

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

West Suffolk College

August 1994

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

The Further Education Funding Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector in England. It discharges the duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the sector every four years. The Council's inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

College inspections involve both full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have specialist knowledge and experience in the areas they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member from outside the world of education and a nominated member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are described in the Council Circular 93/28. In the course of inspecting colleges, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale. 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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 75/94

WEST SUFFOLK COLLEGE

EASTERN REGION

Inspected September 1993 - May 1994

Summary

West Suffolk College, Bury St Edmunds, is the largest provider of post-16 education in the west Suffolk area. It offers a broad range of vocational courses which meets the needs of school leavers and adults, including students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college is also the major provider of recreational and community education in west Suffolk. Responsiveness to the local community and employers is good. There is a strong corporation and an effective senior management team. Courses are promoted energetically and this has resulted in a significant growth in student numbers. Strategic planning is participative and there is a commitment to quality by staff at all levels. There are clear and comprehensive policies for supporting students. Teaching staff are well qualified. The college successfully promotes the academic and personal development of its students and enables them to achieve high standards of work. Students achieve good results in external examinations and levels of progression to further and higher education and employment are satisfactory. There is some good accommodation, including attractive provision for students with learning difficulties. However, there is also some poor accommodation and equipment. The college management information system requires further development and the implementation of the quality assurance framework remains incomplete. The college should develop effective management structures and strategies to improve the support for some of the cross-college activities. There is insufficient careers guidance for students; limited co-ordination of the different elements of learning support; and insufficient provision of, and support for, information technology in some areas.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	3
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics and computing	2	Health and social studies	3
Construction	2	Hairdressing and beauty	1
Engineering	2	Art and design	3
Business and tourism	1	Humanities	2
Secretarial & office technology	2	Continuing education	2
Hotel and catering	2	Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2

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INTRODUCTION

1 West Suffolk College was inspected between September 1993 and May 1994. A team of seven inspectors spent a week in the college from 9 to 13 May 1994. A further 45 days were used to inspect specialist aspects of college provision. Inspectors visited 164 classes, examined samples of students' work and held discussions with governors, staff and students. They also met representatives of local employers, schools and the community including the training and enterprise council (TEC).

2 The inspection was carried out according to the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. The framework describes a four-year cycle. When the cycle becomes fully established, colleges will have the opportunity to respond to the findings of earlier inspection visits before their quadrennial inspection and the subsequent report. As the inspection of West Suffolk College occurred early in the cycle, the opportunity for such response was not available.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Evening classes started in Bury St Edmunds in 1925. The first principal of the Evening Institute was appointed in 1935, the Technical Institute opened in 1953 and the buildings on the present site opened in 1960. West Suffolk College is a medium-size general further education college which serves the west Suffolk area. The college operates from a single site in an attractive setting which is situated half a mile west of the centre of Bury St Edmunds. The college is the major provider of vocational, recreational and community education for the west Suffolk area and also makes use of over 100 local schools and community centres. There are three other further education colleges in Suffolk. Other neighbouring colleges are at Cambridge, Colchester and Kings Lynn.

4 The college offers a wide range of further education provision and some higher education courses. At the time of the inspection, it employed 187 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 95 full-time equivalent administrative, technical or clerical staff (figure 1).

5 College courses are organised in 10 teaching units: academic and professional studies; business and tourism studies; catering and design; construction and building services; continuing education; engineering; hairdressing and beauty therapy; health and social studies; secretarial and office technology; and learning support and development. Other functions, such as admissions, business development, library and learning resources, marketing and quality assurance are organised on a cross-college basis.

6 In November 1993, there were over 5,600 students on roll, excluding non-vocational and franchised enrolments. Of these 1,328 were full-time. Percentage enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 2 and 3; full-time equivalent enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 4. The college set a target of 8 per cent growth for 1993-94. A recent count of enrolment figures by the college has shown that the growth of the college is likely to be closer to 16 per cent

for 1993-94. This compares with an average 4 per cent growth in the Eastern region.

7 West Suffolk College's catchment area includes the towns of Brandon, Haverhill, Mildenhall, Newmarket, Sudbury, Stowmarket and Thetford as well as numerous villages and small communities. About 2.3 per cent of the population are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Research conducted by the college indicates that less than 40,000 people live within five miles of the college but there is a population of 360,000 within a radius of 20 miles.

8 The schools in the west Suffolk area have been organised into first, middle and upper schools with breaks at ages nine and 13. There are 12 upper schools and three independent schools, all but one with sixth forms. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are served by five schools in the west Suffolk area. In Thetford, Norfolk, there are two secondary schools, one of which has a sixth form, and there is an independent secondary school with a sixth form 12 miles north of Bury St Edmunds. The major provider of higher education in Suffolk is Suffolk College, Ipswich. The higher education providers nearest to the college are the University of Cambridge, the University of Essex, the University of East Anglia, and Anglia Polytechnic University which has sites in Cambridge and Essex. The nearest further education college is Cambridge Regional College which is 25 miles away from Bury St Edmunds.

9 Bury St Edmunds is well situated within the Eastern region. There are good road links with Cambridge, London and Ipswich and with the ports of Harwich and Felixstowe. Railway links with Cambridge and Ipswich are good, and Stansted Airport is also within reasonable travelling distance. Between 1981 and 1991 Suffolk was the seventh fastest growing county in the United Kingdom in terms of employment. Since 1991 the industrial profile has changed with declining employment in agriculture and manufacturing and some limited growth in a number of service sector industries. Suffolk has a large proportion of small firms. Eighty-seven per cent of all businesses employ less than 25 people. In the district of St Edmundsbury a high proportion of the work force are employed in distribution and hotels (22.9 per cent) and manufacturing (16.3 per cent). Major employers in the Bury St Edmunds area are involved in sugar refining, brewing and specialist manufacturing including television and broadcasting equipment. Between July 1990 and July 1993 unemployment rose by 150 per cent throughout the county. Figures for February 1994 show the unemployment rate in Suffolk to be 7.9 per cent and in the Bury St Edmunds travel-to-work area 5.7 per cent.

10 In its mission statement, the college aims to provide the highest quality education and training which is cost effective and which meets the needs of the whole community and to offer this in a welcoming environment which supports intellectual and social development.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

11 The college offers a wide range of 40 full-time and 230 part-time courses, including those leading to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). Pilot GNVQ foundation courses in manufacturing and social care are running this year. In most curriculum areas, students work towards all levels of qualifications for a wide range of examination boards. These include the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI), Royal Society of Arts (RSA), and Pitman Examinations Institute. At the time of the inspection, most of the 1,328 full-time students were undertaking vocational qualifications. There is a very small one-year programme of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) courses. The range of GCE A levels is restricted to four subjects during the day but it is intended to expand the choice for the academic year 1994-95.

