

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Plumpton College

January 1995

**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 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.

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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 04/95

PLUMPTON COLLEGE
SOUTH EAST REGION
Inspected October 1994

Summary

Plumpton College is the specialist centre for education and training for land-based industries in East Sussex. The college's use of its location for studies relating to conservation and recreational land use alongside agriculture, is a significant strength. These assets are well utilised by staff who are appropriately qualified and who have good, current experience of the industry. Practical teaching is of a high standard. There is a warm and supportive environment in which students, particularly those in residence, develop and gain confidence. Students show strong commitment to their studies and a high proportion complete their courses, achieve their qualifications and go on to additional further education or employment. The college has good links with schools, industry and the local rural community. At the beginning of the inspection, the college was without a principal, the corporation had failed over several months to appoint an acting principal, and the college was being administered by the senior management team. The acting accounting officer was ratified as acting principal during the course of the inspection. Governors are reviewing the future mission of the college. A long-term plan for the college's future is urgently required. The college has no operational academic board and its procedures for quality assurance are at an early stage of development. A number of important policies and procedures are underdeveloped including marketing, equal opportunities, health and safety, and information technology. The teaching of theory is often weak. More flexible organisation of courses is required to give existing students better access to the curriculum and to attract new students. Support for the development of literacy and numeracy skills is inadequate. Teaching and specialist facilities are generally of a high standard but student residential accommodation and social areas need to be improved.

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	3
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Agriculture	2	Engineering/machinery	4
Horticulture	3		
Equine studies	2		

CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	2
Responsiveness and range of provision	11
Governance and management	25
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	39
Teaching and the promotion of learning	51
Students' achievements	62
Quality assurance	74
Resources	86
Conclusions and issues	113
Figures	

INTRODUCTION

1 Plumpton College was inspected in two stages. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected at the end of the summer term and at the start of the autumn term 1994. The specialist and cross-college visits took place in consecutive weeks in October 1994. Six inspectors took part in the inspection for a total of 35 inspector days. Inspectors visited 49 classes and examined a representative sample of students' work. Meetings took place with members of the corporation, the senior management team, teaching staff, support staff, past and present students, parents, local employers, careers officers and staff of local schools. Discussions took place with a representative of the local training and enterprise council (TEC). Inspectors examined college policy statements, minutes of committees, working papers and documents relating to major aspects of college organisation. An inspector attended a meeting of the full corporation board.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Plumpton College was established on its present site in 1926, although a training centre had existed in the county since the late 19th century. The college was established to serve the local farming industry. In recent years, it has diversified to provide education and training for all sectors of land-based industry. It is the only further education college in East Sussex offering this range of provision.

3 East Sussex is a rural county, and its few large centres of population are mainly on the coast. There is a range of rural businesses, including large downland arable and dairy farms, traditional mixed farms, riding stables, amenity horticulture, golf courses, woodland and conservation activities. There is increasing use of the countryside for leisure purposes and farms have been encouraged to diversify. Rural businesses provide one of the largest sources of employment in the county.

4 The main college site is six miles north-west of Lewes but it also has a farm at the eastern end of the county, at Netherfield, near Battle. The college attracts students not only from East Sussex, but from other parts of the country and worldwide.

5 Plumpton College is in an area of outstanding natural beauty. Its grounds are landscaped and contain a plant centre which is open to the public. The 406 hectare estate is a major resource for education and training. A wide range of farm activities take place, making use of a dairy herd, beef cattle, pigs, sheep and extensive arable crops and grassland. There is also a horticultural unit, a vineyard, an equine unit, a small golf course and sportsfields. The woodland and downland provide good resources for students learning about gamekeeping and countryside management. Plumpton is the only college in the country providing viticulture and oenology courses. As well as its own half-hectare experimental vineyard, it rents a further two hectare vineyard which is run commercially, in a neighbouring village.

6 The college has residential accommodation for 120 students. Classrooms and workshops are modern and well equipped.

7 At the time of the inspection there were 746 students on roll. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2, respectively. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3. There were 30 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 45 full-time equivalent technical and support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. The college has five teaching departments: agriculture and countryside management skills; agricultural machinery; equine studies; horticulture; and viticulture and oenology. These departments offer a wide range of educational qualifications including Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses at first and national level, National Examinations Board for Agriculture, Horticulture and Allied Industries courses at certificate and advanced level, City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G), British Horse Society and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), plus courses offered in conjunction with the Wine and Spirits Education Trust.

8 There is close co-operation with schools in the county. Open days, schools days and other activities attracted 9,500 visitors in 1994. The college is an approved centre for industry lead body courses and works with Sussex TEC through its youth training programmes.

9 In recent years the college has developed a number of international links, especially with colleges in France, Germany, Luxembourg and Eastern Europe. During the summer the college acts as a centre for teaching overseas trainers in agricultural disciplines.

10 The stated mission of Plumpton College is to provide high-quality education and training in activities linked to the land-based industries.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

11 College managers and teachers are well informed about national policy and developments in further education. Student numbers have increased significantly over the last four years and target enrolments have been met. This has been achieved largely through the development of new full-time courses. A BTEC first diploma or a specialist preliminary certificate has been launched in each of the college's main areas of interest. This year, national certificate and national diploma programmes in countryside studies have begun.

12 The college offers a range of NVQs. In the department of agriculture, a large number of farmers were trained to be NVQ assessors. More recently, this department has introduced NVQ testing into its full-time programmes to enable students to gain credit for units of work which they complete. Similar initiatives are being taken in other disciplines as new NVQs become available.

13 However, the college has not diversified its course provision and, against a background of steadily-falling employment in agriculture, this is an obstacle to achieving its aim of increasing student numbers.

14 There are well-structured arrangements for presenting the college to its clients, including schools and industry. Promotion is the responsibility of five tutors, each covering part of the county. This arrangement offers clients a clear point of reference and allows productive working relationships to develop. In addition to their marketing responsibilities, these tutors supervise students on work placement. The recent emphasis on growth in recruitment has increased their workload and clearer priorities should be established for the team.

15 The college successfully promotes itself through a variety of other methods. Departmental representatives attend or organise specialist events relevant to their work; for example, ploughing matches are supported by the machinery department and the equine studies department organises show jumping competitions. Horticulture staff are regular participants on local radio gardening programmes. The college has a stand at the main local agricultural shows. The open day is a major county event which attracts up to 6,000 visitors. Many students report that they first heard of the college on these occasions. Other organisations, including the National Farmers' Union, the Women's Institute, Brighton University and a number of schools make use of the college site for field work, meetings or farm walks.

