

Wirral Metropolitan 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

Wirral Metropolitan College

North West Region

Inspected March 1999

Wirral Metropolitan College is a large further education college on the Wirral peninsula. In February 1999 all but one of the members of the corporation resigned. This action followed a decision by the FEFC to recommend to the secretary of state that all the governors be removed. At the time of the inspection, new governors had recently been appointed and an interim principal was in place following the early retirement of the previous postholder. The self-assessment report contained sections of variable quality: some parts of the report were comprehensive and evaluative; others had limited evidence for judgements or the inaccuracy of data made judgements invalid. Not enough emphasis was placed on teaching, learning and students' achievements. Inspectors agreed with three of the curriculum grades awarded by the college. The inspection team did not agree with any of the grades awarded to cross-college areas.

The college offers a broad range of provision, good routes for progression in some curriculum areas, and courses for local communities in neighbourhood venues. Standards of teaching and learning are below national norms except for courses in psychology, sociology, history and

law. Only 41% of lessons observed were judged to be good or outstanding, compared with the national average of 65%, and 15% were unsatisfactory or poor. The quality of teaching and learning has declined since the college was last inspected. Inspectors found a narrow range of teaching and learning methods and little sharing of good practice. Students' progress is not systematically reviewed. Levels of attendance, retention and achievement are unsatisfactory. There is a lack of equity: some students are well supported in their studies and have pleasant accommodation and adequate resources, others do not. The college has made significant investment in IT resources, but these are not used effectively in curriculum or management functions. A major weakness for the college is the unreliability and inaccuracy of its data. This has led to poor planning, a financial crisis, and an inability to monitor provision. Quality assurance procedures are not implemented effectively. In order to make progress, the college should develop clear leadership and collective responsibility at all levels within the organisation. It needs robust systems for collecting data, monitoring performance and supporting students. It also needs to develop staff awareness of good practice and to set targets related to national benchmarking data.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Mathematics and science	4	Support for students	5
Construction	4	General resources	4
Business studies and administration	3	Quality assurance	5
Childcare, health and care	4	Governance	5
Art and design and performing arts	3	Management	5
English and languages	4		
Sociology, psychology, law and history	3		
Basic education and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	4		

The College and its Mission

1 Wirral Metropolitan College is a large further education college, situated on the Wirral peninsula. The college operates from three main sites: the Borough Road campus in Birkenhead, the International Business and Management Centre also based in Birkenhead, and the Carlett Park campus in Eastham. The college also runs courses at outreach sites and neighbourhood colleges.

2 According to the college's data there were 13,300 students on roll on 1 November 1998. The college attracts students from all age groups, although more than 65% are aged 25 and over. Provision for 16 to 19 year olds in the Wirral is diverse and competitive. There are secondary modern and comprehensive schools for pupils aged 11 to 18, single sex local education authority (LEA) grammar schools and a strong independent sector. There is also a local sixth form college in Birkenhead. The college provides courses in all 10 of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas, though the provision in agriculture is minimal. Courses range from basic skills to degree and professional level qualifications. The college's records for 1997-98 show that there were 414 full-time and 1,370 part-time students on higher education programmes.

3 The Wirral has approximately 331,000 inhabitants, of whom nearly 60% are of working age. Since 1989, the population has been in decline, a decline which is particularly marked for those under 35 years of age. A significantly higher proportion of the population is over 65 than is the case nationally. In December 1998, the registered unemployment rate in the Wirral was 7.8% of the workforce, compared with 4.9% for the north-west. In January 1997, 28.8% of unemployed claimants in the Wirral were under 25 and 37.7% of all those unemployed had been out of work for over 12 months. The proportion of employees on part-time contracts is high, at nearly 40%, compared with 29% in the north-west.

4 Despite historically having a strong manufacturing base, the Wirral's economy is now dominated by the service sector. Education and health-related employment is the largest service category, followed by hotels and retail and wholesale distribution. Manufacturing, based on chemicals and food and drink, remains a significant element. The Cheshire, Ellesmere Port and Wirral Training and Enterprise Council's (TEC's) economic assessment for 1998-99 predicts relatively slow growth in most of the Wirral's industrial sectors. The exceptions to this are the chemical industry and the construction sector in which a more significant growth is predicted. Skill levels in the Wirral are below the national average.

5 At the time of inspection, the college was facing a financial crisis. In February 1999, following intervention from the FEFC, all but one member of the board resigned. Following the early retirement of the principal at the end of February 1999, temporary arrangements were put in place to run the college. According to data produced by the college, it employed 741 staff in January 1999. The curriculum is organised into seven schools which are supported by a range of business units and services.

6 The college's mission states that personal achievement is everyone's right. The college has identified the following as its immediate priorities:

- to raise the quality of teaching, learning and support for students
- to ensure adequate expenditure on teaching resources
- to set clear targets for improvements in retention and achievement
- to generate a positive image with existing and potential students.

The college also recognises the need to provide a firm basis for renegotiating targets with the FEFC and the need to substantially revise its strategic plan.

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during the week beginning 8 March 1999. Before the inspection, inspectors reviewed the self-assessment report and considered information from other directorates of the FEFC.

8 The lack of reliable information from the college affected the planning of the inspection and inspection activity. There are major weaknesses in the college's data on students' achievements. Before the inspection, inspectors checked data for 1997-98 against primary sources of evidence, such as registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. This revealed many inaccuracies, especially in the keeping of registers. The college's data recorded in the FEFC individualised student record (ISR) for 1996 and 1997 may also be unreliable. Despite considerable effort by college staff and inspectors during the inspection, there remained gaps in data, or unreliable figures relating to some qualifications. It has not been possible, therefore, to produce tables for students' achievements in the curriculum sections of the report. Judgements about retention and achievement are based on 1997-98 data as corrected by the inspection team during the verification check, observation of in-year attendance and retention, and selective use of ISR data, where possible.

9 The college was notified in January 1999 of the sample of provision to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by 20 inspectors and two auditors working in the college for a total of 91 days. Inspectors observed lessons, evaluated students' work and examined college documents. Meetings were held with the new governing body, managers, staff, students, the local TEC, the careers service and other local organisations involved in partnership arrangements with the college.

10 The college was one of 30 in the current cycle of inspections which agreed to participate in the joint Department for Education and

Employment (DfEE) and FEFC assessment of careers education and guidance. The joint assessment was guided by the inspection framework, with careers education assessors contributing to judgements made by inspectors. The emphasis in this report on careers education and guidance will help colleges and careers services to improve the quality of the careers education and guidance they offer and help the DfEE to disseminate good practice.

11 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 41% were judged to be good or outstanding and 15% were less than satisfactory or poor. These figures are worse than the average figures for colleges in the sector inspected during 1997-98.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	1	4	5	1	0	11
GCSE	2	7	8	1	0	18
GNVQ	1	6	6	4	0	17
NVQ	0	5	15	5	0	25
Other vocational	3	18	19	4	0	44
Other*	2	14	15	7	2	40
Total (No.)	9	54	68	22	2	155
Total (%)	6	35	44	14	1	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*

*includes higher education, access courses, basic education, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and tutorials

12 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Wirral Metropolitan College	9.6	67
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

Mathematics and Science

Grade 4

13 Inspectors observed 19 lessons covering access to higher education in science, a range of vocational courses, and general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) provision in physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics. The college's self-assessment of mathematics was presented separately from a report on science and computing. Inspectors agreed with some judgements in both reports. They also identified a few additional strengths and some significant weaknesses which had been omitted.

