

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99

THE
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COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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

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

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

Student Achievements

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

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

Summary

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education

North West Region

Inspected May 1999

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education is a medium-sized general further education college, with three main sites within the Vale Royal area of Cheshire. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report.

This was the college's first report within a new framework for self-assessment based on a rigorous analysis of evidence. The process included opportunities for all staff to make contributions to the report. Governors were fully involved in the self-assessment process of the whole college. The college had made progress in addressing many of the weaknesses identified in the report by the time of the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but identified several additional strengths and weaknesses.

The college offers courses in nine of the FEFC's 10 programme areas, ranging from foundation to higher levels. The inspection covered provision in six programme areas, together with aspects of cross-college provision. Some teaching is good, but too many lessons are ineffective. The proportion of lessons judged by inspectors to be outstanding was above the average for colleges inspected in the previous year, but the proportion judged less than satisfactory or poor was well above the average. On some courses, the achievement and retention of students is weak. Attendance rates during

the inspection were below the averages for the sector. Some programme areas have taken appropriate action to address weaknesses. The college has continued to improve its accommodation since the last inspection, although there is still some underuse. Staff and students work in a welcoming and safe environment. Students are well supported by their teachers and have good access to careers and personal guidance. Tutorial arrangements have been strengthened since the last inspection. Quality assurance procedures are clear and comprehensive, but have yet to result in significant improvements in teaching and learning or in retention rates. Arrangements for staff development are strong. Governance at the college is good. Governors have detailed knowledge of students' performance and took an active part in the college's self-assessment process. The college benefits from an open and responsive management team. Strategic and operational planning is well organised. The college attracts adult students from groups which have not usually entered further education. The college should: improve teaching standards in some areas; continue to take action to improve students' retention and achievements, particularly for 16 to 18 year olds on level 3 courses; ensure that library provision meets the needs of students on all courses; address issues in students' attendance; improve guidance and tutorial support for part-time students; develop measures to help governors to monitor the full range of the college's performance; and improve the quality of review and evaluation at course level.

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

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

The College and its Mission

1 Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education is a general further education college situated in the Vale Royal district of Cheshire. The college occupies three main sites: two in Northwich and one in Winsford. It delivers courses to its local communities through some 40 centres throughout Vale Royal and, through a developing learning network, to small and medium-sized enterprises. The college offers a wide range of provision within nine of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) programme areas. Provision ranges from foundation to higher level courses.

2 Vale Royal has a population of 117,500 with a forecast growth of 0.5% a year to 2005. An increase in the number of 15 to 19 year olds is forecast by 2001. Only two of the 36 wards attract widening participation funding. Of local residents, 34% travel to work outside Vale Royal and less than 0.5% of the population is from minority ethnic groups. Much of the employment in the area is in business services, retail and health and social work which are forecast to grow between the time of the inspection and the year 2008. The chemicals industry continues to decline. Significant growth is expected in computing, professional services, distribution and hotel work, catering and leisure and tourism. The business structure is based almost entirely upon small and medium-sized enterprises with less than 1% of companies having more than 250 employees. Unemployment is low at around 3.3% whilst growth areas are providing increased employment for female and part-time workers.

3 In Vale Royal 75% of 16 year olds continue in full-time education. The college recruits full-time students from 58 schools throughout Cheshire. There are seven 11 to 18 schools, three sixth form colleges, four further education colleges and a tertiary college within a 20 mile radius of the college. In April 1999, 62% of the college's students were funded by the FEFC.

Of these students, 17% were studying full time and 83% part time. Of the college's students, 49% were studying at entry or foundation level, 28% at intermediate level, 21% at advanced level and the remainder at higher level.

4 The college's strategic planning group comprises the principal, two directors and the finance and information services manager. Thirteen other managers join them on the college management board. Teaching and learning is managed through six faculties, each with a manager and three programme leaders. There is a business development unit which provides courses for industry. The college sees itself as a key strategic partner within the Vale Royal community in terms of economic, sporting and cultural development as well as through its lifelong learning opportunities. As a member of the Cheshire consortium of colleges and the strategic learning partnership, the college is directly involved in shaping the 'Local Learning Plan' for Cheshire.

5 The college's mission is to 'provide high-quality lifetime learning opportunities for our local and wider communities'. Its corporate objectives for 1997 to 2000 are:

- to extend and improve the quality of general education and careers guidance
- to develop further and deliver flexible education and training opportunities which are genuinely learner focused
- to extend the use of new information communications and information learning technologies for the benefit of all their clients
- to improve the quality of provision and value for money
- to extend collaborative arrangements with local, regional, national and transnational partners
- to improve annual performance against targets for recruitment, retention and achievement.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 17 May 1999. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. Inspectors used data on students' achievements derived from the college's individualised student record (ISR) returns to the FEFC for 1996 and 1997. The college submitted its own data on students' achievements for 1998. The data were checked by inspectors against primary sources of evidence, such as registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies, and were found to be generally reliable. The inspection was carried out by 12 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 49 days. The inspection team observed lessons, examined students' work and scrutinised college documents. They held meetings with governors, managers, staff and students and with representatives of other colleges, schools, the careers service and both local training and enterprise councils (TECs).

