

Varndean College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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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

Varndean College

South East Region

Inspected October 1998

Varndean College is a sixth form college in Brighton and Hove. The self-assessment report was produced for the inspection; it drew on existing quality assurance procedures. The report was comprehensive and evaluative. Action plans resulting from self-assessment are uneven in quality and reflect the recent transition from one quality assurance system to another. The self-assessment of curriculum areas involved staff at all levels and included the grading of lesson observations. These were moderated by the college's curriculum committee. Cross-college sections of the report were drafted by the appropriate senior manager. The senior management team reviewed all sections except governance. External views for all cross-college aspects were provided by two local head teachers and an officer of Sussex Enterprise. Groups of governors were involved in reviewing each cross-college section prior to approval of the complete report by the corporation. Some self-assessments were rigorously conducted. In others, inspectors found that some strengths were overstated and insufficient attention was paid to weaknesses.

The college has good links with a number of collaborative partners, in particular the four schools which share the same attractive site. The college is highly regarded in the local community for its supportive and friendly ethos.

Arrangements for prospective students to gain information about courses are very good. Much of the teaching is good or outstanding. The profile of grades awarded to lessons observed was much better than national figures. Students' achievements in most areas are good. The use of value-added data to improve and evaluate students' success on courses at GCE A level is well developed. Since the last inspection, the college has done much to improve its accommodation, but further and substantial work remains to be done. There have also been considerable improvements in the stocks of materials provided in the learning resource centre and in the availability of computers both for group teaching purposes and for independent use. The college benefits from an open and consultative management style and a clear management structure. Governors have forged constructive links with senior managers and other staff. The college needs to address a number of weaknesses. It should ensure the effectiveness of self-assessment and related action plans through the setting of more precise targets for improvement and by more rigorous arrangements for monitoring progress. Governors need to monitor more effectively the college's non-financial performance. The college should continue its efforts to improve student retention and monitor more closely the impact of learning support.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	2	Support for students	2
Art and design	2	General resources	3
English	2	Quality assurance	3
Psychology and sociology	2	Governance	3
		Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Varndean College is a sixth form college in Brighton, East Sussex. Since 1992 the college has diversified its provision to include education and some training programmes for mature students. In recent years, the number of full-time students has increased by over 20% to the current figure of 946, of whom 63 are mature students. At the time of the inspection, there were over 400 part-time students. The college is committed to widening participation among individuals and groups who have traditionally not taken up opportunities in further education. The mission statement refers to the college's intention to be 'open to a broad community'.

2 The college draws its students from the conurbation of Brighton and Hove, which has a population of 300,000, and from the surrounding region, especially from mid-Sussex. Brighton and Hove is a cosmopolitan community with an economy based upon service industries, particularly financial services and tourism. There are significant areas of urban deprivation in east Brighton, now designated an Education Action Zone, and in the inner parts of the conurbation where much of the population is young and mobile. Of the college's students, 29% live in these areas.

3 The majority of the college's students aged 16 to 19 years come from six partner secondary schools in Brighton where the participation rate at 16 averages above 80%. However, there are considerable variations; rates are below 30% in two schools. Within Brighton and Hove itself there are: another sixth form college; a large general further education college; four local authority schools; and several independent schools all with sixth forms.

4 The college has well-developed links with other local providers of education and training through involvement in: the Brighton and Hove strategic partnership for widening participation; the Sussex sixth form colleges consortium; the pan-Sussex colleges group; and Sussex

Enterprise (the local training and enterprise council). The college sponsors the Friends Centre, which is run by the local Quakers, and is associated with the 'FE Link College' for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

5 Varndean College offers general education courses at intermediate and advanced levels in eight of the 10 programme areas funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college's facilities are available to the local community through its community education programme. To support a variety of leisure and recreational pursuits, the college maintains links with other providers, particularly the Varndean sports school during holidays and at weekends, and the Hopscotch Nursery throughout the year. The college's premises are fully occupied by externally managed language schools during the Easter and summer holiday periods. There are 76 teaching staff (58 full-time equivalent) on day courses, 29 on evening work, and 25 support staff.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during October 1998. Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report, drawn up the sample of work to be inspected, and examined the college's data on students' achievements. These data were checked against primary sources, including class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies, and found to be mainly reliable; there were only minor errors. Data for 1996 and 1997 were taken from the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR). The college questioned the reliability of some retention figures for two-year general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) courses, and these were recalculated. The inspection was completed by nine inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 40 days.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	14	16	7	0	0	37
GCSE	0	3	3	0	0	6
Other	1	2	1	0	0	4
Total (No)	15	21	11	0	0	47
Total (%)	32	45	23	0	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*

They observed 47 lessons, examined students' work, and scrutinised a wide range of college documents. They held meetings with governors, managers, teachers and students, as well as representatives of the local community and partner schools.

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, 77% were judged to be good or outstanding. No lessons were found to be less than satisfactory. These gradings reveal a significant improvement since the last inspection. The profile is substantially better than the national profile recorded for colleges inspected during 1997-98. Lessons judged to be outstanding were mainly in science and psychology.

