

Pershore and Hindlip 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

Pershore and Hindlip College

West Midlands Region

Inspected April 1999

Pershore and Hindlip College in Worcestershire was formed from the merger in May 1997 of Pershore College of Horticulture and the Worcestershire College of Agriculture. The two main campuses are 12 miles apart. A further merger with an agricultural college in Herefordshire is awaiting approval from the secretary of state. The self-assessment report produced for the inspection was the college's first. All staff and governors were involved in the process. The report was detailed but did not clearly indicate key strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college in two curriculum areas and three cross-college areas.

The college offers land-based courses from foundation level to degree level and part-time courses in business studies. Provision was inspected in agriculture and countryside, equine studies and animal care, and horticulture. Since the last inspections, the number of students has increased substantially and the college has widened access to its courses. There has been significant investment to improve facilities for students since the merger, particularly at the Hindlip campus. The quality of the provision in horticulture, based at the Pershore campus, is outstanding. Retention and achievement rates are high. In the other subject areas, teaching is satisfactory but the proportion of lessons judged

by inspectors to be good or outstanding was well below the national average. Data on student retention and achievement for courses based at the former Worcestershire College of Agriculture at Hindlip are incomplete. Figures available indicate some good achievements but some poor retention rates. Overall, attendance rates and class sizes were above the national average. However, student numbers on some courses are low. Students receive helpful practical support. They value the informal help given by tutors. Resources for learning are good in most areas but insufficient for practical work in animal care. There is a well-established quality assurance system. Governors are highly supportive of the college and have played a significant role in the development of the existing and planned mergers. Financial management and planning are strong. The college has close links with industry. The college should: continue to improve aspects of support for students; take appropriate steps to increase the proportion of its teaching that is good or better; further improve its resources; develop its self-assessment process to include more rigorous evaluation; use quality assurance measures to ensure similar levels of provision across sites; and address weaknesses in the management structure.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Agriculture and countryside	3	Support for students	3
Equine studies and animal care	3	General resources	2
Horticulture	1	Quality assurance	3
		Governance	2
		Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Pershore and Hindlip College was established in May 1997 through the merger of Pershore College of Horticulture and Worcestershire College of Agriculture. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has approved a second merger with the land-based Holme Lacy College in Herefordshire. Subject to the secretary of state's decision, it is expected that the two institutions will merge on 1 August 1999.

2 Pershore and Hindlip College is in Worcestershire. There are four general further education colleges nearby at Worcester, Evesham, Bromsgrove and Kidderminster. Three colleges which offer land-based courses in Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Herefordshire are close enough to be in competition with the college. Worcestershire is a mainly rural county, with its population concentrated in a few urban centres in the north and east. Poor public transport and long travelling distances are barriers to widening participation in education. Most of the rural workforce is employed in small businesses, mainly involved in agriculture and horticulture. Unemployment is low, at just over 3%.

3 The college operates on two main campuses, at Pershore, and at Hindlip, 12 miles to the north and close to Worcester, and at two smaller centres at Kings Heath Park and the Birmingham Nature Centre in south Birmingham, the latter through an annual agreement with Birmingham City Council Leisure Services. The college provides further education and training for the land-based industries. Block release training programmes in supervisory management make up a significant part of the total further education provision. There is provision for students with moderate learning difficulties. Higher education programmes are offered in collaboration with three partner institutions: University College Worcester; the University of Central England;

and the Royal Agricultural College. The college works with three training and enterprise councils (TECs): the Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, Herefordshire and Worcestershire; Dudley TEC; and Birmingham and Solihull TEC. The college also collaborates with the Royal Horticultural Society by acting as its regional centre, providing nearly 100 short courses a year for its members. The college's schools centre at the Hindlip campus is visited annually by around 2,500 pupils from local primary schools. Full-time students are recruited on a regional and national basis and a small number come from abroad. A three-fold growth in funding units has been achieved since incorporation, along with a reduction in the average level of funding from £47.78 in 1993-94 to £18.42 in 1998-99. In November 1998, the college had 500 full-time and 1,582 part-time students.

4 The 55-hectare site at Pershore provides specialist facilities for horticulture and floristry. The Hindlip campus has programmes for agriculture, equine studies, animal care, countryside management and motor vehicle maintenance. The primary purpose of the 200-hectare farm at Hindlip and the horticultural trading units at Pershore is to provide practical teaching resources in support of the land-based curriculum, but they are managed as commercial enterprises. There are residential facilities at the Pershore campus for 135 students.

5 In November 1998, the college employed 183 permanent and fixed-term full-time equivalent staff, and four full-time equivalent staff on a casual basis. The senior management team comprises the principal, vice-principal, director of finance and administration, five heads of academic departments and the head of academic services.

