

Plumpton College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
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FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

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Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	–

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

Plumpton College

South East Region

Inspected September 1998

Plumpton College is a college of agriculture near Lewes. The self-assessment report which the college prepared before the inspection was its first. The report is detailed. It identifies strengths, weaknesses and actions for improvement. Some of the actions had been addressed by the time of the inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made by the college. In preparation for the inspection the college carried out a programme of lesson observations. The college's lesson observation grades were similar to those awarded during the inspection. Inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college except in one of the cross-college areas inspected.

Plumpton College offers land-based courses from foundation level to higher national diplomas. Since the last inspection, the college has extended and improved its provision and student numbers have increased. Governance, management, and resources have greatly improved. There have been significant additions and improvements to buildings. The college is well managed. Students are generally well taught. There is a wide range of good-quality specialist facilities and students are enabled to develop their practical skills to a high level. In a few lessons teachers fail to take account of the needs of all the students in the

group. Pass rates on most full-time courses are high. Students are well supported by staff. Students' opinions are taken seriously and acted upon. The college benefits from good links with industry. In partnership with others it is promoting environmentally responsible agriculture. Since the last inspection, arrangements for quality assurance have improved. These arrangements should be developed further to include all aspects of the college as well as the analysis of students' achievements at course level. The college should improve: the recording of tutorials; access for students with restricted mobility; resources for animal care and accommodation at the Ivyland farm centre; and pass rates on some part-time courses.

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

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

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Plumpton College was established in 1926 to serve the needs of the farming community in Sussex. It is situated within an area of outstanding natural beauty at the foot of the South Downs, six miles from the county town of Lewes and 10 miles from Brighton. The college estate comprises 600 hectares of land, including 200 hectares of the South Downs belonging to the National Trust and Lewes District Council. This is managed under an environmentally sensitive area scheme. The college has a diverse estate and modern animal units which contain prize-winning herds of cows and pigs. There is a small farm 30 miles to the east of Plumpton, Ivyland farm centre at Netherfield, which provides facilities for agriculture, conservation and forestry programmes.

2 Since the last inspection, the college has extended its range of courses. It offers full-time and part-time programmes in agriculture, agricultural mechanisation, amenity horticulture and sports turf, animal care, arboriculture and forestry, blacksmithing, conservation and countryside skills, horse studies, floristry, veterinary nursing and wine studies. There is provision for students with moderate learning difficulties. In 1996, the college became an associate college of the University of Brighton, and offers higher education courses in horse studies, forestry and wine studies. The higher national diploma course in wine studies is unique in the United Kingdom. To support wine studies the college operates a commercial vineyard and winery.

3 Agriculture and related industries account for 4% of the East Sussex economy. In 1998, job vacancies notified to the college in agriculture, horticulture and forestry exceeded the number of students available. In 1997, 91% of full-time students completing their courses progressed to further or higher education or employment.

4 In 1997-98, there were 439 full-time and 760 part-time students. Of these,

370 full-time and 324 part-time students were funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). There were 69 full-time students on higher education courses. The number of full-time students has more than doubled since incorporation in 1993. Up to 140 students are accommodated on campus; the remainder travel daily, many on buses provided by the college. In September 1998, the college employed 108 people. There are four academic departments: agriculture and machinery; horticulture; equine and animal studies; and wine studies and forestry.

5 The college's mission is 'to develop as the region's major provider of quality education, training, consultancy and other activities associated with the needs of land based industries and rural businesses'. To achieve its mission the college seeks to widen participation through partnership with public, private and voluntary sector organisations and to work collaboratively with other further and higher education institutions. It has developed productive links with other institutions in Europe, the United States of America and South Africa. It aims to improve the quality of students' experiences by providing an inclusive and supportive environment.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in September 1998. Inspectors had previously examined the college's self-assessment report. The college submitted data on students' achievements for 1998. These data were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and awarding body pass lists and found to be reliable. Data for 1996 and 1997 were taken from the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR). The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors and an auditor working for a total of

29 days. They observed 41 lessons and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with students, governors, managers and staff.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 61% were rated good or outstanding and 5% were less than satisfactory. During the last inspection in October 1994, strengths outweighed weaknesses in 57% of the lessons observed.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
Lessons	7	13	13	2	0	35
Tutorial provision	0	5	1	0	0	6
Total (No)	7	18	14	2	0	41
Total (%)	17	44	34	5	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The college was inspected in the second teaching week of the academic year. The

average level of attendance in the lessons observed was 94%. The average number of students attending lessons was 11. This figure excludes data on tutorial sessions.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Plumpton College	11.0	94
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

