

West Thames College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	-
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	-

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

West Thames College ***Greater London Region***

Inspected October 1998

West Thames College is a general further education college in the London borough of Hounslow. The college produced a self-assessment report which identified many of the strengths and weaknesses of its provision. The report did not acknowledge some of the college's strengths, and did not always place sufficient emphasis on weaknesses, particularly in students' achievements.

The college offers a wide range of courses in eight of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Provision in five of these areas was inspected, together with aspects of cross-college provision. Courses are well managed and there is much good teaching. Support for students is good. Initiatives to improve the attendance and retention of students through improved tutorial support are starting to succeed. The college is well governed by a corporation which has a valuable range of skills and expertise. The management structure has been reorganised to good effect. Communications within the college are good and there is an effective strategic planning process. There is an extensive programme of staff development. Accommodation and general resources are

mainly good. New accommodation is being built as part of the accommodation strategy. The college should improve: students' achievements on many courses; the analysis of students' achievements and the quality of course reviews; the use of targets and performance indicators; and financial reporting.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science and mathematics	4	Support for students	2
Business	3	General resources	2
Health and community care, including hairdressing and beauty therapy	2	Quality assurance	3
Performing arts and media	2	Governance	2
ESOL	2	Management	2
Adult basic education and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 West Thames College is the only general further education college in the London borough of Hounslow. Located on a single site in Isleworth, the college is close to the main route between central London and Heathrow and is well served by public transport. In 1998, the college embarked on a major building and refurbishment programme, funded by the sale of another site.

2 West London has a thriving business community. Heathrow airport is only five miles from the college and its related service industries dominate the area. The headquarters of many large corporations are based in the area, resulting in a concentration of technology-based employment. The unemployment rate in Hounslow was 4.2% in July 1998, having fallen steadily over the previous 15 months. There are, however, pockets of high unemployment in parts of the borough and amongst the substantial refugee community living in the area.

3 The college works in an intensely competitive environment. All 14 secondary schools within the borough of Hounslow have sixth forms and offer vocational courses. There are two large tertiary colleges within three miles of the college, and a further 12 sector colleges within an eight-mile radius. A number of private training providers also operate within the area and provide courses funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Of the year 11 school-leavers in West London, 77% stay in full-time education, compared with a national average of 67.5%. In 1996, just over 29% of the population of Hounslow were from minority ethnic groups, mainly Indian in origin.

4 West Thames College enrolled 7,075 students in 1997-98, of whom 2,135 were full time. Most full-time students take one-year or two-year vocational programmes, although enrolments on courses designed for students who are speakers of languages other than English have increased significantly over the last

four years. At the college 55% of all students and 67% of full-time students are from minority ethnic groups. The college provides a wide range of courses from pre-foundation and foundation levels through to higher education, including courses leading to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) and their precursors such as BTEC first and national diplomas; national vocational qualifications (NVQs); general certificate of secondary education (GCSE); and general certificate of education advanced levels (GCE A levels).

5 The college mission is to provide high-quality education and training to meet the needs of individuals and organisations. It places particular emphasis on providing educational opportunities for those seeking a second chance to learn as well as being the 'first choice' provider for specific areas of vocational education. The college aims to play a major role in the development of highly skilled and motivated individuals who will contribute effectively in the workplace, and to provide a supportive and challenging environment in which students can develop their wider potential. The college is committed to innovative approaches to learning, particularly through the use of information learning technology. The college has a long-standing commitment to widen participation by attracting people who do not normally enter further education.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 19 October 1998. The inspection of hairdressing and beauty therapy was carried out in the week beginning 2 November 1998. Before the inspection, inspectors considered the college's self-assessment report and reviewed information from other directorates of the FEFC. This included data on students' achievements for the three years from 1995 to 1997 which were derived from the individualised student record (ISR). This was supplemented by data

Context

provided by the college on students' achievements in 1998. These data were checked against class registers and pass lists from the examining bodies. The college was given about two months notice of the sample of provision to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by a team comprising 12 inspectors working in the college for a total of 47 days, and an auditor working for five days. Another auditor attended the inspection for training purposes. Inspectors observed a total of 92 lessons, including some tutorials, and examined

students' work and documentation about the college and its courses. Members of the team met governors, managers, staff and students.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons observed, 67% were rated as good or outstanding, and 8% less than satisfactory. These percentages are similar to the averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	1	4	6	0	0	11
GCSE	0	3	1	1	0	5
GNVQ/NVQ	4	11	6	2	0	23
Other vocational	7	17	7	3	0	34
Other	5	10	3	1	0	19
Total (No)	17	45	23	7	0	92
Total (%)	18	49	25	8	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The college was inspected during the festival of

Diwali and a minority of students were absent, with permission, to attend traditional celebrations.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
West Thames College	11.0	72
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

Curriculum Areas

Science and Mathematics

Grade 4

9 Inspectors observed 13 lessons covering GCE A level and GCSE in science and mathematics and GNVQ advanced science courses. The self-assessment report was evaluative and identified the main strengths and weaknesses of the provision. It overemphasised some of the strengths and underestimated weaknesses in students' achievements.