6 The college's mission is to be a local, regional and national centre of excellence for education and training in land-based, business

Context

and such other studies that meet the needs of individuals, employers and the wider community. The strategic aims are to:

- provide quality education and training programmes that are vocationally focused, flexible and financially efficient
- operate an admissions policy that encourages and increases participation in education and training, and ensures equal opportunity for all who might benefit from the college's provision
- develop individuals to have the academic, intellectual, technical and transferable skills required for employment
- invest in the continued development of the college's human and physical resources to provide a caring and supportive environment in which both students and staff feel valued.

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during the week beginning 19 April 1999. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. Data on students' achievements from the individualised student record (ISR) for 1996 and 1997 for the former Worcestershire College of Agriculture were not sufficiently reliable to be used for the inspection. The college supplied achievement and retention data for 1998. Inspectors checked these against class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies and found them reliable. The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected about two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 37 days. Inspectors observed 44 lessons, including tutorials, and examined students' work and documentation about the college and its courses. They attended a corporation meeting and held meetings with governors, managers, staff and students.

8 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, 45% were rated good or outstanding. This profile is significantly below the average of 65% for all colleges inspected in 1997-98, and the average for agriculture colleges of 56%. No lessons were graded as less than satisfactory and, in horticulture, 84% of the lessons were rated good or outstanding.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GNVQ	0	1	4	0	0	5
NVQ and higher education	2	1	0	0	0	3
Other vocational	3	12	17	0	0	32
Other	0	1	3	0	0	4
Total (No.)	5	15	24	0	0	44
Total (%)	11	34	55	0	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*

9 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Attendance at lessons was good on most courses.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Pershore and Hindlip College	12.7	88
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

Agriculture and Countryside

Grade 3

10 Inspectors observed 10 lessons, covering full-time courses at intermediate and advanced level in agriculture and the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) in land and environment. They found some weaknesses not included in the self-assessment report and considered that a number of strengths had been overstated.

Key strengths

- strong links with industry
- clear assignment briefs with appropriate grading criteria
- effective incorporation of key skills into course programmes
- thorough and regular reporting of students' progress to parents

Weaknesses

- lack of a clear structure in many lessons
- ineffective use of question and answer techniques by teachers and failure to check students' notes
- failure to take account of the range of students' knowledge and experience in combined groups
- some industrial experience not effectively monitored or assessed

11 The college offers a range of courses in agriculture from intermediate to advanced level. It is one of the few colleges to have piloted the GNVQ in land and environment. Additional qualifications can be gained in related areas, including food and environmental protection, forklift truck driving and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3. There are low numbers on some courses in the 1998-99 academic year. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that strong links with industry enhance students' learning

opportunities. Employers' views are sought at regular meetings of the college's agriculture industry liaison group. Links with industry contribute to students' learning in a number of ways. Students benefit from a range of visits, talks by outside speakers and practical work on local farms. They also have opportunities for industrial work experience as part of their courses. The effectiveness of the work experience timetabled for one day a week, which students do in addition to farm duties and other work experience in vacation periods, is not effectively monitored. Assessment of students' performance in the workplace is not undertaken on a regular basis. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

12 Teachers use relevant examples from industry to enliven and inform class discussions. However, many lessons lacked a clear structure and teachers did not make clear to students what they were expected to achieve. Teachers give too little guidance on note-taking and do not ensure that students' written notes are of a reasonable quality. Some students' notes are poor. In a significant number of lessons, teachers did not question students effectively and involved only a minority in discussion. The teaching of core subjects to groups combined from students on different courses does not take into account the range of knowledge and experience within the group. In these lessons, teachers failed to vary their teaching and learning activities appropriately and did not pay enough attention to the needs of individual students. Inspectors agreed that key skills have been incorporated effectively into course programmes and assignment briefs. Students understand the purpose of key skills and how they are assessed. Key skills in information technology (IT) are particularly well integrated with all programmes. However, many schemes of work consist only of headings and titles and make little attempt to show the links between different subjects or between practical and theory sessions. Students' attendance at lessons is good and above the national average.

Curriculum Areas

13 Students undertake a broad range of appropriate assessment tasks. Assignments have clear briefs, using a standard format. Most assignments are based on relevant vocational topics, and involve students in gaining knowledge and understanding through working on realistic problems. Teachers give constructive feedback to students on their assignments and take care to correct technical inaccuracies and spelling mistakes. Students' progress is thoroughly and regularly reported to parents through parents' evenings and written reports.

14 Pass and retention rates for the national certificate in agriculture in 1997-98 were good:

all of the small number of students who completed the course achieved the award. Retention and achievement rates on GNVQ land and environment in 1997-98 at intermediate level were 67% and 63%, respectively, and at advanced level were 92% and 50%. No national comparators are yet available for this qualification.

