

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Plater College

March 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-96

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 36/97

PLATER COLLEGE

SOUTH EAST REGION

Inspected September-December 1996

Summary

Plater College is a Roman Catholic residential college which is located in Oxford. The college offers five diploma courses most of which are at first year degree level in the humanities curriculum area. The majority of teaching is effective and teachers are accomplished in their own subjects. Some students achieve impressive levels of academic study and most pass the diploma and progress to higher education. The college recruits adults who would not usually enrol in further education and provides them with suitable support in their academic and personal development. The college community offers students opportunities for spiritual growth. The residential experience helps students to learn to study more intensively. The standards of equipment and accommodation are good. The college should: improve the quality of some teaching; develop systems for recording students' achievements; review some accreditation arrangements; revise the equal opportunities policy and monitor its implementation; draw up a plan for staff development; introduce staff appraisal; review arrangements for deploying staff and allocating responsibilities; improve the effectiveness of management arrangements and implement the quality assurance policy.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	3
Governance and management	4
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	4
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Theology and pastoral studies	2	Core studies	2
Humanities	2		

INTRODUCTION

1 Plater College was inspected during the period September to December 1996. Six inspectors spent a total of 29 days at the college. The team observed 34 classes, examined students' work and scrutinised a wide range of documentation. Meetings were held with governors, the chaplain, staff, former and current students and representatives from the Roman Catholic Church, the Heart of England Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), the University of Oxford, the Open University, the residential colleges' committee and the local education authority (LEA).

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Plater College is one of six residential colleges in England designated under section 28 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, as eligible to receive financial support from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college was founded in 1921 by the Catholic Social Guild in memory of Father Charles Plater who believed that 'working men and women should play their full and proper role in shaping the future, especially in industrial and community affairs'. The college's original aims were to provide education for Roman Catholic men and women in order to prepare them for public service. The college's trust deed, written in 1925, sets the following objectives for the college: to provide residential education at university level for those whose full-time education has been interrupted by employment, and to provide courses in politics and economics with special reference to Christian principles as demonstrated in the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The current mission broadly reflects the objectives set out in the trust deed. In addition, the mission includes: the offer of a wide, flexible and co-ordinated range of education within the social sciences; the development of the college as a national and international centre of excellence in the study of Catholic social teaching; and the pursuit of a programme of research and development work to assist the college to meet all aspects of its mission. The college is an institution recognised for 'higher studies' by the University of Oxford. Plater College students are entitled to sit university examinations and to use the university's facilities.

3 The college has been located in three different buildings in Oxford since it was founded. In 1976 the college moved to a purpose-built campus in the Headington area of Oxford adjacent to Oxford Brookes University. Several other providers of higher and further education are within a few miles of the college including the University of Oxford, Oxford College of Further Education and Ruskin College.

4 The college offers five diploma courses: the University of Oxford diploma in social administration; the University of Oxford special diploma in social studies; a diploma in legal studies credit rated by the Open University; and the two Plater diplomas in theology and social studies, and pastoral studies which are not externally validated. A programme of core

studies is offered to all students. The diploma courses are taught through a combination of lectures, seminar discussions and academic tutorials for individuals or small groups of students. Three years ago the length of the diploma courses was reduced from two years to one year.

5 In 1995-96, there were 86 residential students, 62 per cent of whom were aged 25 or over. In October 1996, there were 101 residential students enrolled at the college. Percentage student numbers by age are shown in figure 1. All students are full time and follow higher education courses in the humanities. Students are recruited from across Britain and each year a few students come to the college from overseas. There are 14 full-time staff; the part-time staff employed by the college are equivalent to an establishment of seven full-time posts. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 2.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 The college is proving successful in achieving its mission to 'attract adults whose educational opportunities have been restricted by social and economic circumstances'. The proportion of students who have either few or no formal qualifications continues to increase; 65 per cent in 1995-96 rising to 79 per cent in 1996-97. Most students were previously unemployed or working in low-skilled occupations; many also worked as volunteers in community and religious organisations. Students' ages range from 20 to 70 years and about 90 per cent of students are Roman Catholics. An increasing proportion of students are male; some 69 per cent in 1996-97.

7 A small number of diploma courses is offered in three main curriculum areas; social sciences, law and theology. Most courses prepare students well for studying a range of subjects at university. In a few courses, for example, the diploma in theology, there is scope to extend the choice of subjects offered. The course in pastoral studies provides students with a valuable opportunity to gain an additional certificate in counselling skills. A useful programme of core skills includes study skills, English, mathematics and computing and offers a general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) in English and mathematics and a RSA Examinations Board (RSA) certificate in numeracy. Currently, no accreditation is offered for computing. Some students are keen to have their computing skills formally recognised.

8 The college is aware that some accreditation arrangements restrict the effectiveness of its courses. Staff have discussed this issue over several years but no decisions have been taken about how to make improvements. Three of the five diploma courses are accredited at first year degree level. The two diploma courses, which are internally validated by the college, are taught at levels which vary from GCSE to the first year of a degree level. Teachers have not determined the appropriate level of study for these courses. Generally, the diploma courses do not adequately prepare

students for careers. For example, the course for the diploma in pastoral studies does not prepare students to go straight into the field of pastoral work, although this is a stated aim of the course. The college does not offer work experience and this restricts the choice of degree course or subsequent career path for some students. A helpful arrangement has been made with a few institutions of higher education which enables students to progress from the diploma courses into the second year of a degree course.