7 The college was one of 30 in the current cycle of inspections which agreed to participate in the joint Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and FEFC assessment of careers education and guidance. The joint assessment was guided by the inspection framework, with careers education assessors contributing to judgements made by inspectors. The emphasis in this report on careers education and guidance will help colleges and careers services to improve the quality of the careers education and guidance they offer and help the DfEE to disseminate good practice.

8 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all lessons inspected in 1997-98. Of the 80 lessons observed, 63% were judged to be good or outstanding and 12% were less than satisfactory or poor. This compares with averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	0	4	2	1	0	7
GCSE	0	3	0	2	0	5
GNVQ and NVQ	6	8	7	2	1	24
Other vocational	6	8	4	3	0	21
Other*	5	10	7	1	0	23
Total (No.)	17	33	20	9	1	80
Total (%)	22	41	25	11	1	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*

*includes access to further education, access to higher education, higher education and tutorials

Context

9 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education	10.7	72
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

Science and Mathematics

Grade 3

10 Inspectors observed 16 lessons covering general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) mathematics and science, general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate and advanced science, and the course leading to the national diploma in sports science.

Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report, but considered that insufficient attention was paid to issues of teaching and learning and student retention.

Key strengths

- well-organised practical work in science
- most achievement rates above national averages
- good learning resources
- broad range of courses

Weaknesses

- some ineffective teaching
- poor retention
- low enrolments in science

11 The portfolio of courses caters well for school-leavers and adults. As well as courses leading to GCE A level, GCSE, and GNVQs in science, there is an access to higher education course and a national diploma in sports science. Day and evening provision in mathematics enables students of all ages to follow modular courses leading to GCSE, GCE A level and GCE advanced supplementary (AS) qualifications. These strengths were not included in the self-assessment report. Teachers work well together to plan courses. Faculty heads co-operate to plan and develop applied science courses. However, inspectors identified some weaknesses in management which were not recorded by the

college. For example, in mathematics, there is no standardisation of marking practices and some records of students' progress are inadequate. In science and mathematics, regular team meetings and annual reviews identify areas for improvement, but they place insufficient emphasis on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. There is little use of value-added measurements to monitor students' progress and performance.

12 Inspectors judged that low enrolments limit effectiveness of science courses. In 1998-99, the GNVQ intermediate course had only three students and the GNVQ advanced had five first-year and three second-year students. As these groups are taught together for part of the week, there are some organisational difficulties in meeting the needs of all students. In a GCE A level biology group of five students, one is completing the second year of a two-year course, two are repeating the course and two completing the course in one year. The small group size and the varied experience of the students restricts class discussion. Science staff are aware of the difficulties and provide individual support to students, where necessary. The national diploma sports science course, which was introduced in 1996, is attracting more students.

13 Three-quarters of the lessons observed were at least satisfactory, but none was judged to be outstanding by inspectors. Lessons are well planned and teachers demonstrate sound knowledge of their subject and examination requirements. In science, practical lessons are well organised and attention is paid to safety. As noted in the self-assessment report, science assignments are well prepared and have clear assessment criteria. Students' work is marked thoroughly and internal verification procedures are clear. Inspectors agreed with the college that teachers in mathematics do not use a wide enough range of appropriate methods. They identified some additional weaknesses in both science and mathematics, including the failure

Curriculum Areas

to stimulate contributions from students, insufficient checking of students' understanding, undemanding work in lessons, and the failure to take account of students' prior mathematical experiences.

14 As the self-assessment report acknowledged, retention is poor on most courses. For example, in 1998, only 33% and 29% of enrolled students completed two-year courses in GCE A level sciences and mathematics, respectively. Retention for GCSE mathematics was 63% and for GCSE sciences 67%. Pass rates in GCE A level sciences improved from 37% in 1997 to 72% in 1998. In mathematics, GCE A level pass rates have exceeded the national averages for two of the last three years and reached 90% in 1998. However, in 1997 and 1998, fewer than 30% of those who started a two-year course leading to GCE A level mathematics and sciences passed

the examination. In GCSE courses, pass rates at grades C or above in sciences have declined from 47% in 1996 to 31% in 1998 whereas in mathematics they have improved from 33% in 1996 to 42% in 1998.

