

Hillcroft College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE**
1997-98

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 according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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Contents

Paragraph

Summary

Context

The college and its mission 1

The inspection 5

Curriculum areas

Computing, biology and mathematics 7

Humanities and social sciences 12

Cross-college provision

Support for students 18

General resources 25

Quality assurance 31

Governance 37

Management 43

Conclusions 50

College statistics

Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report. Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, Assessing Achievement. Sample size: 122 college inspections

Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course*
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.*

Summary

Hillcroft College

Greater London Region

Inspected April 1998

Hillcroft College's self-assessment report was prepared from data used for internal evaluation, as well as from indicators and statistics available from external agencies. Governors, staff and students contributed effectively to the self-assessment process which used the last inspection as its starting point for assessing progress. The college also sought the views of individuals and groups outside the college on the quality of its provision. There are clear links between self-assessment and the strategic and operational plans. The self-assessment report is detailed and evaluative, though not sufficiently concise in parts. The college made good use of benchmarking data to arrive at judgements on strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with the majority of findings in the report and with all but one of the grades awarded; the exception was a curriculum area which had underestimated the strengths of its provision.

Hillcroft College is a women's residential college situated in Surbiton. The mission focuses on women who have been disadvantaged by educational, social or economic factors. The college recruits nationally as well as regionally. Its main programme is the certificate of higher

education and it also offers an increasing number of short courses. The college has made progress since the last inspection, particularly in strategic planning, learning resources, computing facilities and staff development. The quality of teaching continues to be excellent and students' achievements are outstanding. Systems for personal and academic support are effective, although the college should continue to develop its service for students who need additional learning support. The grade II listed building and gardens provide pleasant surroundings for study. Residential arrangements are well managed and students value the extensive opportunities they have to consult staff and use learning resources. The college should: resolve the confusion over roles and responsibilities, especially in the context of health and safety; co-ordinate the aspects of quality assurance; improve target-setting; increase careers guidance; and update the accommodation strategy. Governors need to give further consideration to monitoring some aspects of the college's work.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Computing, biology and mathematics	1	Support for students	2
Humanities and social sciences	1	General resources	2
		Quality assurance	3
		Governance	3
		Management	3

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Hillcroft College is one of six residential colleges in England designated, under section 28 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, as eligible to receive funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college was founded in 1920 as a college for 'working women' and it has exemption under the *Sex Discrimination Act* to recruit only women as students. The college's main building is a grade II listed Victorian mansion; there is a residential annexe in the grounds built in the 1970s. The college is situated in Surbiton, Surrey and is 20 minutes by train from central London.

2 The college mission continues to focus on the education of adult women who have been disadvantaged by educational, social or economic factors. Students are recruited locally, regionally and nationally and the college works with a number of partner organisations to help it achieve its mission. The profile of students closely matches the priority categories of under-represented groups identified in the Kennedy report on widening participation, *Learning Works*. Students are predominantly aged between 25 and 44 and the majority were previously unemployed or were in low-paid work.

3 The main programme of the college is the certificate of higher education, which is a one-year course validated by the Open University. The course, at national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 4, is equivalent to study at first-year degree level. It attracts approximately 115 full-time and part-time students each year. The programme covers a range of modules drawn from humanities, social sciences, social work, computing, mathematics and biology. Students can follow this programme through full-time residential study or full-time and part-time day study. A small number of students take advantage of the college's scheme of accreditation for prior experience and learning.

4 Over the last two years there has been an increasing range of short programmes; these can last from two days to 15 weeks. There were a total of 344 enrolments for the short course programmes in 1996-97. Some of these courses are targeted at particular categories of women, for example lone parents, or at particular aspects of the curriculum, for example 'women into management' and 'women into information technology'. In 1997-98 the college had 25 full-time equivalent staff, of whom eight were academic tutors.

Context

The Inspection

5 The college was inspected in April 1998. Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and reviewed information about the college provided by other FEFC directorates. The college's data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 were checked against class registers and results issued by examining bodies. The college was notified approximately two months before the inspection of the sample of its provision which was to be assessed. The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors and an auditor working in college for a total of 23 days. Inspectors observed 22 lessons. They examined students' work and documentation relating to the college and its courses. Meetings were held with governors, managers, teachers, support staff and students.