Key strengths

- a broad range of provision
- good practical and analytical skills amongst advanced and higher level science students
- well-equipped mathematics workshops

Weaknesses

- a narrow range of approaches to teaching and learning
- poor levels of retention and achievement on some courses
- inadequate arrangements to manage mathematics provision
- underdeveloped internal verification procedures
- insufficient use of information technology (IT)
- a lack of appropriate resources for some courses

14 As the self-assessment report stated, there is a broad range of courses in science and mathematics which caters for the needs of the community. Full-time and part-time vocational

courses in science are relevant to the requirements of local industry and provide opportunities for students to study at different levels. The college is a major provider of higher level vocational courses in chemistry. The provision in mathematics workshops at Carlett Park and Borough Road enables students seeking qualifications at foundation and intermediate levels to attend the college at times which suit them. Students can also attend timetabled lessons in college and at other venues in the community to gain GCSE qualifications in mathematics.

15 Science and mathematics teaching is sound. However, only 53% of the lessons observed were judged to be good or outstanding, compared with an average of 62% for the programme area nationally. The average level of attendance at the lessons observed was 82% in science but only 70% in mathematics. The self-assessment reports for science and mathematics referred to the poor attendance on some courses, but they included few judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. Advanced and higher level students in science carry out practical work effectively and reflect carefully on their findings. For example, when an experiment in a GCE A level lesson did not produce the expected results, students offered thoughtful and reasoned explanations. Some science and mathematics teachers use questions and answers effectively to elicit students' ideas and test their understanding of topics. However, students experience a narrow range of methods of teaching and learning. Students attending the mathematics workshop rarely discuss their work with others studying the same topic and lack of IT facilities in laboratories and classrooms prevents teachers and students from using appropriate software in lessons. Science students at Carlett Park rarely wordprocess their assignments whereas some students based at Borough Road produce excellent work, which includes computer-printed graphs and illustrations extracted from the internet.

Curriculum Areas

16 Inspectors were unable to obtain complete and reliable data for the full range of courses in science and mathematics. Three-year figures available for some courses, however, show that retention and achievement levels fell below the national average for students in general further education colleges. For example, fewer than a quarter of students gained grades C or above in GCSE mathematics in 1997 and 1998. Generally, science and mathematics teachers do not place enough emphasis on identifying strategies to improve poor retention and achievement. Higher level courses in science have high achievement and retention rates, as stated in the self-assessment report.

17 The self-assessment report did not acknowledge shortcomings in the management of mathematics provision. There is no leadership. Roles and responsibilities of individuals are not clearly defined. Formal team meetings rarely take place. Schemes of work are not fully developed. The absence of policies and procedures allows individual teachers to adopt different practices. For example, the number of pieces of work from students which are formally marked and assessed by teachers varies considerably. Learning plans for students who use the mathematics workshops to study for GCSE qualifications are not tailored to individual needs and lack specific targets, and records of progress for these students are inadequate. In science, the standard of marking is variable. Some pieces of work are returned to students with detailed written feedback; others contain few relevant comments. A set of phase tests for a national certificate course was incorrectly marked. Internal verification procedures are relatively new and are not yet applied consistently, a weakness which was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

18 The mathematics workshops provide a pleasant learning environment for students, and they house a wide range of paper-based learning materials. These strengths were mentioned in the self-assessment report. The workshops have

little mathematics software and there are no learning materials in the other rooms used for mathematics lessons. There are no graphical calculators for GCE A level students to use in lessons. Laboratories at both sites are adequate but some equipment is out of date. For example, instrumentation for advanced chemistry courses is old and some of it is not of industry standard. Staff are suitably qualified.

Curriculum Areas

Construction

Grade 4

19 Inspectors observed 21 lessons covering construction crafts, leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3, and technician programmes, some at higher levels. The self-assessment report did not evaluate the quality of construction provision adequately.

Key strengths

- a good range of provision and of opportunities for learning
- a good resource centre and excellent brickwork facilities
- good practical and teamwork activities

Weaknesses

- much inadequate teaching
- poor retention and pass rates on most programmes
- poor levels of attendance and punctuality
- some unsafe facilities and practices
- inadequate development of construction workshops
- insufficient key skills development for craft students

20 The college offers a broad range of vocational courses, school link programmes incorporating general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) foundation units to support the national curriculum, and a community education programme. It provides opportunities for unemployed students, particularly for clients of Training For Work and New Deal. These strengths were not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Good opportunities are provided for students to progress to higher levels of study. Course files and students' records are extensive and well maintained, but

course teams do not review the quality of provision with enough rigour. There is not enough use of national benchmarks to assess performance. Students contribute well to course reviews but there are few summary analyses of their opinions. The views of employers are not effectively sought or analysed.

21 Inspectors did not agree with the college's claim that it offers a good range of teaching methods to suit individual needs. Of the lessons observed, inspectors considered that only 30% were good or outstanding, which is half the national average for construction, and that 24% were less than satisfactory or poor. Many lessons were inadequately planned. Although some theory lessons were good, too many were poorly organised and failed to ensure that the needs of individual students were met. In one lesson, involving first and second-year students, the latter complained that they had studied the main topic before. The teacher offered no alternative study programme and the students had to repeat the topic. Lesson activities were not varied enough and there was little use of resources to support learning. In theory lessons, students were given no encouragement to ask questions or to express their ideas. Few craft students know what key skills they are developing and they are not given enough opportunity to develop their IT skills. In their marking of assignment work, teachers sometimes fail to indicate clearly what the errors are and what way the work can be improved. Spelling errors are rarely corrected.

22 Teaching and learning in the workshops are more effective than in theory lessons. Practical activities reflect industrial practice. Students participate well in team activities and their presentations of research findings to other members of the class are good. Many craft students have good writing skills but lack confidence in their ability to work on their own. Some files and log books are well kept; others are poorly maintained. Technician students do not make enough use of IT in their portfolios.

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A significant proportion of unemployed students are sent to the college by the employment service. Many do not attend regularly or turn up late for classes. Inspectors did not agree with the college that levels of achievement on craft programmes are up to national standards. According to the data provided by the college, retention rates and pass rates on NVQ level 2 craft programmes are at or below national averages. For example, in 1997-98, level 2 craft courses had retention rates and pass rates of 68% and 41%, respectively, compared with 70% and 52% nationally. Retention on NVQ level 3 craft courses is below the national average, at 76%, whereas pass rates are slightly above the national average, at 68%. Retention rates and pass rates in higher technician courses are below national averages and deteriorating.

23 Most teachers are well qualified and experienced. A few have recently updated their industrial and professional skills. Technician support is adequate. Facilities for bricklaying are excellent. Most workshops offer learning environments which simulate real work situations, although some require more imaginative development. A carpentry and joinery workshop and one of the painting and decorating workshops are in a poor state and inefficiently used. There is no effective development plan for these workshops. Machinery and handtools are generally well maintained but they are out of date. Risk assessments in workshops and the testing of electrical equipment are thorough and up to date. However, inspectors found some instances of poor health and safety practice, including students not wearing hard hats or safety footwear in areas requiring them. The shortage of text books, and of consumable materials such as timber, has adverse effects on students' learning. Most of these problems were not mentioned in the self-assessment report. The resource base at the main centre is well stocked with technical literature and IT, including appropriate CD-ROMs. There is a good range of surveying equipment.

