Harlow College

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

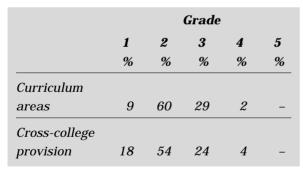# Contents

Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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

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

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

Student Achievements

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

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

Summary

Harlow College

Eastern Region

Inspected October 1998

Harlow College is a tertiary college situated in north-west Essex. The college produced an informative and comprehensive self-assessment report. Self-assessment is well organised and effective. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements made in the report. Some strengths and weaknesses were noted by inspectors that had not been identified by the college or that were underestimated. The college has been successful in addressing some of the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection report, especially in cross-college areas.

The college provides courses in all 10 of the FEFC's programme areas. The inspection covered provision in six programme areas and aspects of cross-college provision. Most teaching is good and students experience a wide range of learning activities. Outstanding links with employers, schools and the community are effectively used to support the curriculum. Students achieve well in most areas. Governors and senior managers provide clear strategic direction, the curriculum is well managed and there is close monitoring of the college's performance against corporate objectives. Support for students is well managed and comprehensive; recruitment and admissions are particularly well organised. Inspectors

concluded that there is high-quality accommodation, well-organised and extensive IT facilities, effective quality assurance arrangements, and good communications between managers and staff. The college should: improve the planning and organisation of some teaching; ensure that tutorials are consistently good in all areas; improve the arrangements for identifying the additional learning needs of students, including those for numeracy and literacy; improve the quality of some course reviews; and strengthen the arrangements for financial reporting.

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

Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics, computing and information technology	3
Engineering	2
Hospitality and catering	3
Health, social care and childcare	2
English and social sciences	2
Basic education	2

Cross-college provision	Grade
Support for students	2
General resources	1
Quality assurance	2
Governance	2
Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1   Harlow College was established in 1984 as a tertiary college following the reorganisation of post-16 education in the town. Most of the college's students are from Harlow and north-west Essex, although the catchment area also includes east Hertfordshire and north London. Two other further education sector colleges are situated within a 15-mile radius: Hertford Regional College, eight miles to the west and Epping Forest College 15 miles to the south. Harlow College sponsors adult further education provision on behalf of North and West Essex Adult Community College. On incorporation, the college was based on two sites close to the town centre but has recently rationalised its provision on to one site. Redevelopment and refurbishment of the site were funded partly through proceeds from the sale of the college's West site.

2   In the west Essex administrative area, which includes Harlow, Epping and Loughton, there are 11 secondary schools of which three have sixth forms. There are six secondary schools in the town of Harlow. Five are local education authority (LEA) maintained 11 to 16 schools. The sixth, St Mark's West Essex Roman Catholic School, is a grant-maintained comprehensive school with a sixth form. There are two secondary schools in Harlow with specialist provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In Essex, the percentage of 16 year olds continuing in full-time education has increased significantly from 54% in 1990 to 70% in 1997. In Harlow the participation rate is 66%.

3   In the 1991 census, the population of Essex was recorded as just over 1.5 million, including 74,600 resident in the Harlow district. Minority ethnic groups make up 3.6% of the population. It is predicted that by the year 2015 there will be an increase of almost 40% in those under 20 living in Essex. The Harlow district has good road links with the nearby M11, providing easy access to London. Over the last 10 years, employment in much of the local manufacturing industry has declined rapidly. However, employment opportunities are increasing in some industries, for example, in research and development in pharmaceuticals and telecommunications. The distribution trade, hotels and the service sector provide major sources of employment in Harlow. In March 1996, the unemployment rate in Harlow district was 4%.

4   The college offers a wide range of general and vocational programmes. The majority of provision is at intermediate and advanced level. Thirty-seven subjects are offered at general certificate of education advanced/advanced supplementary level (GCE A/AS level), 13 at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), and vocational courses are offered in all 10 of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) programme areas. The college's vocational provision includes: foundation, intermediate and advanced general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) in most areas; BTEC first, national and higher national diplomas, mainly in art and design; national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1, 2 and 3; and a range of evening courses in most curriculum areas. In September 1994, the college became one of the first in the country to introduce a modular curriculum based on a three 'trimester' academic year to improve accessibility and facilitate credit accumulation.

5   The college provides youth and adult training on contract from the Essex Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and Herts TEC. It has received further education development funds from Essex TEC for two projects over the last two years, looking at the development of NVQs and the links between key skills and NVQs. The college has also fostered good relations with its partner schools, through its membership of the Harlow schools' consortium. It is an associate college of Middlesex University and has links with a number of other higher education institutions.

Context

6   In 1997-98, the college enrolled 10,127 students of whom 80% were 19 or over; 19% were full time and 60% were studying foundation and intermediate level qualifications. The college has achieved its target funding units in each of the three years to 1997. It employs 289 full-time equivalent staff of whom 52% are in teaching posts. The college is organised into four teaching faculties: business and service industries; applied sciences; arts and humanities; and student services. The latter is also responsible for student support, specialist guidance and advice services, and registration and examinations.

7   The college's mission statement asserts its commitment 'to providing access to high-quality learning opportunities and to achieving excellence in the development of individuals, within a professional, innovative, caring and flexible college community'.

Context

The Inspection

8   The inspection took place during one week in October 1998. Inspectors had previously scrutinised the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors for a total of 45 working days and an auditor for five days. They observed lessons, and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, other college staff and students. Written submissions were also considered from employers, local schools, voluntary and community organisations and the TECs.

9   The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1996 to 1998. Inspectors checked these data against the individualised student record (ISR) and primary sources of evidence, such as registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was unable to establish a direct link between the information derived by the FEFC from the ISR

and the college's records of students' achievements for some qualifications in 1995-96. Errors in recording the 'expected end dates' for some students resulted in inaccurate information. The college has recognised the presence of errors in the ISR. These have also had some impact on the accuracy of the representation of achievements in 1996-97. Data for some courses are not included in the tables within curriculum sections. Other data were generally reliable. The appendix to this report does not provide a summary of students' achievements as agreed data were not available for comparison with national data.

