

Priestley College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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 according to a four-year cycle. It also 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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Contents

Paragraph

Summary

Context

The college and its mission 1

The inspection 6

Curriculum areas

Science 8

Leisure and tourism 13

Art and design/performing arts 19

Humanities 24

Cross-college provision

Support for students 29

General resources 37

Quality assurance 42

Governance 49

Management 55

Conclusions 63

College statistics

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.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report.* Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.
Sample size: 122 college inspections

Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

Summary

Priestley College

North West Region

Inspected January 1998

Priestley College is a large sixth form college in Warrington. The self-assessment report gave a full and accurate picture of the college's strengths and weaknesses, and the judgements and grades reached by the college were well founded. The plan that had been drawn up to address weaknesses was precise and realistic. At the time of the inspection, many of the weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report had been remedied.

The college benefits from good governance. It is very well managed at all levels. It has a close and productive relationship with several local schools, the local authority and the TEC. Over the past two years, the college has diversified its provision to include courses for adults and for industry. Standards of teaching are good throughout the college. Pass rates are at or above national averages in most subjects. The quality of support for students is outstanding. The college's quality assurance system is well established. It is effective in bringing about improvements and in maintaining high standards. The college's buildings are well maintained and provide a secure and comfortable environment. Specialist resources in most curriculum areas are of good quality. The college should address: inadequate resourcing of leisure and tourism courses; poor or declining pass rates and retention rates in a

few subjects; and the uneven implementation of strategies to encourage attendance and retention.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	2	Support for students	1
Leisure and tourism	3	General resources	2
Art and design/performing arts	2	Quality assurance	1
Humanities	2	Governance	2
		Management	1

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Priestley College, Warrington, was established as a sixth form college in 1979. It is located approximately one mile south of the town centre, in an area that is in part residential, and in part industrial. Priestley Training Services, the college's training unit, was established in 1996. It occupies a separate building a short distance from the main campus. Warrington is a prosperous new town with unitary status. It has a population of some 190,000 with an expansion to 200,000 forecast for 2005. Almost 70 per cent of the labour force is employed in service industries. Recently, unemployment rates in the town have declined sharply. They stand at 3.9 per cent, compared with 5.7 per cent for the north west of England as a whole.

2 Warrington has 12 schools, seven of which have sixth forms, and five of which are schools for pupils aged 11 to 16. The college has four partner schools, one of which is Roman Catholic. In 1997, the college's partner schools provided 38 per cent of its students. The educational achievements of pupils in the partner schools are below both national and regional averages. In 1997, 29 per cent of pupils gained five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) passes at grades C or above, compared with 47 per cent in Warrington and 45 per cent in England as a whole. In 1997, 71 per cent of pupils in Warrington continued in education beyond school-leaving age, an increase of almost 5 per cent on the previous year. This figure compares favourably with the corresponding rate (65 per cent) for the north west of England. In addition to Priestley College, Warrington has a general further education college and there are sixth forms in seven secondary schools. Three other sixth form colleges, one of which is Roman Catholic, and four general further education colleges lie within a radius of 20 miles and recruit students from within the district.

3 The college offers 30 subjects at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level), five programmes of the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced level or equivalent, and three intermediate level GNVQs. Students have a choice of 14 GCSE subjects. The college provides pre-foundation and foundation studies, and a range of national vocational qualifications (NVQs). In 1995, it introduced part-time courses and provision for adults on the college site in collaboration with the local education authority's (LEA's) community education service. In 1997, provision for adults was extended to centres in the community. This provision is known as the 'community college'. Priestley Training Services provides training for employers and manages a small amount of collaborative provision.

4 On 1 November 1997, the college had 2,098 students, of whom 48 per cent were 16 to 18 year olds. Fifty-three per cent of the students were studying part time. Five per cent of students were from minority ethnic groups, compared with 1 per cent of the population of Warrington as a whole. The college employs 114 staff, of whom 41 are support staff. The senior management team comprises the principal, vice-principal and three assistant principals, one of whom acts as clerk to the governors. The assistant principals have responsibility for cross-college services; one also oversees the work of the community college. There are three academic faculties: arts and community studies; business and humanities; and science and mathematics. The heads of faculty, who report directly to the vice-principal, manage between them 18 departments.

