

Palmer's College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
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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

Palmer's College

Eastern Region

Inspected November 1998

Palmer's College is a sixth form college located on the outskirts of Grays in Essex. The college provides almost exclusively for full-time students aged 16 to 19 who are following advanced, intermediate and some foundation level courses. The self-assessment process undertaken by the college is rigorous. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of both the curriculum areas and the cross-college areas. However, some strengths were overstated and inspectors identified some weaknesses which were not mentioned. Most, but not all, of the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection have been remedied.

The college offers courses in eight of the 10 programme areas funded by the FEFC. The inspection covered four programme areas and led to five grades being awarded. The curriculum is well planned and courses are effectively managed. Teaching is often good and sometimes outstanding. Teachers give high levels of individual help to students and the monitoring of students' progress is effective. Achievements are good in some mathematics, science and humanities courses at GCSE level and in most advanced courses in the sciences. Achievements in art, design, media and performing arts are consistently at a high level.

Personal support for students is effective. Students are well informed and make appropriate choices about courses. Those wishing to go on to higher education receive sound advice. The college has accommodation of good quality and a pleasant working environment which is conducive to learning. There are excellent sports and fitness facilities. The college's quality assurance programme is comprehensive and well understood. The college is well managed. Roles and responsibilities are clearly understood and communication between managers and staff is effective. Governors have high levels of commitment and expertise. The college should improve: the poor retention on some courses; ineffective teaching in a few areas; lack of appropriate learning support for some students; deficiencies in the provision and use of IT; the underdeveloped arrangements for assessing the quality of teaching in lessons; the links between faculty operations and strategic planning; and shortcomings in the operation of two corporation committees.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Mathematics and computing	2	Support for students	2
Sciences	3	General resources	2
Business	2	Quality assurance	2
Art, design, media and performing arts	1	Governance	2
General studies, law, politics, psychology and sociology	2	Management	2

The College and its Mission

1 Palmer's College is a sixth form college that was formed in 1971. It takes its name from William Palmer who founded a local school for charitable purposes in 1706. The college is located about one mile from the centre of Grays in the new unitary authority of Thurrock in Essex. Within an area designated as greenbelt, it occupies a spacious and attractive site that includes extensive sporting facilities. The land and most of the buildings are owned by the William Palmer College Educational Trust which plays an important part in college life. The Trust provides grants to the college and its students to: reward achievement; offset hardship; support enrichment activities; and develop the physical amenities of the site.

2 Most of the 1,444 students on the college roll in 1998 joined after completing year 11 in their secondary schools and are studying on full-time courses. Approximately 70% of students come from local schools in Thurrock and the remainder from the Basildon area. Achievement rates in Thurrock secondary schools are below national and Essex averages. In 1998, the percentage of 16-year-old pupils gaining five or more subjects of the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) at grades A to C was 33.5% in Thurrock. The proportion of students in full-time education after the age of 16 in Basildon and Thurrock was 66% in 1997, the lowest participation rate in Essex. There are few graduates in the local population; Thurrock is in the bottom 3% of local authority areas according to figures for the number of graduates per household. Of all students on the college roll, 8% belong to minority ethnic groups; the 1991 census figure for such groups in Thurrock was 2.4%. The claimant unemployment rate in the Thurrock district in March 1998 was 4.7%; the national rate was 4.9%.

3 Post-16 education and training is provided locally by four other further education colleges: Thurrock College, Basildon College, South East

Essex College of Arts and Technology in Southend and Seevic College in Benfleet. The 10 secondary schools in the area do not have sixth forms. The five colleges have arrangements for collaboration. Palmer's College is also a member of an active sixth form college consortium which provided assistance in benchmarking the Palmer's College self-assessment report. The relationship between Palmer's College and the adjacent Thurrock College is well developed. For example, there are curriculum planning meetings, a shared course for a general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) and informal joint meetings of principals and governors. Each principal is a co-opted member of the other's corporation.

4 The college offers a range of general educational courses. About 66% of students follow at least one of 30 courses for the general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level), and 28% are enrolled on GNVQ courses that include a small number of students at foundation level. There is a substantial programme of 20 GCSE courses. Students have the opportunity to add to these studies from a wide range of accredited courses, including, for example, business technology and sport, voluntary service, journalism, and work experience. The 12% growth in enrolments over the last four years has mainly come from the increased uptake of GNVQ courses. The college has consistently reached its enrolment targets. The value added to students' achievements is well recorded and has been consistently positive and statistically significant. The number of students progressing to higher education has grown steadily over the last four years. In 1997, for example, 46% of students leaving the college joined higher education courses and 31% went to employment. These figures compare with 37% and 30%, respectively, in 1995. Some 10% of students choose to take a 'year out' before going on to university.

5 Courses at the college are organised through six faculties. The head of each faculty also has a senior role within the student support

Context

system. The senior management team comprises the principal, two assistant principals, the head of student services and the head of finance and administration. Efficiency gains in staffing costs have been achieved without the need to declare redundancies. The college employs 139 staff in teaching and support functions. There are 76 full-time and 18 part-time teachers, and 14 full-time and 31 part-time support staff. A further 42 part-time receptionists, coaches and trainers are employed for the sports and fitness centre, together with two full-time centre managers. The college has recently been recognised as an Investor in People.

6 The mission statement reflects the college's intention to be a centre of excellence in both academic and general education and in sporting activities and performing arts. The mission has been modified recently to focus in particular on full-time students aged 16 to 19. Central to the mission is the provision by the college of opportunities for its students to benefit from 'intellectual, academic and personal development through relevant and challenging curriculum and within a supportive environment'.

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during the week beginning 30 November 1998. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and drawn on information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college submitted data on students' achievements and retention rates for 1998, which were checked by inspectors against primary sources, for example pass lists issued by examining bodies and class registers. Information on achievements and retention between 1995 and 1997 was derived from individualised student record (ISR) data. These data sources, used by the college to compile the

retention and achievement spreadsheet for students completing their courses in 1998, were found to be reliable. Inspectors agreed that the spreadsheets generated from ISR provided a fair reflection of college achievements.

8 The college was notified approximately two months before the inspection of the sample of its provision that was to be assessed. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors and an auditor, working for a total of 47 days. They observed 62 lessons and nine tutorials, and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students.

