

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Oaklands College

September 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-96

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 105/97

OAKLANDS COLLEGE

EASTERN REGION

Inspected January 1996-May 1997

Summary

Oaklands College offers a wide range of courses from foundation level to higher education. Extensive provision is made for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college is effectively governed and well managed. A robust system of self-assessment has been developed which includes the observation of teaching and is linked to strategic planning. Student services are well developed and specialist support is available to support students with additional learning needs. Teaching is generally well planned and is of a particularly high standard on health and social care courses and on programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Overall, students' performance in examinations is satisfactory. Some of the best results are obtained by adult students and by part-time students on vocational courses. There is a good staff-development programme for teaching and support staff. Students have access to good specialist facilities, particularly in agriculture. If the college is to build on its strengths it should: take action to improve retention rates and levels of achievement on some courses; ensure more consistent implementation of its quality assurance procedures; strengthen operational planning through the use of performance targets; improve the provision of information technology equipment; ensure a more consistent approach to tutorials; and improve the quality of some of its accommodation.

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

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science and mathematics	3	Leisure and tourism	2
Agriculture, horticulture, floristry and equine studies	2	Health and community care	1
Construction	3	Art and design	3
Engineering	3	Humanities	2
Business studies and computing	3	Learning support	2
		Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	1

INTRODUCTION

1 Oaklands College was inspected between January 1996 and May 1997. Twenty-eight inspectors spent a total of 110 days in college. They visited 415 classes, scrutinised students' work and examined documents about the college and its courses. Inspectors observed a meeting of the college corporation and met board members. Meetings were held with college managers, teachers, support staff, local employers, parents, and representatives of local schools and community groups, the Hertfordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and the University of Hertfordshire.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Oaklands College is a large further education college which was established in 1991 as a result of a merger between three colleges: De Havilland College; Hertfordshire College of Agriculture and Horticulture; and St Albans City College. Its main sites are at Borehamwood, St Albans and Welwyn Garden City. The college owns a commercial farm and horticultural units and has residential accommodation for some students and staff. In September 1993, it became responsible for provision for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities based at the education centres of Cell Barnes, Harperbury and Leavesden Hospitals.

3 Students are recruited from a wide area, which includes the districts of Hertsmere, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield, and several north London boroughs. Some courses recruit students on a national and international basis. On 1 November 1996, over 29,000 students were enrolled at the college, of whom just under 4,000 were full time. Eighty per cent of students were aged 19 or over. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

4 In the college's main catchment area, there are 18 local authority maintained schools and nine grant maintained schools. All of these schools have sixth forms. The college is a member of a consortium with local schools in Welwyn Hatfield. There are four other further education colleges in the area: North Hertfordshire College, West Herts College, Hertford Regional College and Barnet College. In 1996, the proportion of young people staying on in education in Hertfordshire was 73 per cent. The major provider of higher education in the county is the University of Hertfordshire. The college is an associate college of the university and provides a number of higher education programmes through this association.

5 At the time of the 1991 census, the population of Hertfordshire was just under one million. There has been a decline in the number of jobs in local manufacturing industries, such as aerospace. However, the unemployment rate in the county is lower than the national and regional averages.

6 The college's aims are to provide high-quality, viable and accessible learning opportunities which meet the education and training needs of the local communities and business. The curriculum is managed through seven schools: agriculture, horticulture and floristry; arts, humanities and sciences; business and computing; business enterprise; community and leisure services; construction and engineering; and learning support. Most schools provide courses on more than one campus of the college.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 An extensive range of vocational, general and recreational courses are provided by the college. Vocational programmes are offered in all 10 of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) programme areas and lead to a wide choice of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) and national vocational qualifications (NVQs). There are over 1,000 students on courses in agriculture including farming, horticulture, floristry, equine studies, small animal care, veterinary nursing, environmental studies and conservation. The college is one of the largest providers of construction courses in the country. Over 1,600 students are enrolled on such courses. The college offers over 40 subjects at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level), and a wide range of general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects. Through a consortium agreement with secondary schools in Welwyn Garden City, local sixth form students can choose to study some specialist subjects at the college. The International Baccalaureate is provided as an alternative to GCE A level and GNVQ courses. Student recruitment has been successful across the college and enrolments have grown by 23 per cent over the last three years.

8 There are over 5,000 students enrolled on 65 separate courses at entry and foundation level. These include courses for pupils aged 14 to 16 who have been excluded from school. In almost all curriculum areas, students can progress from foundation to advanced level and in some they can continue on to higher education courses. There is a full range of Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) higher national certificate courses and four BTEC higher national diploma courses. The college also offers courses at degree level in building services, engineering, science and computing, through its collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire and other universities.

9 The timetable allows full-time students to combine elements of vocational and academic courses, for example GNVQ units with GCE A level subjects. There is a varied programme of extra-curricular activities. Student liaison officers, employed by the college, work closely with the students' union to offer a programme of events and activities including an interesting range of social education projects on health, drugs awareness and multifaith celebrations. They also co-ordinate clubs and societies which include drama, circus skills, football, rock climbing, aerobics and the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. An international club arranges activities for overseas students.

10 Courses are provided in hospitals, social services day centres, other community venues and on employers' premises as well as on college campuses. Many can be studied part time during the day or in the evening. The college has identified demand for greater flexibility in the ways in which it delivers its courses. In response, it has developed modular schemes in business administration and agriculture, which allow students to take individual NVQ units without enrolling for a full qualification. There is little provision of 'open learning' programmes which allow students to study on their own and to visit the college to seek support at times of their own choosing.

11 A substantial amount of provision is made for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including programmes designed for people with profound and complex learning difficulties. Most of these programmes can be joined at any time. Education is provided in the college and also in the community. The college has good links with local community groups and is active in promoting education and training for under-represented groups. There is close collaboration with specialist careers advisers, special schools, day centres and hospital trusts. An extensive range of courses is provided for minority ethnic groups, including English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Outreach workers from the college visit the local Bangladeshi community and encourage students to take advantage of the courses available.

