

# Isle College

**REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE  
1998-99**

**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

**THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL**

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*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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## 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

## Isle College

### *Eastern Region*

#### **Inspected February 1999**

Isle College is a small further education college situated in Wisbech in the north Fenland district area of Cambridgeshire, close to the county boundaries of Lincolnshire and Norfolk. The production of the college's self-assessment report involved staff at all levels and governors. Self-assessment is well organised and effective. The report was informative and comprehensive and included action plans to address weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements made in the report. The weaknesses found by inspectors were often included in the report but their significance was sometimes understated.

The college offers provision in all of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Provision in four of these areas was inspected, together with aspects of cross-college provision. The college has made significant progress on addressing issues identified in the last inspection report. Communication between managers and staff is good and senior managers provide effective leadership. Governors are closely involved in strategic planning, and they closely monitor students' achievements. Students benefit from good tutorial support. The college has an effective framework for quality assurance covering both academic and support functions. Most teaching is good and students experience a wide range of learning activities. Students'

achievements are high in most areas. Course management is good. There is a good range of resources which are used effectively on most courses. The college should improve: the provision and monitoring of additional learning support; the monitoring and review of college policies; the provision of appropriate information in financial management reports; the management information systems; effectiveness of corporation due to declared interests; and the strategy to meet present and future accommodation needs.

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

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Cross-college provision</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Engineering	3	Support for students	3
Business	3	General resources	3
Health and social care	2	Quality assurance	2
Art, design, media and performing arts	2	Governance	2
		Management	2

# Context

## The College and its Mission

1 Isle College, which was established in 1956, is a small further education college situated in Wisbech in the north Fenland area of Cambridgeshire, close to the county boundaries of Lincolnshire and Norfolk. The college operates on three sites and serves the communities of Wisbech, March, Chatteris and Whittlesey. The college also has a number of collaborative partners that provide courses in the community. The college attracts students mainly from schools in the Fenland. Within the large geographical area from which the college recruits students, institutions providing post-16 education include three other further education colleges and 15 schools with sixth forms. The percentage of young people in the Fenland district remaining in full-time education in 1998 was 69%, including 45% entering further education. Only 35% of the pupils from the five feeder schools achieve five or more passes at grade C or above in general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) examinations, compared with the average of 46.8% for England.

2 In the 1991 census, the population of the Fenland district of Cambridgeshire was 74,426, and the population of Wisbech 18,585. The Fenland district population is currently estimated to be 80,000. Less than 1% of the Fenland population are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Agriculture and service industries are the main sources of employment. There are few large employers, and those in Wisbech are mainly concerned with the food-processing industry. There has been a steady decline in employment in agriculture over the last 10 years. In December 1998, the unemployment rate in Cambridgeshire was 2.4%. In the Wisbech travel-to-work area it was 5.4%.

3 The college offers a range of vocational education and training programmes. The majority of provision is at intermediate and advanced level. Nine subjects are offered at general certificate of education

advanced/advanced supplementary level (GCE A/AS level), five at GCSE, and vocational courses are offered in all of the 10 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas. Vocational provision includes general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels in most areas; BTEC first, national and higher national certificates in caring, design, engineering, media, performing arts, and printing; national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1 to 4; and a range of evening courses in most curriculum areas. The college provides youth and adult training on contract from the Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise.

4 In November 1998, the college had 4,459 students, of whom 793 were full time. Of the students enrolled, 20% are aged 16 to 18. In each of the three years to 1997, the college did not achieve its target funding units. It employs 158 full-time equivalent staff of whom 44% are in teaching posts. The curriculum is delivered through five divisions: business; construction and engineering; community studies; art and design; and outreach. The executive team comprises the principal, vice-principal curriculum, and vice-principal client services, supported by the director of finance.

5 Governors have reviewed the college's mission statement which aims 'to contribute to the economic and social development of the Fens through the provision of learning opportunities that respond to the needs of the individual and employers'. The college is committed to widening the participation of young people and adults in education and training, and addressing the problems of low aspiration that prevail within its community.

## The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 8 February 1999. In planning and carrying out the inspection, the team used the

# Context

college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. 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 submitted its own data on students' achievements for 1998 and these were found to be reliable. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors and an auditor working for 41 days. Inspectors evaluated the extent of the college's consultation with external bodies, such

as the Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, and local employers. The team observed 41 lessons and tutorials, examined students' work and college documents, and held meetings with governors, managers, staff and students.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 66% were judged to be good or outstanding and 5% less than satisfactory. This compares with 65% and 6%, respectively, for all colleges inspected during 1997-98.

## Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GNVQ	1	4	2	1	0	8
NVQ	2	3	5	0	0	10
Other	5	12	5	1	0	23
Total (No.)	8	19	12	2	0	41
Total (%)	20	46	29	5	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*

8 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 (%)
Isle College	10.9	80
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*

# Curriculum Areas

## Engineering

### Grade 3

**9 Inspection covered provision in general engineering and motor vehicle studies. Inspectors observed 11 lessons, including full-time and part-time provision at a range of levels. Inspectors agreed with the judgements made in the college's self-assessment report, but identified some additional weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- effective course management
- well-prepared and well-taught lessons
- high standards of students' individual work
- the effectiveness of the tutorial system

#### Weaknesses

- poor retention on many courses
- poor achievement rates on some courses
- few work experience opportunities for motor vehicle students
- out-of-date equipment in some areas

10 The college offers a wide range of courses at foundation, craft and technician level. The college policy of widening and maintaining participation has led to differing modes of attendance to attract more students. Some courses are taught together in order to ensure viable class sizes. For example, NVQ level 1 and level 2 students are combined with 'return to work' trainees to form a welding class. Such classes are effectively managed. Course files are well maintained. Course teams meet regularly and minutes show that important issues are discussed and proposed actions monitored. The self-assessment report did not fully evaluate the organisation and management of the area.