10   The following table shows the grades awarded to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the 79 lessons inspected, 66% were judged to be good or outstanding and 9% were judged to be less than satisfactory. This profile compares with the average of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	4	9	1	1	0	15
GCSE	3	2	2	0	0	7
GNVQ	2	7	5	4	0	18
NVQ	2	6	2	1	0	11
Other vocational	1	7	4	0	0	12
Other	2	7	6	1	0	16
Total (No)	14	38	20	7	0	79
Total (%)	18	48	25	9	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

Context

11   The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Harlow College	12.6	81
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

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

Mathematics, Computing and Information Technology

Grade 3

12   Inspectors observed 12 lessons in mathematics, computing and information technology (IT). Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some strengths had been overstated and some weaknesses not identified. Appropriate actions have been taken to address the weaknesses.

Key strengths

- high level of students' involvement in most lessons
- effective management of learning for GCSE mathematics
- good students' achievement on some computing courses
- wide range of computing and IT courses
- effective use of a good range of resources

Weaknesses

- low GCE A level mathematics results
- poor retention rates on GCE and GCSE courses
- lack of a suitable range of mathematics qualifications
- insufficient additional support for GCE mathematics students
- lack of opportunities for work experience for GNVQ students
- unsatisfactory organisation of some programme management files

13   There is a good range of computing and IT courses for full-time and part-time students. Recruitment and retention are generally good. Only one NVQ programme is offered. This was identified as a weakness within the self-assessment report and action has been taken to review this aspect of the curriculum. There are no courses in mathematics suited to students with low GCSE grades or for students who require to study mathematics as a subsidiary to other subjects. These points are not included in the self-assessment. Some programme management files are well maintained while others are poorly indexed. Some files do not identify clearly when action has been taken.

14   In the best lessons, time was used efficiently. Teachers ensured active involvement of students in theory lessons and regularly checked that they understood their work. These strengths were recognised in the self-assessment report. In the weaker lessons, the teaching and learning methods adopted did not take account of the needs of the students. Students were not sufficiently encouraged to prepare for some GCE A level lessons and so did not participate fully in lessons. The college acknowledged that there are few opportunities for students to obtain experience of professional and industrial practices through work placements. However, some students on GNVQ courses do have the opportunity to help others with the use of computers in local schools and in the college. GCSE students' experience in the mathematics learning centre is effectively managed. Students are assessed at the start of their course and an individual action plan is developed. Learning activities are varied and include individual and group teaching. A wide range of learning materials is available. These are indexed by national curriculum and key skills levels. Together with some computer-based learning materials, they form a useful resource for supporting a range of courses across the college. A weakness not identified by the college is the insufficient additional support for mathematics students outside timetabled classes. Assignments, planning sheets and topic notes to support the teaching of both GNVQ and GCE computing courses are accessible by students from the college intranet which they find helpful and convenient. Materials to support learning in City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) and

RSA Examinations Board (RSA) IT courses are of good quality.

15   The standard of students' assignment work on GNVQ programmes is appropriate. Key skills are well integrated with assignment work and are effectively assessed. Teachers' comments on assessed students' work sometimes lack the detail needed to help students to improve their performance. There are good students'

achievements on some computing courses. On the most recent GNVQ intermediate course about 25% of students who did not finish the course at the planned time are expected to complete their course. The low retention rates on some GCE and GCSE courses are identified as weaknesses in the self-assessment report and action is being taken to identify strategies for improvement.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in mathematics, computing and information technology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
C&G level 1	1	Expected completions	332	680	752
		Retention (%)	97	98	95
		Achievement (%)	47	23	61
C&G level 2	2	Expected completions	67	16	49
		Retention (%)	84	89	98
		Achievement (%)	49	12	31
GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Expected completions	18	16	46
		Retention (%)	86	64	88
		Achievement (%)	50	81	24
GCSE mathematics, computing and IT	2	Expected completions	*	*	217
		Retention (%)	*	*	73
		Achievement (%)	*	*	15
GCE A/AS levels in mathematics, computing and IT	3	Expected completions	*	*	71
		Retention (%)	*	*	67
		Achievement (%)	*	*	76
GNVQ advanced IT	3	Expected completions	23	6	28
		Retention (%)	82	100	97
		Achievement (%)	65	83	50

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
*ISR data not reliable

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 2

16   Inspectors observed 11 lessons including both practical and theory lessons covering full-time, part-time and evening courses in motor vehicle and general engineering. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good teaching and effective use of a wide range of learning activities
- effective use of information learning technology
- good achievements in examinations in engineering courses
- high retention rates
- high standard of students' work
- excellent facilities and equipment

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to the learning needs of some students
- poor achievement rates on motor vehicle courses

17   There is a wide range of courses, mainly at NVQ levels 1 and 2, provided full time, part time and through open/distance learning. Effective use is made of information learning technology. A technology learning centre enables students to develop skills, particularly in the areas of electronics, manufacture and computer-aided design. Curriculum development has taken place, in partnership with a local training organisation, in optical fibre installation. Course or programme files contain appropriate documentation including aims, external reports, schemes of work and student views.

18   Teachers use appropriate methods which take account of students' needs. Most teachers follow appropriate schemes of work and the majority use lesson plans which have clear aims and objectives. In the most successful lessons, teachers used a variety of teaching methods including handouts, demonstrations, discussions, question-and-answer sessions, practical calculations and the use of equipment to help explain theory. In the technology learning centre, lecturers acted as facilitators providing assistance and guidance while students worked on individual programmes. In one lesson, the use of a graded example sheet allowed the more able students to work on their own, leaving the tutor time to concentrate on the development of the weaker students. In a small number of lessons, students were not motivated and took little part in the activities. In some lessons, teachers failed to check that learning had occurred. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the range of teaching methods used is a strength.

19   Students' work is of a high standard. When marking work, teachers provide appropriate and helpful comments. In many cases students produced work using IT. Students' progress and performance are effectively recorded. The commitment and enthusiasm of teachers and their treatment of students as individuals is a major contribution to the excellent relationships which exist between them and their students. Students speak highly of their courses and the college. Safe working practices were observed at all times in workshops.

