

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

West Oxfordshire College

March 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-96

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 30/97

WEST OXFORDSHIRE COLLEGE
SOUTH EAST REGION
Inspected April-December 1996

Summary

West Oxfordshire College is a small general further education college, in Witney. Distinctive features include provision in stud and stable husbandry and courses for the county's land-based industries. The college is responsive to the needs of the local community, and it has extended its services by providing a wide variety of courses taught to students at their places of work. It works productively in a partnership with local schools and has many links with the TEC. Relationships between staff and students are positive and friendly, and students have achieved good examination results in many GCE A level subjects. The college has achieved the Investors in People award. Since incorporation, the college has suffered from a lack of both sound strategic management and a settled long-term direction. The college needs consistent leadership by a stable governing body in order to address its difficulties successfully. The college's self-assessment report overestimates its strengths and plans, which are sometimes vaguely worded and are not given an order of priority. The college should improve its library stock; students' access to information technology equipment; the general quality of teaching; its underdeveloped quality assurance system; and much of its accommodation. It should also ensure that its management information system is capable of producing data on students, which are timely and adequate for its own use and that of the FEFC.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	2
Governance and management	4
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	4
Resources: staffing	3
equipment/learning resources	3
accommodation	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	3	Business studies	3
Agriculture, including stud and stable husbandry	3	Health and community care	2
Engineering	3	Humanities	2
		Basic education	3

INTRODUCTION

1 The inspection of West Oxfordshire College took place in three stages. Enrolment and induction procedures were inspected at the beginning of the autumn term in 1996. Between April 1996 and October 1996, nine inspectors spent 27 days assessing the quality of teaching and learning in the college's main curriculum areas. They observed 144 classes and examined students' work. In December 1996, seven inspectors spent 28 days assessing aspects of cross-college provision. Meetings were held with college governors, the central management team and the operational management team, teachers, staff with cross-college responsibilities, support and administrative staff, and students. Inspectors consulted employers, representatives of the Heart of England Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), members of community groups, head teachers and parents of students at the college. They also examined policy statements, minutes of committees and working papers.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 West Oxfordshire College is a small general further education college, based in the market town of Witney. It owns two farms: the Witney Stud Farm, where specialist courses in thoroughbred horse management are run, and the Warren Farm Centre where more general education and training for the land-based industries are provided. The two farms are three and 20 miles away from Witney, respectively. The college is accessible only by road and is close to the A40 between Oxford and Cheltenham.

3 West Oxfordshire is predominantly rural. Witney has a population of just over 20,000 which is expected to be boosted by the end of the century by further housing developments. Once famous for its manufacture of woollen blankets, Witney now has many small firms involved in engineering, wholesale and commercial services. Nearby Carterton, with its population of 15,000, is the only new town in Oxfordshire. Its people are younger than those of Witney and the population will grow when 1,200 new homes are built. The local economy is dominated by the Royal Air Force base at Brize Norton, which provides 60 per cent of jobs in the Carterton area. Oxfordshire's unemployment rate is lower than the national average at under 4 per cent. A survey conducted in 1995 by the TEC shows that nearly half the working population is qualified to at least national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 3 or its equivalent, compared with a national average of 40 per cent.

4 The college faces stiff competition. Witney has two 11 to 18 schools with strong sixth forms and the large college of further education in Oxford is easily reached by public transport. There are five neighbouring secondary schools, four of them with sixth forms; the other intends to open one. Participation in education by 16 to 19 year olds is high: in 1995, 74 per cent of 16 year olds continued in full-time education; 8 per cent

went into training at work; and 11 per cent started jobs. At the end of the last academic year, there were 5,128 students enrolled at the college, of whom 15 per cent were full time. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Three-fifths of the students are 19 years old or over. The college employs 268 full-time and part-time staff, of whom 126 are on full-time or permanent fractional contracts. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. The college is divided into eight departments: staff and student services, training and enterprise, thoroughbred horse management, general education, engineering and computing, health and care studies, business and professional studies, and the Warren Farm Centre.

5 The college's mission is to be a centre of excellence, identifying and meeting the needs of individuals, employers and the community. Its purpose is to provide an accessible, stimulating, flexible and supportive learning environment for students.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 The college offers a wide range of general education and unusual vocational courses. Distinctive features of the provision include the thoroughbred horse stud farm which recruits its students from Britain and abroad; the Warren Farm Centre which serves the county's land-based industries; and the diverse range of full-cost courses for the health service in Oxfordshire and the neighbouring counties. The Monty Roberts course in horse management is unique in this country, teaching students how to train horses more quickly and sympathetically than by traditional methods.

7 There are 19 subjects available at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and 14 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects. Some are available as evening courses. Apart from mathematics, no GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects are offered. Full-time national certificate and diploma courses approved by the Edexcel Foundation (formerly Business and Technology Education Council) are offered in engineering subjects, including aerospace, nursery nursing, information technology applications and horse management. Foundation and first diploma courses in agriculture, horticulture and horse care are taught at the Warren Farm Centre on a full-time or day-release basis. A limited number of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) is available at intermediate and advanced levels in health and social care, and business. The college sees higher education as a potential growth area: it now offers higher national diplomas in business studies, and stud and stable administration. Sixty per cent of higher national diploma students go on to one-year programmes leading to degrees at Oxford Brookes University through a special arrangement between the two institutions. One-year full-time and two-year part-time

access to higher education courses are available for adults who wish to return to study.

8 In the past two years, the college has developed NVQs taught at work to compensate for a drop in full-time recruitment. These programmes doubled in size between 1994 and 1995, and 562 candidates were presented for assessment in 1995. Its contracts for NVQs at work are for clients such as W H Smith, Readers Digest and RAF Brize Norton. Between a quarter and a third of the college's income now comes from sources other than the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college's development plan includes providing training for company course assessors, with college staff acting as the internal verifiers for local firms. NVQs in horticulture and other land-based activities are run by the Warren Farm Centre which has a separate TEC contract from the rest of the college. In January 1996, a training and enterprise department was set up to co-ordinate 16 new NVQs. They include courses in aircraft fitting, plastic film processing, racehorse care, beauty therapy, training for dental surgery assistants and courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college manages programmes leading to NVQ awards in social care for the Windrush Consortium of residential care homes.