11 Teachers have clear schemes of work, detailed lesson plans, and good records of completed work. The progress of students is effectively monitored through well-developed recording systems. Inspectors agreed with the curriculum area's own assessment that in the best lessons teachers make effective use of an appropriate variety of teaching methods, including time-constrained revision test papers to simulate examinations, productive question-and-answer techniques, and the effective integration of theory with practical work. To address the problem of amalgamated courses, teachers have designed learning materials and practical tasks that effectively meet the different learning needs of students in the same class. Full-time students have regular tutorial sessions with a personal adviser. The progress they are making in their studies and their assessments are discussed, and actions and deadlines are agreed in order to improve their performance. Inspectors agreed that on some courses work experience opportunities are underdeveloped, and students are not always able to draw on work experience to improve their learning. For example, on the motor vehicle training programme the lack of large vehicle dealerships locally limits work experience opportunities but strategies to address this issue have not been developed.

12 Since the last inspection report there has been significant investment in equipment for the information technology (IT) computer-aided design suite and the computer controlled electronic training system. Other equipment has been improved to bring it up to current industrial standards, including welding equipment and programmable logic controllers. Recent donations from the motor vehicle industry have enabled the quality of the college's vehicle bodywork equipment to be improved. Equipment is adequate to meet the needs of most courses. Equipment is well maintained and workshop areas are kept clean and tidy. However, on engineering courses some equipment is approaching the end of its useful



# Curriculum Areas

life. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report. Some new staff appointed to the college are employed as instructors and possess recent industrial experience. However, few are teacher trained or possess assessor and verifier qualifications.

13 In practical lessons, students apply themselves to their tasks well and adopt a mature approach to learning. The quality of students' practical work on craft courses is good. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that retention and

achievement rates on some courses are unsatisfactory. For example, there are poor retention rates on many courses. The three-year trend is one of increasing retention at levels 1 and 3 with decreasing retention at level 2. Student achievement rates are below national averages for NVQ level 2 and GNVQ intermediate precursors, although there have been significant improvements on the level 3 courses. The self-assessment report action plan fails to address directly the identified weaknesses of retention and achievement.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ and GNVQ intermediate precursors	2	Expected completions	157	103	17
		Retention (%)	67	64	59
		Achievement (%)	81	75	43
NVQ and GNVQ advanced precursors	3	Expected completions	19	107	41
		Retention (%)	89	63	76
		Achievement (%)	33	51	94
Other over 24 weeks	1	Expected completions	136	108	130
		Retention (%)	75	62	77
		Achievement (%)	56	56	62
Other over 24 weeks	2	Expected completions	68	85	74
		Retention (%)	71	63	59
		Achievement (%)	39	51	69

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

# Curriculum Areas

## Business

### Grade 3

**14 The inspection of business covered administration, office technology and general business courses. Nine lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but found additional weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- high standards of teaching on many courses
- effective and thorough assessment procedures
- good organisation of learning by many students
- effective curriculum management in outward collaborative provision
- good specialist resources
- high retention and achievement on most courses

#### Weaknesses

- ineffective teaching of classes containing students on courses of different levels
- poor integration of key skills
- insufficient sharing of good practice by teachers
- little use of visiting speakers and external visits
- declining achievement rates on GNVQ advanced

15 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the business division offers a wide range of courses from foundation to advanced level, including GNVQ intermediate and advanced, and NVQ courses in administration up to level 3. Management and professional courses are offered up to level 4, and a wide range of short courses in administration and

office technology is offered on a part-time basis. To widen participation, the college has established a number of partnerships with local training providers.

16 The management of collaborative provision is particularly effective, and there are good arrangements for monitoring and evaluating students' progress. For example, one training company has developed new procedures for the delivery of office technology courses, with course planning booklets to enable students on collaborative provision and their tutors to set individual targets and monitor the progress students make towards their achievement. Inspectors agreed that these courses are effectively planned and managed, and that course documentation is thorough.

17 Courses in the college are well managed and teachers have frequent, minuted team meetings and detailed course files. Inspectors agreed that the college's assessment procedures are effective and thorough. Qualification record files contain details of students' assignment programmes. Assignments and class tasks are relevant to the current issues facing industry and commerce both locally and nationally. The college recognises that key skills are insufficiently integrated with the teaching programme. Employer links are generally underdeveloped. For example, course teams make insufficient use of visiting speakers and external visits to consolidate classroom teaching and to increase students' understanding of current business practice. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

18 Much of the teaching is of high quality and lessons are well planned. In the best lessons, teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods to sustain students' interest and extend their knowledge, to promote productive working relationships and to encourage students to develop their knowledge and practical skills through learning on their own. Some poor teaching was also observed. For example, in mixed business studies and administration

# Curriculum Areas

classes, teachers did not always fully address students' individual learning needs or sustain students' interest and extend their skills and understanding. Opportunities for business teachers in the college and the collaborative provision to share good practice are not fully exploited. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

19 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that students have access to good specialist resources. There is a dedicated area within the business programme area containing up-to-date business-related materials and IT software. Students are also able to use up-to-date equipment and IT software in the main Wisbech computer suite and at the centres used in the community. Staff have appropriate qualifications and undertake suitable professional development to maintain their business experience.

