

West Herts College

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

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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 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	10	53	30	7	–
Cross-college provision	14	54	23	7	2

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 104 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college 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 students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. 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 included.

Summary

West Herts College

Eastern Region

Inspected May 2000

West Herts College is a large general further education college with four main campuses and four smaller sites in Watford and Hemel Hempstead. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report. Staff from all areas of the college contributed to its production. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment but considered that some of the weaknesses, especially those relating to teaching and learning and students' achievements, had not been given enough significance. The college was jointly inspected by teams of inspectors from the FEFC and the TSC.

The college makes provision in all programme areas funded by the FEFC. Provision in six of these areas was inspected together with basic skills and aspects of cross-college provision. The proportion of lessons judged to be good or outstanding was well below the national average for 1998-99. Students' achievements are high in some areas, for example in hospitality and catering. In other areas there are some poor retention and achievement rates. Class sizes were slightly below the average for the sector. The college has productive links with employers, schools and the community. Students are

provided with helpful information about the broad range of courses which the college offers. The induction programme is well organised for full-time students. There have been some improvements in the quality of general resources since the last inspection, including substantial investment in IT resources. Staff have a wide range of opportunities for development and training. The college has successfully addressed the lack of clarity in management roles and procedures but some aspects of course management are ineffective. Difficulties with the college management information system have restricted the use to which data have been put. The college makes good use of the wide range of expertise on the governing body. Corporation members have a clear oversight of the strategic direction of the college. The college should address: some poor students' retention and achievements; the quality of teaching and learning; the quality of tutorial provision; the use of performance indicators, statistical data and targets for quality improvement; the weak management of some courses; and the poor standard of some teaching accommodation. Governors should ensure that the evaluation of college performance is more effective.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Computing and information technology	3	Support for students	3
Business	3	General resources	3
Hospitality and catering	2	Quality assurance	3
Early years, health and social care	3	Governance	2
Art and design	3	Management	3
English and access to higher education	3		
Basic skills	3		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 West Herts College was established in 1991 as a result of the merger of three neighbouring colleges. It is one of the largest colleges in the Eastern Region. The college operates mainly from three sites in Watford and a campus in Hemel Hempstead. The college draws the majority of its students from south-west Hertfordshire but also recruits significant numbers from north London. There are three other further education colleges in the county. The college is an associate college of the University of Hertfordshire which is the major provider of higher education.

2 The college operates in a competitive environment. There are 21 secondary schools in the immediate catchment area, all of which have sixth forms. The staying-on rate in full-time education at age 16 for the county is high at 85%. The college has developed extensive partnerships with schools, employers and voluntary organisations and a significant number of its courses are provided in centres which it has established in collaboration with its partners. These partnerships have led to innovative approaches in education and training to widen participation and support lifelong learning. The college provides a significant programme of adult education at its main sites and in community centres. There are well-developed distance learning courses in printing, packaging and publishing.

3 The 1997 Hertfordshire population survey identified a total population exceeding one million. The districts of Watford and Dacorum accounted for 77,000 and 133,000, respectively. Minority ethnic groups make up 4% of the resident population. Watford has the largest proportion at 10%. The local economy is diverse. The service sector accounts for 80% of employment and 14% is in manufacturing. The main employment activities are information and communication technology, finance and business services, publishing and printing, film, television and broadcasting, and logistics.

The unemployment rate is 1.8% compared with the national average of 4.3%. Despite its overall prosperity there are pockets of relatively high social deprivation in central Watford.

4 In April 2000, the college enrolled 3,500 full-time students and 7,141 part-time students. A further 15,000 students were enrolled on adult leisure programmes. The college offers courses in all programme areas funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Provision includes basic education, craft, technician and access courses, higher education, postgraduate studies and professional updating courses. Full-time students have a choice of 31 subjects at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) in 10 vocational areas. There is a wide range of national vocational qualification (NVQ) provision for work-based trainees and other students in employment at levels 1 to 3. The college also has a managing agency offering modern apprenticeships, New Deal and national traineeships.

5 The college employs 369 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 430 support staff. It has recently undergone a major organisational restructuring. The new structure was developed after a nine-month period of consultation and implemented progressively from March 1999 through to the time of the inspection. The college achieved Investors in People accreditation in March 2000. In addition to the principal and vice-principal there is one other senior postholder who is clerk to the corporation and a strategic management team of eight. Curriculum management is the responsibility of 12 heads of school. Each school includes a group of related courses and subjects.

6 The college mission statement is 'to help as many people as we can, as well as we can, to achieve their full potential'. It identifies itself as 'continuously seeking to improve the quality of its education and training work, whilst recognising that resources are scarce and must be used efficiently and effectively'.

Context

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected in May 2000. Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. The college agreed that the inspection would be based on individualised student record (ISR) data for 1998. The data for 1997 were unreliable. They are not quoted in the text of the report, and are not reproduced in data tables as they could not be validated. The college's data on achievements for 1999 were checked by inspectors in advance of the inspection, using primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies.

8 The college was notified approximately two months before the inspection of the sample of its provision to be inspected. Sixteen inspectors and one auditor, working for a total of 65 days, carried out the inspection. They observed 88 lessons. Inspectors examined students' work and college documentation. They held meetings with governors, managers, staff and students.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	2	3	3	2	0	10
GCSE	0	0	3	0	0	3
GNVQ	2	7	9	3	0	21
NVQ	0	10	5	1	0	16
Other vocational	0	12	21	3	0	36
Other	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total (No)	6	32	41	9	0	88
Total (%)	7	36	47	10	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

9 Ten inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) worked with the inspection team during the inspection. The TSC inspectors concentrated on work-based training. Areas inspected were agriculture, engineering, business administration, leisure, sport and travel, hospitality, hair and beauty, health, care and public services, media and design and foundation for work. They also inspected trainee support, equal opportunities, management of training, and quality assurance. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC inspection framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

10 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the lessons observed, 43% were judged to be good or outstanding and 10% were less than satisfactory. This profile is well below the national averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons inspected in 1998-99. The proportion of lessons judged to be outstanding, at 7%, is well below the national average of 20%.

Context

11 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
West Herts College	10.8	72
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Computing and Information Technology

Grade 3

12 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering the range of provision in information technology (IT) and computing. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified an additional strength and weakness.

Key strengths

- wide range of IT and computing courses
- effective support for individual students
- well-equipped specialist IT facilities
- high standard of students' work and good achievements on part-time courses

Weaknesses

- insufficient links with industry
- some ineffective course management
- poor retention and pass rates on full-time courses
- some inappropriate teaching

13 Inspectors agreed that the college provides a wide range of courses in computing and IT. They provide good opportunities for students to progress from foundation to advanced level. Enrolments on full-time courses have increased significantly. The broad range of introductory and short courses in IT applications enables students to attend at locations and times convenient to them. There are poor curriculum links with industry and commerce. Full-time students have few opportunities to obtain experience of professional and industrial practices through work placements. This weakness is acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

14 There is some ineffective course management. Schemes of work do not adhere to a common framework and, in some cases, show only a list of topics to be covered. Some

lesson plans do not clearly identify the activities to be carried out by students. There are regular team meetings, but minutes of meetings seldom identify actions to be taken. Inspectors agreed that there is effective support for individual students. There is a well-planned programme of tutorial activities, which takes account of the needs of students. Students' progress is carefully monitored and systematically recorded. In the GNVQ foundation IT course, a learning assistant provides effective support to students. Students speak highly of the support that they receive.