20   A considerable investment has been made in the new purpose-built two-storey accommodation. The facilities, an identified strength in the self-assessment report, include the technology centre together with traditional craft and technician training areas. All of the accommodation and furnishings are of good quality. The technology centre contains a 14 station computer-aided design suite, and a 30 station network providing computer-aided learning for a wide variety of electronic and mechanical applications.

21   The majority of full-time and part-time courses in engineering have pass rates at or above national averages. The GNVQ/NVQ engineering one-year full-time course and the national certificate engineering part-time two-year course both show pass rates above the national average for the last three years. The self-assessment report did not fully analyse students' achievements. Part-time first- and second-year motor vehicle courses have pass rates well below national averages for the last three years. This was identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with the college that retention rates are a strength.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Motor vehicle (part time, one and two year)	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	88 10 36	59 8 37	68 25 18
GNVQ/NVQ engineering (full time, one year)	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	15 88 73	29 69 90	18 69 78
GNVQ/NVQ engineering (full time, two year)	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	16 73 41	22 56 40	9 100 11
National certificate engineering (part time, two year)	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	95 75 19	95 92 25	76 100 19
Higher national engineering (part time, two year)	4	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	95 100 84	100 81 54	100 100 86

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

Curriculum Areas

Hospitality and Catering

Grade 3

22   The inspection covered NVQ and GNVQ courses in hospitality and catering. Inspectors observed 11 lessons including theory and practical work. Inspectors found that the college overstated the strengths in its self-assessment report on the standard of teaching and learning, and identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths
- good individual support for students
- well-planned work experience for GNVQ students
- a good range of kitchen and restaurant facilities
- good standard of students' work
- good use of extensive links with employers and schools

Weaknesses
- some ineffective teaching
- inadequate planning and organisation of some teaching groups
- inappropriate management of students' learning in the production kitchen
- low results on NVQ food preparation and cooking
- the lack of specialist software for hospitality and catering courses

23   The range of NVQ and GNVQ courses provides students with good opportunities for progression. Individual learning programmes are designed to enable NVQ students to attend at a time which suits their personal circumstances. Adult students who have not participated previously in further education have been successfully attracted to NVQ courses. Most programme management and student files are well organised.

24   Teachers provide good individual support for students and monitor their progress carefully. Key skills are timetabled on all NVQ courses. Inspectors did not fully agree with the college's assessment on the standard of teaching. Some teaching did not challenge students or maintain their interest. Class activities were not always appropriate to the level of the award and the stage of the course. Some lessons were disrupted by the poor behaviour of students. In a few lessons, students were not developing appropriate teamwork skills. Teaching is inadequately planned where, due to low levels of recruitment, both years of the GNVQ advanced course are combined.

25   The catering facilities which include fast-food outlets, a production and skills kitchen, restaurant, bar and coffee shop operate under an innovative partnership arrangement with a contract catering company. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that there is a good range of specialist resources but found that they are not always effectively used. In some practical lessons the kitchens were too small for the number of students in the group. The organisation of students' learning in the production kitchen sometimes did not match the aims of the lesson. Students produce food of a good standard which is well presented. Customer care and communication skills are effectively developed in the food outlets and by students' contributions to functions in college and in the local community.

26   There are good links with local schools. 'Taster' days enable prospective students to sample work in the kitchen and food outlets. Induction programmes are well planned and include a cookery competition which students judge. Assignments are well devised, relate to the hospitality industry and include the assessment of key skills. Students' work is carefully marked with spelling corrected and constructive comments to enable students to improve their performance. Students' portfolios

of work are generally well presented and of a good standard. A variety of visits to the industry enhance students' learning experience. Work experience is well planned and carefully monitored. Inspectors agreed with the college that links with industry are strong.

27   Staff are well qualified and have industrial experience. The self-assessment report acknowledges that staff need to update their experience of industry and plans are well advanced to address this. There is a good level of technician support for students and teachers. There is an adequate stock of library textbooks, although some are dated and the range of periodicals is small. Students have good access to computers in the faculty learning centre. The lack of specialist software for catering courses is acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

8   The college is a regional centre for the British Institute of Innkeeping licensees certificate for which pass rates are consistently high. Pass rates on the GNVQ advanced course have been around the national average over the last three years. Of the five students enrolled on the GNVQ intermediate course in 1997 none achieved the award. In 1998, retention was poor on the NVQ food preparation and cooking course and pass rates have been low over the last two years. The majority of students successfully gain employment in the hospitality industry. There are good opportunities for students to gain qualifications in addition to their main course of study. For example, GNVQ students are able to work towards NVQs in food and drink and food preparation and cooking. Nearly all students successfully achieve basic hygiene certification. Average attendance in lessons during inspection was good at 87%.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
British Institute of Innkeeping national licensees certificate	1	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	89 97 83	191 95 86	280 96 89
NVQ food preparation and cooking	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	33 73 70	42 81 55	33 61 55
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	12 75 75	9 82 78	4 67 75

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

Curriculum Areas

Health, Social Care and Childcare

Grade 2

29   The inspection covered health and social care and childhood education. Thirteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report, although some additional weaknesses were identified.

Key strengths

- effective teaching and use of questions to develop students' knowledge
- very good pass rates and, on some courses, outstanding students' achievements
- well-organised and relevant work experience
- well-planned and appropriate assessment

Weaknesses

- some ineffective lesson planning and classroom activity
- inappropriate and ineffective use of learning resources
- inappropriate curriculum management for one full-time course

30   A wide range of health and social care courses provide progression from foundation to advanced level. There are strong links with the local health trusts. Courses are generally well managed; staff maintain comprehensive programme management files and hold regular team meetings. Review and evaluation is carried out regularly and action is taken to remedy areas of concern. The college's self-assessment report identifies difficulties of low recruitment to some higher level programmes but does not acknowledge the lack of effective initiatives to address this issue. The first and second years of the BTEC national diploma in childhood studies have been combined; this led to students who joined the course in September starting work experience after only one week's induction to the college and without appropriate preparation.