20 The quality of most students' written work is good. GNVQ students' portfolios are well organised, and show a good knowledge and understanding of the subject. In the best office technology classes, students attend regularly, organise their learning effectively and demonstrate good IT skills. In some classes, a poor level of motivation is demonstrated by students. For example, some students were not punctual at lessons and were slow in completing assignment work. Retention and achievement rates on single subject courses in business administration and office technology are good. Pass rates on NVQ administration programmes average over 70%, and pass rates on the GNVQ intermediate course are above the national average. The college acknowledges that retention levels for the GNVQ intermediate business course are declining, and that pass rates for the GNVQ advanced business course have fallen below the national average.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ administration	1 to 3	Expected completions	60	55	44
		Retention (%)	78	75	75
		Achievement (%)	85	67	74
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Expected completions	25	21	11
		Retention (%)	72	71	55
		Achievement (%)	88	100	83
GNVQ advanced business	3	Expected completions	47	41	33
		Retention (%)	74	54	67
		Achievement (%)	68	64	59

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

# Curriculum Areas

## Health and Social Care

### Grade 2

**21 The inspection covered GNVQ courses at foundation and advanced levels, the certificate and diploma in nursery nursing and first aid. Inspectors observed 11 lessons including a tutorial. Inspectors were in broad agreement with the judgements made in the self-assessment report but considered that some issues were not clearly identified.**

#### Key strengths

- well-planned courses
- well-organised and relevant work experience
- good teaching of key skills
- effective teaching in most lessons
- good achievement rates on most GNVQ and early years courses
- high retention rates

#### Weaknesses

- poor classroom management in a few lessons
- little use of IT by students

22 The college offers GNVQs at foundation and advanced levels, national certificate and diploma in nursery nursing, first award in care and a range of first-aid courses. A number of partners who offer first-aid courses work with the college on collaborative provision. To widen and maintain participation, the college delivers some courses with low student numbers. Nevertheless, the range of course options available to students, for example, on the GNVQ advanced, is small.

23 Inspectors agreed with the college that curriculum management of the division is effective. There is good communication and close liaison between the head of division and course managers. Student achievement targets

are set for courses and for teachers responsible for the courses. Course documentation is comprehensive and up to date. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers provide good individual support to students. Parents are well informed about students' progress and attendance. There are effective links with a range of private, voluntary and charitable organisations. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers effectively use these links to provide well-organised work experience. Students' progress on work experience is monitored by a placement officer and teaching staff. The college uses its own childcare facilities and after-school club to provide additional work experience opportunities. These placements are valuable to students. Assignments are set to enable students to reflect on and evaluate their work experiences.

24 Most teaching is good. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods to engage and sustain students' interest. Students form productive working relationships with their teachers. In the best lessons, teachers give clear presentations, make regular checks on students' understanding of the work and provide plenty of opportunities for students to contribute their own ideas. Most teachers are supportive of students during lessons and provide work which takes account of their individual needs. In a GNVQ foundation class with students of very differing abilities, the teacher worked individually with each student to ensure that all were involved in the work of the lesson. In a few lessons, there was poor classroom management. For example, in one lesson the teacher had difficulty maintaining control over a group of lively students. There were also lessons observed where the teaching lacked purpose, and where group work was poorly organised. These weaknesses were not clearly identified by the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with the judgement that there is good integration of key skills. This is achieved by course teams identifying which key

# Curriculum Areas

skills should be addressed by students in completing their assignments. In addition, key skills are taught in separate lessons from vocational study lessons. Assignment work is set within a strong vocational context.

25 Teachers possess relevant vocational and academic qualifications. Teachers update their vocational skills through commercial visits and specialist courses. Most classrooms are well furnished and appropriately resourced. The new programme area resource base is equipped with four computers for students but their use is limited as the software is currently incompatible with that in the library.

26 Students' written work is good. Portfolios on the GNVQ advanced and foundation courses are well presented, and show that students have acquired an appropriate range of skills, including wordprocessing. Teachers mark students' work carefully giving sufficiently detailed written feedback to help students improve their performance. Student achievement and retention rates on some courses are higher than the national average, and this is recognised by the college. For example, students' achievements for the GNVQ advanced were above the national average in 1996, 1997 and 1998. Pass and retention rates are high for the first aid at work courses.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First aid at work	1	Expected completions	207	263	173
		Retention (%)	98	99	96
		Achievement (%)	93	91	95
GNVQ intermediate health and social care	2	Expected completions	29	30	10
		Retention (%)	76	63	70
		Achievement (%)	76	100	66
GNVQ advanced health and social care	3	Expected completions	14	25	19
		Retention (%)	79	52	79
		Achievement (%)	89	100	92
National certificate nursery nursing	3	Expected completions	25	20	13
		Retention (%)	88	95	92
		Achievement (%)	100	61	71
National diploma nursery nursing	3	Expected completions	19	19	28
		Retention (%)	89	95	82
		Achievement (%)	93	94	90