6 All the lessons inspected were rated good or outstanding. This profile compares very favourably with the equivalent figure of 61 per cent for all colleges inspected in 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was 76 per cent compared with an average of 77 per cent for the sector in 1996-97 recorded in the same report. The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
Certificate of higher education	10	6	0	0	0	16
Short courses	3	3	0	0	0	6
Total	13	9	0	0	0	22

Curriculum Areas

Computing, Biology and Mathematics

Grade 1

7 Inspectors observed 10 lessons covering modules of the certificate of higher education and short courses on information technology (IT). They concluded that the self-assessment report was detailed and accurate in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of provision.

Key strengths

- well-planned provision
- effective teaching
- high pass rates and retention rates
- students' practical skills in computing
- specialist resources for computing

Weaknesses

- failure in a few lessons to address all levels of ability

8 The provision is well planned and well managed. Modules on the certificate course have been improved to take account of the reports of external examiners. The content of modules helps to support studies in other subjects, for example psychology. A strategy to increase the provision of short courses is proving to be successful. Since the last inspection, the college has appointed a manager for this area of work; teaching is carried out by the manager and a small number of part-time staff. There are good informal communications but the team rarely meets on a formal basis.

9 The self-assessment report recognises the quality of the teaching as a strength. Inspectors found that teaching was good and, in some cases, outstanding. In practical computing lessons, teachers are skilful in developing students' expertise by breaking complex tasks into a series of simple steps and by helping

them to carry out suitable practical exercises. In an effective introduction to the use of the internet, the teacher gave a clear explanation of the system and a useful overview of the facilities that it offers. He drew on his own and students' experience to bring life to the topic. Students quickly gained confidence and practised their skills by searching for information which would be helpful to them in completing their assignments in other subjects. Teachers continually check students' progress, but, occasionally, students have to wait too long for help from the teacher. Those students with more expertise are not always sufficiently extended. In theory lessons, teachers give clear expositions and use appropriate questions to draw on students' experience and to check their learning and understanding. They make effective use of teaching aids such as the overhead projector. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers successfully support and encourage students in subjects such as mathematics which many have found difficult in the past.

10 Teachers are well qualified and make good use of their commercial and industrial experience to add interest and relevance to the topics being covered. The resources available for computing are justifiably recognised as a strength in the self-assessment report. Computing students use up-to-date hardware and software. They are helped by suitable commercial workbooks and by good-quality handouts that have been prepared by the teachers. The lack of technical support means that teachers spend too much time maintaining and developing the equipment and software systems. There are sufficient books for the other modules but supplies of software designed to aid learning in specific subjects are inadequate. The human biology course is theoretical but, nevertheless, students would benefit from having simple equipment and models to aid their understanding.

Curriculum Areas

11 Students demonstrate good levels of skill and understanding. Computing students have well-developed practical skills. Assignments are challenging and enable students to produce work of a high standard, often at a level beyond that demanded by the course. Teachers' marking is accurate and, where there is more than one teacher, they align their standards by joint marking of a sample of students' work. Marked work is returned to students with detailed and helpful written comments. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that pass rates and retention rates on the certificate of higher education course are very high. Retention has not fallen below 83 per cent and pass rates have been over 90 per cent for the past three years. The college acknowledges that there were weaknesses in the retention rates on the IT short courses last year. To date this year the figure has been 95 per cent. Students on these courses can now enter for a qualification in IT; the pass rates for units that had been completed at the time of inspection were high.

Examples of students' achievements in computing, biology and mathematics, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Computing modules on certificate of higher education	Retention (%)	91	86	98
	Pass rate (%)	92	100	95
Mathematics modules on certificate of higher education	Retention (%)	94	97	83
	Pass rate (%)	97	97	100
Human biology modules on certificate of higher education	Retention (%)	*	91	90
	Pass rate (%)	*	90	100

Source: college data

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Humanities and Social Sciences

Grade 1

12 The inspection covered subjects drawn from the humanities and social sciences. They were taught as short courses or as modules in the programme leading to the certificate of higher education. Inspectors observed 12 lessons. Inspection findings confirmed the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- the outstanding quality of teaching
- effective teaching of study skills as an integral part of courses
- good retention rates
- consistently high pass rates in the certificate course
- students' significant progress
- well-managed provision
- high-quality learning resources