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

Curriculum Areas

Animal Care

Grade 3

9 Inspectors observed 12 lessons, including two tutorials, covering a range of subjects on the first and national diploma courses in animal care. They agreed with the majority of judgements in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- the effective use of assignments
- improved pass and retention rates on the first diploma and the pass rate on the national diploma course
- course documentation
- responsive and flexible teaching team

Weaknesses

- some teaching which does not take account of students' different abilities
- narrow range of courses and choice of options within courses
- inadequate specialist practical facilities
- lack of employer involvement in reviewing courses

10 There was no provision in animal care at the time of the last inspection. In 1995, the college started a first diploma course and added a national diploma course in 1996. A part-time veterinary nursing course started in 1997. There is little evening class provision. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment in its self-assessment report that animal care courses are well planned and well managed and that there are good links with local industry. However, although employers are represented on the curriculum advisory panel, they are not involved in reviewing existing courses. All full-time courses include one day a week of work experience. This is well managed and valued by students. There are no opportunities for students to achieve relevant additional

vocational qualifications. The college recognises that there is a need to broaden the choice of modules offered to include kennels and cattery provision. It plans to offer these later in the current academic year.

11 Most lessons are well planned. In the better lessons, teachers use a wide range of methods. Extensive use is made of assignments. Assignment briefs all follow a standard format and are comprehensive. In most cases, students receive detailed feedback so that they are able to evaluate the standard of their work against the stated criteria. Good use is made of assignments to develop and record common skills. In one lesson, students were asked to investigate and plan the establishment of an animal collection at the college. The task included a series of visits to local zoos. Students worked in small groups and discussed the management of animal collections. Each group reported back to the whole class. The students worked positively and produced a high standard of response. In some less successful lessons teachers fail to involve all the students. In a few lessons, some students experienced difficulty in understanding the complexity and depth of the subject being taught.

12 The college recognised that achievement on the first diploma in 1996 and in 1997 was low. As a consequence, the selection process and aspects of teaching, particularly in mathematics, were improved. In 1998, achievement was good and 96% of students achieved a qualification. The self-assessment report identified a low retention rate on the first year of the national diploma course in 1997, although all the students who completed this course were successful. Retention on the current national diploma course has improved. Second-year national diploma students have the opportunity to follow a general certificate of education advanced supplementary/advanced level (GCE AS/A level) environmental studies course. In 1998, the three students who entered the GCE A level examination passed as did three of the six who entered the GCE AS level examination.

Curriculum Areas

Portfolios of students' work are comprehensive, well presented and of an appropriate standard. There are high levels of progression from both full-time courses into either continuing education or employment. The full-time animal care students organise a dog show for the college open day. This is increasingly popular. Inspectors agreed with the college that students' attendance is good.

13 The animal care unit is relatively new and is located in a converted poultry house. It includes an animal house with fish, reptiles and rodents together with a dog grooming area, offices and two classrooms. The animal care unit has been converted to a high standard and is well managed. As the self-assessment report indicates, however, there are some ventilation problems and it is not large enough. The lack of any kennels or cattery currently limits the college's ability to offer modules in these subjects. Work is under way to convert a poultry house to provide more varied facilities. There are currently no plans to develop boarding kennels. There are three full-time teachers and one assistant who work closely together to form a well-integrated, responsive and flexible team. They are all appropriately qualified and experienced in the animal care industry.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma	2	Expected completions	20	21	27
		Retention (%)	85	86	93
		Achievement (%)	59	67	96
National diploma	3	Expected completions	*	*	16
		Retention (%)	*	*	58
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100

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

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Equine

Grade 2

14 Inspectors observed 12 lessons, including two tutorials. These covered a range of subjects on the full-time and part-time courses in horse studies. They agreed with most of the judgements expressed in the self-assessment report. Inspectors considered some strengths were overstated and identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- retention and pass rates on full-time courses
- progression by the majority of students to higher level courses
- high standard of practical riding instruction
- the regular involvement of students in practical work
- good-quality and well-managed practical facilities

Weaknesses

- little opportunity for full-time horse studies students to achieve additional qualifications
- insufficient attention given to the needs of all students
- poor achievement rate in British Horse Society examinations

15 The college offers a wide range of courses in horse studies ranging from a preliminary certificate to a higher national diploma. The college yard is recognised as a British Horse Society examination centre up to stage 4. Full-time students are encouraged to take British Horse Society qualifications but have few opportunities to take other vocational qualifications. Most courses are well organised

and have detailed documentation. The internal verification procedure effectively ensures that there is a consistent approach to setting and marking students' assessments. The college's close links with industry have not been fully exploited. The equine curriculum advisory panel meets twice yearly and advises the college on new course developments and resources. However, the content and quality of existing courses is not sufficiently considered by this panel.