12 National Targets for Education and Training are included in unit strategic plans and staff are aware of national policies and directions for further education. The college responded well to the pilot training credits initiative. It has over 50 per cent of the training credit provision in west Suffolk with from 360 to 450 credit holders over the year. The college has also taken a major role in the training of school and further education staff to meet the demands of NVQs.

13 The principal is a member of the Western Area Consultative Group of secondary and special school head teachers and local education authority (LEA) staff, and also attends the LEA's county consultative group. Liaison with schools had developed well through joint project work on the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) but these projects are being phased out. Previously excellent links with local high schools have been affected adversely by the need of both schools and the college to compete to sustain growth in student numbers. The development of GNVQs in schools and the college's intended expansion of its GCE A level programme has reduced collaboration. School links continue strongly in a few areas. For example, there are effective links with Mildenhall Upper School through partnership in GNVQ intermediate level programmes in business and tourism, with both Haverhill upper schools through a franchised BTEC national course in business and finance, and with several schools through work in the area of special educational needs.

14 Liaison with employers is extensive. Employers take an active part in open evenings, in employer advisory boards within the college's teaching units, and in groups such as the Thetford and Newmarket business forums. Employers confirmed that the college had become more business-like, flexible and responsive to their training needs. Examples included engineering courses timed to match company hours, strong links with employers in hairdressing and beauty therapy, and joint development of a training programme for social services staff. In catering, the college is

responding to the NVQ initiative and working well with employers who are actively involved in helping to create realistic work environments. A good link exists with the local TECs for training credits, youth and adult training. The college is a member of the Suffolk Business Partnership and chairs the Suffolk TEC 'think tank'. There are links resulting from the college's strong commitments to the Young Enterprise Programme and its participation in the Suffolk Show.

15 The college's services to business unit offers full-cost training, consultancy and short-course development. Using the skills of college staff it has raised £292,000 during 1993-94. The work of secretarial and office technology staff in training and development lead body standards is good. This development has increased enrolments for the college and raised income from a wide range of employers. The narrow range of courses provided by the construction and building studies unit is well targeted, and guided by advice from employers through advisory groups. The unit successfully generates income from short courses. The provision of short courses in computing for industry and commerce has been particularly successful.

16 Full-time equivalent student numbers have increased by 28 per cent between 1988 and 1993 and the college has set a target to increase enrolment by 30 per cent in 1994-95. Promotion of college courses is energetic and effective. The college is involved in careers conventions, open evenings, the use of a marketing bus in various community locations and the services of a full-time marketing manager on the staff. Promotion of courses and activities is usually accompanied by sound identification of local needs.

17 There is an extensive programme of adult education delivered through six centres. The programme is run locally by part-time centre heads and managed by the college on behalf of the LEA. The range of courses is wide, including Saturday workshops and a summer school which has some child care available during the day. The 'Newstart' daytime programme for adult returners, which arranges opportunities to sample a variety of specialist vocational areas as well as providing study skills and advice on planning careers, has been very successful in attracting adult students, particularly women. A developing home study programme for GCSE and GCE A level subjects is available. Some 125 students enrolled in 1993-94. The involvement of college vocational tutors in the continuing education programme is at an early stage of development. Apart from good examples in secretarial and office technology, the experience and expertise of vocational staff has not yet been fully utilised to extend the range and nature of the qualifications offered.

18 The college is responsive to the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, particularly those with moderate and severe learning difficulties, and it is beginning to develop work for adults who have mental health problems. The provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is significant, accounting for 10 per cent of all full-time students. There are 32 full-time students on mainstream

programmes, and 100 on full-time special programmes including the GNVQ foundation course. The college's objective of fully integrating such students onto specialist courses is not always achieved. Link programmes for pupils with special needs are particularly well thought of by local schools. They enable staff to assess students' needs thoroughly before their arrival at college.

19 Steps have been taken to provide higher education opportunities at the college. For example, BTEC and GNVQ programmes in business and tourism offer opportunities for students to progress to the higher national diploma (HND) or higher national certificate (HNC) in business and finance franchised from Anglia Polytechnic University. The college also provides the first year of a degree programme franchised from Anglia Polytechnic University.

20 In some areas, the availability of part-time vocational courses is limited. For example, there is no part-time provision in travel and tourism or leisure studies, and no part-time access to higher education courses. The range of provision in art and design is also limited and does not include opportunities for part-time study.

21 There are strong links with colleges in other countries. Since 1989 the college has participated actively in four visits to community colleges in the United States and Canada, bringing back new ideas some of which are being implemented; for example, the development of workshop materials which students can use independently to enhance their learning. Successful links between courses, staff and students have also been made with colleges in Belgium, Germany, Rumania, France and Denmark.

22 The college has sound policies on equality of opportunity and has established a working group to implement them. However, implementation is still at an early stage. Some good progress has been made in encouraging women, both staff and students, into engineering. The proportion of staff and students from ethnic minority backgrounds parallels the proportion in the local population. The college does not have many students with physical disabilities. However, there are plans to improve access to buildings and disability awareness training for staff has taken place. A unified coherent strategy to promote equality of opportunity is still being developed.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

23 The governing body has 15 members including the college principal, a member of the college staff and a student governor. The governors represent a range of business and community interests; 10 are drawn from professional and business fields, one represents the Suffolk TEC and one is a member of the county education committee. The governing body has committees for finance and general purposes, audit, and remuneration. The work of these committees is supported by five advisory committees. The meetings of the governing body and its subcommittees are well attended.

24 Governors are committed and enthusiastic and good use is made of their professional expertise through their work on advisory groups and committees. The link between individual governors and teaching units is helping governors to develop a greater understanding of the work of the college. The governors have received suitable support and training to enable them to execute their duties effectively. Governors and members of the senior management team have undertaken a series of exchange visits with a community college in the United States which have informed their joint vision for the future of the college.

25 The main concern of the corporation has been to ensure appropriate financial systems for budget control and to establish a management structure that facilitates development. The governors are now giving more consideration to assessment of the quality of the college's provision of education and training. They are not yet provided with sufficient data and performance indicators by which the achievements of the college can be measured. The governing body has not established any procedures to review its own performance or the appropriateness of its committee structure.

26 The senior management team consists of five managers in addition to the principal and vice-principal who act as chief executive and deputy, respectively. Four members of the team have responsibility for managing finance, college services, marketing and business development and administrative functions. The fifth member of the team is responsible for curriculum, quality assurance and student services. The vice-principal is line manager for the 10 academic units of the college and also has responsibility for personnel and staff development.