16 The prospectus and course leaflets are informative, and provide useful guidance on the range of courses and their content. Course leaflets are not printed to a standard format or content, however, and some give insufficient information about student support or opportunities for progression. A uniform approach to informing prospective students about opportunities at the college should be developed.

17 There is a range of courses for full-time agricultural students which are well matched to the opportunities for employment and subsequent careers in the land-based industry. In equine studies and agricultural engineering, there are full-time programmes which prepare students for entry to employment and beyond but the provision does not meet the needs of all students. The college has recognised this, and the range of programmes on offer is being reviewed. In horticulture, the BTEC first diploma caters well for those students with a general interest in the subject, but the recent offer of a specialist national certificate recruited insufficient students.

18 The range of courses for employed students is comprehensive and well matched to the needs of local industry. In agriculture and horticulture, progression is available to NVQ level 3. The use of Ivylands Farm, near Battle, extends access to students from across the county. The college has been responsive to industry's needs for technical up-dating courses, particularly those which relate to new legislative requirements such as chainsaw operation and spray application. In 1991, the viticulture department, unique in the agricultural college sector, was established. Students are recruited from all parts of the country. The department now has a national reputation in wine production studies.

19 Links with local schools developed through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative continue. There are few links with further or higher education colleges in the area.

20 The college has been involved in a number of European initiatives. There are long-standing student exchange links with colleges in France, Germany and Luxembourg. Over the last two years the college has sent teachers to Romania and Poland as part of a government-funded initiative. The college is collaborating with West Sussex College of Agriculture on a European Social Fund project involving a college in Spain.

21 Although the need to increase student numbers is seen as the college's most urgent priority, planning to achieve this is inadequate. The responsibility for leading this initiative is not clearly allocated in the senior management team. Many proposed developments are based on incomplete information and their rationale is not always clear. There is no formal mechanism for internally validating new course proposals. As a consequence, marketing needs and resource implications are not always fully considered. Although enquiries by prospective students have indicated a strong demand for animal care courses, there has been no systematic review to determine the potential for developing this area of work.

22 Too little attention is given to attracting groups who have not previously attended the college in significant numbers, such as unemployed people and adult returners. Differing patterns of attendance for students and more flexible arrangements for organising and delivering the curriculum should be investigated.

23 No single member of the senior management team carries a specific responsibility for marketing. There are no college-wide arrangements for identifying needs through market research or for gathering information in a structured way. Close links with industry do exist through a variety of contacts, including formal meetings and the personal connections of individual lecturers and support staff. The information obtained, however, is not systematically recorded. The college has been involved in a number of external initiatives aimed at identifying the more general needs of rural industries but there is no evidence of any use being made of the findings.

24 Although staff and students generally expressed satisfaction with the handling of equal opportunity issues, the college's equal opportunities policy is insufficiently detailed. There has been little related staff development, and staff are not clear about their responsibilities. Many students were unaware of the existence of an equal opportunities policy.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

25 Members of the corporation and managers of Plumpton College have been through a difficult period during the past year. At the time of the inspection, the college was being managed by a team of four senior staff following the early retirement of the principal in July 1994. The corporation originally appointed the head of the department of agriculture

as acting accounting officer. His appointment as acting principal was ratified by the corporation during the inspection.

26 The senior management team has maintained the unity and direction of the college. Since the principal's early retirement it has initiated a wide range of positive changes, but most of these were only in embryonic form at the time of the inspection.

27 The corporation board had 16 members at the time of the inspection. Of these, 10 represented business including the local TEC, two were staff members, one was a student, two were members of the local community and one was a co-opted member. Two further members, with experience of horticulture and property, were being sought to extend further the skills of the board. Committees for finance, remuneration, audit and personnel were established and working. A grievance and disciplinary panel had been established. Four advisory subcommittees, for the farms, horticulture, equine studies and viticulture, had governor members. These subcommittees meet twice each year, and the corporation receive reports of their meetings.

28 Members of the corporation did not contribute to the 1994-97 strategic plan, although invited to do so by the senior managers. The plan was written by the then head of department of agriculture, with the assistance of other members of the senior management team and heads of department. It lacks detail, and does not contain the analysis of need and the targets required to guide the college over the next three years. The corporation received the plan in July and agreed that it would be reviewed in the current academic year.

29 In April 1994, whilst the strategic plan was being produced, a governor with banking experience was asked by the chairman of the corporation to undertake an analysis to determine the weaknesses of the college. The report which ensued was presented to the corporation on 19 May 1994. It identified matters requiring immediate action and others to be addressed within six months. Five months later, when the inspection took place, no action had resulted from these recommendations, partly because of the situation arising from the early retirement of the principal. Although intended for limited circulation, the report's findings became widely known and adversely affected the morale of staff. It is a credit to the senior management team that morale has recovered significantly in the last few months.

30 The governors should note that the procedure adopted in commissioning the above analysis, which included consideration of financial matters, runs counter to the guidance subsequently offered by the Council in the *Guide for College Governors*, chapter 8, paragraph 25. This states that 'Governors, other than the principal, who are themselves members of professions should avoid being put in the position of offering such [professional] advice to the governing body. In their role as governors, they should contribute to debate on the basis of their broad professional

experience but should stop short of offering a professional opinion which might determine a particular course of action’.

31 The governors aim to increase student numbers by 50 per cent by 1996, and to extend the range of courses offered. Some proposals for achieving these ends have been discussed, but no detailed conclusions have yet been reached. There are significant differences of view among governors about the educational and vocational objectives the college should pursue. No progress can be made until a more systematic needs analysis has been conducted. An immediate priority is to determine the courses to be offered for 1995-96, since careers events for school leavers are now being held and prospective students are making decisions about their future courses of study. It is urgent that members of the corporation should meet with senior managers to agree the revised mission of the college.

32 Governors conduct their meetings in a businesslike manner. The corporation receives reliable and well-structured monthly financial reports. Governors received a briefing from senior managers at the first meeting of the academic year on the number of students enrolled and enrolment trends over the last 10 years. They have also been briefed on the financial health of the college with reference to Further Education Funding Council funding methodology, premises and management issues. The principal of a neighbouring college advised governors on potential overseas opportunities.

33 An academic board was formed at the time of incorporation. Its membership was decided and it met once. Since then, there has been no further meeting. It is a legal requirement under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 that the college has an academic board. It should, therefore, be reconvened without delay. The academic board is intended to provide the forum for development and oversight of courses, and the procedures to assure their quality, as set out in chapter 10 of the *Guide for College Governors*.