15 Most teaching is satisfactory. In the best lessons, IT was used effectively. In a GNVQ advanced IT lesson the teacher provided students with notes on the college's internal computer network before the lesson. Practical demonstrations were effectively managed. In a well-structured lesson on web design a good range of demonstrations of different design styles maintained students' interest and involvement in the lesson. Clear study aids enabled students to produce their own web pages. In some lessons teachers used too narrow a range of teaching methods to make the lessons fully effective. Learning activities were not differentiated to take account of the wide range of abilities of the students in the classes. Not all the students were actively taking part in the work set and the teacher failed to check that learning was taking place. Teachers failed to make sufficient use of visual aids, of IT to assist with presentations, or of teaching materials accessed through computers. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

16 The quality of many students' practical and assignment work is good. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge this strength. Students are able to research information from paper-based or electronic sources and present accurate reports. Assignments are designed carefully to enable students to provide evidence of their development of a range of key skills. Assessment is fair. Some teachers provide good

Curriculum Areas

levels of feedback to students and make helpful suggestions about how work should be improved.

17 Inspectors agreed that specialist resources are a strength. Computer rooms are well equipped with up-to-date technology. Students have easy access to the college's internal computer network, the Internet and electronic mail facilities. There is a good range of specialist software, including appropriate programming and multimedia development tools. A range of operating systems is available to help students' learning on more advanced programmes. The library contains an appropriate range of journals, reference books and computer manuals for students. Teachers have a broad range of experience in computing.

18 Retention rates on the main courses are low. Retention is particularly poor on GCE A level computing and GNVQ advanced IT courses. In 1999, only 49% of the students who started the GNVQ advanced IT course completed it. Retention rates for the GNVQ intermediate course in IT have usually been above the national average. Pass rates on full-time programmes have declined. The achievement rate on the GCE A level computing programme was well below the national average at 44% in 1999. Students' retention on part-time courses in IT has been improving and is above the national average. The self-assessment report does not give sufficient significance to the poor retention and achievement on some courses.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in computing and information technology, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
C&G 7261 IT certificate	1	Number of starters	*	632	701
		Retention (%)	*	91	95
		Achievement (%)	*	62	67
NVQ installing IT products	2	Number of starters	*	56	55
		Retention (%)	*	96	89
		Achievement (%)	*	87	63
GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Number of starters	*	50	60
		Retention (%)	*	74	80
		Achievement (%)	*	75	58
GNVQ advanced IT	3	Number of starters	*	44	57
		Retention (%)	*	52	49
		Achievement (%)	*	*	75
GCE A level computing	3	Number of starters	*	24	32
		Retention (%)	*	71	57
		Achievement (%)	*	43	44

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 3

19 Inspectors observed 16 lessons covering the range of provision in business, administration and secretarial studies. Inspectors agreed with the majority of judgements in the self-assessment report but identified additional strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors from the TSC observed training in NVQs in administration.

Key strengths

- effective assessment and monitoring of students' progress
- good pass rates on some courses
- effective links with employers

Weaknesses

- poor punctuality on some courses
- poor achievement rates on general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and GCE A level business studies
- some ineffective teaching
- some poor curriculum liaison between campuses

20 The college offers a broad range of courses on the Cassio and Dacorum campuses. There are good opportunities for progression. Inspectors agreed that there are effective links with employers. Industrial and commercial links are used to provide information to make courses relevant to the business world. There are well-developed procedures for students' work experience on most full-time courses. Courses are well planned. All courses have schemes of work. Their level of detail varies. The poorer examples of work schemes are lists of topics which do not give details of planned evaluation and monitoring. Some lessons have unrealistic time allocations. The self-assessment report recognises that there are some inconsistencies in practice between the two campuses. Students of GNVQ business at the

Dacorum campus do not attend work experience. Students following the same course at different campuses do not share common assignments. There are effective arrangements for the assessment and monitoring of students' progress on most courses. On NVQ courses tutors have designed comprehensive documents to help to assess students' progress. All students complete learning plans that are regularly reviewed with their tutor against the course objectives. The college's self-assessment report did not acknowledge this strength.

21 Most teaching is satisfactory. The best lessons were clearly planned and had specified learning objectives and teachers made appropriate use of resources. On some GNVQ courses, teachers encourage students to draw on their own background knowledge and work experience to enliven lessons. Teachers place insufficient emphasis on consolidating students' learning. Often they do not check whether students have understood the work or have a reasonable record of their learning. In many lessons, teachers allowed a few students to dominate question and answer sessions to the detriment of the rest of the class. In other lessons, teachers allowed insufficient time for students to reflect before responding to questions. In some lessons the work moved at the pace of either the slowest or the fastest student. Teachers did not differentiate the work sufficiently to take account of the abilities of all students. Some students left lessons early when they had completed all the work planned. Lack of differentiated learning materials meant that some students were required to undertake more tasks at the same level, and were not given opportunities to tackle more difficult work in order to achieve their full potential. Teachers failed to make use of group work to develop students' ability to work co-operatively and engage in discussion. The college's self-assessment report did not identify these weaknesses. In seven lessons, students arrived late. This adversely affected teaching and learning. Teachers did not always address students' poor punctuality during lessons.

Curriculum Areas

22 Teachers are appropriately qualified. Their own development needs are identified through the annual review of staff training and development and, wherever possible, these needs are met. The business studies teaching accommodation consists of modern classrooms. Appropriate subject materials are well displayed in rooms to establish a strong curriculum area identity and a pleasant learning environment. The rooms are large enough for all classes to work in them effectively. The learning centres have a good range of up-to-date books and journals. Students use the Internet for research work on assignments, which supplements their learning in lessons and helps to develop their skills of enquiry. The provision of relevant Internet directories for use by students is underdeveloped.

23 Students' written work is often of good quality. Students' portfolios on the GNVQ

intermediate and advanced courses in business show that they have acquired an appropriate range of research and presentational skills. Students' work is marked and returned quickly. Spelling or grammatical errors are corrected. Retention rates are at, or above the national average on most courses. Inspectors agreed that there are high pass rates on some courses. On the GNVQ intermediate business course the pass rate for 1999 was significantly above the national average at 82%. Pass rates on the NVQ level 3 accounting course for 1999 have improved and are now above the national average. Pass rates on the GCSE business studies course have been poor and declining over the last three years. In 1999, only 25% of students who completed the course achieved the qualification. Pass rates on GCE A level business studies are below the national average.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in business, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE business	2	Number of starters	*	63	42
		Retention (%)	*	59	76
		Achievement (%)	*	46	25
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Number of starters	*	52	68
		Retention (%)	*	79	81
		Achievement (%)	*	80	82
NVQ administration	2	Number of starters	*	54	75
		Retention (%)	*	78	89
		Achievement (%)	*	63	66
NVQ accounting	3	Number of starters	*	48	34
		Retention (%)	*	81	94
		Achievement (%)	*	47	76
GNVQ advanced business	3	Number of starters	*	125	89
		Retention (%)	*	64	89
		Achievement (%)	*	75	87
GCE A level business studies	3	Number of starters	*	83	93
		Retention (%)	*	65	64
		Achievement (%)	*	73	63

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Hospitality and Catering

Grade 2

24 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in hospitality and catering. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified an additional weakness.