9 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, 66% were good or outstanding and only 3% were less than satisfactory. This profile is slightly below the average of 71% and 3%, respectively, for all sixth form colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	5	20	12	0	0	37
GCSE	3	3	3	1	0	10
GNVQ	2	2	4	1	0	9
Other vocational	3	3	0	0	0	6
Total (No)	13	28	19	2	0	62
Total (%)	21	45	31	3	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

10 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The average level of attendance was 87% and showed a high degree of consistency across all

curriculum areas, ranging from 84% in business to 89% in mathematics. This outcome compares favourably with the average for sixth form colleges of 84%.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Palmer's College	15.0	87
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 Computing

Grade 2

11 Inspectors observed 10 lessons in mathematics and computing. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report although some strengths were overstated and some additional weaknesses were found. The weaknesses identified by the college are being addressed and parts of the action plan have been successfully completed.

Key strengths

- well-managed courses
- good retention and achievement on GCSE courses
- the effective use of the GCE A level mathematics workshop
- an appropriate variety of learning activities
- the high level of support available to students
- effective monitoring of students' progress

Weaknesses

- poor retention on some courses
- the failure to check students' understanding in some lessons
- insufficient and unreliable computer equipment

12 Computing courses are available at GCE A level, GCSE and at an introductory level. There is an appropriate range of mathematics modules available at GCE A/AS level that allows students to study pure and applied mathematics and statistics. GCSE mathematics is available at three levels. There is no provision for the small number of students for whom a qualification below the level of GCSE is appropriate. Nor is there an opportunity for students who are able to progress beyond GCSE level to continue some

limited study of mathematics that would lead to a recognised qualification and strengthen application to university.

13 Courses are effectively managed. Course handbooks provide students with information on course content, assessment and the operation of the course. There is a regular review of schemes of work which has resulted in improvements. For example, suitable equipment for experiments in mathematics has been acquired and the time allowed for the completion of course modules has been modified. Opportunities to enhance learning through the use of graphic calculators are identified in the schemes of work. This development has remedied weaknesses identified during the previous inspection. There are regular, minuted course meetings that include critical reviews and an analysis of achievement and retention that result in actions points. However, the points do not always include timescales for completion to allow progress to be monitored effectively.

14 The teaching ranges from satisfactory to good. In many lessons there is an appropriate variety of learning activities to which students respond positively. In one GCSE class students successfully solved problems on the blackboard, while the rest of the class were attentive and helpful. In computing courses there is an appropriate balance of theory and practical work. GCSE information technology (IT) students are required to use CD-ROMs and the internet to research their projects; their work is frequently good. As identified in the college's self-assessment report, homework is set regularly and marks recorded. Half-termly tests provide additional checks on understanding and progress, and inform the regular reviews of progress. Some lessons were not always well managed. Teachers did not check students' understanding nor monitor their progress with sufficient care.

15 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that the mathematics workshop for

Curriculum Areas

GCE A level students is used extremely well. Timetables are organised so that the workshop and its wide range of learning materials are available to all students. The workshop provides effective opportunities for meeting individual learning needs and is highly valued by students. Staff also help students with academic problems outside timetabled lessons and workshops.

16 The resources available to study mathematics include a good range of textbooks, videos, computer graph plotting programs, a class set of graphic calculators and self-study material. There is insufficient access to computers for mathematics students to undertake activities as a whole class. Specialist computing is not well supported by existing equipment, some of which is unreliable. This shortcoming was not specifically identified in the self-assessment report. The college has a replacement programme but these facilities are not planned to be replaced until 2000.

17 Student achievement and retention rates in GCSE courses are well above the norms for sixth form colleges. The improvement in GCSE mathematics grades is very good, particularly for students with previous GCSE grades of E and F who on average improved their performance by almost two grades. The college uses a system for comparing students' final GCE A level examination results with their attainment at GCSE. In most GCE A level courses an analysis of results against entry grades indicates significant levels of improvement above those predicted. Inspectors agreed with the college that achievements in GCE A level computing, which have been consistently above the norms for sixth form colleges over the last three years, are a strength. The college acknowledges that retention on the computing course is poor and has taken action to improve the rate. Achievement and retention in GCE A level mathematics is above or close to the norms for sixth form colleges.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Cambridge IT certificate	1	Expected completions	71	66	49
		Retention (%)	80	82	92
		Achievement (%)	62	72	40
GCSE mathematics	2	Expected completions	338	306	265
		Retention (%)	83	81	82
		Achievement (%)	63	64	50
GCSE IT	2	Expected completions	53	54	34
		Retention (%)	77	74	88
		Achievement (%)	63	68	77
GCE A level computing	3	Expected completions	25	26	53
		Retention (%)	64	73	71
		Achievement (%)	88	83	82
GCE A level mathematics	3	Expected completions	134	117	133
		Retention (%)	78	79	72
		Achievement (%)	87	87	87

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

Curriculum Areas

Sciences

Grade 3

18 The inspection covered science subjects at GCE A level, GCSE, and GNVQ intermediate level. Fourteen lessons were observed.

Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some of the strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- effective course planning
- high levels of achievement at GCE A level in biology, chemistry and physics
- effective arrangements for practical science

Weaknesses

- an insufficient range of learning opportunities
- a low retention rate in GCE A level courses
- insufficient sharing of teaching methods

19 Most of the faculty's provision is in courses at GCE A level. The number of students studying full GCSE programmes has declined across the college but the science faculty has retained a significant GCSE programme. The college has successfully broadened the curriculum by developing a GNVQ intermediate course which is appropriate for students who had not achieved high enough grades at GCSE. The faculty also provides workshops in the three science disciplines. These timetabled sessions are primarily intended for students who need additional help if they are to reach a satisfactory standard; however, the workshops do not always meet the needs of all those students who require support. An accredited extension programme, 'into medicine', provides an effective preparation for those students who wish to progress to higher education in medical or veterinary sciences.