9 The diploma courses are available only through full-time residential study. A few part-time evening courses are provided for students at the college and for people in the local community. Students are able to extend the breadth of their studies by attending lectures at the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University. The college's mission to provide Catholic social teaching is met partly through the requirement that all students study a course in Christianity and society. Students value a distance learning course, which has recently been introduced, on the life of Christ; the course is completed prior to arrival at the college. The college has not devised ways of assessing whether the part of its mission that is concerned with the promotion of Catholic social teaching is being achieved.

10 Arrangements for reviewing and developing most diploma courses are not systematic. Generally, issues are dealt with as and when they arise, for example, the need to reduce the length of courses to meet funding requirements. However, the course in legal studies is an exception; it is carefully reviewed and developed to meet students' and employers' needs. A few new initiatives have been carefully researched, for example, a course in development studies, but have failed to progress through lack of funding.

11 The college has beneficial links with a range of institutions and bodies including the local TEC, universities, other adult residential colleges and various national and international Roman Catholic organisations. Many commented positively on the college's responsiveness; some use Plater College's facilities for their conferences, including the Catholic women's league, the conference of Roman Catholic bishops and the society for liturgical studies.

12 In recent years, the college has improved its marketing and in 1995, a useful and carefully constructed marketing plan was produced. It is not yet clearly linked with the college's strategic plan. The college does not systematically review progress made in implementing the marketing plan. Some effective market research has been carried out for a few new initiatives. However, the college conducts little market research that might contribute to the development of existing courses. Such developments are mainly determined by the views of teachers and some current students and by the accreditation requirements. This year, extensive publicity has succeeded in increasing the number of students who have been recruited. Some groups consisting of clergy, community workers and former Plater College students have been established across Britain; they effectively promote the college's courses. Advertisements are placed regularly in

local and national newspapers, church magazines and on local radio. Television broadcasts have also been used for advertising purposes. The college reviews the effectiveness of its publicity. A modest amount of external funding supports some new forms of provision, for example distance learning. Income is generated through arrangements for overseas students to live in the college whilst studying in Oxford. Students from overseas and visitors provide some useful informal learning opportunities for students.

13 The college's equal opportunities policy is not comprehensive and is not applied to the curriculum. Students receive a copy of the policy which is explained during the induction programme. There is no system for monitoring and reporting on equal opportunities or for reviewing the policy. There is little active promotion of the practice of equal opportunities in the college. The college has a disability statement but this does not identify a named member of staff who will oversee and monitor this aspect of the college's work.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

14 Trustees, governors, management and other staff are deeply committed to the ethos of the college and its mission. They want students to benefit from their learning at the college and to succeed in their studies. However, currently, there is no consensus among staff on how the college should be managed and the appropriate division of responsibilities between managers and teachers. Amongst a few staff there is low morale and a lack of co-operation. These negative factors restrict the effectiveness of the management and organisation of the college.

15 The college has four trustees who are Roman Catholic archbishops and a board of governors with 18 members, two of whom are women. There is regular liaison between the governors and the trustees. Currently, there is one vacancy on the board of governors. Three governors are from the University of Oxford, one is a Roman Catholic bishop who represents the interests of the trustees and other members include the principal and a teacher. Two students and three former long-standing governors, known as emeritus governors, attend meetings as observers but do not have voting rights. Several governors are former Plater College students. The governors bring expertise to the college which is generally well used and includes experience of education, business, law, personnel, management, community work, the church and trades unions. However, few governors have a detailed understanding of further education and the requirements of the FEFC. The board's committees have terms of reference and they function effectively; working groups are set up when they are needed. Governors' attendance at meetings is good. The governing body which meets three times a year receives a range of reports, including financial reports at each meeting, but does not receive minutes of the academic board. There is too little discussion of some important issues, for example, students' achievements, the profile of students who enrol and some aspects

of the curriculum. The administration of the governing body's business is generally effective, although minutes do not identify what action is to be taken on issues discussed. Governors have recently approved a register of interests but they have not adopted a code of conduct. Although there are useful informal discussions between governors and managers, there are no systematic arrangements nor are targets set that might help to ensure that the college is effectively managed. Most governors take an active interest in the life of the college and attend various functions.

16 Governors were involved in drawing up and approving the strategic plan. A two-day meeting of governors on strategic planning is scheduled for February 1997. Staff views are sought on the plan but although they are aware of its contents, they feel little real involvement with the planning process or its results. Some staff do not fully support the emphasis given to exploring new developments, for example, distance learning. During the year managers and governors do not formally monitor the progress that is made in implementing the strategic plan. Some of the objectives do not include measurable targets; some of the targets that are set are not achieved and the reasons are not always explained in the annual review. A brief progress report is presented to governors once a year.

17 The college has a range of policies, most of which have been approved by governors. The implementation of the health and safety policy is monitored on a regular basis and reports are presented to governors. The monitoring of other policies is generally underdeveloped; there are no arrangements for reporting to governors nor for formal review of these policies.

18 Systems for managing the main activities of the college are weak. Senior managers do not effectively monitor management arrangements and make improvements. Arrangements for defining and agreeing areas of responsibility for staff and establishing clear lines of accountability are not effective. Responsibilities for some functions are neither clearly allocated nor understood by staff. For example, teachers, who are thought by senior management to hold the responsibility for curriculum co-ordination, do not believe that they have been given this responsibility and do not co-ordinate courses. The tasks that are involved in co-ordinating the curriculum have not been explained to staff nor agreed with them. A few staff are unwilling to take responsibility for specific areas of college life.