16 Lessons are well planned. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of practical riding instruction is good. Students are streamed according to their riding ability. In one riding class, four inexperienced first diploma students were required to tack up their horses and take them to the indoor arena. The teacher provided effective support throughout the lesson and praised the students for their achievements. This helped to build their self-confidence. In one class, eight national diploma students took turns to lunge (a horse-training technique) three horses. Students assessed each other and this helped them to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of lunging. In the best lessons, teachers sustained students' interest with a variety of activities. There were clear links made with the practical aspects of the subject. The teaching of theory and the teaching of health and safety are not always illustrated and reinforced by practical sessions. In the less effective lessons, teachers do not vary the activities enough and give insufficient attention to meeting the needs of all students. A few students on the first diploma course already have the academic qualifications required for entry to the national diploma course but they do not have the practical experience that the college requires. The college should ensure that these students are given work which is sufficiently challenging. The quality and use of handout material is good. Most assignments are

Curriculum Areas

appropriately designed. Most teachers provide sufficient feedback to students on how they can improve their work.

17 Retention and pass rates on full-time courses are good. Students are well motivated and committed to their studies. They take part in regular yard duties, demonstrate a high level of vocational competence, and are aware of industrial requirements. For example, students organise a successful annual horse show. The college recognises the poor pass rates achieved by full-time and part-time students in British Horse Society examinations. In 1998, achievement for full-time students in stage 1 and 2 tests improved. Few students take tests above this level. Part-time students often enrol on these courses without intending to take the examination. Students' assignment work is of a high standard. Their work is well presented and demonstrates well-developed skills in information technology (IT). Many students progress to higher level courses.

18 Teachers have good vocational qualifications and experience. They use this experience effectively in teaching and provide considerable informal guidance and support to students. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the equine yard is of a high standard. The American barn stable block and traditional loose box yard provide stabling for 60 horses. There is an outdoor manège and an indoor school with a viewing gallery. The equine yard is well managed and is used effectively for teaching practical skills and providing work experience.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma and preliminary certificate in horse studies	2	Expected completions	28	15	24
		Retention (%)	71	80	83
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100
National diploma in horse studies	3	Expected completions	*	10	9
		Retention (%)	*	80	100
		Achievement (%)	*	100	100
National certificate and advanced national certificate	3	Expected completions	34	22	21
		Retention (%)	94	68	90
		Achievement (%)	100	66	79

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

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Agriculture and Countryside Studies

Grade 2

19 Inspectors observed 17 lessons in agriculture and in land and countryside studies. Two of these lessons were tutorials. Inspectors agreed with the majority of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. By the time of the inspection, action had been taken to address some of the weaknesses identified.

Key strengths

- the vocational relevance of most teaching
- effective course management
- attendance, retention and pass rates on most courses

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention given to meeting the needs of all students
- management of some practical lessons
- accommodation at Ivyland farm centre

20 Courses in agriculture and land and countryside studies are offered from foundation to higher education level. Since the last inspection, a rural foundation course for students with learning difficulties has been established. This widens the range of entry routes for students. Of the students on the foundation course, 70% were successful in progressing to higher level courses and employment. The college's self-assessment report did not recognise that the range of courses and the progression opportunities offered are a strength of the provision.

21 Most of the teaching is good. In the most successful lessons, teachers explain the learning objectives clearly to students and check their understanding of previous work. In many

theory lessons, teachers explain the vocational relevance of the topics being studied and make reference to practical and commercial applications. Most lessons are well structured and teachers use an appropriate range of teaching and learning methods. For all students, college work is supplemented by well-structured work experience and visits to local industrial and commercial sites. Most practical teaching is of a good standard. Teachers ensure that students' skills are developed progressively. In some weaker practical lessons, students are not effectively involved for long periods. In a well-planned tractor driving lesson, the teacher involved students who were not driving in assessing the driving skills of another student and discussing their findings before roles were changed. In a few lessons, teachers did not draw all students into class discussions; weaker students, in particular, made few contributions. Some students had poor numeracy skills, and opportunities to develop these were sometimes missed. A few teachers took little account of students' practical experience and did not draw on this to extend the learning of the whole class.