15 The college's specialist resources are used effectively to support learning. Farm staff help to supervise students' farm duties and the farm manager has a regular updating session with students, using information from a farm diary document. Staff devote considerable time to developing and improving the farm facilities.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate in land and environment	2	Expected completions	*	#	12
		Retention (%)	*	#	67
		Achievement (%)	*	#	63
National certificate in agriculture	2	Expected completions	#	#	4
		Retention (%)	#	#	100
		Achievement (%)	#	#	100
GNVQ advanced in land and environment	3	Expected completions	*	*	13
		Retention (%)	*	*	92
		Achievement (%)	*	*	50

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

*first results of pilot in 1997 (intermediate) and 1998 (advanced)

#no reliable ISR data

Curriculum Areas

Equine Studies and Animal Care

Grade 3

16 Inspectors observed 21 lessons at intermediate and advanced level in equine studies and animal care. The self-assessment reports for each area did not clearly identify key strengths and weaknesses. Some strengths were overstated. Some weaknesses had been addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- highly motivated and responsive students
- well-managed and maintained resources
- close links with industry
- good rates of progression to further education and employment

Weaknesses

- lack of appropriate level and pace of learning in many lessons
- ineffective management of work placements in animal care
- insufficient resources for the development of practical skills in animal care

17 Animal care courses have developed since the last inspection and the range of provision is growing. Intermediate and advanced level programmes are provided at Hindlip and students can also study for first and national diplomas at the Birmingham Nature Centre. Courses in equine studies are provided from intermediate to higher national diploma level but numbers on some courses have been low. All students are encouraged to gain additional qualifications. Although equine studies students have a programme of key skills, IT is not fully integrated with the curriculum.

18 The programmes have clear schemes of work, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. Teachers use examples from their own experience and from the college's practical resources to enhance theory lessons. Many lessons are not well planned and the work is not demanding enough for all students. Students are highly enthusiastic about their courses and, when given the opportunity, contribute well in lessons. However, teachers do not make enough use of discussion to deepen students' understanding and group work is not always well managed. Assignment briefs are not always clear and some of the tasks set are unrealistic.

19 Equine studies and animal care students undertake practical duties as part of their course. The animal care unit is developing systems for recording this activity but there is insufficient supervision to monitor students' competence. There are good opportunities for equine studies students to develop practical skills. They have four riding sessions a week and all students can do extra practical work on Wednesday afternoons. Staff and students show a clear awareness and understanding of health and safety. There are not enough practical lessons in comparison with theory lessons in the timetable to provide sufficient opportunities for the development and monitoring of students' practical skills on some animal care courses.

20 Attendance is good, a strength identified in the self-assessment report. Students are courteous and attentive, contributing well to classroom and practical activities. Retention rates are carefully monitored and reasons for withdrawal are well documented. There have been some high pass rates but retention has been low on some courses. In 1996-97, all of the small number of students on the national certificate and diploma courses completed their programme and achieved pass rates of 100% and 75%, respectively. Progression to employment and to higher level courses is good.

21 The department has close formal and informal links with industry. Advisory

Curriculum Areas

committees support course development and ensure that courses meet the needs of industry. Members of the college's equine industry liaison group meet students to discuss and evaluate the needs of the course. Work placement forms a major part of the learning experience and is valued by students. However, students on animal care placements are not effectively monitored and opportunities to link work placement with the curriculum are not always used.

22 Practical facilities for animal care exist at the Hindlip campus and at the Birmingham Nature Centre. The Birmingham centre provides for students who could not otherwise attend the animal care courses. The college provides transport for these students one day a week so that they can use the specialist facilities at Hindlip. The limited practical resources in animal care restrict opportunities for students to gain practical experience. There are not enough dogs and cats available to allow students to gain experience of essential practical tasks. The current location of the animal care unit at Hindlip makes further expansion difficult.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in equine studies and animal care, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma in animal care	2	Expected completions	*	#	28
		Retention (%)	*	#	75
		Achievement (%)	*	#	64
National certificate in equine studies	2	Expected completions	#	#	3
		Retention (%)	#	#	67
		Achievement (%)	#	#	100
National diploma in animal care	3	Expected completions	*	*	14
		Retention (%)	*	*	64
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
National diploma in equine studies	3	Expected completions	*	#	14
		Retention (%)	*	#	50
		Achievement (%)	*	#	86

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

*course not offered

#no reliable ISR data

Equine facilities are adequate for the courses run by the department, including higher national diplomas, but the indoor riding school is small. Students have access to good learning resources at the Hindlip site but, as the self-assessment report stated, there are not enough animal care books. Practical resources at Hindlip are well managed and maintained.

23 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that course administration is good. There is an effective system for reporting students' achievements to students and their parents. Course team members are enthusiastic and committed. They give good support to students and work hard to develop resources and course provision. They follow standard college procedures but do not always fully understand the implications. Over the last two years the teaching and management responsibilities of some staff have changed significantly but they have not been adequately supported for these changes by, for example, opportunities for them to update their technical skills.