9 There is effective liaison with local schools. The GCSE and GCE A level courses are planned in consultation with the West Oxfordshire Learning Partnership to avoid duplication and to give students in the area as much choice among subjects as possible. Students at local schools take one or more GCE A levels at the college in combination with their other studies. This open and co-operative relationship with schools brings benefits to all parties. The college has free access to schools for careers talks and it uses the schools' mailing lists to contact parents. Local schools have asked the college to produce a common format for the assessment of key skills. The college hopes to offer younger pupils at local schools the opportunity to undertake GNVQs and NVQs in future, alongside their main studies. The Warren Farm Centre offers study visits for school children of all ages, and last year it received 3,000 visitors.

10 The college is a centre for community education, and the Workers' Educational Association has used the campus for many years. The college works with special schools and with units attached to secondary schools to raise awareness of the range of opportunities available for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In 1994-95, the college mounted, for the first time, a pilot course for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties. It was withdrawn in the following year, after failing to attract sufficient students. Some students with physical disabilities follow mainstream courses. There is a one-year foundation course to give students who have low grades at GCSE, the special teaching and guidance they need. Progression is available through the 'vocational access', 'towards independence' and 'moving on' courses. Most adult basic education students have the opportunity to gain nationally-accredited qualifications such as the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G)

wordpower awards. Recently a free 10-week course for women returners to work was run by the college with sponsorship from a supermarket. There are some open learning packs to help students to achieve NVQs on their own, and general education courses have been modularised to give more flexible access. There are few formal arrangements for the accreditation of prior learning to enable students to gain exemptions from parts of their studies.

11 Links with the TEC are productive, and include contracts for modern apprenticeships and for training credits which have grown significantly. The college has made successful bids to the development and competitiveness funds for work such as the development of the Internet for distance learning, and the building of a centre at Warren Farm for training for the landscaping industry. The college works well with other training providers such as West Oxfordshire Training Services. Links with local industry are growing. Employers particularly value direct contact with specialist teachers to develop training courses, and they feel that the college is becoming more businesslike in its approach. A good example of this growing capability is the range of courses for medical practices in Oxfordshire, Somerset, Wiltshire and Berkshire.

12 The college has established a larger network of links with local employers than that of many other rural colleges in the sector. It has taken active steps to develop new markets, including investment in new staff. Nevertheless, better co-ordination and analysis of activities are still required; at present, individuals and departments work largely in isolation from one another and they do not fully exploit opportunities for the benefit of the college as a whole.

13 The college has links with Europe. There have been staff and student exchanges with vocational institutions in Finland, Spain and Austria with the help of European Union funds. Students on the GCE A level chemistry course exchange with the Provoo Vocational School in Finland to compare water pollutants in rural west Oxfordshire and industrial Helsinki. The department of thoroughbred horse management has a long-standing relationship with the French jockeys' school. Last year 30 students visited France to gain experience of its horse racing industry.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

14 In 1994, the corporation board increased its permitted membership from 14 to 18. There are 12 independent members, one from the TEC and two co-opted members from the local community. Other members include two elected staff members and the principal. There are no student governors. There were three vacancies remaining at the time of inspection. Since 1994 the board has always had two or three vacancies and there has been considerable turnover of members. At the time of inspection, only seven governors had two or more years' experience. Governors have a broad range of senior managerial experience and particular strength in financial matters.

15 The board has five committees: finance and general purposes; employment policy and personnel; audit; remuneration; and a search committee which fills vacancies for governors. The first three of these committees meet regularly. They are well attended, with an average of 86 per cent of members present at the last four meetings. In contrast, full board meetings had an average attendance of only 68 per cent for the six meetings held between January and November 1996. The clerk, who is a member of college staff, serves the main board and all of the committees, except the remuneration committee which is clerked by its chairman. Documentation for meetings of the corporation and its committees is not presented in a format which facilitates decision making. Governors receive large quantities of paperwork, without sufficient indication of its context to allow them to identify readily the key issues. Discussion is protracted and it leaves some members uncertain about what they have achieved. Examination results are presented to the corporation without written explanation or commentary. Some members commented that the absence of national comparative statistics, retention data or a record of students' destinations makes it difficult for them to assess the real quality of the college's achievements or to track trends from year to year. Important papers are sometimes tabled at corporation meetings; discussion is recorded as it occurs rather than in a logical sequence, and remarks are ascribed to named individuals. Recently, members have been informed whether an item is for decision, discussion or information; this is a step in the right direction.

16 Governors are committed to the success of the college and to its future development. They have a good grasp of their duties. Members are at ease with their financial responsibilities, but are less comfortable in determining the educational character of the college. Most of the board's time is devoted to finances. Many members have not taken up the training opportunities offered to them. While some governors have made a valuable contribution to the development of parts of the curriculum, and others plan to do so, most governors are unfamiliar to staff.

17 The college's first strategic plan was produced by senior staff. The corporation board and the academic board were able merely to comment on a plan which was already formulated. There were some opportunities for staff to contribute, but these were confined largely to setting targets for enrolment to their own areas of responsibility. This restrictive process gave rise to a plan which conveyed no widely-shared view of the college's future. The governors and the academic board played a similarly limited role in updating the plan. Although departments made proposals which had some influence upon the plan, staff below the level of middle managers were not told that this had been the case. A new process introduced for the strategic plan to be drawn up this year, encourages more involvement by governors and a more consistent approach to gathering the contributions of staff.

18 In January 1996, a new management structure was introduced. There are eight heads of department who report to the assistant principal (curriculum), although, in fact, two are managed by the principal. This modification is not recorded on the college's organisational chart. The assistant principal (resources) has responsibility for all the business activities of the college. The two assistant principals and the principal form the central management team, which meets weekly. The quality assurance manager, employed on a 0.4 full-time basis, attends central management team and other meetings as required. The central management team meets the heads of department every other week to form the operational management team. Heads of department with the assistant principal (curriculum) and the quality assurance manager, form the middle management team which meets fortnightly and has a particular focus on quality assurance. Terms of reference for this complex of committees have still not been prepared. While members are developing a reasonably clear view of their responsibilities, uncertainty remains about the relationship of these committees to the academic board. The academic board has a membership comprising all of the members of the operational management team and three members of staff who have cross-college responsibilities. Eight members of teaching staff are supposed to have been nominated to the board, but the college has not carried out this important widening of representation and perspective. It is not clear whether or not the academic board is quorate without the extra eight members. Managers on the academic board spend time reconsidering matters which they may have already discussed in management team meetings. Failure to complete the implementation of the new management structure in detail is an opportunity wasted to give the college a new impetus and sense of purpose.