19 Some routine and time-consuming tasks, for example, following up each student who is absent from a teaching session, are carried out by the principal and vice-principal. Such duties together with heavy teaching commitments leave them with insufficient time to carry out senior management duties. Although measures have recently been taken to improve communication within the college, most staff do not receive all the information which they need to carry out their work. Arrangements for communicating with different groups of staff require review and improvement.

20 There is a small number of staff at the college and most have several roles. There is some confusion amongst staff about who has which roles and responsibilities. There are certain areas of work for which no one carries any designated responsibility, for example quality assurance. However, some staff are clear about their responsibilities, for example administrative staff. No systematic arrangements exist at the college for supporting and supervising staff.

21 Arrangements for meetings of staff are inadequate. Staff are unclear about the purpose of some meetings, where decisions are made and the procedure for reporting decisions. Sometimes after agreement is reached no action follows. Minutes are not always published and even when they are, do not specify what action is to be taken and who is to take it. The senior management team has no terms of reference. It does not meet on a regular basis nor are its meetings minuted. Staff are not clear about the role of the senior management team.

22 There is a fortnightly meeting for teachers, the chaplain, the development officer and other senior managers. These meetings are useful for discussion and the sharing of information but they do not provide opportunities for detailed examination of some important issues, for example, the planning of the curriculum. The meetings are minuted and minutes are sent to staff who are unable to attend. The many informal discussions between individual staff are useful but they do not systematically enable appropriate groups of staff to discuss issues and make decisions. There are some gaps in the current cycle of meetings, for example an absence of meetings which focus on learning and pastoral support.

23 In most curriculum areas, there are no formal course team meetings. The boards of study which have recently been established do not have a curriculum management and planning function, although the academic board does. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the academic board as it has only met once. The current lack of meetings for planning the curriculum contributes to the ineffectiveness of much curriculum co-ordination. For example, there is a lack of clarity about the academic level of a few courses and there are inconsistent approaches to marking students' assignments.

24 The college has operated with a financial deficit in recent years. A small surplus is projected for the end of the year 1996-97. The college is prudent in spending its budget and has introduced various efficiency measures. This year, for the first time, a target has been set for income generation. Some budgets are devolved and budget holders understand the rationale for allocating budgets. The college does not calculate unit costs and, currently, it is cautious about spending time on this exercise when funding arrangements for residential colleges are being reviewed. Enrolment targets set by the FEFC have been met, but in 1994-95 and 1995-96 the college failed to meet its own enrolment targets. At the time of inspection, enrolment targets had been met for 1996-97. The college

derives most of its funding from the FEFC; its income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 3 and 4.

25 The use of management information for planning and management purposes is underdeveloped. Some progress is being made in computerising information systems and in improving management information such as data on admissions. Some data which are collected, for example, trends in students' achievements, are not effectively analysed. Students' destinations are monitored and action is taken to improve the proportion of students progressing to higher education. Completion rates for courses are monitored and action is taken to try to improve them. Great efforts are made to help students to return to their studies, for example by offering to provide additional study support.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

26 The college provides a welcoming atmosphere for its students; staff are sensitive to the needs of adults who have undertaken little formal study since leaving school. Students value the personal support given by staff and their willingness to help at any time. Many former students remain in touch with the college. They speak warmly of the second chance which the college gave them and of the confidence and will to succeed which they developed in their academic studies and careers.

27 Recruitment to the college has, until recently, depended on personal recommendations. The recruitment arrangements are now more comprehensive and effective. Many hear of the college through a Roman Catholic parish priest; a significant number are motivated to study at Plater College by a desire to serve the community and the church. The college has recently developed an admissions database which is providing useful information that helps to locate potential students in different regions.

28 The college responds promptly to inquiries by sending the college prospectus and leaflets giving detailed information on courses. Applicants from across Britain benefit from the opportunity to attend information meetings in their local area which are arranged through a network of friends of Plater and former students. Records of the outcome of these meetings lack detail. There are limited opportunities for students to receive specific advice on courses prior to entry. Effective strategies are used to encourage students who have shown some interest but are initially hesitant to apply to the college. For example, the college writes to inquirers on a regular basis giving further information about the college and encouraging them to make contact if they want to ask any questions. Admission procedures, in most cases, give applicants the opportunity to visit the college and meet students between their interviews. In general, students are pleased with the information and advice which they receive and feel able to make a sufficiently informed choice about their studies. Inadequate records are kept of advice given to applicants at interviews. The college has not developed a system for accrediting students' prior learning.

29 Many students receive a copy of a distance learning course in Christian theology to help them prepare for study at Plater College. Most students value this preparation; a minority find that it does not give them adequate support with the study skills required for writing essays. A generally well-planned and effective induction programme enables most students to make informed choices about their course and the options that they will study. Staff establish good working relationships with students at induction. Students also value meeting former students at this time. There are informal procedures which ensure that students, if they wish, are able to transfer between modules or courses. Students are advised of their rights and responsibilities through the 'learner agreement'.

30 Decisions on the level of both teaching and support that students need in English and mathematics are, in part, based on initial diagnostic testing. Students also receive valuable individual assistance from other teachers of core studies with, for example, computing. Where students are identified as needing further tuition in basic skills, or requiring assessment and support for dyslexia, the college arranges for them to attend the basic education service run by the LEA. Students benefit from the support in basic skills which they receive. Suitable arrangements are made to provide support for students with hearing or sight impairments.