27 The organisational structure, which is modelled upon those found in community colleges in the United States of America, was established about two years ago to meet the demands of incorporation. The responsibilities of college managers including unit heads are clearly defined and, in general, the structure works effectively. One weakness is the extremely wide area of management responsibility of the head of curriculum (quality assurance and student services). Another is the limited number of middle managers with direct responsibility for support functions and curriculum development across the academic units; for example, insufficient staff resources are available to support the management and development of information technology facilities, the monitoring of the quality assurance process and the development of the management information system.

28 The principal provides dynamic leadership and is supported by an effective senior management group of experienced business managers who have a shared vision for the development of the college. The college is actively promoted and the achievements of students and the college are recognised within the local community.

29 The senior management team work well in facilitating change and monitoring the performance of the college. The team interact effectively

with the governing body, providing comprehensive papers which enable informed decisions to be made about college policy. The team also provides regular briefings to an extended group of middle managers who are responsible for particular budgets. The academic units are effectively led, and staff and other resources are deployed effectively. There is appropriate devolution of responsibility and roles are clearly understood. Course teams hold regular minuted meetings. Staff act with a shared sense of purpose and are well motivated.

30 The mission statement and strategic plan were developed through an extensive process of consultation and analysis involving all staff of the college. Each of the academic units and functional areas of the college undertook an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities facing the institution and advised the senior management team of their findings. This enabled the senior managers to identify key strategies. The units each have development plans which are well understood by teaching staff and relate to the college's strategic plan. Plans for the implementation of cross-college initiatives are less well developed and there has been limited evaluation of the feasibility and resource requirements of these developments.

31 College committees and working groups are in place to enable the monitoring of college policies. There is a recognition of the need to revise the membership and function of the academic board. At present the board plays a limited part in the development of the college and in monitoring matters relating to academic affairs such as the quality of the curriculum.

32 The unit of funding for 1992-93, inherited from the LEA was £2,620 per weighted full-time equivalent student. The median for general colleges of further education and tertiary colleges was £2,444. Summaries of the college's income and expenditure for the period April 1993 to July 1994 are shown in figures 5 and 6. Budgets are devolved to academic units and also to cross-college services for equipment, materials and staffing. The procedures for financial allocations are clear and well understood. There is close monitoring and control of expenditure.

33 The senior management team and the governors make effective use of financial information to monitor and control the current financial position and to develop strategic and operating plans. Information is held and reported by cost centre for each of the operating units and cross-college support functions. Unit costs are analysed to inform decisions on course viability and to aid resource allocation. Unit and service budget holders are being trained to increase their understanding of financial information and to provide them with the expertise required to build budget proposals for 1994-95.

34 The present management information system consists of a range of recording procedures. The college collects information centrally on student admissions, enrolments, retention rates, examinations, destinations, and the utilisation of staff teaching time. However, there is no routine reporting of non-financial performance measures. Some academic unit managers

make extensive use of management information to monitor achievement of enrolment targets, retention rates, successful completion of courses and progression.

35 The college is aware of the need to develop its information systems. The present systems place a heavy burden on teaching staff, provide little support for course delivery and management, and often result in duplication of effort. The college is introducing a college-wide, fibre-optic network, shared with the academic network, to support the collection and dissemination of information. This now allows all managers direct access to information.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

36 The college has well-defined policies on student guidance and learning support services. Student support services are the responsibility of the head of curriculum and student affairs and the co-ordinator of student support services. They manage a centralised admissions service for full-time students and co-ordinate guidance, counselling, and support for group tutors.

37 Student support services lack a visible base, such as a prominently positioned guidance centre which would bring together the expertise of admissions, guidance and careers. Such a base would also encourage enquiries from current and prospective students, particularly adults who are considering returning to education.

38 The college provides attractive and comprehensive information to prospective students. There are several widely-publicised open events to inform students, parents and employers about the courses offered and to give them the opportunity to discuss their needs with college staff. The college prospectus and leaflets are distributed by the schools and careers service. However, in many of the schools college staff are not now able to address pupils in their final year of compulsory schooling (year 11) personally, to provide information about courses. School pupils therefore receive less comprehensive information and guidance about college courses than in previous years. The careers service provides valuable impartial guidance at individual interviews and at careers conventions.

39 The central admissions process for full-time students is efficiently organised but hampered by inadequate support from the management information system. The reception staff and admissions officer are helpful and welcoming. In 1993, a survey of applicants showed an extremely high level of satisfaction with information on the college and its courses and entry procedures. Prospective students who are unsure about which course fits their need are interviewed by the student support services co-ordinator. All applicants for full-time courses are interviewed by course specialists. Staff from each of the units, supported by the careers service, give useful further guidance in late August, when students receive GCSE examination results, and at enrolment. Students can change courses easily

at all stages of their application. The low number of course changes in the first term reflects the success of these comprehensive arrangements.

40 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported. The college application form enables students, parents or carers, to describe the student's needs and these are discussed fully at interview. Information is passed to teaching staff with helpful suggestions about how these needs might be accommodated. Induction onto the 'Steps' course is particularly effective. Progress is carefully monitored and regularly updated through regular team meetings. Parents speak very highly of the course and the support that both they and the students receive from the staff.

41 Most full-time students receive a thorough and informative introduction to the college and their course. Meetings are held to enable the senior managers to welcome students personally and to introduce guidance staff, including the learning support co-ordinator and the careers officer. The tutor handbook provides a detailed framework for induction. This is fully implemented on the majority of courses and the information and guidance is sensibly reinforced at appropriate times during the first half-term. However, induction is less thorough on a minority of courses where students receive insufficient information on their course or on the study skills required.

42 Guidance for part-time students is less comprehensive. The majority of students on part-time courses receive some guidance both when they apply and at enrolment. The course tutor takes initial responsibility for any support required during the course. There are appropriate arrangements for advising and monitoring students on the training credits programme.

43 Additional help for students is available from the learning support co-ordinator, from basic skills support, and from mathematics and communication workshops. However, these three strands of support are managed separately. Closer co-ordination would ensure that students better understand the full range of help available to them. For example, some students thought that the workshops were intended to support students following GCSE courses in mathematics and English rather than to offer assistance in language and numeracy to all students. More use could be made of the two workshops by students following BTEC courses or working at levels below GCSE. In September 1993, students on one-year courses were screened to assess their literacy and numeracy needs. This has not yet been extended to all students. As part of a national project, the college is researching further methods of screening for basic skills needs. The college does not have a policy which ensures that all students have the opportunity to develop information technology skills.