19 The new management structure has improved communication within the new departments. They are developing a sense of identity and a sharper focus on quality assurance. Communication between the departments and central management is less good. Some cross-college services have found it more difficult to be effective across a larger number of departments. New heads of department have received little training. They have generic job descriptions, but not to a consistent format. Reorganisation has not alleviated the sense of overload at all levels of staff. In many cases, this malaise appears to stem not from too few staff, but from the lack of a constant focus for their work. The effectiveness of the college would be markedly improved if the central management team stood back from day-to-day matters and sought instead to draw together the strands of activity into settled policies, procedures and delegated responsibilities.

20 The college had an operating deficit in each of the last three financial years. In each of these three years it also failed to meet its recruitment targets. In 1993-94, it achieved 96 per cent of its target; in 1994-95, it achieved 90 per cent of its target; in 1995-96, it is estimated to have achieved 95 per cent. The college has been consistently unable to provide

the FEFC with accurate and timely data. In 1994-95, payroll costs as a percentage of the college's income were well above the average for the sector at 81 per cent. Whilst the college was quick to introduce new staff contracts and has both cut its costs and increased its earnings from full-cost courses, there is no clear plan which brings together all the measures the college is taking to produce an operating surplus for 1996-97. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6, respectively. The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £16.80 per unit, compared with the median for general further education and tertiary colleges of £17.97 per unit.

21 The college has considerable difficulty in producing accurate data on students' enrolments and achievements. Teachers have little confidence in the college's management information systems. There are computer-based systems for student data and finance. In September 1996, a new system for registers and timetabling was introduced. During the whole of the academic year 1995-96, teachers used temporary registers and, at the time of inspection, there was still a variety of registers in use. Many teachers did not know what the official college register looked like.

22 The use of policy to regulate activity is uneven. Policies exist for some important areas of college life such as health and safety and equal opportunities, but not for others. Some areas have a supporting committee and a reasonably clear line of reporting to the governing body. Others, for example equal opportunities, have a person identified to carry them out but no clear arrangements for their monitoring, review and evaluation. Learning support is co-ordinated by a manager and it is discussed at management meetings, but there is no policy to guide its evolution.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

23 Procedures for the recruitment of students are effective and well managed. Course information is provided, in most cases, through informative literature. The close working relationship between the college and local schools ensures that the college contributes directly to the guidance of pupils. All the opportunities for study locally after the age of 16 are published in a single prospectus and there is a series of open days at the college to allow students to see its part of the programmes. The college responds quickly to applications. The planned introduction of a centralised application system in the college should improve administration further. Parents are invited to accompany students at initial interviews and are offered a tour of the Witney Site. Parents and students interviewed by inspectors were very positive about the college. They cited the good learning environment, small classes, well-motivated peers, individual attention and availability of appropriate vocational courses as reasons for choosing West Oxfordshire College.

24 Enrolment is well organised and students continue to receive advice and guidance during the process. Students may change their course after enrolling. The induction procedure for full-time students works well.

There is an initial one-day programme to cover basic information and subsequent activities which relate specifically to each course. The majority of part-time students receive no formal induction. Students with learning difficulties are able to attend college for a taster week in the summer to help them to adjust to their new environment.

25 Students value the personal contact and support they receive from staff. Every full-time student has a personal tutor and, except at Warren Farm, a timetabled weekly tutorial. Tutorials are used to provide a mixture of group work and individual help. The college has a code of practice for tutors of full-time students which outlines the duties and responsibilities of the tutor. It is too loosely monitored to ensure that the tutorial programme is consistent for every student. The requirement for tutors to record the outcomes of tutorials is not always fulfilled and nobody checks whether or not it has been done. The quality of tutorials is inconsistent. Action planning is patchy, and records of achievement are not kept up by most students. A fuller tutorial curriculum, together with more effective monitoring, would improve matters. Part-time students do not have tutorials, but they are advised by their subject teachers. Training for tutorial work is available for the 41 tutors. Participation is voluntary and not all tutors take part. Only a quarter of them attended a meeting to review the code of tutorial practice.

26 All full-time students sign a learning agreement which sets out their responsibilities and those of the college. Procedures for reporting absences and student withdrawals are applied inconsistently, although parents spoke favourably of the speed with which they were contacted when there were problems. Students who leave their courses early are interviewed to find out why. Destination data are collected by teaching departments during the autumn term, but there is little evidence that the data are analysed and used or that partner schools are kept informed of the progress of their former pupils.

27 In addition to guidance and tutorials provided by teachers, the staff and student services department offers counselling, welfare and careers advice, and learning support. The student services team are scattered around the college's main site. This makes it difficult for students who are unsure of their needs to seek out the most appropriate service. Formal meetings of the staff and student services team are irregular, with the result that members concentrate on their own work rather than being able to contribute effectively to a coherent service.

28 Two careers service advisers are based in the college. The careers service is well regarded. The accommodation in which advisers have to work is poor; it has no window or ventilation. Services for 16 to 19 year old students include advice on job seeking, applying to higher education, possibilities for a year off between courses of study and what to do when examination results are received. The advisers have close links with tutors. There is little careers guidance available for part-time students.

Confidential support is provided by the counsellor for students with personal, accommodation, welfare and financial problems. The quality and professionalism of the service are held in high esteem.

29 The work of the learning support team is increasingly well regarded. Although staffing has been increased at Witney, it remains insufficient to meet demand. Seventy-three full-time students are receiving help with literacy, numeracy and dyslexia problems, but 51 are still on a waiting list for help. The learning support needs of full-time students are identified during pre-entry guidance and by formal testing during induction. Some departments have devised their own tests with the help of learning support specialists, to make them more relevant to vocational areas, while others use the college's system. The needs of part-time students are not analysed. At the Warren Farm Centre, nearly half the students are in need of additional support, for which an additional staffing allowance has been made. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive an appropriate level of additional help.

30 The college has a student union. There is no member of staff, apart from the head of staff and student services, to assist its work and to secure a consistent service for students. Many students travel to college daily and there is now no common lunch hour, so that few events and activities take place. Only the football club and the turf club are active.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

31 Of the 144 sessions inspected, 45 per cent had strengths which outweighed the weaknesses and 10 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. The profile of the college's lesson grades is well below the average for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Many sessions were ponderous and dull. The poor quality of teaching on some NVQ programmes should be of particular concern to the college in the light of its intention to develop this area. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		1	9	16	2	0	28
GCSE		0	2	3	0	0	5
GNVQ		1	4	4	1	0	10
NVQ		2	5	8	4	0	19
Basic education		0	5	8	2	1	16
Other vocational		9	19	20	3	0	51
Other		1	7	5	2	0	15
Total		14	51	64	14	1	144

32 Teachers had produced schemes of work for all curriculum areas, but the quality of planning is variable both within and between departments. In health and care, there was a well-planned and coherent curriculum. In other subjects where there was good practice, for example, chemistry, biology and some engineering courses, schemes of work reflected course and syllabus aims, and gave details of the teaching methods to be used, the resources required, the assignments and the methods of assessment. In too many courses, however, schemes of work were sketchy; no more than a list of topics. Some programmes of study in humanities had no obvious structure, and schemes of work in mathematics and computing were not set out in a form which would convey anything to students. Links between related areas of equine studies courses were rarely made explicit, so that the teaching was sometimes unco-ordinated and students failed to see the coherence of the curriculum. The provision for adult students with learning difficulties lacked a sense of purpose, a problem made worse by the inclusion of students who would have been better served by other courses.