Key strengths

- well-organised practical science lessons
- well-designed and well-equipped laboratories

Weaknesses

- poor and declining pass rates on GCE A level courses
- poor pass rates at grades C or above in GCSE mathematics
- poor retention rates in GNVQ advanced science
- failure of teachers to check students' progress in some lessons

10 The college offers GCE A levels and GCSE courses in biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics, and GNVQ intermediate and advanced level science courses. A similar range of courses is provided by schools and other colleges in the area. The college has recognised the need to develop provision for students who have low entry qualifications but an interest in science and mathematics. Recently appointed managers have started to take action to improve poor retention and pass rates, but it is too soon to see the effects of this. Progress has been made in identifying ways in which teaching and other aspects of courses can be improved. Courses are generally well planned.

11 Inspectors agreed with the college's view that most teaching is satisfactory or better. Lessons are well prepared. In practical science lessons, students demonstrate that they can carry out practical tasks competently and safely. Students in a GCE A level biology lesson were carrying out an experiment to identify the factors affecting enzyme activity. The teacher developed the students' understanding of scientific processes by asking them to plan aspects of the experiment themselves and to consider carefully the meaning of the results they obtained. In the more effective theory lessons observed, students developed knowledge and skills with good support from their teachers. There is an over-reliance on worksheets and textbooks as means of learning. In a few lessons, teachers did not check sufficiently students' learning and understanding.

12 Teachers set homework regularly for students and return it promptly. Suitable assignments and projects are set. Most students' work is of an appropriate standard and is well presented, although few students make use of information technology (IT) in presenting their work.

13 The college acknowledges that retention rates are low and pass rates are poor on most GCSE and GCE A level courses. Although some students obtain a high grade in one or more subjects, GCE A level pass rates have declined over the past three years. The GCE A level mathematics pass rates have been consistently low over the past three years while those for biology, chemistry and physics have declined below the national average for the sector. The GCSE mathematics pass rate at grades C or above has been consistently low, and last year was only 13%. Pass rates in GCSE biology at these grades have been at or above the national average for students aged 16 to 18 over the last three years, but retention rates have fallen from 92% to 62%. Retention rates are poor for GNVQ advanced science students. The college's records show that a significant number of

Curriculum Areas

students enter, but do not sit GCSE examinations.

14 Teachers are well qualified and most have relevant commercial or industrial experience. They are supported in their work by a team of experienced technicians. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that specialist resources are a strength. The science laboratories provide well-designed, spacious accommodation for practical work. However, some classrooms are too small for the numbers

of students who use them. There is sufficient scientific equipment and materials for the courses offered. Little use is made by students of the computer workstations available in the laboratories and the mathematics workshop. The library offers a good range of text books and books on science and mathematics, CD-ROM databases and access to the internet. There is a useful collection of books in the science and mathematics staff room.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE mathematics	2	Expected completions	290	358	378
		Retention (%)	81	81	69
		Achievement (%)	26	17	13
GCSE biology	2	Expected completions	38	38	66
		Retention (%)	92	79	62
		Achievement (%)	46	40	37
GCE A level mathematics	3	Expected completions	75	81	59
		Retention (%)	75	67	59
		Achievement (%)	36	34	40
GCE A level biology	3	Expected completions	38	54	30
		Retention (%)	61	80	90
		Achievement (%)	74	63	52
GCE A level chemistry	3	Expected completions	39	47	24
		Retention (%)	67	75	75
		Achievement (%)	68	34	33

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

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 3

15 Fourteen lessons were observed at foundation, intermediate, advanced, and higher education levels. Courses for full-time and part-time students were covered. Inspectors concluded that while the self-assessment report contained critical judgements, it did not place sufficient emphasis on some strengths and weaknesses and failed to identify others.

Key strengths

- broad range of courses
- good teaching in most lessons
- progression of many students to other courses within the college and to higher education

Weaknesses

- failure of some teachers to explain complicated terms
- poor punctuality and irregular attendance amongst some students
- deteriorating retention rates on some courses
- poor achievement rates on a significant number of courses

16 The college offers an extensive range of full-time and part-time business courses, and a wide range of short courses, from foundation level to higher education. These include GCSE, GCE A level and GNVQ courses; programmes leading to NVQs in accounting and business administration; courses in international trade and export management; BTEC courses in public services; and a wide range of office skills provision. The self-assessment report identified as a weakness the lack of development of short courses which meet local needs. This issue is being addressed and a member of staff has been

given specific responsibility to develop this area of work. The courses attract students of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. There are good opportunities for students to progress to higher level courses, and many students take advantage of this.

17 Most courses are well managed and most course teams meet regularly. Most teaching is good or better, a strength not sufficiently acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Most lessons observed by inspectors were well planned and, in many, teachers used humour effectively to enliven the session and maintain students' interest. In several lessons, teachers drew effectively on the students' work experiences. In most lessons, teachers questioned the students regularly to check that they understood the material being covered. In a small number of lessons observed, teachers failed to explain complicated issues sufficiently. Full-time students are provided with opportunities to apply their knowledge to business problems. GNVQ intermediate and advanced students undertake work experience, much of it organised through an agency. Foundation level students are involved in the young enterprise scheme. Other students either visit or are visited by a variety of local employers, and students on public service courses have opportunities to visit uniformed service units in the region. Employers are not involved in planning courses.