44 Tutorial responsibilities are clearly set out in the tutor handbook, including the responsibility for ensuring that students receive advice and guidance on careers and higher education opportunities. There are guidelines for the conduct of group tutorials and packs of well-prepared

materials on a wide range of topics including health issues. The majority of students receive good support from group tutors who are their first point of contact for help and guidance. For example, students on the access and 'Newstart' courses received effective support, which closely linked their learning programmes to personal need. For a minority of students, tutorial time is used less effectively; some tutors are not clear about its purpose and, on occasions, it becomes a time for completing assignments. There has been little recent staff development on tutorial skills and issues. Further discussion and in-service training would be useful to develop tutors' skills. It would also help them to adapt the current programme to fit the smaller time allowance envisaged for next year.

45 The co-ordinator of student support services provides valuable additional support to students, and refers them when necessary to appropriate specialist agencies. The provision of counselling and guidance is insufficient to meet the demands of students, particularly in relation to the increasing number who are experiencing financial difficulties. It is to be expected that the proposed reduction of tutor time will increase the level of referral from tutors.

46 The college's relationship with the careers service is excellent. The careers officer provides a service of very high quality. She offers a varied programme including attendance at open evenings, group work, individual interviews and drop-in sessions. However, the time allocation is currently only two days per week and the college has no other specialist careers adviser. This severely limits the extent of support which can be provided, for example, to develop wider careers skills or to liaise with tutors. The college uses the expertise of the careers officer to advise on books and software for the careers room but there is insufficient support to relieve her of administrative tasks or to ensure the maintenance of the stock.

47 All students on full-time vocational courses are provided with a full record of achievement which includes assessment of progress by students and tutors and the setting of clear targets. The scheme has achieved accreditation from the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board and there has been wide consultation with local employers. The records are kept up to date and are well presented. The scheme could usefully be extended to include GCSE and GCE A level students. The quality of reporting to employers varies; some employers who are sponsoring day-release students do not receive regular reports on their progress.

48 Most full-time courses arrange consultation evenings for parents or carers and also contact them at other times, for example if they are concerned about a student's absence from college. There is some evidence that in a small number of cases, absences have not been followed up promptly.

49 A student support services officer and four part-time assistants provide effective and unobtrusive supervision of the two common rooms. They see their role as making students feel welcome in the college. They run the college shop and organise a variety of sporting and other activities

during the college day. A particular strength of this provision is that it helps students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to integrate into the life of the college. Both students and parents consider that this benefits all students. There is also a valuable link with health promotion workers which leads to the mounting of displays and the provision of speakers on health-related issues. There is a students' association but its role is unclear. The association does not have an office as a base and the majority of students who were spoken to during the inspection were unaware of its activities.

50 Students are informed of their rights and responsibilities through the student handbook and the tutorial programme. The Charter for Further Education was discussed in tutorial time, prior to starting the development of the college's own charter.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

51 The students at West Suffolk College experienced good quality teaching. Of the 164 sessions inspected, 62 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed the weaknesses. Weaknesses outweighed the strengths in 5 per cent of sessions.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
NVQ		9	14	11	1	0	35
GCE A/AS level		0	6	1	0	0	7
GCSE		0	3	3	0	0	6
GNVQ		4	1	2	0	0	7
BTEC (non-GNVQ)		6	26	21	3	2	58
SLDD		1	5	5	0	0	11
CGLI		2	4	2	0	0	8
Workshops		2	4	0	0	0	6
Others*		4	11	9	1	1	26
Total		28	74	54	5	3	164

* includes Access, NEBSM and NNEB courses

52 In most sessions the relationships between teaching staff and students were supportive and helped to provide a good learning environment in which students were encouraged to contribute their ideas.

53 Course aims were clearly stated and courses were well managed. Teaching is supported by standardised schemes of work and teachers keep records of work undertaken by classes. The majority of teachers had written plans for their lessons.

54 Many of the best teaching sessions were characterised by a balance of teacher and student activity and a variety of teaching methods. For example, in art and design, and learning support and development,

teachers encouraged group and team work which enabled students to participate actively and share their learning. In many areas, the teaching was demanding and students responded well. In business and tourism, students were fully involved in a range of classroom activities and in field trips and industrial visits. Careful questioning by teachers helped to ensure that learning had been achieved. In the adult education programme, good use was made of adult students' experience and knowledge, although this could be developed further. In catering, and hairdressing and beauty therapy, some excellent work was observed in the practical areas; concise, clearly-written information was provided for the students who were constantly challenged to develop technical skills and to take responsibility for their own work.

55 Teachers make every effort to provide students with experiences and standards that are applicable to the world of work. One example of the involvement of staff and students with real-life situations is the yearly student 'take over' for one week, of the local Forte Hotel. Students apply for all the usual posts at the hotel (except that of general manager), and they are interviewed and selected in the normal way. They are provided with the company's own training, and then begin work under the guidance of college staff and the hotel manager. Only three hotel staff remain in post for the week. The students supply all the normal services and, in addition, a variety of promotional activities and functions which they have planned and organised. The exercise allows them to be assessed on the basis of an actual work situation, including the overall team work required to run a hotel successfully. The general manager and customers are able to comment on students' work.

56 Individual learning packs were used to good effect to encourage students to work at their own pace in engineering and electronics, and in construction and building services. The college should consider the provision of more learning packages for use in quiet study areas, to assist students to keep abreast of their courses, to help those who progress faster or slower than the rest of the group or to enable students who have missed teaching sessions to catch up with their work. Helpful printed notes were issued in computing. In catering, concise and clearly-written information was provided for students. The hand-outs used in most teaching sessions were well presented and informative.

57 The well-organised, open-access information technology, communications and mathematics workshops provided good opportunities for developing skills and were valued by students. GCSE mathematics students, for example, responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to work on their own, using workshop materials. The communications and mathematics workshops kept records on each student's progress and teachers were often able to work individually with students to support their course work. The college should extend the workshop provision in communication and mathematics to cater more for students below GCSE level.

58 Within the unit of learning support and development, care had been taken to ensure that the whole environment encouraged students to make choices for themselves. Lunch breaks were also used creatively to provide learning opportunities for students. Support staff were deployed effectively and involved in course planning. A communicator was working particularly effectively with deaf students.

59 A small number of sessions had more weaknesses than strengths. In these, schemes of work were limited, session plans inadequate or non-existent and learning objectives unclear. A few teachers set complex essay questions which lacked focus. There were examples of teachers' low expectations of students and of some under-achievement as a consequence. In some cases, teaching did not take account of differences in students' abilities. In a few sessions, the pace of the work was too slow. Some hand-out material was poorly produced, taking little care of readability or relevance.