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

# Curriculum Areas

## Art, Design, Media and Performing Arts

### Grade 2

**27 Ten lessons were observed covering a range of art, design and furniture courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- clear project briefs
- well-planned, lively and effective teaching
- thorough feedback on students' work
- high quality of students' practical work
- productive external links
- high achievement on many courses and progression into higher education and employment

#### Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement on part-time programmes
- shortcomings in specialist accommodation

28 The college's provision in art, design, furniture, media and performing arts comprises a range of full-time courses at foundation, intermediate and advanced level. Part-time courses include City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) programmes in photography, furniture craft and restoration, printing and creative studies. Other part-time programmes include desktop publishing, computer design applications and sound-recording techniques. There is a range of possible modes of attendance which meet the individual needs of a broad client group.

29 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that lessons are well planned. Teaching is lively and contains an appropriate mix of

theoretical and practical work, and group and individual learning activities. Project briefs are comprehensive and key skills are identified. Assessment criteria are clearly listed and encourage students' sequential learning and achievement. Inspectors agreed that formal assessment by peers and tutors is regular and effective. Students receive regular written feedback on their progress which they use in their planning. GNVQ students in art and design maintain well-organised course logs which contain project briefs, notes and feedback on their progress. Some students' work showed a lack of thorough investigation before the realisation of the finished design, and some images used by students lacked originality.

30 Course leaders and tutors manage their programmes effectively. Course teaching files are well organised, informative and supplement the qualification record file. There is a schedule of formal team meetings which evaluate provision and contain minuted action points which are effectively monitored. For example, to improve individual students' achievements, clear assessment criteria and particular learning outcomes were incorporated into all project briefs. External links are continually being developed with professional artists, designers, performers, directors and media consultants. Many of these are involved in teaching and the setting of realistic project briefs. The location of the performing arts course in a local theatre enhances the content and delivery of the programme and provides a real working environment for students. The core studies in drawing, design and art history across year one of the national diplomas in design provide students with a valuable learning experience. Teachers emphasise the importance of observation drawing and research in all aspects of art and design.

31 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that courses are appropriately resourced in terms of staffing and equipment. Some specialist accommodation is well used and maintained. Visual material and students' work

# Curriculum Areas

is well displayed, promoting a professional and creative learning environment. However, some accommodation is uninspiring and not conducive to creative activities. Students' access to computers is adequate and there is sufficient library stock for the programmes offered. Staff are well qualified and enthusiastic. Specialist accommodation is fragmented across the Wisbech site and this inhibits the spread of good practice and has an adverse effect on students' learning.

32 Inspectors agreed with the college that students' external achievements compare favourably with sector pass rates. Pass rates in 1997 on the diploma in foundation studies and the national diplomas ranged between 90% and 100%. The majority of students in art and design progress to higher national diploma or

specialist degree courses. A number of students find related employment. For example, in performing arts some students have been successful in securing work as entertainment managers in holiday camps and on cruise liners. Students' practical work was of a high quality and there were some good examples of observation drawing and effective use of sketch books. A high standard of craft skill was displayed in samples of new and restored furniture. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some retention rates are poor. In 1997, retention on the performing arts programme was 55%. On some part-time programmes, for example C&G creative studies and sound recording, the retention rates were poor, at 45%. Students' achievements on part-time photography and furniture courses are low, ranging between 41% and 52%.

## A summary of achievement and retention rates in art, design, media and performing arts, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Furniture craft and restoration	1 to 3	Expected completions	51	24	104
		Retention (%)	63	58	72
		Achievement (%)	41	79	41
Art and design (part time)	1 to 3	Expected completions	118	206	196
		Retention (%)	73	76	77
		Achievement (%)	48	51	44
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	Expected completions	15	18	15
		Retention (%)	79	82	71
		Achievement (%)	73	86	89
National diploma in general and specialist art and design	3	Expected completions	109	88	89
		Retention (%)	80	73	69
		Achievement (%)	88	100	95
National diploma in performing arts	3	Expected completions	10	14	13
		Retention (%)	80	54	55
		Achievement (%)	88	100	100
Diploma in foundation studies	3	Expected completions	40	38	32
		Retention (%)	98	97	97
		Achievement (%)	97	100	100

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

# Cross-college Provision

## Support for Students

### Grade 3

**33 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report, although they differed in the emphasis given to some judgements and identified two additional weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- effective pre-course advice and guidance
- systematic and effective monitoring of students' absences
- effective tutorial support
- extensive range of childcare facilities

#### Weaknesses

- inadequacies in the provision and monitoring of additional learning support
- no formal arrangements for referral or for monitoring counselling needs of students
- insufficient use of careers education and guidance

34 Inspectors agreed with the college that students receive comprehensive advice before starting their studies. Many students find out about the college through attendance at open days or at careers information events held at local schools. College staff also run advice and guidance sessions at several local libraries. There is an extensive range of course guides and information leaflets. However, a few contain insufficient information on course content and teaching and learning methods, and others are lacking in clarity. The college is taking steps to improve its promotional materials. The advice centre provides a well-resourced and accessible enquiry service. Enquiries and applications are followed up

efficiently. Students commented on the helpful and friendly approach of college staff.