34 Although there is an equal opportunity policy, there is no strategy for its implementation. Nor is there any mechanism for its review and evaluation as the policy itself requires. The college has a health and safety policy, and responsibilities for maintaining a safe working environment are clearly allocated. The health and safety adviser inspects all areas of the college annually. However, the college does not have a health and safety committee to discuss issues and monitor practice. Consequently, it does not meet the minimum requirements for good practice on health and safety, and this is of particular importance given the potentially hazardous nature of much of its work.

35 Heads of department meet weekly with the senior management team. These meetings form a basis for good communications within the college. Agendas are set and notes are taken. The notes are widely circulated. However, they do not identify the actions which are required. Although

academic issues are aired at these meetings, discussion is concentrated mainly on issues relating to management of the college. Departmental meetings are also held regularly. Sometimes, however, they become conflated with course team meetings. Communications between the college's staff and its governors are spasmodic, and should be improved, particularly during this time of change.

36 The income and expenditure for the college to July 1994 are shown in Figures 5 and 6, respectively. Allocation of financial responsibility is clear. Budget holders regularly meet the college finance officer. Heads of department receive monthly financial reports and have access to more detailed information if required.

37 Computerised and manual systems are used to collect and process management information. The college has recently changed its management information software. An accounting package is used by financial and accounting staff to produce a comprehensive range of reports including those for governors, senior managers and heads of department. A separate software package for student records is being used for the first time this year. It is intended that this will provide the information necessary to meet management and funding council needs. However, the routine collection of data on which the computer systems depend, should be improved.

38 The college is at an early stage in developing performance and efficiency indicators. For example, an exercise to determine the cost of a full-time student place has been carried out at the request of the corporation but the method used produced misleading results.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

39 The college provides careers education and guidance to school pupils through its network of area tutors, supported by other teaching staff. The two-day taster courses for school pupils provide excellent opportunities for careers guidance. Links with the local careers service are close. Careers staff are available at the college open day, contribute to the student induction programme and visit the college regularly to provide careers advice. The college has effective procedures for dealing with enquiries from the public.

40 All applicants to full-time courses are interviewed to discuss the appropriateness of their chosen course and a tour of the college facilities is arranged. Most students consider the interview helpful but the quality of guidance varies. A small number of students reported that they were not fully informed about course content prior to entry, and particularly about those elements of the course not directly related to their career intentions. There are no clear statements of admission criteria and interview practice. This should be rectified without delay.

41 The enrolment procedures and induction programme are well planned and managed. There is a two-week induction for new full-time

students. The first week, in late June provides an introduction to the college, the student's chosen course and the associated health and safety issues. The students are also assessed in basic skills such as tractor driving and horse riding. The timing of this week is particularly helpful for students on 'job skills' youth training programmes and others who take up employment for the first time during the summer. For students unable to attend, a second diagnostic week is arranged in early September. All full-time students attend a second week of induction at the start of the academic year in late September, when the programme includes more comprehensive information about the college and its courses. Students are pleased with the induction they receive and feel that the good relationships with staff, which are a strength of the college, are established at this early stage.

42 During induction, students receive advice on study skills. However, there is no college policy to ensure that this advice is structured consistently, and students' opinions about the usefulness of these sessions vary considerably. Course handbooks are given to all students and most provide useful information about the curriculum, assessment, and resources. The new college charter was issued during induction this year and students are generally well informed about their rights and responsibilities.

43 Accreditation of prior learning is at an early stage. Training for a member of staff from each academic department has been undertaken, and one formal assessment has taken place. On a less formal basis, some tutors have adjusted the individual learning programmes for current students to take account of previous experience.

44 Tutorial support is the responsibility of course tutors, who arrange individual and group tutorials. These are provided throughout the academic year, and students are generally complimentary about the accessibility and helpfulness of tutorial staff. Nevertheless, the way in which tutorials are conducted varies considerably, as do tutorial records. In some cases, the process is not systematic enough in reviewing progress, setting short-term targets and identifying learning needs. Arrangements for monitoring the effectiveness of tutorials should be improved. Course tutors monitor student attendance and take prompt action on unexplained absences. Students on work experience, including those on their middle-year placement when they are away from college for 12 months, are well briefed and supported.

45 Guidance on personal matters is available from the full-time student services manager and the part-time wardens. Arrangements are in place to refer individual students to outside agencies for personal counselling should more specialist help be required. Advice on financial matters is also readily available to students.

46 Much of the personal and academic support received by Plumpton students is on a very informal basis and this is generally effective. The

residential students, who live and work in a closely-knit community, receive strong support from teachers and support staff.

47 At the time of the inspection in the early part of the academic year, it was not possible to assess the effectiveness of the careers advice provided for students. Some third-year students were not clear about the routes available to them although there are well-resourced sections in the college library which provide general information about careers and more advanced courses.

48 Procedures to identify learning support needs for students with literacy or numeracy difficulties have only recently been established. All full-time students took the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit diagnostic tests during induction this year. However, arrangements to meet the needs of those students requiring help have not yet been organised.

49 The college does not have any specific programmes, or expertise, relating to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A member of staff acts as co-ordinator for such students and where practicable, students are integrated into existing courses. A hearing-impaired student receives satisfactory support in all his classes. Training has been provided in the use of audio aids and teaching presentation to assist lip reading for all the staff who work with this student. In addition regular help is available from an external specialist teacher. One student with dyslexia was not receiving additional support.

50 The college has strong links with a number of special schools, and provides link courses, farm visits and curriculum support. There is a course run on behalf of Mencap for adults with learning difficulties. Further initiatives are contemplated.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

51 The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Classes	4	24	12	9	0	49

52 Much of the teaching observed was good. Strengths outweighed weaknesses in 57 per cent of the sessions inspected. These were predominantly practical sessions. Eighteen per cent of sessions were considered to be less than satisfactory. These were almost exclusively theory classes.

53 Schemes of work were available for all courses. In equine studies additional documentation had been developed to support the management of courses including a particularly good student course handbook. Most schemes of work were simply a list of topics to be covered during the year and did not give sufficient detail about the work, or the time and methods to be used.

54 Assessments are normally well planned. In equine studies there is a clear schedule of assessments which is made known to students, and there are effective arrangements for ensuring the consistency of practical assessments. In machinery courses there are regular tests and pieces of set work. Attendance levels in all classes were good and were regularly monitored.