60 Assessment is well organised. For example, in business and tourism, students were well briefed about the tasks to be undertaken and assessment outcomes were clearly stated on assignment forms. Students' learning was systematically evaluated in many of the sessions. In art and design there is a termly review of progress and teachers and students are involved in joint assessments. In engineering, there is systematic recording of the acquisition of skills. The unit of learning support keeps meticulous individual records of progress on a weekly basis for students with severe learning difficulties. In business studies, students' files are conscientiously assessed and were neatly presented for internal and external verification. In computing, student assessment records were exemplary. Generally more systematic and consistent approaches are needed for the assessment, setting and marking of students' written work. More explicit and positive responses to assignments and course work would also benefit students. In particular, the college should ensure that part-time students receive constructive comments on their work. There were examples of good practice. In art and design the marking criteria were shared with students so that they knew clearly the standards required. In engineering and electronics, the marking of some students' work was very carefully done and provided helpful feedback on progress. However, on one of the engineering courses and in health and social studies, students' work received inadequate responses from teachers.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

61 In general, students develop appropriate levels of knowledge and skill in their subject areas. They speak positively of their learning experience at the college and of the progress made towards achieving their ambitions. Course completion rates are high and examination results are good.

62 A number of regional and national achievements which have been well publicised locally help students feel part of the college's broader

success. For example, a catering student reached second place in the European Catering Student of the Year in 1993 and groups of catering students worked at the Paris Air Show and at Buckingham Palace garden parties. A secretarial student won an international award for her shorthand and audio transcription. In hairdressing and beauty therapy a student won the national Young Protégé Scholarship and other students were actively involved in promoting their work by organising shows for local employers. BTEC national business and finance students' formal achievements were enhanced by participation in the Young Enterprise Programme and the Suffolk Show, which involved them in direct contact with representatives from industry.

63 In hairdressing and beauty therapy, students used information technology as an integral part of their studies. In construction and building services, they developed good research and problem-solving skills. In vocational courses such as engineering and hairdressing and beauty therapy, the development of students' core skills is carefully monitored and forms part of the overall assessment of their performance. Students generally were active in discussion and many spoke of their improved confidence to participate socially in the local community, at work or in the family environment.

64 The college has a high course completion rate for its students; 86 per cent of full-time students and 94 per cent of part-time students completed their courses. The completion rate is particularly high in learning support and development at 95 per cent. Hairdressing and beauty therapy has a completion rate of 92 per cent, and business and tourism 90 per cent. Completion rates are carefully monitored and reports presented to the academic board and unit managers. Where withdrawals are above expected norms, the head of curriculum and student affairs investigates.

65 Rates of continuation in further education and progression to higher education or employment are high. In 1993, 21 per cent of college students progressed to higher education, 38 per cent remained in further education and 31 per cent gained employment. Of those applying to higher education in 1992-93 some 94 per cent gained a place. Progression in art and design is good; in 1993, 70 per cent of national diploma in design students went on to higher education and all those completing the first diploma in art and design went on to higher level courses in further education. Of those taking GCE A levels, 82 per cent went on to higher education, and 94 per cent of those taking the access course progressed to higher education. In business and tourism 77 per cent of students on BTEC national programmes progressed to higher education or employment.

66 Achievements for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were also high. Sixty-five per cent of students with special training needs gained employment in 1992-93. The piloting of new GNVQ courses and the establishment of Duke of Edinburgh awards have been particularly successful with these students. Greater attention should be

given to providing opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to acquire nationally accredited certification.

67 Examination results in GCSE and vocational courses are above national averages in almost all areas of work. In 1993, 96 per cent of BTEC candidates, aged 16-18, gained their qualifications, compared with a national average of 80.5 per cent. This performance placed the college in the top third of institutions within the further education sector. Of 266 GCSE entries 54 per cent obtained passes at grades A-C compared with the national average for further education colleges excluding sixth form colleges of 39 per cent. In academic and professional studies and continuing education there were 100 per cent pass rates in many subjects. In hairdressing and beauty therapy several courses achieved 100 per cent pass rates and in business and tourism 90 per cent of students achieved a pass or better. In health and social studies and secretarial and office technology there was an overall success rate of 87 per cent. Results obtained by the very few candidates taking a GCE A level were satisfactory with an average pass rate of 75 per cent at grades A-E.

68 Students' records of achievement were well monitored and updated during tutorials. Most students were involved in their completion and took responsibility for the collection and organisation of the contents.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

69 There is a strong institutional commitment to the measurement and continuous improvement of the quality of all aspects of college work. This has resulted in all staff being involved in policy development. There is also a proposal for a quality assurance framework, which has a variety of linked mechanisms. The college acknowledges that at the moment the system is not sufficiently complete to provide all the necessary checks and balances to assure overall quality.

70 The review process for courses and cross-college services is effective. It is phased throughout the year, with two fixed points for reporting. This enables course teams and cross-college providers of support services, such as admissions and student services, the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their work in December and at the end of the academic year. Students' views are systematically collected from questionnaires, from representatives on course boards and through tutorial and other discussions. In addition, the head of curriculum, who is also responsible for quality assurance, examines all the questionnaires and cross-checks that the relevant teams have acknowledged and acted upon the points raised. Advisory boards for teaching and cross-college services have been established to receive and discuss reports arising from the review process, and to determine any required action. Unit heads create a unit report from course reports, which is then passed on to the academic board and the head of curriculum. Currently the academic board receives and discusses reports, but does not contribute significantly to the overall process of review; the only effective overall scrutiny is provided by the

head of curriculum. There are plans to examine the remit of the academic board to involve it more actively within the quality assurance framework.

71 The management information system does not yet produce a range of timely, accurate and accessible data on performance for staff who are responsible for the production or evaluation of annual reviews. Better quality information from the management information system would enable staff to be more consistent and rigorous in their review activities. Some reports are currently more descriptive than evaluative and use an incomplete range of statistical data.

72 In order to comply with the requirements of GNVQ and NVQ programmes, the college has set up an internal verification system. Reports provided by the external verifiers and moderators, employed by awarding bodies to examine assessment and quality assurance, indicate satisfaction with the college's standards and methods. These reports are thoroughly examined, and are used to inform course review. There are proposals to introduce a regular audit of curriculum and other college activities, to enhance the review procedure. The intention is that staff from across the college audit courses and services at regular intervals, looking at course documents, delivery methods and plans in order to ensure that courses and services remain relevant to the needs of students and employers.