31 All students are allocated a personal tutor, whom they meet weekly for the first term. General guidelines for each meeting are provided for tutors but there is no planned tutorial programme. Tutors evaluate students' progress and try to resolve any difficulties that students may have with their studies. After the first term, personal tutorials are available on request. Personal tutors respond quickly if students request a meeting. Students appreciate this personal tutorial support. However, tutors have not undergone any training for their role, and vary in their approach. Current arrangements for monitoring attendance and absences are ineffective on some courses, for example, the course in Christianity and society.

32 Careers resources for higher education are adequate and are well used by students. Some teachers have built up extensive contacts with university staff in their own subject areas, and the informal help on careers that they give to students is generally effective. Students appreciate the general guidance sessions on how to apply to university. Personal tutors are responsible for assisting students with applications to university but they are often not well informed about career options. No member of staff is qualified and trained to give careers advice and the college has no formal agreement with the local careers service to assist in developing careers education in the college. Arrangements are made for students to receive careers guidance from a local adult guidance centre if they remain unsure about their future. Students are not given the opportunity to develop and maintain records of achievement.

33 Students speak with enthusiasm of the wealth of social and educational activities in the local area, and they value the arrangements that the college has made for them to use the facilities of the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University. Generally, student relationships are sound but occasionally the behaviour of a few students is disruptive. Students' families can visit the college and stay at weekends. This is greatly appreciated. College staff and the junior common room committee arrange various social activities for students. Students can borrow a vehicle owned by the college which enables small groups to go on social and educational visits. The college has a football team.

34 The experience of living in college helps students to learn to study intensively and to produce good work. Students benefit from the long opening hours of the library, the computing facilities and the support from tutors and other students. There are two male resident tutors. The college also offers the experience of living and learning in a religious community and gives students the opportunity for spiritual growth. A resident Roman Catholic priest is college chaplain and says mass daily. All services are well attended and students have the opportunity to participate in a variety of other more informal acts of worship and to attend a fortnightly Anglican Eucharist. A series of evening lectures on Christianity in Oxford is well attended. The lectures have fostered a range of interests amongst students including: ecumenism through music in the liturgy; the work of a parish; and teaching the faith to children. A recent survey aimed to assess students' satisfaction with residential arrangements but the responses have not been analysed and considered.

35 Students benefit from the range of support, both personal and academic, that is given by teachers, personal tutors, the chaplain and other staff. The college handbook, which each student receives, lists further sources of support, for example telephone helplines, and the resident tutors have detailed knowledge of a variety of local support agencies. Arrangements for professional counselling for students have recently been revised. The college now has a contract for counselling services from a local doctor's surgery. Students requiring counselling are seen promptly; they value the quality and the anonymity of this service. It is not clear yet whether the hours available in the contract for counselling services will be adequate to meet students' needs.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

36 Of the classes inspected, 65 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed the weaknesses. Six per cent of classes were judged to have weaknesses which outweighed the strengths. The average attendance level was 83 per cent in the classes inspected. The average number of students in each class was 11. The inspection grades awarded to the lessons inspected are shown in the following table.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Higher education	3	12	8	2	0	25
Other	3	4	2	0	0	9
Total	6	16	10	2	0	34

37 Most teaching is effective. In the better teaching sessions, teachers use a variety of methods which meet students' different needs. Teachers have positive relationships with students which encourage learning. Many teachers are distinguished in their subject areas. Teachers mark students' work promptly and, in most cases, give constructive written comments which help students to improve their work. In most sessions learning materials are clearly presented, relevant and assist students' learning.

38 The planning of some teaching is underdeveloped. Some schemes of work are no more than a list of topics and several teachers do not use lesson plans. In some sessions, the narrow range of teaching methods used did not sustain the interest of all students. Most lectures did not effectively meet the different needs and abilities of students.

39 In theology and pastoral studies, several teachers have high levels of academic expertise which inspire and motivate students. The use of a range of teaching methods enables students with different abilities to respond to the challenge presented by teaching at a high academic level. Some teachers effectively combine lectures with small group discussions, debate, and the appropriate use of teaching resources such as visual aids. However, many lectures are not suitable for students of varying abilities or those with little previous experience of studying at this level. Academic tutorials, given to one or two students at a time, are of high quality and meet students' different needs. Teachers mark students' work promptly but the assessment criteria used for marking do not always match the level of the course. Assessment arrangements are not always appropriate for the course. For example, assessments in the pastoral studies diploma mainly focus on aspects of social science not of pastoral studies. Teachers generally give detailed and helpful written comments to students on their work and they keep records of students' progress. There are significant weaknesses in the planning of courses. The courses on theology, pastoral studies and Christianity in society would benefit from review to ensure: academic coherence and breadth; greater clarity on the objectives and level of study; and suitable assessment arrangements.

40 In the diplomas in social studies, social administration and legal studies, the aims and objectives are clear and are shared with the students. Most teaching sessions are effective. In some lectures, teachers present students with information but they do not ensure that the level of the material is appropriate for students of varying abilities. Some teaching sessions are carefully planned and well managed, and students have the

opportunity to participate in discussions. A range of effective teaching methods is used which engages students' interest and suits their different abilities, for example exercises in pairs and small groups, questionnaires and class discussions. Teachers prepare printed learning materials of good quality to support their teaching. They use a range of up-to-date and relevant resources, for example current research findings and central government statistical reports. Some academic tutorials are not appropriate for students who have little experience of study. Teachers mark students work conscientiously and give written comments. There is further scope for teachers to suggest how students can make improvements in their work.