Key strengths

- well-planned teaching
- the relevance of lessons and assignments to current industrial practice
- good retention and achievement rates on most courses
- excellent support for students with learning difficulties
- thorough monitoring of students' progress
- good course management

Weaknesses

- poor culinary and food service skills in some lessons
- low attendance in some lessons
- some poorly decorated facilities and dated equipment

25 The college offers a range of hospitality and catering courses from foundation to advanced level leading to GNVQ and NVQ qualifications. Students have good opportunities to gain additional qualifications in food hygiene and awards in wines and spirits. Progression rates to higher level courses and employment are good. In 1999, 90% of NVQ level 1 students progressed to NVQ level 2 and 72% of NVQ level 2 students progressed to NVQ level 3. The management of hospitality and catering courses is good. Schemes of work are comprehensive. Course teams meet regularly and maintain clear records of meetings. The progression of action points arising from meetings is carefully

monitored. The outcomes from lesson observations are used effectively to help improve the quality of teaching.

26 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the standard of teaching is good. Lessons are planned to take account of the different learning needs of students. They involve students in an appropriate range of theory and practical activities. Teachers use examples from their own industrial experience to illustrate good practice. In many lessons students worked effectively in groups and enthusiastically completed their tasks. Students were encouraged to use their work experience to relate theory to practical situations. Teachers make effective use of challenging questions and lively discussions to check students' learning and extend their knowledge. A few lessons were too long and student interest was not maintained. For example, students became inattentive in theory lessons that immediately followed practical sessions in the kitchen. Inspectors agreed that lessons and assignments are relevant to current industrial practice. The restaurants and kitchens provide a variety of realistic working environments. Students gain valuable experience of different food production and food service operations and have excellent opportunities for assessment. In some practical lessons insufficient attention is paid to basic hygiene and culinary skills such as knife work and inappropriate working methods are not always corrected. The self-assessment report did not identify this weakness. The attendance at lessons observed during the inspection was below the national average for the programme area. Inspectors agreed with the college that there are effective arrangements to support students with learning difficulties. Learning support tutors work with teachers and students on theory and practical activities. They provide additional support to enable students to successfully complete tasks. There is good evidence that this is helping to improve students' retention and achievements.

Curriculum Areas

27 Most portfolios of students' work are well organised and many display good use of IT. Teachers set interesting assignments that are clearly written and are related to the different sectors of the hospitality industry. Students' work is conscientiously marked and teachers provide constructive written feedback with guidance to students on how to improve their performance. Spelling and grammatical errors are not always corrected. Procedures for internal verification are thorough. Students' progress is systematically monitored and carefully recorded. The tutorial arrangements give students the opportunity to influence the content of tutorials and enable them to suggest topics that are important to them. There are no tutorials for part-time students.

28 Teachers are well qualified and most have recent industrial experience. Inspectors agreed

that some catering facilities are poorly decorated and furnished and some basic catering equipment is outdated. Most classrooms are well equipped with video, television and overhead projectors and some have computers. Library bookstock is dated. There are few specialist videos and CD-ROMs. Computers with industrial standard software are not easily available to students.

29 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are good retention and achievement rates on most courses, particularly on NVQ courses. For example, the NVQ level 1 food preparation course recorded 91% retention in 1999 and the achievement rate was 95%. The achievement rate on GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering in 1999 was 100%. Retention, however, was low at 68%.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in hospitality and catering, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ food and drink	1	Number of starters	*	39	56
		Retention (%)	*	67	85
		Achievement (%)	*	100	98
NVQ food preparation	1	Number of starters	*	44	35
		Retention (%)	*	80	91
		Achievement (%)	*	90	95
NVQ food and drink	2	Number of starters	*	20	47
		Retention (%)	*	76	92
		Achievement (%)	*	100	84
NVQ food preparation	2	Number of starters	*	44	15
		Retention (%)	*	80	100
		Achievement (%)	*	73	86
NVQ food preparation	3	Number of starters	*	18	12
		Retention (%)	*	100	85
		Achievement (%)	*	94	83
GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering	3	Number of starters	*	21	18
		Retention (%)	*	83	68
		Achievement (%)	*	70	100

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Early Years, Health and Social Care

Grade 3

30 Inspectors observed 16 lessons across the range of provision in early years, health and social care. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that insufficient significance was given to the weakness in teaching and learning. They identified additional strengths and weaknesses. TSC inspectors observed training in care and childcare.

Key strengths

- broad range of courses
- high pass rates on the majority of courses
- well-organised and varied work experience
- well-planned courses

Weaknesses

- some insufficiently challenging teaching
- declining retention on most courses
- some poor aspects of course management
- some poor accommodation

31 The college provides a broad range of courses in early years and health and social care. Full-time courses include GNVQ health and social care at foundation and intermediate levels, Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE) certificate in childcare and education and diploma in nursery nursing and BTEC national diploma caring services (social care). The self-assessment report did not identify the range of provision as a strength. Inspectors agreed that course provision is well planned. There is a growing area of NVQ provision in care and childcare at levels 2 and 3. The access to social work and social

care course provides effective progression opportunities for adults who are seeking an alternative career in the caring professions. There is an increasing range of higher education provision at the Dacorum campus. Course teams meet regularly and all courses are well documented in the comprehensive course files. However, there are some poor aspects of course management. Minutes of meetings are insufficiently precise and most lack clear action points. Schemes of work are insufficiently detailed. Some courses do not have an adequate annual schedule of students' assignments. There has been some disruption to students' learning as a result of staff absence and through unannounced room changes. The system of annual review using the course files is well established but little use is made of published information on students' achievements to help assess the quality of courses.

32 Most teaching is satisfactory. In the best lessons, teaching is well planned and teachers use a variety of suitable methods to enable students to expand their understanding. In many lessons, however, the teaching is uninspiring and students are not given enough opportunities to take an active role in their learning. In an early years lesson, students watched a video for 45 minutes. The follow-up discussion lacked depth and did not address a number of relevant issues. In some lessons, teachers spend a considerable amount of time in giving students information and do not always encourage them to think sufficiently about the topic and draw on their own experiences. Inspectors saw very few examples of effective group work. Some handouts are of a poor presentational quality. The self-assessment report did not give sufficient significance to the weaknesses in teaching and learning. Assignments are well designed and vocationally relevant. Teachers make detailed and helpful comments on students' work and identify areas for improvement.

Curriculum Areas

33 All full-time courses include a period of planned work experience. Inspectors agreed that this is well organised and offers students valuable practical experience in a variety of suitable care placements. Two work placement co-ordinators are responsible for the organisation and monitoring of placements. Course tutors make placement visits on a regular basis. They maintain good contact with placement providers and carefully record students' progress in the workplace.