73 A college validation system has been introduced recently to examine the quality of new course proposals. It brings together a team of people from both inside and outside a unit to examine the course documentation and the implementation strategy before proposals go to external awarding or validating bodies. Although this aspect of the quality assurance framework is new, staff who have been involved report that it has both improved the quality of new course documentation, and provided considerable staff development for the panel members.

74 There is strong institutional support for professional development which is demonstrated by the firm commitment to gain the Investors in People award by the autumn of 1994. This is seen as another part of the quality assurance framework. One result of the audit for this award has been the introduction of a weekly newsletter, called 'Briefs', which is distributed to all staff. It is widely read, and staff acknowledge that it has helped to improve communication. The newsletter is posted to any member of staff who is on sick or maternity leave, keeping them in touch with events. One benefit of the move to achieve Investors in People status has been the development of a systematic approach to human resource management, including the setting of targets and budgets. Another has been improvements in the value ascribed to staff in general, and the status of support staff in particular.

75 An appraisal scheme for staff is in place; it embraces all full-time staff and part-time staff who are employed for eight hours or more a week. The scheme is clearly linked to a staff development plan. The college budget for staff development for 1994 is 1.5 per cent of staffing costs. A large proportion of the staff-development budget is devolved to unit level.

Disruption to the planned staff-development activities was caused by the temporary removal of approximately 40 per cent of this allowance during 1993. The effect has been to damage the efficiency of the service to staff. A record of training is kept by individuals, unit heads and the staff development manager. There is evaluation of staff development at individual, unit and college level.

76 Induction programmes for all new staff are in place. They include guidance on college policies and the working practices required of all staff. All new staff are assigned to mentors for help and advice in their first year at the college. This arrangement provides new or inexperienced staff with real support, and encourages their swift integration into the life of the college.

77 An assessment of current services to students has been carried out, and a development plan produced which identifies responsibilities for the production of the college charter. This work is proceeding towards predicted completion in time for September 1994.

RESOURCES

Staffing

78 Teaching staff are well qualified, highly motivated and deployed effectively. They have appropriate experience for their present work and future developments. Most teachers are graduates and have teaching qualifications; a number have higher degrees. All teaching staff on vocational programmes have either gained or are taking assessor awards towards the standards of the training and development lead body. Staff have good industrial and commercial experience.

79 The college operates the principle of parity of esteem: teaching and support staff are equally valued. Teaching staff and staff who work in support services, for example, library, caretaking, students' diner, technician support and the college nursery, work together in effective teams to extend learning beyond the classroom and workshops. For example, staff working in the student diner are involved in the induction of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and along with other staff they receive training in how to support such students. They welcome the opportunity to enhance their professional skills and to contribute to the learning of all students.

80 Two new posts of technician/demonstrator were introduced recently. These posts provide support for learners in an electronics workshop. They also provide technical expertise to maintain and develop electronics equipment. Existing technicians also provide student support. The college plans to appoint more technicians/demonstrators over the next three years. This will help the college to move from classroom teaching where the teacher is the main resource, to a learning centre approach where the teacher is only one of many supports for learners.

81 The college is developing a formula to achieve greater productivity and flexibility in its use of staff. Currently, the college employs a large number of part-time staff. This provides a wide range of expertise and specialist skills and enables the college to use its staff resource more efficiently. The overall proportion of part-time staff is 40 per cent but in some areas the proportion is over 50 per cent. The college is reviewing this aspect of its staffing policy to ensure that the benefits from employing part-time staff outweigh the increased costs of administration and management.

82 The college in recent years has slimmed down its organisational structure. However, there is now insufficient staffing to support the administrative and clerical requirements of the units, and the development of cross-college curriculum initiatives such as information technology. In student support services, additional staffing in counselling and in careers guidance is required in order to meet demand.

Equipment/learning resources

83 In most areas there is sufficient equipment and materials to support teaching. Business and tourism studies, catering, hairdressing and beauty therapy are well equipped. However, there is some out-of-date equipment in engineering. In art and design, the range of equipment is barely adequate for existing courses.

84 The Harvey Frost centre, in the main college building, houses the library and open access workshops in communications, mathematics and information technology. The library offers a range of learning support materials relevant to the curriculum on offer. There is access to computer equipment and CD-ROM databases, and there is a silent study area. In most areas, the library stock is satisfactory. However, there is an inadequate book stock for art and design and for humanities. Study spaces in the library are insufficient for the present student population and to meet future needs. The library subscribes to a number of inter-library loan services to enhance its provision.

85 There are some good examples of resource-based learning in construction and electronics. The electronics workshop is large and well equipped; a facility which enables students to study at their own pace supported by two staff employed as technician/demonstrators. There is an open-access information technology facility but it is unstaffed for much of the time. The communications and mathematics workshops provide places where students can work independently on materials at times of their own choosing and with support from tutors. The present arrangements for the communications, mathematics and information technology workshops do not fully exploit their potential and meet all student needs. Computer resources are generally adequate to meet the demands of students and the curriculum. However, students in some areas have insufficient access to information technology facilities. At present there is no overall strategy for the development of information

technology across the college and there is an inadequate level of technical and learning support.

Accommodation

86 The college is situated on a pleasant site close to the town centre. An attractive wooded area belonging to the college is adjacent. The campus consists of a number of buildings including some unsatisfactory temporary accommodation. The buildings are well kept and clean and provide a welcoming and attractive environment. There is a programme of planned maintenance and, with the help of external consultants, the college is finalising its accommodation strategy. The use of accommodation is carefully monitored and action has been taken to increase the efficient use of space. At present, the college is engaged in two building projects to provide additional accommodation for the growth in student numbers targeted for September 1994. Good attempts have been made to make all areas accessible for students or staff with restricted mobility. However, problems remain with access to the main building.

87 There is some good college accommodation. Public spaces are welcoming and attractive. There are well-equipped teaching facilities for catering, and hairdressing and beauty therapy. Minden House is a purpose-built centre with lively and colourful wall displays and it provides stimulating accommodation for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The raised wall garden of Minden House is a particular feature and designed for wheelchair users. Student facilities are good. There are two common rooms, which are staffed during the day, and a well-run and attractive student diner.