12 The college works co-operatively with local employers and the Hertfordshire TEC. It is the largest single provider of services to the TEC and offers training credits in 30 different occupational areas. The school of business enterprise has organised specialist short courses for individual employers which are delivered at the college, and has also arranged courses which are delivered away from the college in collaboration with local authorities, businesses and voluntary organisations. For example, training towards NVQ units in process operations for a major pharmaceutical firm is provided in the workplace. Co-operation with the Hertfordshire Probation Service has led to a programme of vocational retraining designed to rehabilitate offenders. Links with employers enrich the experience of students on college courses. In many curriculum areas, employers provide work placements and advise on curriculum development through their membership of committees and liaison groups. Students in the school of community and leisure studies run a commercial travel agency. Employers have donated specialist equipment to the college to be used on motor vehicle courses.

13 The college's marketing unit produces attractive promotional materials and provides reports on local and regional labour market trends. This market research provides a useful aid to strategic planning at college level, but it is not used effectively by course teams when planning and designing new courses.

14 The college's commitment to equal opportunities is emphasised in its mission statement and reinforced by a detailed policy which was produced

through extensive consultation with staff. Staff development has been used to raise awareness of equal opportunities issues. There have been a number of initiatives to address gender bias on courses; for example, the development of electronics courses for year 10 female pupils from local schools. The monitoring of the equal opportunities policy would be easier and more effective if there were clearer and more measurable targets.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 The college is governed effectively. The corporation has 15 members: eight business members, the TEC nominee, the principal, two members of staff, two co-opted members and one student member. Governors have experience at a senior level in agriculture, pharmaceutical research, life assurance, floristry, construction, electronic instrument manufacture, trade unionism, and higher education. Three members serve on national bodies concerned with industrial training. Members have established a code of conduct and a register of interests, and have set standards by which to measure their own performance. They are clear about their role. The corporation has four committees, each with clear terms of reference: finance and general purposes; audit; remuneration; and search. Levels of attendance at the board and its committees are good. There are comprehensive papers and well-written minutes. In the corporation meeting observed by inspectors, senior managers briefed the board thoroughly and members probed issues perceptively. Some corporation members are closely involved with monitoring the college curriculum through their chairmanship of advisory committees.

16 Members have contributed to the strategic development of the college. They have given detailed consideration to the accommodation strategy and to the issues which arise in managing a large and diverse estate. The corporation has also approved contingency plans for use in the event of unforeseen changes to external funding. Governors attend an annual corporation planning seminar to evaluate progress with the strategic plan. At the most recent seminar, particular attention was paid to students' achievements, teaching and learning and the college's self-assessment report.

17 The senior managers communicate effectively with other staff. There is an appropriate range of committees scheduled to facilitate consultation and decision making. The college management team comprises the principal, assistant principal, the director of finance, the heads of schools and heads of service units. It meets fortnightly; the meetings are recorded and responsibility for any action to be taken is clearly identified. Senior managers have been sensitive to the needs of staff throughout a period of restructuring which coincided with the introduction of new conditions of service. Policies for equal opportunities and health and safety have been defined but they have not been implemented or monitored effectively in all the schools.

18 There is a well-defined planning cycle which involves all staff. The most recent strategic plan was informed by self-assessment at school and college levels. The process has identified the need for greater attention to students' achievements. Strategic planning is linked with the development of the annual budget and the setting of objectives for management. However, some of the objectives are not defined sufficiently precisely. The college has achieved its enrolment targets. Other performance indicators, such as retention levels have only recently been introduced. As a consequence, they have had little impact on the management of the schools and units.

19 The quality of course management is variable. In many subject areas, there are comprehensive development plans and clear organisational arrangements, but this is not universal. In a few programme areas, there are examples of ineffective co-ordination and teamwork across subjects and sites. Timetabling is not always well organised and, as a consequence, some students experienced disruption in the initial weeks of their courses.

20 Resources are managed appropriately. The college has undertaken a 'benchmarking' exercise to compare its income and expenditure pattern with that of other colleges. Potential areas of economy have been identified. The management information system provides effective support for senior managers and allows the college to respond to external demands for information on student numbers and the budget. It provides less support for administration and management at school level. It is of limited use for generating reports on the use of accommodation, students' attendance and students' achievements. The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 was £18.92 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges was £18.13 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

21 Each of the schools in the college is responsible for managing their students' recruitment and guidance. They are supported by central specialist student services staff who are present on each major campus. The specialist student services include personal counselling and guidance on careers, welfare and accommodation. College chaplains provide pastoral support for students and staff. There is a school of learning support which is responsible for providing additional learning needs, language and disability support. College-wide guidelines for induction and tutorials have been developed but there is some variability in the quality of support that students receive.

22 Before entry to the college, prospective students receive comprehensive guidance which enables them to make informed choices. There is clear information on courses. Course leaflets and other literature are well designed and attractive. Where appropriate, the information is translated into other community languages. There are information and

helpline services at Borehamwood, St Albans and Welwyn Garden City to deal with initial enquiries and to arrange for more detailed guidance about the curriculum. All prospective full-time students are invited for an interview. Applications are carefully monitored and enrolment numbers are regularly checked, but there is some duplication of effort at school and college levels.

23 Sound advice is given to students at interview, although some tutors fail to make use of the information contained in students' records of achievement. Many course teams keep in touch with prospective students and organise open evenings for them and their parents or guardians. This enables students to make a more informed choice about their course of study and eases the transition from school to college. Procedures for assessing students' prior learning and achievements are not implemented across all curriculum areas.

24 Enrolment is generally well organised. There are well-defined procedures for students to review their choice of course and transfer to an alternative course, if appropriate. Specialist staff provide advice and guidance to those students who do not gain the necessary entry requirements for their first choice of course.