31   Teachers use appropriate teaching methods. In the best lessons, teaching was effective and teachers made good use of questions to further students' knowledge and understanding. In one successful NVQ care lesson, the tutor led a lively discussion on social stereotyping. Students were encouraged to provide examples from their own experience as care workers. Careful attention was given to the use of appropriate language in communicating with clients. In some lessons, teachers failed to provide enough opportunities for students to contribute to discussion or failed to assess what students had learnt. Some teachers made inappropriate or ineffective use of learning resources. In a practical childcare lesson, in which students used model dolls to practise the skills of bathing babies, the realism of the exercise was considerably reduced by the absence of water for the bath. The lack of overhead projector screens in classrooms led to teachers using the back wall to project transparencies and this caused difficulties in managing some lessons. Some overhead transparencies were poorly produced and hard to read. The self-assessment report did not identify these weaknesses. Work experience is well planned and monitored and forms an effective and integral part of all full-time courses. A work placement co-ordinator ensures that there is a good level of liaison with placement providers. Assessment is well planned and appropriate; assignments are clearly specified. Key skills are effectively integrated with both GNVQ and NVQ courses. Course work is conscientiously and accurately assessed. Teachers give clear and detailed advice on how students can improve their performance.

Curriculum Areas

32   The self-assessment report recognises that staff are well qualified and have relevant vocational experience. The accommodation varies in quality. Some rooms are well equipped and contain good examples of students' practical work and attractive wall displays. Others are drab and contain no wall displays. There are appropriate facilities for craft work and other practical activity. One room has been set up as a simulated nursery classroom. A learning centre for care courses has recently been established but it has few facilities which students can use to study on their own.

33   Pass rates on most courses are consistently high and, in some cases, significantly above sector averages. For example, in 1997 and 1998, pass rates for GNVQ foundation and intermediate courses were at, or above, 80%. In 1996 and 1998, students on the Council for

Awards in Children's Care and Education diploma in nursery nursing course achieved a pass rate of 100%. A very high percentage of NVQ level 2 candidates successfully achieve their awards. The pass rates on a minority of courses are less satisfactory. In 1997, although the overall results for all level 3 courses were good, only 29% of the students who completed the GNVQ advanced course achieved the award. The majority of courses have high levels of retention. Attendance on most courses is good; the average attendance during the inspection was 80%. The self-assessment report acknowledges that retention on some courses falls below the college's minimum target of 80%. Students' portfolios are well organised and some contain work of a high standard. A high proportion of students progress to other courses in the college or into relevant employment.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in health, social care and childcare, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Intermediate vocational (GNVQ, Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education certificate in childcare and education)	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	35 73 74	24 86 92	33 73 85
NVQ childcare and direct care	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	25 78 76	42 79 83	69 91 90
Advanced vocational (GNVQ, national diplomas, Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education diploma in nursery nursing)	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	61 80 84	43 81 70	25 89 88
NVQ childcare and continuing care	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	18 72 67	25 96 68

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
*course not offered

Curriculum Areas

English and Social Sciences

Grade 2

34   The inspection covered English language and literature, sociology and psychology at GCE A level and GCSE. The 16 lessons observed included some in communications. Inspectors considered that the self-assessment report was well written and comprehensive, although too much significance was given to some of the strengths and some of the weaknesses were understated.

Key strengths

- effective use of a wide range of teaching methods
- good support for students
- careful marking of students' work
- very good English learning resource centres
- high-quality course guides in most subjects
- effective departmental and curriculum organisation
- well-managed support for cross-college communications

Weaknesses

- poor students' retention and achievements in GCSE English language
- some GCE A level achievements below national average
- insufficient use of IT

35   The quality of teaching is good. As noted in the self-assessment report, teachers use a wide range of teaching methods. These include whole-class teaching, small group work, effective use of students' feedback and, in some subjects, television. Teachers communicate their interest and enthusiasm for their subjects to students. In the best lessons, lively discussion among the students deepened their understanding of key issues. Well-devised lesson plans gave clear information upon the aims and objectives of lessons and a good indication of the time and resources needed. There was a good rapport between teachers and students. In a minority of classes, some students were less well motivated and some teachers had difficulty in meeting the needs of students of widely varying abilities and motivation. In English, well-produced course guides support students' learning. These give a helpful introduction to students on how to analyse critically key texts. Students' experience is also enriched by visits to theatres and by other educational activities.

36   Teachers in English and social sciences pay careful attention to attendance and retention. There are clear action plans to address key issues which have arisen. These have led to changes in curriculum organisation which have benefited students. For example, all evening classes in psychology are now held on the same night. This enables students whose initial abilities are uncertain to move between classes to find an appropriate level. Careful attention is also paid to the review of students' progress which enables teachers to provide effective support to students with difficulties. English teachers work well as a team. They are linked to each vocational area to support the teaching of key skills in communications.

37   Staff are well qualified and, as noted in the self-assessment report, take advantage of opportunities to update their subject skills. Several act as moderators and examiners and some have contributed to the writing of published textbooks. Classrooms are well furnished and many have relevant and attractive displays, including examples of students' work. The learning resource centres for English are a particularly good feature. They have a wealth of paper-based materials, regularly revised by staff, which enable students to work on their own. This strength was also noted in the previous

inspection report. The resource centre for social sciences is less well developed. However, computers have only just been installed in these centres. There are few computers available for staff to use in their offices. The college acknowledges that students make insufficient use of IT.

38   Students' written work is always carefully and conscientiously marked with helpful commentary to enable students to improve the quality of their work. Students confirmed that, as indicated in the self-assessment report,

written assignments are promptly returned to them. Some GCE A level examination results are below national averages. This was not fully recognised in the self-assessment report. Retention for GCSE English language has been poor and examination results have been below the national average. The department has recently begun to monitor added value measures but this does not yet provide consistent evidence of higher than expected performance.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in English and social sciences, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE English language	2	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	211 69 41
GCE A level English language	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	39 83 74	34 61 94
GCE A level English literature	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	69 69 75
GCE A level psychology	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	47 58 61
GCE A level sociology	3	Expected completions Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* * *	* * *	58 69 72

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
*ISR data not reliable

Curriculum Areas

Basic Education

Grade 2

39   The inspection covered basic skills, courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Sixteen lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, although they found additional weaknesses in teaching and learning.