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped accreditation for short courses

13 The college's main provision is the certificate of higher education. Modules that are taught within the humanities include: history; literature; philosophy; women's studies; and visual studies. Modules within the social sciences include: psychology; economics; politics; sociology; and preparation for social work and related professions. There are also short 'return-to-learn' courses. The college's self-assessment report identified the high standard of teaching as a significant strength. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. Teaching is carefully planned and all sessions have relevant study skills components. Teachers made impressive use of an appropriate variety of methods to encourage students to analyse their past experiences and to relate their

findings to key concepts and theories in the subject discipline. For example, in a psychology lesson students worked in small groups discussing and recording what they considered to be the defining characteristics of their adolescence. The teacher used the groups' conclusions as the basis for reviewing cross-cultural literature on the psychology of life phases. Teaching is challenging yet consistently supportive of students. Assignments are marked using criteria that are appropriate to the level of study and that have previously been explained to students. Teachers give detailed and constructive individual feedback to students on their assignments and more generally on their overall progress. Occasionally, teachers' written comments only briefly cover points that have been more fully explained to students during discussions.

14 Students make striking progress in their studies. Most enrol at Hillcroft College with little history of academic success. In 1996-97, 91 per cent of students on the certificate course had qualifications at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) level or below; within a few months they were achieving well at first-year degree level. Studying in the college's residential environment helps students to concentrate on their studies and to achieve success. Inspectors confirmed that pass rates on the certificate course are consistently high. Over the last three years, the pass rate has remained above 90 per cent in all modules; for most modules pass rates are consistently over 95 per cent. In 1997, the pass rate was 100 per cent in visual studies. Retention rates are also consistently high on the certificate course at over 90 per cent. During the last three years, retention rates on short courses have been good. Inspectors agreed that accreditation is underdeveloped for short courses. The college has begun to address this issue. The majority of students progress to higher education from the certificate course: 74 per cent in 1995-96 and 79 per cent in 1996-97. Most students choose to study for the first year of a degree in their

Curriculum Areas

specialist subject at university rather than to enter the second year of the degree course. Several students each year enter employment directly instead of enrolling for further study. The college regularly reviews student performance data but acknowledges that it does not set formal targets for retention and achievement.

15 Students develop a wide range of study and communication skills. Many progress rapidly from being reluctant to speak in groups to expressing complex ideas with sophistication and confidence. In a course on women's health, students effectively analysed documents on health policy; they applied their knowledge, for example the incidence of poverty amongst women and the caring roles they often have, to help to assess the implications of these policies for women. The college recognises that the standards of students' written work is good. Occasionally, a few students over-personalise points of view in their academic writing. Students keep a weekly learning diary; they chart what they have learned and reflect on the impact that new ideas and knowledge had on their thinking. Inspectors found that this process, by encouraging the distillation and absorption of new knowledge and of theoretical perspectives, helped students to learn more rapidly.

16 Courses are well managed; staff regularly review and develop the curriculum. Modules on the certificate course are designed to provide opportunities for students to study on a range of degree courses. The various short 'return to learn' courses prepare students well for entry to the certificate course or other areas of study in further education. The college's strategic plan and the annual operating plan steer developments effectively. For example, they have led to an increase in cross-cultural perspectives in courses and the development of targeted short-course provision for groups of women, for example lone parents, who are usually under-represented in further education.

Where relevant, modules include well-planned and relevant educational visits or work placements which help to increase students' learning.

17 Teachers provide students with good printed learning materials and topical extracts from newspapers and journals. These resources are carefully selected to enable students to compare and contrast different viewpoints and to reflect on the uses that can be made of research data. Occasionally, materials are handwritten and not clearly presented. Students make good use of computerised resources such as CD-ROMs and they are beginning to use the internet facility which has recently been installed in the college. Teachers are highly qualified in their subjects and most have teaching qualifications. All are experienced teachers. In a history lesson, the teacher effectively contrasted historical events in Europe and Africa in medieval times. She gave expert guidance to students as they worked in small groups analysing an academic text on cultural histories that had recently been published. A few teachers are recognised as national experts in their fields. All teachers keep abreast of developments in education and in their subjects by participating in staff development, attending external conferences and continuing to read widely.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in humanities and social sciences, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Humanities modules on certificate of higher education	Retention (%)	94	94	90
	Pass rate (%)	97	96	97
Social science modules on certificate of higher education	Retention (%)	94	93	92
	Pass rate (%)	98	95	94

Source: college data

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

18 Inspectors agreed with most aspects of the college's assessment of support for students but found that some weaknesses had been understated.