25 There is extensive and effective liaison with schools and external agencies in relation to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Individual needs are assessed carefully and specialist equipment, such as personal computers and audio aids, is provided where necessary. The school of learning support works closely with course teams to ensure that students with additional support needs receive help. Specialist support staff assist students with assignment work and, where appropriate, work alongside vocational tutors in the classroom. The college does not assess the standard of students' basic skills as a matter of course. Nevertheless, in 1996-97, some 80 per cent of full-time students undertook some form of initial assessment of their numeracy and literacy skills. There was wide variation in the quality of diagnostic assessments used by course teams. In the best examples, course teams had worked with specialist staff to develop tests which were suitable for their subject area.

26 There is a comprehensive framework for the induction of students. Guidelines are provided for tutors. Students are issued with a checklist which covers the topics which should be covered during their induction. Lively and well-attended freshers' fairs are held on each main campus to alert students to the range of recreational activities that are available. On many courses, the induction phase is the first stage of a structured tutorial programme. The outcomes of the induction period are recorded and are referred to during subsequent tutorials. Feedback from students on induction shows a high degree of satisfaction, although a few students were critical about the length of the process and the amount of repetition it involved.

27 The college has a clearly-defined tutorial framework which emphasises the importance of full-time students completing national records of achievement to monitor and evaluate their own progress. Computer software to help in the completion of these records is available in learning resource centres on each campus. In practice, many tutors do not encourage their students to maintain records of achievement. The quality of tutorial support for both full-time and part-time students varies. Most full-time students have weekly timetabled tutorial sessions and these are generally well planned. The college does not have uniform procedures for monitoring students' attendance. Some course teams check records and follow up unexplained absences rigorously. Other course teams are less assiduous in their approach. Progress reports are completed for full-time students and parents and guardians are invited to attend a consultation evening at least once a year.

28 A professional counselling service is available to students and staff. It is widely publicised and those who have used the service speak highly of it. Counsellors provide sessions for individuals and groups. Their work includes crisis and stress counselling. The college has an effective working relationship with Hertfordshire Careers Service. A specialist adviser from the service works closely with college guidance staff and course teams to provide careers advice. The programme includes presentations on higher education and employment opportunities as well as individual careers guidance. The learning resource centres on each campus have a useful careers library and computer databases on career planning, higher education and employment opportunities. College guidance staff work with local schools to arrange joint careers conventions and visits to universities for students progressing to higher education.

29 Fifty-three childcare places are available in attractive, well-equipped nurseries at St Albans and Welwyn Garden City. There are subsidised rates for the children of students. Childcare is provided at a number of outreach centres in the community for students who are parents attending ESOL courses. This facility is highly valued and attracts students who would otherwise be unable to attend these courses.

30 There is an active students' union with a sabbatical president who is a member of the corporation. Elected union representatives have regular meetings with college managers. Students told inspectors that their collective views are listened to and valued. The productive working relationship between college managers and the students' union has led to the development of a student representative system, and the provision of training for about 80 elected course representatives a year.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

31 Inspectors observed a total of 415 teaching sessions. In 63 per cent of these, the strengths outweighed the weaknesses. In 9 per cent the weaknesses outweighed the strengths. These percentages are similar to

the average for all colleges inspected in 1995-96, according to figures published in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Consistently good practice was found on the courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, where strengths outweighed weaknesses in 83 per cent of the classes inspected. On average, nine students were present in the lessons inspected, giving an average attendance of 74 per cent. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	4	21	15	8	1	49
GCSE	2	5	6	2	0	15
GNVQ	12	21	23	5	0	61
NVQ	11	17	11	1	1	41
Other vocational	14	53	36	11	0	114
Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and basic education	26	43	13	1	0	83
Other*	14	17	13	8	0	52
Total	83	177	117	36	2	415

* includes higher education and access to further and higher education.

32 Teachers of mathematics and the sciences drew effectively on their knowledge of the subject. Students worked purposefully from textbooks and teachers kept comprehensive records of students' assessment and the topics covered in class. There was a strong reliance on formal exposition by teachers. The pace of lessons and the range of classroom activities were not always appropriate, given the wide range of students' abilities. In the better sessions, teachers employed questions skilfully to check on and develop students' understanding. There was insufficient attention to the development of key skills. The teachers on the different campuses had not agreed a common approach to the setting and marking of students' work.

33 On agriculture courses, students benefited from clear demonstrations of farming skills and careful supervision of their work. Effective use was made of the college farm and horticultural units. For example, students on the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) national certificate course were given a group task which involved catching, preparing and treating sheep; all of them were involved in the task and the teacher subsequently discussed the wider implications of their work for sheep husbandry. In the best floristry lessons, students gained practical skills through completing realistic assignments. Many were able to work effectively on

their own. In a few sessions, the teaching methods were not sufficiently varied to take account of the range of students' experiences. In equine studies, second-year diploma students were responsible for supervising first-year students during yard duties and had to maintain a daily record of their achievements and progress. On some courses, the assignment objectives and assessment criteria were insufficiently clear.

34 On construction courses, teachers drew upon their industrial knowledge and experience to set realistic assignments. During practical sessions, students were able to consolidate their learning through projects and other exercises. In the better sessions, effective use was made of specialist equipment and trade literature to highlight the industrial applications of the subject. For example, in a class on practical surveying, modern laser-guided equipment was used to undertake a survey of the college grounds. In weaker sessions, teachers made insufficient use of teaching aids where these would have been useful, or failed to check that students understood the topics being covered.

35 On engineering courses, practical tasks in the workshop were used to promote understanding and develop skills. On motor vehicle programmes, teachers provided skilful demonstrations of technical equipment. There were examples of well-designed assignments on most engineering courses, but schemes of work did not include assessment details. Teachers made insufficient use of information technology, for example, as an aid to complex calculations or in project planning. Overhead transparency slides were used extensively by teachers to emphasise key points. However, they were often of a poor standard.

36 Placements with local employers provided full-time students on business studies courses with a valuable insight into the world of work. Many students were able to complete assessment tasks which drew upon their work experience. On secretarial courses, teachers had designed self-study packs which enabled students to work at their own pace. Key skills were integrated with other aspects of GNVQ assignments. Assessment criteria were appropriate. Simulations and business games were employed to good effect to enliven learning and demonstrate business applications. For example, second-year GNVQ students played the roles of bankers, buyers and shopkeepers in a negotiating exercise which lasted for the full teaching day. The teaching methods employed on the part-time management courses were skilfully designed to draw upon the work experience of adult students.