41 Courses in core studies include mathematics, English and communications, computing and study skills. A number of these subjects are new to students, for example computing, and they sometimes appear to be intimidated. There are other subject areas which many students initially fear. For example, they believe that they will never make progress in mathematics or develop the study skills that are required for writing essays and passing examinations. However, teachers communicate skilfully with their students and explain their subjects well. They give students a great deal of valuable support and convince them of their ability to learn. Most teaching sessions are well planned. In the more effective sessions, teachers review previous learning, use a variety of teaching methods and frequently check on students' understanding. Students work at the pace which suits them. A few teaching sessions are not supported by schemes of work or lesson plans. In these sessions, a narrow range of teaching methods is used which does not meet the needs of students with different abilities; students are given little chance to apply new knowledge or practise new skills. There is scope to relate core studies more closely to the other courses which students are studying. Arrangements for recording students' progress in study skills, mathematics and computing are underdeveloped.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

42 Examination results are generally good on the diploma courses for the students who sit the examinations. In 1995-96, the pass rates for four of the five diploma courses ranged from 85 per cent to 100 per cent. One course, the diploma in social studies, had a pass rate of only 61 per cent. The average pass rate for all the diploma courses was 82 per cent compared with 92 per cent in 1994-95. The pass rate on some diploma courses, measured as a proportion of those who enrolled, is lower. In 1995-96, it was 70 per cent overall compared with 82 per cent in 1994-95. The lack of external validation for two of the diploma courses makes it difficult to compare the standard of students' achievements across the college. The pass rates for internally validated courses are consistently higher than those which are externally validated. The lack of continuous or modular assessment in two of the diploma courses restricts the potential for achievement of some students.

43 In 1995-96, the retention rates for completion of courses across the five diploma courses ranged from 76 to 86 per cent. Most students who complete their course go on to university. A few students progress to teacher training, or go directly to parish work. In 1995-96, 77 per cent of students who completed their diploma courses moved on to higher education and 5 per cent joined religious orders. Most students who go to university start on the first year of a degree course which is at the same level as some of the courses at Plater College.

44 Most of the written work from students is of a good standard. The number of assignments required from students is high, especially on the courses that lead to a single final examination in which coursework does not count towards the final assessment. Students have a positive attitude towards their studies, enjoy their work and are keen to do well. The discipline of academic study helps to develop their intellectual and communication skills. Most students learn to present arguments competently and to give well-structured responses to questions from their teachers. They steadily grow in confidence during their courses.

45 Students on the diploma courses in both pastoral studies and theology and social studies speak with enthusiasm about their studies. Most students produce work of a high academic standard but some find it difficult to keep up with the pace of study. The best student essays are highly competent, displaying thorough research and the ability to evaluate different viewpoints. While studying the doctrines of grace and redemption, some students made effective use of standard texts and papers which included documents from Vatican Two and the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church. They were then able to discuss the inter-relationship between different sources of religious teaching.

46 The students on the diplomas in social studies, social administration and legal studies are enthusiastic about their studies. Most are articulate, reflective, highly motivated, and keen to pass their examinations and move on to more advanced study. The majority of students work well when studying in groups and their communication and teamwork skills benefit from such opportunities. However, not all students contribute to discussions or ask questions.

47 Students enjoy studying mathematics, English, and computing, and learning how to improve their study skills. Achievements in GCSE English are impressive: in 1994-95 and in 1995-96, 100 per cent of candidates gained grades A to C; and in 1995-96, 63 per cent of candidates gained grade A or A*. There are good results in GCSE mathematics: in 1994-95, 65 per cent of candidates gained grades A to C although in 1995-96 this fell to 54 per cent. Only a few students take the GCSE in statistics but results are good. Students in the lower level mathematics group make good progress, moving quickly from almost no mathematical knowledge to tackling fractions and long division competently. There are poor retention rates for students on a few of the courses in core studies, for example, in

GCSE mathematics. Students develop appropriate study and computing skills and give due attention to matters of health and safety in their computing work.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

48 The college is beginning to develop some procedures to assure quality. The principal has recently devised a useful framework for quality assurance comprising a definition of quality, a quality assurance policy and a document which sets out quality assurance requirements and targets. The document also includes a model for improving quality and a proposal for a quality assurance strategy. The proposed strategy and arrangements for quality assurance have been discussed with staff. However, the concept of assuring quality is new to them and the systems that have been proposed are not yet fully understood. There is a low awareness amongst teachers of the need to introduce more systematic and rigorous procedures that will maintain continuous improvement in the college and few have been implemented. The governing body has approved the quality assurance policy but has not considered the criteria by which it could judge the performance of the college. At present, there are few effective procedures or agreed criteria for reviewing and evaluating the success of courses.

49 All college courses have boards of studies which were introduced in 1995 and are in the early stages of development. They have met twice and membership comprises students and teachers. The intention is for the boards to develop an approach to course review that will include analysis of the views of students, reports from external assessors and evaluations of courses by tutors. The boards are not sufficiently self-critical. The academic quality assurance group, described in the quality assurance document, has not met. Some relevant quality assurance issues have been discussed at staff meetings. Staff have not made explicit either the standards for individual courses or for the diploma programmes as a whole.

50 The college has started to undertake surveys of students' views each year, although this has not yet become systematic. Staff do not compare and analyse the findings of the surveys that have been conducted and, so far, the surveys have not contributed directly to the procedures for assuring quality in the college. Surveys include students' evaluations of the induction process, which are used for marketing purposes at the end of the course to improve strategies for publicity, and students' views of the college's residential services which are used by the catering manager for planning purposes. A procedure was established recently for students to evaluate courses each term. These evaluations include questions to students about the content of courses, teaching methods and course administration. Students' responses have not been analysed, reported to staff or used for monitoring or planning purposes.