35 The induction programme for full-time students is extensive. A teachers' handbook contains a checklist which identifies the range of information and activity to be carried out during induction. An attractive, well-presented student handbook and diary provides useful information on the range of college services. There is a separate handbook for part-time students. A few evening-class students were not fully aware of the range of college facilities available to them.

36 The college's tutorial support is effective. A team of five personal advisers monitors students' progress throughout their studies and offers good levels of guidance and pastoral support. The personal advisers are highly valued by students. All full-time and some part-time students have weekly timetabled tutorials. Other part-time day and evening students are given the name of a personal adviser they can contact for help. The programme of tutorial activity includes opportunities for students to develop their study skills and to complete a national record of achievement. Inspectors agreed with the college that tutorials are well managed. Personal advisers maintain records of tutorial activity. Students receive a copy of the action plan for learning agreed with them. There are effective arrangements for monitoring students' attendance. Registers are held centrally and are monitored by an attendance adviser. Regular reports are provided for personal advisers and course co-ordinators who follow up any concerns with individual students, where necessary by telephone or letter. Students' attendance has improved as a result of these measures.

37 The self-assessment report recognised the need to improve procedures for assessing the learning support needs of students and for providing appropriate support programmes. A learning support co-ordinator was appointed



# Cross-college Provision

in December 1998, and more consistent arrangements have been introduced for the initial assessment of students' learning support needs. Compared with the previous academic year, the take-up of basic skills support by those students identified as requiring it has improved from 39% to 62%. Despite these improvements, the college acknowledges a number of remaining weaknesses. Although all full-time students completed basic skills tests during induction, some of the tests were incorrectly administered and there is some doubt about the accuracy of the results. There is no systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of learning support. Attendance at some additional learning support classes is poor. There is inadequate record-keeping and monitoring of how students are progressing as a result of the additional support they receive. The roles and responsibilities for the assessment and provision of learning support are unclear.

38 Students needing childcare facilities at the Wisbech site benefit from an extensive range of provision which includes a parent and toddler group, a well-equipped pre-school facility with places for 45 children and an after-school facility. This provision is well regarded and helps to support the college's commitment to widening participation. Students experiencing financial hardship are able to apply for subsidy from the college's access fund and from an additional hardship fund. There are clear application procedures and fair criteria for approval of awards. Personal advisers often act as a first point of contact for students experiencing personal difficulties. The advisers recognise that their role does not include that of specialist counsellor. Students requiring counselling support are referred to external agencies. The college has established contacts with several local agencies which offer counselling support but inspectors found that there are no formal procedures for referral or for monitoring and reviewing the counselling needs of students.

39 Students receive good levels of support in applying to higher education. The library contains a comprehensive and up-to-date range of careers education resources. Careers information material is also available in the advice centre. The college has a service level agreement with Cambridge Careers Guidance Limited to provide specialised careers guidance. Inspectors concluded that the current arrangements do not make the best use of this service. Careers advisers do not attend college on a regular weekly basis; their attendance is dependent on students' requests for a careers guidance interview. The take-up of individual interviews has been low. Careers advisers do not attend personal adviser meetings and take little part in the college's careers education programme. Both college staff and the careers service recognise the need for a more active partnership on careers education and guidance. The self-assessment report acknowledged that there is insufficient information available on students' destinations.

## General resources

### Grade 3

**40 General resources have improved at the college since the last inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- extensive IT facilities for students
- clean and well-decorated main accommodation in an open and landscaped site
- staff accommodation of a high standard
- good facilities at Chatteris

#### Weaknesses

- the lack of an effective strategy to maintain the current accommodation
- insufficient utilisation of accommodation and recreational areas

# Cross-college Provision

- poor access in some areas for students with restricted mobility
- some deficiencies in the learning environment

41 The college occupies a site of 5.38 hectares in Wisbech. There are 10 main buildings which were built in three phases in 1956, 1960 and the early 1970s. The college also owns a playing field of 7.38 hectares. An Astroturf area is used by students at break times and by local residents in the evening and at weekends. The spacious grassed areas are well maintained and frequently used by students in the summer. The college has ample car parking and a well-organised parking area for coaches. Most teaching accommodation is good and the college is clean and well decorated. The majority of classrooms are appropriately furnished, with a satisfactory level of equipment. Inspectors observed some inappropriate use of rooms with large groups of students in small classrooms, and large rooms where only a few students were being taught. Since the last inspection, the college has taken steps to group curriculum areas together but there is still fragmentation of some provision resulting in the isolation of a few staff. The quality of other venues used by the college varies but inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that the facilities for students at Grove House, Chatteris are good.