18 Attendance at a number of lessons inspected was poor and in about a quarter of those observed, the punctuality of students was also poor. Both attendance and punctuality were identified in the self-assessment report as issues for attention. Retention rates are poor on GCSE courses, but good on GCE A level courses. On GNVQ courses and their precursors, retention rates have risen over the last year. On other courses over 24 weeks they have fallen over the last two years. Pass rates in 1997-98 on a number of courses are poor. Pass rates for both the first diploma and the national diploma

Curriculum Areas

in public service were good. Pass rates for GCE A level at grades A to C, GCSE and GNVQ courses were below the national average for the sector. The numbers achieving full qualifications on the NVQ courses in business administration and accounting are low. However, some students either achieve a partial qualification or go on to complete the full qualification in the following year. Many students progress to higher education. The self-assessment report does not acknowledge many of the weaknesses in students' achievements.

19 Staff have appropriate qualifications and an up-to-date knowledge of their subject. Accommodation, equipment and resources are satisfactory.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCE A level and GCSE	2 and 3	Expected completions	74	74	57
		Retention (%)	68	66	68
		Achievement (%)	23	45	55
GNVQs and precursors	1, 2 and 3	Expected completions	175	169	118
		Retention (%)	78	63	83
		Achievement (%)	69	86	59
NVQs	2 and 3	Expected completions	52	58	111
		Retention (%)	96	71	93
		Achievement (%)	40	12	19
Other courses over 24 weeks	1, 2, 3 and 4	Expected completions	213	515	99
		Retention (%)	92	86	74
		Achievement (%)	54	40	41

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

Curriculum Areas

Health and Community Care, Including Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

Grade 2

20 Twenty-six lessons were observed in hairdressing and beauty therapy, care and childcare. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- much good teaching
- effective use of work experience
- good achievements on counselling courses and in practical work
- high standard of accommodation and specialist equipment

Weaknesses

- failure of some teachers to check students' learning
- some poor pass rates

21 The college provides an extensive range of courses from entry level to higher education, in hairdressing and beauty therapy, care and childcare. There are programmes leading to NVQs and GNVQs and access to higher education courses in nursing, paramedical science and social work.

22 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that courses are well managed. There is much good teaching. Schemes of work are detailed. In hairdressing and beauty therapy, practical lessons are well planned. In one lesson on hair cutting, the teacher continuously emphasised the importance of line and shape whilst drawing the students' attention to relevant aspects of health and safety. In some lessons the teaching was less well planned or

insufficiently stimulating, and teachers did not check that students were learning.

23 Good use is made of work placements for all full-time students, a strength acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Placements are closely monitored by college staff and there are good links with work place supervisors.

Students benefit from the linking of theory to practice in lessons and assignments. There are useful handbooks for students on care courses which outline the content of the courses and assessment methods. The handbook for students on the diploma course in nursery nursing has clear guidelines on writing child observations which the students find helpful. Students have good access to computers and use them to prepare assignments. Hairdressing and beauty therapy students are able to use relevant specialist computer software in their practical work. On care courses, the development of students' IT skills is not integrated with other aspects of the care curriculum as successfully as is the case with communication and application of number skills. This weakness was noted in the self-assessment report.

24 Students achieve good standards on many courses. Hairdressing and beauty therapy students demonstrate skills of industrial standard. In one lesson, continuing education students demonstrated good level skills in shampooing and blowdrying even though they were at an early stage of their course. Students' written work is of a good standard. In some lessons observed, students had good oral communication skills. For example, nursery nursing students gave well-planned presentations on their choice of books and toys to promote equality of opportunity.

25 On some courses retention rates are good. There are good pass rates on counselling courses. Pass rates on childcare and nursery nursing courses are close to national averages. There have been improvements in the students' achievements on other courses. Pass rates for NVQ levels 2 and 3 courses in hairdressing and

Curriculum Areas

beauty therapy have improved, and now match or exceed national averages. Retention has improved on GNVQ courses. Pass rates on GNVQ foundation and advanced courses in health and social care have also improved, although these are still below national averages. Achievements are weak on the GNVQ intermediate course in health and social care. Areas of weakness in retention and pass rates are acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Many students progress to employment or further courses of study. A high percentage of students on GNVQ advanced and access courses in care go on to higher education.

26 Inspectors agreed with the college that there are well-maintained and well-equipped hairdressing and beauty therapy salons which meet commercial standards. There is a lack of equipment and visual aids to support learning and a lack of learning materials for independent study in some areas. Childcare and health care teaching rooms are well resourced with equipment to demonstrate practical care skills. Staff are well qualified and many have recent professional experience. Most have relevant assessor and verifier awards.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in health and community care, including hairdressing and beauty therapy, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Certificate in childcare and education	2	Expected completions	31	40	37
		Retention (%)	81	80	76
		Achievement (%)	64	58	71
Certificate in counselling skills	2	Expected completions	29	29	39
		Retention (%)	90	83	90
		Achievement (%)	100	92	91
NVQs in hairdressing	2	Expected completions	217	178	150
		Retention (%)	68	67	75
		Achievement (%)	39	45	66
NVQs in beauty therapy	3	Expected completions	105	147	108
		Retention (%)	85	90	94
		Achievement (%)	71	60	73
GNVQ advanced health and social care	3	Expected completions	34	20	12
		Retention (%)	65	45	92
		Achievement (%)	32	50	55

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

Curriculum Areas

Performing Arts and Media

Grade 2

27 Inspectors observed 12 lessons, covering GCE A level subjects, and BTEC first and national diplomas in media, music technology and performing arts. The college's assessment of these curriculum areas was comprehensive and inspectors agreed with most of the judgements, although they considered that some strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- good teaching in most lessons
- vocationally based assignments
- good progression to higher education and employment on some courses
- improved retention and good achievements on vocational programmes