5 The college's mission states: 'with the aim of being the best in its field, and in responsible partnership with the local community, Priestley College is committed to providing the highest quality education and training for all its students'. The mission is elaborated in 12 strategic aims, four of which focus on support for students.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 12 January 1998. The inspectorate had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college produced data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 which were validated by an inspector against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of provision which was to be assessed approximately two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by nine inspectors working for a total of 32 days and an auditor working for five days. They observed 65 lessons, and examined students' work and college documentation. There were discussions with governors, managers, college staff and students and the chief executive of the North and Mid-Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

7 Of the lessons inspected, 74 per cent were good or outstanding. No lesson was less than satisfactory. This profile is well above the average for all colleges inspected in 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was slightly above the

average for the sector, documented in the same report, at 83 per cent. The lowest attendance rates were in leisure and tourism at 77 per cent. The following table summarises the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	9	23	9	0	0	41
GCSE	2	5	1	0	0	8
GNVQ and other vocational	1	8	7	0	0	16
Total	12	36	17	0	0	65

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 2

8 Inspectors observed 19 lessons and sampled all of the work in the three science departments. The self-assessment report gives a detailed account of the strengths and weaknesses of provision in science which was supported by inspection evidence.

Key strengths

- good teaching
- steady improvements in most advanced students' work throughout their courses
- better than average GCE A level pass rates
- large numbers of students progressing to science-related programmes in higher education
- a well-led and unified staff team
- regular review and development of the curriculum
- well-appointed specialist accommodation and ample resources

Weaknesses

- some low retention rates
- very low GCSE pass rates in 1997
- timetabled periods too short for effective practical work in GCSE classes

9 The college offers GCE A level and GCSE courses for full-time students in chemistry, physics and biology. Modular GCE A level courses are available in all three subjects. Evening classes are available in biology. The three science departments are well led and managed. The work of the departments is carefully co-ordinated. There are frequent departmental and faculty meetings for full-time teachers and the biology department, in particular, takes care to ensure that part-time teachers are kept informed of developments in

their subject and in the college, a strength which is insufficiently emphasised in the self-assessment report.

10 Teachers plan their lessons thoroughly and ensure coverage of examination syllabuses. Teachers use methods which help students to develop scientific skills, and share with students the criteria they use for assessing work. Coursework and homework are carefully corrected and promptly returned. Students appreciate the amount of time teachers devote to giving them informal individual tuition. Students are encouraged to develop safe working practices. For example, in a chemistry lesson involving the use of new apparatus the teacher started by outlining good safety practices, warned students of possible dangers, and pointed out the hazard cards on display in the laboratory. Technicians provide effective support for teachers and students. In GCSE classes, the college timetable allocates too few blocks that are long enough for students to undertake substantial practical work. This leads to some loss of continuity in experimental work. In some instances, students are not punctual when lessons restart after a break.

11 Inspectors agreed with the college's claim in its self-assessment report that specialist accommodation is a strength. Preparation rooms, storage areas and laboratories are well maintained and are suitably and safely equipped. Students' work is attractively displayed. Each subject area has a selection of appropriate equipment and books. Teachers have prepared a wide range of well-designed and carefully-produced course handbooks, resource packs, worksheets and other aids to help students to learn. A few classrooms need whiteboards.

12 The work of most advanced students shows steady improvement throughout the time they are in college. Many students achieve results that are better than those predicted by their entry qualifications. Pass rates at GCE A level in

Curriculum Areas

all three sciences have consistently been above the national average for 16 to 18 year olds for sixth form colleges. Examination results in GCSE subjects are less satisfactory. In 1995 and 1997 they compare unfavourably with national averages. The self-assessment report acknowledges as a weakness the retention rates in GCE A level human biology and in physics. The levels of attendance in some GCE A level and GCSE subjects fall below targets which the college has set. Data on students' destinations indicate that a large proportion of students move on to courses in higher education that are either in, or related to, science. Individual students in science have achieved both college and external prizes for their academic work. Some students opt to undertake work experience with a local engineering company which allows them to work on projects which relate directly to their coursework. Biology students go on field trips, including a recent one to Kenya.

Examples of students' achievements in science, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS level (full time)	Retention (%)	76	78	85
	Pass rate (%)	75	93	92
GCSE (full time)	Retention (%)	78	83	91
	Pass rate (%)	33	48	17

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Leisure and Tourism

Grade 3

13 Twelve lessons were observed in leisure and tourism. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment of this provision. The self-assessment is accompanied by a detailed plan of the actions required to address the weaknesses it identifies.