42 The teaching accommodation and recreational areas on the main site and at Grove House, Chatteris are underused. This weakness was acknowledged by the college. There has been no space utilisation survey to help the college to identify where rationalisation could take place. The college estimates that it has some 8,000m<sup>2</sup> surplus space. The college has not yet produced a comprehensive accommodation strategy which assesses the main site and sets out a costed plan for its future use. However, a feasibility study in collaboration with another college has produced a set of accommodation options. The college

has suspended its programme of maintenance and repairs until future decisions about the accommodation have been made, but decoration and urgent minor works continue. There is no programme of maintenance which involves planning for the future, and the college lacks a clear strategy to address any backlog of essential building work that ensues. This weakness was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with the college that there are some deficiencies in the learning environment on the main site, including unsightly mobile classrooms and containers used for storage, some poor furnishings and decoration, untidy grass parking areas and little use of display material on walls and corridors to provide a more stimulating environment.

43 The library provides a satisfactory level of facilities and services for staff and students. There is an appropriate range of books and other resources for most programme areas, including periodicals, audio and video cassettes and CD-ROMs. There are 75 study spaces and five study carrels for silent study. An appropriate level of support is provided by a small team of library staff, including an excellent newsletter for teachers. The library is not accessible to students with restricted mobility but students are able to use an IT terminal in the ground-floor communications workshop with access to the catalogue of learning materials and a telephone for ordering books. Since the last inspection, the college has developed resource bases in business studies, engineering and, very recently, in health and care, where students are able to use IT and other resources. Links between these resource bases and the library are not yet well developed.

44 The college's self-assessment report stressed the significant improvement in IT since the last inspection. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is 1:7. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that students are able to use modern computers with

# Cross-college Provision

industrial standard software, including those in the engineering IT room where there are 14 computers for students to use. The Wisbech site also has a computer suite containing 44 workstations, with appropriate software and new furniture, and a large computer suite for 29 art and design students. In the library area there are 12 computers, including one with internet access. Suites of 22 new computers at Chatteris and 40 at Whittlesey are also well used and provide adults with a comfortable and professional environment for learning. Students do not make much use of the internet. Teaching staff have little direct access to the administrative computer network. These weaknesses are recognised by the college.

45 Although most ground-floor accommodation is accessible to students with restricted mobility, there is no access to first-floor accommodation on the site, including the library block. Recently acquired accommodation at Whittlesey and Chatteris is not accessible beyond ground-floor level to students with mobility difficulties. There are designated spaces for drivers with disabilities on the main site. Students are encouraged to use the cafeteria as a common room. The cafeteria provides an adequate level of service. Security on the site has been improved with the use of personal alarms for staff and good lighting. Signposting around the site is poor with few directional signs to key areas. Inspectors agreed that staff accommodation was good. All staff have their own office and access to a staff lounge.

## Quality Assurance

### Grade 2

**46 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Considerable improvements have been made in this area since the last inspection.**

#### Key strengths

- strong commitment to continuous quality improvement
- effective target-setting
- well-understood quality assurance procedures
- rigorous arrangements for assuring the quality of collaborative provision
- well-planned and effective staff review and development

#### Weaknesses

- the lack of defined standards of performance in the college charter
- lack of evaluation in some annual quality reports from support activities
- inadequate monitoring of some action plans

47 The college has systematically improved its arrangements for quality assurance since the last inspection. The introduction of rigorous annual review, teaching and learning observation and target-setting has led to improvements in the quality of services and students' achievements.

48 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the quality assurance policy is well understood by governors and staff. It includes the requirement to maintain qualification record files, which bring together all documents and reports relevant to each award in one location, and the annual review of qualifications and business support activities. The files and reviews for academic activities are thorough and rigorous. Annual reviews of qualifications have been established for several years, and include a detailed review of the previous year's performance against targets. There is effective action-planning to remedy identified issues. The support areas of the college have less experience of annual review and some lack clear targets for performance and action plans. The monitoring of action plans is not always effective. For

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example, some action plans were incomplete and lacked targets for monitoring purposes. There is a range of formal and informal procedures to obtain students' opinions on the quality of learning. For example, students' opinions are obtained regularly by means of questionnaires which are analysed and the data used to inform the annual reviews. In some cases, students are involved in regular minuted meetings with staff. In other areas, feedback is informal and less rigorous. There is no mechanism in place for the systematic gathering of employers' views of the provision. The self-assessment report acknowledged that the information obtained is not always used to inform effectively the review processes.

49 Preparation for self-assessment was supported by a series of college conferences and development groups. The annual review process covers all aspects of the college work, including academic areas, business support functions and external partnerships. There is a clear link to the strategic planning process. The three-year strategic plan is reviewed annually, and priorities for action and associated targets are stated as critical success factors. The annual self-assessment reports are used as the basis of operational plans. Targets are set for performance at all levels of operation and form a major focus of the annual quality review. The best reports are based on sound analysis of evidence and are appropriately evaluative. Action plans include responsibilities and timescales and identify any training and resources needed for success. A minority of the reports from support activities tend to be descriptive.

50 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that staff development is well planned to meet both the college's strategic objectives and individual training needs. Training is effectively planned, funded and evaluated. Individual training needs are identified through course quality reviews and the annual staff appraisal and development

scheme. For teachers this includes lesson observations and for non-teaching staff, observation of tasks. The scheme has the confidence of staff and is regularly reviewed. There is an extensive in-house training and development programme which is structured to meet many of the common needs identified in the staff reviews. This programme is freely available to all staff, including those of collaborative partners. The college first achieved Investor in People status in July 1997, and this has recently been reconfirmed.