Context

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons inspected and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Attendance in lessons in science, psychology and sociology was particularly good at about 90%.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Varndean College	12.3	85
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

Science

Grade 2

9 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in biology, social biology, chemistry, physics and general science, including GCE A level, general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and access to higher education programmes. Inspectors agreed with the overall findings of the college's self-assessment report. At the time of the inspection, significant progress had been made in implementing a detailed action plan to address identified weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-planned and well-organised courses
- good standards in theory and practical teaching
- high levels of achievement and progression in the access to science course
- good GCE A level and improving GCSE results
- a highly qualified and flexible technician support team
- effective tracking of students' progress
- good tutorial support

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates in some subjects
- little structured development of key skills within science subjects
- cramped accommodation for chemistry

10 There is an appropriate range of science courses. These include GCE A level in biology, and modular GCE A levels in social biology, chemistry, physics and electronics. A GCSE single award in co-ordinated science has recently replaced single subject sciences; this development more closely accords with the previous experience of pupils progressing from the main partner schools. In 1996, the college

successfully introduced a one-year access to higher education course in science.

11 All courses have appropriate schemes of work. Inspectors agreed with the conclusion of the self-assessment report that assessments, projects and supporting resources are well organised. All lessons observed were well planned and were supported by well-prepared teaching materials. Teachers ensure that students have the opportunity to assemble notes of high quality. The content of some lessons was exceptionally challenging but effectively managed by teachers. Students are developing a good scientific discipline which includes the appropriate use of technical language. Practical work is carried out competently and safely. Homework of an appropriate standard is set regularly. Students' work is marked promptly. Effective written feedback indicates how the work can be improved. There is insufficient use of information technology (IT) in programmes at GCE A level and no co-ordinated approach within science subjects to the development of other key skills.

12 There are high levels of retention, achievement and progression in the science access course. GCE A level achievements are at or above the national averages for sixth form colleges. In general, students are performing better than their GCSE scores at school might indicate. The self-assessment report identified the very low levels of achievement and retention in GCSE science in 1997. As a result, an action plan which included the setting of agreed improvement targets was drawn up. The rates of achievement and retention improved dramatically in 1998. The college has recognised that retention rates are low in a some subjects at GCE A level, especially biology and social biology, and is taking action to remedy this situation. The essay competition, 'Women into Science and Engineering', which is run by University College, London and the Wellcome Foundation, was won by Varndean College students in 1996 and 1998, and a recommendation was awarded to a Varndean

Curriculum Areas

College student in 1997. Such wider opportunities to enrich students' experiences in science are appropriately acknowledged as a strength in the self-assessment report.

13 The science curriculum area is well managed. Staff have clear roles and responsibilities. There is an appropriate framework of meetings for area, subject and technical staff with agenda for consultation and development issues. The reorganisation since the last inspection of three science departments into a single science curriculum area, has resulted in significant benefits in terms of: shared best practice and expertise; co-operative working; and efficient use of resources. The area has an effective system for personal tutorial support for both its adult and younger students. The tracking of students' individual progress is well developed through a local database which is regularly reviewed by staff.

14 Teaching staff are well qualified and are supported by highly qualified technicians. Together they form an integrated team; technicians are regularly involved in teaching and demonstrator activities. Science equipment is adequate for all the courses that are offered. The college's highly sophisticated analytical chemistry equipment, much of which has been supplied by industry and the two local universities, constitutes an exceptional facility. The self-assessment report does not provide any judgement on the specialist science accommodation. The biology and physics areas are satisfactory. The chemistry laboratories are too cramped for the sizes of the groups being taught in them. This shortcoming is increased by the limited storage space, the lack of an instrument room and some poor housekeeping within the practical working areas.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE science (single award)	2	Expected completions	*	18	23
		Retention (%)	*	67	87
		Achievement (%)	*	17	50
GCE A level physics (two year)	3	Expected completions	25	24	19
		Retention (%)	88	79	74
		Achievement (%)	73	89	87
GCE A level chemistry (two year)	3	Expected completions	25	43	28
		Retention (%)	64	88	71
		Achievement (%)	94	86	81
GCE A level biology (two year)	3	Expected completions	29	34	29
		Retention (%)	69	56	62
		Achievement (%)	85	100	84
GCE A level social biology (two year)	3	Expected completions	28	39	34
		Retention (%)	71	59	53
		Achievement (%)	80	61	78
Access to science	3	Expected completions	*	13	11
		Retention (%)	*	85	73
		Achievement (%)	*	91	100

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

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 2

15 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in art and design, photography and art history.

Inspectors were in overall agreement with the college's assessment of its provision in art and design and found that some weaknesses had already been remedied.

Key strengths

- well-planned lessons
- well-chosen visual exemplars
- the strong emphasis on drawing skills and well-maintained workbooks
- good examination results at GCE A level
- progression to higher education
- the range of specialisms and enrichment activities

Weaknesses

- some aspects of classroom management
- declining retention rates in art at GCE A level
- limitations of accommodation

16 The area provides a range of courses in art and design and photography at levels 2 and 3. An intermediate general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) in art and design was introduced in 1997. The daytime course in history of art is offered on a one-year basis. Courses are carefully planned and the range of specialist activities is a major attraction for students.