Curriculum Areas

Horticulture

Grade 1

24 The inspection covered full-time courses in horticulture at intermediate and advanced levels and part-time higher national certificate provision. Inspectors observed 13 lessons. They agreed with most of the strengths in the college's self-assessment report but identified a few additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- high standards achieved by students in practical and written work
- well-planned teaching
- well-managed courses with appropriate assessment programmes
- high retention and pass rates on most courses
- clear vocational focus derived from strong industrial links and commercial activities
- high rates of employment among former students
- excellent resources for practical teaching

Weaknesses

- little development of IT in the curriculum

25 The horticulture department is the main user of the Pershore campus. It provides courses from foundation to degree level, in a wide range of specialisms. Inspectors agreed that effective use is made of campus facilities to give students a wide range of appropriate learning experiences. Most teaching is of a high standard. Teachers encourage students to ask questions and to engage in discussion in lessons, and they take account of the needs of individual students. In subjects such as business and

science and technology, teachers maintain students' interest by concentrating on the horticultural implications of these subjects. For example, in a lesson on the biology of insects the teacher related information on life cycle and morphology to problems of crop pest control. Students on national diploma courses undertake work placements in industry. There are effective systems for planning and monitoring course delivery. Assessment programmes are well planned and all assessment briefs are internally verified before use. Inspectors agreed with the college that the verification process results in improvements. Students are kept informed of their progress through regular tutorials and individual reports, which may be discussed with the student by the college principal.

26 With few exceptions, retention and achievement rates are high. Retention rates have been above 90% on two-thirds of the courses over the last three years, and achievement rates have exceeded 90% on most courses. Following discussion in departmental meetings, the college has set targets for retention and achievement. These are regularly monitored by course teams but, in some cases, there is no clear strategy for ensuring that they are met. Many assignments are carefully designed to provide an appropriate challenge for the more able students as well as meeting the requirements of examining bodies. Much of the work is of a high standard. Practical work is conducted with appropriate regard for health and safety. Students work well together in groups and produce good results. Participation in national competitions such as the Chelsea and Malvern Flower Shows, where student entries have won gold and silver medals in recent years, motivates students, provides opportunities for the development of transferable skills and encourages excellence.

27 The college has good links with the horticultural industry. Until recently, formal links were not well developed, a weakness noted

Curriculum Areas

in the self-assessment report and now rectified by the re-establishment of a horticultural liaison group. Former students are in demand in the industry. Over 85% of national diploma students progressed to jobs or higher education in 1997 and 1998. The timetable is well managed to give sufficient time for the teaching of core subjects whilst preserving time for specialist studies for each option area. Course teams are responsive to curriculum issues arising from feedback from students. Some students nevertheless express disappointment that they cannot spend more time in specialist practical lessons. All students on full-time and substantial part-time courses receive an introduction to IT that enables them to make use of the college's network. However, there is not enough use of IT skills in the curriculum.

28 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that teachers of horticulture are well qualified

and experienced and maintain strong contacts with the industry. These contacts are used in helping students to find work placements, for which the department has more offers than students to fill them. Facilities for practical work are excellent. They include commercial units that provide realistic working environments while generating income to help maintain the teaching facilities. Teachers' involvement in the commercial units helps to ensure that their teaching is up to date and has industrial credibility. Data on the business performance of the units are used in teaching. The campus grounds, which have large numbers of well-labelled plant specimens, several attractive model gardens designed and constructed by students, conservation areas, arboreta and three national plant collections, provide a rich educational resource.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma in horticulture	2	Expected completions	35	28	19
		Retention (%)	94	96	100
		Achievement (%)	87	96	100
National certificate in horticulture	2	Expected completions	49	45	34
		Retention (%)	88	93	82
		Achievement (%)	77	98	86
National diploma in horticulture	3	Expected completions	65	71	77
		Retention (%)	100	96	79
		Achievement (%)	100	95	98
Higher national certificate in horticulture	4	Expected completions	*	25	45
		Retention (%)	*	96	76
		Achievement (%)	*	100	97

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

*programme first completed in 1997

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 3

29 The college did not prepare a self-assessment report on support for students but included judgements within curriculum sections. Inspectors agreed with many of these judgements. Some strengths were overstated and some weaknesses were not identified. There have been some improvements since the last inspections.

Key strengths

- the range of information and advice available to students before enrolling
- effective induction
- effective monitoring of attendance and follow-up of absences
- helpful practical support for students

Weaknesses

- unmet learning support needs
- the uneven quality of tutorial provision
- ineffective arrangements for counselling
- underdeveloped careers education and guidance

30 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that students receive a range of useful information and advice before they enrol. The prospectus and applicants' handbooks are clearly presented and informative. The college runs monthly advice days and a series of open days and 'drop-in' advice sessions throughout the year. It also provides information and advice at a range of external events such as careers days and agricultural shows. Guidance and admissions procedures are well documented and systems usually work well. A recent survey of students' views has identified that guidance and admissions processes are less satisfactory in a few areas and the college is planning to address this. Interviews enable most students to make an informed choice about their studies.

31 The self-assessment identified that induction arrangements are good. Useful information is given about the course, college facilities, health and safety, learning support and study skills. Students have the opportunity for their prior learning to be accredited. Occasionally, tutors advising on this facility do not understand how the arrangements work. This weakness was stated in the self-assessment report and staff training has recently been provided.