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies and Administration

Grade 3

24 Inspectors observed 21 lessons in business and administration, including GCE A level, higher national certificate, GNVQ, NVQ and other vocational provision. There were three self-assessment reports for the programme area. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the reports but identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a broad range of courses and good opportunities for progression
- good teaching, learning, retention and pass rates on accounting and higher national certificate courses
- effective curriculum planning and management
- the high standard of students' work

Weaknesses

- some teaching and learning activities which fail to meet students' needs
- erratic attendance, poor retention and low levels of achievement on several courses
- drab classrooms and a lack of basic equipment
- ineffective review of students' progress

25 Business studies students can undertake full-time and part-time courses extending from foundation level, to degree level and professional courses. In administration, there are courses from entry level to NVQ level 3. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that the broad range of courses and good progression opportunities constitute a strength. Courses are well managed and feedback from

students is acted upon as part of course review. The distance between the campuses makes it difficult for teachers on administration courses to meet and share good practice.

26 Teaching is sound, but only 43% of the lessons observed were judged to be good or outstanding. Most of the better lessons were in two areas of the curriculum. A strength omitted from the self-assessment report was the high standard of teaching on higher national certificate programmes. Some teachers use varied methods of working to sustain students' interest and they regularly check students' understanding. In the first lesson of an accounting class, the teacher built up on the board a useful chart showing the framework of the accounting role in business. This was used to explain the skills students would develop during the course. On most courses, teachers draw on students' experience of work to relate concepts to the commercial world and build on students' prior knowledge and skills. All full-time business and administration students undertake relevant work experience, which provides good opportunities for work-based assessment and the assessment of key skills. Some students are able to benefit from placements abroad. Too many lesson plans lack explicit aims and objectives. The pace of some lessons is too slow to make good use of students' time in college. In one lesson, for example, far too much time was spent writing complicated data on the board. In other lessons, the work is taken at too fast a pace for some and there is not enough time for students to consolidate what they are learning.

27 The quality of most assessed assignments and other written work is good. Teachers mark work promptly, but they do not always correct grammar and spelling and sometimes fail to provide appropriate feedback. On most courses, students' progress is effectively tracked. However, there is some poor tutorial practice and reviews of progress are not as effective as they should be, a weakness not recognised in

Curriculum Areas

the self-assessment report. In one case, for example, the review of a student's progress established that a significant piece of work, outstanding at the previous review four months earlier, was still not complete. On occasions, no record is maintained of students' progress on practical tasks.

28 Inspectors were unable to obtain complete and reliable data for the full range of courses in the business programme area. Pass rates and retention rates for NVQ level 3 and 4 accounting courses and the higher national certificate are good. For other courses, including GCE A level and GNVQ, retention and achievement levels over the last three years fell below the national average for students in general further education colleges. Attendance on some courses is erratic. Attendance and retention are not monitored with sufficient rigour.

29 Teachers are appropriately qualified, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. Almost two-thirds have a teaching qualification. Teachers on administration courses have not had recent experience of working in industry and there is no strategy for updating their industrial experience. Teaching accommodation in the International Business and Management Centre, used by students on higher level courses, is well furnished and well equipped. The conditions in which many full-time GNVQ students learn are poor. Some teaching rooms are drab with very few resources to inspire students' learning. Teachers working in the more basic rooms are restricted in the equipment they can use by its unavailability or unreliability. Most students have ready access to computers and there is a wide range of appropriate software. Library books are in good supply for higher level courses; the stock for other business courses is restricted and ageing. Administrative support for teachers on the Borough Road campus is inadequate. Technician support for administration courses is shared between two sites.

Curriculum Areas

Childcare, Health and Care

Grade 4

30 Inspectors observed 19 lessons covering GNVQ, NVQ and other vocational provision. Two self-assessment reports were produced covering this provision. Inspectors did not agree with many of the strengths mentioned in the reports. They identified a few additional strengths and many additional, significant weaknesses.

Key strengths

- use of work experience on childcare courses
- careful marking of students' written work

Weaknesses

- the narrow range of teaching and learning methods
- poor pass rates on GNVQ, NVQ and counselling courses
- poor attendance and retention rates on many courses
- little use of IT in coursework and class work
- the inadequate number and range of books for students

31 The college offers courses in health, social and childcare from foundation to higher levels, but there has been little curriculum development to address changes in demand. Course files are well maintained and provide a good basis for planning. Clearly-written course handbooks inform students about awarding body and course requirements. Some schemes of work and many lesson plans lack detail. Course materials, such as lesson plans and handouts, are not shared by teachers and there is insufficient sharing of good practice. These weaknesses were not mentioned in the self-

assessment report. Most course teams meet once or twice a term and minutes of meetings are circulated to team members and the head of school. The minutes contain few references to curriculum planning and development.

32 Of the lessons observed, 16% were judged to be good or outstanding. This proportion is significantly lower than the national average for this programme area. In most lessons, there was too little opportunity for students to share ideas and draw on relevant experience and teachers were not doing enough to check their students' understanding. Often teachers spent too much time giving information. In one lesson, for example, the teacher talked about vocational aspects of care to a group of adults employed in the care sector. The presentation lasted 45 minutes and there was no opportunity to draw on the experience and expertise of the students. Few learning activities adequately addressed the wide range of ability within classes. Such weaknesses in teaching and learning were not mentioned in the self-assessment reports. With few exceptions, attendance at lessons observed was unsatisfactory or poor. Average attendance was below the national average for this programme area. Punctuality was poor in several lessons.

33 In the better lessons, learning activities were appropriate and varied and teachers maintained students' interest. In a well-planned and lively lesson, students worked in groups to consider ways of working with parents; the groups shared their findings and the teacher clearly summarised the key outcomes. Inspectors agreed with the college that effective work placements are a feature of all childcare programmes. Careful monitoring of placement activities enables students to develop appropriate vocational competences and teachers encourage students to apply their work experience in class work and projects. Teachers make frequent use of handouts. These are usually professionally presented and appropriate. In most cases, students' work is

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carefully marked. Teachers' written comments are often detailed and indicate how work can be improved. Internal verification is effective; extensive written feedback is provided on a good proportion of students' work. These strengths were not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

34 There are timetabled IT skill development sessions for GNVQ students and full-time, second-year childcare students. However, teachers generally do not integrate IT with coursework and class work, and students make infrequent use of IT in their assignments. Only a minority of students occasionally use the college intranet to gain access to the internet or to use relevant CD-ROMs. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge these weaknesses.

35 Information on student retention and achievement for 1996 and 1997 may not be reliable. Information checked by inspectors for 1997-98 shows that pass rates on all GNVQ and NVQ courses were significantly below national averages, as were those on the counselling courses at levels 2 and 3, and on the advanced diploma in childcare and education. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment reports. In 1998, pass rates were above national averages on the national certificate for dental nurses and on the higher national certificate in social care. Retention rates were poor on the GNVQ advanced course, on the certificate in childcare and education and on the advanced certificate in childcare and education.

36 The library at Carlett Park, where the health and care courses are delivered, holds a few outdated reference books and no relevant journals. There are no up-to-date books appropriate for students' assignment work. The books held in a small library in the curriculum section are too few for the number of students needing them. Accommodation is poor at Carlett Park. Classrooms are in poor decorative order and are often very cold. Students and staff have enhanced the quality of

this poor accommodation by displaying students' work and relevant posters.

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design and Performing Arts

Grade 3

37 Inspectors observed 18 lessons in art and design, performing arts, music and media. They judged that the college's self-assessment report overstated some strengths. Inspectors found other strengths and weaknesses not included in the report.