17 Overall, the standard of teaching is good. However, lesson observation grades awarded by inspectors were not as uniformly high as those recorded in the college's self-assessment report. Studio-based teaching is a strong feature; staff offer individual guidance and support. Lessons, which are generally well planned, were more successful where the intended outcomes were

clearly stated and where visual exemplars were used effectively to support students' learning. Examples of poor classroom management included: students sitting with their backs to the teacher; an over concentration by the teacher on the work of one student; and an inappropriate choice of activities which failed to engage students' interest. Assignments and projects are imaginatively designed and written feedback in workbooks, although variable in quality, is provided weekly.

18 Students' achievements in photography, which included the award of a certificate of excellence to a student in 1998, and pass rates of 100% for three years at GCE A level, were identified as outstanding by the college. Inspectors agreed. Most recent pass rates in art and design at GCE A level were above the national average for sixth form colleges, and significantly so at grades C or above. Many students progress to higher education courses in art. In 1997, retention on courses at GCE A level in design, photography, history of art and art were below the national averages. Retention in 1998 improved to 80% or higher in all subjects at GCE A level except in art which fell to 61%. Practical work is often outstanding and colourful. Selections from this work are displayed in the studios and throughout the college and are used as exemplars. Workbooks are used to reinforce the importance of drawing skills and are well maintained by students. Many students speak confidently and articulately about their work. In its self-assessment report, the college identified as a weakness the problem of students failing to meet deadlines in compliance with the requirements of the examining board. Action is being taken to resolve this matter.

19 Courses are well planned. Much thought is given to project design. Extended work schemes are provided for students and, in their second year, copies are sent to their parents. Some of these are handwritten by teachers and could be better presented. The enrichment programme, which includes visits to galleries,

Curriculum Areas

an annual visit to Italy, and workshops given by visiting practitioners, is much valued by students. Opportunities are provided for students to display their work at external venues, including the Brighton Festival. GNVQ students produced some outstanding sculptures for a street procession in Brighton. The high reputation of the programme area in the local community, together with action taken to improve liaison with local schools, has contributed to an increase of almost 50% in the recruitment of students in 1998.

20 Whilst there has been a reorganisation of art and design studios and additional storage space created for three-dimensional work, all studios would benefit from further refurbishment. This weakness is recognised in the college's self-assessment report. Lack of space in the ceramics studio makes effective one-to-one teaching difficult. The large number of photography students places increasing pressure on darkrooms and three-dimensional and photography studios. Despite these constraints, the studios are well managed to allow for a diverse range of activities.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	*	*	12
		Retention (%)	*	*	75
		Achievement (%)	*	*	78
GCSE photography	2	Expected completions	34	26	19
		Retention (%)	50	69	89
		Achievement (%)	76	100	88
GCE A level photography	3	Expected completions	30	26	31
		Retention (%)	73	73	94
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100
GCE AS photography	3	Expected completions	16	14	20
		Retention (%)	56	57	90
		Achievement (%)	89	100	94
GCE A level art	3	Expected completions	64	77	74
		Retention (%)	78	75	61
		Achievement (%)	98	79	98
GCE A level design	3	Expected completions	14	22	15
		Retention (%)	64	68	87
		Achievement (%)	100	87	92
GCE A level art history	3	Expected completions	13	13	6
		Retention (%)	69	77	83
		Achievement (%)	100	90	100

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

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

English

Grade 2

21 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering three GCE A level courses, GCSE English and English for speakers of other languages. The inspection supported the overall judgement in the college's self-assessment report, but gave different emphases to some features of strength and weakness.

Key strengths

- stimulating teaching
- a well-planned, imaginative and effective induction course at GCE A level
- the confident and lively engagement of students in lessons
- good examination results in literature at GCE A level
- the responsiveness of teachers to students seeking help
- the commitment of teaching teams to the review and improvement of achievements

Weaknesses

- too few opportunities for students to consolidate their understanding
- insufficient guidance for students on improving their performance
- pass rates below the national average for language at GCE A level

22 Whilst schemes of work in English are generally well constructed, they focus on the teacher's role and give insufficient attention to students' learning objectives, assessment criteria and the development of skills. Lessons are well planned. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that students experience an appropriate variety of teaching methods and learning activities which sustain interest and motivation. For example, in a 45

minute Shakespeare lesson, learning activities moved from a prepared dramatic reading of a short scene through individual brainstorming of key issues and on to students in pairs sharing these issues. Conclusions were then given to the teacher who summarised them on the board in a structured format; a class discussion concluded the lesson. The logical development of these different activities ensured a high quality of concentration and achievement in the class. In general, however, students in the subject need greater opportunity to consolidate their understanding of key concepts and processes.

23 The induction course is imaginative, carefully planned and valued by students. It lays the foundation for their confident and lively engagement in lessons. Students speak positively of the way induction helps them to adjust to the new learning demands that they face. Students' involvement in the subject is enhanced through an extensive enrichment programme and extra-curricular activities. For example, in a literature lesson, textual analysis was illuminated by regular reference to a recent visit to a live performance.