33 Most teachers prepared conscientiously for individual lessons. In the better lessons, aims and objectives were stated clearly at the start and students were aware that the lesson was part of a considered programme. Reference was made to previous work, students' growing knowledge and understanding were checked, and precise directions were given for future work. Students in a GCE A level media studies class were asked to plan a sequence for a new soap opera. Instructions were clear. All students were involved and enjoyed the activity. They learned to work effectively in small teams to accomplish the task. At the end of the session, the teacher succinctly summarised the main learning points and identified the next stages of the planning and production process.

34 In the weaker lessons planning was poor and activity was haphazard. Most of the theory lessons on equine study courses were dominated by the teacher to the extent that little contribution from students was possible. No account was taken of their differing abilities. In other lessons, teachers allowed a few students to do all the talking and made little attempt to ensure that all the students contributed to discussion. A mixed-ability group of agricultural students was set a humdrum written assignment to finish before the holidays. The assignment did not challenge the more able students and they left the class early, while a third of the class was unable to complete the work.

35 In many lessons there was too little variety in the learning activities. Teachers failed to interest students or to build up their ability to learn on their own. Many teachers asked questions of students and then immediately answered the questions themselves. Students were passive recipients of information and teachers the only source of knowledge, rather than one of several resources for learning. A first-year group of NVQ motor vehicle engineering students were learning about wheel tracking and alignment in the lecture theatre. Most chose to sit in the back rows.

The students were not stimulated and the teacher's questions to the group failed to arouse any response. Students in a GCE A level social science class were introduced to affiliation and reinforcement theories. They contributed little to the session and the teacher did most of the work. The atmosphere was relaxed to the point of torpor, and the teacher made little attempt to check that students were learning.

36 In the better lessons, teachers were imaginative in finding ways to maintain their students' interest. They used methods such as group work, the exchange of ideas and individual presentations by students. These activities were appropriately conducted at a lively pace. In a mixed class of NVQ and first diploma agriculture students, skilfully-managed questioning drew out the main lessons the students had learned and the teacher structured them into a summary using the whiteboard. Questions either to individuals or to the whole group were used intelligently to ensure that every student was involved and that the content of the lesson was covered at a good pace. In small groups, childcare students prepared activities for use on work placement. Each group presented their project to the rest of the class and each proposal was tested out. The whole process was video taped to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the projects themselves, and of the presentations. In a modern languages evening class, the teacher was obviously aware of the differing levels of competence and confidence in the student group and of students' various reasons for wanting to learn a new language. This knowledge was used effectively to structure a practical exercise on the use of the past imperfect tense, which enabled every student to take part without embarrassment or anxiety.

37 In some curriculum areas, assignments were set regularly and marked promptly. Assessment criteria were made clear to students and the better teachers gave detailed guidance in their comments on how students could improve their work. Students were regularly kept informed of their progress. However, many courses have no consistent approach to setting and marking work, and the quality of marking is uneven. Some teachers make few, if any, written comments and those they do make are often perfunctory. The lack of evaluative commentary on work returned to students means that it cannot be used effectively for revision. There was a tendency to make fuller comments on the assignments of weaker students and to be less concerned to mark fully the work of the more able students. Grammatical and spelling errors were sometimes left without correction.

38 Practical work was well organised and properly assessed and, in most cases, proper attention was paid to health and safety. Students on the land-based courses enjoyed their practical work and regretted the fact that their reliance on college transport meant their day for this work was short. Most of the practical teaching on equine studies was good. The vocational access course provides a sound preparation for employment and gives students opportunities to have work experience.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

39 Students at West Oxfordshire College enjoy their studies and show appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding. Most students develop key skills to an appropriate level. Students aged 16 to 18 taking GCE AS/A level examinations in 1995, scored, on average, 4.5 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2). This placed the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure based on data in the 1995 performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). In 1996, students scored, on average, 3.9 points per entry. This places the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector, according to data published by the DfEE.

40 In 1995, 86 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 on vocational courses included in the DfEE's performance tables were successful. This placed the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector according to data published by the DfEE. In 1996, 83 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 on advanced vocational courses included in the DfEE's performance tables were successful. This places the college in the top third of all colleges on this performance measure. In the same year, 57 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 on intermediate vocational qualifications were successful. This places the college in the middle third of further education colleges according to this performance measure.

41 The number of students enrolled for GCSE subjects has fallen by over 40 per cent in the last two years, and the number of students enrolled on the full-time GCSE programme is small. Examination results and retention rates are generally good on these courses. Over the last three years, results in English have been consistently above the national average for colleges of general further education. Although results in human biology and physics were poor in 1995, they were well above the national average in 1996. Eighty-six per cent of students studying accounting and 80 per cent of the students in psychology who were entered for the examinations gained grade A to C; a proportion which is significantly above the national average.

42 GCE A level examination results and retention rates on courses are mostly good. In 1996, all full-time students in the second year of their GCE A level courses stayed to complete them. The majority of GCE A level students are aged 16 to 18. In 1996, every student entered for GCE A level examinations in accounts, art and craft, biology, geography, mathematics, physics, and psychology achieved a pass at grades A to E. Results were also above the national average in business studies, human biology, and law. Pass rates in economics and English have been consistently good. In 1996, chemistry with a 40 per cent pass rate, computing with 29 per cent and economic and social history at 29 per cent were well below national averages, and sociology results have been poor for the past two years. The college does not analyse the value added to students' achievements by GCE A level courses by comparing their actual performance at GCE A level with their predicted performance based on GCSE achievements.

43 The following table shows the number of students aged 16 to 18 entered for GCE A level examinations each year between 1994 and 1996, together with pass rates at grades A to E, measured against national averages for general further education colleges.