Key strengths

- a wide range of courses
- good progression for the students who are retained
- well-developed basic drawing and visual research skills

Weaknesses

- poor attendance linked to unsatisfactory initial guidance
- inadequate analysis of student achievement trends
- poor retention on many courses

38 The college offers a wide range of courses in art and design and performing arts, as stated in the self-assessment report. Students have the opportunity of studying full time or part time, and can progress from level 1 to level 4 within the college. Community-based provision offers local people a chance to sample some of the specialisms within the programme area. There are weaknesses in recruitment practice. Students are not always given sufficient information to inform their choice of programme. Inspectors found examples of students who had been enrolled on inappropriate courses. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report. Average attendance at lessons observed was 62%, which is well below the national average for this programme area. Punctuality is also poor in some lessons.

39 Teaching is sound, but only 50% of lessons observed were judged to be good or outstanding, against a national average of 69% for this programme area. Inspectors agreed with the finding of the self-assessment report that there is effective teaching in some lessons. Such lessons were characterised by good pace and structure, and a sense of energy. For example, in a GNVQ intermediate class, students used a wide range of media to prepare slides. The teacher had prepared the lesson so that there was sufficient time for learning to be reinforced and for students to complete the task. In performing arts, a lesson taught by specialist teachers successfully combined dance, music and drama skills to create an energetic performance based on *Les Miserables*. Not all lessons are so well planned. In a lesson for a mixed group of fashion and design students, the assignment on which they were working was too long and the students were not sufficiently motivated. Consequently, the quality of work they produced was below the standard expected for that stage of the course. In the better lessons, teachers provide a good variety of resources to stimulate learning. In poorer art and design lessons there is an over-reliance on reference books, at the expense of 'live' material. For example, in a lesson based on marine life, students copied pictures of fish.

40 Students are developing good vocational skills. Examples from sketch books and work in progress showed good observational skills. Strong images are developed in art work using texture, colour and mixed media. The majority of students' work benefits from the emphasis on life drawing as part of their studies; this skill is not adequately developed in the national diploma course. On GNVQ programmes, inspectors saw lively, colourful and humorous pieces of work produced by students. There is poor development of visual studies in the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) embroidery class. Sculpture and three-dimensional design skills are generally underdeveloped. Assessment is thorough and

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teachers provide regular and supportive feedback. Key skills are developed effectively as an integral part of assignments. Students' achievements are enriched by visits to exhibitions and field trips, and by participation in live performances. Formal links with employers are less well developed than those with higher education institutions.

41 Inspectors agreed with the findings of the self-assessment report that there is sound achievement and good progression for students retained on performing arts courses. The majority of those who complete their course go on to higher education. There are also some good achievements within art and design. For example, 90% of students on the foundation programme progressed to higher education in 1998, a matter which the self-assessment report failed to note. There is insufficient analysis of retention and achievement trends and some of the data reported to inspectors were inaccurate. The self-assessment report recognised problems with retention on a range of art and design courses, including the foundation, advanced GNVQ and national diploma in design courses. However, achievement data were not sufficiently analysed in the report. There is poor achievement, which is below national benchmarks, on national diploma and GNVQ intermediate art and design courses. There was little evidence in course reviews of targets being used to assess performance or inform future planning.

42 Staff have relevant experience and qualifications. There is effective use of teachers' professional practice to inform teaching. Many staff are practitioners in the field. They bring in slides of their work and demonstrate techniques used in industry and commerce to stimulate students. Studios and workshops are well lit and spacious and have adequate equipment. Some workshops are disorganised and dusty. Music students enjoy good rehearsal facilities. Media students work on industry standard computer hardware and software. Part-time

embroidery students have inadequate resources, including lack of access to appropriate machines.

Curriculum Areas

English and Languages

Grade 4

43 The inspection covered English and modern foreign languages, but not English as a foreign language (EFL). Twelve lessons were observed. The college produced a separate self-assessment report for modern foreign languages; English was included in the humanities report. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the report, but disagreed with some judgements and added judgements of their own.

Key strengths

- diverse provision to meet the needs of students
- well-motivated students pleased with the progress they are making
- examples of good assessment processes

Weaknesses

- unimaginative teaching and inadequately structured lessons
- unsatisfactory retention and achievement rates
- ineffective collection of, and use of, data
- shortcomings in management
- inadequacy in resources

44 The range of provision in this curriculum area is extensive. It includes courses at levels 1, 2 and 3, accredited either by examining boards or through the Merseyside Open College Network. Classes run in eight outreach centres as well as on the three main sites. The college also offers flexible forms of learning. Language courses currently cover modern foreign languages, including minority languages such as Cantonese and Arabic.

45 There are instances of good practice in assessment, for example, a self-assessment

checklist used to help place students on the right level of language course. The quality of teaching is unsatisfactory. Of the lessons observed, only 33% were judged to be good or outstanding, which is well below the national average. Teachers make insufficient use of schemes of work, and the quality of lesson plans varies considerably; a few are well articulated and detailed, while others are little more than lists of topics. The self-assessment report identified this as a weakness. The aims and outlines of lessons are rarely shared effectively with students, and there is little summarising of important points. In most of the lessons observed there were only two methods of working: inputs from the teacher, and teacher-led discussion or questioning. This gave students little opportunity to work together or to contribute significantly to the development of the lesson. Tasks were not always well explained. Teachers sometimes did too much work for the students, supplying the information or comments that students might have been expected to provide. Positive features of the teaching include: the individual attention received by students, particularly in workshops and the language centre; the pleasant atmosphere teachers succeeded in creating in their lessons; and the welcoming response to students' contributions.

46 With very few exceptions, students are eager to learn. Most coursework is well presented and standards are appropriate for the level of course. As the self-assessment report identified, students' achievements in external examinations are poor. Data supplied by the college indicate that pass rates for GCE A level and GCSE subjects in both English and languages are significantly below the national average. Retention levels shown in the data are also poor, although there are signs of an improvement this year. Data on Merseyside Open College Network courses indicate that there is considerable variation between locations; retention levels overall are below national averages, but achievement rates for

Curriculum Areas

those who complete their course are generally around average. Attendance at the lessons observed was 70%. Although the start time for a number of lessons has been put back 15 minutes to suit those with family commitments, punctuality is poor.

47 Management in this area of work has been subject to repeated reorganisation and is currently split between three schools. Data are not collected and analysed effectively. Registers are not up to date and there is significant variation in the way registers are kept. There are no effective arrangements for co-ordinating the provision and sharing good practice. While staff working in some areas of provision work well together and have made good progress towards establishing consistent approaches and procedures, arrangements in other areas are less effective. In general, informal contacts and arrangements are working more effectively than formal ones. For example, the formal college arrangements for tutorials are not followed, but most students have had at least one tutorial, arranged as and when possible. Students particularly appreciate the informal help they receive from tutors.

48 With few exceptions, staff in this area have appropriate degrees and teaching qualifications. Some staffing levels are generous, for example, in the workshops and in the language centre. Conversely, the GCE A level programme has been reduced to a one-year programme of 4.5 taught hours plus two hours of supported self-study. Few students take up the self-study option, and a number of them comment on the difficulty they are having in coping with the demands of the course.

49 Teaching resources vary in quality. Some course materials are excellent, providing useful and attractive guidance or reference material for students. Others are poor. The language centre has produced a helpful tape and booklet to accompany each section of the commercial programmes used in the centre. The booklet also includes follow-up assessment activities that

lead to a tutorial at the end of the section.