15 A particular strength omitted from the self-assessment report is the quality of learning resources. The two science laboratories, refurbished in 1996, provide a suitable learning environment for practical lessons and have a good range of equipment. In science and mathematics, students have direct access to computers in laboratories and teaching rooms, but the range of computer-based learning materials available is small. Three technicians provide good support for teachers and students in science. Teachers of mathematics and science are appropriately qualified and experienced.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE mathematics	2	Expected completions	*	*	163
		Retention (%)	*	*	63
		Achievement (%)	*	*	42
GCSE sciences	2	Expected completions	*	*	58
		Retention (%)	*	*	67
		Achievement (%)	*	*	31
GCE A level mathematics	3	Expected completions	7	29	34
		Retention (%)	71	66	29
		Achievement (%)	80	53	90
GCE A level sciences	3	Expected completions	36	60	55
		Retention (%)	42	57	33
		Achievement (%)	62	37	72
GNVQ advanced and precursors (science)	3	Expected completions	19	*	13
		Retention (%)	79	*	54
		Achievement (%)	93	*	43

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

*data incomplete

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 3

16 Inspectors observed 13 lessons, covering all aspects of electrical, electronic and mechanical engineering and motor vehicle provision. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made in the self-assessment report, though they considered that it overstated some of the strengths and failed to identify some strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- effective teaching in mechanical and electrical engineering courses
- assignment and practical work of a good standard
- students' good achievements on GNVQ and precursor programmes
- the high quality of learning materials

Weaknesses

- poor teaching on motor vehicle courses
- low levels of retention on several courses
- failure to implement internal verification procedures on some courses
- ineffective monitoring of targets and action plans

17 The college offers a range of courses from foundation to higher technician level, which provides students with good opportunities for progression. The self-assessment report recognised the need to broaden the spectrum of foundation courses in order to encourage and widen participation in this programme area. It also acknowledged the need to include a European aspect in its curriculum and is currently developing links with Germany. The college has good external links, particularly with local schools, one of which sends pupils to the faculty to follow a national vocational qualification (NVQ) course.

18 Of the lessons observed, seven were judged good or outstanding. This is a lower proportion than the national average for the programme area in 1997-98 as quoted in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*.

Inspectors also observed a higher proportion of less than satisfactory and poor lessons than is seen nationally. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that lesson planning is often good. In the best lessons, schemes of work are detailed and clearly show forward planning. Teachers use an appropriate variety of methods. In one foundation lesson, the teacher and technician combined to demonstrate thermal cutting techniques. The entertaining shapes they chose to cut, which included a rabbit, engaged and retained students' interest. Students then practised the cutting methods themselves. Lesson and programme planning and classroom management on motor vehicle courses are much poorer. Students on these courses are often timetabled for long periods of time in the same room, with the same teacher and with no variation in teaching and learning methods. In one lesson, the lecturer made no attempt to control the continuous chatter of students who seriously disrupted the learning of others. These significant weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

19 Faculty staff review courses annually, following a detailed college procedure. Data on students' retention and achievements are not analysed systematically and action plans rarely focus on significant issues. There is little monitoring or evaluation of the outcomes of the process. Some teachers are not aware of college or course targets or concerned to meet them. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that internal verification procedures were not fully implemented across the faculty. In GNVQ courses, college verification procedures are applied rigorously with considerable benefit for the process of assessment. The opposite is true in some NVQ courses where verification plans have not been implemented.

Curriculum Areas

20 Summarised retention and achievement rates are at or above national averages for the programme area, but the aggregation masks significant variations, a fact recognised in the self-assessment report. Some results are excellent. In 1998, the BTEC national certificate course in electrical/electronic engineering had retention and achievement rates of 100%. Others are less successful. In the same year, only six of the 32 students who started the BTEC national diploma in engineering obtained the final qualification. Motor vehicle and fabrication and welding courses all have a history of poor retention. In spite of efforts to reverse the trend, significant numbers of students have left some courses in the current year. Students are often self-motivated and hard working. They demonstrate good practical and written skills. These strengths were not recognised in the self-assessment report. Students have ready

access to information technology (IT) facilities and often use them to produce well-presented assignment work. In a higher national certificate lesson, students used a computer-based system to investigate transient waveforms. Printouts from the program were then used to form the basis of their written assignments.