34 Students produce good-quality assignment work that meets the requirements of awarding bodies. Assessment is rigorous and teachers provide constructive comments to help students to improve their performance. Students' oral contributions in class are often confident and show good levels of understanding and application. Inspectors agreed that there are high pass rates on most courses. Most are above the national average. Achievements on NVQ programmes have improved significantly over the last two years. Retention rates are declining on most full-time courses. Current statistical indicators show a further decline in retention. The self-assessment report does not reflect the significance of this weakness. The college does not have reliable or comprehensive data on student progression.

35 Teachers are well qualified and have an appropriate mix of academic, vocational and teaching qualifications. Some update their professional experience in their own time through voluntary work in care settings. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some classroom accommodation has a detrimental effect on learning. Rooms are noisy, some are overcrowded, and few contain displays of high-quality work by students. Specialist equipment and library facilities on both campuses are adequate. Staff and students make insufficient use of information learning technology.

Curriculum Areas

A summary of retention and achievement rates in early years, health and social care, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GNVQ foundation health and social care	1	Number of starters	*	14	17
		Retention (%)	*	93	76
		Achievement (%)	*	77	77
NVQ care/childcare and education	2	Number of starters	*	63	61
		Retention (%)	*	92	69
		Achievement (%)	*	36	88
CACHE certificate in childcare and education	2	Number of starters	*	35	29
		Retention (%)	*	94	86
		Achievement (%)	*	82	84
BTEC national diploma social care	3	Number of starters	*	40	37
		Retention (%)	*	80	78
		Achievement (%)	*	96	79
CACHE diploma in nursery nursing	3	Number of starters	*	116	97
		Retention (%)	*	79	75
		Achievement (%)	*	96	88
Access to social work	3	Number of starters	*	20	15
		Retention (%)	*	95	80
		Achievement (%)	*	89	92

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 3

36 Inspectors observed 10 lessons covering courses in art and design. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- effective support for individual students
- the high standard of students' work
- good progression to higher education and employment
- the high level of achievement on GNVQ art and design

Weaknesses

- some ineffective teaching
- inadequate course planning and organisation
- underdeveloped use of target-setting to improve achievements
- unsatisfactory accommodation and specialist resources at Ridge Street

37 Inspectors agreed that the provision in art and design is extensive. It covers courses from GNVQ foundation level to postgraduate professional development diplomas in a variety of disciplines, including copywriting and art direction. City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) qualifications are offered in ceramics and creative studies. Some full-time students also study GCE A level art. Progression rates to higher level courses are good. Many BTEC national diploma students progress to the foundation diploma in art and design at the college. Most students who apply to university gain places at their preferred choice. Students following the professional development diploma in copywriting have excellent progression to relevant employment. Students value the careful guidance they receive from teachers.

The self-assessment report does not identify that much course planning and organisation is poor. Course files have been produced for most courses but many are incomplete. Class timetables and registers in use at the time of the inspection were often inaccurate. Lesson plans seldom state aims and objectives clearly. They do not identify the learning activities that are intended. Insufficient attention is paid to the analysis of students' achievements and little use is made of national benchmarking data produced by the FEFC. Targets for improving the retention and achievements of students are not set. Inspectors agreed that there is effective support for individual students. A learning support tutor helps students on foundation and intermediate level courses with project and assignment work. Technical demonstrators are used effectively to assist students in specialist areas.

38 Much of the teaching in art and design is satisfactory. In the best lessons, teachers briefed students clearly and used well-planned activities to develop the students' skills and abilities. In one successful lesson in printing, students enjoyed and gained considerable benefit from working on a brief for an external client. The whole group was involved in planning the activity. They received good support from their tutor. A few lessons were less than satisfactory. These lessons lacked direction. Students were unprepared for the planned activities and those using secondary source material and poor-quality research materials were left unchallenged. Poor punctuality disrupted some lessons and several students missed important introductions to assignments. The average attendance for the lessons observed was 64%, significantly below the national average of 77% for the programme area.

39 Teachers are well qualified and are encouraged to update their skills through external or in-house training activities. Students value the specialist support that they give.

Curriculum Areas

The library has an adequate stock of reference books. Inspectors agreed that accommodation at the Ridge Street site is unsatisfactory. Internal and external decoration is shabby. Studios and corridors have few examples of students' work on display and in many studios, students' work is poorly stored. There are insufficient IT facilities to fully support the level and type of work students undertake at this site.

40 Students' work is of a high standard. Ceramics work is individual, creative and based on good design development. Students have successfully gained awards in a variety of national competitions sponsored by department stores, manufacturing companies and national institutes. Students' design briefs are conscientiously checked against course specifications to ensure all aspects are covered. Assignments are well written. However,

teachers also use them as the main planning tool for teaching and, as a result, fail to make sufficient separate preparation for lessons. Students' progress is carefully and systematically monitored. Carefully maintained tutorial records contain detailed written comments and give clear guidance to students on how their performance can be improved. Retention rates on many courses have improved over the last two years and have been sustained at high levels in others. For example, the retention rate has been 95% on the BTEC foundation studies in art and design course in each of the last two years. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are good achievements on all GNVQ art and design courses. Pass rates are above the national average for all levels of the course.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in art and design, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GNVQ foundation art and design	1	Number of starters	*	6	13
		Retention (%)	*	50	92
		Achievement (%)	*	67	75
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	Number of starters	*	29	36
		Retention (%)	*	62	75
		Achievement (%)	*	94	80
GNVQ advanced art and design	3	Number of starters	*	67	37
		Retention (%)	*	79	81
		Achievement (%)	*	92	93
BTEC foundation studies in art and design	3	Number of starters	*	43	37
		Retention (%)	*	95	95
		Achievement (%)	*	93	91
BTEC national diploma in graphics	3	Number of starters	*	17	19
		Retention (%)	*	82	84
		Achievement (%)	*	79	85
GCE A level studies/fine art	3	Number of starters	*	*	117
		Retention (%)	*	*	73
		Achievement (%)	*	*	84

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

English and Access to Higher Education

Grade 3

41 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering English, communication studies and access to higher education (humanities pathway). Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-organised learning programmes for students
- effective management and teaching on the access programme
- teachers' careful marking and informative feedback on students' work

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement on many courses
- much insufficiently demanding teaching
- some unsatisfactory teaching accommodation

42 The college offers full-time courses in GCE A level English language, English literature and communication studies. GCE A level English language and literature is offered as a one-year part-time course. GCSE English language courses are offered to full-time and part-time students. The humanities pathway within the college's large access programme offers English, history and philosophy. Course management for English and communication studies is satisfactory. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the access course is well managed. Guidance from tutors is supported by comprehensive course materials. Effective arrangements are made to ensure that students with commitments outside the college may

continue with their studies. Many students progress to higher education from this course.