20 Inspectors confirmed that course planning closely matches the requirements of the accrediting bodies. However, lesson planning takes little account of the range of ability in a class. Heads of department have recently begun to collect together learning material from the teaching teams to support schemes of work. The full potential of these schemes is not realised as they do not identify teaching methods. Teachers are experienced and enthusiastic about their subjects. Students' experimental work is competent. In the better lessons teachers seek to build on students' prior learning. They use effective questioning techniques to challenge and involve students. Good use is made of activities which increase interest in the subjects, for example, the use of a video explaining the applications of Newton's laws in space and a practical project based on testing the local water supply. In one lesson, where the aim was to learn how to produce effective coursework, students benefited from studying photographs, and extracts from CD-ROMs, journals and books. This was one of the few lessons that applied IT to science teaching. Less satisfactory lessons are characterised by: poor questioning techniques which fail to engage students intellectually; the ineffective use of visual aids; and poor planning of the time available. Weaknesses in the range of learning opportunities for students were not identified in the self-assessment report.

21 The science faculty has taken appropriate action to try to improve poor retention rates. Contacts with the heads of science departments in the local schools have been used to sharpen subject guidance to intending GCE A level students. Co-ordination of professional practice across the three science departments is improving. The faculty has devised a common policy for the promotion of study skills to increase the capacity of students to learn by themselves. However, the science staff have not discussed teaching methodologies that will achieve the policy. The skilled and well-trained technician team provides effective support for

Curriculum Areas

laboratory work. There is sufficient laboratory equipment available for current needs but learning materials are uneven in quality. Library provision of books and journals is satisfactory and the range of CD-ROMs is increasing.

22 Students are given many opportunities to practise for external examinations. Standards of marking are appropriate to the qualification aim. In some cases, mark schemes from the examining boards are used effectively to heighten students' awareness of examination requirements. The volume of work produced by students is high. However, on all courses some students' files are poorly organised and unchecked. There is insufficient constructive

feedback to students about their work. Marking generally concentrates on conscientious correction of fact and expression. The college recognises that retention is below both national and college norms in GCE A levels and particularly poor in human biology. Compared with national norms for sixth form colleges pass rates in GNVQ, and in most GCSE subjects are at least satisfactory, often good. At GCE A level, with the exception of human biology, there are high levels of achievement and this is noted in the self-assessment report. Inspectors confirmed that, the value added to students' achievements, as shown by the system used by the college, is outstanding in physics and good in biology and chemistry.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE sciences (astronomy, biological sciences, chemistry, physics)	2	Expected completions	115	91	99
		Retention (%)	88	71	73
		Achievement (%)	39	58	60
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	15	20	20
		Retention (%)	93	95	65
		Achievement (%)	43	100	77
GCE A level biology	3	Expected completions	37	54	29
		Retention (%)	79	69	79
		Achievement (%)	83	97	86
GCE A level chemistry	3	Expected completions	60	69	50
		Retention (%)	75	59	66
		Achievement (%)	75	93	82
GCE A level human biology	3	Expected completions	29	39	40
		Retention (%)	66	51	49
		Achievement (%)	58	35	58
GCE A level physics	3	Expected completions	49	59	62
		Retention (%)	84	63	69
		Achievement (%)	88	81	98

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

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 2

23 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in business across the range of provision. They generally agreed with the college's judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- systematically planned teaching and assessment strategies
- effective teamwork at department and course level
- effective teaching
- high retention rates on most courses
- consistently good GNVQ intermediate pass rates
- thorough and constructive feedback to students on their progress
- students' good understanding of business theories and concepts

Weaknesses

- failure of some teaching to take account of the wide range of students' abilities
- poor classroom management in some lessons
- careless presentation of work by some students
- insufficient opportunities for students to apply theoretical concepts in realistic business settings

24 Business courses are managed by the faculty of business and languages. The faculty provides GNVQ courses in business, GCSE and GCE A level business studies, and additional studies in business technology. Student numbers have grown significantly over the past four years in GNVQ advanced business but numbers on GCSE and GCE A level business studies have declined slightly.

25 The quality of the teaching in business is good. The best teaching is characterised by

clear objectives communicated to students and by skilful techniques which develop and test their understanding. Teaching on advanced level courses is often appropriately demanding and introduces students to a broad range of problem-solving activities. However, for the larger groups teaching often takes insufficient account of the wide range of ability among students. Inspectors confirmed that teachers use an appropriate variety of strategies to maintain the interest of students. Classroom teaching is enhanced by visiting speakers, field visits and research activities. There are insufficient opportunities for students to practise their business and practical skills in realistic business settings through planned work experience, for example; this shortcoming is recognised in the self-assessment report. Handout and support materials are of a consistently high standard. Teachers work co-operatively and teaching teams are well managed. Course targets are set annually for retention and achievement, and performance is monitored throughout the year. All courses have comprehensive schemes of work which incorporate annual schedules of assessment activities and staff responsibilities. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that assessment methods are thorough and consistent. Teachers' comments on marked work are constructive and identify both strengths and areas for improvement. The rigorous internal verification procedures ensure that assessment is fair. Regular oral feedback to students about their progress is helpful and supportive. Assignments are imaginatively designed to promote originality of thought. The careful scheduling of assignments and projects throughout the year maximises opportunities to meet examination requirements and to develop career paths for students. Effective arrangements are made across departments to ensure smooth transition for students who progress to higher levels of study within the college.

26 Most students are hard working and are eager to express their opinions. Teachers tap

Curriculum Areas

this enthusiasm effectively in topical discussions that also have a relevance to the business world. In some lessons observed by inspectors unpunctuality and inappropriate student behaviour were allowed to disturb teaching and learning. Occasionally, during class discussions, the vocal minority dominated the lessons with the result that many students did not contribute. However, in GNVQ foundation the organisation of activities ensured that each student was encouraged to make a constructive contribution. In GNVQ advanced and GCE A level programmes, teachers inspire students to develop their evaluative and synthesising skills.

27 Classrooms are well maintained and have relevant and interesting business materials on display. Courses are well resourced. Students regularly use specialist base rooms that are equipped with computer facilities. However, the timetabling of large groups in small rooms often restricts the teaching style and hampers effective learning.