Key strengths

- much effective teaching
- good pass rates at GNVQ intermediate level
- students' assignment work of a good standard
- well-managed and carefully-structured programmes
- effective integration of key skills with other parts of the curriculum

Weaknesses

- instances of insufficiently challenging teaching
- poor attendance levels and punctuality
- low retention rates on advanced courses
- poorly-organised work experience
- inadequate specialist learning resources for tourism

14 The range of leisure and tourism courses offered in the college has been reduced. Provision comprises intermediate and advanced level GNVQ programmes in leisure and/or tourism. Many students successfully combine a related GCE A level subject with the GNVQ advanced programme. Many also learn a foreign language. The teaching of languages for vocational purposes is good and suitably demanding.

15 The department is well managed. There are effective systems for monitoring students'

performance; for obtaining, analysing and taking action on the views of students and employers; for evaluating examination results; and for implementing operational development plans. All staff have training and development lead body assessor awards; a number have recent and relevant experience in the leisure and travel industries.

16 There was effective teaching in many lessons. Lessons were well planned and documented. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that key skills were clearly mapped against vocational units and were effectively developed and monitored. Theoretical concepts were always set in context. Teachers often allowed students to work in different ways. In a few lessons, teachers' expectations of students were too low. Teachers failed to manage question and answer sessions effectively, did not ensure that students consolidate their learning and made few checks on what students had learnt. Inspectors agreed with the college's recognition in its self-assessment report that work experience for leisure and tourism students is haphazard and poorly organised.

17 The classrooms in which leisure and tourism students do most of their work are clean and comfortable. They contain displays of relevant material. Students who study sport as part of their programme have the use of a small indoor sports hall, two outdoor tennis courts and a sports field covering seven acres. Equipment held in the gymnasium is not easily accessible. Resources for tourism are inadequate; there is no realistic work environment. Not enough use is made of the internet.

18 Students' assignment work is of good quality. Teachers correct work carefully and provide helpful feedback in most instances. As the college notes in its self-assessment report, GNVQ pass rates have generally been at or above the national average, and a substantial proportion of students achieve distinctions and

Curriculum Areas

merits. In 1997, advanced level pass rates fell markedly although a number of students subsequently completed the qualification in the following academic year. There are poor levels of attendance and retention on advanced courses. Retention rates on intermediate level courses are higher than the national average. There is a common problem of lateness which is disruptive to learning. Most leisure and tourism students progress to employment or remain in further education at the end of their course. Few go on to higher education.

Examples of students' achievements in leisure and tourism, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
BTEC national diploma travel and tourism	Retention (%)	68	+	+
	Pass rate (%)	100	+	+
GNVQ advanced	Retention (%)	+	60	67
	Pass rate (%)	+	96	66
GNVQ intermediate	Retention (%)	64	91	71
	Pass rate (%)	55	61	66

Source: college data

+comparable data not available

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design/Performing Arts

Grade 2

19 Inspectors observed 20 lessons across the full range of provision. The self-assessment process resulted in many rigorous and accurate judgements. The grade profile of lesson observations carried out by the college closely matched that of observations carried out by inspectors. The self-assessment report contains most of the strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors.

Key strengths

- effective teaching, which is particularly good in music
- students' achievements above the national average on many courses
- good rates of progression to higher education and related employment
- good purpose-built art and design accommodation
- detailed records of students' progress maintained at course level

Weaknesses

- unsatisfactory attendance and retention rates on some courses in 1997
- poor key skills development on GCE A level art and design courses
- insufficient use of information technology (IT)

20 The college offers a broad and rapidly growing range of full-time GCE, GCSE and GNVQ courses in the performing and expressive arts. GCE, GCSE and leisure classes are offered in the evening. Opportunities for students to progress within the college are improving. In 1997, approximately 40 per cent of full-time students progressed to further courses of study within the college.

21 There is much effective teaching. Teachers give students a great deal of individual attention. Teaching in music is very good. Practical lessons in the studios and workshops allow students to experiment with different materials and to develop technical skills. Teachers occasionally failed to make their objectives clear, to give adequate explanations, to check students' understanding or to use varied methods to sustain students' interest. In a number of lessons, students relied on their teachers to do most of the work. Projects are carefully structured and have clearly-identified aims and objectives. Teachers usually assess work fairly, but do not always record comments and agreed actions in writing. The development of key skills is inadequate on GCE A level art and design courses. Students do not always make good use of IT. The self-assessment report contains most of these weaknesses.