43 Inspectors agreed that there are well-organised learning programmes for students. Useful study guides have been produced for all courses. Lessons are well planned and provide a variety of appropriate learning opportunities. Most teaching is satisfactory. In the best lessons, teachers made effective use of careful questioning to involve students and to extend and consolidate their learning. Good use is made of IT by GCE A level communication studies students in undertaking research and preparing classwork and project work. In poorer lessons, teachers set tasks which were insufficiently demanding for the students. The self-assessment report did not identify this weakness. Not enough attention was paid to ensuring that all students' learning needs were met. In many lessons, only a minority of students contributed to the work. Some teachers allowed students to remain passive for long periods. In group and individual activities students were sometimes not given any time limit, with the result that their attention wandered. Lack of punctuality was a problem in some lessons and the tutor did not always question it during the lesson or make any attempt to address it. Students' experience is enriched by visits to theatres and by other educational activities.

44 Teachers are well qualified, many with higher degrees in a relevant subject area. The libraries have an adequate collection of communication, language and literature texts, and a good stock of modern fiction to support the GCE A level programmes. The collections are in the process of being updated and extended. There is a good collection of video cassettes for use in teaching and learning. Library resources for the access programme are inadequate. Some of the teaching accommodation used for English and access courses is unsatisfactory owing to poor acoustics or a high level of noise from adjoining rooms.

Curriculum Areas

Some classrooms are not of an appropriate size for the learning activities planned to take place in them.

45 Students on the access programme produce good work. They demonstrate high standards of presentation, organisation and writing skills. Students are provided with helpful feedback from their teachers. Their written work is marked thoroughly. Teachers highlight errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar and add helpful comments to indicate where improvements can be made. Records of students' progress are detailed and ensure that appropriate additional help can be given to students, where necessary. Students know how they are progressing and what they must do to improve further. This strength was not identified in the self-assessment report. Retention and achievement rates for the humanities access programme are good.

The achievement rate of 89% in 1999 was significantly above the national average. Student retention and achievement rates on GCSE English language courses in 1999 were close to the national averages. Retention and achievement rates on other courses are declining and are poor. The self-assessment report underestimates the significance of this weakness. In 1999, only 54% of students of GCE A level communication studies completed the course. The pass rate of 62% was well below the national average. The retention rate on GCE A level English language in 1999 was 63%. Only 58% of the students who completed the course passed. The value-added analysis used by the college indicates that full-time students are performing less well in GCE A level English courses than would be expected on the basis of their GCSE grades.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in English and access to higher education, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE English language	2	Number of starters	*	283	279
		Retention (%)	*	71	71
		Achievement (%)	*	57	40
GCE A level communication studies	3	Number of starters	*	73	83
		Retention (%)	*	60	54
		Achievement (%)	*	75	62
GCE A level English language	3	Number of starters	*	91	93
		Retention (%)	*	79	63
		Achievement (%)	*	71	58
GCE A level English language and literature	3	Number of starters	*	93	94
		Retention (%)	*	65	63
		Achievement (%)	*	63	71
Access to higher education – humanities	3	Number of starters	*	21	27
		Retention (%)	*	71	70
		Achievement (%)	*	80	89

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)
*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Basic Skills

Grade 3

46 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering the range of provision for basic skills. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but identified an additional weakness and considered that one strength was understated.

Key strengths

- productive basic skills work in the community
- vocational relevance of assignments
- effective use of learning support assistants and volunteers
- good achievement on most courses

Weaknesses

- inadequate recording of progression in basic skills
- underdeveloped arrangements for cross-college co-ordination of basic skills
- inadequate use of IT to develop learning on some courses
- insufficient involvement of part-time staff in curriculum planning

47 Literacy and numeracy courses at, or below level 1, are offered as discrete provision for adults on the two main sites in the college and in the community. For full-time students on vocational and general education programmes, provision is made through individual student support and in timetabled lessons. Both adult and vocational programmes offer basic skills accreditation.

48 The college has recently developed basic skills programmes in conjunction with local community centres, schools and businesses. The self-assessment report understated this strength. Courses which offer basic skills with a

work-related or leisure focus are particularly effective. 'Working with Children' is a one-year course offered in a community centre in one of the poorest areas of Watford. Students are able to take basic skills qualifications. They use their knowledge and experience of the subject to illustrate their assignments. There has been 90% attendance and 100% retention on the course this year.

49 Arrangements for the cross-college co-ordination of basic skills are underdeveloped. Programme areas manage their own foundation programmes, the learning support unit manages support workers, and adult programmes are managed by the community education department. Good practice is not always shared. The college recognises this weakness and has taken measures to improve it. A cross-college basic skills co-ordinator was appointed one month before the inspection. It is too early to assess the impact of this appointment. Initial basic skills assessments carried out by student support staff are sent to course tutors but are not always used by class teachers as a basis for planning. The recording of progression in basic skills is inadequate. This weakness was understated in the self-assessment report. Individual learning plans on adult programmes and group learning support plans on foundation programmes are designed to record progress. However, the recording is mainly of activities covered rather than of the progress students have made in developing the skills identified in the initial assessment. One-to-one sessions are more appropriately recorded. A large number of part-time staff teach basic skills. Very few of them attend meetings or contribute to programme reviews. There is only one full-time teacher on adult provision. Part-time staff attend few staff development events. This weakness was partially identified in the self-assessment report.

50 Basic skills lessons are supported by learning support assistants and volunteers and through team teaching. Lesson plans did not

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provide full information on how the individual needs of students were to be supported. Inspectors agreed with the college that tasks set on the foundation programmes were vocationally relevant. In the best lessons, students were encouraged to work together to solve problems. Students' own experiences formed the basis of the tasks set and teachers used a range of different teaching methods to encourage learning. In less effective lessons, there was an emphasis on the completion of paper-based tasks, often designed to meet accreditation criteria rather than the identified needs of students. They did not motivate the students. In some lessons there was no opportunity for small group discussion. IT is not used as an integral part of learning on some programmes. This was partially identified by the college in its self-assessment report.

51 Teaching accommodation is inadequate in one of the community centres. Computer facilities for the adult programmes on the two main sites are not sufficiently up to date to run the software needed. Staff on adult basic skills courses all have a basic skills qualification. Staff on foundation programmes have teaching qualifications but few have recent basic skills qualifications.

52 Inspectors observed some students' work of a good standard. On some courses the work in students' folders clearly demonstrates the progress made since the beginning of the year. Students achieve well on most discrete courses. On the C&G 3793 Wordpower course the pass rate in 1999 was 96%. Pass rates have improved on all courses except C&G numeracy level 2. Retention rates on these courses are high.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in basic skills, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
C&G 3793 Wordpower	1	Number of starters	*	33	35
		Retention (%)	*	73	85
		Achievement (%)	*	80	86
C&G 3750 numeracy	1	Number of starters	*	32	107
		Retention (%)	*	86	74
		Achievement (%)	*	68	69
C&G 3611 communication skills	1	Number of starters	*	110	54
		Retention (%)	*	90	72
		Achievement (%)	*	60	89
C&G 3793 Wordpower	2	Number of starters	*	47	50
		Retention (%)	*	92	78
		Achievement (%)	*	89	96
C&G 3750 numeracy	2	Number of starters	*	175	80
		Retention (%)	*	83	81
		Achievement (%)	*	72	42

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data unreliable

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Support for Students

Grade 3

53 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that the significance of some weaknesses had been understated.