28 Students' written work demonstrates good understanding of business theories. Many business students enhance their studies through opportunities to take a range of qualifications in wordprocessing and shorthand. Students do not always use their IT skills to present their work in an appropriate business style and some work submitted for assessment is untidy and carelessly presented. Some students on GNVQ intermediate programmes have poor note-taking skills. With few exceptions, the retention rate for business courses is high and attendance is good. Pass rates for GNVQ intermediate courses are consistently above the national average and were particularly high in 1998. The self-assessment report recognised that GCE A level business results are slightly below the sixth form college national average, though there was an improvement from 65% in 1997 to 77% in 1998.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	44	65	45
		Retention (%)	86	86	89
		Achievement (%)	76	72	84
GCSE business	2	Expected completions	35	19	19
		Retention (%)	66	68	100
		Achievement (%)	74	31	56
GCE A level	3	Expected completions	77	102	69
		Retention (%)	81	80	88
		Achievement (%)	68	65	77
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	+	18	55
		Retention (%)	+	78	71
		Achievement (%)	+	69	69

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+course not running

Curriculum Areas

Art, Design, Media and Performing Arts

Grade 1

29 The inspection covered all provision of art and design offered by the college including media and performing arts. Twelve lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with the majority of the findings in the self-assessment report but found some additional strengths.

Key strengths

- the high standard of teaching
- outstanding pass rates
- well-documented courses and exemplary project briefs
- enhanced learning opportunities for students
- good technical support
- the high standard of specialist accommodation and equipment in most areas

Weaknesses

- low student retention rates on two advanced level courses
- insufficient use of IT by students

30 Art, design, media and performing arts courses are managed by three different faculties in the college. The range of courses has expanded through the introduction of GNVQs. There is a good range of accredited vocational courses which gives students an opportunity to enhance their practical knowledge of certain areas, for example radio, video production and journalism. Inspectors confirmed that improvements have been made in the overall quality of course documentation since the last inspection. The best course handbooks provide students with useful information on: the way courses are taught; assessment procedures; and

the balance between theory and practical work. Project briefs are detailed and some are exemplary. For example, photography students were required to produce a folder of images based upon their interpretation of a poem. Design and technology students showed considerable inventiveness in responding to a brief to design a clock in a setting of their choice.

31 Inspectors confirmed that the quality of most lessons was of a high standard. In the best lessons teachers made good use of informative handouts to strengthen students' understanding of complex issues. The whiteboard was used imaginatively to ensure that students took accurate notes. The aims of most lessons were shared with students. In many lessons teachers effectively linked theoretical knowledge to practical work. A few lessons lacked a sufficient variety of activities and gave students too few opportunities to discuss and analyse their work. Teachers make good use of time in lessons and encouraged students to develop a positive work ethic. A strong emphasis is placed by teachers on the importance of personal research. However, not all students pay sufficient attention to the importance of note-taking and writing skills.

32 Teaching staff are conscientious and enthusiastic. Technicians are employed in areas such as design and technology. The college encourages students to obtain a level of technical competence in sound, lighting and video editing for which they receive a college certificate. They are then qualified and able to support other students, college productions and outside organisations who hire the college's facilities. This innovative approach to augmenting technician support is a strength not highlighted in the self-assessment report. There is a good range of purpose-designed accommodation. The well-equipped theatre has raked seating and the media suite includes a radio production studio. The design and technology studios offer excellent facilities for

Curriculum Areas

design, theory, modelling and specialist use of computers. Workshops are mostly well equipped although, as student numbers have increased, there is some overcrowding. The unusual collection of over 1,000 historical costumes is regularly used for teaching. Specialist rooms for photography, pottery and fine art are dispersed, which inhibits opportunities for collaboration. The pottery room and the kiln are on separate floors and this separation hinders effective working; there is a similar problem with the photographic darkroom and studio. New specialist IT equipment is underused. A significant number of students make insufficient use of computers to improve the presentation of their work. Not all staff have sufficient computer skills and this weakness, identified by the college, is being resolved.

33 Students are well motivated although some undervalue the quality of their work, most of which is good. Many students develop good performance and exhibition skills and present their work to public audiences. At the time of inspection, drama students had devised and performed a pantomime for local primary school children. Media students develop radio programmes which are broadcast through the college's radio network. Inspectors confirmed that there are high pass rates on most courses. On GCE A level courses in theatre studies, art and design and design and technology, pass rates have been at or close to 100% during the last three years. Pass rates on the BTEC national diploma in performing arts and most GCSE courses are well above national averages for sixth form colleges. There have been poor retention rates for GCE A level courses in design and technology and art and design and this is recognised in the self-assessment report.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE courses (art and design)	2	Expected completions	107	109	123
		Retention (%)	82	71	86
		Achievement (%)	69	83	80
GCE A level theatre studies	3	Expected completions	49	40	51
		Retention (%)	86	80	73
		Achievement (%)	80	97	100
GCE A level art and design	3	Expected completions	46	35	54
		Retention (%)	83	69	69
		Achievement (%)	89	100	100
GCE A level media studies	3	Expected completions	70	80	93
		Retention (%)	74	71	74
		Achievement (%)	90	98	94
GCE A level design and technology	3	Expected completions	18	16	21
		Retention (%)	67	69	67
		Achievement (%)	75	100	100
BTEC national diploma in performing arts	3	Expected completions	19	26	23
		Retention (%)	89	81	70
		Achievement (%)	100	100	94

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

Curriculum Areas

General Studies, Law, Politics, Psychology and Sociology

Grade 2

34 Fifteen classes were observed. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- thorough and confident teaching
- the encouragement and support by staff for individual students
- good results in GCE A level psychology and GCSE psychology and sociology
- very effective contributions by students in class
- full information available on courses
- a self-critical approach by staff

Weaknesses

- some teaching which lacked sustained pace and variety
- insufficient specification of teaching methods in schemes of work
- failure fully to resolve some identified curriculum issues

35 Courses are carefully planned. Detailed schemes of work give precise information about course content and resources but contain insufficiently detailed information on teaching methods. Staff work well in subject teams both in planning courses and sharing ideas and teaching materials. Staff have a self-critical and enquiring approach to identifying areas for improvement. For example, they have produced detailed course handbooks as a response to a survey which showed that courses were sometimes chosen by students who had insufficient knowledge of their content and demands. While some teachers have recognised

that students should be given differentiated tasks to match their varying levels of ability, subject teams have been less successful in applying these perceptions in a sustained and purposeful way, to improve their teaching. Some targets that are set to improve performance are difficult to measure.