55 Effective use is made of practical and theoretical assignments in all courses. They are realistic and relevant, a fact which is appreciated by students. One third-year student on the national diploma in agriculture chose to investigate the success of a winter wheat crop using four different methods of sowing. The project brief was carefully prepared with the help of his tutor, and a four-hectare site was made available on the college farm. All fieldwork was undertaken by the student, who also arranged for a manufacturer to lend specialist equipment and supply technical advice.

56 In some areas, there is considerable variation in the structure and clarity of assignment briefs. This causes confusion, especially when the brief is given verbally, and often means that the analytical content of the work is lost. The fault is made worse where written work returned to students does not contain sufficient comment and guidance from the tutor. The college should consider the adoption of a standard written format for assignments and of a policy to ensure that student work is promptly and appropriately marked.

57 Instruction in practical and workshop activities was far stronger than the associated classroom teaching. Lecturers have a good working relationship with their students. Their technical knowledge and experience is substantial and students quickly become enthusiastic about practical work.

58 In agriculture, equine studies, horticulture and countryside courses all the practical sessions made good use of the college farms and estate. The aims and objectives of each practical session were clearly stated at the start, and were relevant to the overall course programme. Practical sessions were normally well structured and there were frequent and explicit links to relevant theory. All sessions had a strong emphasis on health and safety and, where appropriate, on animal welfare issues. Many practicals included good groupwork. In a session involving routine health-care tests on sheep, students had to work as a group to determine the layout of handling equipment, organise the selection of animals and carry out the necessary operations to a required commercial standard. Carefully-managed equine and agricultural practicals ensured that the whole group was active even when the tutor had to supervise individual students. In some machinery classes, however, when a group had to be split for fieldwork, tutors did not give sufficient thought to ensuring that the students who were not working under direct supervision had useful alternative exercises to carry out. In horticulture, students are given individual plots to lay out and cultivate. This gives reality both to the work and its assessment.

59 The routine duties undertaken by agriculture and equine students require early-morning starts and weekend work on the college farm and in the stables. Arrangements for these activities were well planned, supervised, assessed and linked to the overall course programme. Farm and yard staff contributed to assessments, including the assessment of punctuality and reliability, qualities which were accepted by all as being relevant to the industrial context. Critical appraisal of students' skills is particularly well developed in equine and horticulture classes, where supportive guidance successfully develops their self-confidence.

60 The effectiveness of classroom sessions is much more variable. Some are well planned, with a clear structure which allows for progression in learning. For example, a lecturer introduced basic techniques of welding in the classroom. He stressed the need to use correct terminology, and a range of different welds were introduced using overhead projection transparencies. Examples of each type of weld were passed around for students to handle. Questions were directed to both individuals and to the class in general, and students felt able to interject and ask their own questions. The pace was lively, notes were built up during the class and the teacher summed up the main points before the session concluded. Related practical work in the welding workshop was programmed to follow.

61 Too many classroom sessions were not well planned and did not provide sufficient variety of methods to maintain student interest. Introductions were often very brief and failed to establish links with other parts of the curriculum. Students were frequently required to spend time copying lengthy notes from the overhead projector, when a hand-out or some personal research would have been more appropriate. Inadequate preparation sometimes resulted in there being insufficient material or examples to occupy the whole of the period. Often, there was no structured discussion and little opportunity for students to ask questions. The use of groupwork was limited and was inhibited by the layout of the furniture in some rooms. Whilst in some equine and agricultural classes questions were skilfully used to check comprehension and progression, in some other areas they were often so open-ended that weaker students were unable to participate. More able and articulate students then dominated the classes. Some tutors failed to cope with the range of student abilities in a single group, sometimes because they had neglected to prepare an adequate variety of work. The weakness of classroom teaching is a significant issue which the college needs to address.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

62 Students speak positively about their courses and about the college. They enjoy their studies, particularly the practical activities, and most exhibit a real dedication to their chosen vocation. Most students are articulate and confident, qualities reinforced by the good relations with staff.

63 Students demonstrate sound knowledge of their subjects and apply it effectively. Most practical work is of an appropriate standard. In agriculture, in particular, students are well informed about commercial practice. Invariably, students carry out their tasks with due care for health and safety. The importance of health and safety is reinforced in theory sessions, notably in machinery courses.

64 Students work collaboratively in groups but are also, in many instances, able to work independently and without supervision.

65 Students' written work is of an acceptable standard or better. In the advanced certificate in equine business management, in particular, some assignments achieve standards beyond the requirements of the course assessment criteria. Students cope well with challenging assignments. However, there is greater variation in the quality of written work in machinery courses, where students are unenthusiastic about theoretical work. During time outside their main course, machinery students acquire additional competencies such as welding, chainsaw operation and quad driving which will be of use to them in employment.

66 In most courses, a more explicit approach to the development of core skills should be adopted. This should be linked to co-ordinated provision for learning support. Third-year students on the national diploma in agriculture have developed good communication and information technology skills which are a part of their core curriculum. However, information technology is under used in most other courses. Most basic numeracy and communications skills support is left to individual subject lecturers although the college is considering the provision of additional support for students identified as needing help through the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit testing.

67 Completion rates on full-time courses, 1992-94, are generally satisfactory. Reasons for students leaving courses are recorded, but the information is not collated centrally. This is a significant weakness in the college's data.

68 Rates for examination success are typical for the agricultural college sector, with results around the national average. In the national certificate in agriculture the pass rate has averaged 92 per cent over three years. In 1993-94, all students who completed the national diploma in agriculture passed. There was also a 100 per cent pass rate among those who sat for the first diploma, but the retention rate was only 82 per cent.

69 In 1993-94, students on the national certificate in the management of horses, and on the advanced national certificate in equine business management, achieved grades above the national average. Success rates in the preliminary course were high, with 100 per cent pass rates achieved in both 1992 and 1993. In the horticulture first diploma, the pass rate has improved from 80 per cent in 1993 to 91 per cent in 1994, and no student left the course during 1994.

70 In 1994, very poor results were recorded for the C&G course in agricultural mechanics, with a pass rate of only 27 per cent. This result is not typical of what has been achieved over the years. It is attributed to low achievement in the theory papers, a not uncommon problem on the college's courses.

71 Results achieved by part-time students are generally satisfactory. The pass rates quoted below are the percentages of students who entered and passed examinations. In agriculture, 85 per cent of the students passed in 1993, and in 1994, 84 per cent, a considerable improvement on earlier performances. In horticulture, 81 per cent of students passed in 1993, and 82 per cent in 1994, although the number of entries declined by 30 per cent over the two years. In agricultural machinery, the 'job skills' programme for youth training sponsored by Sussex TEC has had variable success and retention rates. In equine studies only the 1993 statistics were available: 78 per cent of students successfully completed their courses.