21 Teachers are, in the main, appropriately qualified. A small but significant number of staff do not have the necessary assessor and verifier qualifications required by the courses on which they teach. As recognised in the self-assessment report, there is a wide range of high-quality learning materials, many of which are produced within the college. In the machine tool workshop, there is a lack of planned maintenance, but most workshops and laboratories are well equipped, clean and tidy.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ and craft	1	Expected completions	69	100	92
		Retention (%)	83	80	80
		Achievement (%)	58	60	62
NVQ craft, GNVQ and precursors	2	Expected completions	287	288	199
		Retention (%)	73	74	68
		Achievement (%)	92	56	59
NVQ craft, GNVQ and precursors	3	Expected completions	140	191	108
		Retention (%)	74	66	61
		Achievement (%)	92	68	56
Professional and higher qualifications	4	Expected completions	57	66	44
		Retention (%)	68	92	57
		Achievement (%)	82	33	88

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

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 2

22 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering a range of business and management courses from NVQ level 2 to higher national certificate level. They agreed with the self-assessment report's identification of the major strengths and weaknesses but found that it did not specifically identify the courses to which they applied.

Key strengths

- well-organised lessons
- innovative flexible learning approaches
- effective teaching and assessment of key skills on GNVQ programmes
- achievement rates at or above national averages on most courses
- good retention on most courses
- well-managed courses

Weaknesses

- failure of some teaching to stimulate students' interest
- poor or declining retention and achievement rates on national certificate and GCE A level courses
- lack of formal links with employers
- lack of recent commercial updating for full-time staff

23 The college provides a range of courses from 'new horizons for adult returners' to higher national certificate level and professional qualifications. Management courses are taught through the Mid-Cheshire Business School at the college's Winsford site, which also designs and teaches bespoke courses for industry. Students can take a broad range of NVQs at times and in ways which best suit them. This breadth of provision was recognised as a strength in the self-assessment report. Courses are well managed. There is a published schedule for

meetings, at which the monitoring of students' attendance and retention is a regular item on the agenda. The monthly faculty newsletter provides a valuable means of communication for staff. Course files are well maintained and students receive comprehensive handbooks. Students' opinions are regularly surveyed to inform course reviews, but there is no formal method for collecting employers' views. GNVQ programmes include work experience as an integral part.

24 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teaching and learning is strong. Of 11 lessons observed, eight were judged good or outstanding; one was less than satisfactory. Lessons are well organised. Plans show aims, objectives and teaching and learning activities. In most lessons teachers use a variety of appropriate methods. In one lesson, students were involved in a quiz, in answering questions directed at individuals, and in discussion of their own work experiences. The lesson was lively and productive in preparing the students for a small group assignment. There is increasing use of information communications technology as an integral part of teaching and assessment. Teachers are developing the use of the college intranet to increase the range of learning methods. Students can access teaching and assessment materials on-line and, in some cases, these have hyperlinks to relevant worldwide web pages. On the higher national certificate business course, learning packs enable students to study on their own and progress at their own pace. Workshops allow students to develop their knowledge further through the use of case study materials. Teachers lead the discussion of issues arising from the case studies using digital projection facilities. In a minority of lessons, teachers failed to stimulate students' interest. In one lesson, a room was inappropriately laid out for the group discussion which was expected to take place, the teacher did not appropriately direct questions to include all students and the task sheet used was not contextualised and included

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a spelling mistake. As a result, some students were not fully involved in the work and appeared to lack interest. The teaching and assessment of key skills are integral to GNVQ programmes. Students attend timetabled workshops to develop key skills and assessments are carefully mapped against performance criteria.

25 The quality of most students' work is good. Portfolios are well maintained and organised and students' progress is clearly monitored. Teachers use standard documentation to give constructive feedback on students' work but the quality of some written comments on assignments is poor. Spelling or grammatical errors are not always corrected. Achievement rates on most courses are at or above national averages. On the GNVQ advanced business course, for example, achievement rates between 1996 and 1998 were significantly above the

national average. There are also good retention rates on most courses. Between 1996 and 1998, retention rates on the Association of Accounting Technicians intermediate course were 90%, 100% and 88%. There is poor or declining retention and achievement on a minority of courses. On the GCE A level business course, retention has declined from 100% in 1996 to 60% in 1998 whilst achievement has declined from 100% to 44%, significantly below national averages. This poor retention and achievement was recognised in the self-assessment report and action plans have already been implemented.