37 Students on leisure and tourism courses took part in a wide range of activities outside the classroom. For example, those on sports studies courses enjoyed specialist coaching in the college gymnasias and also benefited from placements in local sports centres. Those on tourism courses had the opportunity to attend a five-day residential course which was held overseas. On most vocational programmes, students were given course handbooks which provided useful information on workload and

assessment. In a few lessons, teachers made insufficient use of visual aids or handouts where these would have been useful in developing students' understanding.

38 Teaching and assessment on health and community care courses were well planned. Most lessons were conducted at an appropriate pace and teachers made effective use of clear visual aids and reference materials. Group activities were well managed and interesting. For example, a group of first-year BTEC national diploma students completed an investigation designed to raise their understanding of the culture and diets of different ethnic groups; they prepared typical dishes and gave short presentations on the significance of diet in different cultures. Numeracy and information technology skills were successfully developed as integral elements of students' assignments. Teachers responded with care and understanding to the particular needs of adult students.

39 In art and design, a wide range of media was used to develop students' knowledge and technical skills. For example, following a visit to the British Museum, students experimented with dyes and embroidery to recreate textiles from other periods. Students benefited from some imaginative teaching and project work and often received detailed one-to-one support from tutors. However, the development of key skills was not given sufficient attention. The objectives of several media studies classes lacked clarity; students found it difficult to make links with previous sessions.

40 The teaching of GCE A level and GCSE subjects in the humanities and social sciences was usually well planned and executed. For example, in an English literature class on a Shakespeare comedy, students contributed to a lively and well-informed discussion of the playwright's language, characterisation and themes. Whilst many lessons were well structured, there was little sharing of good practice between staff based on the different college campuses. Some staff were not sufficiently conversant with the GCE A level programme as a whole.

41 On the access to higher education programmes, the development of the skills of investigation and private study were strongly emphasised. Adult students developed high levels of competence on modern foreign language courses; for example, during a German lesson, a group demonstrated confidence in speaking and listening skills and were ably supported by the teacher who used mime and gesture to aid understanding. Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) made sensible use of different techniques for widening students' vocabulary including well-designed role-play exercises, which students clearly enjoyed.

42 There were many examples of outstanding teaching on courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Individual students' learning needs were diagnosed meticulously, and learning and assessment programmes were adapted to suit each student. The curriculum was flexible and learning objectives were designed to meet the needs of individual students, some of whom had profound learning difficulties.

Teachers had high expectations of their students and accorded them adult status and dignity. There was close co-operation between teachers from the college and staff from external agencies.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

43 Almost 6,000 students obtained qualifications at the college in 1996. Students completed courses on each of the three routes leading to qualifications post-16: the work-based route represented by NVQs and other competence-based awards; the applied vocational route represented by GNVQs, vocational diplomas and certificates; and the academic route represented in the main by GCSEs and GCE A levels. These qualifications covered the levels, from foundation to advanced professional, across all the FEFC programme areas. Some 60 per cent of the college's students who were enrolled in November 1995, and were due to complete courses by the end of the 1995-96 academic year, achieved the full qualification for which they were aiming. Another 20 per cent gained partial awards.

44 According to data published in the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE's) performance tables for 1996, 71 per cent of the 391 full-time, 16 to 18 year old students in their final year of study for advanced vocational awards achieved their final qualification. This represents a decline from 1995 (74 per cent) and 1994 (85 per cent). The DfEE performance tables for 1996 also show that, in respect of intermediate level vocational courses, 55 per cent of the 331 full-time, 16 to 18 year old students completing these courses were successful. On both measures, the figures place the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector.

45 Given the range of provision, the aggregate figures quoted above conceal significant variations in results across the college. The main features of achievement in 1996 in respect of full-time vocational courses were that:

- 51 per cent of the students initially enrolled on GNVQ intermediate courses and 49 per cent of those on advanced courses achieved the full qualification within the standard timescale
- the comparable rates for students on other full-time vocational qualifications such as C&G and BTEC first and national diplomas were higher; in all cases over 60 per cent
- there was considerable variation in the results achieved by groups of students studying for the same qualification at different college campuses.

46 There were many examples of successful achievement by part-time students studying for vocational qualifications. Over 70 per cent of students on BTEC higher national certificate courses achieved the full qualification within the standard timescale. There were also high completion and pass rates on the part-time courses for students studying management, modern foreign languages and EFL. On many work-related programmes, for

example those in agriculture, business administration, construction, childcare and motor vehicle engineering, students' acquisition of work-related competences was recognised through the award of NVQ units.

47 Results at GCE A level were mixed. Six hundred and twenty-four candidates were entered for GCE A level examinations in 1995-96. In general, adult students were more successful than younger students. The 419 full-time students aged 16 to 18 who entered for GCE AS/A level examinations scored, on average, 3.5 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2) according to the data in the 1996 performance tables published by the DfEE. This places the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. In comparison, the 35 students, aged 19 or over, taking two or more GCE A levels in 1996 scored, on average, 6.9 points per entry.

48 For those subjects with 10 or more entries, the main features of the results at GCE A level for students aged 16 to 18 who completed their courses were:

- pass rates above the national average for general further education colleges in biology, geography, environmental science, philosophy, politics, English language, English literature and communication studies
- results which were near the national average for general further education colleges in art, environmental science, sociology, media studies, psychology, Spanish and physical education
- pass rates below the national average for general further education colleges in business studies, chemistry, economics, physics, mathematics, computing and history.

