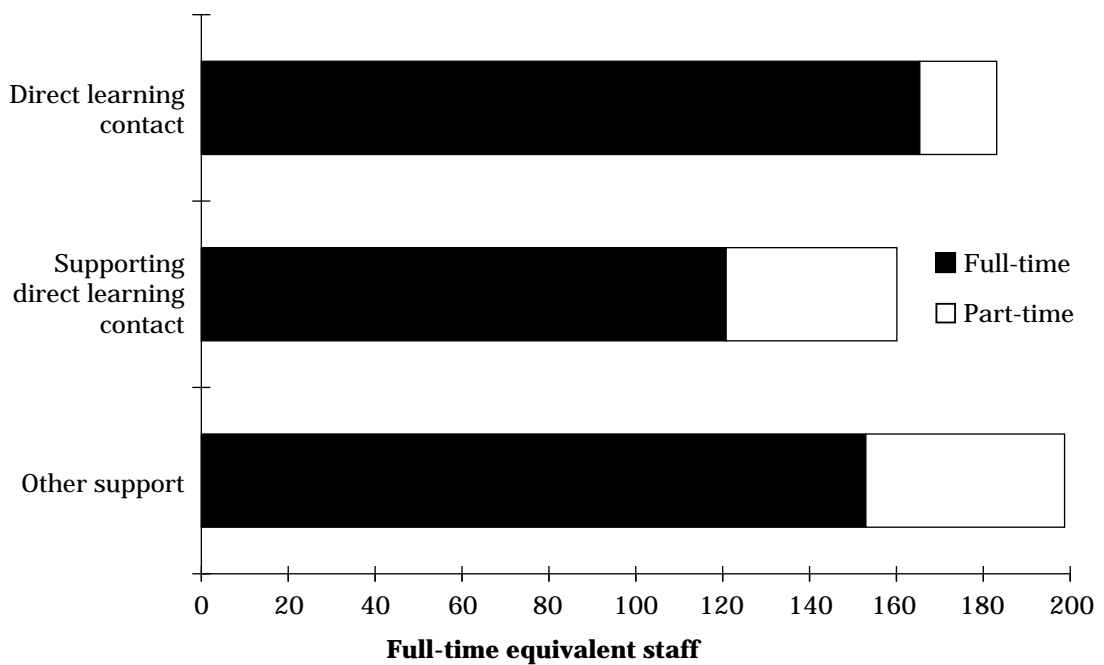
Halton College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 37,957

Figure 4

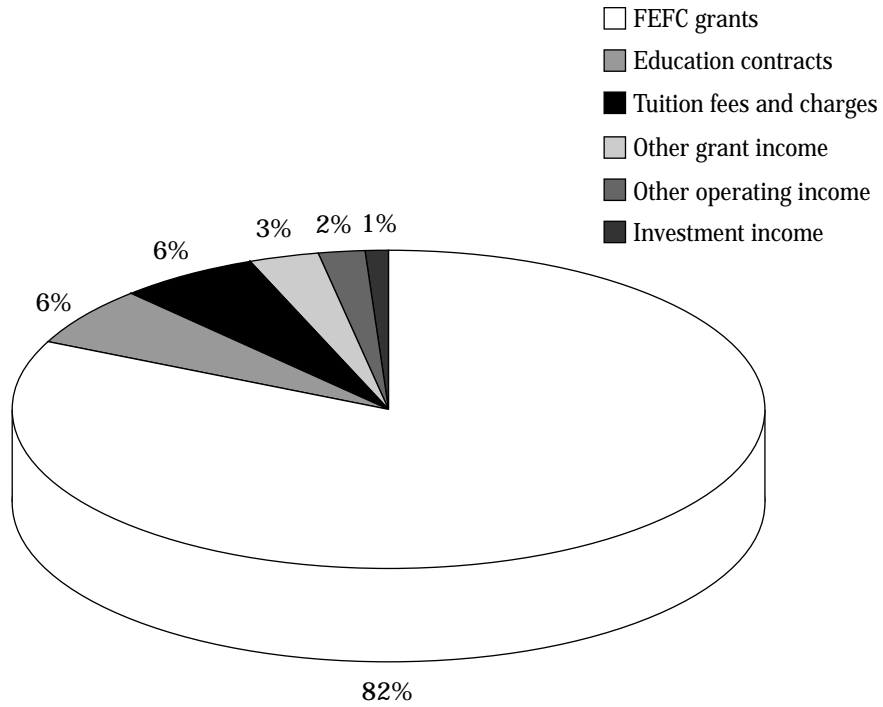
Halton College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 542

Figure 5

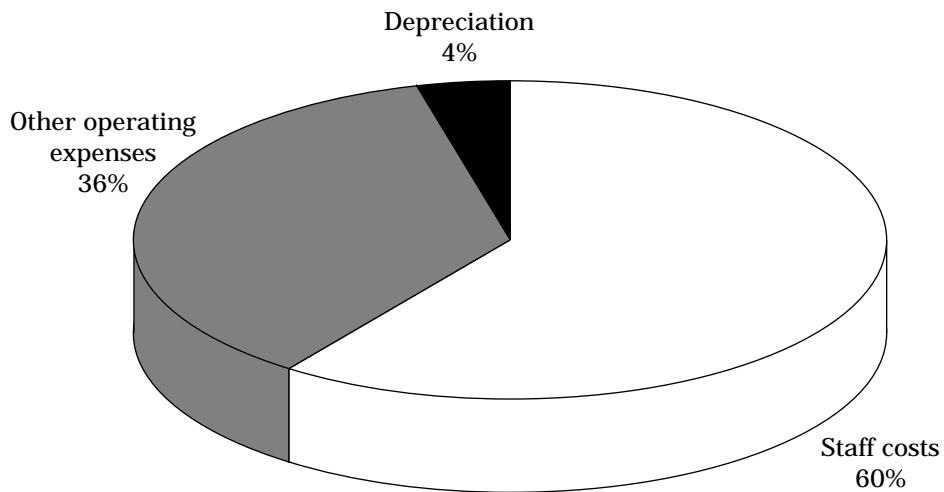
Halton College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £18,022,000

Figure 6

Halton College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £17,437,000

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