Much guidance and teaching material is on the college's computer network though students make little use of the material in this form.

Curriculum Areas

Sociology, Psychology, Law and History

Grade 3

50 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in history, law, psychology, and sociology covering GCE A level, GCSE, access to higher education and local history courses. They agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They identified a number of strengths and weaknesses not included in the report.

Key strengths

- good teaching in most lessons, some of which is very skilled
- courses in outreach centres that reflect community needs
- excellent learning materials in sociology
- good responses from students in lessons

Weaknesses

- low retention rates
- poor-quality data
- the uneven quality of induction
- shortcomings in accommodation and equipment

51 The college offers history, law, psychology and sociology at GCSE and GCE A level and as a part of an access to higher education programme. Local history courses, taught in community venues, are popular. The curriculum is planned to meet the needs of adult students rather than of school-leavers. Schemes of work vary greatly in their detail and quality, and are identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report. GCE A level courses last for one year; teaching is intended to be supplemented by the supported use of materials designed for students to work on by themselves, but few students attend the timetabled private study sessions. Teachers are unable to agree on

how best to make this private study element an integral part of schemes of work: they have received little training, and have had little opportunity to share good practice, such as that which exists in sociology, for example. Induction procedures vary in quality. A significant number of students across the GCSE and GCE A level programmes said that they had received no information in advance about their programme.

52 The quality of teaching and learning is good. Of the lessons observed, 82% were judged to be good or outstanding. This compares well with the national figure of 70% for the humanities curriculum area. Most teachers know their students well and respond to their specific interests and learning needs. The college identified this strength in its self-assessment report. Teachers make skilled use of a range of methods, including collaborative tasks, paired and group work, feedback and presentations to the whole group, and opportunities for debate. They build on students' experience and link it to the topic being studied. In a psychology lesson, for example, students were given the opportunity to share their experience of child rearing; this was then related to theories about learning and attachment. Law students researched and presented clear arguments on the British system of justice. Sociology students were asked to use their experience to evaluate and challenge traditional concepts of class. Students of local history gathered evidence from their local area and contributed their knowledge and insights with much enthusiasm. In the best lessons, teachers succeeded in making complex theory clear and managed also to make the lessons fun.

53 Students respond well in class. They are attentive and show respect for the views of others. Most are prepared to ask and answer questions. In the lessons observed, a number of students showed their capacity for perceptive observations. Students are given effective

Curriculum Areas

guidance on how to complete assignments though some find it difficult to meet submission deadlines. Most coursework is well written and completed assignments include competent discussion around the main theories of the discipline students are studying. Written work is carefully marked and graded according to the criteria of the relevant course.

54 Student retention and achievement data were of very poor quality. Retention rates for the current year are poor on many GCE A level and GCSE courses. Inspectors were able to verify data showing improvement in pass rates in GCSE law. Substantial numbers of students who complete access courses progress to higher education. A high proportion of students on local history courses obtain Open College credits. Attendance at the lessons observed by inspectors was 73%. There is no agreed system for monitoring and following up absence. Attendance patterns and trends are not systematically reviewed.

55 The teaching accommodation on the main sites is drab and bare. Rooms lack basic teaching aids. The accommodation at outreach centres is better equipped. Teachers of sociology have produced good learning materials which are available to students via the college network. Such practice is not widespread.

Curriculum Areas

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

Grade 4

56 Inspectors observed 24 lessons, covering basic education and supported learning. They agreed with many aspects of the self-assessment report, but found that weaknesses were more significant than those stated in the report.

Key strengths

- good communication and teamwork
- good-quality accommodation and resources, including access to IT
- opportunity for students to sample vocational areas

Weaknesses

- much ineffective teaching
- the inappropriate goals set for some students
- ineffective review processes
- low attendance, retention and achievement rates in basic education
- few independent learning opportunities for students
- lack of staff training to support curriculum changes

57 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college offers a range of courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to develop independent living skills, and sample vocational courses. There is increasing use of support tutors in vocational curriculum areas. Basic education provision takes place across all college sites and in appropriate community venues.

58 Teaching is not effective in many cases. Only 33% of lessons observed were judged to be

good and none were outstanding; 21% were judged to be unsatisfactory. Lesson planning is linked to the syllabus content. In the majority of lessons teachers use a variety of teaching methods and learning activities. In a significant number of lessons, however, there is an overemphasis on the demands of accreditation, a matter not recognised in the self-assessment report. Though initial assessments take place, they are often translated into broad learning goals without measurable targets. The effectiveness and use of formal assessment and review vary considerably. Competences and skills linked to the syllabus are assessed clearly, but there is insufficient monitoring of the achievement of individual learning goals. In many instances, there is little review of action plans and no documentation of progression. In the better lessons, there was a clear link between students' learning needs and the learning tasks which were set. Opportunities for students to learn, working on their own, are hindered by the high ratio of volunteer tutors to students in some basic education classes. In other lessons, teachers played too strong a role and unnecessarily limited students' choice and initiative.

59 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that students' work is generally of a satisfactory standard. Some students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are achieving well within vocational areas, gaining skills and confidence. One student who had rapidly lost his sight was receiving effective support in the form of adapted keyboards and software, and the negotiation of a suitable course. Work placement is a significant aspect of the experience of many students on vocational access courses, though the nature of the work does not always link closely to the vocational area. For students with learning difficulties progression is hampered by the restricted range of foundation courses. The college is taking action to address this weakness.

Curriculum Areas

60 A significant proportion of the students in basic education are producing work of a high standard because they have attended the same class for several years. However, students are not always given adequate guidance about the level of course appropriate for their ability. In many lessons, there was little differentiation of tasks or outcomes to cater for the wide range of abilities. There is inadequate analysis of the reasons for the low attendance and retention rates in basic education and, consequently, lack of effective action to redress the situation. There is little evidence of performance indicators.

61 Effective teamwork and communication between staff facilitate a close informal monitoring of the day-to-day running of the provision. Within discrete provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, there is an effective system for transferring information between tutors and support workers. Increasing flexibility allows some movement between courses to provide the best offer to the students. A system to link aspects of the curriculum offered through vocational schools is not fully in place. This leads to inconsistencies in the delivery of underpinning knowledge and the accrediting of competences. In both provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and in basic education there is a lack of curriculum planning and related staff development. Little account is taken of how provision will link with employment opportunities in the area, and of the needs of under-represented groups. Links with external agencies and the voluntary sector are underdeveloped.

62 Accommodation across the area is generally of a good standard. Access to IT is good. The college intranet provides useful support for a number of students with literacy problems. There is good resourcing for the needs of visually impaired students. Reductions in staffing have limited the range of specialist skills available. There is a need for more training for both specialist and vocational staff.

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Support for Students

Grade 5

63 Inspectors agreed with many of the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They found a number of additional weaknesses and considered there to be insufficient evidence to support many of the strengths.

Key strengths

- there are no key strengths

Weaknesses

- inequity of access to support
- the failure to address decline in enrolments and poor retention rates
- underdeveloped systems for the delivery of impartial advice and guidance
- ineffective systems for identifying and responding to students' learning support needs
- ineffective tutorial support for most students
- inadequate careers education and guidance

64 The responsibility for support for students is shared between student services and the curriculum schools. Staff within student services have produced policies, procedures and guidelines but these are not implemented consistently by most curriculum areas. This has resulted in some students receiving better quality support than others. The self-assessment report did not give sufficient emphasis to the significance of this weakness.