24 Relationships between teachers and students are friendly and purposeful. Attendance and punctuality are good, as the self-assessment report indicates. Teachers make supportive and challenging interventions in class activity. For example, in a discussion of an aspect of linguistics with students on the first year of a GCE A level course, the teacher insisted on precision and clarity in students' use of technical terms without being intimidating. Students find their teachers approachable and willing to help. However, lessons incorporate insufficient systematic guidance for students on ways to improve their use of independent study time and to raise their overall performance. For example, students' files frequently lacked basic organisation and students were unclear about the purpose of the various types of material which they store in their files. Work of an

Curriculum Areas

appropriate standard is regularly set and marked. Students were often unsure about how they should interpret marks or grades. Written comment on their work is on the whole insufficiently constructive.

25 Retention and pass rates on courses in literature, which are taken by the majority of students at GCE A level in this programme area, are good, being at or around the high national average for sixth form colleges. In the combined language and literature course, pass rates at grades A to E are good. The smaller language course at GCE A level attracts a high proportion of relatively less able students. While pass rates are below the national average, value-added indicators are positive. Retention on the language course is a problem which is recognised by the college but was not recorded in the self-assessment report. Measures to address this problem are having a positive impact. Several special factors, including the temporary enrolment of a group of visiting German students, combined to create an

untypical retention figure in 1998. At GCSE, results have improved and exceeded the national average in 1998. As was recorded in the college's self-assessment report, about 20% of students proceed each year to degree courses in English and related subjects.

26 A well-qualified, committed and enthusiastic staff is organised into course teams which work well together. They plan, manage and review programmes and methods. The aim of the teams is to improve students' achievements. For example, each course team has developed a detailed student handbook that contains a variety of informative material and advice to support students throughout their courses. The English teaching occurs mainly in a block of three temporary classrooms. These rooms are well cared for and are decorated with attractive and appropriate wall displays. The restrictions on space and on the appropriate use of audiovisual aids do, however, place limits on the range of teaching and learning activities that can be designed.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE English	2	Expected completions	102	107	82
		Retention (%)	76	74	79
		Achievement (%)	58	49	60
GCE A level English literature	3	Expected completions	89	74	74
		Retention (%)	81	86	81
		Achievement (%)	96	94	94
GCE A level English language and literature	3	Expected completions	26	40	43
		Retention (%)	69	70	58
		Achievement (%)	100	82	100
GCE A level English language	3	Expected completions	21	10	19
		Retention (%)	76	70	37
		Achievement (%)	88	71	71

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

Curriculum Areas

Psychology and Sociology

Grade 2

27 Inspectors observed 11 classes, covering courses at GCE A/AS level and GCSE in sociology and psychology, and also the social sciences access course. Inspectors agreed with many aspects of the self-assessment report, but found that it did not adequately reflect the weaknesses they had identified.

Key strengths

- well-planned lessons and schemes of work
- good teaching
- active learning within the classroom
- availability of excellent support material for students
- results and achievements in psychology at GCE A level
- committed and responsive students
- the achievement of added value for a significant number of students

Weaknesses

- poor retention in sociology at GCE A level
- limited feedback on some students' written work

28 The quality of teaching is uniformly good and, in many cases, outstanding. Teachers were well prepared; they had good working relationships with their students. Courses are well planned and schemes of work are designed to reflect the need to provide for students with different abilities. The college's self-assessment report recognised these features as a strength of the provision. Students receive handouts and written materials which are of high quality. In sociology, there was a well-designed handout to help students to plan and research their project work. In most lessons, teachers used a wide range of appropriate teaching methods and

provided an active learning environment that engaged the attention of students.

29 The teaching team meets regularly. It reviews the effectiveness of the courses that are offered. Teachers want to retain their students on the courses and to improve their achievements. At the same time they want to continue to offer opportunities to students with widely differing abilities and levels of educational attainment. For example, they are considering whether the one-year course in sociology at GCE A level effectively meets the needs of students. Efforts have been made to improve retention through the implementation of student support systems and the setting of targets for those who enrolled on two-year courses in 1998.

30 Attendance at classes was good, although in some instances tutors did not challenge students who arrived late for classes. The use of student self-assessment, with appropriate teacher support and verification, has been adopted. Students are encouraged to develop the skills of self-review and to set appropriate targets for improvement. Teachers are concerned to help and encourage their students; many examples were observed of teachers both supporting and challenging them. However, some students were unresponsive, and not all students gained from the richness of stimuli. In one otherwise well-prepared sociology class, the teacher did not provide sufficient opportunities for students to make oral contributions or to demonstrate that they had understood the content of the lesson. Teachers' written comments on students' marked work were sometimes inadequate. Comments did not always fully explain why a particular grade was awarded. Teachers reported that students received oral feedback on their work. For students on two-year courses the lack of written commentary from their teachers is a weakness of the provision.

31 Inspectors could not agree with the college self-assessment report's overall assessment of

Curriculum Areas

students' performance as good or outstanding in external examinations. Examination results in psychology at GCE A level are outstanding. Teachers are justifiably proud of the achievement and degree of improvement of those students who come from areas of social exclusion and disadvantage. However, the GCSE psychology course had poor achievement rates in 1997 and 1998, despite a reduced intake of students. Achievements in GCSE sociology have declined to below national averages. Retention on sociology at GCE A level has been uniformly poor for three years. The college claims that these statistics result in part from the open access policy pursued in sociology and psychology. Many of the students were responsive, and showed good motivation in class

and demonstrated an appropriate understanding of their subject. A significant proportion of students' written work was of a good standard.