72 Students have opportunities to participate in a number of competitions organised by the college or in local, county and south of England shows. Notable successes have been achieved locally in ploughing, in horse shows, and in winning the best pig carcass award at the South Eastern Fatstock Show. In 1993-94, the winner of the national 'Student Greenkeeper of the Year' award was a Plumpton student. In the same year, another student was awarded a silver medal by C&G for a livestock project and a team of part-time students won the regional competition for practical skills.

73 The college's destination data reveal that 85 per cent of students of agriculture and equine studies proceed to additional studies or to relevant employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

74 The college's quality-assurance policy statement is contained in its strategic plan. It includes a set of objectives which are further developed in a separate document, the quality development and assurance programme. Objectives are clearly stated and are supported by a description of the means by which the college intends to achieve and measure success.

75 The quality development and assurance programme is a relatively recent initiative. Staff are not well informed about it and the new policy has so far had little impact. While there is evidence of simple, informal quality control practices in some areas, there is no coherent system of review applied consistently throughout the college.

76 The college's first self-assessment report, produced for the inspection, comprises a list of strengths and weaknesses in each of the five main departments. None of the departmental contributions were the product of a systematic review which analysed available course performance data

and student perceptions of their courses. Weaknesses were identified, but the few action plans recorded in minutes of department meetings, were vague and failed to allocate responsibility for action and timescales for implementation.

77 Student evaluation of courses is now required across the college. A standard form asks students on completion of a course for an overall rating of satisfaction with the course, and invites further relevant comments. There was some analysis of responses, to determine whether or not a course was perceived as successful. Students' comments were not always clearly stated, consequently their value was limited. Students are not involved with staff in formal course review, although national diploma and national certificate students in agriculture have an end-of-course discussion with their lecturers. On an informal basis, students speak highly of the manner in which staff respond to criticism or complaint. In only a few cases was it possible to track students' requests for improvement through to appropriate remedial action.

78 Consultation with employers on quality of provision is also informal. The advisory committees provide useful guidance on specialist resources, but they are insufficiently consulted about the suitability and quality of provision. Other links with employers have not been fully exploited in relation to curriculum development and quality assurance.

79 Recommendations in moderators' or verifiers' reports are not always implemented, nor are there systematic records of those actions which have been taken. For example, in two consecutive reports on horticulture, unfavourable comment was made about inadequate record-keeping, without result.

80 The college is committed to acquiring Investors in People status by July 1995. A detailed plan has been drawn up with the help of a consultant. An appraisal scheme has been launched, and, at the time of the inspection, about 20 per cent of the staff had been appraised. In the machinery department, where most progress has been achieved, training needs have been identified and dates set for meeting them. Other departments are due to follow this good example.

81 Staff development has focused predominantly on updating knowledge or the development of teaching skills. There has been some training of staff in how to conduct staff appraisal. There is evidence to suggest that the college should give priority to training in management and quality assurance. Observation of teaching during the inspection also indicated that some staff require support in aspects of classroom management.

82 Plumpton is currently involved with the Sussex TEC initiative on quality management. The college has provided a portfolio of evidence to meet the standards of the Sussex Quality Management System. However, the relationship between this quality system, which the TEC can properly require only for the courses it funds, and the college's quality assurance development programme is not clear. It is currently the subject of negotiation.

83 The college charter has been published, and all students have been made aware of its purpose and contents. It is too early to assess the impact, if any, of this initiative. The charter itself is well designed. It takes the form of a summary, and further information is readily available in the college information centre.

84 In the administration department, targets have been agreed and standards of performance are set. This applies both to the work of administrative staff within the college, for example in such matters as prompt production of committee minutes, and to their relations with the general public. Similarly, on the college's Wales Farm, monthly and annual production targets are set and reviewed regularly.

85 The college should establish without delay, a co-ordinated quality assurance system which links systematic course review with appraisal and staff development. This process should lead to the setting of targets and plans for action. The quality assurance system should provide evidence for presentation to the academic board, to managers, and to the corporation for monitoring quality and standards. This same evidence should be used to inform departmental and college strategic planning. Annual operating plans should ensure that targets are published, monitored and evaluated in a regular cycle.

RESOURCES

Staffing

86 Lecturers have appropriate qualifications and industrial experience. The knowledge and competence of staff are sustained by a programme of technical updating. In agriculture, direct involvement with the college farm is particularly helpful in this respect. Many staff have links of their own with the industry, which ensure that they have a good understanding of recent developments and current issues.

87 It has been the policy of the college to encourage staff to gain teaching qualifications in addition to their initial technical qualifications. Eighty-three per cent of staff now have a relevant teaching qualification. Good progress is being made towards Training and Development Lead Body certification for teachers. Twenty-nine per cent of teaching staff have qualified as assessors whilst a further 42 per cent are training as NVQ assessors and 19 per cent as verifiers. Least progress has been made in horticulture, where only one member of staff is accredited as an assessor. This is a significant shortcoming, given the large proportion of NVQ programmes offered by this department.

88 In equine studies, horticulture and some specialist machinery courses, part-time staff add to the range of specialist expertise. This is particularly so in welding, garden design and floristry. All part-time staff are enthusiastic and committed to their work, but some need greater support from full-time colleagues and more effective integration into course teams.

89 The number of technical support staff is adequate, except in horticulture, where there is no technical support to prepare machinery and tools for practical sessions. Support staff, especially the farm staff and the equine yard manager and supervisor, are active in support of teaching and assessment. In horticulture, the groundsman spends time with full-time students to develop their practical skills, and it is planned that he will study for Training and Development Lead Body assessor accreditation.

90 There is one librarian. Staffed library opening hours, particularly in the evenings, can only be provided by lecturers supervising voluntarily. The college is running a trial under which the library remains open but without staff. Activities are monitored by close-circuit television and an electronic book security system. There is no technician support for computing, so that a lecturer spends time on routine housekeeping activities. These shortcomings will be a significant limitation in realising the college's plans to extend the opportunities for students to work on their own.

91 The ratio of students to staff has changed gradually from 9.8:1 in 1992-93 to 11.4:1 in 1993-94. In the current year, a move has been made to reduce the taught hours on most courses.

92 Since incorporation, the college has exercised careful control over the deployment of administrative support, and has met its new and wider responsibilities with only one additional member of staff.