65 Although the college has good links with schools and external agencies, these have not prevented the decline in enrolments. The poor quality of course information leaflets and the lack of entry criteria for courses have been recognised as weaknesses and work is under

way to address these issues. Failure to ensure that students have access to impartial advice and guidance before enrolling for a course has resulted in many students being accepted onto inappropriate courses and leaving college early. For example, 16 of the 32 students who enrolled on a foundation music course left the course because it was inappropriate for them. The course tutor had not been involved in the interview process and was expected to accept all the students who enrolled. The college's review of enrolments for the year 1997-98 indicated that 53% of students were not satisfied with the advice and guidance they were given about courses.

66 Students' induction to the college and the courses they are studying is of variable quality and dependent on their tutors' commitment to it. For example, staff from student services provide valuable inputs about specialist support but only in response to requests from tutors. Evaluations undertaken by curriculum schools indicate that some students are not aware of the support services that are available. Some students have not been given a copy of the college charter or a course handbook.

67 The college judged that some students receive effective tutorial support. However, there is no formal requirement to provide timetabled personal tutorials and some students do not have personal tutors. Inspectors found that, where they do take place, some tutorials are poorly attended. For example, only three out of 23 students on a GCE A level psychology course attended a tutorial. The academic board approved a tutorial policy and support pack but implementation varies with the commitment of individual tutors. Many students speak highly of the informal support provided by their teachers.

68 Most tutorials are used to monitor students' progress but inspectors found poor practice on a number of courses. Procedures for monitoring attendance vary across curriculum areas. Although retention rates on many courses are poor, the college policy states that tutors do not

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need to contact students until they have been absent from college for a week. Some tutors contact students earlier than this. However, it is unclear who has responsibility for making contact with students who do not have a personal tutor. Research projects focused on improving retention rates within particular programmes have been successful, but the lessons learned have not been transferred to other programmes.

69 Arrangements for identifying students' learning support needs are inadequate. There is no systematic initial screening or diagnostic testing to identify students who may need help with literacy and numeracy. It is also unclear how many students are receiving support. Some schools make their own arrangements to provide support. Hairdressing and beauty therapy students, for example, receive effective support. However, other students do not know where to go for additional support for literacy and numeracy. Some students who are referred by their tutors to the learning support workshops do not attend. This weakness was identified in the self-assessment report.

70 Over the past two years, the resources available to support students have been reduced. This has had a negative impact on their experience. Specialist staff, such as a teacher of the deaf and youth workers, have left the college and not been replaced. The amount of time available to support students who have dyslexia and those who are mentally ill has been reduced.

71 The quality of careers education and guidance varies across the college. Inspectors did not agree that the range of software packages produced by college staff is a strength of the provision. Resources at one of the main sites are out of date. The partnership agreement between the college and the careers service is weak and has not enabled resources to be focused on areas of greatest need. Too much reliance is placed on tutors requesting

careers education and guidance for students and this results in some students experiencing a better quality of support than others. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those participating in the compact scheme, which links students with staff in local companies, receive good-quality advice and guidance.

General Resources

Grade 4

72 Inspectors judged that the self-assessment report understated some weaknesses and gave some strengths too much weight. Not enough recognition was given to the cumulative effect of the college's weak financial position over several years. A few good aspects of the provision were not included.

Key strengths

- some well-refurbished areas at the Borough Road site
- good-quality teaching and refectory accommodation at International Business and Management Centre
- welcoming neighbourhood colleges and outreach centres

Weaknesses

- much excess accommodation
- planned maintenance not being carried out
- several years of insufficient expenditure on curriculum resources
- IT not well used or monitored
- limited access for students with restricted mobility

73 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there have been attempts to rationalise accommodation since the last

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inspection. However, recent utilisation reports show that the college still has a great deal of surplus accommodation. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report, although the report did mention that centralised timetabling is not fully operational.

74 The self-assessment report described the absence of minimum standards for teaching accommodation and this weakness was confirmed by inspectors. The buildings on the three main campuses are deteriorating. The planned maintenance programme, which indicates the need for annual expenditure of between £500,000 and £700,000, has not been followed. For example, in 1997-98, the college spent only a third of this sum. Damage to corridor ceiling tiles remains unrepaired, broken blinds are not replaced and windows are not cleaned. Both general and teaching accommodation vary in their fitness for purpose and their quality. The best accommodation is at the International Business and Management Centre, built in 1995, but even this building is beginning to look shabby in places. Carlett Park presents a dismal picture. Parts of the accommodation are out of use or rented out for commercial purposes and large areas of empty pot-holed car park space add to a sense of drabness.

75 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that Borough Road, now the largest of the college's campuses, has been improved internally. It has some good-quality specialist teaching rooms and mathematics and English workshops, though some general teaching rooms and some construction areas are unsatisfactory. Considerable effort goes into ensuring that much of the accommodation at Borough Road is kept clean and tidy. The reception areas at Borough Road and Carlett Park are gloomy and unwelcoming. Corridors and staircases across the college are stark, lacking any form of display. Much of the signposting is inadequate. Poor external lighting is a cause for concern among staff who work in

the evenings. There is ample staff accommodation; much is sound though some needs decorating.

76 The three neighbourhood colleges and three community venues visited during the inspection were welcoming, well decorated, bright and pleasant. A few rooms in the community venues are too small for the range of activity and the number of students using them.

77 For several years, there has been insufficient expenditure on curriculum resources and materials. This has seriously affected the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are providing their own paper and pens. Other staff do not have the stationery they need to do their jobs. Students bring their own materials to practical lessons in a number of subject areas, including joinery and art and design.

78 The self-assessment report identified the computer network and production of supporting materials as a strength. Inspectors did not agree. They judged that the system was not being used to the full and did not represent value for money. The college has invested heavily in computer equipment and staff who support the computer network account for some 5% of the college's pay budget. Most of the computers are linked to the college network and give access to a wide range of IT based material and electronic mail. However, the college has failed to ensure that the use of computers is integral to the curriculum. There has been insufficient investment in staff training and machines have not been properly maintained or upgraded. Few teachers make effective use of the facilities available, although there are examples of good practice. Where materials are appropriate and the network functions properly, students value the opportunities and the quality of the multimedia packages available to them. Inspectors agreed with the judgement expressed in the self-assessment report that there is a need to introduce effective tracking and monitoring of students' use of the network. The college libraries are spacious but during the inspection

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they were only sparsely used. Bookstocks are inadequate.

79 People with restricted mobility face problems in using the college. Access to the International Business and Management Centre building is good. The two other main campuses are built on several different levels, separated by flights of steps. Access to much of the teaching accommodation and the refectory areas is unsatisfactory. At the time of the last inspection there were seven crèches and nurseries but financial constraints have reduced this to one shared facility at the International Business and Management Centre and access to services provided by other agencies in some of the community venues. The absence of childcare facilities at two of the major sites is acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

Quality Assurance

Grade 5

80 The section of the self-assessment report covering quality assurance identified most of the weaknesses found by inspectors. The few strengths cited in the report were judged to be relatively insignificant.