22 Art and design courses take place in an attractive purpose-designed building. Studios and workshops are adequately equipped for the level of study. As numbers increase some rooms are becoming overcrowded. There is insufficient storage for students' work. Practising artists and designers visit the college, set projects, give feedback on students' work and exchange ideas with students and staff. There is an artist in residence and a trainee potter on work experience. Research and field trips are a valuable part of the students' studies. Past students are encouraged to visit the college to talk about their experiences in employment or other institutions of education and to show their work.

23 Retention and attendance rates on many courses are good. However, both inspectors and the college's self-assessment report identify a number of courses where they are a cause for concern. Most students who complete their courses achieve the qualification they are seeking. Pass rates for many GCE A level subjects are above the national average for 16 to 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. Students on

Curriculum Areas

the BTEC national diploma in foundation studies in art and design have achieved a 100 per cent pass rate in each of the past three years. Tutors keep detailed records of students' destinations. Progression to higher education is good.

Examples of students' achievements in art and design/performing arts, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS level (full time)	Retention (%)	77	84	85
	Pass rate (%)	91	92	95
GCSE (full time)	Retention (%)	78	100	93
	Pass rate (%)	62	100	50
Intermediate vocational (full time)	Retention (%)	89	90	73
	Pass rate (%)	67	78	45

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Humanities

Grade 2

24 Inspectors observed 14 lessons and sampled provision in GCE A level, GCE advanced supplementary (AS) level and GCSE geography, history, law, psychology, sociology and politics. Inspectors agreed in the main with the college's self-assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

Key strengths

- thoroughly planned courses and lessons
- much good teaching
- many pass rates at or above the national average
- good attendance
- effective sharing of good practice by staff

Weaknesses

- failure of teachers to provide students with enough opportunities for effective discussion
- distracting noise from adjoining rooms and corridors

25 The college offers full-time courses in 14 subjects at GCE A level, including three foreign languages. Evening classes for part-time students offer a similar choice, with the addition of archaeology, and of four further languages at levels 1 to 3. Humanities subjects are well managed. All teachers have teaching and assessor qualifications. The self-assessment report comments on the strength of teamwork in the humanities subjects. Staff who teach on full-time courses work closely with the part-time teachers in the community college. This gives them the opportunity to share good practice, to the benefit of all students.

26 Most humanities subjects are well taught. Lessons are carefully planned to ensure that

syllabuses are thoroughly covered and that students acquire the knowledge they need. Teachers sustain students' interest through the use of a variety of teaching methods. For example, in one sociology lesson the teacher was introducing students to the topic of differences between religions. Working in groups the students used a handout as a basis for analysing the key characteristics of various religions. Each group subsequently presented its findings to the rest of the class. In a few lessons teachers allowed a few individuals to dominate in question and answer sessions and group discussions, giving others little chance to participate. In most lessons teachers give insufficient opportunities for students to engage in deep and challenging discussion and to develop to the full the analytical skills appropriate to the level of study, a weakness which the self-assessment report does not fully acknowledge.

27 The rooms used for the teaching of humanities subjects are comfortably furnished and are equipped with basic aids. There are attractive subject displays. At times, there is a good deal of distracting noise from adjoining rooms and the corridor. Most learning materials are of good quality and are in plentiful supply. Language students benefit from the use of multimedia teaching equipment.

28 The quality of most students' written work is good. Most teachers mark work well and some pay attention to the assurance of students' key skills. One department has developed a form on which teachers record their comments. The form gives students a clear analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their work and of the steps they need to take to improve it. On most courses achievements are good, with psychology and geography achieving a pass rate of 100 per cent at GCE A level in 1997. GCSE pass rates show continuing improvement. The self-assessment report highlights the need to improve retention in a few humanities subjects.

Curriculum Areas

Examples of students' achievements in humanities, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS level (full time)	Retention (%)	79	77	77
	Pass rate (%)	84	90	88
GCSE (full time)	Retention (%)	85	74	77
	Pass rate (%)	51	53	73

Source: college data

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 1

29 Inspectors agreed in almost every respect with the college's self-assessment report. There has been rapid progress in implementing the action plan that addresses the relatively minor weaknesses identified in the report.