49 Results at GCSE level were fairly typical for general further education colleges. In 1995-96, 50 per cent of the 1,312 GCSE entries were awarded passes at grade C or above which was the same as the sector average. Students aged 16 to 18 achieved an average pass rate of 44 per cent. The pass rate for students aged 19 or over was 63 per cent. The largest single group of entries was in mathematics where 35 per cent of students achieved grade C or above compared with 31 per cent in the previous year. In English, 67 per cent achieved grade C or above compared with 59 per cent in the previous year. In other subjects with 10 or more entries, results were well above the national average in science, drama, design and accounting. The results were close to the national average in physics, mathematics, computer studies, sociology and media studies but below the national averages in biology, human biology, chemistry, psychology, business studies, art and design, geography, French and health studies. Results for students sitting four or more GCSE subjects were poor. One hundred and forty-four students were enrolled on the full-time GCSE programme in 1996. Only eight of these students achieved four passes at grade C or above and only 26 achieved two or more grades C or above at

this level. Most of these students were taking GCSE subjects for the second time, having been unsuccessful at school.

50 Students' achievements at entry and foundation level were good. Over 70 per cent of the 1,515 students entered for qualifications at this level were successful. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were offered a range of opportunities to gain nationally-recognised accreditation. There were effective systems for recording their achievements and appropriate progression routes to further study.

51 Students on most academic, vocational and professional courses demonstrated appropriate knowledge and understanding. The standards they attained in projects and other assignments met the demands of the examining bodies. They achieved appropriate standards in key skills on most vocational courses, but achievements in information technology were poor in some areas. More specific vocational capabilities were well developed in many curriculum areas. For example, horticultural students showed imagination and flair in the design of planting schemes in the individual gardens which they cultivate each year as part of the assessment for the course. There were some examples of outstanding individual achievements. For example, a construction student won the 'Worshipful Company of Tilers and Bricklayers' award as the highest scoring candidate nationally in the 1996 C&G brickwork examination.

52 The college recognises that student retention rates are a cause for concern on many courses. On the GNVQ advanced courses, the average retention rate over 1995-96 was 70 per cent. This compares with 75 per cent for 1994-95 and 88 per cent for 1993-94. There has been a similar downward trend on the two-year, full-time GCE A level programmes. Retention rates on the wide range of part-time courses vary. On BTEC higher national certificate programmes, there was a good average retention rate of over 80 per cent in 1995-96.

53 College data on students' destinations show that of the approximately 1,000 full-time students aged 16 to 18 who completed their studies in 1995-96, 10 per cent progressed to higher education, 27 per cent continued in further education, 36 per cent gained employment, 7 per cent went to other destinations and 20 per cent were unknown. Forty per cent of the students on GNVQ advanced courses progressed to higher education in contrast to 16 per cent of those on GCE A level courses. Over three-quarters of the adult students completing the access to higher education course in 1996 went on to study degree or higher diploma qualifications.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

54 The college senior management team is strongly committed to improving the quality of courses and college services. Over the last three years, the college has developed a robust self-assessment process which has supplemented its procedures for course monitoring and review.

55 There are college guidelines for the development of new courses which include arrangements for internal validation. The resource implications of new course proposals are carefully considered by an internal review panel. For the purpose of course monitoring, each course team maintains a course logbook which is intended to provide comprehensive coverage of course planning, record keeping and evaluation. Completed course logbooks are subject to annual scrutiny by a school board of study. Common issues which arise from this process are summarised in a school action plan. Although the procedures for course review are well defined, many course teams do not maintain comprehensive records. Some also fail to analyse students' achievements with sufficient rigour or to develop effective action plans to remedy identified weaknesses.

56 Students' opinions are collected systematically and used to inform the wider review process. Well-designed questionnaires are administered each year. For example, an 'accessibility questionnaire', issued early in the academic year, enables students to comment on their initial experience at the college. Questionnaire returns are analysed centrally and the outcomes are passed on to managers at all levels so that account can be taken of them in drawing up action plans. This process has been effective in securing improvements in provision. For example, publicity for open days has been improved, the profile of learning support services has been raised and teachers now adhere more tightly to assessment schedules. Feedback is also obtained from student representatives on course committees.

57 The college recognises that it needs to establish a more comprehensive range of performance targets. At course level, enrolment targets are set and monitored but other targets such as attendance, completion and progression rates are not. Explicit standards to measure the quality of cross-college services are being developed.

58 Effective internal verification procedures, designed to ensure greater consistency in the assessment of vocational programmes, are in place. There are common procedures for producing schemes of work and assignment schedules, and an agreed method for moderating marked assignment work. These are significant achievements given that many courses are taught and assessed on several campuses. External examiners and verifiers are satisfied with current procedures.

59 The college has developed a rigorous process of self-assessment over the last three years, based upon the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The process includes a detailed analysis of teaching and learning, derived from the observation of lessons, and a systematic review of other aspects of each school and service unit. From the weaknesses identified in the current report, the college management team has specified action points which will be subject to review as part of the strategic planning process. The judgements in the college self-assessment report matched those of inspectors.

60 The college charter is consistent with the national charter for further education. Students are introduced to it during induction and receive an abridged version of it in their student handbook. The complete version is available at various locations including reception areas and libraries. To date, there has been no monitoring of the fulfilment of the charter's commitments. The charter is not linked to the service standards and is not part of the college's quality assurance system. There is a formal students' complaints procedure.

61 The college has a comprehensive staff-appraisal system that applies to all staff. It operates on an annual cycle. All staff receive training in appraisal techniques and there are monitoring procedures designed to ensure that the appraisal cycle is completed. Staff are positive about the process and recognise its benefits, for example the linking of training to clearer individual development targets.

62 Staff development is well planned and effectively managed and reviewed. Half the staff-development budget is allocated to college priorities, for example information technology training, and the remainder is devolved to schools and service units. All new staff receive an effective induction programme. In 1995-96, one or more staff-development activities were undertaken by almost all full-time and by a significant proportion of part-time staff. There are many opportunities for support staff to participate in training; in 1995-96 half the expenditure on staff development was devoted to support staff. The college achieved Investor in People status in 1994.