Key strengths

- the effective recruitment and admission procedures
- a carefully-organised induction programme
- the good tutorial system
- effective arrangements for personal support
- positive benefits from studying in a residential context

Weaknesses

- limited opportunities for careers guidance
- incomplete development of additional learning support

19 The college responds promptly to student enquiries, providing helpful leaflets and giving relevant information on courses available. Although most students find out about the college from personal recommendations, the college also has a well-planned advertising schedule and carries out a regular analysis of the effectiveness of its advertising. Open meetings for prospective students are valued. They give students the confidence to apply to study at the college, and offer impartial guidance on appropriate course options. The programme of short courses provides an effective opportunity for some students to sample the college and progress to the certificate of higher education.

20 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that induction arrangements for the certificate course are well organised and

effective. Students' confidence is built up through a suitable variety of activities arranged during the week. Activities which students value include the equal opportunities sessions and the introduction to the support services. Students are well informed of their rights and responsibilities through the student handbook, charter and learning agreement. A particular strength of the induction week is the focus on the work of the personal tutor group. Separate sessions are held to meet the needs of residential and non-residential students. 'Taster' lessons enable certificate students to become better informed about the range of modules available for study. The college responds to student comments on induction by regular evaluation of the course. The college acknowledges in its self-assessment report that for some shorter courses there is a need to provide a more consistent approach to induction.

21 Residential arrangements are well managed and help students to settle quickly and study effectively. Careful allocation of study bedrooms takes account of each student's requirements or preferences. Social events are organised. A member of staff is available at all times to help students if they have problems. The residential learning environment also enables students to help each other. The 24-hour opening each day of library and IT resources allows students to make maximum use of opportunities for learning.

22 Students speak highly of the individual support they receive from both module tutors and personal tutors. In student perception surveys the level of support given by personal tutors is identified as a strength by many students. Weekly group sessions are well structured and there are ample opportunities for additional individual tutorials. A professional personal counselling service is available. Progress which has been made in addressing the need for childcare provision, includes successful bids to the European Social Fund;

Cross-college Provision

students on some of the short courses can now receive payment for off-site childcare provision. A range of strategies is currently being pursued to enhance childcare support for other courses. A well-managed bursary fund supports students experiencing personal financial difficulties.

23 Relocation of the learning resources centre since the last inspection has improved access for students with disabilities. The college is making progress in developing its services for students who need additional learning support. There is provision for the increased numbers of students diagnosed as dyslexic but the college acknowledges that follow-up needs to be organised more quickly. These students value the loan of laptops and spelling checkers and are assisting the college in identifying appropriate software for support. Despite the increased provision of literacy support, one-to-one sessions are not taken up by all students whose needs have been identified; some students have requested regular group sessions for basic literacy.

24 Some students were not given adequate careers guidance at induction to enable them to make suitable choices. Provision of careers education and advice has recently been improved. A well-documented, effective programme assists students who are applying for higher education courses. There is a suitable range of readily accessible careers books and software. The college acknowledges the need to make more use of visiting speakers and outside visits, and has identified that guidance for certificate students who wish to proceed to employment is insufficient.

General Resources

Grade 2

25 Inspection evidence supported the college's judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of general resources.

Key strengths

- the up-to-date IT facilities
- the well-stocked library and learning resources centre
- the good-quality teaching accommodation
- the comfortable and well-maintained residential accommodation

Weaknesses

- no formal replacement programme for equipment
- poor decorative order in a few parts of the building
- the lack of displays in some areas

26 Inspectors confirmed the college's view that IT facilities are a strength. Since the last inspection, the college has made a significant investment in computing equipment. There are now 21 up-to-date computers to which students have access every day until late evening. There is 24-hour access to five networked computers. The range of software includes CD-ROMs and the recently-installed internet. Students make good use of the computing equipment. Occasionally, students have to wait to use a computer.