Key strengths

- good pre-course guidance
- effective induction procedures
- a comprehensive and well-organised tutorial system
- thorough reviews of students' progress
- an extensive enrichment programme
- good learning support and support for students with disabilities
- a well-planned programme of higher education and careers guidance

Weaknesses

- failure in some cases to implement strategies for encouraging students' attendance and retention

30 The college has a strong commitment to supporting its students, which is made explicit in many of its strategic aims. During the inspection, students spoke positively of the college's welcoming and friendly atmosphere, and of the willingness of staff to give them individual support.

31 As stated in the self-assessment report, pre-course guidance is well organised and effective. School liaison tutors make regular visits to the college's four partner schools. For pupils from schools serving the 11 to 18 age group, with which the college has no formal links, there are widely publicised open evenings throughout the year. All applicants for full-time courses have individual interviews both before

and after the publication of their GCSE results. They receive clear explanations of possible combinations of subjects and of the content of courses. Part-time students receive their first lesson free of charge to help them to decide whether they have chosen the correct course. Each year, the college reviews pre-course guidance and admissions procedures in the light of feedback from students and others. Data on admissions inform strategic planning.

32 There is an effective induction programme. It forms part of all schemes of work, whether for full-time or part-time students. Details of the induction programme are given in students' handbooks. Each student completes a record of activities. Personal tutors prepare a report on each full-time student after the first six weeks of term, and communicate with parents or guardians as early as possible. Students may transfer to other courses in the early stages of their programmes, but few choose to do so.

33 The college has a strong and well-organised tutorial system and the post of tutor is highly regarded. The college has developed learning materials to ensure tutorials have a consistent content. Personal tutors meet their students weekly. They help them to maintain individual records of progress, to review their work and to set targets for developing and improving their work. The college satisfies the requirements of sections 44 and 45 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* by making provision for collective acts of worship.

34 As the self-assessment report points out, the college vigorously encourages students to extend and enrich their studies. For example, full-time students on GCE A level courses are required to take GCE A level general studies. In 1997, 87 per cent of them passed the examination. Many students also enrol for voluntary activities that include community service, sports, languages, and the production of a college magazine. Students in the community college are given the opportunity to join these activities. A popular and unusual feature of the

Cross-college Provision

college's enrichment programme is a course for potential officers which has led to a number of students being awarded flying scholarships with the Royal Air Force. The scholarships give them the opportunity to learn to fly a light aircraft, usually to solo standard. There is an active student council, which organises many successful social events. Its chair usually becomes the student governor.

35 Since it was last inspected, the college has developed its systems of learning support. Full-time students are screened to assess those who may have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Part-time students may opt for screening. In 1996-97, over 7 per cent of students were identified as requiring learning support. The take-up of such support is high. Links with external agencies, such as the educational psychology service, enable students to receive additional specialist support. The college runs a free crèche service which travels to outreach centres. There is a hardship fund for helping students in financial need. The college supplements the access funds provided by the FEFC.

36 The strength of the college's arrangements for providing careers education and guidance is clearly acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Cheshire Guidance Partnership, the local careers service, provides the college with two careers advisers for four days a week. The advisers work closely with the college's own staff to give students impartial advice on opportunities in higher education and for employment. There is also a well co-ordinated programme of talks given by guest speakers, including former students, and of visits to universities and employers. The well-stocked careers centre is prominently located in the main corridor and is open throughout the day and evening. Each October, the college runs an event for community college students to make them aware of opportunities in higher education and employment.

General Resources

Grade 2

37 The self-assessment report is comprehensive. It details the improvements that have been made to accommodation and general resources since the last inspection. Inspectors' judgements corresponded closely to those in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-maintained and clean buildings
- efficient and effective use of accommodation
- good specialist equipment
- a sufficient supply of modern computers
- facilities for the production of high-quality learning materials

Weaknesses

- insufficient recreational and private study spaces for students
- an overcrowded library
- limited access to the main buildings for people with restricted mobility

38 The provision of a secure and pleasant working environment is a priority in the college. Buildings are kept clean and in a good state of repair. The main reception area is welcoming. Common areas are well decorated and comfortably furnished. Visual displays, many of students' work, enliven classrooms and corridors. The college has a clear and well-considered strategy for improving the quality of its accommodation and resources. There is a rolling five-year maintenance programme, which is reviewed and updated annually. There have been significant improvements to accommodation since the last inspection: the refectory has been refurbished; a well-equipped learning support centre has been created; the main corridor of the college now

Cross-college Provision

incorporates a students' study area and careers centre; accommodation for staff has been improved. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there remains insufficient staff desk space. The refectory is the only area in which students can meet for social purposes. People with restricted mobility have access only to the ground floor of the college's buildings.