Weaknesses

- declining achievements in academic subjects
- failure of teachers to ensure students meet rigorous professional standards
- poor punctuality and attendance

28 As well as GCE A level theatre studies and media studies, the college offers vocational programmes at levels 2 and 3 in performing arts, media and music technology. In order to widen participation, lower level Saturday courses and courses for disaffected school pupils have been introduced. Course teams meet regularly. The quality of the assessment of students' work is assured through internal verification and cross-marking. Most assignments are vocationally relevant. Students benefit from being able to use a professional theatre for some performances. They also make recordings of local musicians. Work experience is arranged for media students; performing arts

students produce events in local schools. There is insufficient specialist equipment for some large groups.

29 Most of the teaching observed was good. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods. Teachers successfully employ question and answer techniques to encourage students to participate in discussion of the work. Teachers do not always insist upon students meeting rigorous professional standards. Most teachers are assiduous in monitoring students' progress. Where appropriate, key skills are integrated with assignment design. There is effective tutorial support for students, who receive feedback individually on their progress. There are opportunities for teachers to meet parents and guardians to discuss students' progress.

30 As identified in the self-assessment report, the punctuality and attendance of students is poor. Strategies devised to address this issue are not yet succeeding on all courses. Attendance in the lessons observed by inspectors was 66%. On vocational courses, retention has improved and achievement is good. Progression by students to higher education and employment related to their courses is good on some programmes. Achievement is weaker on GCE A level courses. These weaknesses were identified in the self-assessment report. While many students have good oral communication skills, a few students observed were reluctant to become involved in activities in lessons. Some video work produced by students is of a high standard.

31 Most teachers are appropriately qualified and have recent, relevant industrial experience. The provision is further enriched by employing current practitioners as part-time teachers. Teaching is supported by technicians and demonstrators. The level of accommodation and equipment is good for media and music technology. The current inadequacies of the accommodation for the performing arts are being addressed through the college's building programme. The library and IT facilities are satisfactory.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma in performing arts	2	Expected completions	14	18	9
		Retention (%)	50	78	78
		Achievement (%)	71	93	100
National diploma in performing arts	3	Expected completions	17	14	13
		Retention (%)	47	50	100
		Achievement (%)	88	86	92
National diploma in music technology	3	Expected completions	*	*	16
		Retention (%)	*	*	88
		Achievement (%)	*	*	57
National diploma in media	3	Expected completions	43	40	33
		Retention (%)	77	73	97
		Achievement (%)	74	93	88
GCE A level theatre studies	3	Expected completions	18	15	11
		Retention (%)	72	33	82
		Achievement (%)	85	60	56

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

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

ESOL

Grade 2

32 The inspection covered a range of full-time and part-time programmes in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) for adults and young people. Fourteen lessons were observed, including two which were held at venues in the local community. The self-assessment report identified all of the strengths noted by inspectors, but not all the weaknesses.

Key strengths

- flexible range of provision with opportunities for progression
- responsive pastoral support
- well-planned, lively and effective teaching
- good opportunities for external accreditation
- high levels of retention and good achievements overall

Weaknesses

- lack of individual learning plans and records of progress for some students
- few opportunities for students to learn on their own
- poor quality of some learning materials

33 A broad range of courses designed to meet the learning needs of young people and adults is offered at the college's main site as well as at 11 locations in the local community. Students can combine their study of English with courses in basic skills and vocational modules. On the gateway courses for adults, the vocational emphasis is strong and a good range of work placements has been established. The college makes provision for young refugees to study full time, gain English language skills and prepare for progression to other courses at foundation or

intermediate levels. Learning opportunities are developed to take account of individual strengths and some young people can combine preparatory studies with GCSE or, exceptionally, GCE A level courses. The college has responded imaginatively to the needs of a new group of young Kosovan refugees. The self-assessment report acknowledged the responsive approach to pastoral care, which is evident across all programmes. There is regular contact between teachers and tutors. There are well-established links with the community, local schools and other agencies, including a refugee guidance project.

34 Courses are well managed. As recognised by the college, the curriculum is well planned, with detailed course handbooks and schemes of work. Teaching is lively and makes effective use of a variety of learning activities. Pronunciation practice is well integrated with class work. Teachers are good at questioning students to check that learning is taking place. They support weaker students by devising appropriately simplified tasks or by using volunteers as classroom assistants. Good use is made of students' prior experience and skills. Students work hard, collaborate effectively and participate confidently. They enjoy their lessons and are enthusiastic about the teaching.

35 In the less effective lessons observed by inspectors, teachers used worksheets too much as a method for students' learning and the objectives of the lessons were not made clear to the students. Most of the teaching involved the whole class and there was little opportunity for students to learn on their own. Although there is a range of appropriate learning materials and teaching resources, some visual teaching materials are poorly designed, or badly copied. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

36 There are effective procedures to assess students when they enrol and place them in appropriate classes. The specific learning needs of students are not always identified, for

Curriculum Areas

instance on the part-time modular programme. Students do not all have a record of their own progress which they can carry forward with them to new courses.