32 Arrangements for learning support have developed since the last inspections. The college identifies a need for further improvements in its plan for 1998-99. The self-assessment did not identify some weaknesses in the effectiveness of this provision. All students on full-time and substantial part-time courses are screened to assess their additional support needs. The service also caters for students referred by tutors or who refer themselves. However, in 1997-98 almost half the students identified as needing support did not receive it and, in the current year, about one-third of those needing support are not receiving it. Liaison between learning support staff and course teams helps to link support to the content of students' vocational courses. Some support focuses on students' immediate problems with assignments, giving insufficient attention to addressing their underlying difficulties in basic skills. Learning support is not easily accessible for students at the smaller centres away from the main sites. Staff make suitable arrangements for supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

33 Inspectors found weaknesses in tutorials that were not included in the self-assessment report. Every student is entitled to tutorial support and has a personal tutor. The college has not developed a tutorial programme and individual tutors interpret what is required differently. While some students have a weekly individual or group tutorial, others see their tutor only if they have problems and some do

Cross-college Provision

not have a tutorial on some occasions because the time is used for extra subject teaching. The quality of tutorials inspected ranged from excellent to satisfactory. Action-planning is weak. Students are very appreciative of the informal help they receive from tutors outside lesson and tutorial times. Inspectors agreed that teachers monitor students' attendance closely and follow up absences; most courses have high attendance rates.

34 The college provides a range of helpful practical support including extensive free travel which enables students living in more remote rural areas or the inner-city areas of Birmingham to enrol on its courses. Financial support is available for students experiencing hardship. Appropriate materials and equipment are supplied. The system of wardens is valued by students and helps to create a friendly and supportive college community. The students' union organises a range of recreational activities, mainly at the Pershore campus. The union has regular meetings with the principal. A community committee involves students in decisions on improvements to campus life. Counselling arrangements are not effective. In spite of efforts to promote the counselling services available, many students and some staff are not aware of them. The college does not employ a qualified counsellor. Two members of staff have received some training in counselling skills. Wardens have recently undertaken initial awareness training on counselling skills.

35 Following a review of careers education and guidance in 1997, the college has produced a useful policy and action plan for improving provision. The college does not have a programme of careers education. It is part of the tutor's role to provide this but, in practice, careers education is underdeveloped. The college does not systematically provide opportunities for students to update and develop a national record of achievement. Under a partnership agreement with the local careers service, students benefit from individual careers

guidance interviews. Some find it difficult to attend because of their lesson timetables. The college's stock of careers information is not comprehensive and some materials are out of date. Most subject teachers give students advice and information about further education and employment opportunities and careers. This works particularly well in horticulture. Good displays of up-to-date job advertisements are posted outside the college libraries.

General Resources

Grade 2

36 Inspectors found strengths and weaknesses not identified in the self-assessment report, which made little mention of learning resources. The college has since undertaken a number of reviews and is now better informed about the quality of its resources.

Key strengths

- significant investment in improvement and refurbishment of accommodation
- effective property maintenance
- high standard of general accommodation on the Pershore campus
- good learning resource centre on the Hindlip campus
- extensive collection of books and other materials in the Pershore library
- good communal accommodation for students on the Pershore campus
- effective allocation of rooms

Weaknesses

- some poor accommodation on the Hindlip campus
- shortage of books in the Hindlip library
- incompatible IT systems

Cross-college Provision

37 The last inspection report for Pershore College of Horticulture identified significant strengths in the general accommodation. There are effective arrangements for monitoring the condition of buildings. The quality of the accommodation has been maintained since the last inspection and, in many cases, improved by planned refurbishment. Public areas are well decorated and welcoming. Classrooms are comfortably furnished and well equipped. Communal accommodation for students is good and a number of improvements have been made since the last inspection, including a refurbished social area leading to pleasant outdoor terraces. There is reasonable provision for outdoor sports but no covered area. The level of facilities in residential accommodation varies but most hostels have recently been refurbished and all are of an adequate standard.

38 The last inspection report for Worcestershire College of Agriculture identified that much of the accommodation on the Hindlip campus was poor. Since the merger, the college has invested heavily in improvements and there is now some good accommodation at this site, notably the resource centre and laboratory. However, as the self-assessment report identified, a number of weaknesses remain. Some teaching areas are of poor quality and the close proximity of some classrooms to the college farm adversely affects students' learning. The refectory has been redeveloped to good effect but is overcrowded at break times. Communal accommodation is poor. Students use the refectory as a social area and there are few recreational facilities. There is a lack of communal accommodation and areas for private study at the Birmingham Nature Centre. Most staff work areas are adequate or better. Staff at Pershore have good access to computers and there is reasonable access at Hindlip.