39 The college has improved the quality and quantity of its learning resources since the last inspection, and the self-assessment report clearly lists the strengths. The library is well stocked, and includes topic files, journals, and a large collection of audio and video tapes. It has a computerised catalogue, but this is not used to monitor usage or inform purchasing. Much of the stock is stored in specialist classrooms because the library is no longer large enough to accommodate the growing number of users. Library staff work closely with subject tutors to ensure that students have the books and materials they need. The opening hours of the library have recently been extended so that evening students can use it.

40 The college systematically replaces and upgrades major and minor items of equipment. Recent purchases include equipment for the media suite, and data-logging equipment for science. A central reprographics unit with desktop publishing equipment produces high-quality learning and marketing materials.

41 The self-assessment report shows that the college has done much to improve the quality and accessibility of computers over the past four years. Good-quality computers with up-to-date software are available in a ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students of 1:9. There is access to the internet. Computers are located in dedicated rooms, in the library and in other study and subject areas. There are 12 portable computers for use in the community college and a network with 10 machines at Priestley Training Services. Teaching and administrative staff have an additional 34 computers, although there are still too few in teachers' workrooms.

Quality Assurance

Grade 1

42 The self-assessment report gives a detailed picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the college's quality assurance system. Inspectors agreed in almost every respect with the judgements in the report.

Key strengths

- comprehensive and thoroughly documented quality assurance framework and procedures
- consistent implementation and rigorous monitoring of quality assurance procedures
- effective systems for managing performance
- rigorous review of the curriculum
- an active and influential role for governors
- an extensive programme of classroom observations
- an up-to-date effective charter
- an accurate and detailed self-assessment report
- well-managed and appropriate staff development

Weaknesses

- a need to extend performance review to all part-time staff
- incomplete evaluation of the programme of lesson observations

43 The college has a long-standing commitment to maintaining and improving the quality of all aspects of its provision. Following the last inspection, it determined to develop its quality assurance arrangements by extending the quality assurance framework, strengthening the involvement of governors, and ensuring greater consistency in the application of procedures. This it has done with great success.

Cross-college Provision

There is now a comprehensive and thoroughly documented quality assurance framework which is understood by all staff. Much thought and effort has gone into developing quality assurance procedures. Some, such as large-scale lesson observation, are relatively new; others are well established. Quality assurance arrangements are linked to strategic and operational planning at college, faculty and curriculum area level, a strength commented on in the self-assessment report.

44 An important feature of the quality assurance framework is a system of performance management for whole curriculum areas and for individual students. Curriculum managers undertake rigorous self-assessment. Their work is subject to review by senior managers. An agreed programme of action is then regularly monitored. Students' progress is also carefully monitored. Tutors use GCSE results to predict the qualifications students should achieve when they complete their course and to help them to set appropriate goals. A programme of lesson observations was begun early in 1997, but it has still to be fully evaluated. The college intends to link lesson observations to arrangements for the review or appraisal of staff and their professional development. Part-time staff are observed teaching, but do not take part in the review process. The self-assessment report acknowledges this weakness and action is being taken to address it.

45 The staff review programme is well established. It provides a basis for planning staff development activities in the college, including those that focus on helping teachers to improve their teaching skills. There are good arrangements for the induction and training of new staff and for developing and supporting those who have taken on new roles, particularly middle managers. The college was one of the first to achieve the Investor in People award. In 1997, it successfully reapplied for the award. Late in 1997 it gained a chartermark in

recognition of the quality of its performance standards, the information it provides to prospective students and others, and its relations with its clients.

46 The governing body, through its academic planning and quality assurance committee, makes a strong and influential contribution to the design, development and monitoring of quality assurance arrangements in the college. The committee's remit focuses on quality-related aspects of curriculum development, teaching and learning, and students' achievements across the college, all of which are regularly discussed and reported to the full board. The self-assessment report comments appreciatively on this strength.