22 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that there are good attendance, retention and pass rates on most full-time courses. Retention and pass rates have improved steadily over the past three years. Pass and retention rates on the agriculture courses have remained high but retention on the first diploma dipped sharply to 69% in 1997. Many students achieve additional vocational qualifications, for example, in fork-lift truck driving and the use of chainsaws. Achievement on some part-time national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses is low. Most assignments provide suitable opportunities for students to gain and apply knowledge. Some students' responses are carefully researched and well presented. However, other students do not analyse the information they have gathered in sufficient detail and are not able to draw meaningful conclusions from it. When they leave college, most students progress to other

Curriculum Areas

further or higher education courses or to related employment.

23 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment, that courses are well managed. Schemes of work are prepared to a common format. Assessment schedules are prepared at the beginning of the year and are usually followed. There are course handbooks and other documentation which students need, and these are given out at induction. Assignment briefs follow a common format and include standard assessment criteria for vocational and common skills. Work is marked and verified accurately, but sometimes insufficient written feedback is provided by teachers to enable students to improve their performance.

24 Staff have appropriate qualifications and experience. Their links with industry enable them to keep up to date with current developments. During lessons, they often use

their experience effectively to illustrate how theory is applied in practice. Good use is made of the well-managed estate. Students undertake many of the planning and practical operations on the farm. Practical facilities include sufficient machinery and estate workshops. The resources centre is well stocked with books and periodicals. The college works with a number of rural organisations. Land and countryside students are working with the National Trust on a project to improve the management of downland grassland and habitats on the college farm. Accommodation at the Ivyland farm centre is inadequate. The college has plans to improve it.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
National certificate in agriculture	2	Expected completions	10	15	8
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	80	80	100
National certificate in countryside and rural skills	2	Expected completions	5	16	7
		Retention (%)	60	69	100
		Achievement (%)	67	91	100
First diploma in agriculture	2	Expected completions	13	16	19
		Retention (%)	92	69	84
		Achievement (%)	75	100	100
National diploma in agriculture	3	Expected completions	9	9	18
		Retention (%)	100	89	89
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100
National diploma in land and countryside studies	3	Expected completions	8	8	12
		Retention (%)	63	75	92
		Achievement (%)	100	100	91

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

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

25 The college has maintained the quality of support for students since the last inspection. The balance of strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors broadly reflects that stated in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- wide variety of opportunities for students to gain pre-entry information
- high-quality admissions
- experienced staff
- responsive and growing learning development service
- clear policies and guidance for tutors
- strong commitment to equal opportunities

Weaknesses

- little use of accreditation of students' prior learning
- uneven recording of tutorials and provision of careers advice
- low take-up of learning development
- some students unaware of student support services

26 The college ensures that prospective students are fully informed of the opportunities available through a wide variety of activities. This is recognised in the self-assessment report. 'Tasters' are offered, some of which include a residential element so that prospective students experience all aspects of college life. The open day provides an excellent opportunity for information gathering. The college also participates in regional events such as the South of England Show, which offers good publicity. Interviews are well managed and scheduled to occur throughout the year. Students who are undecided about their course can have ready

access to two or more tutors for advice. There is little use of accreditation of students' prior learning on admission to courses or recognition of the value of students' previous practical experience.

27 Students describe the college as welcoming. The principal participates in the induction of all full-time students. Separate handbooks for full-time and part-time students are clear and helpful. Students are made aware of their rights and responsibilities through the introduction of the students' charter, and are given assistance with the completion of their learner agreement. A special induction takes place for resident students. A sports induction is provided for all students to encourage the use of the college's high-quality facilities.

28 Learning support is provided by the college's learning development service. It has grown rapidly since its establishment two years ago. The philosophy underlying the service is that all students can develop their ability to learn, no matter what their starting point. Literacy and numeracy skills of full-time students are assessed on entry to the college. Help is offered to all who do not reach level 1. The learning development service is flexible, unobtrusive and valued by the staff and students who use it. However, only 44% of those students identified as having support needs initially took advantage of the service. This is recognised in the self-assessment report, and the college has taken steps to address this matter since September 1998. The learning development tutor supports students where course-related learning development needs have been identified. For example, a mathematics workshop has been provided for students on the first diploma in animal care. Learning support is also available for part-time students. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive specialist support. Staff development has been provided to ensure that teachers are aware of strategies which promote inclusive learning.

Cross-college Provision

29 Designated staff provide good tutorial support for groups of full-time and part-time students. There is a helpful guidance pack for tutors. Records of tutorial sessions vary in quality and completeness across curriculum areas. Some tutors do not record the targets they have set for students and, as a result, students lack a framework for improvement.