32 Teaching staff are well qualified. This strength is recognised by the college in its self-assessment. Resources for the social sciences are adequate and include schemes of work which are stored centrally. Handouts are shared by teachers as a common resource. Library bookstocks are sufficient for the courses that are offered. Computer-based learning is supported and encouraged by teachers in the curriculum area. The accommodation used for teaching is adequate. Wall space is used creatively in some classrooms and encourages learning.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE psychology	2	Expected completions	25	29	16
		Retention (%)	72	69	100
		Achievement (%)	67	30	53
GCSE sociology	2	Expected completions	27	29	12
		Retention (%)	74	69	92
		Achievement (%)	65	50	45
GCE A level psychology	3	Expected completions	49	67	72
		Retention (%)	82	79	76
		Achievement (%)	100	100	98
GCE AS psychology	3	Expected completions	19	12	12
		Retention (%)	47	75	100
		Achievement (%)	100	100	71
GCE A level sociology	3	Expected completions	54	44	51
		Retention (%)	69	66	47
		Achievement (%)	73	76	83

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

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

33 The college's self-assessment report on support for students is comprehensive and evaluative. Inspectors generally agreed with the college's identification of strengths, but found that it had not identified some weaknesses.

Key strengths

- marketing and liaison with schools
- comprehensive pre-course guidance and induction
- the guidance for careers and higher education
- a supportive and friendly ethos
- thorough systems for reviewing students' progress
- the welfare and counselling service

Weaknesses

- ineffective screening of learning support needs for advanced level students
- the targeting and monitoring of learning support

34 The college's pre-entry guidance for students builds on its excellent relationships with local schools. Regular progression opportunities, including presentations for year 10 and 11 pupils, open evenings and 'taster' days, attract potential students. Students make informed choices of programmes of study; inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that this process was effective and impartial. Mature students also enjoy, and appreciate, high levels of guidance to appropriate programmes of study.

35 Induction activities are well planned and provide a welcoming and supportive entry to the college. Students speak highly of their transition to college life. All students are given copies of

the college charter, which explains their rights and responsibilities. The college's liaison with parents is good. There are regular parent evenings and a comprehensive reporting system. Following the introduction of an electronic registration system for students, there has been an improvement in overall attendance and punctuality. Parents are informed of any problems as they arise. The level of information and advice that parents receive from the college is good.

36 A revised guidance policy was introduced in September 1998; inspectors felt it was too early to evaluate fully its effectiveness. Tutorials for full-time students are divided between group and individual sessions. Group sessions are not always effective or purposeful in the eyes of some students. Individual action-planning and progress review are effective in monitoring student performance. In programmes at GCE A level and advanced GNVQ, this approach takes account of predictions based on the potential indicated by students' previous GCSE achievements. A system of 'causes for concern' and 'dialogue' sheets is effective in recording student referral to guidance leaders and other support services.

37 Inspectors were unable to agree with the college's overall self-assessment of learning support. The college's learning support and counselling annual report provides an evaluation based on surveys of students' views. The responses are largely positive. Those students identified as needing learning support receive good levels of support. Students with specific learning difficulties are appropriately supported; they often receive financial support from the college to obtain a statement of their needs. However, the assessment of the learning support needs of students on advanced level courses uses materials that are not effective in identifying their needs, and a relatively low number of students receive support. There is no formal assessment of the progress in the development of skills made by individual students as a result of learning support.

Cross-college Provision

The annual report highlights key issues in learning support and makes recommendations for improvement. At the time of the inspection, some of these issues were yet to be resolved. To improve further its service to students, the learning support team plans to undertake training so that it can give appropriate support to students with dyslexia and to those with complex learning difficulties. Students speak very highly of the academic support that they receive, and recognise that teachers are generous in the time they spend helping their students.

38 Personal support services to students are good. An accredited counsellor provides therapeutic counselling of a high quality to students, and occasionally to families and staff. A welfare officer gives students advice on financial matters such as information on grants, travel support and benefits. A nursery on the college site is also available for students' use and provides a number of places at discounted rates. Part-time evening students are able to take advantage of these services by appointment.

39 Students have the opportunity to engage in a wide variety of social, cultural and recreational activities. The open college programme provides opportunities in sporting, community and college-based activities. The college provides an 'information technology for all' programme which ensures that all students have basic IT skills. The students' union provides a useful forum for student opinion and representation, as well as providing social activities. The students' union benefits from the advice of a student liaison officer, who is a member of college staff, and the attendance by two college site managers at executive committee meetings. The college supports a number of clubs and activities, for example an active politics society and regular drama group. Christian students are provided with opportunities to meet weekly for an act of religious worship.

40 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that the provision of careers guidance is very effective in helping students to gain entry to higher education. Excellent references are written by teachers in support of students' applications. The college has achieved the 'Committed to Careers' award from Sussex Careers, and supplements the contractual service with a careers co-ordinator, a comprehensive careers library and computer-aided careers guidance. Recent initiatives to develop support for students entering employment are promising.

General Resources

Grade 3

41 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the college's self-assessment report. However, they identified some weaknesses which were not noted by the college.