37 A variety of methods are used to ensure that students are punctual and attend regularly. Lateness is consistently challenged, recorded and discussed in tutorials. Timetabling arrangements meet the needs of adult students. This responsive approach has resulted in high levels of retention. The average level of retention on externally accredited courses was 94% from 1996 to 1998. Pass rates are good for externally accredited qualifications. The average pass rate on all Pitmans examinations was 89% between 1995 and 1998. Between 1997 and 1998 there was a 20% increase in the number of students gaining external qualifications. These good achievements were identified in the self-assessment report.

38 The teaching team is experienced and includes teachers or volunteers who speak languages other than English. Many of the staff are well qualified to teach ESOL. Some staff teach in other areas such as IT, numeracy, vocational skills or learning support and this enables the effective integration of language teaching with the development of other skills. Volunteers are encouraged to obtain a teaching qualification and to become part-time teachers.

39 There are few opportunities for students to learn outside timetabled lessons, a weakness not recognised fully in the self-assessment report. There are plans to develop independent learning through using the language laboratories, the learning centre and the networked computer room.

Curriculum Areas

Adult Basic Education and Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Grade 2

40 The inspection covered the separate specialist provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and students who are developing their basic skills. Twelve lessons were inspected. The self-assessment report acknowledged most of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision, although the impact of some weaknesses on teaching and learning and students' achievements was underestimated. Some progress has been made in addressing weaknesses since the self-assessment report was produced.

Key strengths

- an increasing number of courses to meet the needs of a wide range of students
- successful motivation and personal development of young students
- good retention rates and success in externally accredited awards
- good provision for older students
- good use of IT and specialist resources to support learning

Weaknesses

- limited identification of individual students' learning needs and monitoring of progress on some courses
- a failure to meet some students' needs, particularly the more able

41 Since the previous inspection the college has increased the range of its provision in this curriculum area. It now offers a good range of courses which aim to cater for students of all

ages with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There is good provision for older students with serious mental health difficulties and degenerative memory loss. There are courses for students from local schools, including disaffected young people, and courses for adults who wish to return to education. The range of courses is recognised as a key strength in the self-assessment report.

42 Most teaching is purposeful and effective. Careful attention is paid to building students' confidence and motivation, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. Students work well in groups. However, in some lessons observed teachers did not provide the more able students with sufficiently challenging work. In some lessons students did not have enough opportunity to study on their own. In a few lessons, the individual needs of the students were not always met. Portfolios of students' work are well presented. Students participate in work experience.

43 The retention rates for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good, as are their achievements on externally accredited awards. The majority of students progress to other courses, training or employment. The college has identified these strengths. However, on some of the courses aimed at adults who wish to return to study or develop basic skills, retention rates and attendance are not as good and achievements in numeracy qualifications are low. The college has recognised this weakness.

44 All students undergo an interview and assessment process and full-time students have an extended induction. However, the information that this yields about students' needs is not used effectively on some courses to draw up individual learning programmes, to identify the short-term teaching objectives or to indicate appropriate teaching methods for individuals. There are, as yet, no detailed procedures to monitor and measure students' progress against their learning objectives.

Curriculum Areas

There is evidence that this has resulted in some students missing opportunities for learning and achievement. This weakness was acknowledged in the self-assessment report and is being addressed.

45 The management of the curriculum area is good. Course teams meet regularly. They establish targets and strategies for improvement and aim to be responsive to national developments. Teaching accommodation is mostly good and some base rooms are enlivened by displays of students' work and photographs. Students have access to specialist teaching areas and where IT is available it is used well to improve their learning.

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Support for Students

Grade 2

46 Inspectors agreed with most of the college's own assessment of its support for students, but identified a few additional strengths and weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses identified in the college self-assessment report had been partially addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- extensive range of good-quality promotional materials for courses
- good advice and guidance service
- well-planned induction and tutorial programmes for full-time students
- good personal, welfare and careers support for students
- effective support for students with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities
- rigorous monitoring and recording of students' destinations

Weaknesses

- some poor induction and tutorial provision for part-time students
- underdeveloped procedures for monitoring effectiveness of learning support

47 The college provides an extensive range of good-quality course publicity materials. There is an extensive programme of promotional activities, including open days at the college and attendance by college staff at many school open evenings and exhibitions. As recognised in the self-assessment report, admissions procedures cater for a wide range of client groups. Applicants for specific courses are interviewed by course tutors to establish that the course will meet their needs. Students who are unsure

about their choice of course are directed to an effective, impartial advice and guidance service. Students with particular needs are interviewed and advised by specialist staff. There is rigorous monitoring of the admissions process by the college registry to ensure applicants are kept informed of the progress and outcome of their application. All students are provided with a comprehensive handbook which provides information on the level of learning support and other services that they may expect to receive whilst at the college. There is a comprehensive and informative handbook for tutors which includes policies and procedures for most aspects of the college's student support arrangements. The handbook is reviewed and revised annually.

48 There are effective induction arrangements for full-time students. A fair held during induction gives students a good introduction to college services and facilities. The college has started to address weaknesses in the provision of induction for part-time students. The language and numeracy learning support needs of most students are assessed through screening tests arranged during induction.