26 Teaching rooms are well maintained, clean, and well equipped with audiovisual equipment. Whilst the self-assessment report recognises that staff are well qualified, it does not give recognition to the need to update further the industrial experience of full-time staff.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Association of Accounting Technicians	2	Expected completions	25	34	19
		Retention (%)	92	91	84
		Achievement (%)	17	53	100
Association of Accounting Technicians	3	Expected completions	20	20	50
		Retention (%)	90	100	88
		Achievement (%)	17	40	47
GNVQ advanced business	3	Expected completions	50	42	45
		Retention (%)	80	69	87
		Achievement (%)	100	81	87
BTEC national certificate in business and finance	3	Expected completions	38	50	26
		Retention (%)	47	46	35
		Achievement (%)	100	95	78
Certificate in personnel practice	3	Expected completions	*	25	20
		Retention (%)	*	92	85
		Achievement (%)	*	83	94
Higher national certificate in business and finance	4	Expected completions	27	23	22
		Retention (%)	59	78	77
		Achievement (%)	81	88	75

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

*course not offered

Curriculum Areas

Leisure and Tourism

Grade 2

27 Inspectors observed 10 lessons covering GNVQ intermediate and advanced leisure and tourism courses and NVQ travel services. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment of strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- much good teaching and learning
- good levels of achievement on GNVQ intermediate courses
- well-managed courses
- effective internal assessment and verification procedures

Weaknesses

- low retention on GNVQ advanced courses
- poor attendance in some classes
- inadequate leisure and tourism library stock

28 Teaching is well planned and well managed. Documentation and procedures are clear and standardised. Programme leaders have access to management information reports which enable them to compare students' retention and achievements with national benchmarking data produced by the FEFC. Figures for the current year so far demonstrate improvements in both retention and achievements. Communication within the faculty is sound and is enhanced by the production of a regular bulletin which updates staff on faculty and college issues. Teachers encourage students to set personal targets and monitor their progress carefully.

29 Teachers approach most lessons with a sense of purpose and professionalism. Students take an active part in learning and are well motivated. Of the 10 lessons observed seven were judged to be good or outstanding. This is

6% above the national average for the programme area in 1997-98 as quoted in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*. Teachers check that learning has taken place through question and answer sessions and lively class discussion. In two of the lessons observed students received clear briefs from teachers that identified appropriate tasks. These involved various methods of research, including use of the internet, surveys of college users and desk research. Students then analysed the results. The subject assignments are clearly linked to the work carried out in the classroom. In lessons students are given constructive feedback on work they are producing. This helps them to improve the standard of their coursework. Students work effectively in small groups and make informative presentations to the rest of the group demonstrating that they have understood the work. Teachers give strong individual support to students and readily give up their own time to assist with particular problems. This approach has developed the positive relationships that exist between students and teachers.

30 Students' work is well written, well presented, accurate and relevant to industrial practice. Key skills are developed through assignment and classwork, where appropriate. Assignments are clear and, on the whole, carefully assessed. The use of industry-based case studies is particularly effective. Some marking of students' work is not sufficiently rigorous and insufficient attention is paid to the correction of spelling and grammatical errors. The use of computers is actively encouraged although, on occasions, there are insufficient computers for all students. Students' attendance for lessons observed was low at 64%. Achievement rates on most courses are at or above national averages. For example, achievements at GNVQ intermediate level are well above the national average. GNVQ advanced courses show a decline in both retention and achievement but have good

Curriculum Areas

achievement figures for 1998. The action plan in the self-assessment report has addressed these concerns and significant improvements in retention during the current year can be identified from college data. Students' achievements on NVQ travel service courses were poor in 1997, and satisfactory in 1998. Following faculty reviews, this course will no longer be offered from 1999.

31 Leisure and tourism teachers are adequately qualified and enjoy regular contact with relevant local companies. One teacher has developed a good relationship with a local museum that provides useful learning opportunities for students within a real tourism

environment. Eurocamp, a national leisure organisation, has its headquarters close to the college and provides a range of leisure work experience opportunities for students.

Classrooms are comfortably furnished and suitably equipped. Some teachers do not make the best use of teaching resources. The library has a small range of leisure and tourism stock; much is dated and little used. The faculty has developed learning materials on the college intranet and collaborates with other local colleges to share good materials and disseminate best practice. Not all staff are yet using this facility.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	24	16	13
		Retention (%)	97	100	71
		Achievement (%)	71	94	87
GNVQ advanced	2	Expected completions	22	18	17
		Retention (%)	79	62	55
		Achievement (%)	69	67	81

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

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 1

32 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report which identified the outstanding quality of teaching and learning and students' achievements. Most weaknesses identified in the report have been addressed. Ten lessons were observed in a range of vocational art and design courses.

Key strengths

- broad, challenging curriculum
- good and outstanding teaching
- high standard of students' work
- good retention and achievement on full-time programmes
- excellent community links and work experience
- well-resourced specialist accommodation
- excellent progression to higher education

Weaknesses

- low achievements on craft courses

33 The range of full-time courses in art and design allows students to progress from intermediate level courses to higher education. The area offers a wide range of options, including life drawing, ceramics, IT skills, multimedia work and textiles. Specialist national diploma courses in fashion, graphics, spatial design and photography extend the range of opportunities. The curriculum is well managed and courses are taught by a well organised and united staff team. As the college identified, community links are excellent. These extend to schools, higher education institutions and partners in the community and have attracted funding, some of which has financed a new multimedia suite. Work placements in schools, design firms, and museums are

available to vocational students. There is positive feedback from employers and students are often offered employment.