Number of students entered for GCE A levels 1994-96

	1994	1995	1996
Number of students entered	237	214	230
Number of subjects in which students were entered	18	19	19
Average pass rate (%)	77	85	82
National average for general further education colleges (%)	72	72	74
Number of subjects above national average	8	13	13
Number of subjects below national average	8	6	6
Number at national average	2	0	0

44 The success rates on many advanced programmes have declined over the past three years. Results for the national diploma in computing have been good, but there has been poor retention on the national diploma in information technology. Most students who complete the national diploma course in agriculture (management of thoroughbred horses) are successful. Results in engineering are generally below national averages. In 1996 the national diploma in aerospace was an exception to this poor record. Business studies results are good. Although results in health and social care have declined in recent years they remain generally good. Most of those who complete the access to higher education course achieve the qualification. Results are also good on the further and adult education teachers' certificate course. The following table shows the success rates in advanced vocational courses, such as national diplomas and advanced GNVQs.

Success rates* in advanced vocational courses 1994-96

	1994	1995	1996
Computing and information technology	100	46	62
Agriculture	88	87	94
Engineering	54	38	65
Business studies	87	100	74
Health and social care	91	85	72
Access to higher education	84	64	62

** success rate equals percentage of those enrolled on 1 November of year 1 of the course who achieved their qualification.*

45 The success rates on many intermediate courses are poor, including for example, those achieved on the first diplomas in information technology applications and engineering, and on the GNVQ intermediate in business. Although results on intermediate courses in agriculture and health and social care have declined, they remain close to the national average. The following table shows the success rates in intermediate vocational courses, such as BTEC first diplomas and intermediate GNVQs.

Success rates* in intermediate vocational courses 1994-96

	1994	1995	1996
Computing and information technology	48	67	36
Agriculture	86	98	67
Engineering	100	33	39
Business studies	63	47	33
Health and social care	-	93	56

** success rate equals percentage of those enrolled on 1 November of year 1 of the course who achieved their qualification.*

46 Achievements on courses leading to NVQs in agriculture are mixed. The percentage of students achieving a full qualification has improved at level 1, but sharply declined at level 3. Results at NVQ level 1 in floristry are good; in 1996, every student successfully completed the course. Results were also good at NVQ level 2 in floristry, but poor at level 2 in estate maintenance and game management. The NVQ level 2 results in electrical and mechanical engineering have been below the national averages for the last two years. Success rates on the NVQs related to the awards of the Association of Accounting Technicians are varied. The following table gives the success rates for NVQs for 1994-96.

Success rates* in NVQs 1994-96

	1994	1995	1996
Agriculture level 1	55	76	96
Agriculture level 2	73	91	60
Engineering level 2	-	67	29
Business studies level 2	58	76	47
Agriculture level 3	93	26	20
Business studies level 3	62	39	41

**success rate equals percentage of those enrolled on 1 November of year 1 of the course who achieved their qualification.*

47 Adult basic education students are well motivated and keen to make progress. In 1996, 43 per cent of these students achieved their primary learning goal and another 35 per cent made good progress towards achieving their goals. The majority of students' files are well organised

and show evidence of progression. Students on the vocational access course speak with confidence about their work and have good opportunities for progression to other courses and to employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

48 There is no general policy on quality assurance, and procedures have in the past proved ineffective. The system of course review and evaluation neither required nor encouraged discussion or analysis of performance indicators by teams of teachers, and there was no action planning or target setting. Procedures were widely resisted or ignored by staff. The summary reports of the scheme were based necessarily on partial data and they contained little evaluative comment. There is no evidence that the procedure resulted in any improvements in teaching and learning.

49 A new scheme requires staff teams to consider indicators of their performance, including course costs, student retention rates, achievement rates and student destinations, and to produce an action plan designed to bring about continuous improvement. Many teams were unable to do so with any degree of confidence in the first cycle. The college management information system is not capable of providing current, reliable data to course teams. The scheme also requires collection of students' and employers' views through use of evaluative questionnaires. The lack of a systematic means of collecting opinion was a weakness of earlier arrangements, and there were substantial differences in the accuracy of feedback given by employers, for example, in health and care and engineering. The use of questionnaires should help matters. Heads of department bring together course monitoring forms to produce departmental summaries and action plans. In turn, these form the basis for a college action plan, which is discussed at the academic board. This process is one of aggregation at each stage, rather than synthesis and refinement. Some departmental action plans define objectives specifically, but others either have no targets or targets that are too vague to be measurable.

50 Since restructuring in January 1996, the responsibility for quality assurance now rests with the central management team. Development of policy and procedures is led by the manager for quality assurance. The middle managers group for quality assurance meets fortnightly with a clear agenda, and their minutes assign responsibility and deadlines for action. A course validation, monitoring and action planning system has been devised, through which curriculum provision for 1995-96 was evaluated. Every full-time course team took part. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of this system in improving the service experienced by students, but college staff are plainly much more positive about it and they spoke highly of its potential.

51 Both the training and enterprise department, and Warren Farm Centre, have participated in the TEC quality assurance survey. Systems

for internal verification of student assessment have been ineffective, and there has been no co-ordination of the process across the college. Some reports from moderators and external verifiers have been sent directly to course teams, but monitoring has been unco-ordinated. A newly-appointed internal verification co-ordinator is mapping the current provision and identifying staff with assessor and verifier skills and qualifications. The college has decided to introduce common documentation and methods, but it has yet to do so.

52 The college was awarded Investor in People status in March 1995. The staff-development policy sets out in plain terms entitlement, responsibilities and priorities for training. The college has a staff-development budget of £19,000 this year to cover fees for external courses; approximately 0.4 per cent of its income. The costs of five in-service training days for all staff during the year are additional to this cash sum. Topics covered during training days last year included preparation for inspection; drugs awareness; basic management training for newly-promoted heads of department; and development for personal tutors. Staff have not always attended these sessions and their effectiveness has therefore been uneven. Since restructuring, the role of the staff-development committee has been subsumed by the operational management team. The head of staff and student services draws up a plan. Activities are recorded and monitored against the college's operational objectives and the budget. Staff undertaking training are required to complete an evaluation form afterwards, and a list of activities is circulated periodically so that the outcomes can be shared. Staff-development initiatives include an employee development programme which began last year with a small amount of pump-priming funding from the TEC. It is designed to encourage a climate of active learning among staff by supporting some personal development or training which is not directly job related, such as twilight workshops in French conversation. An induction programme for newly-appointed staff is run in the autumn term. Many staff are unable to attend because of other commitments. Clearer priorities are needed to guide the provision of staff development and to ensure that it always reaches those whom it is intended to benefit.