51 The college's annual report includes a section on students' achievements which lists, but does not analyse, the number of students

passing each diploma course and the destinations of students from the previous year. Reports to the governors about students' achievements are brief and lack an evaluative commentary. The college does not analyse students' achievements in relation to their previous attainments; no systematic analyses of the value the college adds to students' achievements are carried out. Membership of the academic board comprises all full-time teachers, the principal and vice-principal. At its first meeting, the academic board received reports from boards of studies but it has not yet reported to the governing body. Other procedures for considering and reporting on important aspects of quality in the college, for example summaries of students' views of courses, are not effective.

52 The college has a students' charter which is included within the college handbook and distributed to all students. It is a descriptive document which provides some basic information about the college and identifies the sources of other information. It does not identify service standards nor describe the services students may expect to receive. The student handbook contains a section on college rules and the complaints procedure; the vice-principal is the named complaints officer. The procedure for registering complaints is not well known to students. They have, however, an opportunity to comment on matters that concern them through their regular meetings with staff and with representatives of the governing body.

53 Domestic and residential services are given a high priority by the college. An administrative group, chaired by the college secretary, has met five times and has discussed aspects of service provision and the care of students. Standards have not yet been identified and there are no clear targets for these areas of activity. A catering group, also known as the food committee, meets infrequently but is intended to have an overview of catering services. There is no separate system for receiving students' complaints about catering at the college. Some students make complaints informally. The catering services, which are contracted out, operate a sound quality control and assurance system which is effectively monitored. There are clear standards and targets for catering and domestic services.

54 There is no staff-development plan, despite a clear commitment to produce one in the strategic plan. No priorities for staff development have been agreed across the college although some staff discuss their ideas for staff development with their manager. The connections between the various staff-development activities and college strategic objectives are unclear. For example, teachers have not been trained in quality assurance procedures. Staff-development activities in 1995-96 cost £3,306, 0.4 per cent of total expenditure. An allocation of £500 has been set aside for each of the full-time teachers to spend on their own staff-development interests for 1996-97. Some teaching and support staff participate in development activities but no evaluation is undertaken of their impact on the quality of work in the college. Teachers have recently agreed new contracts which include an element of 20 per cent of the working week for

research into areas of personal academic interest. There are currently no effective procedures for ensuring that the focus of their research meets college objectives or for monitoring the progress and outcomes of research activity. The principal has established a scheme for staff appraisal, but this has not yet been approved by governors and no staff or managers have been appraised.

55 The college has produced a self-assessment document which provides a summary of current issues, including some priorities and opportunities for and threats to, the college. It offers some judgements under the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. Staff, other than managers, did not contribute to the development of the document which identifies, in most of the areas of the college, far more strengths than weaknesses. Many of these judgements conflict with those of the inspection team. Inspectors identified several significant weaknesses, for example, in the management both of the college and its quality assurance activities, which were not mentioned in the self-assessment document. The college has not yet developed a sufficiently rigorous and self-critical approach to self-assessment.

RESOURCES

Staffing

56 Full-time and part-time teaching staff are well qualified in their subject areas. All teachers have a first degree in an appropriate discipline and most have a higher degree. Many teachers conduct academic research and most have substantial teaching experience. Only half of the full-time teachers, and less than a third of part-time teachers, have a teaching qualification. One teacher has a teaching qualification specifically for the teaching of adults. Library and information technology staff are well qualified. Support staff are suitably qualified and experienced. The college employs a full-time chaplain.

57 The deployment of staff is not systematically monitored across the college. Some staff have more demanding workloads than others in similar posts. There are no formal arrangements for the regular supervision and review of staff roles. A paper has recently been prepared by a member of the teaching staff which proposes a method that might help to ensure an even allocation of responsibilities. This paper is currently being discussed in the college. In some cases, no staff are deployed to carry out some important roles, for example, the co-ordination of pastoral and tutorial support. The level of administrative support is generally adequate but there is insufficient clerical support for some teachers. The college has engaged external consultants to provide specialist expertise and services. For example, the college uses an external contractor to provide residential services and specialist consultants were engaged to draw up accommodation and maintenance strategies.

58 There are appropriate personnel policies and procedures, for example on staffing matters that involve appointment, redundancy, discipline and grievance.

Equipment/learning resources

59 Teaching is adequately supported by teaching aids, including whiteboards, flip charts and overhead projectors and screens. Television, video, and facilities to assist those with hearing impairments are readily available. Teaching equipment is in good condition and maintenance arrangements are effective.

60 The library area has recently been extended to include a careers room, a section for journals and access to a new computer resource base. There are 28 study spaces which is sufficient to meet the demand from present students and some past students who return to the college to study. The library is open 14 hours a day, every day of the week.

61 The library is well stocked with over 12,000 items, mainly books that relate to the courses that are taught and to the college's mission as a centre for Catholic social teaching. There is a wide collection of pamphlets, journals, careers materials and a range of reference materials. The librarian and teachers jointly plan priorities for new books and for replacing those which are out of date. There are few computerised learning and resource materials such as compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases. The library budget, which has been reduced this year, does not give much scope for investment in computerised resources or for developing the computerised cataloguing system. The college has formal arrangements which allow students to use the libraries at Oxford Brookes University and in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford.