36 Teaching is thorough. Staff have the qualifications and experience to teach with authority, and have a very detailed knowledge of syllabuses and examination board requirements. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that particular care is taken to ensure that students learn satisfactorily, and understand new ideas. Staff check carefully and regularly that students have mastered the terminology used in subjects. The self-assessment report identified that a range of resources is effectively used in lessons. Teachers make selective use of video to illustrate key points and use high-quality handouts to provide necessary information. In the weaker lessons teachers failed to sustain the interest of students in the work; this weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report. In some classes the teacher talked for too long and students had few opportunities to respond to points being made, to contribute to discussions or to develop their own ideas.

37 Inspectors confirmed that individual students receive effective encouragement and support from staff who are well aware of their needs. Some of this help is given within lessons but is also offered in individual tutorials, in extra revision sessions and by referral to the learning support centre. Students are appreciative of the help they receive. There are support workshops for GCE A level students, but at the time of the inspection these were not available for all students. Much guidance is given to students through the positive and encouraging written comments on their assignments, although sometimes these comments lose their impact by not being sufficiently specific.

Curriculum Areas

38 Classrooms contain interesting display material which helps to create an atmosphere that encourages study of the subject. Some rooms are used effectively as subject resource bases and books are available to supplement the stock in the library. The library stock is sufficient for the needs of students studying these subjects and includes several copies of books that are used frequently. There are appropriate videos and CD-ROMs in stock. Some classrooms are timetabled for use by groups which are too large for them. These cramped conditions restrict the range of teaching styles which can be used and this weakness is recognised in the self-assessment report.

39 Students have a positive attitude to their work and most are able to make very effective and confident contributions in class. Students

work well together in group activities. These strengths were not recognised in the self-assessment report. Students' written work often demonstrates interest and good understanding but sometimes the ability to express ideas clearly and accurately is lacking. Pass rates in GCSE psychology and sociology are significantly above the national average for sixth form colleges. In 1998, GCE A level students in psychology achieved a pass rate higher than the national average for sixth form colleges. Students have consistently gained higher grades than those predicted from their GCSE results. Retention has been identified by staff in this curriculum area as an issue and an analysis of the reasons for drop out has been carried out. However, there has been no pattern of improvement over the range of courses between 1996 and 1998.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in general studies, law, politics, psychology and sociology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE psychology/social science	2	Expected completions	122	114	118
		Retention (%)	84	74	80
		Achievement (%)	84	91	87
GCSE law	2	Expected completions	52	49	54
		Retention (%)	90	80	82
		Achievement (%)	31	58	51
GCE A level psychology	3	Expected completions	89	101	94
		Retention (%)	71	66	73
		Achievement (%)	78	85	91
GCE A level sociology	3	Expected completions	89	149	118
		Retention (%)	75	76	75
		Achievement (%)	78	76	84
GCE A level politics	3	Expected completions	28	22	16
		Retention (%)	96	77	94
		Achievement (%)	93	82	80
GCE A level law	3	Expected completions	25	61	52
		Retention (%)	64	80	71
		Achievement (%)	92	79	81

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

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Support for Students

Grade 2

40 Inspectors agreed with the strengths in the self-assessment report but found that one key weakness had been understated.

Key strengths

- students are well-informed and make effective choices
- readily available counselling support and welfare services
- effective procedures to support students progressing to higher education
- a well-organised and well-managed student executive

Weaknesses

- the lack of appropriate learning support for some students
- some aspects of the tutorial programme

41 Inspectors agreed with the college that there are comprehensive procedures for informing students and parents about the college. Liaison with partner schools is well established and good use is made of college open days. Induction starts in July when students meet their personal tutor to discuss their programme of study, and continues in September in curriculum areas and through tutorials and assemblies. There are clear guidelines on entry requirements to courses and on the content of student programmes. The process is reviewed on an annual basis, and changes are made to improve the system. Surveys of students indicate a high level of satisfaction with their transition to college. The college distributes both an information handbook and diary to students and a well-prepared handbook to parents. Parent evenings take place throughout the year.

42 All students have a personal tutor. Time is allocated for the provision of individual tutorials and for registration. Additional time is allocated

for specific activities such as courses on stress management and study skills. Effective procedures support the work of tutors and include the monitoring of student record files. Students are clear about the tutor's role as the first point of contact when there are queries or problems. Students value the individual student interview highly but are less enthusiastic about some topics in the extended tutor programme. Inspectors found that some records of interviews lack sufficient detail. The identification of student needs is often carried out by tutors rather than the students themselves, and does not always result in precise target-setting. Informative reports on progress are discussed with students before they are issued to parents. The tutorial programme is accredited through a national scheme. There are sound procedures to monitor student attendance and remedial action is taken immediately attendance falls below the college target of 85%.

43 Since the last inspection the college has improved the co-ordination of learning support for students. A co-ordinator and assistant have been appointed, a base room established and a start has been made on initial diagnostic assessment. The co-ordinator works with schools to identify students with additional support needs before enrolment. Tutors have been briefed to recognise signs of dyslexia in students, who are then referred to the co-ordinator. There is a clear plan to develop additional support provision but the timescales for implementation are long and some students do not receive appropriate support. Students are able to refer themselves for learning support. GNVQ students are given a basic skills assessment on entry in order to identify learning support needs. A pilot screening project linked to the literacy skills required in GCE A level humanities was administered to all students enrolling in the faculty this year. The project identified more students needing support than are receiving it. Students studying GCE A levels are not screened across the full range of skills required for their programmes. For example, there is little screening for numeracy skills. Not

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all teachers working with dyslexic students have been trained sufficiently on how to support them. These weaknesses in learning support are recognised by the college.

44 The careers department is well organised and well resourced. There is a service level agreement with Essex Careers and Business Partnership. Comprehensive handbooks complete with worksheets assist students in applying to higher education or seeking employment. The college is successful in ensuring that all students have a careers interview and agree an action plan for their identified career aim. A range of activities, including higher education fairs and visits to institutions, support students applying for higher education. There is a much less developed programme for the 30% of students seeking employment.