53 The college inherited a scheme for staff appraisal from the local education authority (LEA). The scheme handbook provides clear guidelines for both appraisers and appraisees. It is based on a two-year cycle, and it includes task or classroom observation. The first cycle of appraisal for full-time members of staff was completed in time for the college's assessment for Investor in People status in spring 1995, but almost no appraisal has been conducted since.

54 The college charter was produced by the senior management team after some consultation with staff. Students, employers and governors were not involved in the process. The charter is written in clear and

accessible language, but it makes few measurable commitments to service standards. A summary of the charter is included in the full-time students' handbook and displayed throughout the college in poster form. Staff and students at Witney are aware of its contents; those at Warren Farm are not. There are no formal means for monitoring whether or not the commitments in the charter have been met.

55 The college produced its first self-assessment report for inspection, using the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. After consultation with staff, managers completed questionnaires, the results of which were used to compile the report. While, in most cases, the college's assessment of its weaknesses corresponds with the judgements made by inspectors, strengths are overestimated. The action plans relating to each area of operation are not prioritised and they are sometimes vague.

RESOURCES

Staffing

56 The college employs 82 full-time teachers and 12 full-time equivalent part-time teachers. The majority of teaching staff are appropriately qualified and experienced, but formal qualification levels among some of the teaching staff at the Warren Farm Centre are low. Eighty-five per cent of the full-time teaching staff have a higher education or professional qualification and 90 per cent a teaching qualification. A large proportion of staff have achieved the awards to assess GNVQ and NVQ programmes, but slow progress has been made in training internal verifiers. There are no internal verifiers in thoroughbred horse management. Administrative, technical and learning support staffing is good.

57 Nineteen per cent of teaching hours are taught by part-time staff, in varying proportions across the college. In health and social care, part-time staff teach one-third of the curriculum, whereas in business and professional studies such staff teach only 10 per cent. In some areas, part-time teachers are employed to bring in relevant commercial experience but the college has no strategy for the use of part-time teachers, and it sets no targets for departments for the use of part-time staff.

58 There is no human resource strategy. Currently, there are a number of personnel policies, including those for grievance and disciplinary procedures. Many policies are being reviewed. Personnel matters are the responsibility of the assistant principal (resources), aided by the principal's personal assistant. There are no staff with personnel qualifications. Personnel records are kept manually and information cannot be retrieved or sorted easily. Procedures for recruitment of full-time staff are clear, and all applicants complete an equal opportunities monitoring form. However, the information given on these forms is not analysed. The use of staffing is not monitored with sufficient care and there is little central direction over such important matters as taught hours and minimum class sizes.

Equipment/learning resources

59 In most areas equipment is adequate. Although much of the equipment in science is old, it is well maintained and appropriate. The aeronautical engineering section is well equipped with a variety of resources which includes a Jet Provost aircraft, a modern wind-tunnel and two gas-turbine engines. In mechanical engineering there is a comprehensive range of welding equipment and there are sufficient modern engines in motor vehicle engineering. There is a wide range of specialist equipment and tools for the equine study courses. The number of thoroughbred horses varies throughout the year as colts are purchased in the autumn, trained, and sold on in the spring. The brood mares at the stud farm enable students to gain first-hand experience of foaling. At the Warren Farm Centre, some basic equipment in horticulture is lacking so that, on occasions, students stand around doing nothing. The college has a herd of 75 cattle and a sheep flock of about 130 ewes.

60 In most classrooms, the furniture and general purpose teaching aids are adequate. Overhead projectors, whiteboards and other audio-visual aids are readily available. There is a central audio-visual aids service managed by a technician. The reprographic service is also managed centrally. Both are good.

61 There is a small library at Witney. It has about 12,000 books, periodicals, video tapes and compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases. The library also holds information on careers and higher education opportunities. There are 70 study spaces, 33 of which are in the silent study area. The library is run by a full-time librarian, a part-time librarian and two library assistants, all of whom are professionally qualified. The library's budget for 1996-97 is £15,000, an increase from last year of 177 per cent. A lamentable £800 was spent on books in 1995-96, when most of the budget of £5,400 was spent on electronic media. The bookstock is poor, old, and out of date. The number of books borrowed from the library decreased between 1993-94 and 1995-96 by 25 per cent. There are no effective means to identify book requirements related to the curriculum. The librarian at Witney is also responsible for the library at Warren Farm. A technician at Warren Farm is a qualified library assistant, but many other responsibilities leave little time to devote to the library. The library at Warren Farm has about 1,500 books. These are listed on the library catalogue at Witney, but the catalogue is not available at Warren Farm. The library arrangements at the farm are seriously inadequate.

62 There are 121 computers available for students' use; a ratio of one machine to every 13 full-time equivalent students. This is low compared with the average found in further education colleges. One hundred and five computers are modern and able to run appropriate software. There are sufficient machines to teach the specialist courses in information technology. Eighteen of the modern machines are available on open access to students. The college has access to the Internet and a video conferencing

facility. The college intends to develop a comprehensive learning resource centre by bringing the library, audio-visual resources, the reprographic service and an expanded computer facility together, but it has no general strategy for development of information technology in the curriculum.

Accommodation

63 The college at Witney is in the middle of a housing estate close to the town centre. The buildings are of many different ages and styles, including a nineteenth-century stable block, temporary classrooms, and buildings from the 1950s to the 1970s. There are 13 separate buildings on the campus. Because of the sloping site, access to many of the buildings is poor for wheelchair users or others with restricted mobility. The campus is cluttered and undistinguished. The college is trying to improve the appearance of the site, and the building team have a planned programme of maintenance. Students on a training-for-work programme at Warren Farm are installing planted areas and outdoor seating.

64 The stud farm at Common Leys occupies about 36 hectares of pasture land. It has good specialist yard facilities. There are 108 hectares of land at Warren Farm. Classroom and student communal areas are inadequate. Although there are food vending machines, there is no refectory. There are no shower facilities. The college is building a new teaching block which will provide four classrooms and a computer room. A seventeenth-century barn at Warren Farm has been adapted to provide two large teaching rooms.

65 Teaching accommodation at Witney is generally clean, tidy and well maintained. In many curriculum areas, specialist rooms are grouped together. Rooms for health and social care are well decorated, with attractive wall displays. The classrooms in engineering lack interesting displays. Much accommodation in humanities has restricted space. The teaching accommodation in science is adequate, although the greenhouse is dilapidated. There is a newly-decorated students' common room. The refectory provides a good service throughout the day, and there are vending machines available for students in the evening. There is no nursery or creche and no sports facilities on the site, although many students make good use of the local sports centre.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

66 The particular strengths of the college are:

- good relationships between staff and students
- good links with local schools and the community
- provision for some specialised markets
- active development of off-site learning
- productive relationships with the TEC and with local employers
- many good GCE A level results.