Key strengths

- imaginative use of a good range of teaching methods
- effective use of students' language and experience
- well-organised and well-managed work experience
- good retention and achievement on full-time programmes
- strong curriculum links with special schools and other agencies
- good progression opportunities for students

Weaknesses

- some poorly planned lessons for students with learning difficulties
- students insufficiently challenged in a few lessons
- inaccurate and incomplete data on students' achievements
- lack of accreditation for some part-time programmes
- insufficient use of good-quality resources

40   In the most successful lessons, teachers ensured that the work was relevant to each student's individual goals. Imaginative methods were used to help students learn, including the use of role-play and drama to reinforce concepts and improve communication skills. In basic skills and ESOL lessons, the students' own language, culture and experiences were extensively used. In a successful family literacy class, a student's poem was used effectively to introduce a discussion of rhyme, rhythm and language. This led to an analysis of nursery rhymes and their place in children's learning about language. Discussion followed on how children learn and this was related to how the students themselves learned. The level of discussion about learning was profound and stimulating for the group. Some teaching is poorly planned. In some lessons for students with learning difficulties, students' individual needs are not addressed and insufficient attention is given to their individual learning programme. In a few lessons, the work was not challenging and students lost interest. Students are not expected to do work between lessons to reinforce their studies. These weaknesses in teaching are not recognised in the self-assessment report. Students with learning difficulties on full-time courses have a well-planned work experience programme. Students find the work experience of great value and are well supported by a job coach and the MENCAP pathways officer. Meticulous records kept on work experience help teachers to plan and students to learn from their experiences. These key strengths are recognised by the college.

41   The curriculum is well managed, providing progression routes for students on both full-time and part-time programmes. In basic skills and ESOL, students progress from level to level. In the adult foundation programme, students with learning difficulties can sample different modules before moving on to a full-time course. The college has extensive links with seven special schools which support progression from school to further education. Ten link courses run each year and there is good progression from link programmes to full-time courses.

Curriculum Areas

42   Teachers are well qualified with appropriate qualifications in teaching basic skills, ESOL, or students with learning difficulties. Opportunities are taken to update teachers' skills and knowledge. This strength is recognised in the self-assessment report. Insufficient use is made of good-quality resources in some lessons. For example, some numeracy and literacy lessons took place in a classroom where there was no opportunity for students to select their own exercises or worksheets and no access to a computer to wordprocess literacy work. Little use is made of audiovisual resources and in some lessons this encouraged overdependence on the written word.

43   Inspectors agreed with the college that there is good retention and achievement on full-time programmes. An increasing number of students with severe learning difficulties are progressing to vocational courses or employment. Of students leaving the springboard course in 1997, 33% went on to NVQ level 1 courses, 33% moved on to the headway course and 11% to employment. Of those leaving the headway course in 1998, nearly all went on to other college courses, apart from two who went into employment. A weakness recognised by the college is that data on students' achievements are inaccurate and incomplete, particularly for part-time programmes. Consequently, achievements are not fully reflected in programme reviews and other quality assurance procedures. As the self-assessment report also recognises, some part-time programmes are not accredited. Retention and achievement on part-time programmes is uneven. For example, college data show only 45% retention in each of Wordpower and Numberpower foundation qualifications, with only 3% of students achieving the Wordpower certificate in 1998.

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

44   Inspectors found the self-assessment report comprehensive and accurate but identified a few strengths and weaknesses not included in the report.

Key strengths

- comprehensive information and advice to full-time students
- effective partnerships with local schools
- readily accessible advice and guidance for part-time students
- well-structured induction for full-time students
- a comprehensive framework for tutorial support
- effective systems for monitoring and reporting progress to full-time students
- well co-ordinated careers education and guidance

Weaknesses

- ineffective arrangements to identify the learning support needs of some students
- inadequate feedback, monitoring and provision of support for basic skills
- unsatisfactory tutorial support for some full-time students

45   The college provides a comprehensive support service for students. Responsibilities and roles of staff in the student services faculty are clear, resulting in a well-managed and effectively co-ordinated service.

46   Students find the good-quality publicity material readily available and useful. A comprehensive programme of information and advice events in local schools includes contribution to parents evenings for year 9 and 'taster' days for year 10. A programme of college open days includes ready access to general careers advice for prospective full-time students. Student interviews are carefully co-ordinated and specialist tutors are fully involved in the process. Student admissions are well managed. The college has made much progress since the last inspection to ensure that appropriate advice and guidance is available to part-time students. The team of 'learning link' advisers has good links with community agencies and responds efficiently to a large number of enquiries in person and by telephone. A specialist adult guidance adviser is also available. Feedback from students about these services is very positive.

47   Induction for full-time students is well structured and common procedures are consistently applied across the college. Students appreciate the opportunity to sample not only their chosen course but also programmes of additional studies. A system is in place to identify full-time students who have learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Initial assessment is carried out, support needs are identified and individual action plans are developed with students.

48   Students' ability in key skills is assessed by programme tutors and monitored by subject specialist key skills co-ordinators. College policy is not to assess the basic English and mathematics skills of GCE A level students with grade C or above in GCSE English and mathematics. Some students are not receiving the additional support they need. Assessments are not always carried out for full-time GCSE students. Self-referral is relied on for part-time students. Feedback about the results of assessments to faculties indicates only whether language or numeracy presents difficulty for individual students and not the nature of their needs. It is left to individual tutors to clarify the specific areas where students need help. Some tutors do not see this as a priority. Links between basic skills specialists and senior tutors are underdeveloped. The college has, however,

begun to take action on this. Time for additional learning support is not allocated in some subject areas and students' attendance is erratic at the learning support sessions which are arranged. Insufficient support is provided for tutors to assist them to plan their teaching or to provide appropriate additional support for their students.