49 The college has recognised the need to improve its procedures for assessing the learning support needs of students and for providing appropriate support programmes. A learning support co-ordinator has been appointed recently. Improvements to monitoring and administration arrangements have resulted in the identification of a larger number of students requiring learning support compared with the previous year. Learning support is provided during each student's course of study and through additional periods spent in the learning support centre. Learning support tutors monitor and review the progress of students and inform the course tutor of each student's progress. There is little learning support for evening course students. There are no systems for evaluating the effectiveness of learning support in improving retention and

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achievement rates. This weakness was not stated in the college's self-assessment report.

50 The college provides good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, a strength not recognised in the self-assessment report. A number of learning support assistants work as note-takers alongside visually and hearing impaired students. A student with disabilities has been successful in progressing from an access course at the college to the first year of a national diploma course. A support assistant works with the student during lessons. The college has also helped the student find a work placement and obtain some specialist resources.

51 Full-time students have a weekly group tutorial and a personal tutorial at least once a term. There are guidelines for tutors which detail the essential elements of a tutorial programme. Inspectors observed seven tutorials; two were outstanding and most of the remainder were good. Students speak highly of their group tutorials. As acknowledged in the self-assessment report, tutorial provision for part-time students is implemented in some programme areas but not in others.

52 There is an effective and responsive counselling and guidance service which is provided by an enthusiastic team. The use of these support services by students is carefully monitored and evaluated. The college's access and welfare funds provided financial assistance to some 490 students in 1997-98. An external organisation is contracted to provide careers information and guidance. Students and teaching staff are very satisfied with the service. The college supports students by providing nursery places for 43 children, although the number of places available does not meet the demand. A wide range of recreational activities is provided for students, both on the college's premises and off-site. These include a poetry group as well as football, basketball, badminton and cricket.

53 Students' destinations are rigorously monitored by course teams and programme area managers. There are generally good progression rates to higher education and employment. Industrial links have been strengthened through these monitoring procedures. They have led to work placements for students and opportunities for students to visit local companies.

General Resources

Grade 2

54 The college's self-assessment report acknowledged the improvements in resources since the last inspection, and concluded that general resources are an area of strength. Inspectors broadly agreed with the college's assessment. Progress has already been made in addressing some of the weaknesses identified in the report.

Key strengths

- good standard of most teaching accommodation
- extensive range of good-quality IT equipment
- improvements in library and learning resources
- good facilities for students with physical disabilities
- good standard of work areas and other facilities for staff

Weaknesses

- the poor standard of social areas for students
- few leisure and recreational facilities

55 The college occupies a single site, which is centred around Spring Grove House, an eighteenth-century mansion owned originally by Sir Joseph Banks, the founder of Kew Gardens.

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The site also includes several large purpose-built teaching blocks, 18 huts and a converted office building. The college is developing its accommodation in line with a detailed accommodation strategy, and has made significant progress since the last inspection. Extensive building works are taking place currently to provide 'front of house' services and improved recreational areas for students, as well as new teaching accommodation. The standard of most teaching accommodation is good. Most classrooms are bright, clean and appropriately furnished, and have a good level of equipment. The new building will replace the huts, which are poor. The accommodation strategy also addresses the college's low space utilisation.

56 As the self-assessment report indicates, there has been a significant investment in IT across the college over the last three years. An IT strategy group, supported by advisory groups responsible for teaching, learning and business support, is responsible for developing IT across the college. Students have access to over 500 modern computers. The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is 1:6. All computers use industrial-standard software and many are networked. A good level of technician support is provided across the college.

57 There has been an expansion in library and learning resource since the last inspection. The main resource centre has been enlarged and remodelled. It incorporates a learning centre, which is used by students to develop their IT skills. The reference library contains a range of books, journals, tapes, CD-ROM titles and other materials. A second, new learning centre provides a conducive working environment for students to develop their key skills. The computers in the centre can be used by students on a 'drop-in' basis. Each library staff member is responsible for maintaining links with specific curriculum areas.

58 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that since the last inspection there is improved access for people with restricted mobility. A new lift was recently installed in the college's main building, providing access to the main resource centre and the learning centre. The college has also installed ramps and automatic doors at key locations across the main site, and parking spaces for people with disabilities are provided.

59 The self-assessment report acknowledged that social and recreational facilities for students are poor. The student common room is unpopular with the increasing number of adult students attending the college. The main refectory and counter service areas provide a poor standard of accommodation. They are currently being refurbished as part of the building programme. The college recognises the small range of sports and leisure facilities available on the site, and hires facilities from a neighbouring higher education institution. Staff have appropriate working areas and satisfactory support facilities. They have good access to computers, and there is a modern, dedicated staff training centre.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

60 Inspectors agreed broadly with the judgements in the self-assessment report but felt that the college gave insufficient weight to students' achievements in assessing the quality of its provision.

Key strengths

- well-documented framework and procedures for quality assurance
- systematic collection of students' views
- effective complaints procedures
- extensive internal staff development programme aligned to strategic goals

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Weaknesses

- lack of impact of quality assurance procedures on students' achievements
- insufficient monitoring and analysis of students' achievements
- some poor course reviews and action plans

61 The college makes a clear commitment to establishing comprehensive quality assurance systems as one of its six strategic goals. There is a well-documented framework and a set of procedures for quality assurance. The corporation has recently established a quality committee to enable it to monitor the college's performance. The college executive, which includes the principal and other senior managers, meets regularly as the quality management group, to develop quality assurance procedures and monitor their implementation. Staff discuss quality-related matters in a 'focus group' which reports to the academic board. Course teams review their work termly. A staff handbook clearly summarises the main elements of the college's quality assurance procedures. Business support staff have recently set measurable service standards for areas such as learning resources and the registry and some improvements to services have resulted. Quality and strategic planning cycles are closely harmonised. Operating statements and action plans are regularly reviewed and updated. The college was one of the first to be awarded a quality mark for its services to students, including the student charter, in 1996.