27 A relocation and complete reorganisation of the library and learning resources centre, following the previous inspection, has led to an increased number of study areas for students, including an adjoining room dedicated to quiet study. The library has over 14,000 volumes that are well matched to the curriculum areas offered at the college. There are several specialist collections of national importance, for

Cross-college Provision

example in women's studies. The bookstock and periodicals are carefully and regularly reviewed with subject tutors. Priority is given to new purchases that support the current teaching of subjects and the planned developments in curriculum provision, for example support for students learning basic skills. Learning resources staff are skilled at helping students to make the best use of materials available. There is a useful range of study skills materials. There are insufficient basic numeracy materials for students working on their own. The self-assessment of the learning resources centre was based upon thorough evaluation, comparisons with other providers and standards set by professional bodies. Inspectors confirmed that the learning resources centre is of high quality and well used by students.

28 The college is an attractive grade II listed building. Some rooms and common areas have interesting photographic displays of the college's history. However, several areas of the college lack visual display. Students use the pleasant, large, landscaped gardens for recreational purposes. Staff have made arrangements for students to have access to high-quality sports and fitness facilities in the local area.

29 Inspectors agreed that the overall standard of accommodation is good. Students commented on the homely and friendly environment. Study bedrooms are comfortable and clean. There is an effective system for carrying out minor repairs promptly and students value this service. Most teaching rooms are well decorated and suitably furnished. There are several rooms which students can use as social areas. The bright and spacious dining room is also a key meeting area for staff and students. Staff have access to IT and most have individual offices suitable for meeting a few students.

30 There is a rolling maintenance programme. Decisions about how best to use the small budget are carefully considered; in recent years, priority has been given to structural work such

as rewiring, roofing, improvements in access for students with disabilities and some redecoration. A few parts of the college remain in poor decorative order. The college acknowledges that there is no formal system for updating inventories of equipment and establishing a replacement programme. Health and safety issues are dealt with but there is no system to ensure regular and comprehensive assessments of potential risks. The self-assessment did not identify this weakness.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

31 In its self-assessment report the college identifies most strengths and weaknesses but, in a small number of cases, weaknesses are understated. The process for formulating judgements was thorough.

Key strengths

- detailed and realistic self-assessment report
- well-established system for the review and evaluation of curriculum areas
- effective staff development
- lesson observations
- positive response to student opinions

Weaknesses

- inadequate action-planning
- inadequate co-ordination of quality assurance procedures
- few formally agreed standards
- low response rates on most student surveys
- slow implementation of the appraisal system

32 The self-assessment report is based on the quality statements from Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. All staff were

Cross-college Provision

involved in the process and the report includes assessments of progress since the college's last inspection. Governors took part in the preparation of the report and in the self-assessment of their own performance. The report is linked to the strategic and operating plans of the college. Advice on the accuracy and rigour of the self-assessment was given by an external member of the self-assessment steering group. The college made good use of benchmarking material drawn from: inspection reports of other colleges; classroom observations; students' achievements; and the outcomes of student surveys and course reviews. Peer moderation and management views influenced the final draft of the report and the internal grading. Action plans do not cover all the identified weaknesses; some wording is imprecise, for example 'needs further development'.

33 Several successful quality assurance procedures are in place but they lack co-ordination and do not constitute a full system of quality assurance. These weaknesses are not explicitly identified in the self-assessment report. The quality committee in its first cycle of operation is starting to address the need, identified in the self-assessment report, for clearer systems and documentation. The quality committee reports to the academic board which is chaired by the principal who holds overall responsibility for the quality of provision throughout the college. The academic board meets regularly and considers a range of academic matters including course reviews, students' achievements and other quality data. New course developments are informed by the college's strategic plan but there is no formal course approval system.

34 Course reviews are generally thorough and lead to improvements in programmes of study. There is a variety of mechanisms for eliciting students' views including surveys, student representation on committees, student meetings and suggestion books. The learning diaries kept

by students on the certificate of higher education course are particularly effective in identifying where improvements could be made. Issues raised through this and other channels are responded to positively. Many students do not complete the surveys and this weakness has been recognised by the college.

35 The self-assessment report acknowledges that there are few formally-agreed standards or targets against which performance can be measured. The college has developed a simple system for value-added calculations which is used to monitor students' performance. The indicators which are used sometimes underestimate the significant progress made by students. The student charter is undergoing a review; the aim is to include more measurable targets. Good progress is being made towards achieving this aim through a comprehensive and well-documented consultation and evaluation process.