62 The two computer rooms are well used and valued by students. They are open until 23.00 hours each day of the week. Guidance notes and computing handbooks are available to support students in their independent use of the computers. There are 14 up-to-date computers all of which are equipped with a range of industrial standard software. Students can also gain access to the Internet on some computers. Student use of the computer facilities is not systematically monitored. A diary system for reporting any problems with the computers is effective and repairs are carried out promptly. The use of computers in other curriculum areas is underdeveloped.

63 The need for equipment across the college is kept under review by the management team. Details of all assets are kept in a register and there is a planned programme for replacement. In addition, staff request additional equipment as they identify a new need. For example, catering staff have requested various pieces of kitchen equipment which the college has then purchased.

Accommodation

64 The college is situated on a compact and pleasant site within easy reach of the city centre and close to several other educational establishments. It was designed and built some 20 years ago as an adult residential college and extended to include a chapel and a student common room which also serves as a conference centre. The standard of the accommodation, including the teaching rooms, is good. The main buildings include a lecture hall, a seminar room, two computer rooms, the library, administrative offices, four residential blocks and a detached house with study bedrooms. The college leases further accommodation in two nearby religious centres for use as additional bedrooms and, occasionally, as teaching rooms. The college's main site provides residential accommodation for four teachers and 86 students. Study bedrooms are comfortable and are adequately furnished.

65 There is a lack of visual displays in teaching rooms. Occasionally, the lecture hall and the student common room are inappropriately used for teaching small student groups. Much of the college's teaching takes place in small group tutorials in tutors' offices. The library and the computer resource room provide attractive learning environments. Leisure facilities for students include a well-appointed and easily accessible common room, a dining room with an adjoining bar, and the college gardens. The college has made arrangements with Oxford Brookes University for students to use its leisure and sporting facilities.

66 Residential services are effectively managed and appropriate attention is given to health and safety. For example, regular checks are carried out to ensure that the water supply is pure. College buildings are clean and well maintained. There are safety representatives for each residential block, although their names and room numbers are not displayed on notice boards. Access to some parts of the buildings for people with restricted mobility is poor. For example, there is no access to the computer room and the library. One residential block is accessible to wheelchair users.

67 In 1994, a comprehensive accommodation strategy with a five-year development programme was drawn up. Progress in implementing the programme has been hampered by lack of funds. The college is exploring ways of raising funds to further improve the buildings.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

68 The strengths of Plater College are:

- the effectiveness of most teaching
- teachers who are accomplished in their own subjects
- the high levels of academic study achieved by some students
- the significant proportion of students who gain qualifications and progress to study in higher education

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- the recruitment of students who do not usually enrol in further education
 - the range of support for students in their academic and personal development
 - the opportunities which the college community offers to students for spiritual growth
 - the value of the residential experience which helps students to learn to study more intensively
 - the high quality of the library and of facilities for computing
 - good accommodation
 - well-managed residential services.

69 If it is to continue to develop the quality of its provision, the college should:

- improve the quality of some teaching
- define the level of study required for diploma courses and seek to ensure appropriate forms of accreditation
- extend the range of teaching methods so that they meet the needs of all students
- establish systems for recording students' achievements in their learning
- review the policy and monitoring arrangements for equal opportunities
- improve the effectiveness of management arrangements
- implement the quality assurance policy
- draw up and implement a staff-development plan linked to the strategic objectives of the college
- introduce staff appraisal
- review arrangements for deploying staff and allocating responsibilities.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

 - 2 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)

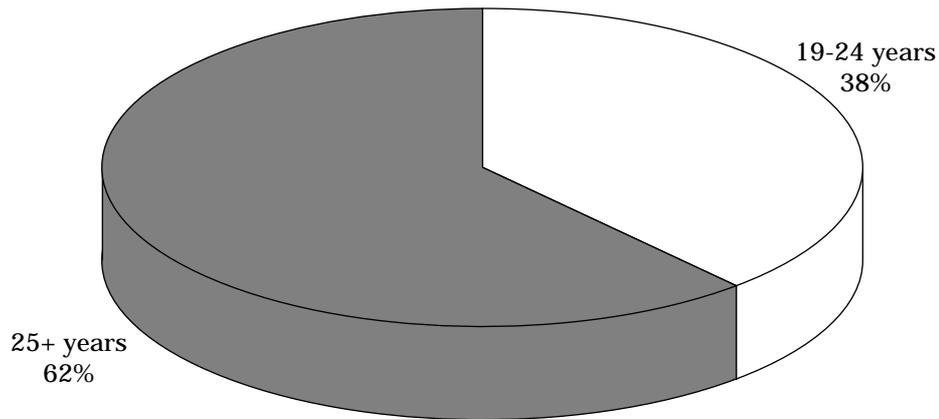
 - 3 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 4 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