88 In some areas of the college, the teaching accommodation is poor. The classrooms in the temporary huts are in a poor state of decoration and provide an unstimulating learning environment. In art and design, there is a lack of appropriate accommodation and some of the spaces are disorganised. In engineering, classrooms require redecoration and refurbishment. There is insufficient space to create a realistic work environment for full-time construction students.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

89 The college successfully promotes the academic and personal development of its students and enables them to achieve high standards of work. The college has many strengths:

- responsiveness to the local community and employers
- a good range of vocational courses
- responsiveness to the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- an energetic promotion of courses resulting in significant growth in student numbers

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- a strong corporation and senior management team who provide effective leadership
 - participative development of strategic planning
 - clear and comprehensive policies for student support
 - good standards of teaching and promotion of learning
 - high standards of student achievement
 - a clear strategy and commitment to quality by staff at all levels
 - well-qualified teaching staff with high expectations of the students they teach
 - strong and effective teamwork involving all staff.

90 The college should address the following issues:

- the under-developed computerised management information system
- the limited management structure and strategy to support some cross-college developments
- insufficient careers guidance for students
- limited co-ordination of the different elements of learning support for students
- absence of a quality assurance framework to include all elements of the process
- poor accommodation in some areas
- insufficient provision of, and support for, information technology in some areas.

FIGURES

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- 1 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993-94)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by age (1993-94)

 - 3 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1993-94)

 - 4 Enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1993-94)

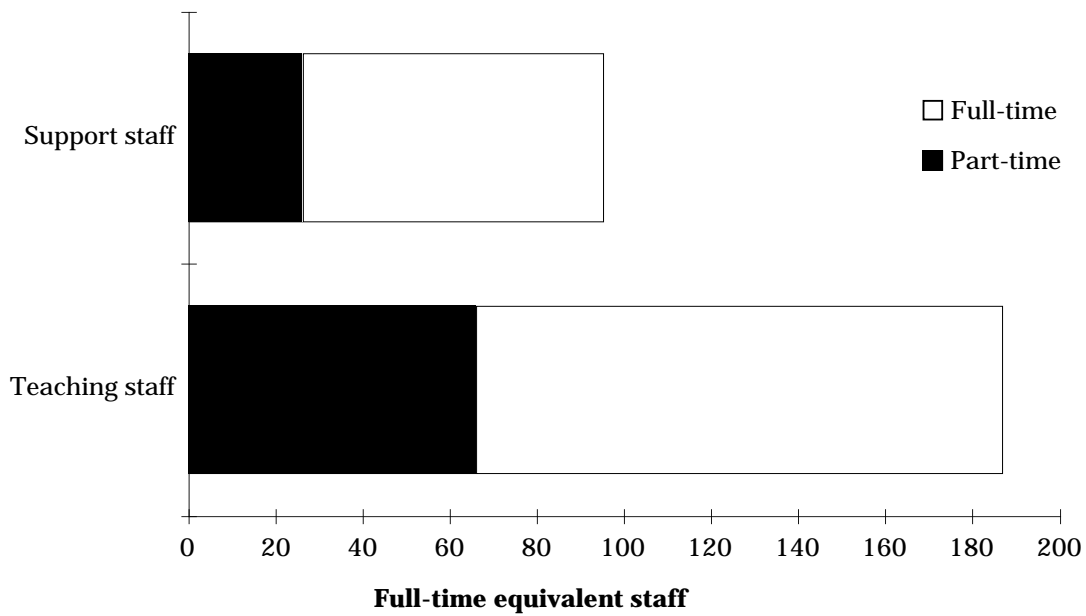
 - 5 Budgeted income (16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Budgeted expenditure (16 months to July 1994)

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

Figure 1

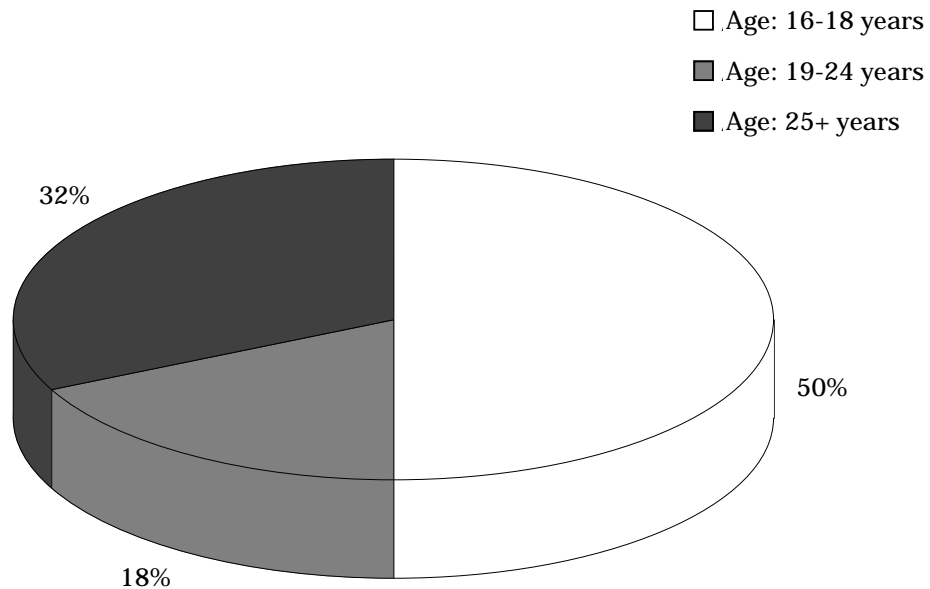
West Suffolk College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993-94)



Full-time equivalent staff: 282

Figure 2

West Suffolk College: percentage enrolments by age (1993-94)



note: figure excludes non-vocational and franchised enrolments

Enrolments: 5,636

Figure 3

West Suffolk College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1993-94)