47 The college's charter is reviewed each year, and has been amended to reflect the development and expansion of the college. It lays down the standards against which the college seeks evidence of its performance through regular surveys of students', parents' and employers' opinions. Two additional charters have been developed to meet the needs of adults and part-time students, and of parents and guardians.

48 The college's self-assessment report was the first that it had produced. A programme of briefings for staff, led by an external consultant, raised their awareness of the objectives and procedures associated with self-assessment. The governors' curriculum and quality assurance committee steered the production of the self-assessment report. A self-assessment review group, which included external members, monitored the process. Lesson observations provided the basis for judgements on the quality of teaching and learning. Evidence from curriculum areas informed judgements on cross-college aspects of provision. The report is set out under the headings of Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. An action plan follows each of the sections, with responsibilities and timescales identified. The college has taken the process of

Cross-college Provision

self-assessment very seriously and acknowledges the benefits of such an approach.

Governance

Grade 2

49 The college's self-assessment report gives a detailed and honest assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of governance. It contains an action plan which was updated immediately prior to the inspection to show the progress that had been made.

Key strengths

- governors with a range of expertise and experience
- good attendance at governors' meetings and training events
- an effective relationship between governors and college managers
- a committee structure with a focus on academic planning and quality assurance
- clear and informative minuting of governing body meetings

Weaknesses

- some brief and uninformative reports
- the monitoring of progress towards the achievement of strategic and operational targets
- insufficient evaluation of governors' performance

50 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The board 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.

51 The board has sought to ensure that its conduct and operations meet legal requirements. It has a code of conduct, standing orders and an annually updated register of governors' interests. The interests of senior members of staff are also recorded, but these now require updating. Inspectors agreed with the view of the board given in the self-assessment report that it would be desirable to outline more precisely the roles of the chair and vice-chair.

52 There are currently 17 members of the board: the principal, two members of staff, a student, three co-opted governors, and 10 independent governors. There is a vacancy for the nominee of the TEC. The self-assessment report acknowledges that governors are enthusiastic and well informed. They have a useful and appropriate range of expertise and experience. There are induction arrangements for new members of the board. Training seminars are well attended and have helped all governors to gain a better understanding of their role. They have a clear view of the distinction between governance and management.

53 The board met seven times during the last year. Meetings of the board and its committees are well attended. Six standing committees carry out the day-to-day work of governance: finance and general purposes; remuneration and human resources; audit; academic planning and quality; and business development. An appeals committee has not so far had to meet. The committees have clearly-specified terms of reference and operate effectively. The clerk distributes agendas and supporting papers in good time, and minutes all meetings. Minutes are clear and informative and are produced and despatched promptly. They indicate that governors take the opportunity to challenge and probe college managers on proposals put before them. The self-assessment report recognises all of these strengths. Committee minutes are only circulated to committee members; they are not seen by all governors. Reports from the

Cross-college Provision

college's managers to the board and its committees are detailed and clear. However, some reports from committees to the full board contain insufficient information for members to understand the basis for recommendations.

54 Governors set the framework for strategic planning at their annual residential meeting. The self-assessment report acknowledges the need for the board to make more use of FEFC performance indicators and to be more closely involved in setting targets against which to measure performance, especially as regards students' achievements. Reports to governors about the progress made towards achieving operational targets should be more systematic.

Management

Grade 1

55 The college's self-assessment report contains a comprehensive appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of management. An action plan indicates the action to be taken, and by whom, to address the weaknesses that have been identified. At the time of the inspection, an updated plan showed that most of the weaknesses had been addressed.

Key strengths

- a well-managed college, responsive to change
- successful diversification
- tight financial control
- good links with the TEC and local authority
- reliable management information
- a clear framework for strategic and operational planning
- well co-ordinated management functions

Weaknesses

- annual reviews of curriculum areas insufficiently aligned to review of operational targets
- equal opportunity monitoring and co-ordination not fully effective

56 The college is very well managed. Staff understand and support the mission of the college and know to whom they are accountable. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report when it notes that there is a well-defined team structure which gives all staff the opportunity to contribute to decision-making. Communications are good. A weekly briefing from the principal alerts staff to developments affecting the college. This is supplemented by half-termly newsletters, announcements on noticeboards and briefings at team meetings.