Equipment/learning resources

93 The college has a good range of agricultural equipment, both in the teaching areas and on the college farms. This includes an appropriate variety of modern tractors and cultivating equipment, and also a new materials handler which reflects the most up-to-date industrial practice. Students also get the opportunity to use the latest models of some equipment, such as a combined seed drill, which are loaned to the college by agricultural equipment suppliers. Workshop machinery includes two milling machines, two lathes and a pillar drill, which are in good working order and are sufficient for the needs of the courses. Blacksmithing and welding equipment is adequate.

94 In horticulture, there are adequate machinery and tools to support current provision. Plants, and horticultural activities taking place in the college grounds are not labelled and described in any way. This is a wasted educational opportunity.

95 The equine studies centre has stabling for 34 horses. There is a good range of horse types. The training course has a variety of cross-country fences, there are good tracks for hacking including the South Downs Way, and there is a good variety of show jumping equipment. There are sufficient tools and riding tack.

96 Computer facilities are housed in a single room and available to students on an open-access basis. The equipment is adequate to meet current demand. However, the ratio of one machine to approximately 25 students, is low by current standards and reflects the inadequate level of computer use in college courses.

97 A development plan has been written by the lecturer responsible for information technology. This has not been formally adopted as college policy. Staff development in basic computer awareness and curriculum application should be provided. The college has no compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases, and there is little use of specialist commercial software, except for farm accounts, dairy herd records, field recording and greenkeeping.

98 The library and resources centre is small, but is well located near other student facilities. The library contains approximately 5,000 texts, a variety of periodicals and journals, and a collection of video tapes and slides. There is also a small, but well-stocked, careers section. The library has 24 study places although many residential students choose to work in their own rooms. Students have access to a photocopier. In horticulture and equine studies, there is an adequate range of up-to-date books and journals. Texts are well used, especially in equine studies where they reflect the priority already given to independent research. The turf management and greenkeeping sections have a number of modern texts, but require additional copies. In agriculture, there is a shortage of modern books. In machinery courses, there are appropriate periodicals, but the range of suitable workshop books is poor. Old and inappropriate stock should be removed. The library shelving is inadequate for the storage and effective display of the current bookstock.

99 The library is not heavily used. The college is only just beginning to consider the place of the library in its strategy for encouraging students to work on their own. The recently-installed library security system is intended to allow student access when there are no staff on duty.

100 Equipment inventories and an asset register exist but there is no equipment replacement policy. This is a significant shortcoming in disciplines which are so heavily dependent on major capital items.

Accommodation

101 The campus is attractive and welcoming. The college grounds are landscaped and well maintained.

102 Workshops and classrooms are mainly in good-quality buildings. Most of the specialist indoor facilities are of a high standard, especially the agricultural and horticultural workshops, the new indoor riding school and the small winery. The gas and electric welding shops are small but well equipped. Outdoors, there is a fine horse arena, a purpose-built stable yard, an all-weather tractor driving area, sports turf, and a nine-hole golf course. The two temperature-controlled glasshouses and plastic tunnels

are fit for their purpose, but are under used. The plant centre is poorly developed, and does not provide a realistic retail outlet for training. There is too little covered space for teaching near the horticultural machine store. The grounds are not used at all for horticultural interpretation, and their development for hard landscape is limited.

103 The buildings are clean and well lit. However, some of the older areas are unattractive and in need of decoration and refurbishment. Much of the residential accommodation is spartan and some requires substantial improvement, especially the communal washrooms. The students' dining and social areas are adequate, but the latter are dingy. There are good outdoor sports facilities, but no covered sports area.

104 There are sufficient good-quality teaching rooms to support current courses. Some are crowded because of increasing group sizes. Most are reasonably furnished, but the layout of furniture frequently discourages group activity. There are sufficient teaching aids in all rooms, but there were only a few examples of good wall displays. Floristry is taught in an ordinary classroom which has inappropriate furniture and fittings. The coldroom facilities are not within easy reach of the class, and the retail space required for NVQ assessment has not been provided.

105 The college's main site has two classrooms in a temporary building. Following the Hunter survey the college is planning its replacement. One space used for a classroom in the machinery workshops is unsatisfactory.

106 Few parts of the main college buildings, even on the ground floor, are accessible to students using wheelchairs or to those with other mobility difficulties. Access for disabled students has been provided in the farm information centre.

107 The college farm, Wales Farm, is run commercially and provides a realistic working environment for practical classes and assessments. There is a wide range of soil types and habitats. The equipment and mix of enterprises is appropriate to a large commercial farm of its type. Performance figures for all business activities are in line with industrial standards.

108 The farm manager is also the head of the department of agriculture. The balance between the commercial imperatives of the farm and the curriculum needs of the students is well struck. The business plan for the farm specifically identifies support for the curriculum. For example, pigs are kept largely for teaching purposes, and a wider range of crops are grown than might otherwise be the case. Conservation aspects of the estate are emphasised for the development of the countryside courses. They include woodland and tree planting, hedgerow and headland management, and the preservation of ponds and watercourses. Pheasants are reared in the college woodlands. Work on the downland, including management of a bronze age camp, is used to teach farming and conservation in environmentally-sensitive areas.

109 Students spend a great deal of time on the farm. Farm staff are committed to their support and assessment. A farm information centre has been developed as a teaching resource, both for Plumpton students and for visiting school parties and interest groups. Access to all farm data by staff and students is encouraged through the regular publication of a farm guide, weekly circulation of farm diaries, and the use of computerised information including accounts, field usage, and production statistics. The college monitors student use of the farm, and has calculated the cost of educational activities on its commercial performance.

110 Ivylands Farm, near Battle, is leased by the college as an out-centre in the east of the county. It is an 18 hectare grass farm used for sheep and beef production. Its educational centre consists of two good-quality classrooms, and a staff room and resources centre in temporary buildings. The integration of the farm with an informal advice network for local farmers, makes Ivylands an effective learning environment. Its horticultural facilities are minimal.

111 In addition to its own farms and estate, the college makes good use of local farms and woodlands to support its work. Students visiting Ivylands have access to the adjoining Netherfield Place Farm, consisting of 41 hectares of grassland and 24 hectares of arable crops. Close to Plumpton, there are opportunities to study local poultry and beef enterprises. Neighbouring farms also provide additional ploughing experience and access to animal management techniques such as de-horning. The willingness of farmers to co-operate is important in providing students with an appropriate range of practical experience and assessment opportunities. To extend its conservation interests, the college manages substantial areas of downland for both Lewes District Council and the National Trust.