RESOURCES

Staffing

63 The college has 371 full-time equivalent teachers and over 400 full-time equivalent support staff. There are sufficient teachers with appropriate expertise for the range of courses offered. The proportion of teachers on permanent contracts relative to those on temporary part-time contracts varies widely between schools. For instance little work in construction or engineering is undertaken by part-time teachers, whilst in foreign languages over 50 per cent of all work is carried out by part-time teachers. Most staff are well qualified. Eighty-seven per cent of teachers on permanent contracts are graduates. There is no formal college policy requiring teachers to have a professional teaching qualification, but 76 per cent have such a qualification. About half of all teachers have assessor awards. Many teachers have relevant commercial, industrial or professional experience but there is a need for updating in some areas, including management and agriculture. There is a carefully-considered human resource strategy which demonstrates the college's commitment to an ethos in which staff are valued and supported.

64 Technician and administrative support in most schools is adequate. There is an effective partnership between teachers and support staff in

helping students to learn successfully. Posts for learning support assistants have been established in a number of areas, such as agriculture. Learning support assistants play a valuable role in guiding students in the use of information technology in the learning resource centres as well as undertaking more conventional tasks such as cataloguing. There are appropriate personnel procedures for staff which are described in a comprehensive staff handbook.

Equipment/learning resources

65 General teaching areas and classrooms are well equipped. Students benefit from modern specialist equipment in many areas. The college farm provides students with access to a wide range of enterprises on a commercial scale. There is an excellent equestrian unit on a single, compact and well-planned site providing both indoor and outdoor facilities. Effective use is made of the college farms and horticultural facilities. At Welwyn Garden City there is a well-equipped travel centre which is used to support the development of students' specialist skills. Most of the construction workshops at St Albans provide good facilities for the development of basic craft skills. The motor vehicle division has a range of equipment which includes modern vehicles and motor cycles, some of which have been donated by local companies. The specialist facilities for modern languages include language laboratories, computers and video-replay facilities, but these vary in quality between sites. Equipment in some of the other curriculum areas is not of current industrial standard. Reprographic facilities are well organised and teachers are provided with an effective service.

66 The college recognises the need to improve its information technology resources to support both teaching and administration. At present, 528 computer workstations are available for students to use, giving a ratio of 16 full-time equivalent students to each computer. The distribution of information technology facilities is uneven, so that in some areas, for example in business and computing, students have good access to computers, whilst in other areas this is not the case. There are also different types of computers and different software in use across the college. With the help of external consultants, a more coherent information technology strategy has recently been established. Information technology services, learning resources and media services have been brought together into a single integrated service and the college is investing significantly in upgrading its facilities. The establishment of learning resource centres on each of the four main campuses has improved students' access to information technology facilities.

67 The library stock is sufficient to meet the current demand in most curriculum areas. It comprises approximately 65,000 books, 435 journals, a collection of about 1,100 videos and 124 compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) titles. A libraries network links the college with the University of Hertfordshire and the other Hertfordshire colleges. This increases the

range of books and periodicals which are available to students. There is effective liaison between learning resources staff and teachers. The learning resource centres are open until 20.00 hours on weekday evenings, which particularly benefits part-time students. There is a shortage of study spaces, including quiet areas and areas for learning support, most markedly at the Welwyn campus.

Accommodation

68 The college has four main campuses located in central and southern Hertfordshire. Three of them, St Albans, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood are in urban environments. Most of the buildings on these sites were erected in the early 1960s at a time when learning was mainly classroom based and when engineering was a more significant part of the provision. The fourth, the Oaklands campus, is situated on the eastern outskirts of St Albans in attractive parkland. It is located on the site of the former agricultural college and has an extensive estate supporting a commercial farm, horticultural nurseries, an equine centre, an outdoor swimming pool, golf course and sports playing fields. It houses the administrative services and two residential blocks providing accommodation for about 100 students. In addition to the main campuses, the college has seven other sites, sports playing fields and farmland.

69 All the main campuses provide library, refectory and recreational facilities. Each has a students' wing that provides common rooms and recreational areas. Rooms are provided for specific groups such as the young Asian women at St Albans. The college recognises that the layout of the campuses inhibits access for students with disabilities. Every effort is made to provide access for these students, for example by timetabling their classes in the most accessible rooms.

70 The quality of the general teaching accommodation varies widely. Most of the accommodation at Welwyn Garden City provides an attractive learning environment. However, some teaching rooms on the other campuses are untidy and in need of redecoration. The temporary classrooms at Borehamwood provide an unsatisfactory environment for students and at St Albans there are a number of former dwelling houses which are unsuitable for educational use. The strategic plan includes objectives relating to the development of accommodation. These include improving access to buildings and making rooms more suitable for teaching and learning. The college has identified the need for more effective and efficient use of its accommodation and is developing management systems to achieve this.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

71 The main strengths of the college are:

- the wide range of courses from foundation level to higher education
- the wide links with community groups
- comprehensive and effective student support services
- some well-planned and effective teaching
- excellent health and community care courses
- outstanding provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- the support available to students for improving their basic skills
- a rigorous self-assessment process which is linked to strategic planning
- a comprehensive and well-planned staff-development programme
- generally good specialist equipment, including excellent facilities in agriculture.