30 Policies are in place to support the provision of careers education. A qualified careers adviser is on site for two half days a week, based in the resources centre. There are careers resources available in the centre. Not all students are aware of this facility. Tutors are pivotal to the provision of specialist careers education; most are well informed, experienced and give strong support. However, since careers advice is not always documented it is difficult to ensure that all students receive adequate advice. The survey of students' opinions reveals that some students have not received careers advice, and that satisfaction with the service varies widely between curriculum areas. The industrial liaison officer provides a valuable link with employers and advises on local job vacancies. He also takes responsibility for monitoring students' destinations.

31 Students are well supported by a committed and caring team of staff working across the college. They provide a strong pastoral framework for residential students and encourage a responsible approach to independent living. The college nurse provides a valuable service, and a doctor provides a regular surgery. Wardens maintain a support and security service for residential students outside the working day. Students observe that the balance between support and discipline is fair and effective. Communications between staff and students are good. However, surveys show that some students are unaware of the range of college services available to them and the self-assessment report quotes this evidence. The staff/student liaison committee, attended by the principal, allows the opportunity for issues

to be addressed in a constructive way. The student society organises social events, some of which are shared with the Old Plumptonians' Association.

General Resources

Grade 2

32 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. Some strengths and one weakness identified by the college were given greater weight by inspectors. Some weaknesses had been addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- improvements to accommodation since the last inspection
- effective property maintenance
- extensive sport and recreational facilities
- good resources centre
- recently improved bookstock, and quality of computers for students

Weaknesses

- poor access to many areas for students with restricted mobility
- poor-quality older residential accommodation
- too few desktop computers for teachers

33 The grounds of the main college site are attractive and well maintained. Estate signs have been improved recently, and the college intends to do further work. College buildings are of varying ages and quality. The original buildings of 1926 have been added to in successive decades. As the self-assessment report indicates, there have been significant additions and improvements to buildings since the last inspection. The self-assessment report also identifies the continuing need to redecorate

Cross-college Provision

classrooms within the continuous programme of refurbishment. The standard of most general teaching rooms is acceptable, with those in the newer areas presenting a brighter environment. A minority are poor.

34 The accommodation strategy presents a clear view of college priorities, strengths and weaknesses. About £1.3 million has been spent on new works and improvements to buildings over the last four years. The college has shown considerable initiative in accessing sources of funding outside its own budget, particularly in the case of funding for the sports centre.

35 There is good occupancy of teaching rooms. Improved usage of space has been achieved through the use of computerised central timetabling. There is now a much better match of group to room size. The property maintenance programme is well conceived and well managed. Health and safety requirements are met. The college has identified in its self-assessment report the need to improve access for students with restricted mobility. All recent buildings provide good access and facilities. The newly built sports hall is often used by visitors with disabilities. The college has improved access to older buildings with ramps, particularly to provide access to the dining and resources areas. However, movement around the buildings, and most teaching rooms, is not possible for wheelchair users.

36 Students and teachers speak highly of the resources centre; a strength identified in the self-assessment report. It is modern and bright, with a quiet area, computer room and classroom. There is a good range of texts, videos and CD-ROMs. The bookstock of 3,800 is still relatively small. It is, however, largely up to date, in contrast to the situation existing at the last inspection. Some 1,700 new titles have been added to the bookstock in the last three years. The books and periodicals budget of around £23,000 represents a healthy level of expenditure. Opening hours are extensive; the centre is open for private study until 22.00 hours on four evenings, as well as at weekends.

37 The self-assessment report understates the improvements achieved in the quality and number of computers since the last inspection. There are 33 modern computers for students' use at Plumpton and three at Ivyland farm, representing a ratio of computers to full-time students of 1:12. Students report few problems in gaining access to computers, 30 of which are located in the resources centre and the adjoining computer room. Students and staff have open access to the former and to the latter when classes are not timetabled. The computer network supports a suitable range of software to support the curriculum. The college has recently received substantial funding to develop its computer provision for staff and students, and to use IT to improve teaching. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report's conclusion that teachers require more computers in their workrooms.

38 Residential accommodation for students varies in quality. The accommodation strategy indicates that the college will continue to modernise the oldest buildings and to build new hostels. In the meantime, decorative improvements and refurbishment have maintained a minimum acceptable standard in the larger newer hostel. Other communal facilities are appropriate for a residential college. The sports hall offers outstanding specialist and recreational accommodation for both staff and students. Sports pitches and a nine hole golf course complement this. At the time of the inspection, building work to complete a new student common room and student services area was nearing completion. It will also provide an additional servery for the refectory, complementing the existing dining area. This has suitable opening hours and offers a good range of food at reasonable prices. It is open during most vacations to provide for special courses. Staff have a small but functional common room. Most teachers have adequate work areas close to their teaching rooms. Some work rooms are crowded.