Key strengths

- the notable refurbishment of some areas
- the improved access to buildings for wheelchair users
- a significant increase in the number of computers
- the improved stock in the learning resources centre
- the provision of quiet working spaces for students

Weaknesses

- substantial parts of the accommodation in need of considerable structural improvement
- an underdeveloped accommodation strategy
- cramped conditions in the learning resource centre

Cross-college Provision

- no policy for the replacement of equipment
- insufficient storage space
- the lack of open access to IT facilities for part-time students

42 The college occupies a large green-field site in Surrenden, north of Brighton, which it shares with four schools that are maintained by the local authority. The main building housed a former grammar school. It was built in the early 1930s, with extensions added in the 1950s and 1960s. At the time of incorporation, most of the buildings were in a neglected state; some of the accommodation remains in poor condition. However, inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that improvements have been made in recent years. These include: replacement of the heating system; building a mezzanine floor in the Hone refectory for social use by students; refurbishing the design and biology areas; and installing a new modern languages centre. Access to buildings and parking facilities for wheelchair users have been improved. Nevertheless, several classrooms, changing rooms and toilets need considerable structural improvement. The first aid room is unfit for its purpose, a weakness not mentioned in the college's self-assessment report. Some staff workrooms are cramped, and lack sufficient storage space. The corridors in the quadrangle of the original building are open to the elements and skylights in the building used for art studies are defective. The college acknowledged in its self-assessment report that it has inadequate indoor sports facilities.

43 The college's existing and limited accommodation strategy is rapidly becoming out of date. Feasibility studies are exploring the possibility of comprehensively improving sports facilities and of providing on site a specialised unit for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college hopes to embark on a more ambitious accommodation programme. As recorded in the college's self-assessment

report, the condition and internal decoration of most of the buildings are under constant review. The college has its own small maintenance team on site and employs a part-time decorator. Although there is a system for identifying work to be done, there is no maintenance programme that expresses the college's priorities. The premises are generally clean, if shabby. The college acknowledged in its self-assessment report that it does not have a policy or programme for the replacement of equipment. Some of the classroom furniture is old and is now in need of replacement. Overall, the college uses its space efficiently during the day but not so well in the evenings.

44 The college's report justifiably stresses the significant improvement in the number of computers since the last inspection. There are 144 modern computers, a good ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students of 1:7. The college has an IT development policy. It now provides a designated open access IT room for students that contains 24 machines, of which 20 are connected to the internet. However, timetabling decisions prevent open access to this provision for part-time evening students. This shortcoming is not noted in the college's self-assessment report. Staff report a high level of satisfaction with the availability of general teaching resources which are centralised to ensure their efficient use.

45 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that stocks in the learning resource centre have been improved since the last inspection. Good liaison exists between teachers and the staff of the centre. It now contains 14,400 texts and videos compared with only 10,000 at the previous inspection. The college subscribes to 63 periodicals. There are 66 CD-ROMs, 30 of which are available on the IT network. Satellite television is available. Of the five computers in the centre, two are linked to the internet, and are designated for students' research work rather than wordprocessing. The centre's catalogue is now computerised and usage is monitored. Videos are housed on the

Cross-college Provision

bookshelves alongside texts, which has considerably increased their use. The centre's budget is modest at £11,500, amounting to approximately £11 per student, and is lower than during the previous inspection. The level of staffing is barely adequate for the number of students using the facility.

46 There are 59 work spaces in the learning resources centre, including 18 which are designated for silent work. Although improvements have been made, the area is cramped and is unsuitable for wheelchair users, weaknesses that were not recorded in the self-assessment report. The college publishes a timetable of rooms that may be used for quiet study when they are not occupied by classes.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

47 Inspectors agreed with several of the strengths and the two weaknesses in quality assurance identified by the college. There were other strengths and weaknesses that were not identified.

Key strengths

- the high standard of reviews of curriculum areas
- the extended use of value-added data
- effective processes for collecting and analysing students' views
- the linkage of staff development and appraisal to strategic planning

Weaknesses

- a self-assessment process which is not fully integrated with existing procedures for quality assurance
- insufficient rigour in target-setting at course level
- no formal arrangements for quality assurance in administrative areas

48 The college's self-assessment report indicates that the present review system for quality assurance, introduced in 1997, is supported by a coherent policy and set of procedures which staff and governors understand. Annual reviews of the quality of courses require the use of a standard set of performance indicators against which to measure performance. Area co-ordinators summarise and collate information on student performances, and take account of student feedback. Students' views are sought frequently through questionnaires, case reviews, and exit interviews. The information gained by these means is constructively used. The quality review process provides the basis of agreed improvement targets for the following year. The college recognised in its self-assessment report that the effectiveness of the new procedures is not yet proven.

49 The self-assessment report was produced specifically for the inspection; the college has acknowledged this approach as a weakness. The process is not at present an integral part of the new quality review system. Self-assessments relating to each of the 13 curriculum areas were drafted by area co-ordinators in consultation with colleagues and drew heavily on existing reviews of quality. Staff were given ample opportunities to contribute. They felt involved in the self-assessment and believed the process to be beneficial. Lesson observations were conducted to inform judgements about teaching and learning. Observations were graded and each member of staff was observed at least once, and given feedback. Grades were somewhat better than those awarded subsequently by inspectors. Some staff are unsure about whether or how the self-assessment process will continue. The weaknesses identified through self-assessment are addressed in action plans but there is considerable variability in the quality of these plans. In many cases, the planned action and the arrangements for monitoring progress are insufficiently specific.