112 The college has retained a consultant to prepare an accommodation strategy, detailing its options for the future. This has yet to be fully explored by the corporation. There is a property maintenance schedule under the direction of a senior manager. Room allocation is effectively managed, but utilisation and occupancy are not yet evaluated.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

113 The particular strengths of Plumpton College are:

- high standards of practical teaching
- good links with schools and industry
- a good record of student progress to further education and employment
- the quality and experience of the staff
- the quality of staff/student relationships and the commitment of staff to student support
- the farms and estate and their use in the curriculum.

114 If it is to succeed in achieving its aims, the college should:

- develop a shared vision for the future of the college
- ensure that the strategic plan is sufficiently detailed and contains realistic goals for achieving the college's mission
- develop a strategic planning process
- establish an integrated quality-assurance system
- establish procedures for the review and implementation of all college policies
- ensure that there is a functioning and effective academic board
- improve the quality of theoretical work in engineering/machinery courses
- raise the overall standards of classroom teaching
- develop a more flexible organisation of courses to enable students to attend at different times
- develop learning support for students
- improve residential accommodation.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

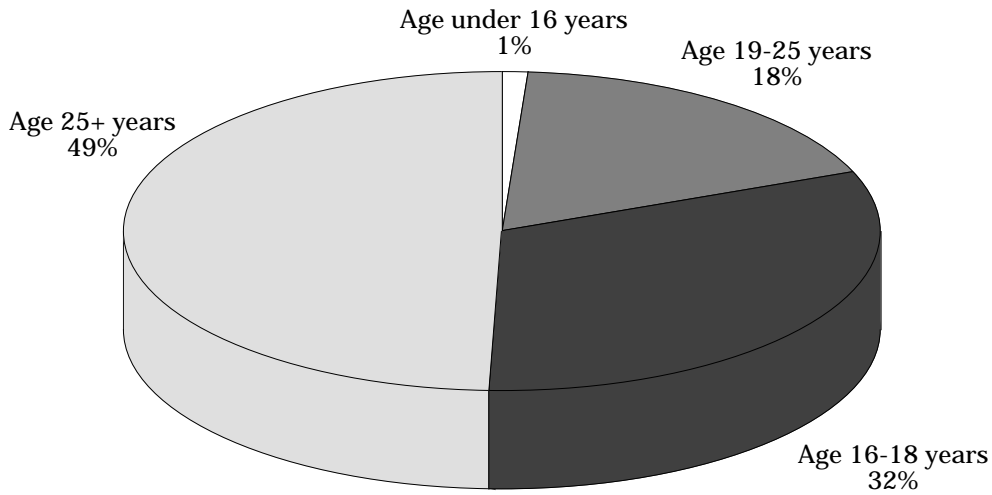
 - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

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

Figure 1

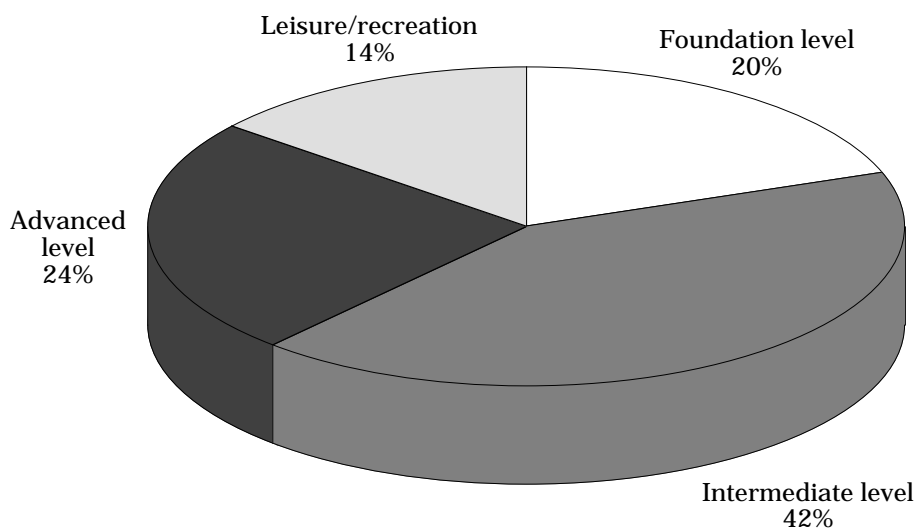
Plumpton College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 746

Figure 2

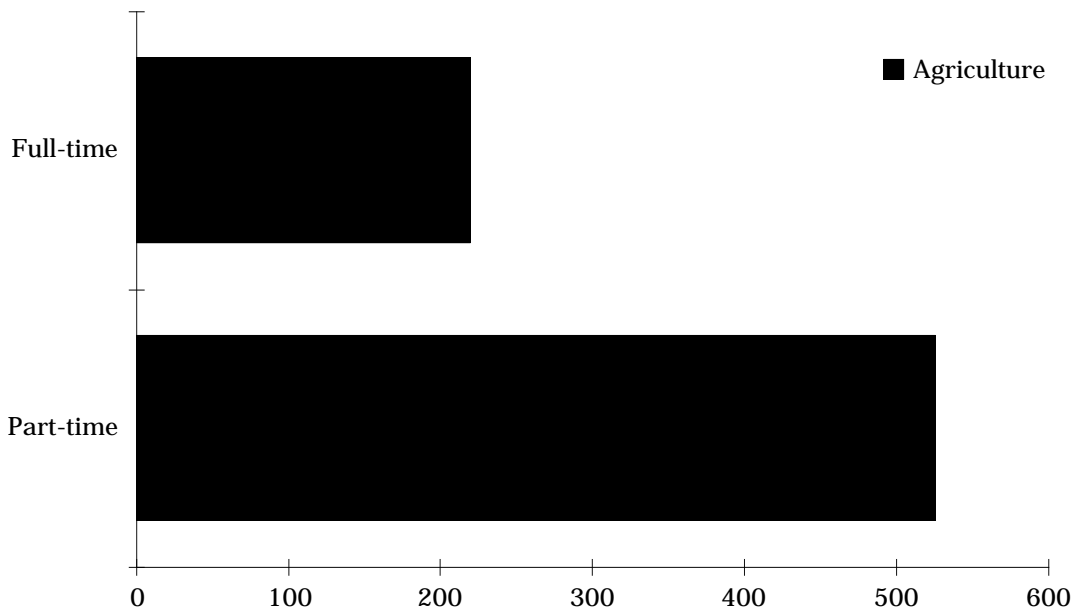
Plumpton College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 746