Cross-college Provision

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

39 Inspectors found that the self-assessment report did not give a full account of quality assurance in the college. They agreed with some of the judgements in the report. Key weaknesses identified by inspectors were omitted from the report.

Key strengths

- the improvements in quality assurance since the last inspection
- clear course review procedures
- the opportunities for students to express their views
- effective staff development

Weaknesses

- no comprehensive and agreed statement of policy and procedures
- insufficient evaluation of students' achievements in course reviews and departmental reports
- the underdeveloped quality assurance arrangements for support services
- insufficient involvement of support staff in the self-assessment

40 The college has improved its arrangements for quality assurance since the last inspection. It has created a management post with responsibility for quality assurance, established a quality assurance committee with clear terms of reference and strengthened the role of the academic board. These developments have raised staff appreciation of the importance of quality assurance and contributed to improved retention and pass rates. The college does not yet have in place quality assurance arrangements covering all aspects of its work. The self-assessment report recognises that the absence of a quality assurance policy, and a

handbook which draws together all the college's procedures for quality assurance, are weaknesses. At the time of the inspection, a draft quality assurance policy had been presented to the academic board and was subject to consultation in the college.

41 The college produced its first self-assessment report in June 1998. The process involved all teaching staff and drew on information from course reviews and surveys of students' opinions. A self-assessment review group with external members and chaired by a governor provided critical feedback. Comments on the quality of teaching were informed by a programme of lesson observations carried out by senior staff. Their lesson observation grades were similar to those awarded during the inspection. Some key support staff did not contribute directly to the self-assessment report. Evidence for the report relating to support services was drawn from previously conducted surveys of students' opinion, and data collected for Charter Mark.

42 The self-assessment report recognises that full-time students have good opportunities to express their views. They complete three questionnaires each year. Trends and levels of satisfaction are centrally analysed. Findings are reported back to students. Questions about the quality of teaching provide useful information for course teams, who respond promptly to issues which are raised. Overall, the surveys show that students are very satisfied with their courses.

43 A clear cycle for course review is aligned to the termly surveys of students' views. It is well understood by staff. At termly review meetings, attended by student representatives, programme teams discuss survey findings, internal verification issues and external verifiers' reports. Actions are identified and minuted and the progress made in implementing these actions is monitored by the director of studies. The quality assurance committee and the academic board scrutinise in detail the annual

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reports prepared for them. Although most course teams produce useful reviews which include references to retention, success and students' destinations they sometimes lack rigorous analysis and evaluation of achievements. Most omit precise achievement data and fail to comment on trends. A few reviews contain little useful information.

44 Quality assurance of support services could be improved. There are few service standards and no requirement for individuals or teams to review their performance. The termly surveys of students' views cover support services. Response by managers to issues identified through the surveys forms the basis for quality assurance of support services. Some improvements have resulted, for example, in an increased emphasis during induction on the role of the learning development tutor. However, survey findings are not always used to improve the quality of support services. The surveys show that most students are satisfied with support services. The self-assessment report omits references to the quality assurance of support services.

45 The college has been awarded a number of quality kitemarks for aspects of its services. It has achieved Investor in People status, the Charter Mark award, the Basic Skills Agency quality mark, and the Sussex Careers Services quality mark, 'committed to careers'. Students are aware of the charter, which includes some performance targets. Commitments are monitored and performance against targets is published annually in the college newsletter. The complaints procedure is clear and appropriate. Most complaints are promptly resolved. A few were not dealt with in the time stated in the charter.

46 Internal verification operates effectively. The director of studies monitors action required by external verifiers. College staff act as programme advisers for each full-time course. Advisers do not teach in the department responsible for the course to which they are

appointed. They help to spread good practice and improve the consistency of marking and grading. Their reports to department heads inform the course review process.

47 Staff development is effectively planned, delivered and monitored. Development activities are matched to college objectives and individuals' needs identified through staff appraisal. The need to improve the standard of teaching was identified through the programme of lesson observations. As a result, teaching and learning was the focus of a recent staff development day and there are plans for further training activities. Teaching and support staff regard staff appraisal as supportive and beneficial. Currently, there is no formal link between lesson observations carried out by senior managers and appraisals carried out by line managers. College policy is to appraise staff each year. Inadequate central records make it difficult to assess whether the required appraisals have taken place. Indications are that for around one-third of the staff, over a year has elapsed between appraisals.