67 If it is to continue to improve the quality of its provision the college should address the following matters:

- the lack of a settled long-term direction
- the lack of systematic management
- the inadequate management information system which produces unreliable student data and tardy returns to the FEFC
- the failure to meet enrolment targets
- pedestrian teaching on many courses and low expectations of students
- the underdeveloped quality assurance system and the halt in staff appraisal
- the poor library
- insufficient computers
- some poor accommodation.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)

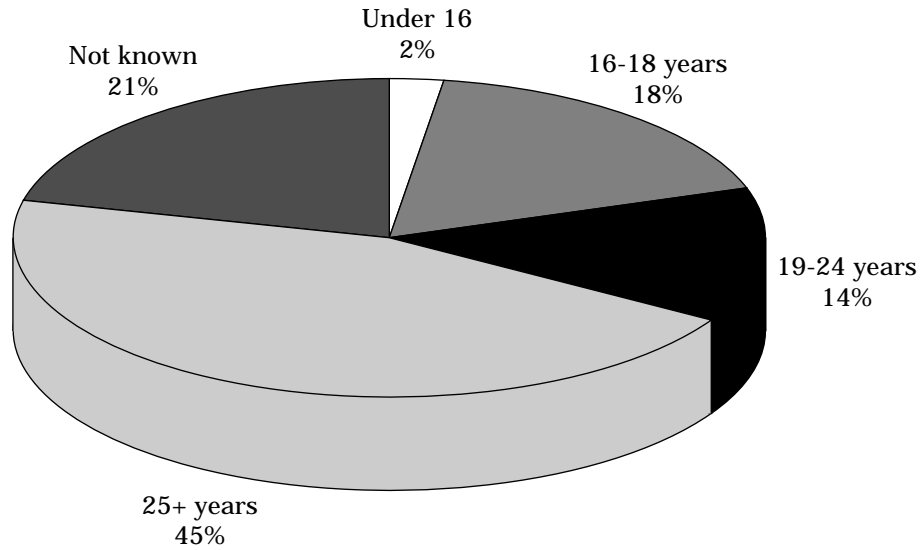
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

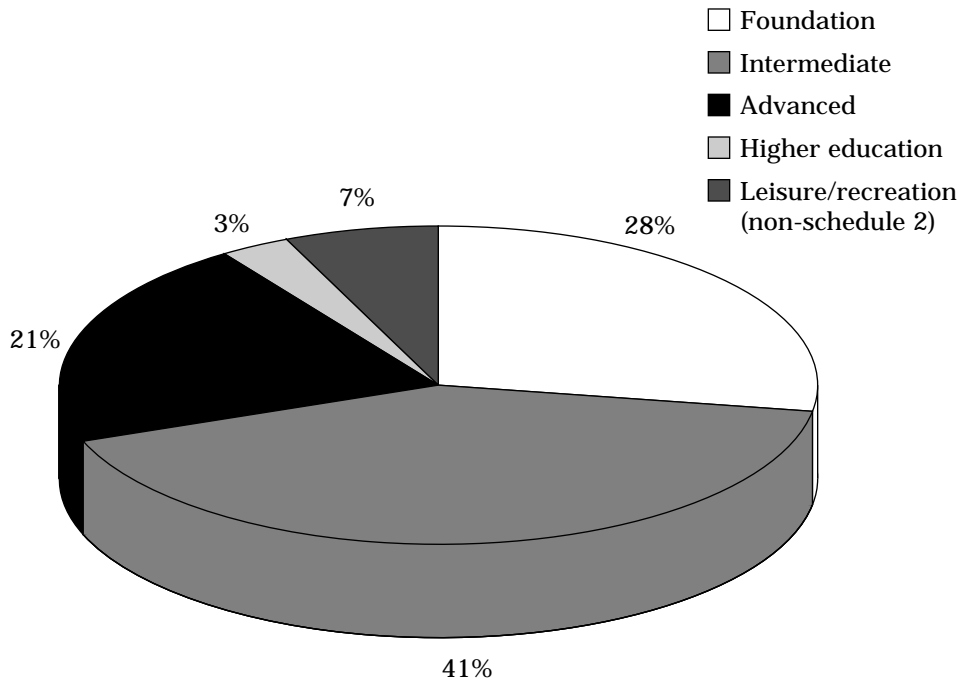
West Oxfordshire College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 5,128

Figure 2

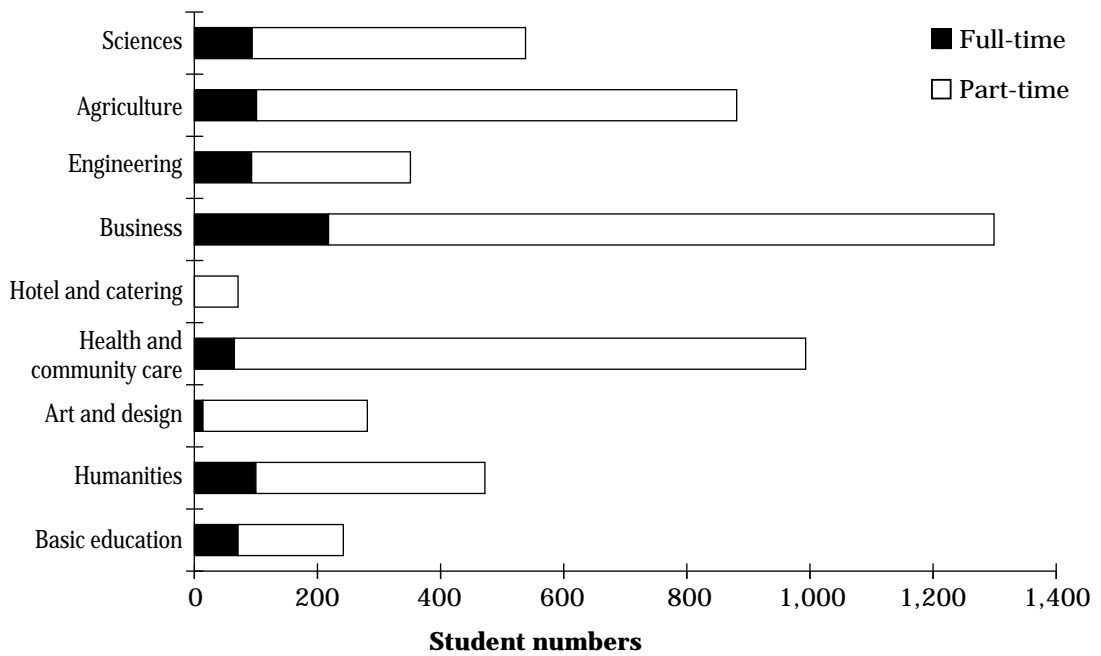
West Oxfordshire College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 5,128