39 The college carefully plans and monitors its use of rooms. Use of the best rooms is maximised and classes are timetabled to have lessons close to the relevant specialist area. In term time weeks, when there is spare capacity

at Pershore, income is generated by letting surplus rooms. Block-release work is phased to extend the use of many rooms for most of the rest of the year. Careful planning has enabled the provision of enough rooms to meet demand on the Hindlip campus this year. However, the college has identified a likely shortage of classrooms next year and is using the timetable system to explore options for transfer of work to Pershore. The college has been slow to develop an overall accommodation strategy; a first draft has just been produced. A recent external audit of access for students with restricted mobility has provided detailed evidence for the judgement in the self-assessment report that there are some weaknesses in this respect. Access to the first-floor library at Pershore is very difficult for students with restricted mobility. Improvements since the last inspection include developments on the Hindlip campus, where the library has been relocated to the ground floor. The audit is being used to plan further work.

40 The new resource centre at Hindlip caters effectively for a range of study needs. The centre, which houses the library, computer suite and learning support workshop, is well furnished and welcoming. It is well used and valued by students. The self-assessment report made little reference to IT. The college has recently used consultants to review its IT facilities. A number of shortcomings identified in the consultants' report have been rectified but rationalisation is not complete. Although the number of machines is adequate to meet demand and most can run modern software, students are being taught on systems that are sometimes different from those available for them to use on their own. IT provision at the centres in Birmingham is old and outdated. Use of the library is closely monitored and the information is used effectively in planning, a strength not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Libraries on both sites have a good range of journals and extensive collections of leaflets and product information. There is a

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good range of books in the Pershore library and a relatively high number of texts per student. The number of books in the Hindlip library is low. Although there has been a substantial increase in the number of animal care books, the growth in student numbers has meant that there are still too few for each student. The self-assessment report identified a need to review the Pershore library. Inspectors agreed with the findings of the review that there are some weaknesses, including insufficient space and some small study areas.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

41 Inspectors agreed with the some of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but considered that the college had overstated its strengths. Many statements in the report were descriptive and did not contribute effectively to the grading of the area.

Key strengths

- strong college commitment to, and staff's understanding of, quality assurance
- rigorously-monitored quality assurance procedures
- effective action to obtain and respond to the views of students
- comprehensive staff appraisal

Weaknesses

- insufficiently evaluative and comprehensive self-assessment
- underdeveloped use of targets, standards and performance indicators
- lack of a full historical record of students' achievements for monitoring purposes

42 The college places a strong emphasis on quality assurance. A management review committee has responsibility for reviewing and supporting the system and regularly evaluating the level of compliance with the procedures. The college's performance on quality is also considered at every meeting of the senior management team. The academic board receives reports on many aspects of quality assurance. The depth of attention that it can give to some of these reports is constrained by the limited amount of time available in meetings for consideration of each report.

43 The college makes good use of the ISO 9002 quality management standard in its arrangements for quality assurance.

Registration has been maintained continuously since it was first achieved in October 1992. Clear procedures for the college's administrative and educational processes are specified in a two volume quality assurance manual. All procedures are audited and this leads to reports that highlight opportunities for improvement in areas where procedures are not being followed. The procedures do not effectively cover all key aspects of the college's work and there are significant variations in the quality of some aspects of the students' experience. Staff in some of the college's support services are involved in quality assurance arrangements but some have had little involvement in setting and monitoring their own standards of service.

44 The poor quality of data on students' achievements for 1995-96 and 1996-97 for courses at the former Worcestershire College of Agriculture has made it difficult for inspectors and the college to identify trends in performance. The self-assessment report acknowledged that course reviews do not take into account the performance of the previous year when reviewing how well courses have been delivered. This weakness is more significant than the college acknowledged, as annual course reviews do not consider students' achievements in relation to national averages or

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other benchmarks and rarely refer to performance in relation to targets. There is a general lack of reference to performance indicators in reviewing teaching, resources or the curriculum. The findings from lesson observation have not been well incorporated into the college's reviews and reports on quality.

45 The college pays good attention to students' views. Students are represented on course teams. Course review reports make good reference to the views of students on their courses and state clearly the action needed to improve areas causing dissatisfaction. The college charter clearly sets out the college's commitments to its students. There is an appropriate procedure for dealing with complaints and regular monitoring of the handling of complaints. The self-assessment report noted that the college's performance in relation to charter standards has not been adequately monitored.

46 Self-assessment is not yet sufficiently evaluative. The self-assessment report produced for the inspection was the first the college had undertaken. Significant staff development time has been devoted to preparing staff for self-assessment. A particular strength of the process was the good level of staff and governor involvement. However, the self-assessment report showed a lack of understanding of the guidance and requirements given in some of the relevant Council Circulars. There are significant omissions and most sections of the report do not contain sufficient judgements or evidence. Some strengths are repeated and some are undermined by weaknesses. All weaknesses are stated as facts without supporting evidence. The evidence for strengths lacks quantifiable measures of performance. There is no specific reference to self-assessment in the quality assurance section of the report.