Governance

Grade 2

48 Inspectors and auditors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, some significant strengths and weaknesses had been overlooked.

Key strengths

- clear strategic role of governors
- good compliance with best practice on issues of openness
- wide range of relevant experience of governors
- effective financial oversight
- active and successful search committee

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Weaknesses

- overlap in terms of reference and operation of some committees
- underdeveloped evaluation of their own performance by governors

49 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. The board comprises 12 business members, two co-opted members, two community members, two staff members and the principal. The local community, land-based industries, accountancy, banking, law and higher education are represented. This wide range of experience is used effectively to inform the work of the corporation. There is a healthy balance of longer-serving and newer members.

50 Governors identify closely with the mission of the college and have a clear view of their strategic role. They are aware of the challenges facing the college from the changing nature of land-based industries. In the self-assessment report, governors indicated a need to be more closely involved in strategic planning at an earlier stage in the process.

51 There is an active search committee. It is aware of the need for succession planning and has undertaken an analysis to identify relevant additional professional experience which would be of benefit. New governors are recruited through an effective mix of targeted advertising and other contacts. The self-assessment report recognises that women are under-represented on the board and this issue is to be addressed through the activities of the search committee. Meetings of the governing body and its committees are generally well attended and take place in accordance with an appropriately planned cycle of meetings. A target of a

minimum attendance of 80% has been set for all meetings and this is usually met. The board and its committees are well supported by the clerk and operate within a framework which takes into account current best practice. An annual meeting, open to the public, has been held in each of the last three years; the register of interests which has been in place for a number of years is currently being updated; students' achievements and college performance against their charter standards are widely publicised through the college's 'Outlook' newsletter.

52 There are eight committees and one subcommittee which report directly to the corporation board. The self-assessment report recognises that there is some overlap between the terms of reference of some of the committees. There is a need for an overall review of the committees' terms of reference. Governors are keen to use their experience for the benefit of the college and to maintain their active involvement in college activities. The distinction between governance and management is clearly documented in the college's standing orders. There have, however, been rare instances where the boundary between the role of the corporation and of college management has not been observed. The corporation has successfully worked with management in achieving a significant reduction in the college's average level of funding over the last four years. During this time it has ensured that the college continued to offer a wide range of courses and has also improved the quality of the estate.

53 Although the corporation responded positively and self-critically to the last inspection report, it has only recently started to evaluate its own performance. Governors completed a questionnaire as preparation for self-assessment. While this self-critical survey was of value, it was the only source of evidence to support judgements in the governance section of the self-assessment report. A member of the corporation effectively chaired meetings of the

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self-assessment report review group and the corporation considered thoroughly and approved the college's self-assessment report. Feedback from the self-assessment questionnaire helped the corporation to identify its training needs. To improve their performance, governors intend to introduce a series of curriculum briefings and training workshops. There is a helpful induction programme for new governors. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there is a need for further governor training.

Management

Grade 2

54 Inspectors found that the college had made considerable improvements in this area since the last inspection. The self-assessment report frankly identified strengths and weaknesses and inspectors agreed with the majority of them.

Key strengths

- effective senior management team
- consistent achievement of enrolment targets
- straightforward and appropriate strategic planning
- good financial management
- responsiveness to the needs of industry
- partnership arrangements in innovative agricultural developments

Weaknesses

- student recruitment patterns at variance with strategic predictions
- lack of achievement targets for specific curriculum areas
- insufficient reporting and monitoring of some policies

55 The senior management team works effectively to improve the quality of provision and manages efficiently the college's estate and its enterprises. The team consists of the principal, the deputy principal, who is also the farms director, and the directors of studies, resources, and finance and administration, respectively. They meet weekly to discuss strategic and operational issues. Minutes are clear and identify responsibilities for action. Senior managers also meet weekly with the four heads of department and the student services manager. Departmental minutes contain fewer details of responsibilities and timescales for action. The management structure is clear and understood by staff. The self-assessment report records the value of this uncomplicated structure. A computer programme tailored to the needs of the college controls the efficient deployment of teachers.

56 Since the last inspection, progress has been made in implementing changes in order to achieve the college's strategic objectives. There have been improvements and developments in the college's curriculum and facilities. Funding unit targets have also been substantially exceeded each year since incorporation. The self-assessment report recognises that, notwithstanding these improvements, the college needs to improve further students' retention and pass rates. Clear quantitative targets and timescales for improving these have been set. These are linked to strategic plan objectives and included in the strategic plan. They have, however, been set at college level and there are no similar targets for individual courses or groups of courses.