51 The college's charter is brief and lacks clear and measurable standards for expected performance and entitlements. Most students are unaware of the charter's existence. The self-assessment report acknowledged these weaknesses. Students have little awareness of the complaints system. Inspectors agreed that there is consistent monitoring of complaints and a report is made to the corporation and academic board analysing the patterns of complaints.

52 Arrangements for the quality assurance of collaborative provision with partners are well organised and effective. Inspectors agreed that contracts are clear and include rigorous quality assurance requirements. The college includes in its review process the regular monitoring of staff appointments and observation of classroom performance. All partners submit an annual qualification review and there is detailed discussion of these and the resulting action plans.

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## Governance

### Grade 2

**53 Inspectors and auditors broadly agreed with the college's self-assessment of governance, although they identified some weaknesses not included in the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- governors' commitment to the college
- close monitoring of the college's academic performance
- clear governance policies for the guidance of the corporation
- effective contribution by governors to strategic planning
- effective procedures and support for the conduct of the corporation business

#### Weaknesses

- inadequate financial information for governors
- failure to formalise procedures for the appointment of governors
- reduced effectiveness of corporation due to governors' declared interests

54 Inspectors agreed with the college that governors are committed to the college. There are high levels of attendance at corporation and committee meetings. Governors are keen to increase their knowledge of the work of the college. Governors make regular visits to curriculum teams and support areas to meet staff and students. There is a well-attended annual training weekend where issues facing the college and the sector are discussed.

55 The FEFC audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially fulfils its responsibilities in accordance with the

instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

56 Governors effectively oversee the academic work of the institution. They have established a schedule of reports and reviews for consideration at their meetings. There is regular consideration of data on student applications, enrolment, retention and destinations. Reports from the academic board are received on a regular basis. The corporation also considers college progress against its performance indicators and critical success factors. Actions which emerge from their academic monitoring are swiftly addressed. Governors are well briefed on developments in the further education sector.

57 Inspectors and auditors agreed with the college that there are effective procedures, policies and support for the conduct of corporation business. An appropriate range of committees has been established, although the membership of two committees does not fully accord with their terms of reference. An appropriate cycle of meetings has been established for corporation business. Agendas and minutes are timely and clear and supported by appropriate papers. There is little use of tabled papers. There are no formal procedures for governors to consider the training needs of the individual members.

58 Following the last inspection report, governors established a set of governance policies and performance indicators to guide their work. These policies cover: governance; clients and community; curriculum; finance; environment and staffing. They undertake an annual review of their effectiveness as governors. However, the review is not set against their policies or performance indicators. This weaknesses was not included in the self-assessment report.

59 Inspectors agreed that governors have established some policies for openness, including a register of interests and code of

# Cross-college Provision

conduct. There is a lack of formalised procedures for the appointment of governors. Although the search committee has met frequently, governors have not conducted a formal audit of their skills and experience. Little use has been made of public advertising for governors and there is no written appointment process for governors. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report. The self-assessment report noted that there was no chair of the corporation in post. There had been a vacancy for a chair for two months. The non-appointment was a breach of the instrument of government as the corporation should have appointed a chair at the meeting following the vacancy arising. An appointment was made by the corporation before the inspection.

60 The college recognises that governor representation from outside the local area is difficult. Inspectors agreed that many governors had business interests that could conflict with their role. These interests include a governor who is a partner of the college's solicitors and governors with interests in local property companies. Although these interests have been fully declared, a significant number of governors are prevented from taking part in important items of corporation business because of their declared interests, thereby reducing the corporation's effectiveness.

61 Governors have played a significant role in determining the strategic direction of the college through their involvement in the production of a mission statement and strategic plan. The strategy and development committee works energetically to identify and promote strategic options. Governors' training events are characterised by debate on long-term and strategic issues. Governors led staff in a brainstorming session as part of a strategic planning exercise.

62 Governors receive financial management reports that are inadequate for them to understand fully the state of the college's

finances. The college's three-year financial forecast approved by governors did not include a sensitivity analysis or contingency plan. Variances against budget are reported by exception but governors have not established the parameters for this exception reporting, which is at the management's discretion. The unit report included in the monthly financial management reports was not effective in identifying for governors the shortfall in units in 1997-98. The college's monthly financial management reports are distributed to all governors and considered by the finance and resources committee at every meeting.

## Management

### Grade 2

**63 Inspectors and auditors broadly agreed with the college's judgements in the self-assessment report but identified additional weaknesses. The college did not give sufficient weight to weaknesses in financial management.**

#### Key strengths

- significant progress on addressing issues identified in the last inspection leading to improved students' achievements
- effective strategic planning and priorities for development
- good links with external organisations
- open and consultative style of management

#### Weaknesses

- failure to monitor systematically the implementation and effectiveness of key policies
- lack of appropriate information in financial management reports

# Cross-college Provision

- some inadequacies in management information
- underdeveloped accommodation strategy

64 The college has made significant progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the last inspection report. There is a clearly-understood management structure. Monitoring of progress against strategic targets has improved, comprehensive quality assurance procedures have been developed and there have also been significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and students' achievements.