36 Staff development has improved since the last inspection and is now effective. The annual staff development plan is linked to strategic objectives and needs analysis. It is fully costed and is reviewed twice a year. There is a system for evaluating internal and external events which is being used increasingly to disseminate good practice and new ideas. Classroom observation has been formalised in the last year and a high proportion of staff has been observed. Teachers are benefiting from reviews of the effectiveness of their own teaching as well as from observing other teachers' methods. Judgements on the quality of lessons are similar to those made by inspectors. Appraisal has been slow to develop. Staff have been trained and timetables for appraisal have been set but none have been carried out below senior management level. The college has stated its intention to move towards Investor in People status but acknowledges that it will not meet the target for achievement set in its strategic plan.

Cross-college Provision

Governance

Grade 3

37 The findings of the inspectors and auditors closely match the judgements made in the self-assessment report in almost all aspects. The weakness related to standing orders was not made explicit by the college.

Key strengths

- governors strongly committed to the college's mission
- an appropriate and effective committee structure
- governors actively involved in strategic planning
- efficient conduct of the governing body's business
- effective use of self-assessment

Weaknesses

- insufficient monitoring of some aspects of the college's work
- no code of conduct for governors
- an incomplete register of interests
- a lack of standing orders for the governing body

38 Under the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, Hillcroft College is defined as a designated college, and therefore it does not come within the standard instrument and articles of government for further education institutions. It is a company limited by guarantee, with the legal framework for its operation set by its memorandum and articles of association. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The governing body, known as the council, substantially conducts its business in accordance with the memorandum and articles of association. It also substantially fulfils its

responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

39 Governors demonstrate a clear commitment to the mission of the college and are actively involved in the strategic planning process. Monitoring of the strategic plan is carried out through reports to council but the self-assessment recognises that there is inadequate monitoring of some aspects of the college work, for example issues involving health and safety and equal opportunities.

40 The governing body has established a search committee to assist with the identification and recruitment of external governors. The different categories of governors are properly appointed in accordance with the requirements of the memorandum and articles of association. There is good support for the work of the governing body and its committees as the self-assessment report makes clear. Comprehensive papers are provided to the council and its committees, which form a good basis for decision-making. The minutes strike an effective balance between recording the decisions of the council and their debates on matters of importance, for example the establishment review. However, the clerk to the governing body has not produced standing orders on the conduct of the governing body's business. There is generally a good level of attendance at meetings. The college has been careful to ensure that all meetings are quorate.

41 The governing body has an appropriate committee structure, that includes committees for finance and general purposes, personnel and audit. The audit committee is operating effectively in monitoring audit matters and advising the corporation on the effectiveness of the college's system of internal control. The personnel committee has provided an appropriate level of support during the exercise to restructure the establishment. Governors give careful consideration to the college's financial position.

Cross-college Provision

42 The self-assessment report recognises that the governing body has made little progress in developing a code of conduct setting out the individual and collective responsibilities of governors in relation to the college. The governing body agreed to establish a register of interests but it is not operating effectively, since most governors have declined to make a return. Governors used the self-assessment process to carry out a detailed evaluation of their performance which has helped them to clarify issues requiring action. They recognise that further training is needed to help governors fulfil their role effectively.

Management

Grade 3

43 The college's self-assessment report was comprehensive and self-critical. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses which were identified in the report. A few weaknesses found by inspectors were not mentioned in the report.

Key strengths

- a clear and well-supported mission
- effective procedures for strategic and operational planning
- good audit arrangements
- effective external liaison
- effective strategies for widening participation
- successful implementation of equality of opportunity

Weaknesses

- confusion of roles due to transitional structure
- inconsistent internal communication
- underdeveloped performance review
- inadequate financial accounting system
- ineffective monitoring of some strategies and policies

44 The college has a clear and specific mission which has been carefully considered in the context of changes to the college's portfolio of courses. The mission is understood and supported by staff, and the college is successful in achieving its mission. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the process of strategic planning has improved considerably since the last inspection. The strategic plan has clear objectives and operational plans linked to the strategic objectives. The plan covers all main areas of activity. Targets for enrolment are reviewed and reset at college level each year. Enrolments have increased but failed to meet targets set during the last three years. This shortfall has not adversely affected the college's financial position.