Key strengths

- good liaison with schools and effective induction into college
- comprehensive range of well co-ordinated and effective personal and welfare support services
- good provision of additional support for literacy and numeracy
- good support for individual students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- effective arrangements for informal support and guidance

Weaknesses

- inadequate pre-entry guidance in some curriculum areas
- poor content and quality of some tutorials
- no specified entitlement for students to careers education and guidance
- underdeveloped systems for evaluating the effectiveness of student support services

54 Inspectors agreed with the college that there is good liaison with schools. Prospective students are well informed about the college and its courses through recruitment events such as 'taster' days and open evenings. The events are well attended and highly appreciated by pupils. Pre-entry guidance is inadequate in some curriculum areas. Action is planned to be taken to address this weakness by centralising admissions and appointing a team of admissions officers. However, at the time of inspection, this team was not in place. The college gave

insufficient weight to this continuing weakness in its self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed that the arrangements for induction are effective. Student services staff ensure that students are aware of the range of support available.

55 There is a comprehensive range of well co-ordinated and effective personal and welfare support services. A 'one-stop shop' on each main campus provides easy access to services. They offer a welcoming environment and provide detailed information in an extensive range of attractive publicity materials. Students benefit from the accessibility of student guidance officers who provide advice on a wide range of welfare, health and financial issues. Unusually, students have weekly access to free legal services provided by a firm of local solicitors. Staff have links with a variety of local support agencies to whom they refer students, as appropriate.

56 The content and quality of some tutorials is poor. This weakness was recognised in the self-assessment report but inspectors considered that it was given insufficient significance. Personal tutors are provided with a 'tutor pack'. However, it does not contain clear specifications for the conduct of tutorials across the college. There are some good examples of the monitoring of individual students' progress through tutorial reviews but it is not uniformly good. Some tutorial files are poorly organised. Student services provide effective inputs into tutorials. However, their involvement is at the invitation of tutors and not all students benefit. Students receive regular written reports on their progress and, where appropriate, these are sent to parents. There is no clearly defined entitlement for students to careers education and guidance. It is included in the tutorial programme, but some tutors do not give sufficient time to it. Tutors are well supported by a team of trained college guidance officers but they do not all take advantage of the services offered. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit from the

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support of a specialist adviser. Careers advice and guidance for part-time students is not well established. There is a generally effective system for helping students with applications to higher education.

57 Inspectors agreed that there is good provision for the additional support needs of students in literacy and numeracy. All students studying for more than six hours a week are assessed. Course tutors use the results to help plan appropriate learning activities for students. However, the results are not always passed to all staff who teach them. There is good support for students with learning difficulties. They benefit from appropriate individual or small group support. Many students have additional help provided on their course. Learning support tutors are attached to curriculum areas. They develop subject knowledge and close working relationships with teaching teams. This arrangement has contributed to improved student retention rates on some catering and engineering courses.

58 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the arrangements to provide informal support and guidance for students is a strength. There are student liaison officers and youth workers who manage the 'student wings' on the main campuses. They supervise the social areas and work effectively with students to encourage good behaviour, act as an initial, informal source of advice and guidance on both personal and work-related matters, raise awareness about health and social issues and provide advocacy for students, when required. Students value these informal services. The college also funds two student union sabbatical officers who organise the social activities of the students' union. The systems for evaluating the effectiveness of student support are underdeveloped and this is acknowledged by the college. Although evaluations of different aspects of the service are undertaken, there is no systematic overview to inform managers of its overall effectiveness.

General Resources

Grade 3

59 Inspectors largely agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified an additional weakness.

Key strengths

- thorough analysis and planning for the development and maintenance of accommodation
- well-managed and effective libraries with a strong curriculum focus
- good IT provision and support
- good use of external funding to enhance accommodation and resources for students

Weaknesses

- the poor standard of some accommodation
- inadequate social and recreational facilities for students
- limited access for people with restricted mobility in many places
- poor use of existing accommodation

60 The college has four main campuses and four smaller sites in Watford and Hemel Hempstead. The accommodation ranges from converted Victorian buildings to purpose-built accommodation constructed in the 1990s. The campuses provide very different environments. The buildings at the Dacorum campus at Hemel Hempstead are set in attractive, well-kept grounds and include a recently built and smart management centre for professional courses. The modern buildings at the Leggatts campus are bright and open and furnished attractively. Many specialist teaching areas, such as those provided for hairdressing and beauty courses, are well resourced and welcoming. The standard of some accommodation on most of the sites, however, is inadequate. Lessons in

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some rooms at the Cassio and Leggatts campuses are disturbed by extraneous noise and there are many areas with poor ventilation. At the main Hempstead Road campus in Watford, directional signs are poor and there are areas which are drab and untidy. The college recognised weaknesses in accommodation in its self-assessment report.

61 Inspectors agreed with the college that senior staff plan meticulously for the development and maintenance of the estate. The college carried out a thorough analysis of its accommodation in order to produce a detailed strategy for future development. Refurbishments have been carried out methodically. Maintenance is planned and costed for five years ahead and requests for work are dealt with efficiently, although there is a backlog of non-urgent work. Existing accommodation is not well used. Space utilisation is well below the sector average and classrooms are frequently unsuitable for the classes using them. Timetabling and allocation of rooms is not centralised in order to ensure the best match between rooms and classes.

62 In spite of some improvements since the last inspection, many parts of the college are inaccessible for people with restricted mobility. Only on the Leggatts and Hempstead Road campuses is there access to all floors. Lessons can be timetabled to accommodate students with mobility problems in the most convenient rooms, but other facilities, such as the library at the Cassio campus and science laboratories, cannot be reached. The self-assessment report acknowledges this.

63 The libraries and learning centres on all the campuses are well managed and co-ordinated through the teaching and learning resource service. The service provides good support for staff and students. It has well structured and formal links with the curriculum. Each of the college's schools has a curriculum resource officer who attends course team meetings, manages a delegated budget for

library resources on behalf of the school and researches new stock. Libraries are open in the evenings and, at Hempstead Road campus, on Saturdays. Only two of the libraries provide quiet study areas and some are crowded at peak times. Library staff are well qualified and provide good induction sessions for students and training in the use of resources for both students and other staff. The computerised management system enables users to search the catalogues of other Hertfordshire colleges and the University of Hertfordshire. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that computing facilities are widely available to students. A computer network links the campuses and makes electronic mail facilities and Internet access available to all students and staff. Students are well provided with computers. The ratio of computers to students is 1:6.4. There is good technical support for users through a well-organised helpdesk, and local 'champions', who have some technical expertise, have been developed to offer additional support. Curriculum areas have an appropriate range of specialist software in most cases. However, there are inadequate IT resources at the Ridge Street site.

64 Students express dissatisfaction with the social and recreational facilities available to them. The college's 'student wings' on three campuses provide some relaxation areas and indoor games facilities but have short opening hours. There are no common rooms and mature students, in particular, feel that they have nowhere to go to relax. Refectories close early in the afternoons. The college's sports facilities are based on the Leggatts campus where students can use playing fields and there is shared use of a community sports centre. Students on the other campuses, including those on the public services course, who need fitness facilities, have little access to sports amenities. The self-assessment report did not identify the inadequate social and recreational facilities for students as a weakness.