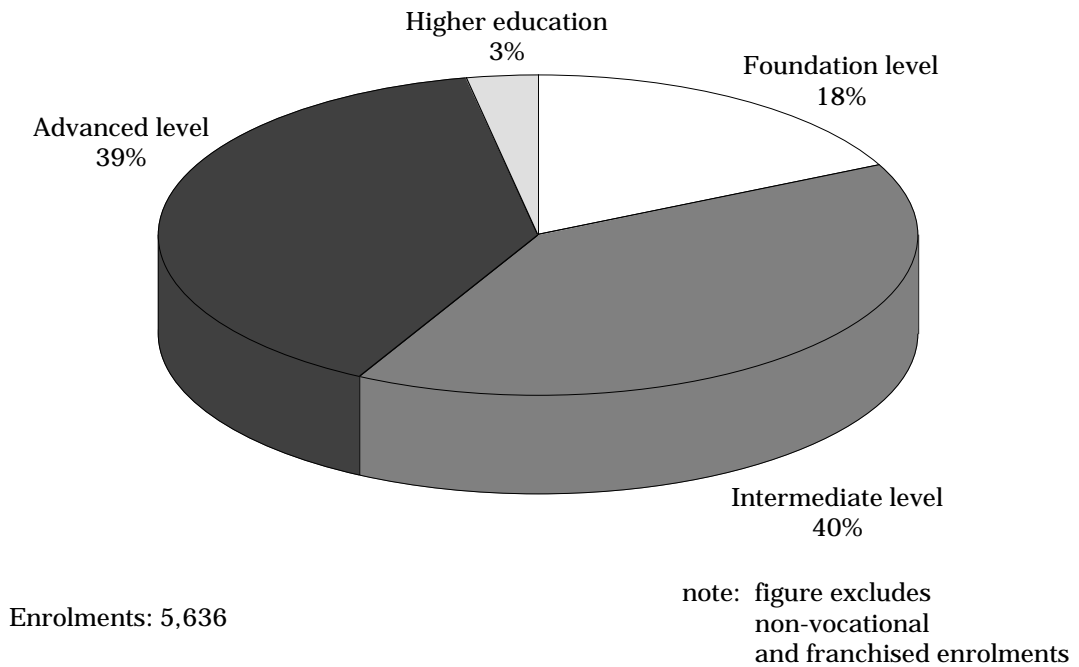


Figure 4

West Suffolk College: enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1993-94)

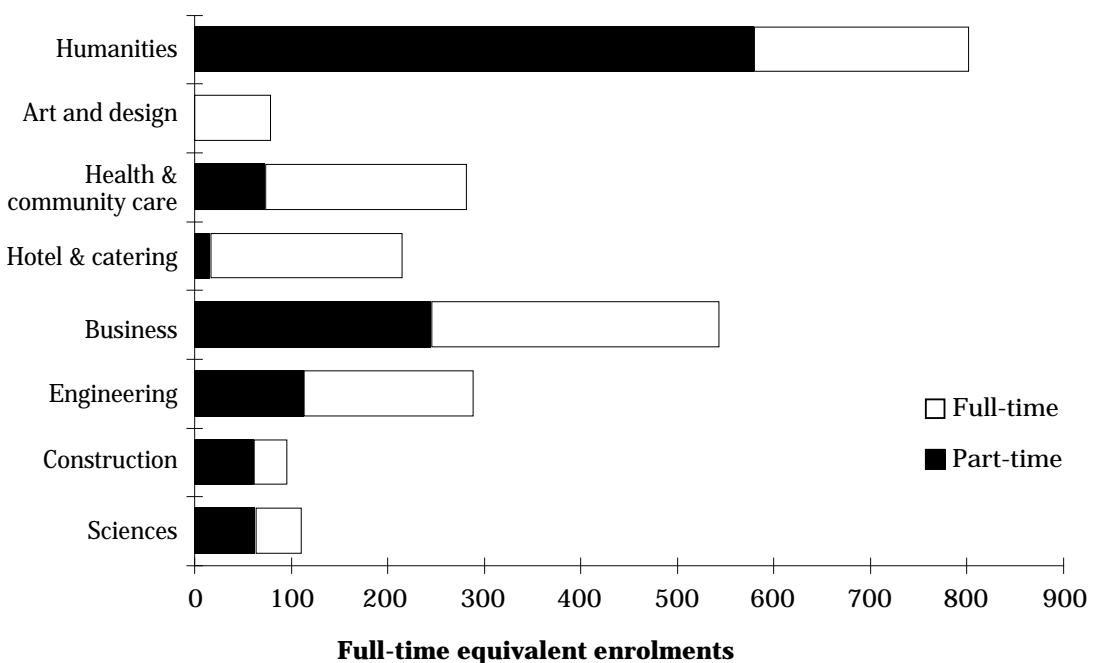
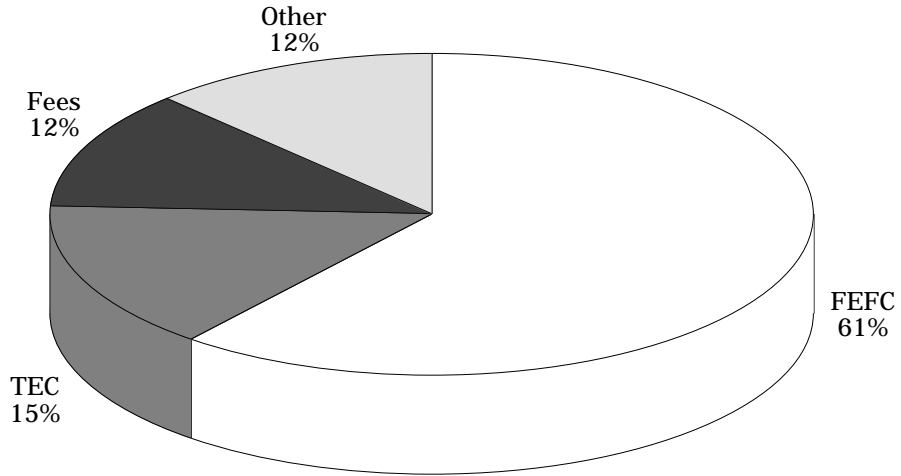


Figure 5

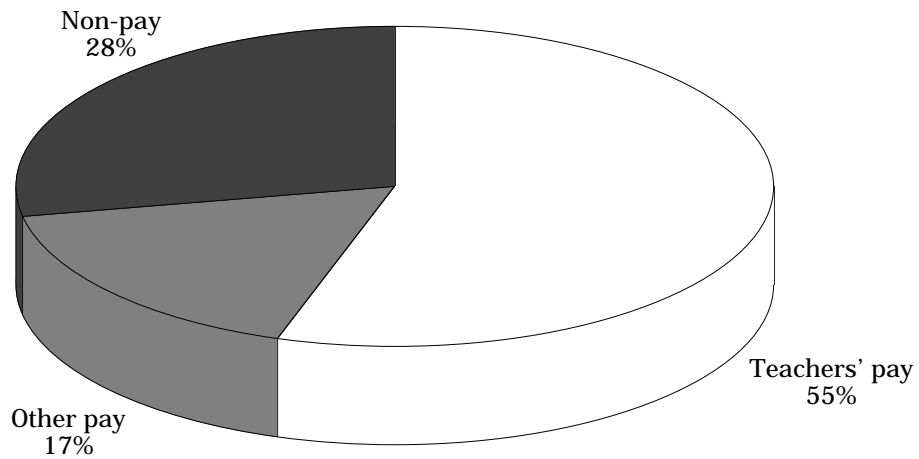
West Suffolk College: budgeted income (16 months to July 1994)



Budgeted income: £9,519,824

Figure 6

West Suffolk College: budgeted expenditure (16 months to July 1994)



Budgeted expenditure: £9,529,202

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