45 The organisational structure has been reviewed since the appointment of the principal less than two years ago. Changes have been made following a process of consultation; a transitional structure is in place. The committee structure has been reviewed and changed; a calendar is published of the regular meetings of committees and working groups. A clear reporting structure exists between the college council, the academic board and college governor committees. The matching of new roles to existing staff has not yet been successfully completed which is acknowledged in the self-assessment report. There is confusion amongst some staff with regard to their current accountabilities. At the time of the inspection, senior staff comprised the principal and finance officer/registrar. The new structure is intended to include a management group of the principal, director of finance and information, director of support services and two curriculum section heads. The college acknowledges that there are inconsistencies in internal communication. Feedback to staff about some activities is comprehensive. However, some significant meetings, for example between the principal and finance officer/registrar, and between the principal and section heads, are neither minuted nor reported.

Cross-college Provision

46 Managers are developing aspects of performance review. Objectives have been set for the current year that form the basis of mid-year and end-of-year reviews for the college as a whole. Some performance criteria have been set but they are not in place for all of the operational plans. Where they have been agreed, the college acknowledges that performance criteria are not yet sufficiently clear nor capable of measurement. There are few regular reviews of performance between managers and their staff.

47 The college has an appropriate range of policies which have received formal approval. The monitoring of some key strategies and policies is not effective. The accommodation strategy is out of date and a new draft has not yet been prepared. Staff are unclear on their responsibilities for issues that involve health and safety. Safety procedures are inadequately monitored and reports are not published with any regularity. Management information is adequate for most monitoring purposes but managers are not yet using detailed reports to monitor their work. Management information is not always effective for planning purposes.

48 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the financial management of the college is adequate. The budget planning process is clear and appropriate to the college. The financial accounting system does not meet the college's financial management needs. Financial reports are produced using a combination of manual and computerised systems which is an inefficient use of resources and hampers their regular production. Managers monitor the college's financial performance effectively. However, financial reports do not include forecasts of out-turn for both income and expenditure to the financial year-end nor a cashflow forecast. The college's internal and external auditors are operating effectively and have provided positive assurance on the college's system of internal control.

49 The college's well-established and successful strategies for widening participation are noted in the self-assessment report. In line with the mission, the college successfully recruits students who have previously been excluded from further education. The college has an effective policy and code of practice for equal opportunities. The self-assessment report includes evidence of effective liaison with a growing number of external organisations and agencies. Funding for specific projects and developments has been achieved from a range of sources. Partnerships have been developed with community groups and voluntary organisations. Initiatives include: targeted provision for Asian women in collaboration with a local authority and voluntary community groups; and a 'women into management' project in association with employers. The college makes good use of market information that has been provided by other organisations, for example in the preparation of the needs analysis in the strategic plan.

Conclusions

50 The inspection team found the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. The curriculum sections were not sufficiently concise but appropriate attention was given to teaching and learning and to students' achievements. Most of the findings of the inspection team confirmed those in the college's self-assessment report. In a few instances inspectors found weaknesses in cross-college areas which had not been made explicit or given sufficient emphasis by the college. Inspectors found the college to be realistic in its overall judgements about provision. In one curriculum area and in all the cross-college areas inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college. In the second curriculum area inspectors judged the provision to be outstanding rather than good.

Cross-college Provision

51 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 (July 1997)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	0
16-18 years	0
19-24 years	9
25+ years	91
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Foundation	0
Intermediate	65
Advanced	0
Higher education	35
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1997)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	28	188	47
Humanities	58	122	39
Basic education	0	63	14
Total	86	373	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	7	1	0	8
Supporting direct learning contact	1	0	0	1
Other support	15	1	0	16
Total	23	2	0	25

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£793,000	£831,000	£780,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	*	*	*
Payroll as a proportion of income	71%	70%	70%
Achievement of funding target	*	*	*
Diversity of income	34%	37%	31%
Operating surplus	£21,000	£37,000	£11,875

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

**not within Council's funding methodology*

Students' achievements

		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Certificate of higher	Pass (%)	96	93	93
education	Retention (%)	91	93	94

Source: college data

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