34 Inspectors judged eight of the 10 lessons to be good or outstanding. A variety of exciting learning activities and detailed briefs for assignments develop students' skills in a clear and sequential way. A ceramics teacher demonstrated the techniques of firing and glazing pots through an outdoor raku firing. The teacher used contemporary examples and other students' work to encourage the students to produce successful pots. Teachers effectively manage individual and group work. In one lesson, design students described the progress of their individual projects and confidently shared ideas with the rest of the group. One student presented musical rhythms in a visual way, using lettering and typography, and considered suggestions for improvements. A well-designed programme of critical studies is linked closely to students' own practical work. Students' work is clearly informed by a range of historical and contemporary influences. Extensive use is made of visits to galleries and trips to Europe.

35 The standard of students' work is outstanding. Thorough attention is paid to basic drawing skills. Students' drawings are vigorous and often on a large scale. Compositions are strong and effective use is made of mixed media and texture. There is dynamic use of mark-making with traditional tools such as charcoal and rubber and less traditional use of sticks and twigs. The life drawing course provides enrichment for students on all the vocational programmes and students' work is exemplary. Observational skills in drawing and painting are well developed. Experimentation is encouraged. Paintings are vibrant and use media and texture to good effect. Inspectors observed a good standard of work in ceramics, sculpture and model-making. In a spatial design lesson students worked on a live brief from a local primary school to redesign the playground. The three-dimensional models were well

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received by the school. Additional units of textile design and pattern-making add rigour to coursework for the national diploma in fashion. The certificate in IT develops students' key skills. Sketchbooks, research, study books and design sheets effectively demonstrate work in progress and the development of ideas.

36 Students on vocational courses achieve high pass rates and retention is good. GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses show retention and achievement rates well above national averages. Achievement on the BTEC diploma in foundation studies is similarly strong. The specialist national diploma programme has pass rates close to the national average and good retention. Retention rates on the GCE A level course have declined and, in

1998, fell below the national average. On one-year and short craft courses, pass rates in recent years have been poor. The programme has been reorganised and retention in 1998-99 is showing signs of improvement. Progression to higher education is excellent; in 1998, all students on the national foundation studies course progressed to higher education courses.

37 The programme area has well-resourced specialist accommodation. Studio and workshop facilities are well managed and maintained. The open-plan design studios are spacious and well equipped, but noise in the area is distracting. There is a generous range of specialist workshops for work in ceramic, wood, plastics, textiles and print. Students have good access to IT.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Various craft courses	2	Expected completions	43	836	812
		Retention (%)	76	87	76
		Achievement (%)	90	74	67
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	Expected completions	18	22	26
		Retention (%)	94	77	77
		Achievement (%)	100	100	95
GNVQ advanced art and design	3	Expected completions	29	38	30
		Retention (%)	83	87	77
		Achievement (%)	91	94	91
BTEC national diploma foundation studies	3	Expected completions	64	42	168
		Retention (%)	89	95	90
		Achievement (%)	89	85	92
BTEC national diplomas (fashion, graphic design, photography, spatial design, technical illustration)	3	Expected completions	128	121	389
		Retention (%)	84	83	79
		Achievement (%)	78	85	88
GCE A level art, art studies, fine art	3	Expected completions	41	15	112
		Retention (%)	90	80	65
		Achievement (%)	73	50	79

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

Curriculum Areas

Humanities

Grade 3

38 Inspectors observed 10 lessons in a range of humanities courses, including access to higher education, pre-access and teacher education. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified additional, significant, weaknesses.

Key strengths

- range of courses to meet individual students' needs
- well-planned lessons, with clear objectives
- effective management of the access course
- constructive and thorough marking of students' work
- effective support for students

Weaknesses

- poor achievement on the teacher education course
- low retention on the access course
- failure of some students to achieve qualifications within agreed timescales
- undemanding work in some lessons
- weak course management on teacher education courses

39 The college's range of humanities courses allows students to study in ways and at times which suit their abilities and personal circumstances. The access programmes successfully attract students who would not otherwise return to education, and contribute to the college's widening participation strategy. Students are able to gain credit for partial achievement, take a break from study and return to college at a later date. All access to higher education students undertake an initial basic skills assessment and, if required, receive

additional support. Teachers are committed to the development of students' key skills. The teaching of communications, IT and application of number is integral to the pre-access courses. All courses offer progression to further study and higher education.