45 The counselling service, which is well used, is provided by a qualified counsellor in conjunction with a consultative peer support system. Students have access to a nurse and regular clinic. Good links with a range of outside agencies have led to awareness raising sessions for students on health issues, for example HIV/AIDS and drugs. Student questionnaires show a high level of support for this comprehensive range of services and events. The college provides subsidised transport for some students, and advice on applying for grant aid is readily available.

46 A student executive is elected annually by the whole student body. Students and members of the executive consider that their views are taken seriously by college managers. The executive has a residential conference at which targets are set for the year's activities. The officers have well-defined job descriptions. The executive makes a presentation of its business plan to the principal and a report is submitted to the governors. A self-assessment report on student executive activities is also produced. The learning experiences of members of the student executive in their year of office are externally accredited.

General Resources

Grade 2

47 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. However, they concluded that the college had overstated some strengths.

Key strengths

- well-maintained accommodation of good quality
- a pleasant working environment conducive to learning
- the well-organised and welcoming library and learning resource centre
- excellent sports and fitness facilities

Weaknesses

- some cramped teaching accommodation
- deficiencies in IT provision
- insufficient refectory and common room space for students at peak times

48 The college's main buildings date back to the 1930s. Subsequent additions have been made up to the early 1990s. The sports facilities were substantially extended in 1996 to provide a well-resourced sports and fitness centre which is available to students and staff and to the local community. Most of the accommodation is in good condition and is well maintained. The William Palmer College Educational Trust has set high standards for the maintenance of the buildings and grounds. The effective five-year planned maintenance programme is reviewed annually. There have been regular improvements to, and adaptations of, specialist classrooms, laboratories and teaching areas which have been clearly linked to curriculum planning. Substantial financial support has been provided by the Trust.

49 The college provides a pleasant working environment for students and staff which is conducive to learning. There is a spacious and

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welcoming central reception area. Buildings are well signposted and are generally clean and tidy. Corridors and many classrooms contain attractive visual displays. Classrooms are generally grouped into curriculum areas and most are of good quality. Audiovisual aids are readily available. Some classrooms are too small to accommodate the size of group that is allocated to them. The self-assessment report acknowledged that there is insufficient refectory and common room space for students at peak times. There is generally good provision for staff working areas; all faculties have their own staff rooms, which include adequate storage space and access to computers.

50 As the college stated in its self-assessment report, the library resource centre provides a welcoming atmosphere for students and staff. Careful attention has been paid to maintaining features of the original architecture and design whilst adapting the accommodation to suit current needs for study. Effective use has been made of the available space to create a variety of study areas including space for private study and for group work. There are adequate resources to meet the learning requirements of all curriculum areas. The bookstock is in excess of 15,000 volumes. There are 380 videos which are classified and shelved with the bookstock. Students have access to over 120 CD-ROMs, 35 computers, and the internet. The computerised catalogue provides students and staff with a range of search facilities. The library resource centre staff are well qualified. They maintain strong links with teaching staff and actively promote the services available to both students and staff. Quality assurance procedures have been established to monitor both usage and the service provided. Analysis of library statistics and students' questionnaires indicate a high level of usage and of satisfaction with services of the library learning resource centre.

51 The provision of IT equipment for the use of staff and students has increased significantly since the last inspection. However, the college

has recognised the need to improve further the facilities for IT and has produced a second comprehensive IT development plan. An IT development group meets regularly to consider key issues and to monitor the progress of the IT strategy. About 200 computers are available for students' use; the ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is 1:7. The self-assessment report recognised that a significant number of machines are not compatible with standard IBM. There is no college-wide computer network, although local networks have been introduced in some curriculum areas. Access to the internet is restricted to a single machine in the library learning resource centre. The college has identified the urgent need to network the open access computers in the library learning resource centre and has produced an action plan to achieve a solution.

52 The previous inspection report noted problems of access for wheelchair users in many of the buildings. The college conducted a feasibility study to consider the installation of a lift but concluded that the costs would be prohibitive. Effective alternative steps have been taken to ensure that students with restricted mobility are able to study at the college: classes have been moved to downstairs rooms where necessary; ramps and handrails have been introduced; parking spaces have been reserved for students with disabilities; and there is a toilet adapted for use by people with disabilities.

53 Inspectors agreed with the college that staff and students have access to high-quality sports and fitness facilities, which have been adapted to provide access for people with disabilities. The facilities include: a health and fitness suite; a four court sports hall; a 22 metre indoor swimming pool; squash courts; and Astroturf tennis courts. The sports and fitness centre has attracted a membership of over 2,000 and in June 1997 was awarded the Thurrock business award for the 'Best New (large) Business'.

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Quality Assurance

Grade 2

54 The college has made steady progress since the last inspection in improving the quality assurance arrangements. Inspectors were in broad agreement with the strengths in the self-assessment report but identified two additional significant weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-established and comprehensive arrangements for quality assurance
- clear and well-defined responsibilities for all aspects of the quality assurance programme
- the establishment and careful monitoring of service standards for support areas
- the strong commitment to staff development
- the comprehensive and rigorous self-assessment process

Weaknesses

- insufficient monitoring of course and faculty action plans
- underdeveloped arrangements for assessing the quality of classroom practice
- the lack of systematic procedures for gathering employers' views

55 The college is committed to continuous improvement of the quality of the provision and the achievement of students. Since the last inspection the college has introduced mechanisms to assess the potential performance of all students based on their qualifications at entry. The targets for students' achievements are closely monitored. The value-added scheme used by the college provides an effective basis for comparing the success rates of different groups of students across the range of subjects that is offered.

56 There is a well-planned approach to self-assessment which builds on existing quality assurance arrangements. Inspectors agreed that self-assessment is comprehensive and covers all teaching and support areas. Evidence to support judgements was rigorously reviewed and moderated by a self-assessment group. The college acknowledges that the procedures for self-assessment are not yet fully integrated with the other arrangements for assuring quality. There was limited use of lesson observations to inform the judgements on teaching and learning. Lesson observations are not yet used to share good practice and inform staff development. Action is being taken to remedy this situation.