47 The college is recognised as an Investor in People. Staff appraisal is comprehensive. There is a single scheme for the whole college and all staff have an annual appraisal review. These

reviews help to identify staff development needs but inspectors found that some needs, for example for technical skills updating, had not been identified or met. Staff development priorities for 1998-99 were set by a college committee, which considers all requests and decides whether they meet objectives in the strategic plan. College documentation does not show clearly enough how the outcomes of appraisal reviews, quality assurance reports, strategic and operational plans are brought together to prioritise future staff development programmes. The college has an extensive internal programme of staff development for all staff and the academic board receives a detailed annual report on the previous year's staff development activities.

Governance

Grade 2

48 Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but identified further strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- the wide range of governors' skills and experience
- appropriate procedures for accountability and openness
- regular review of progress against strategic objectives
- effective conduct of corporation and committee business
- governors' contact with curriculum areas and the students
- good understanding of the distinction between governance and management

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to the changed management requirements of the college
- underdeveloped monitoring of students' retention and achievements

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

50 The corporation comprises 16 governors, drawn from both of the merged colleges. It has adopted a strategy of formally reducing its membership before the proposed merger with Holme Lacy College, to assist the merger of the two corporations. The corporation recognises a need for more women members. Governors bring a wide range of relevant expertise to the college. An audit of governors' skills has been carried out. Governors make annual declarations of their eligibility to serve. The college has established an appointment procedure that includes the use of a search committee. There is an induction process for new governors and governor training has taken place, together with an annual meeting on strategic planning. Although a formal governor development and training programme has not been established, the outcomes of an annual self-evaluation by governors is used to identify training needs. The self-assessment report did not clearly identify these strengths and weaknesses.

51 The corporation meets frequently and governors' attendance is sufficient to ensure that all corporation meetings are quorate. Governors have been appropriately involved in the strategic planning process and receive termly reports on progress against strategic targets. However, the operating statement does not include clearly measurable targets by which performance can be assessed. The corporation receives regular information on the college's financial position and has also received many detailed reports on the progress of the proposed merger. Some information on students' achievements and retention is submitted to the

corporation by the academic board but, as the self-assessment report recognised, the monitoring of academic performance requires further development. The corporation has recently approved targets for retention and achievement for each course.

52 Governors are strongly committed to supporting the college. Their dedication and expertise have been important in carrying through the recent merger and in preparing for the planned merger with Holme Lacy College. After the first merger, governors approved urgent action, including significant capital investment, to improve facilities for students. However, insufficient attention was given to the management requirements of a college with two geographically distant sites and a significantly broader curriculum. There are problems of maintaining the same levels of service in cross-college areas at the two sites and there are weaknesses in the management of the Hindlip staff and campus. The additional pressure of dealing with a further merger proposal has added to the heavy demands on senior managers. Some of these weaknesses have now been identified and have been addressed in plans for the proposed merger.

53 Governors have informal links with curriculum areas and receive regular reports from heads of department. Although there is no student governor, the corporation receives a verbal report from the president of the students' union at every meeting. This provides a formal and useful forum for communication between governors and students. Governors also meet informally with student union officers after corporation meetings. They have a good working relationship with senior managers and clearly understand the distinction between governance and management.

54 The corporation has the following committees: finance and general purposes; audit; and remuneration. As indicated in the college's self-assessment report, the administration of corporation and committee

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business is effective. The corporation receives all committee minutes and a written report from the relevant committee chairman identifying key issues. However, there is no schedule of routine items for decision and monitoring. The corporation has not formally approved the college's operating statement for 1998-99 or the three-year financial forecast for 1998 to 2001. The audit committee has not established a procedure to review progress on internal audit recommendations. The clerk to the corporation services all committees of the corporation, with the exception of the remuneration committee.

55 There are appropriate procedures for accountability and openness, a strength not recognised in the self-assessment report. These include the adoption of standing orders, a code of conduct and a 'whistleblowing' procedure. Few items of corporation business have been designated as confidential. The corporation's minutes are placed on noticeboards at both main college sites. A publicly available register of interests is updated at each corporation meeting.

56 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the corporation's annual self-evaluation of its performance, based on a questionnaire, is well developed. Governors were fully involved in the self-assessment process and formally approved the college's self-assessment report before its submission to the FEFC.

Management

Grade 2

57 Inspectors agreed with many of the college's judgements in its self-assessment of management but with some differences of emphasis. The evidence in support of strengths was not always clearly presented.

Key strengths

- responsiveness to opportunities for growth and widening the curriculum
- the well-developed planning process
- strong links with many external organisations
- effective financial management

Weaknesses

- inadequacies in management information systems
- weaknesses in the management arrangements

58 The college has substantially exceeded its unit targets in the last three years, has reduced its average level of funding and has significantly improved resources at Hindlip. The merger broadened the college's curriculum and further major curriculum developments have included the growth of business studies, the development of a GNVQ in land and environment and the introduction of further foundation level courses. Two centres in Birmingham have widened access to the college's courses. A successful competitiveness fund bid has led to the establishment of a centre of excellence at Hindlip to assist the food and drink industry.

59 As the self-assessment report stated, the college's strategic planning is well developed. Staff have been fully involved in the development of departmental plans. These have been discussed with governors as part of the planning process. The strategic plan makes good use of available labour market information.