49   A recently introduced comprehensive framework for tutorials seeks to provide students with a more coherent programme of support, feedback and guidance. Its introduction was supported by staff development for tutors and a 'tutor tool kit'. The recent implementation means that materials have not yet been adapted to take account of the needs of individuals or related to the vocational study of some students. In some tutorials, inspectors observed inappropriate teaching and learning methods and the use of tutorial sessions by some tutors for subject teaching. The self-assessment report identified the inconsistent tutorial provision as a weakness. Study skills tuition is supported by comprehensive and informative programme and subject handbooks. Full-time students receive feedback on progress through their tutorials. Formal reports are provided regularly during each trimester and include reports to parents. Some tutors make effective use of the student's national record of achievement. Policies are in place on punctuality and attendance and inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that these are actively implemented by programme tutors. Managers monitor aggregate data on attendance each trimester.

50   Careers education and guidance is well supported by a team of college staff and the Essex Careers and Business Partnership. A careers education programme takes account of the needs of particular courses and a handbook assists tutors to support individual students. Access is available to well-equipped careers workshops. The college has achieved the Recognition of Quality award in careers education and guidance. Students across the college wishing to progress to university are supported by comprehensive and well co-ordinated guidance. Support for preparation of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications is valued by students.

51   Students receive good personal support. Counselling services are delivered by external agencies through carefully negotiated contractual arrangements. Nursery provision previously provided within the college has now been established outside the college. The students' union is active in contributing to student induction and other college events through clubs and societies. A member of staff is designated to help ensure good communications between students and college management.

General Resources

Grade 1

52   Since the last inspection the college has consolidated its accommodation on one site and made significant improvements. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- accommodation of a high standard
- extensive IT facilities for students
- well-developed network of library and learning centres
- good study facilities for students throughout the college
- excellent refectory facilities for students and staff

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped arrangements to monitor use of library facilities
- insufficient access to computers and the internet for some students and staff

Cross-college Provision

53   The accommodation provides good facilities which are capable of further adaptation as curriculum needs change. Expenditure of £5 million has been well managed to include new buildings and substantial refurbishment to the existing accommodation. Reception and student services are well sited in a purpose-built area. The spacious main hall is used flexibly. Inspectors agreed that the college catering facilities offer an excellent range of choice. Students make good use of sports facilities which include extensive playing fields, tennis courts, a sports hall, and the well-equipped multi-purpose Harlow sports centre. As identified in the self-assessment report there are good facilities for students with restricted mobility. Virtually all of the site is accessible and on a single level, except for a few general-purpose classrooms. There are attractive, well-lit, paved walkways that link the 14 teaching blocks. Signposting is clear.

54   There is an innovative, coherent IT strategy. A college-wide network provides students with a very high level of access to computers. Extension of the network into nine community outlets is also planned. An IT learning centre includes 200 up-to-date computers and is extensively used. There is a good range of specialist facilities for visually impaired students. However, at some times, there are insufficient computers for use by students on their own. Some parts of the IT plan have not yet been implemented; some teachers and most students have insufficient access to the internet. The weaknesses are not identified in the college's self-assessment report, although they are addressed in planning documents.

55   Well-equipped library and curriculum learning centres provide a broad range of learning materials. Effective links between library and teachers ensure that purchases reflect the needs of the curriculum. The library bookstock is generally adequate and was last reviewed in 1995. It is supplemented by a good range of databases available on CD-ROM. The art and English literature collections are extensive but inspectors identified shortages in catering and engineering. The catalogue is computerised and includes the items held within the curriculum learning centres. Library staff provide effective help to students when using the facilities. The engineering technology learning centre provides an exceptional variety of electronic and mechanical applications accessible by computer-aided learning. Some newly established learning centres are less well equipped and used. There is a shortage of equipment to support learning in a few areas of the curriculum. Over 400 independent study spaces in the library and learning centres provide students with good facilities for private study. The number of study places is well above Library Association guidelines. Students' use of these facilities is not effectively monitored.

56   As stated in the self-assessment report, most teaching areas are suitably equipped. Classrooms are generally clean and adequately furnished. However, in some rooms whiteboards of poor quality adversely affect learning. Some staff rooms are not used effectively, particularly where storage space is lacking. A few rooms have inadequate ventilation. These deficiencies were not identified in the self-assessment report. There is a spacious well-equipped staff common room.

Cross-college Provision

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

57   The college's self-assessment report is comprehensive and self-critical. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report but identified a few additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- clear commitment to continuous quality improvement
- the comprehensive quality assurance framework
- use of performance indicators and targets
- the contribution of quality assurance to improvements in courses and services
- staff development linked to quality assurance and strategic objectives

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention by some course teams to the views of students and employers
- variability in the rigour of course review

58   The college mission statement and strategic plan express a commitment to continuous improvement. Two of the seven strategic objectives relate to quality assurance and to the raising of student retention and achievements.

59   Self-assessment is comprehensive and effectively linked to the annual planning cycle. Handbooks provide detailed information to staff about self-assessment procedures. Teaching and service areas are required annually to identify their strengths and weaknesses and provide an action plan. A cross-college team undertakes detailed assessment of each area every three years. Self-assessment reports are collated by the principal, deputy principal, and assistant principal for curriculum development

and evaluation, and discussed by the college self-assessment review group. This includes governors and a senior manager from another college. The work of the review group was observed by the college inspector on occasions. A final report is received by the corporation, and a summary report is given to staff. Not all staff fully understand the purpose of the various quality assurance committees. The process of self-assessment, supported by lesson observation, has led to improvements in course provision and services. For example, improved access for users of wheelchairs resulted from an analysis of complaints, and some annual course performance reviews. Review of courses in health and social care in 1996-97 identified a lack of integration of key skills with other aspects of the curriculum. This led to a review of the college key skills policy and an action plan to address the weaknesses has been implemented.

60   The lack of standard documentation for annual course reviews results in some inadequate self-assessment reports. The best are evaluative with action plans and targets for improvement. Others lack rigour, set few measurable targets and contain insufficient analysis of students' achievements. There is no requirement for course and service teams to have an employer or student representative present during the self-assessment meetings. An analysis of the grades awarded for lesson observation is not included in the self-assessment report. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

61   Performance indicators are used and compared with national norms. Staff understand the targets and are working towards their achievement. Enrolment and retention data are published weekly, and reasons for poor performance are pursued by faculty managers. Governors and staff received a report on the 1997-98 performance targets and a summary of the 1998-99 targets. Each faculty and service area has quality statements identifying the standards it is expected to meet.