57 The quality assurance framework has been extensively revised since the last inspection and responsibility for its management clarified. Inspectors agreed that quality assurance procedures cover all areas of the work of the college. Well-defined quality standards are listed in the staff manual, together with clear procedures and milestones for achievement. Teachers and support staff have a good understanding of aspects of the quality assurance programme and this is recognised in the self-assessment report.

58 Service standards have been established for all support areas in consultation with staff. The progress made towards the achievement of the set targets is carefully monitored. Where appropriate, standards have been included in the informative and well-presented college charter. The document is continually reviewed and the charter pledges are carefully monitored. The complaints procedure is clear and well understood by students.

59 The quality assurance programme is audited on a planned cycle. The quality audit group checks for compliance with the quality standards and the effectiveness of the quality programme. The senior management team considers the comprehensive audit reports; most of the recommendations for improvements

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have been adopted. The self-assessment report understated the value of the work of the quality audit group, which checks the effectiveness of the quality assurance programme. For example, as a result of their work, significant improvements have been made to the college's careers service and to health and safety procedures for student trips and visits.

60 The regular meetings held by departments and faculties are well documented and constitute an integral part of the quality assurance programme. The action points arising from these meetings do not always explicitly state who is responsible for the action or the timescale for implementation. There is insufficient monitoring and reporting of progress on the action points at subsequent meetings. This weakness was not noted in the self-assessment report.

61 Inspectors confirmed that effective use is made of college surveys. Students' views are gathered by various means and they indicate high levels of student satisfaction. However, as there is no standardised course review questionnaire it is difficult to compare levels of student satisfaction within departments and across the college. The college recognises that there are inconsistencies and action is being taken to resolve this issue. A positive development has been the use of focus groups to gain more valuable feedback from students. Improvements resulting from student feedback include changes to the timing of work experience and better guidance on study materials. Parents' views about the college obtained at open evenings are overwhelmingly positive. The college has a range of contacts with employers which provide, for example, work placements and visiting speakers. There are underdeveloped procedures to gather systematically employers' views about the college and the curriculum. This weakness was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

62 Inspection confirmed the college's commitment to the development of its staff.

There is a well-established annual professional review for all staff. The outcomes of reviews inform staff development activities. There is a sufficient budget to cover most requests for staff development. Approximately 75% of staff attended an external training event in the last 12 months. Development sessions are arranged within college as the need arises, for example for IT and GNVQ training. Staff development activities are thoroughly evaluated. Staff are required to disseminate information on their development activity. The college achieved Investor in People status in 1998.

Governance

Grade 2

63 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. Inspectors found that some of the strengths were overstated and a number of weaknesses had not been recognised.

Key strengths

- the commitment and expertise of governors
- the clerking of the corporation and most committee business
- the clear understanding of the distinction between the roles of governance and management
- governors' involvement in the development of the strategic plan
- governors' close monitoring of the college's financial position

Weaknesses

- shortcomings in the method of operation of the remuneration and search committees
- some inappropriate delegation by the corporation
- insufficient monitoring of the college's corporate objectives

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64 The corporation has 17 members; there is appropriate representation from business and the Trust. Inspectors agreed that governors bring to the corporation a wide range of skills, as well as experience, in accountancy, the law, the media, business, and public and voluntary service. Governors' commitment to the college is demonstrated by the very high levels of attendance at meetings of the corporation and its committees. Corporation membership is stable, with many long-serving members. Advertising has been used to recruit new members, who then receive an effective induction to the work of the college and to their new responsibilities. Training is available for governors, and is valued by those who take up the offer.

65 The self-assessment report stated that the work of committees is well defined but there are no terms of reference for the search committee. The appointment of business members is incorrectly delegated to the search committee. There are also a few shortcomings associated with the remuneration committee: it is clerked by the chair of the corporation; the minutes of the committee lack sufficient detail; and the minutes are not reported to the corporation.

66 Inspectors agreed that governors understand the respective roles of governance and management. This understanding is evident in the work of the corporation and its committees, where a successful working relationship exists between corporation members and senior managers. The FEFC audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially fulfils its responsibilities in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

67 The business of the corporation and most of its committees is effectively administered, a strength that was not fully reflected in the self-assessment report. Agendas and minutes are

timely and clear, and are supported by appropriate papers. There is very little use of tabled papers. Governors are well briefed on developments in further education. The clerk to the corporation has a wide range of other responsibilities within the college but governors have taken appropriate action to ensure the effectiveness of the role of clerk, including a job description and appropriate clerical support from an assistant clerk.

68 Inspectors agreed that governors effectively monitor the college's financial position. The corporation and the finance committee receive the college's management accounts at appropriate intervals; they are fully scrutinised. However, the approval of the college's three-year financial forecast has been inappropriately delegated to the chair of the finance and premises committee. The corporation is provided with a copy of the forecast after approval. Consequently, consideration of the college's strategic plan takes place separately from the approval of the three-year financial forecast.

69 Corporation members are fully involved in the strategic planning process. Some governors, together with senior managers, participated in a strategic planning conference which examined in detail a draft strategic plan for 1997 to 2000. The college recognises that monitoring of progress towards the corporate objectives within the 1997 to 2000 strategic plan has been too infrequent.

70 Governors have been involved substantially in self-assessment. Together with senior managers, and staff from other colleges, they were involved in the moderation of the college's self-assessment report. Governors have established a two-year cycle to review the corporation's performance. Reviews have taken place each year, most recently in May 1998, when the college's draft self-assessment report for governance and a draft code of conduct and practice were considered.

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71 Governors receive information about the college's academic performance through frequent reports from the principal. Although these are discussed thoroughly, there is no comprehensive schedule of the information on performance that the corporation expects to receive. Governors have recently asked to receive data that cover a three-year period, to enable trends to be monitored effectively. Data and targets are not always presented clearly. For example, the overall targets for retention and achievement presented in the principal's report are not entirely consistent with the faculty targets presented to the corporation in the report's supporting papers.

72 As the self-assessment report notes, the corporation has established policies for openness and accountability. There is a code of conduct and practice for governors which also acts as standing orders for the corporation. A register of interests has been established for governors and is reviewed annually. Minutes of the corporation and its committees are in principle available to the general public but they are not easy for them to obtain.