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65 The college has augmented the range and quality of its accommodation and resources for students through its success in acquiring funds from external sources. IT resources are being improved to address the strategic objective of developing a flexible and relevant curriculum. There is good accommodation for motor vehicles courses. A travel office has recently been developed. Students on media and printing courses have benefited from the links with private sector companies, which have contributed to exceptional resources within the college and a productive link with the Leavesden Film Studio.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

66 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgements on quality assurance in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- strategic commitment to, and recent improvements in, quality assurance arrangements
- well-organised lesson observation scheme
- comprehensive framework for self-assessment
- well-managed staff development

Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in evaluating the quality of courses
- insufficient use of performance data by curriculum teams
- underdeveloped arrangements for monitoring the quality of some aspects of provision
- ineffective course action plans

67 The commitment of managers and governors to quality improvement is reflected in

the college's strategic aims and in its recent restructuring. Some improvements have been made to the quality assurance system since the last inspection. Arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching have been introduced. Performance indicators and targets are more clearly identified and the corporation has established a quality and curriculum subcommittee. Inspectors agreed that the college has an appropriate quality assurance framework but it has not yet produced significant improvements in performance. A quality improvement strategy has been agreed but this has yet to be translated into a development plan with a schedule for actions and measures of success. Systems to assess the rigour with which quality assurance procedures are implemented are not yet established.

68 The college produced its first comprehensive self-assessment report in preparation for the inspection. The self-assessment report is a substantial document and is supported by a comprehensive audit of course provision. However, the evidence to support judgements is not explicitly stated in the report. It provides an adequate analysis of quality in most areas but is insufficiently self-critical. Curriculum areas carried out evaluations against the quality statements in Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. Inspectors found that some course self-assessments were detailed but many were inadequately completed. Some support areas produced detailed self-assessment reports. Inspectors agreed with the college that performance indicators and service standards are underdeveloped for support areas. There are inadequate arrangements to monitor the quality of distance learning provision and underdeveloped systems for monitoring the quality of franchised courses.

69 A comprehensive manual provides clear guidelines for implementing the academic quality framework and this is noted in the self-assessment report. The scheme for the

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observation of teaching is well organised and effectively co-ordinated. A summary report of observed lessons is provided to course teams but it is not yet used to support the evaluation of courses. Assessment of teaching quality is insufficiently self-critical. Lesson grades awarded by the college were significantly higher than those awarded by inspectors. Students' views about the college and their course are collected and analysed twice a year. These show that students' levels of satisfaction with their teaching have declined. Students' views are not considered fully in the evaluation of courses. Insufficient action has been taken by course teams to respond to the findings from surveys of students' views. There are no systematic procedures for collecting the views of employers or parents. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there is insufficient use of performance data to monitor and assess the quality of course provision. Course teams undertake little analysis of students' achievements. On some courses there is no calculation of overall retention and no comparisons are made against national benchmarking data. Many course statistical summaries are incomplete. Course logs are often not completed until the end of the year. There is insufficient monitoring of course performance during the year. The college has yet to establish criteria for identifying courses which are failing to meet minimum standards.

70 Action plans for curriculum areas are detailed and are monitored systematically. However, course action plans are often sparsely completed, imprecise and do not identify timescales for action. Course teams do not routinely review the progress on actions taken since their previous meetings. Target-setting at course level is underdeveloped. Targets for retention and achievement are identified by course tutors but action plans for improvement are not completed. Senior managers monitor quality improvement action plans for cross-college areas. Central records are kept of issues identified by external verifiers.

71 The college charter is clearly written with some measurable standards of service. Supplements state the college's commitments to parents and employers. The self-assessment report recognises that charter commitments are not systematically monitored. Complaints are systematically recorded and appropriate action taken. An analysis is made annually of complaints but there is no report identifying the time taken to resolve each complaint, the number of outstanding complaints, or their significance. The published complaints procedure does not include a procedure for appeals to governors or the FEFC.

72 Staff development is well managed. The college has established professional skills managers in curriculum areas to improve the co-ordination of staff development. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that staff development is linked appropriately to college objectives and individual training needs. Staff speak highly of the support that they receive. However, more work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of staff development. There is an induction programme for all new college staff and a well-developed teacher training programme. Most staff have teaching qualifications. The college operates an appraisal system for all staff. At the time of the inspection, college records show that a significant number of appraisals were not completed within the agreed time. The college achieved Investors in People status in March 2000.

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Governance

Grade 2

73 Inspectors and auditors broadly agreed with the college's self-assessment of governance. They identified a significant weakness that was not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good clerking arrangements
- governors' strong commitment to the college
- effective use of members' expertise
- effective involvement in the development and monitoring of the college strategic objectives

Weaknesses

- lack of openness in some procedures
- ineffective evaluation of some aspects of college performance

74 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. 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.

75 The corporation has a membership of 16 with three current vacancies. There is a substantial core of experienced and knowledgeable governors. The corporation has appropriate arrangements for the nomination of new governors. The appointment process is a formal and open procedure. In October 1999, the corporation determined its new membership in accordance with the revised instrument of government. This includes two governors to be nominated by local authorities. These posts are currently unfilled. Inspectors and auditors agreed that much care is taken to match governors' skills and experience to membership

of committees. The corporation has an appropriate range of committees: finance and general purposes; remuneration; search and succession; quality and curriculum; human resources; audit; and estates and buildings. Committees operate in accordance with their terms of reference and there are effective arrangements for reporting to the corporation. Attendance at meetings is good.

76 There are frequent presentations from senior managers and other staff at corporation meetings. In addition, the college organises away-days at which senior managers and governors consider a range of strategic issues. They enable governors to be fully involved with the development of the college's strategic objectives. These strengths were recognised in the self-assessment report. Governors have had a significant role in the development of the college's wide-ranging accommodation strategy and the development and implementation of its management restructure. Relationships between governors and senior managers of the college are productive. Governors are generous in the time they give to the college in addition to their corporation and committee duties. They attend a wide range of college events. They are, however, aware of the distinction between management and governance. Their responsibilities are covered in detail in the corporation standing orders.

77 Inspectors and auditors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the corporation has effective procedures for conducting its business. Clerking arrangements are good. All meetings are accurately and clearly minuted. The chair of the corporation formally appraises the performance of the clerk to the corporation and the principal. Both have appropriate job descriptions. The corporation has agreed a formal procedure for the clerk to intervene, as appropriate, with regulatory advice. Up-to-date management accounts are produced for each meeting of the finance and general purposes committee. They receive detailed and critical consideration. These

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arrangements enable the governors to monitor the financial progress of the college. Governors are aware of the implications of recent deficits for the financial health of the college and its ability to implement its accommodation strategy. The audit committee monitors the implementation of audit recommendations.

78 The self-assessment report recognised that the corporation's evaluation of the college's performance against a range of targets and indicators is underdeveloped. As a part of the work of the committees, governors monitor progress made towards achieving the strategic objectives of the college. However, the quality and curriculum committee has only recently agreed the performance indicators that will be used to monitor the academic performance of the college. At the time of the inspection, there had been little analysis of college retention and achievement rates. The views of students are not always given sufficient significance. For example, a recent student perception questionnaire highlighted concerns over the effectiveness of some teaching. The need for further investigation and action was not raised when the committee reported the outcomes of the questionnaire to the corporation.