Cross-college Provision

50 The senior management team reviewed all sections except governance. External views for all cross-college aspects were provided by two local head teachers and an officer of Sussex Enterprise. Groups of governors were involved in reviewing each cross-college section prior to approval of the complete report by the corporation.

51 There are no formal arrangements for quality assurance in administrative areas; this shortcoming was not identified as a weakness in the college's self-assessment report. However, staff involved in the provision of services to students do undertake reviews. The evaluation of performance in support and guidance services for students includes careers education, learning support and counselling. For example, the counsellor keeps comprehensive records of usage of the service, including an evaluation of its impact on individuals who have received counselling. Learning support staff conduct regular student and staff questionnaires. Comprehensive reports are written and appropriate action is subsequently taken. These reports provided evidence for the college's self-assessment report.

52 The use of value-added information to monitor general performance across the college is well established; it has recently been extended to monitor and review the progress of individual students taking courses at GCE A level. Students' actual progress and achievement is compared with predictions of their potential achievement. The outcomes are monitored effectively through the tutorial programme.

53 Staff development and appraisal are linked to strategic planning. A new scheme for staff appraisal, that included teacher observation, was introduced in September 1997. It builds on an established process which has been modified; the system applies to all staff. Just under 1% of the staffing budget is allocated to staff development. A third of the budget is retained centrally for training staff with cross-

college responsibilities, in particular for management training. Needs are mainly identified through staff appraisal and, recently, through quality reviews. Co-ordinators evaluate the work of their teams annually, but produce no cost-benefit analysis. The college achieved Investor in People status in December 1996.

Governance

Grade 3

54 In their self-assessment report, governors were successful in identifying some of the strengths and weaknesses that featured in their work. They failed, however, to focus on key issues which were of particular concern to inspectors and auditors.

Key strengths

- effective involvement in strategic planning
- a broad range of relevant experience and skills
- an effective working relationship between governors and senior managers
- the detailed consideration of financial forecasts and annual budgets
- direct and constructive links with students, staff and courses
- a strong sense of corporate identity

Weaknesses

- the inadequate monitoring of the college's non-financial performance
- the restricted scope of the work of internal auditors
- an out-of-date code of conduct and register of interests
- insufficient attention to guidance from the FEFC
- no procedural standing orders

Cross-college Provision

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

56 Governors bring a wide range of expertise and skills from education, business and the professions to their work with the college. The corporation has 17 members; at the time of the inspection there were two vacancies. The college has established a search committee as recommended by the FEFC audit service during a previous review. However, the terms of reference of this committee and its procedures do not reflect the latest guidance from the FEFC.

57 The corporation has established an appropriate range of committees, which are supported by clear and timely minutes. Particular strengths include: the extent to which all governors are aware of the detailed workings of each committee; and the quality of the contribution from student and staff governors. The governors' commitment to an open mode of operation is given emphasis by the attendance of staff observers, for example, on the finance and personnel committees. Student involvement in the work of the corporation is a strength.

58 Amendments to the terms of reference and the standing orders for all committees were approved by the corporation, on the recommendation of the FEFC's audit service. However, at the time of inspection, the amendments had not been actioned. There are no written standing orders for the conduct of meetings of the corporation and its committees. The lack of these arrangements is not recorded in the self-assessment report. While the corporation has adopted a code of conduct and a register of governors' interests, neither fully reflects the most recent guidance arising from the recommendations of the Nolan committee.

59 Governors are closely involved in the preparation, evaluation and approval of the strategic plan. They then continue to address strategic issues facing the college. The outcome of the strategic planning process is a well-structured plan which is appropriately integrated with the three-year financial forecasts. The finance committee closely reviews the college's financial position at least twice each term and the chairman of the finance committee identifies key issues for governors at corporation meetings. The audit committee's interpretation of its role has continued to be very restricted. This shortcoming is reflected in the scope of the internal audit service, which has not considered important operational systems within the college, for example, governance, strategic planning and budget-setting. In addition, the requirements of Council Circular 98/15, *Audit Code of Practice* have not yet been properly considered by the audit committee.

60 There are effective working relationships between governors and senior managers, which is reflected in the flow of information between them, and by the principal's report to each meeting of the corporation. The governors are aware of curriculum issues such as retention and achievement rates. However, they do not adequately monitor the college's non-financial performance nor the implementation of the board's decisions. Governors have not attended to the appraisal and professional development of the principal until recently, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report.

Cross-college Provision

Management

Grade 2

61 The judgements in the self-assessment report were generally supported by inspectors, although weaknesses were formulated in very general terms. The report omitted a significant weakness.

Key strengths

- the open and consultative management style
- the clear organisational structure
- strategies to promote the understanding of roles and responsibilities
- the strong strategic links with neighbouring schools
- the range of collaborative partnerships
- effective financial reporting, control and monitoring

Weaknesses

- some failures in the implementation of college systems and processes
- poor monitoring of the health and safety policy

62 Since the last inspection the management structure has been reorganised. Senior staff fulfil several roles. A more broadly based senior management team now brings together staff with overall responsibility for academic programmes, student guidance and resources. There are cross-college teams, for example to deal with issues that involve equality of opportunity, and groups with specific functions, for example marketing and liaison with external agencies. The college publishes the terms of reference for all working groups as well as an annual calendar that gives the dates of group meetings. Support staff participate fully in these groups. Their involvement in the college's activities is further promoted by 'pairing' some

support staff with teachers; they then attend tutorials as co-tutors.