72 If it is to build on its strengths the college should:

- take action to improve retention rates and levels of achievement on some courses
- ensure more consistent implementation of the quality assurance procedures
- strengthen operational planning and establish measurable targets
- improve the provision of information technology equipment
- ensure a more consistent approach to tutorials
- improve the quality of some of its accommodation.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at April 1997)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at April 1997)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at April 1997)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at April 1997)

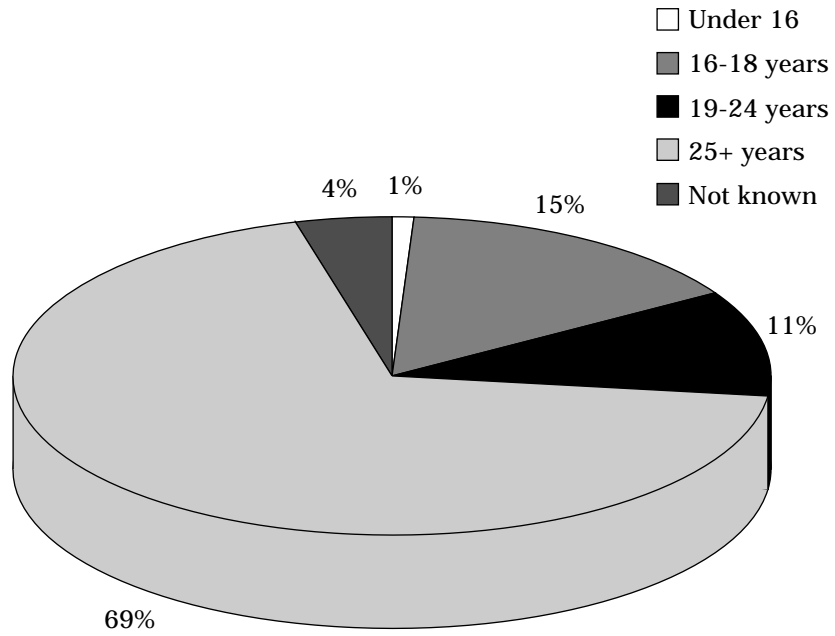
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

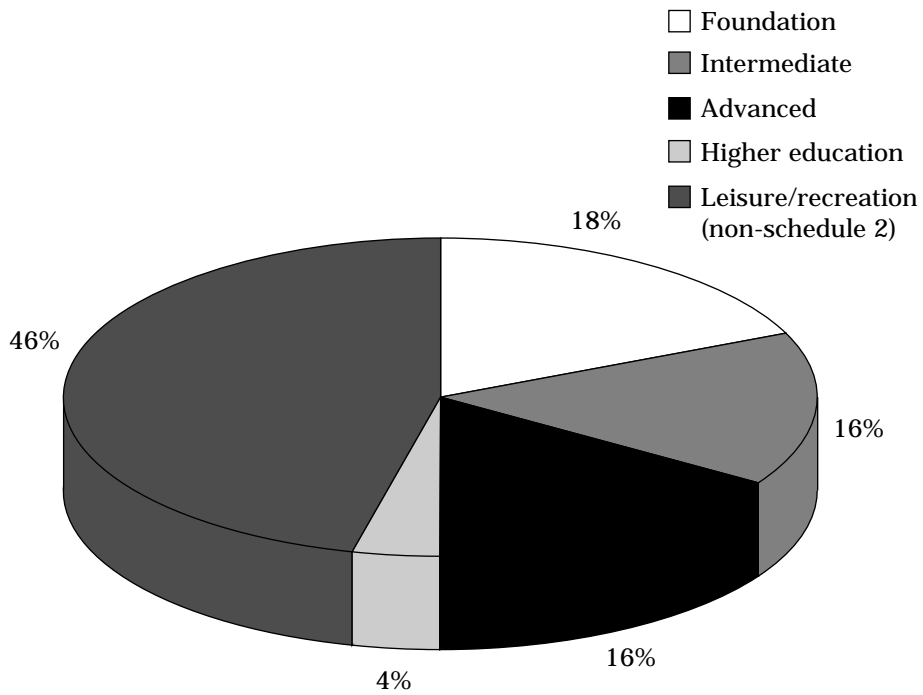
Oaklands College: percentage student numbers by age (as at April 1997)



Student numbers: 29,033

Figure 2

Oaklands College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at April 1997)



Student numbers: 29,033

Figure 3

Oaklands College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at April 1997)

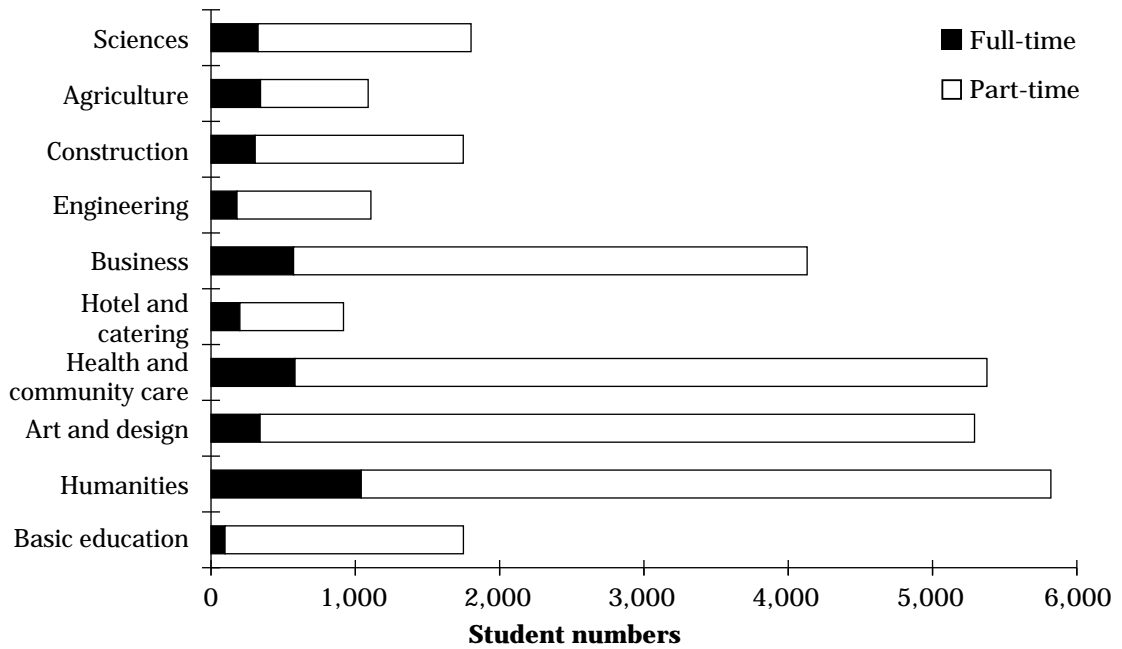


Figure 4

Oaklands College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at April 1997)