79 As recognised in the self-assessment report, procedures for governors to evaluate their own performance are undeveloped. The governors have recently begun to identify measurable targets to use in assessing their performance and measure their effectiveness qualitatively. The self-assessment report did not identify that the openness demonstrated by governors in their relationships with staff, is not reflected in corporation procedures. Only the minutes of the corporation and the search committee, edited for matters of confidentiality, are publicly available. The corporation does not hold an annual public meeting and has not produced an accessible summary of its annual report in the last two years.

Management

Grade 3

80 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some of the strengths had been overstated.

Key strengths

- good teamwork by senior managers
- open and consultative management style with strong corporate ethos
- clear lines of management accountability
- effective collaboration with local business and community groups

Weaknesses

- ineffective curriculum management in many areas
- some inaccurate management information
- some inefficiencies in deployment of staff
- deficiencies in some aspects of budgetary control

81 The college is completing a major reorganisation of teaching and support staff. It has successfully addressed the lack of clarity in management roles and procedures in the former faculty structure. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that management roles and responsibilities are well defined. There are standard job specifications for managers and administrators. Senior managers are strongly committed to corporate goals and work effectively as a team. The college's mission and strategic objectives have been redefined and effectively communicated to staff. There is close co-operation between the central departments and the 12 schools. The college is developing coherent strategies for tackling cross-college developments such as the introduction of key skills as part of curriculum 2000.

Cross-college Provision

82 The self-assessment report acknowledges that there are weaknesses in the quality of curriculum management. Changes to the management structure have not yet led to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and students' achievements. There has been a decline in student retention in some curriculum areas. The overall standard of teaching has declined since the last inspection. Some course management was ineffective. The self-assessment report underestimates the significance of these weaknesses.

83 The college's strategic objectives provide a useful framework for the development of operational plans. Each school and central department has a development plan. Senior managers recognise that operational objectives and tasks need to be defined more carefully to enable performance to be monitored rigorously. The process for setting and monitoring targets for student retention and achievement is at an early stage of development. Many subject areas do not set and monitor targets against national benchmarking data. There have been significant improvements in the quantity and accuracy of student data supplied to managers since the last inspection. However, much of the historical information on students' achievements held in the college's system is unreliable. In many curriculum areas, course teams hold their own local records because the central data are not trusted. The college recognises that it still needs to integrate the separate systems for recording financial, student and resources data and to extend on-line access to more staff. There are inefficiencies in the deployment of staff across the college sites and the duplication of some course provision. The average class size is low in most curriculum areas. The college has compared its staff utilisation against national benchmarks for further education colleges and recognises that it needs to make significant gains in efficiency.

84 There has been insufficient monitoring of the college's success in implementing its

policies. There is a lack of quantitative targets and data to assess the extent to which the college serves its communities. Some progress has been made in collating data on staff. This has not yet led to positive action to address gender and ethnic imbalances. Inspectors agreed that the college is strongly committed to the promotion of equal opportunities. The equal opportunities committee, a subcommittee of the academic board, is responsible for the promotion of the policy.

85 Inspectors agreed that the college has successful partnerships with local business and community groups. It works closely with the other Hertfordshire colleges, the local university and with local employers in advertising agencies, garages, catering and the print and film industries. It has attracted substantial business sponsorship and recruits international students to its further education and higher education courses. It also makes a substantial contribution to the training of disadvantaged groups, such as asylum seekers and has developed much community provision. The college is seeking to improve its marketing and starting to use market research information more systematically to evaluate the perceptions of customers.

86 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college has significant cash reserves. However, there was a moderate unplanned financial deficit in the last financial year and a similar unplanned deficit is forecast in the current year. These deficits could have a severe impact on the college's ability to fund its ambitious capital programme to consolidate its accommodation. The director of finance is a full member of the college senior management team. Budget holders receive promptly monthly reports on their expenditure and income. These do not include their approved annual budgets. A formal financial training programme has not been established for the newly appointed heads

Cross-college Provision

of schools. Effective budgetary control has not been evident. These weaknesses are not clearly identified in the self-assessment report. The budget process is well documented and a course costing methodology has been developed. Senior managers review monthly management accounts. The management accounts only include a few targets and performance indicators.

Conclusions

87 The college completed its first comprehensive self-assessment in preparation for the inspection. Its format followed the guidelines of Council Circular 97/12, *Validating self-assessment*. The report clearly identified strengths and weaknesses and included actions to address the weaknesses. Inspectors considered that it provided an adequate analysis of quality in most areas but was not sufficiently self-critical. Lessons observed and graded by the college resulted in a profile of grades considerably better than the grades awarded by inspectors. Inspectors agreed with three of the seven curriculum area grades in the self-assessment report, but awarded lower grades for four areas. They agreed with two of the college's cross-college grades, but awarded lower grades in three cross-college areas.

88 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 (April 2000)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	0
16-18 years	32
19-24 years	18
25+ years	50
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (April 2000)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation)	28
Level 2 (intermediate)	16
Level 3 (advanced)	20
Level 4/5 (higher)	6
Non-schedule 2	30
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (April 2000)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	566	1,787	22
Agriculture	4	99	1
Construction	0	85	1
Engineering	236	346	6
Business	507	1,243	17
Hotel and catering	374	197	5
Health and community care	479	627	10
Art and design	747	545	12
Humanities	457	1,337	17
Basic education	130	875	9
Total	3,500	7,141	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 6% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (April 2000)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	272	95	2	369
Supporting direct learning contact	128	12	5	145
Other support	248	21	16	285
Total	648	128	23	799

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£25,417,000	£24,125,000	£23,985,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£18.86	£18.28	£17.47
Payroll as a proportion of income	73%	68%	68%
Achievement of funding target	101%	99%	99%
Diversity of income	36%	37%	36%
Operating surplus	-£1,368,000	-£680,000	-£1,475,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999)

Payroll – Council Circular 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Number of starters	1,723	1,185	1,574	1,536	1,158	1,694
	Retention (%)	83	80	82	85	82	85
	Achievement (%)	70	59	55	73	69	70
2	Number of starters	2,673	2,274	2,193	1,531	1,973	1,491
	Retention (%)	74	76	78	83	81	77
	Achievement (%)	76	67	67	79	74	73
3	Number of starters	1,728	2,299	2,350	2,630	2,217	1,674
	Retention (%)	88	70	72	85	80	76
	Achievement (%)	76	72	73	71	68	71
4 or 5	Number of starters	12	103	64	559	659	584
	Retention (%)	100	83	81	87	81	83
	Achievement (%)	100	57	46	94	70	79
Short courses	Number of starters	1,541	1,184	1,532	4,015	6,196	6,164
	Retention (%)	89	92	90	88	94	94
	Achievement (%)	67	82	74	68	80	68
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	562	847	1,754	913	886	1,365
	Retention (%)	84	81	83	81	77	78
	Achievement (%)	87	80	49	83	93	83

Source: ISR

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