62 There is a systematic approach to collecting students' views on the service provided by the college. Periodic questionnaires are analysed and this leads to action plans to address weaknesses. Students are consulted about the standards set for their learning. There is careful monitoring of the college's performance against the commitments made in the students' charter.

There are effective procedures to handle comments and complaints from students. The college publicises the complaints procedure and encourages students to use it more widely.

63 There is an extensive range of internal staff development events which support the college's strategic goals. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. The college has recently achieved the Investor in People award. Individual staff development needs are identified through an appraisal system. All staff were appraised in 1997-98 and those spoken to by inspectors felt positive about the process. Priority is given in staff training to the development of skills and knowledge that will improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers without teaching qualifications undertake professional accredited training. The college has recognised in its self-assessment report a need to improve the quality assurance arrangements for teaching provided by part-time teachers. A system for the direct observation of teaching has been in place for the last two years. Findings from these observations have been analysed to inform staff development priorities.

64 The college's quality assurance systems have not led to sustained measurable improvements in students' achievements. This issue is not fully identified in the self-assessment report. Pass rates on a significant number of courses have been below national averages and college targets over the past three years, and some have declined. Insufficient monitoring and analysis of students' achievements has inhibited the capacity of the college to apply quality assurance procedures rigorously. There is no evidence of an overall strategy to address the decline in achievements.

65 Course reviews are clearly integral to the college's self-assessment process. Course reviews and action plans vary in their depth of analysis and overall quality. The best course reviews clearly identify strengths and

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weaknesses. They propose actions to address weaknesses and specify dates by which actions should be completed, and have brought about improvements. However, in a number of cases, insufficient emphasis is given to the importance of students' achievements and some action plans do not address specific weaknesses.

66 In 1997, all course teams were asked to set a retention target which was 2% above the retention rate for the previous year. Most, but not all, course teams established targets and compared their performance against targets. Overall, retention has improved. Programme area managers are now starting to monitor achievements and retention more effectively.

67 Self-assessment procedures have been well established in the college since 1995 and have been conducted with increasing rigour. Inspectors confirmed that teaching and business support staff had been involved in the process for the production of the self-assessment report.

Governance

Grade 2

68 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report but considered that a few weaknesses were understated.

Key strengths

- the wide range of governors' skills and expertise
- the professional working relationship between governors and managers
- effective involvement by governors in strategic planning
- good clerking arrangements and efficient procedures for conducting corporation business
- governors' awareness of, and compliance with, issues of openness and accountability

Weaknesses

- governors' lack of knowledge of the curriculum and of the analysis of students' achievements
- underdeveloped procedures for monitoring the achievement of strategic objectives
- procedures for monitoring the finances of the college not always adhered to

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

70 The corporation comprises the principal, a student governor, two staff governors, nine independent governors, a TEC nominee and one co-opted governor. As recognised in the self-assessment report, governors have a range of backgrounds and their expertise has been effectively used by the college. There are several long-serving governors who provide stability and experience and are knowledgeable about the further education sector.

71 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that there are efficient and effective procedures for conducting the corporation's business. Meetings are well attended. Clerking arrangements are good.

The corporation receives regular, well-written reports from the principal and other senior managers, which provide information on matters such as major capital projects, student enrolments and retention.

72 Governors receive information on examination results, but not analyses of achievement trends. The corporation has adopted a code of conduct, a policy on 'whistleblowing' and a register of interests.

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There is a comprehensive set of policies and procedures for the conduct of corporation business. The board has the following appropriate committees: personnel and finance; audit; remuneration; and quality. The terms of reference for committees are well defined and relevant. The chairman and the vice-chairman of the corporation meet the principal and other senior managers regularly to exchange information.

73 A search committee is working to fill three vacancies on the corporation. Governors have recognised a need to strengthen the board's expertise in areas such as quality assurance and IT. The quality committee has not yet had time to make any significant impact. As a result of the self-assessment process, the board has begun to evaluate its own performance but has yet to establish some key performance indicators. The cycle of meetings established for the personnel and finance committee does not always allow for adequate consideration or follow up of items of business before meetings of the full corporation. Managers provide governors with briefings on most financial issues arising and governors consider that they are adequately informed on financial matters. However, neither the personnel and finance committee, nor the corporation, are provided with management accounts as a matter of routine.

74 Governors clearly understand their role and have a professional and productive relationship with senior managers. The inspection team agreed that the process of strategic planning is well understood and supported by the corporation. Governors work with senior managers in determining the college's strategic goals and contribute to the strategic plan. Inspectors agreed with the college that the current procedures for monitoring the college's achievement of the strategic plan are underdeveloped, though governors hope to address this through the development of performance indicators.

Inspectors agreed that governors lack knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of most of the college's curriculum areas. There are plans for presentations from curriculum managers on aspects of the curriculum. Governors are updated regularly by senior managers on issues affecting the further education sector.