63 The new structure has led to more meetings, but staff agree that they are purposeful. Meetings are generally supported by appropriate documentation. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that the open and consultative management style is a key strength. Lines of communication are now seen as clearer, stronger and shorter. Line managers are in more regular contact with their staff and as a consequence have a much better understanding of their work. The senior management team has recently revised its own routines to ensure a more effective use of time for strategic and operational issues. As a result of these structural and operational changes, there is a sense of ownership of a shared vision among the staff which inspectors recognised as a strength in the college.

64 Staff are involved in the strategic planning process. They recognise where their own areas of work fit within the college's annual operating statement. Even where decisions are unpalatable, staff understand the thinking that lies behind them. Increasingly, the focus of management meetings is the monitoring, review and evaluation of current performance. While college processes and systems are understood by staff, they are not always implemented with the same degree of thoroughness. The monitoring of management targets and action plans is uneven in quality across the college.

65 The production of management information at college and department levels is good. Staff have access to the management information system through a network of 36 terminals. Within some subject areas, additional records are kept, because the disaggregation of data by subject is difficult to achieve on the central system. The college is taking full precautions to ensure its systems are year 2000 compliant.

Cross-college Provision

66 The self-assessment report identified financial monitoring as a strength; inspectors and auditors agreed with this judgement. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. Management accounts are closely monitored by the senior management team each month. They include a cashflow summary and a rolling cashflow forecast. In addition, there is a summary of performance against key financial performance indicators. The finance team is run by the director of resources who leads an experienced team. The financial regulations are updated annually. Each month, budget holders receive clear statements of actual and committed expenditure. The internal and external auditors have not identified any significant weaknesses in the college's systems of internal financial control.

67 Some cross-college policies are the remit of specific staff groups. For example, the equal opportunities group, which includes a member of the senior management team, meets at least termly. A confidential incident book, and a special 'pigeon hole', which the group have made available for the staff, aid reporting and monitoring. Students and staff have raised issues with the group and appropriate action has resulted. Inadequate attention is given to the implementation of the college's health and safety policy; the lines of reporting remain unclear and there is confusion about who is accountable for action. This potentially serious weakness was not identified in the college's self-assessment report.

68 In its self-assessment report the college identified as a strength the range of its activities with external agencies. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. The college works closely with the partner schools which share the Surrenden site; the development of joint facilities is an agreed priority. The college sponsors the work of the Brighton Friends Centre funded by the FEFC and shares in the provision of adult education with Longhill School. The college is

also undertaking a feasibility study with the new Brighton and Hove unitary authority to explore the possibility of joint on-site provision for students with learning difficulties and a basic skills programmes for mature students. The college is a member of the Sussex Consortium of sixth form colleges which aims to promote collaboration between colleges.

Conclusions

69 The inspection team found that the college's self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. The report was comprehensive, largely evaluative and well presented. However, some sections were more rigorous than others. In most respects, inspectors agreed with the judgements reached by the college in its curriculum areas. In four of the cross-college aspects, inspectors considered the college to be overgenerous.

70 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 (September 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	63
19-24 years	4
25+ years	33
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (September 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	0
Intermediate	41
Advanced	59
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	184	90	20
Engineering	8	0	1
Business	102	51	11
Hotel and catering	48	0	3
Health and community care	25	21	3
Art and design	110	15	9
Humanities	467	269	53
Basic education	2	0	0
Total	946	446	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 29% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (September 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	53	5	0	58
Supporting direct learning contact	7	0	0	7
Other support	18	0	0	18
Total	78	5	0	83

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£2,748,000	£2,845,000	£2,781,000
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£18.50	£17.68	£16.93
Payroll as a proportion of income	76%	73%	74%
Achievement of funding target	103%	108%	98%
Diversity of income	9%	*	*
Operating surplus	-£67,000	£2,000	-£93,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

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

Diversity of income – Council Circular 97/35 (1996)

Operating surplus – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

*data not available

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	*	*	*	78	54	126
	Retention (%)	*	*	*	*	*	*
	Achievement (%)	*	*	*	77	95	61
2	Expected completions	686	777	642	66	217	97
	Retention (%)	*	*	*	*	*	*
	Achievement (%)	79	65	93	58	82	87
3	Expected completions	*	1,297	1,486	*	93	139
	Retention (%)	*	*	*	*	*	*
	Achievement (%)	84	87	88	88	67	76
4 or 5	Expected completions	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Short courses	Expected completions	25	13	29	39	82	38
	Retention (%)	56	100	100	97	98	100
	Achievement (%)	64	100	78	61	99	87
Unknown/ unclassified (mainly OCN)	Expected completions	*	*	*	141	258	340
	Retention (%)	*	*	*	69	74	71
	Achievement (%)	96	100	96	61	99	79

Source: ISR

-ISR data not collected

*ISR data may not be reliable

n/a not applicable

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