Key strengths

- there are no key strengths

Weaknesses

- quality assurance arrangements which are not providing a reliable picture of college performance
- a decline in quality of provision since the last inspection
- lack of rigour in team reviews and self-assessments
- underdeveloped use of performance indicators to inform judgements
- a weak staff appraisal system and insufficient staff development
- unsystematic use of clients' views

81 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that quality assurance arrangements have deteriorated since the last inspection. The comparison of grades awarded to lesson observations in the two inspections shows that the standards of teaching and learning have declined. In 1995, 51% of lessons were judged to be good or outstanding and 9% less than satisfactory; in 1999 the comparative figures were 41% and 15%. Four grades awarded to curriculum areas were lower in 1999 and three remained the same. There has been a slight improvement in attendance, but at 67% this remains below the national average of 77% for all colleges inspected in 1997-98, as quoted in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*. The self-assessment report for quality assurance demonstrated a sharp awareness of weaknesses.

82 Quality assurance arrangements cover all areas of the college, but there are significant weaknesses in their implementation. Links between all the groups which work on quality assurance are unclear to staff. The college review and evaluation board which receives curriculum and business support team reviews is operating ineffectively and rarely gives feedback to teams on their work. A quality unit co-ordinates reviews. In the year before the inspection, school review committees, the college review and evaluation board, the academic board, and the quality assurance and self-assessment processes were reviewed and a quality action plan was produced. The connection between this and the college's strategic plan is not clear.

83 Team quality manuals require analysis of performance against standards and performance indicators. There are procedures in place to review recommendations from external verifiers. Some quality team manuals are not completed fully, as identified by an audit conducted by the quality unit. With a few exceptions, course teams do not analyse their performance in depth and few use national benchmarking data to

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evaluate their work. There is little comment on trends. Action points for improvement are frequently not measurable and do not address key weaknesses, even when courses have failed to meet their targets. Insufficient attention is paid to teaching and learning in course reviews and self-assessment reports.

84 Lesson observation has not effectively informed self-assessment judgements. Grades from observations are not collated centrally to give managers an informed view of the quality of teaching and learning in the college. Reviews of performance, at course and college level, are obstructed by a lack of accurate statistical data from the college's information system. This was acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

85 Students' views are collected regularly. Information from surveys is not drawn together systematically. Students are not directly informed of any actions resulting from these surveys; in some cases, the results are not acted on. The students' charter contains statements about the services the college provides for students and the standards it intends to meet. A postal survey to monitor its effectiveness in 1998 met with little response. The centralised surveys of students present the college with some relevant information but this information is not collated effectively. The college has made attempts to determine the views of employers with whom they work, but response rates have been low. Formal complaints are recorded and followed up; an annual report goes to the academic board.

86 The self-assessment report cited staff appraisal as a weakness in the college. At the time of the inspection, only 27% of staff had been appraised since 1994. There were three different systems in operation at the time of the inspection. The recently-introduced system for college managers now focuses on targets which are tied into strategic objectives. Difficulties in making progress on appraisal have been compounded by frequent restructuring of staffing and changes of jobs. Weaknesses in

appraisal were recorded in the last inspection report in 1995. Since then, provision for staff development and training has worsened. The budget was reduced from £88,000 in 1997 to £31,000 in 1998 (0.14% of total income), £19,000 of which is committed to continuing higher education courses for staff.

87 The process of self-assessment varied across the college. Staff in some curriculum areas had opportunities to contribute to the report but others were not involved. Governors formally approved the report. The self-assessment report has a clear structure. Each section identified strengths and weaknesses with associated evidence. The action plan was a summary which did not address all the key weaknesses recognised in individual self-assessment reports. Inspectors were unable to support many of the grades that the college awarded itself in its self-assessment report. A useful update was provided before the inspection to show the progress which had been made since the self-assessment report was produced.

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Governance

Grade 5

88 Inspectors and auditors were able to agree with the weaknesses which the college identified in its self-assessment report but they also identified others. They could not concur with the strengths.

Key strengths

- there are no key strengths

Weaknesses

- failure of the corporation to ensure effective management of the college
- failure to ensure the solvency of the college
- failure to secure accurate management information on which to base corporation decisions
- insufficient involvement in monitoring the implementation of the strategic plan
- lack of performance indicators to measure college and governor performance
- lack of attention to monitoring academic performance and quality assurance
- failure to ensure effective links with curriculum areas

89 At the beginning of February 1999, all but one of the members of the corporation of the college resigned. This action followed the decision by the FEFC to recommend to the secretary of state that under section 57 (1) (a) of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* all the present governors be removed. At the time of the inspection, the decision of the secretary of state was awaited on the status of the one remaining governor. In February, the secretary of state approved the appointment of six independent new governors. At the first meeting, an additional four governors were

appointed and a search committee was established to fill the remaining six vacancies on the corporation. The new corporation members have already demonstrated a commitment to address the issues facing the college. They have appointed an interim principal and have made arrangements to appoint a new principal; the former postholder took early retirement at the end of February.

90 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The former corporation did not conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also did not fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. As a result of the college's critical financial situation, the corporation has failed in its statutory responsibilities: to ensure the solvency of the college and the safeguarding of its assets; to secure the efficient, economical and effective management of all of the college's resources and expenditure so that the investment of public funds in the college is not put at risk; and to plan its financial affairs so that its total income is sufficient to meet its total expenditure.

91 The inspection of 1995 considered governance and management to have weaknesses which clearly outweighed the strengths. Many of the weaknesses remain to be addressed. Inspectors concurred only in part with the claim in the self-assessment report that the former corporation had demonstrated a willingness to take action, for example over the rationalisation of accommodation. Inspectors considered that the former governors failed to ensure that college managers proposed and implemented effective action to address weaknesses. Neither in records of corporation meetings, nor through its committees, is there evidence of the corporation effectively challenging managers to address with an appropriate degree of urgency the key management issues facing the college.

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92 The former corporation did not play an active role in the strategic planning process. Although they received detailed reports from college managers, they did not ensure that they monitored systematically the progress the college was making in implementing the strategic plan. Members relied too much on the communication they received from senior managers. There were no systematic arrangements for governors to establish or maintain links with staff or students in order to gauge the impact of their decisions on the work of the college.

93 Inspectors concurred with the weakness in the self-assessment report that the former corporation was not sufficiently active in demanding management information as a basis for decision-making. Governors failed to assure the necessary quality of financial forecasting. Current income forecasts are unrealistic; they are based on inaccurate calculations of student numbers. Data available to the curriculum and quality committee did not allow it to monitor effectively the college's academic performance. This weakness was also recognised in the self-assessment report. At full corporation meetings, too little attention was given to the effective monitoring of the quality of the students' experience or their achievements.

94 The former corporation monitored attendance at meetings but it did not set targets for individual governors; a few individuals had poor records of attendance. Governors played a role in the assessment of their own performance, although performance indicators were not established. All governors were appraised by the chair of the corporation. The vice-chair of the corporation was part of the college's self-assessment team. The corporation considered the governance section and approved the college's overall self-assessment report.

95 Corporation and committee agendas and supporting papers are well organised and are sent out in good time in advance of meetings. The new governors are rigorous in questioning

the quality of the information they receive. Minutes are promptly prepared and distributed. They record corporation resolutions but do not always sufficiently highlight key issues discussed. All corporation meetings are open to the public except when the board resolves that they should be closed. Corporation minutes are available in the college's library. There is a comprehensive code of conduct for governors and a register of governors' interests which is open to public inspection. The corporation has a good set of standing orders. However, the previous corporation was over-secretive in respect of the issues which it considered to be confidential. The last annual report prepared by the corporation was for 1995-96. The code of practice on 'whistleblowing' and register of governors' interests are in need of further development.