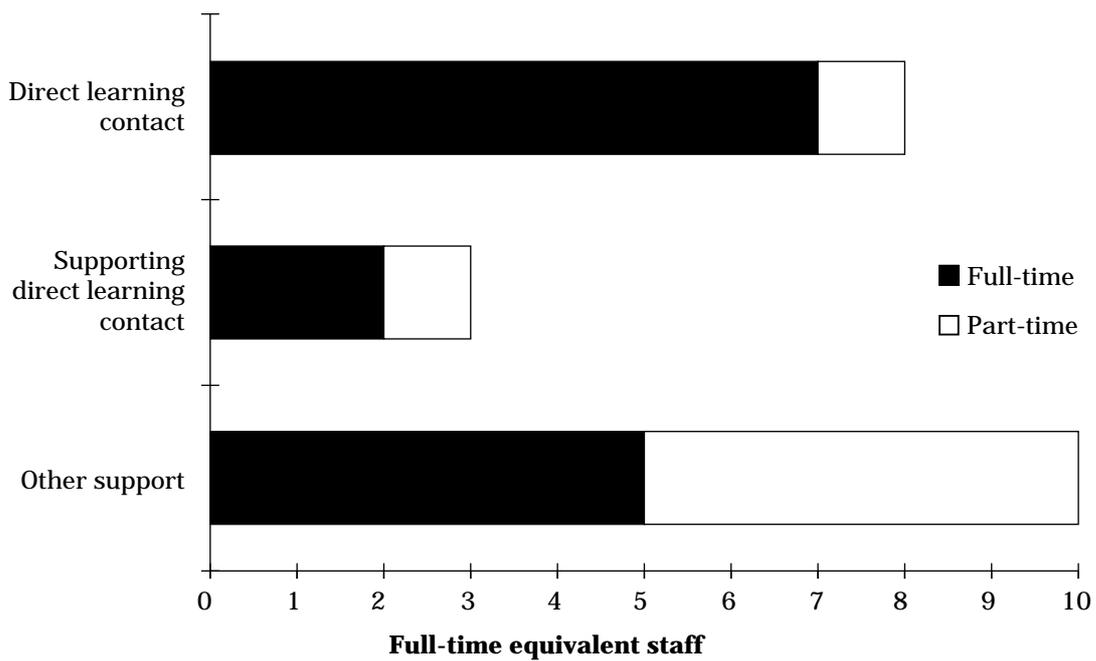
Plater College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 86

Figure 2

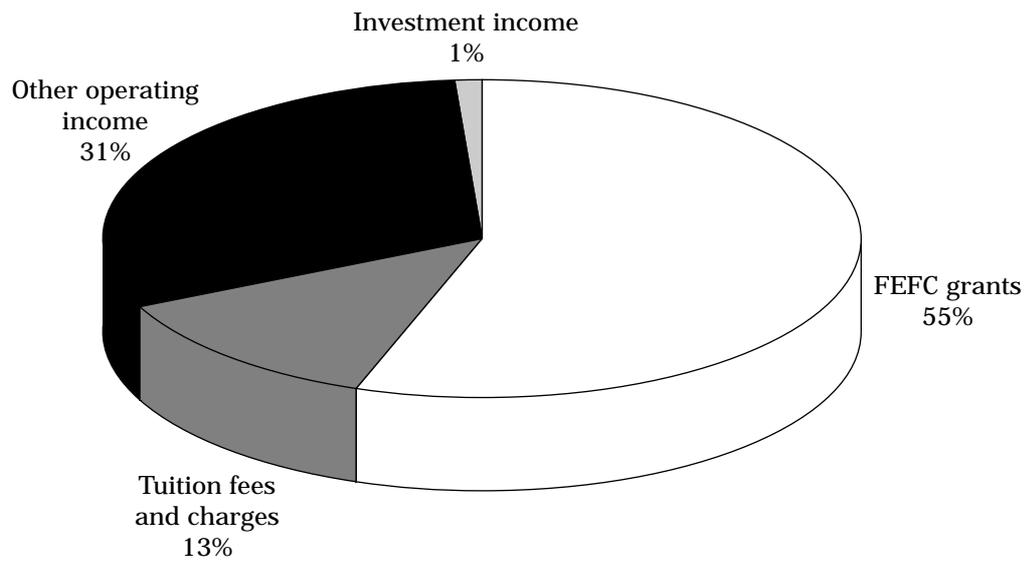
Plater College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 21

Figure 3

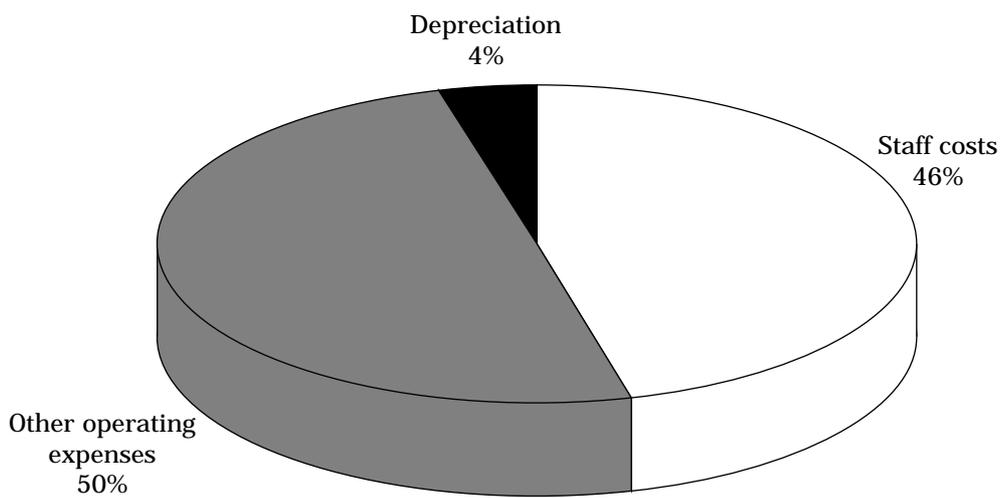
Plater College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £802,988

Figure 4

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



Expenditure: £828,289

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