62   Inspectors agreed that there are effective arrangements to ensure the quality of collaborative provision. These include regular meetings, the observation of teaching and learning and joint arrangements for the verification of assessments. Collaborative providers attend an annual college conference to review quality assurance procedures. The college has a central verification team and common documentation to support this process.

63   The college's charter is revised annually. Commitments in the charter are monitored and are supported by 11 service standards which have been set in consultation with users. The college acknowledges that further quantitative measures are required for some aspects of the charter. The college's complaints procedure is published in the student handbook and induction pack. The procedure is also displayed in the college reception area. Inspection confirmed that there is consistent monitoring of complaints by the deputy principal who produces an annual report to the academic board analysing the patterns of complaints and response times.

64   Staff appraisal is well established and includes observation of teaching staff. Inspectors agreed with the college that staff development needs are derived from the annual appraisal process. Personal action plans for staff are negotiated with line managers. Appraisal is well regarded by staff, who see the process as supportive and efficient. Staff development needs are also identified by programme teams and faculty heads as a result of the annual self-assessment. Arrangements for staff to apply for, and be released to attend, staff development events, are clear. The procedures are carefully managed to ensure that staff development plans reflect both personal and strategic objectives. Opportunities for staff to update their vocational skills include placements in industry. The staff development programme has supported new teaching and learning methods and the promotion of key

skills on youth training and modern apprenticeships. The college invests in excess of 1% of the budget on staff training costs. All full-time and fractional teaching staff attended at least one staff development event in 1997-98. The effectiveness of staff development events is thoroughly evaluated.

Governance

Grade 2

65   Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, although they concluded that while some of the weaknesses had been addressed, some additional ones had not been identified.

Key strengths

- governors' extensive professional and strategic experience
- governors' commitment to the college and its partnership with the community
- well-informed strategic planning and monitoring of action plans
- arrangements for the selection, training and development of governors
- effective arrangements for the evaluation of governance

Weaknesses

- insufficient documentation to support corporation decisions especially of some committee recommendations
- insufficient monitoring of some aspects of college finances

66   Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that a strength of the corporation is members' broad experience of strategic management. The majority of governors are senior executives within the private or public sectors. They bring a wide range of professional and business skills from education, law, finance and human

resources. Governors are highly committed to the college, to helping it to meet its corporate objectives, and to its being a major partner in the development of the town and the district. The corporation has a membership of 15, including five women, two staff and a student member. The board and its committees are serviced by a clerk who is a member of the college staff.

67   The job description for governors defines the extent of their authority and there is a clear understanding of their roles and duties. The search committee has clear terms of reference and established procedures for the appointment of governors, including open public advertisement of any vacancy. The corporation has adopted detailed standing orders and a code of conduct and ethics. A comprehensive corporation handbook incorporates these documents. New governor induction is based upon an explanation of the main issues contained in this handbook. Further training and development for governors is available through seminars within the college and governors are encouraged to attend external courses. The governors have established effective arrangements under which they can review their own performance and training needs.

68   As noted in the self-assessment report, comprehensive policies and procedures are put into effect by the corporation. The college has supplemented its formal self-assessment report with a full evaluation of its policies and procedures for governance. The register of interests has a wide scope and is kept up to date. The governors are committed to openness and present an annual report to the public at a general meeting. All board members have a 'paired' senior manager with whom they meet regularly; governors' knowledge of the context and working of the college is greatly enhanced by this system. In turn, governors contribute their skills to support such developments as the introduction of a college marketing database

and the analysis of the needs of small and medium size enterprises. The 'pair' system was identified by the college as a strength. Inspectors found that the college's identification as a weakness of too little discussion of curriculum-related matters at corporation meetings was overstated. Governors are well informed and able to place their planning and monitoring of the college within its context. There are now a range of curriculum-related performance indicators, summarised in an innovative college operating performance statistics report, which are reviewed quarterly.

69   Governors make informed contributions to the generation and review of the strategic plan. Annual review meetings are held jointly with the college senior management team. Action plans, identifying operational targets, for the principalship are reviewed annually by the corporation. All college managers also have action plans, linked to corporate objectives. There is good awareness throughout the college of key strategic and operational targets. The creation of the strategic plan draws upon the well-established and extensive local community partnerships.

70   The work of the corporation is supported by an appropriate number of committees: finance and policy; personnel; search; audit; and remuneration. Agendas and papers are normally circulated well in advance of meetings but, on occasions, key papers have been circulated late or tabled at the meetings. There are also occasions when items for decision by the corporation are not identified as substantial items within the agenda, and are supported only by the minutes of the committee from which they have been referred and a verbal report. On these occasions, the minutes do not provide a sufficiently detailed record of the verbal reports and it is not possible to demonstrate that all governors have direct access to all of the information needed to inform their decisions. This issue was not identified in the college's self-assessment report. The college is engaged

in a major accommodation project. Monitoring of the progress on the project was carried out by the finance and policy committee through receipt of written and verbal reports. The corporation was advised on progress through verbal reports alone. The authority to approve payment of cost overruns on this project was delegated to the principal with retrospective reporting to the governors. The finance and policy committee, though quorate, has, on three occasions, conducted important business with only one independent governor in attendance. The college should therefore review the quoracy rules of this committee.

71   For the first part of the 1997-98 financial year, college management accounts were not produced regularly or in good time. A meeting of the finance and policy committee in late 1997 was given a verbal, rather than written, update on the college's financial position as at two months before. Early in 1998 the committee considered management accounts three months in arrears. Governors recognised at this meeting the need to apply to the FEFC for what was by then retrospective borrowing consent. Subsequent meetings of the finance and policy committee have continued to consider management accounts that are generally five weeks in arrears. These accounts usually include a commentary prepared by the senior management team. The decision to circulate management accounts to all governors was not taken until June 1998. The college continues to have a poor financial health score. Governors' consideration of the college's financial forecasts has been limited. An update during the year to the college's financial forecast for 1997-98 to 2000-01 showed significant variances to the forecasts prepared six months previously. This updated forecast was considered by the finance and policy committee, but not the full corporation. A tabled paper on the college's next three-year financial forecast, for 1998-99 to 2001-02, was initially considered by a poorly attended meeting of the finance and policy committee. The financial forecast was

subsequently considered by the corporation, without the written commentary and sensitivity analysis that support the forecast.