73 Inspectors confirmed that, although the performance of senior postholders has been reviewed as part of the college's review process, the outcomes of these reviews have not been reported to governors. For example, the review of the previous principal, conducted by the chair of the audit committee, has not been reported to the corporation.

Management

Grade 2

74 Strengths in the self-assessment report were generally supported by the evidence found during inspection. The significance of the weaknesses was understated. Some weaknesses identified in the previous inspection that relate to management have not been fully remedied.

Key strengths

- clearly defined and regularly reviewed roles and responsibilities
- effective communication of information and decisions to staff
- a well-planned and well-managed curriculum
- effective links and liaison with other educational institutions
- clearly-documented policies, regularly reviewed and effectively monitored
- comprehensive and timely financial management information

Weaknesses

- a lack of faculty plans relating to the college operating statement
- insufficient monitoring of the achievement of targets and objectives
- information needs of management insufficiently identified

75 The college management structure and the responsibilities of managers are clear. A comprehensive staff manual includes job descriptions as well as criteria for assessing the effectiveness of managers. Job descriptions are reviewed regularly. The role of the six heads of faculty, who report directly to the principal, has been strengthened since the last inspection. They now have clearly-defined responsibilities for managing the operation of departments as well as a pivotal role in co-ordinating the pastoral support and the academic management of the college. The college recognises the need to develop further the role of the faculty head.

76 A review of the strategic plan identified little success in developing part-time provision of adult education. A revised three-year plan is more closely focused on the college's core provision for full-time students aged 16 to 19. However, the plan does not identify measurable targets or performance criteria relating to most of the objectives. Faculties and support services

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have not identified the actions they need to take to achieve the objectives identified in the plan. The college recognises that procedures are not in place for regular monitoring of targets in the strategic plan by management and governors. Targets for college managers recorded in professional reviews are not closely related to the college's strategic objectives. The college acknowledges the need to review the college's planning cycle to ensure a closer relationship between objectives and targets at all levels.

77 Inspectors confirmed that information and decisions made by managers are effectively communicated to staff. Staff appreciate the open management style, regard their managers as effective and find the college a friendly, pleasant and business-like place in which to work. College policies and procedures cover key aspects of college operations and are well documented in the staff manual. The equal opportunities policy provides a clear statement of the rights of students and staff and the equal opportunities working group has commissioned initiatives to monitor and raise awareness of issues comprehensively.

78 Management information is generally reliable and accurate. The management information system has been developed considerably since the last inspection. However, the development plan has not been formally reviewed in the last three years and the information needs of managers have not been analysed. There is no manual that documents operational procedures. The system is not sufficiently used to monitor regularly the achievement of college targets. Departments and faculties are required to prepare an action plan for each course identifying how targets for retention, achievement and the adding of value to students' progress will be achieved. They review and publish their achievement annually but do not receive summary interim data to enable them to assess progress against performance indicators.

79 The curriculum is effectively managed. A well-organised enrichment programme provides opportunity to gain qualifications in a wide range of areas. The low level of provision of GCE AS courses reduces the flexibility of the curriculum for some students. The effective management of courses is supported by regular departmental and faculty staff meetings which work to clear agendas. Resources are deployed efficiently. The smaller allocation of contact hours to courses has reduced costs without loss of staff morale or reductions in levels of achievement.

80 The effective marketing policy is focused on the college's core business for full-time students aged 16 to 19 and conducted largely through its well-managed liaison programme with partner schools. Termly meetings of subject liaison groups and a curriculum management group support the planned transfer of students from school to college. There is a close relationship with Thurrock College through regular meetings between senior staff. A small programme of courses is offered directly to business interests in the locality and includes well-established training courses for Thameside Community Health Care Trust. The college is an associate college of Anglia Polytechnic University and a member of a compact with local universities that includes Anglia Polytechnic University. The college has conducted some exploration of markets beyond those for students aged 16 to 19. The marketing strategy does not give sufficient attention to college objectives that relate to liaison with industry.

81 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The head of finance has long experience and is supported by a suitably resourced finance team. The college's monthly management accounts are produced regularly and in good time. The management accounts include income and expenditure, balance sheet and cashflow forecasting 12 months ahead. A commentary on the

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management accounts is produced quarterly. Monthly reports are produced for budget holders and the content of these reports can be varied to meet budget holders' preferences. Financial management information is not produced directly from the college's accounting system. There has been a low level of resources for internal audit which is being addressed by the college. Financial regulations are up to date but do not include a procedure for dealing with irregularity.

Conclusions

82 The inspection team found that the college's self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning the inspection. Many of the findings of the report are confirmed by the inspection team. Inspectors agreed with two of the curriculum grades awarded by the college. Where they disagreed, one area was graded by inspectors as outstanding. Inspectors awarded one grade lower than the college in the other two curriculum areas. Inspectors agreed with only one of the five grades awarded for cross-college provision. In those areas where the inspection team and the college disagreed, inspectors considered the college to be overgenerous.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (November 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	99
19-24 years	1
25+ years	0
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	1
Intermediate	12
Advanced	87
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	253	0	18
Agriculture	12	0	1
Engineering	10	0	1
Business	236	0	16
Hotel and catering	47	0	3
Health and community care	39	0	3
Art and design	188	0	13
Humanities	659	0	45
Total	1,444	0	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 18% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (November 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	81	0	0	81
Supporting direct learning contact	14	0	0	14
Other support	20	0	0	20
Total	115	0	0	115

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£4,199,000	£4,349,000	£4,481,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£18.20	£17.97	£17.32
Payroll as a proportion of income	71%	72%	71%
Achievement of funding target	103%	103%	100%
Diversity of income	8%	9%	11%
Operating surplus	£25,000	£9,000	-£41,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

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

Payroll – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

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

Diversity of income – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circular 97/35 (1996), college (1997 and 1998)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18		
		1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	18	21	15
	Retention (%)	90	95	93
	Achievement (%)	60	60	71
2	Expected completions	1,515	1,428	1,374
	Retention (%)	81	82	79
	Achievement (%)	62	63	74
3	Expected completions	1,319	1,485	1,607
	Retention (%)	74	73	73
	Achievement (%)	85	85	84
4 or 5	Expected completions	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Short courses	Expected completions	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: ISR

n/a not applicable

Note: there are no students aged 19 or over

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