57 There is straightforward and appropriate strategic planning. Senior managers and the chair of the corporation meet at an annual planning weekend to review progress towards targets set in the previous academic year. They also propose aims and objectives for the forthcoming year. At later meetings, involving heads of departments and other governors,

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these aims and objectives are developed into firm targets for the forthcoming year. The college has recently updated its marketing plan. This provides a detailed consideration of the external commercial environment and marketing strategies. The processes used to gather information on the needs of employers, industry and prospective students have improved since the last inspection. In particular, curriculum advisory panels with representation from industry, have been established to help identify industrial needs. The appointment of an industrial liaison officer to foster ties with land-based commercial enterprises is proving a useful source of marketing information. Marketing data are taken into account at planning meetings. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some data arrive too late. Some assessments of future patterns of student demand for courses have proved inaccurate.

58 The relatively small size of the college helps formal and informal communication. Managers work closely with staff through daily contacts and regular meetings. The self-assessment report recognises that some staff are not sufficiently aware of developments in the college. The college has taken some action to address this weakness. The weekly college diary is widely circulated and now incorporates information from key meetings. More details on the strategic position of the college have been included in general staff meetings. The management information system provides regular reports on students' enrolment and retention for managers and the academic board. The college has recognised a need to provide information on students' achievements to appropriate staff on a more regular basis and to widen direct access to college information systems.

59 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The college is in a healthy financial position. The structure of the finance team is appropriate and staff are

suitably experienced. Financial planning is soundly based. There are satisfactory procedures to enable the senior management team to monitor the college's financial position on a timely basis. The financial information system is appropriate to the needs of the college and has been assessed as year 2000 compliant by the college's internal auditors. The financial regulations and procedures are comprehensive and were last updated in April 1998. The college's average level of funding for 1998-99 is £16.51. The median for all institutions in 1998-99 is £16.89.

60 There are good links with the local authority, employers, the local community, and commercial organisations in the land-based industries. The college co-operates with the National Trust and the local authority in environmentally sensitive farming on the South Downs. The principal is involved in promoting environmentally responsible agriculture. There are also links with agricultural colleges in France. The rural foundation course was supported by a successful bid to the European Social Fund. Equal opportunities are fostered and data on the ethnicity, gender and age of students are collected. Comprehensive environmental policies and plans have been drafted. Nevertheless, reporting and monitoring of some aspects of policies is incomplete.

Conclusions

61 The self-assessment report provided a useful starting point for planning the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the findings in the report, but found that some strengths and weaknesses had not been identified by the college. They agreed with all the curriculum grades awarded by the college. In one area of cross-college provision they concluded that the college had been overgenerous in its grading.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1998)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	1
16-18 years	32
19-24 years	15
25+ years	50
Not known	2
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Foundation	8
Intermediate	25
Advanced	27
Higher education	11
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	29
Total	100

Source: college data

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

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	0	47	4
Agriculture	438	605	86
Engineering	1	89	8
Health and community care	0	9	1
Humanities	0	10	1
Total	439	760	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 10% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1998)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	34	2	0	36
Supporting direct learning contact	19	0	0	19
Other support	33	2	4	39
Total	86	4	4	94

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£3,206,000	£3,515,000	£3,641,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£20.16	£18.16	£16.66
Payroll as a proportion of income	50%	47%	48%
Achievement of funding target	123%	137%	107%
Diversity of income	51%	55%	57%
Operating surplus	-£127,000	-£103,000	-£41,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	102	70	26	84	134	126
	Retention (%)	75	93	96	94	89	94
	Achievement (%)	79	56	84	42	42	86
2	Expected completions	199	175	181	275	210	252
	Retention (%)	92	85	85	91	85	85
	Achievement (%)	70	72	88	65	57	76
3	Expected completions	–	13	46	–	66	105
	Retention (%)	–	77	83*	–	95	88
	Achievement (%)	79	100	93	70	44	62
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	0	0	–	15	16
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	100	94
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	77	27	27
Short courses	Expected completions	7	176	94	301	605	206
	Retention (%)	100	100	100	99	100	100
	Achievement (%)	57	80*	97	57	64	87
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	56	41	2	110	100	2
	Retention (%)	96	98	50	93	95	100
	Achievement (%)	89	100	n/a	53	25	n/a

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

*ISR data may not be reliable

n/a not applicable

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