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The corporate objectives in the strategic plan are complemented by departmental operating statements. College-wide targets for students' achievements and retention have recently been set. Senior managers discuss key management issues in their weekly meetings. They make good efforts to communicate with college staff. An informative newsletter is circulated weekly. The principal holds meetings with all staff three times a year.

60 Although management responsibilities are clearly assigned, there are some weaknesses in the management arrangements. Some of these are recognised and the plan for the proposed merger seeks to address them. There is heavy pressure on senior managers, partly recognised by the appointment of a management accountant to assist the director of finance. There are weaknesses in the management of developments at the Hindlip campus; too little account was taken of weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. Some cross-college aspects have received insufficient attention and there is a lack of co-ordination. For example, there are significant variations in practice in support for students and quality assurance across the sites. The college has been slow to develop strategies for some key areas, such as IT and accommodation.

61 The college makes efficient use of resources. Where numbers are low, course groups have been combined for teaching purposes. Staff are deployed to teach new subjects as demand changes. In a few cases, these measures have not been fully effective.

62 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The college has high levels of accumulated reserves and good levels of solvency. These have been maintained despite a 61% reduction by 1998-99 in the average level of funding compared with that of the former Pershore College of Horticulture in 1993-94. The college's income is derived from various sources, including the sale of produce.

The college's director of finance is a qualified accountant and a member of the college's senior management team. Detailed monthly management accounts are produced promptly. The management accounts do not yet include a rolling 12-month cashflow forecast. Budget holders receive informative monthly reports.

63 As the self-assessment report recognised, there are weaknesses in access to, and the availability of, computerised management information. The two main campuses have different and incompatible computer systems. There is a separate college-wide computerised management information system but staff have little access to data. Only one senior member of staff has effective access to the student record system.

64 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that the college has exceptionally well-developed links with external organisations. These include the Royal Horticultural Society's regional office, based at the Pershore campus, and the British Horse Society. The college has contracts with three TECs. The Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise for Herefordshire and Worcestershire commented favourably on the college's involvement in work-based training, its role in the education business partnership and its responsiveness to employers' needs. The college is also involved in initiatives to provide training for young people who have had little success in the formal education system.

65 Much of the college's marketing information is derived from its many useful links with land-based industries. These include well-developed industrial liaison groups. The college has featured in television and radio programmes and has produced an informative newspaper that has helped to raise its public profile. As noted in the self-assessment report, there is no comprehensive marketing strategy and market research is underdeveloped. However, there has been substantial market research in relation to the food industry development at Hindlip.

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66 The college has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy. The equal opportunities committee monitors implementation of the policy and provides an annual report for the corporation. The college has well-developed health and safety procedures. All students and new staff receive a thorough induction on safety matters. Safety audits include off-site venues and student hostels are regularly checked. The corporation receives an annual report on health and safety.

Conclusions

67 The self-assessment report was detailed but had a number of shortcomings that reduced its usefulness as a starting point for the inspection. Inspectors agreed with a number of the findings but found strengths and weaknesses that had not been identified by the college. They agreed with two curriculum grades and three cross-college grades awarded by the college. They found that the college had overestimated its strengths in one curriculum area and two cross-college areas.

68 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	3
16-18 years	26
19-24 years	47
25+ years	16
Not known	8
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	15
Intermediate	20
Advanced	43
Higher education	21
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	1
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	0	27	1
Agriculture	498	664	56
Engineering	0	94	5
Business	2	734	35
Health and community care	0	63	3
Total	500	1,582	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 9% 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	39	9	1	49
Supporting direct learning contact	25	4	0	29
Other support	99	7	3	109
Total	163	20	4	187

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996**	1997**	1998
Income	£3,577,000	£3,908,000	£4,687,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£23.62	£19.25	£19.53*
Payroll as a proportion of income	51%	53%	56%
Achievement of funding target	131%	159%	100%
Diversity of income	53%	55%	58%
Operating surplus	-£204,000	-£10,000	-£434,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

*provisional data

**combined data for merged colleges

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	22	1	0	50	38	17
	Retention (%)	100	100*	n/a	100	97*	100
	Achievement (%)	41	n/a	n/a	11	100	94
2	Expected completions	99	44	185	100	175	157
	Retention (%)	100*	89*	97	100*	94*	95
	Achievement (%)	64	78	94	76	91	100
3	Expected completions	–	81	324	–	39	126
	Retention (%)	–	99*	99	–	97*	98
	Achievement (%)	64	100	100	46	100	97
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	0	0	–	9	33
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	100	97
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	25	100	100
Short courses	Expected completions	70	554	135	792	513	1,865
	Retention (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
	Achievement (%)	27	100	10	48	100	100
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	5	0	17	3	0	86
	Retention (%)	100	n/a	88	100	n/a	100
	Achievement (%)	0	n/a	93	0	n/a	100

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

*ISR data may not be reliable

n/a not applicable

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