57 The principal and senior managers play an active role in local and national networks and are well informed of issues affecting further education. The college is held in high regard by the local TEC, with which it has a close and productive relationship. Whilst the college's core business remains the provision of full-time programmes of study for 16 to 19 year olds, the curriculum has recently and rapidly been diversified to include provision for over 2,000 adults. The diversification has been well managed. It has made a considerable contribution to the increased participation rate for adults in education in Warrington over the last two years. The college's small but successful training unit, Priestley Training Services, has developed productive links with local firms to provide direct training and a small amount of collaborative provision. The strategy of diversification has been accompanied by a carefully-managed reduction in the college's average level of funding from £18.37 in 1994-95 to an anticipated £16.09 in 1997-98.

Cross-college Provision

58 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. Financial returns submitted to the FEFC are reliable and timely. The college controls its finances tightly and is currently in a healthy financial position. Management accounts are reported each period to budget holders, including members of the senior management team. The finance and general purposes committee, and subsequently all governors, receive management accounts in the same format as those received by senior managers. The FEFC's audit service has assessed the college's internal audit service as being adequate. The internal auditors have concluded that the college's internal controls are substantially sound.

59 The college's management information system has been substantially improved since the last inspection and now provides an effective service. An assistant principal, supported by a small team of qualified staff, oversees the computer network. The college has a clear idea of its information needs. Senior managers and governors receive regular reports. Personal tutors have direct access to the information they need to enable them to monitor students' progress and achievements. As the self-assessment report recognises, there is scope to improve the scheduling of reports for middle managers and teachers, some of whom need further training in accessing the data they require.

60 The self-assessment process identified weaknesses in the way the college undertakes market research and promotes itself to the local community. The self-assessment report concluded that marketing efforts across the college lacked coherence and co-ordination. In response, the college commissioned a consultant to produce a plan which the college board endorsed and agreed to fund. The plan, though not yet fully implemented, has already resulted in improved publicity materials and improved arrangements for open evenings.

61 The college has developed a clear framework for planning and target-setting. Staff understand the framework. Operating plans for curriculum areas have been in use since 1996-97. They provide a useful basis for monitoring the progress made towards achieving targets. Curriculum teams do not always take the opportunity to review the progress they have made over the year and to identify areas which are to be carried through to the next planning cycle. The operating plans for cross-college services and for Priestley Training Services are recent developments; it is too early to evaluate fully their effectiveness.

62 The college makes explicit its commitment to promote equal opportunities for all its students through its mission, its charter and a range of policies, some of which have only recently been developed. The work with the community in centres at a distance from the college and the work of the learning support team are examples of how it puts its principles into practice. Inspectors agreed with the college's own assessment that further work needs to be done to improve the arrangements for monitoring and co-ordinating the implementation of equal opportunity policies across the college.

Conclusions

63 Despite the newness of the self-assessment process, the inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful and informative basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. The inspection team agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with all but one of the curriculum grades awarded by the college in the areas inspected and with all but two of the grades for cross-college provision. In the latter two cases, inspectors considered that the college had made sufficient progress with its action plan to justify higher grades than those originally given.

Cross-college Provision

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (November 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	48
19-24 years	7
25+ years	45
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	20
Intermediate	16
Advanced	49
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	15
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (November 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	198	132	16
Business	99	527	30
Hotel and catering	73	0	3
Health and community care	72	162	11
Art and design	124	36	8
Humanities	404	265	32
Basic education	6	0	0
Total	976	1,122	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (November 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	60	5	3	68
Supporting direct learning contact	2	1	2	5
Other support	36	1	4	41
Total	98	7	9	114

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£2,838,000	£3,090,000	*
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£18.37	£16.83	£18.46
Payroll as a proportion of income	73%	73%	*
Achievement of funding target	103%	115%	*
Diversity of income	6%	5%	*
Operating surplus	£131,000	£40,000	*

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96)

*data not available

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	241	264	293
	Average point score per entry	4.5	4.8	4.9
	Position in tables	top third	top third	top third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	73	103	77
	Percentage achieving qualification	79%	81%	69%
	Position in tables	middle third	top third	middle third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	75	71
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	80%	58%
	Position in tables	*	top third	middle third

Source: DfEE

Note: the majority of the college's students are 19 years of age or older

The achievements of these students are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

FEFC Inspection Report 41/98

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