40 In most lessons teaching was satisfactory or better, and there were some examples of good or outstanding practice. Lessons are well structured and teachers make aims and objectives clear to students. Schemes of work are well developed, although some are more useful than others. In a small number of lessons, lesson plans and teaching failed to take into account the different abilities of students. The work set was not sufficiently demanding for the more able students. Some students were not actively involved in lessons and did not fully participate in discussions. The self-assessment report did not identify some of the weaknesses observed in teaching and learning. In the better lessons, students took part in a variety of appropriate learning activities which built on their experiences and enabled them to develop their knowledge and skills effectively. They worked enthusiastically and enjoyed participating in class discussion. For example, in a social science lesson students held a lively debate about 'nationalism', which originated from students' presentations to the class. Teachers use skilful questioning to check students' understanding. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that good relationships between students and teachers promote effective learning. Students appreciate the relaxed and friendly environment created by teachers. Individual support is effective. Students' oral contributions were, in the main, confident and well expressed. Students' work is marked consistently and teachers provide detailed feedback to help students improve their performance. Errors in written English are corrected.

41 The access course is well managed. Teachers work well together and share good

Curriculum Areas

practice. There are effective systems for monitoring students' progress. Internal verification of course assignments is thorough and carefully documented. Not identified in the self-assessment report is the weak curriculum management of teacher education. Here, the management of resources and the monitoring of students' assessments and progress is ineffective. There is inadequate monitoring of students' achievements.

42 Retention and achievement rates were recognised in the self-assessment report as weaknesses. In 1998, retention rates for the access to higher education course were low and had significantly deteriorated since 1997. However, during the current year measurable improvements have been achieved through a greater focus on retention. On the pre-access and training and development programmes, a significant proportion of students fail to achieve their qualification within the agreed timescale, a weakness not acknowledged in the self-

assessment report. A high proportion of students progress from the pre-access course to access, and from access courses into higher education. Performance on the teacher education course is poor.

43 Teachers are well qualified and experienced. There is a suitable range of equipment and materials. Handouts are well prepared and presented. Some teachers use the internet for research but, as yet, there is little use of IT in the curriculum. Most students make effective use of IT in the presentation of their assignments. The self-assessment report recognised that library resources are insufficient to meet students' needs, although an agreement has been made with the local library to augment the service. Most subject base rooms are well equipped with overhead projectors, flip charts and whiteboards. They have displays of learning materials but lack examples of students' work.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Credit certificate (short)	2	Expected completions	*	19	30
		Retention (%)	*	100	100
		Achievement (%)	*	100	43
C&G 7307 further education certificate	3	Expected completions	22	5	31
		Retention (%)	91	80	94
		Achievement (%)	55	0	46
Access certificate to higher education	3	Expected completions	39	51	87
		Retention (%)	79	78	45
		Achievement (%)	90	85	77
C&G 7281 competencies in training and development	3	Expected completions	7	41	82
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	14	32	95
C&G 9281 initial certificate in teaching basic skills (short)	3	Expected completions	20	17	36
		Retention (%)	90	100	83
		Achievement (%)	72	35	67

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

*data incomplete

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

44 The self-assessment report identified the main strengths of the provision and some of the weaknesses. In parts it was descriptive, rather than evaluative.

Key strengths

- well-targeted initial information and advice
- good tutorial support
- effective learning support
- good access to careers and personal guidance

Weaknesses

- some aspects of induction
- insufficient monitoring of support for part-time students

45 The college has an effective range of strategies to inform prospective students about its courses. Schools liaison is well organised. There are plenty of opportunities for young people and parents to discuss options at open days and evenings. College staff give presentations and hold interviews in schools and attend events held by the careers service. The college uses promotional stalls in venues such as shopping centres and libraries to reach prospective students. Sessions have been held on local employers' premises to raise awareness of lifelong learning opportunities. A community worker identifies needs and develops courses with adults from groups which have not customarily enrolled for college courses. Guidance is provided for those students unsure of what they want to study.

46 Inspectors did not fully agree with the self-assessment judgement that induction is effective. Induction programmes are reviewed and modified each year in response to student feedback. Students receive a helpful student

handbook and are made aware of the services available to them at college. In some programme areas, insufficient attention is paid to ensuring that students are on the right courses, and that those at risk of leaving are identified. Some courses have experienced high drop-out early in the autumn term. Students who applied for courses after the main enrolment period were less likely to have received impartial advice on the most appropriate course. Some students had insufficient information about what the course involved. The college has recognised the need to provide better induction for students who start courses throughout the year.