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

Management

Grade 2

73   Inspectors agreed with most of the self-assessment report's identification of the strengths and weaknesses of management. Some of the weaknesses identified in the report have been addressed.

Key strengths

- detailed strategic analysis and planning responsive to national initiatives
- thorough monitoring of performance against corporate objectives
- outstanding external links
- effective monitoring of deployment of resources
- clarity of management structure and individual responsibilities

Weaknesses

- untimely and infrequent financial reporting to budget holders and senior managers
- some inconsistent implementation of policies and procedures

74   Good analysis of local needs and detailed planning has resulted in a comprehensive strategic plan. College staff have opportunities at appropriate stages to contribute to the

development of the plan. The plan focuses on seven well-considered corporate objectives. Action plans produced by faculties, and by teaching and service sections, are also expressed in terms of these seven objectives. Monitoring of performance against the objectives is thorough. Since the last inspection, college managers have made good progress in addressing serious weaknesses in the college's financial situation. Staff and accommodation costs have been significantly reduced, without affecting the range of provision or student numbers. The college has diversified its income sources.

75   The first corporate objective, 'growth through partnership', is vigorously and effectively pursued. Strong and productive links with Essex and Herts TECs, local schools, community organisations and businesses have informed college plans, increased opportunities to attract funds and maintained the high profile of the college in the community. Inspectors agreed with the college that its external links are outstanding. The college is responsive to national initiatives. For example, the commitment to widen participation is expressed in the strategic plan and implemented through a task group which focuses on increasing adult participation.

76   Management roles and individual responsibilities are clearly defined. Capable and enthusiastic leadership is provided by a senior management team consisting of the principal, his deputy and six assistant principals. There is appropriate consultation on curriculum issues. Procedures are in place to ensure consistent practice in faculties and sections. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that communication in the college is good. All staff received summaries of the strategic plan and the self-assessment report. A monthly newsletter is sent with pay slips. There are regular staff briefings and sufficient opportunities for faculty, section and programme teams to meet. There is a comprehensive staff handbook.

77   The college has an appropriate range of policies. In most cases, monitoring of their implementation and effectiveness is sound. For example, the admissions policy is monitored by sampling offers of places to see if the most appropriate offer has been made. Student focus groups have discussed progress towards the aims in the equal opportunities policy. However, the self-assessment report acknowledges that monitoring equal opportunities could be strengthened by using quantifiable targets. The self-assessment report also acknowledges that some policies are not yet implemented consistently. Inspectors identified some weaknesses in the maintenance of programme management files, the completion of programme reviews and the provision of tutorial support.

78   Resources are effectively deployed. Funding unit targets are the basis for faculty budgets. Allocations are reviewed three times each year. The use of staff and accommodation is closely monitored. The performance of faculties and sections is judged by reference to their action plans and the achievement of college targets. Targets are set for average group size, retention, achievement and attendance. There are financial targets for courses for industry and other income-generating activities. The need to meet resource targets has occasionally had an adverse effect on students. For example, on a few occasions, classes containing students at different levels have been combined without the adoption of appropriate methods for supporting the needs of all students in the combined group.

79   The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The financial returns to the FEFC have been timely. At the time of the inspection, an operating surplus was forecast for 1997-98. The most recent three-year financial forecast, submitted to the FEFC for 1998 to 2002 does not demonstrate a continuation of this trend. The college's overall financial position remains weak.

Cross-college Provision

In the early part of 1997-98, budget holders did not receive regular reports of expenditure and senior managers and corporation members did not receive timely or frequent management accounts. Comprehensive college management accounts are now produced five or six weeks after the month end to which they relate. There is no qualified accountant at the college, although the current team has long experience.

80   The management information system provides a range of standard reports which are now generally reliable. The system is not easy to use, but users are provided with a helpful manual. Development is continuous. For example, this year a new link with the library system automatically enters each student on to the library database. In the past, errors were made entering data for the ISR. As a result, some data on students' achievements produced for the inspection were inaccurate. Recently new policies on information management have been approved. Responsibilities for data accuracy are clearly identified. There are now clear procedures for capturing data, checking entries and changing information about individual students.

Conclusions

81   The college's self-assessment procedures are well organised and effective. The inspection team found the self-assessment report comprehensive and a useful basis for planning and undertaking the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements made in the report. Some additional strengths and weaknesses were noted by inspectors and some were underestimated by the college. Some of the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection report, especially in cross-college areas, have been successfully addressed. Where the overall judgements of inspectors differed from the college they were mostly lower. One of the grades awarded in the curriculum areas was better than the self-assessment and three were lower. In the cross-college areas two of the five grades were lower than the self-assessment report.

82   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 (June 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	20
19-24 years	13
25+ years	67
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (June 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	31
Intermediate	29
Advanced	26
Higher education	6
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	8
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	271	1,638	19
Agriculture	28	147	2
Construction	52	151	2
Engineering	136	1,207	13
Business	280	1,322	16
Hotel and catering	142	395	5
Health and community care	240	830	10
Art and design	348	364	7
Humanities	412	1,788	22
Basic education	46	330	4
Total	1,955	8,172	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 7% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (June 1998)

	Perm-anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	127	24	0	151
Supporting direct learning contact	47	3	2	52
Other support	85	1	0	86
Total	259	28	2	289

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£11,131,000	£11,324,000	£11,699,000
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£18.73	£18.73	£17.85
Payroll as a proportion of income	80%	72%	*
Achievement of funding target	103%	100%	*
Diversity of income	21%	24%	*
Operating surplus	-£7,400,000	-£39,000	*

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)
ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)
Payroll – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997)
Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997)
Diversity of income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997)
Operating surplus – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997)
*data not available

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