Figure 3

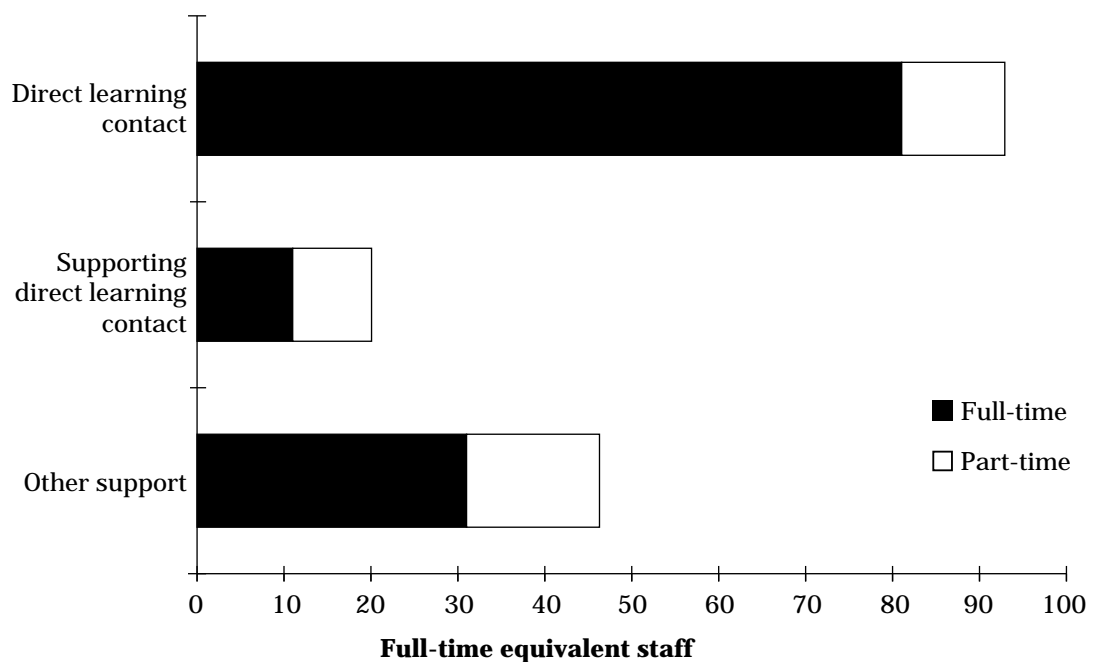
West Oxfordshire College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 5,128

Figure 4

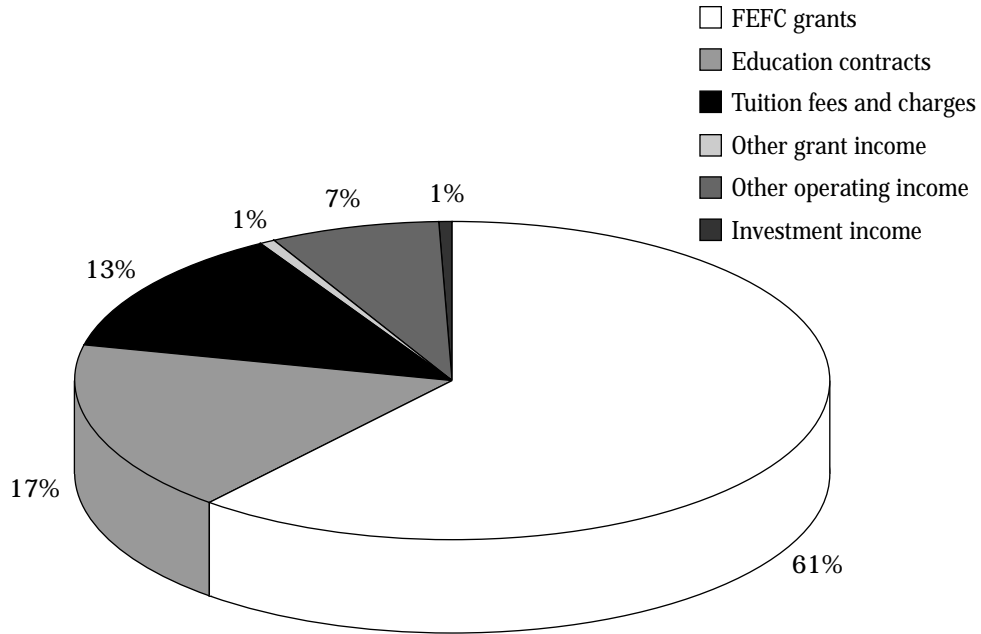
West Oxfordshire College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 159

Figure 5

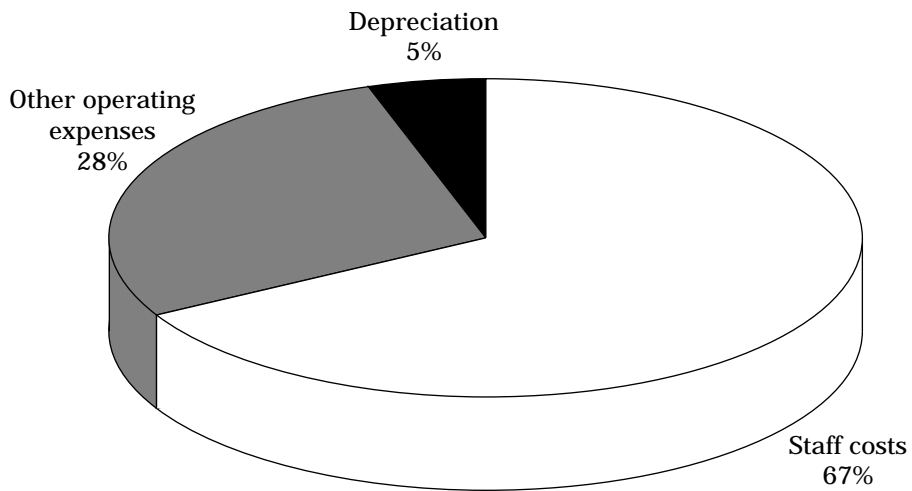
West Oxfordshire College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £4,618,000

Figure 6

West Oxfordshire College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £4,931,000

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