Figure 3

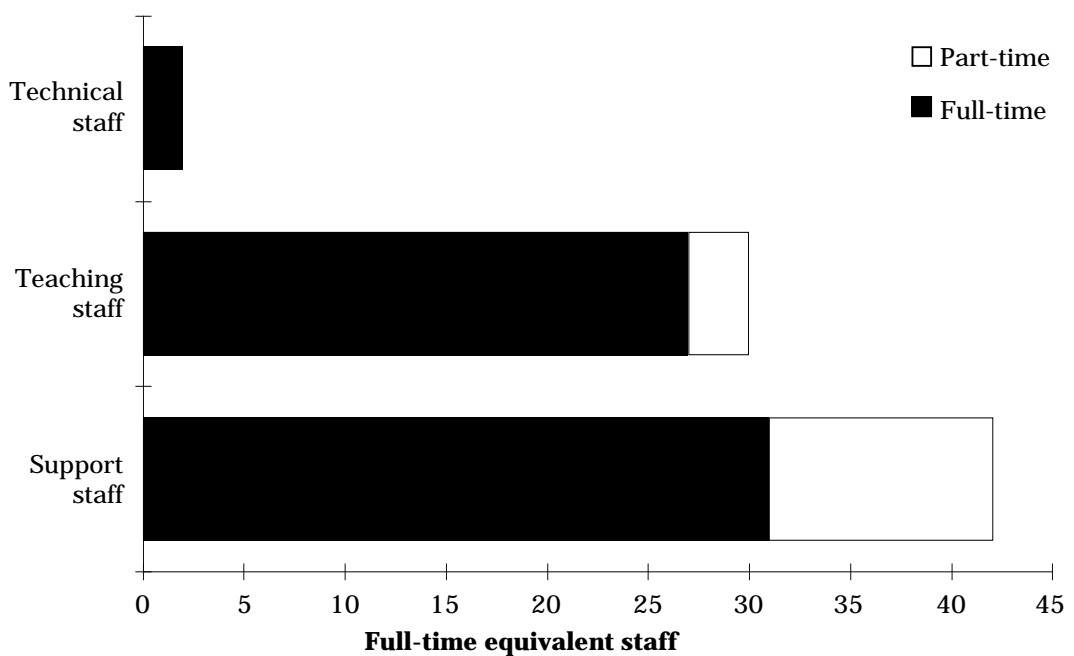
Plumpton College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 746

Figure 4

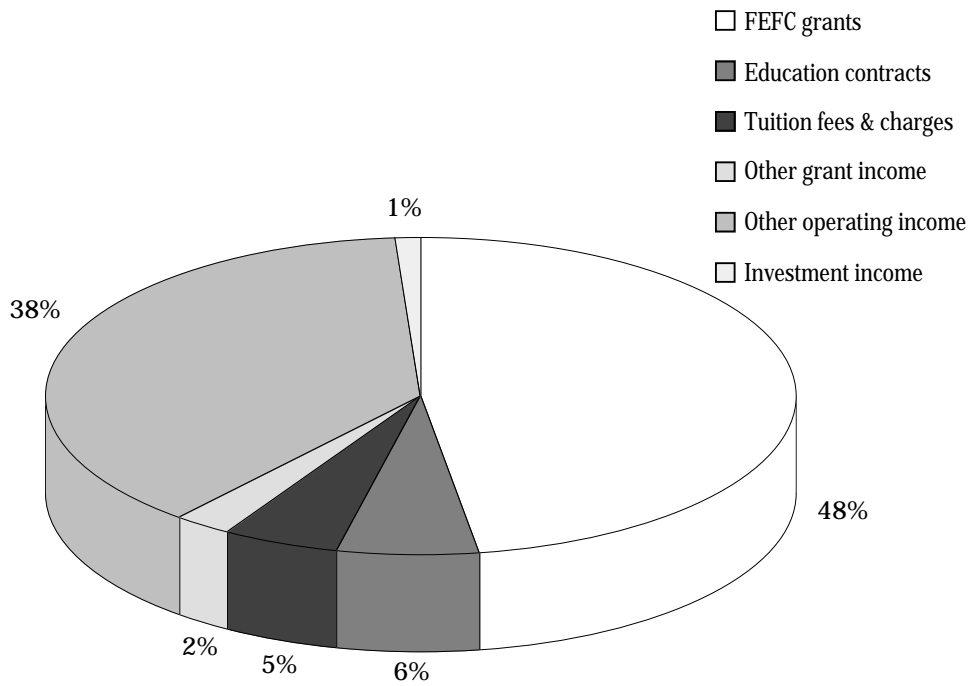
Plumpton College: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 75

Figure 5

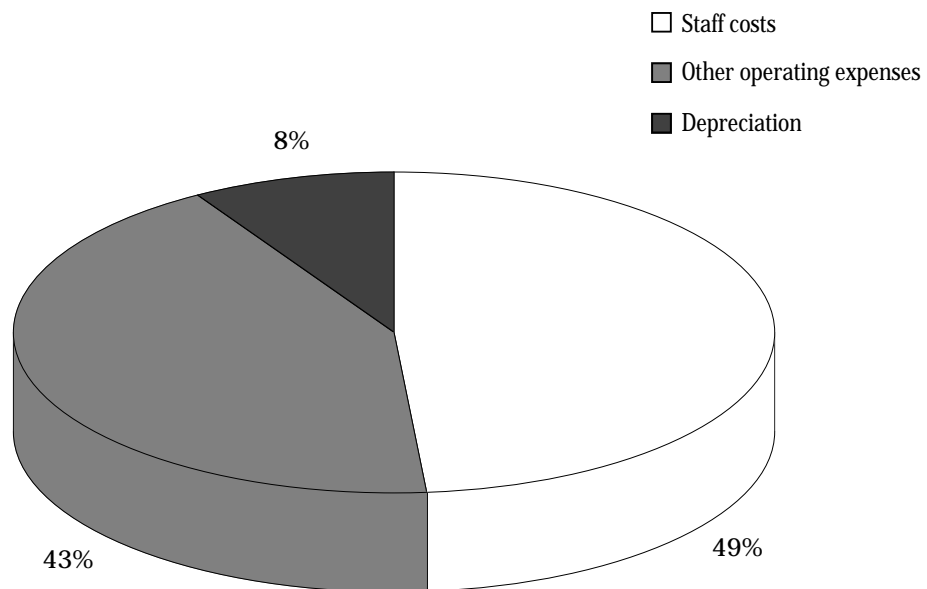
Plumpton College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)



Income: £3,868,000

Figure 6

Plumpton College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)



Expenditure: £3,783,000

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