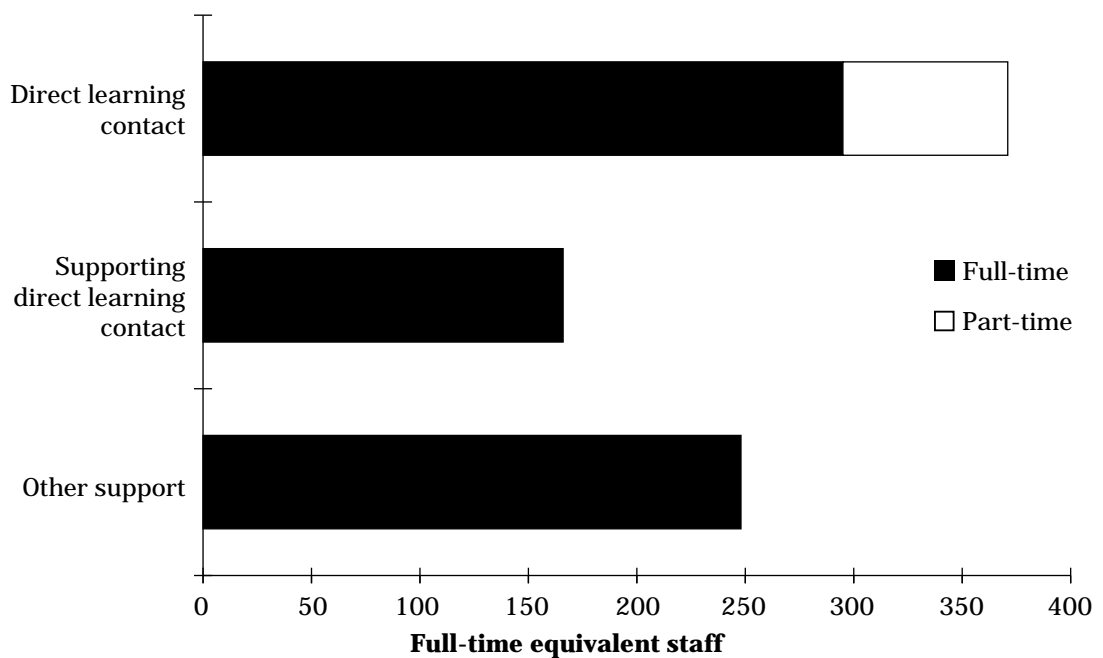
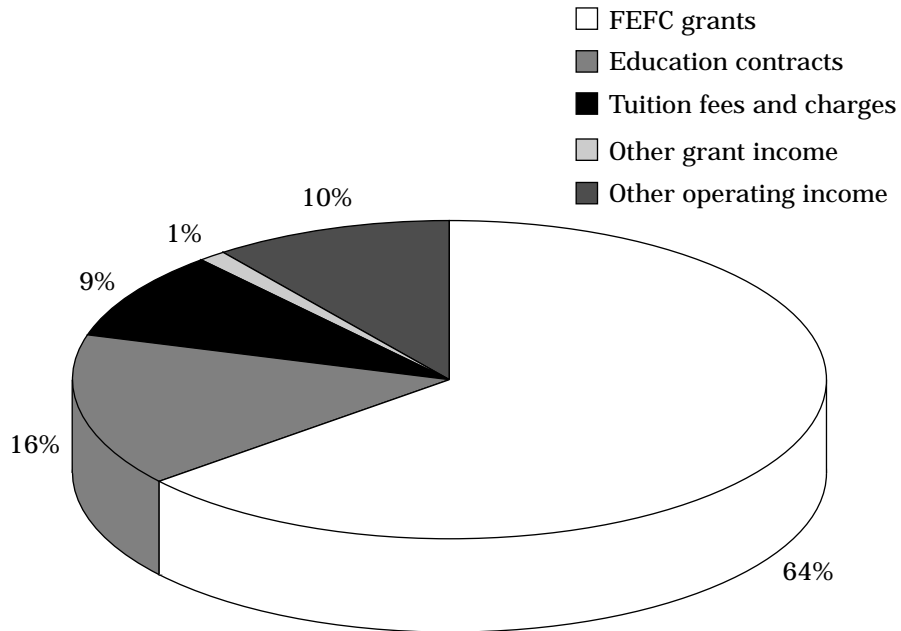


Figure 5

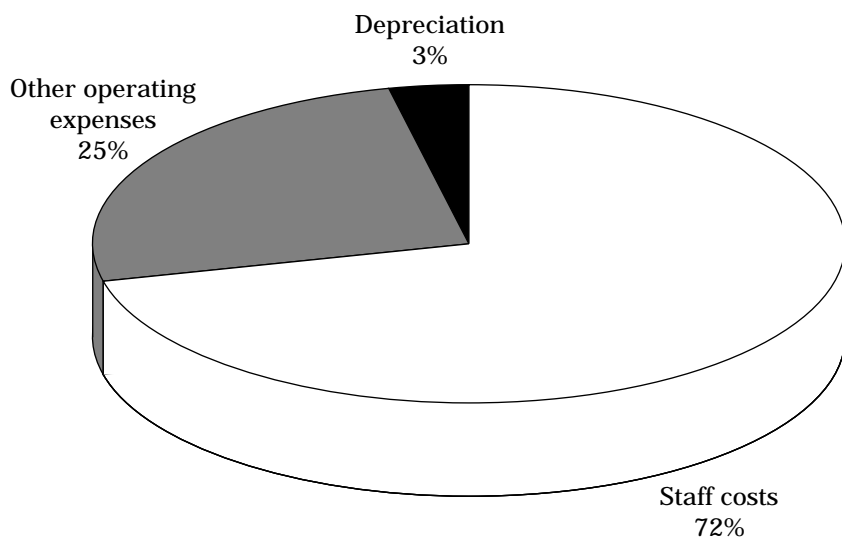
Oaklands College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £25,946,000

Figure 6

Oaklands College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £28,800,000

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