Management

Grade 2

75 The college self-assessment report identified most of the strengths and some of the weaknesses found by inspectors.

Key strengths

- well-defined management structure
- effective strategic planning process and identification of key strategic goals
- good communications throughout the college
- productive collaboration with a range of external organisations
- the effectiveness of the academic board

Weaknesses

- inadequate financial reporting and monitoring

76 Overall, the management of the college is good. The management structure has been reorganised since the last inspection and inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that this has led to improvements in efficiency. Staff understand their roles and responsibilities and reporting lines are clear. The college executive is made up of the principal, the vice-principal, who is also director of enterprise, and three directors who have responsibility for operations, resources and personnel, respectively. The executive meets weekly.

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77 The director of operations line manages 10 programme managers and two operations managers who have responsibility for the curriculum and pastoral support. The director of operations meets programme managers each fortnight to discuss curriculum, attendance and retention issues. The college's computerised management information system is able to provide a variety of reports on recruitment, attendance, retention and achievement. These reports are not yet fully used by managers.

78 Communications within the college have improved since the last inspection. Staff are kept informed through a weekly bulletin. Minutes and records of appropriate meetings are available to all staff. Managers make effective use of electronic mail to communicate with each other. There is effective communication within the four directorates.

79 The college adopts a consultative and comprehensive approach to strategic planning, a strength not acknowledged by the self-assessment report. The current strategic plan includes six goals covering the development of students' knowledge and skills, finance, resources, links with the community, areas of vocational expertise and quality assurance. Operational plans are related to the strategic goals. The business centre, which is managed through the enterprise directorate, provides the college with useful, up-to-date market information. The college highlights in its self-assessment report that it has productive links with external organisations including neighbouring colleges, the local education authority (LEA), universities, the local training and enterprise council (TEC) and employers.

80 Changes in the remit of the academic board have led to improved participation by staff from across the college. Academic board members are now drawn from the focus groups set up to consider the college's six strategic planning goals. The board discusses key strategic issues, self-assessment and quality assurance procedures. Equality of opportunity is

emphasised in the college's mission statement and the college's equal opportunities policy has been reviewed recently. The college's policy on equal opportunities is monitored by the academic board. The college is committed to widening participation and has successfully developed new courses in pursuit of this aim.

81 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. There have been significant staffing difficulties over the last year within the finance team, including illness and long-term vacancies. Financial reporting and monitoring have suffered as a consequence. Management accounts have generally not been prepared for the last 15 months. Where management accounts have been prepared, they have been submitted directly to the corporation approximately two months after the period end to which they relate. They do not include forecasts to the year end in respect of either the income and expenditure account or the balance sheet. No cashflow forecast is prepared. Expenditure against budget is monitored monthly by the finance team, but formal reports are not produced for the executive. Financial regulations are currently being updated, but are too brief in some areas and have not been complied with in some instances. The college has historically had good financial health and the maintenance of this status has been set as one of its strategic financial targets. Effective tendering and planning procedures have enabled the college to commence a major building project which is not planned to impact on available reserves. The college's average level of funding for 1998-99 is £18.45 per unit compared with the median for general further education colleges of £16.48 per unit.

Conclusions

82 The college's self-assessment report contained a substantial amount of useful commentary and evidence. It was self-critical and evaluative and reflected conscientious work

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by programme area and cross-college teams to review provision and develop action plans to address weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with many of the college's judgements about its strengths and weaknesses. However, they identified some weaknesses which the college had not noted, in particular, the failure to place sufficient emphasis on weaknesses in students' achievements. The grades awarded by the college for its provision were better than those awarded by inspectors in the majority of cases.

83 Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (May 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	23
19-24 years	19
25+ years	56
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (May 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	42
Intermediate	20
Advanced	25
Higher education	3
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	10
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	387	700	15
Construction	0	30	1
Engineering	59	147	3
Business	308	795	16
Hotel and catering	94	267	5
Health and community care	316	561	12
Art and design	483	163	9
Humanities	387	1,187	22
Basic education	101	1,090	17
Total	2,135	4,940	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 24% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (October 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	138	5	53	196
Supporting direct learning contact	31	2	0	33
Other support	102	2	0	104
Total	271	9	53	333

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£13,204,000	£12,848,000	£13,883,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£21.55	£20.93	£19.95
Payroll as a proportion of income	74%	71%	59%
Achievement of funding target	99%	100%	100%(est)
Diversity of income	19%	18%	29%*
Operating surplus	£687,000	-£433,000	£2,357,000*

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

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

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

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

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

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

*includes £1,400,000 from sale of college site

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	231	410	772	365	463	789
	Retention (%)	78	92	83	96	94	83
	Achievement (%)	51	58	43	46	63	54
2	Expected completions	812	1,003	1,280	677	832	1,022
	Retention (%)	83	77	73	85	80	80
	Achievement (%)	64	51	57	60	63	56
3	Expected completions	–	1,091	986	–	897	1,066
	Retention (%)	–	71	66	–	74	73
	Achievement (%)	70	68	62	52	51	58
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	0	0	–	71	78
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	96	83
	Achievement (%)	100	n/a	n/a	61	52	44
Short courses	Expected completions	95	139	237	2,711	2,784	2,210
	Retention (%)	100	95	92	97	95	95
	Achievement (%)	34	50	49	40	67	63
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	107	264	628	1,340	1,534	1,590
	Retention (%)	84	88	95	89	80	81
	Achievement (%)	32	40	55	63	68	53

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

*ISR data may not be reliable

n/a not applicable

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