65 In recent years, the college has achieved significant growth in part-time enrolments. It has successfully developed centres in the community as part of its vision of a dispersed local college providing for the various communities in the Fenland. Operational plans are clearly linked to the college's strategic objectives. Operational and strategic planning is effectively linked to the self-assessment process. The college has refined its objectives into a number of critical success factors. The development of these critical success factors has helped staff understanding of college priorities. Operational plans have clear targets and have become increasingly tied to the critical success factors. Detailed market research informs strategic planning. There have been considerable delays in developing an approved accommodation strategy, partly caused by changing circumstances following mergers of neighbouring colleges. This uncertainty has limited the college's capacity to apply for capital funding. The college is considering a number of accommodation options. However, these options have not been fully costed.

66 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college for the past three years has had operating

deficits. The college has closely monitored its position on solvency and has enjoyed levels of solvency above the sector average. Budget strategies, supported by written papers, and initial drafts of budgets were discussed by college management with the finance and resources committee well in advance of the start of the financial year. However, the commentary to the financial forecasts does not include written sensitivity analysis or contingency plans. Governors approved changes to the format of the monthly financial reports and the presentation of budgets in 1998. The college's annual budget is now presented in a form that is on a different accounting basis to its three-year financial forecast. The college produces monthly finance reports but these are not comprehensive.

67 Staff have a good understanding of the management structure and their roles. The executive consists of the principal and two vice-principals with responsibility for curriculum and client services respectively. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that there is effective communication across the college. Senior managers communicate effectively with staff through a weekly staff newsletter and conferences. There are regular consultative meetings between managers and trade unions. Operational decision-making is carried out through curriculum and client services management teams. Meetings are minuted but contain little information on action to be taken and deadlines. Many managers have multiple roles. The college makes good use of technicians to support direct access by students to workshops.

68 In spite of recent improvements the management information system still has some inadequacies. Some progress has been made in identifying the information needs of managers and reports are planned on target-setting, performance against targets, withdrawals, achievements and enrolments by postcode.

# Cross-college Provision

Those reports which are now available are well used by senior managers. The input of inaccurate data caused the college to lose a significant number of funding units during the 1997-98 academic year. The college's internal auditors have noted the absence of a contingency plan for the potential loss of IT systems in the college's plan to ensure year 2000 compliance. The college's final funding unit claim for 1996-97 has not yet been submitted as an audited return to the FEFC and delay to the 1997-98 return is predicted.

69 Inspectors agreed that the college has effective links with local communities and external organisations. There are good collaborative arrangements with local colleges. Partnerships with employers and local communities include the sharing of local library facilities and resources, and the delivery of customised training in first aid and food hygiene. The college establishes contact with potential new students through family literacy projects in local primary schools. Partnerships with other providers and the local TEC/chamber have resulted in successful funding bids.

70 Inspectors found that policies are not systematically monitored and evaluated in terms of their effectiveness. The development of some policies such as IT has been slow. The college's commitment to promoting equal opportunities is clearly in evidence through its commitment to low achievers and various measures to widen participation throughout its catchment area. However, there is no clear overview and annual report of how effectively equal opportunities are promoted throughout all of the college's activities.

## Conclusions

71 The college's self-assessment procedures are well organised and effective. The college is self-critical, and all staff were involved in the self-assessment process. 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 weaknesses were understated by the college. Inspectors agreed with the curriculum grades awarded by the college, but disagreed with one of the five grades awarded for cross-college provision.

72 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 (November 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	20
19-24 years	12
25+ years	66
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by level of study (November 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	36
Intermediate	33
Advanced	17
Higher education	1
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	13
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	56	1,155	27
Agriculture	0	18	0
Construction	22	118	3
Engineering	111	309	10
Business	82	717	18
Hotel and catering	41	187	5
Health and community care	151	268	9
Art and design	268	290	13
Humanities	41	374	9
Basic education	21	230	6
Total	793	3,666	100

Source: college data

## Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 11% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

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

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	58	1	10	69
Supporting direct learning contact	16	1	4	21
Other support	61	0	7	68
Total	135	2	21	158

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

# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends

### Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£4,866,000	£4,953,000	£4,811,953
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£17.51	£17.33	£16.36*
Payroll as a proportion of income	70%	70%	61%
Achievement of funding target	93%	94%	90% (est)
Diversity of income	22%	23%	18%
Operating surplus	-£314,000	-£494,000	-£172,047

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), college (1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

\*provisional data

### Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	233	402	439	442	781	777
	Retention (%)	68	75	71	73	79	73
	Achievement (%)	94	53	54	85	63	61
2	Expected completions	405	571	472	375	665	708
	Retention (%)	68	67	63	68	73	72
	Achievement (%)	89	75	67	92	66	69
3	Expected completions	–	524	433	–	316	392
	Retention (%)	–	70	69	–	82	74
	Achievement (%)	–	78	82	–	62	64
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	n/a	n/a	–	37	38
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	92	71
	Achievement (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	79	83
Short courses	Expected completions	84	207	255	577	1,697	2,344
	Retention (%)	92	95	94	88	97	95
	Achievement (%)	85	77	85	98	81	84
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	88	129	234	57	117	309
	Retention (%)	69	78	74	81	85	73
	Achievement (%)	91	64	57	97	34	56

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

n/a not applicable

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