96 The former corporation had six committees comprising; audit, finance and resources, personnel, search, remuneration and curriculum and quality. The audit committee did not operate effectively since it failed to comply in all aspects with its terms of reference. For example, it did not consider whether the independence of the firm appointed as the college's internal and external auditors would be compromised by them accepting significant amounts of consultancy work from the college. The corporation followed the processes prescribed by the FEFC for terminating contracts when the previous principal left the college. However, the inspection team found that the remuneration committee had not complied with its terms of reference when it recommended the early retirement package for the previous principal.

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Management

Grade 5

97 Inspectors did not agree with the key strengths identified by the college and found weaknesses not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Although shortcomings in management were openly acknowledged in the self-assessment, inspectors concluded that the college had not been realistic in estimating the significance of weaknesses.

Key strengths

- there are no key strengths

Weaknesses

- failure to deliver the college mission
- weak financial management and the critical financial situation
- disorganised planning, based on inaccurate data
- poor management of resources
- poor internal communications
- lack of target-setting
- lack of review of teaching and learning

98 Management of the college has been dominated by declining financial circumstances over the last four years. Meanwhile, the heart of the college's mission, the delivery of high-quality provision and services, has been severely neglected. There has been no systematic review of teaching and learning.

99 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. The college has experienced severe financial difficulties which show no signs of improvement. The college's cost base is in excess of its income. Trade creditors have significantly increased. The college's 1997-98 unaudited financial statements show that it had a £10 million negative balance on its income and expenditure account and a

combined debt due to the bank, the FEFC and other creditors of £12 million. This position will worsen because the reported income figure is at least £1 million too high as it is based on an inaccurate student unit figure. The college's revised strategic financial plan is also prepared using overoptimistic income assumptions. Consequently, the basis of the college's financial recovery is fundamentally flawed. Effective financial control and decision-making are not possible when estimated income is inaccurate.

100 Although the finance team is now appropriately structured, qualified and experienced it is relatively new. Monthly management accounts are detailed, but not user-friendly. The college's internal auditors stated that in 1997-98 the college's internal control system was basically sound. However, the college has been unable to submit its financial statements and student record returns to FEFC deadlines.

101 As part of the college's financial recovery plan, expenditure on consumables has been drastically reduced. This has resulted in staff being unable to obtain the materials they need to do their work. Budgets have been curtailed without notice and purchase orders unprocessed. Students are suffering as a result of shortages. Meanwhile, expenditure in other areas has been substantial; for example, the college spent £286,000 on external consultants in 1997-98 and a further £278,000 between August 1998 and the beginning of March 1999. A proportion of these costs have either been imposed by the bank as part of its monitoring of the financial position or are in lieu of not having made full-time appointments to the finance functions of the college.

102 The inaccuracy of data held on the college's management information system is acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Despite this, management information has been repeatedly used as a basis for planning. This fundamental weakness calls into question the validity of all plans and targets adopted by the

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college. This year, large numbers of student withdrawals have not been entered on the central system. Recently-introduced procedures to improve the accuracy of enrolment data are not supported by robust auditing. Although a consultants' report suggests the accuracy of registers has generally improved, a substantial number of staff have failed to adopt the new procedures. The quality of data in class registers is poor.

103 The college has set targets for minimum course enrolments, student retention and the achievement of qualifications. However, retention and achievement targets are the same for all courses. Preparations to fulfil the FEFC's requirement to set annual targets for retention and achievement by May 1999 have been minimal.

104 Inspectors did not agree with the college that strategic and curriculum planning are a strength. Procedures for strategic planning are disjointed and there is no established planning cycle. The objectives in the strategic plan for 1998 to 2001 lack detail and are not clearly derived from a needs analysis. The links between the strategic plan and a host of subsequent planning documents are confusing.

105 The executive team meets weekly. This meeting is followed by two others involving business managers and heads of school. Minutes of the meetings comprise lists of actions but there is no evidence to show that these are rigorously monitored or consistently completed on time. The college was not able to produce a central record of papers considered by any of these key management groups.

106 The implementation of policies on equal opportunities is claimed as a strength; inspectors did not fully agree. Although structures for overseeing equal opportunities work remain in place, financial support for this work has declined since the college's last inspection. The college is funding urgent health and safety work. Staff training in health and safety issues is inadequate.

107 The college recognises that its marketing has been weak. A programme of activities to remedy this has been established. The college considers its external relationships to be a key strength; inspectors could not fully agree with this judgement. There are links with local and regional partners which aim to widen participation and develop neighbourhood colleges. The relationship between the college and its local TEC is not good. Contracts for training have decreased due to lower than expected student achievement rates. The local TEC has declined to approve the college's current strategic plan.

108 The last inspection found that disputes about teachers' contractual arrangements were hindering the college's progress. Little has changed. About 40% of teachers remain on the same contractual arrangements prevailing at incorporation. The inability to resolve matters has prevented efficiency gains found in the great majority of sector colleges. Since June 1995, the college has reduced its full-time equivalent staffing by 33%. This reduction has not been linked to a thorough analysis of staffing needs. There is no effective human resource strategy. Morale is low amongst many staff and a high percentage of days are lost because of sickness.

109 Improvements in consultation with staff are claimed as a key strength even though weaknesses in communication are recognised. No senior manager has responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness of communications and consultation. There have been regular meetings with union representatives and various groups of staff. Surveys carried out over the last year and views expressed to inspectors by staff suggest that there is much to be achieved before staff working for the college feel fully engaged in its development. Resentment has grown in some quarters. There is little collective responsibility for the situation the college finds itself in.

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Conclusions

110 The self-assessment report undertaken for the inspection identified a number of the weaknesses of the college. Some sections were comprehensive and evaluative and inspectors agreed with many of the judgements. Other sections had limited evidence for judgements. The inaccuracy of management statistics made the judgements in some sections invalid. Most curriculum sections pay insufficient attention to teaching, learning and students' achievements. Inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college in three curriculum areas, but in all the others found the provision to be weaker than represented in the self-assessment report. The inspection team generally agreed with the weaknesses identified in cross-college areas, but not with many of the strengths. In most areas, inspectors identified additional weaknesses. The seriousness of weaknesses was not fully appreciated or reflected in some of the grades awarded; for example, in support for students. All the other cross-college areas were judged to be one grade lower than that awarded in the self-assessment report.

111 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 (January 1999)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	17
19-24 years	16
25+ years	66
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (January 1999)

Level of study	%
Foundation	23
Intermediate	28
Advanced	18
Higher education	6
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	25
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (January 1999)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	384	1,989	18
Agriculture	3	24	0
Construction	305	201	4
Engineering	607	287	7
Business	485	2,112	19
Hotel and catering	201	278	4
Health and community care	541	883	11
Art and design	446	236	5
Humanities	267	3,473	28
Basic education	38	540	4
Total	3,277	10,023	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 28% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (January 1999)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	296	4	87	387
Supporting direct learning contact	147	3	0	150
Other support	195	9	0	204
Total	638	16	87	741

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£25,747,000	£24,042,000	+
Average level of funding (ALF) Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£20.17*	£20.75*	£19.29*
Payroll as a proportion of income	80%	74%	+
Achievement of funding target	107%	97%	+
Diversity of income	74%	74%	+
Operating surplus	-£8,690,000	-£5,659,000	+

Sources: Income – college (1996 and 1997)

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

Payroll – college (1996 and 1997)

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

Diversity of income – college (1996 and 1997)

Operating surplus – college (1996 and 1997)

+accurate data not available

*provisional data

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