47 Tutorial support is good. Seven of the 10 tutorials observed by inspectors were judged good or outstanding. Full-time students have a minimum of one hour a week allocated for tutorial. Tutors have schemes of work outlining group activities for full-time courses. Most students have individual interviews with tutors to monitor their progress and these are well recorded in many cases. Mature students on the access course receive excellent individual support, which is well documented in students' files.

48 The self-assessment report recognised that support for part-time students is less well developed; 36% of them were unaware of the support available. The college has made progress since the report was produced. Part-time students are entitled to support through their course tutor, and through central student services. Tutors have been trained and services are publicised, especially for students not attending main sites of the college. There is insufficient checking to ensure that all part-time students receive an adequate level of support. Some tutors for part-time students keep records of their progress, but this is not formally monitored. Many of the part-time students spoken to during inspection were positive about the support they receive.

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49 As the self-assessment report indicated, the college provides an effective service for students who need additional help with their studies. They are identified in several ways: at enrolment, through screening tests, by referral or self-referral. Screening tests administered in 1998 identified approximately 300 students needing help. Two hundred and twenty currently receive extra support, and a further 87 have taken up some support during the year. Help is given with literacy and numeracy, and support is provided for students with physical disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, autism, dyslexia and other specific conditions. Students receive help either in the classroom or in separate sessions. This support is well linked to the students' main course of study. The college is aware that continued staff development is needed for specialist support workers and to raise awareness amongst all lecturers.

50 Students have good access to careers, counselling and welfare advice. Childcare is provided on the two main sites. The liaison between the careers service and the college is effective. A careers adviser, who provides group sessions and individual interviews, is linked to each faculty. The college also employs its own careers adviser, who focuses on part-time and mature students. Careers education forms a valuable part of the tutorial programme for full-time students. Help for students wishing to apply for higher education is effectively given through tutorials and the central support services. Computer-based resources for careers guidance are good, but some paper-based resources are out of date. In many curriculum areas students produce a curriculum vitae, using a helpful computer package. There are regular meetings between the college and the careers service, but both recognise the need for better evaluation of the service. At present, some students who have a need for particular advice do not receive sufficient help.

51 Students are encouraged to broaden their experience by getting involved in a range of

additional activities. Some of these lead to accreditation, some are recreational. They have the opportunity to join a student council, which represents the views of the students on matters affecting them.

General Resources

Grade 2

52 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report but identified a few additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-maintained and well-equipped teaching rooms
- welcoming reception and student services areas
- good access to most college facilities for students with restricted mobility
- up-to-date IT facilities
- good catering, sport and recreational facilities at Hartford
- attractive displays of students' work in most areas of the college

Weaknesses

- underuse of accommodation
- restricted library stock for some curriculum areas
- some poor temporary buildings

53 Since the last inspection the college has continued to adapt and improve its accommodation. Its largest site, in Hartford, includes a range of 1960s buildings for specialist accommodation, student services, learning resources and a modern design studio. The London Road site, used for art and design, and the building at Winsford, which houses the college's business school and the Verdin Centre, are Victorian buildings. There are few development opportunities at these latter sites because of planning restrictions, but students

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appreciate the ambience of the London Road building. The Verdin centre is primarily used for part-time courses for adults. The college has recently updated its accommodation strategy. It does not fully address the issue of low space usage.

54 Maintenance is well planned and responses to routine maintenance requests are prompt. Teaching and public areas are well decorated and clean. At Hartford, the main reception and student services areas are sited in a welcoming visitors' entrance. Attractive and interesting displays of students' work in many areas of the college enhance the environment. Direction signing is good on all sites. Video surveillance systems provide a high level of external security. There is good access to buildings and other facilities for people with restricted mobility, apart from the first floor at London Road. The business school houses a well-equipped conference centre and lecture theatre. Realistic working environments are available to students in a number of curriculum areas. Most classrooms are well equipped with audiovisual resources. However, as the self-assessment report recognised, the large number of temporary classrooms provide poor teaching areas. Office and workroom accommodation for staff is good. Equipment is well maintained and health and safety procedures are effective. Car parking facilities are good at both Hartford and Winsford.

55 The library service operates on all three college sites. Opening hours are restricted at Winsford and London Road. A computerised management system is in place but it does not include books lodged in curriculum areas. A range of leaflets details the sources of information available for subject areas, including internet sites. Some teaching teams have strong links with the library. Most students receive a general induction to the library, but fewer receive induction specific to their subject areas. The Hartford information study centre provides a pleasant environment. It has 130 study places, a quiet study area and

a 'silence' room. It offers journals and a newspaper cuttings service. Its bookstock is small in a few subject areas. The London Road library includes an illustration collection, paper cuttings and magazines, but the bookstock is either for reference only or for short-term loan. At Winsford, a public library opposite the college keeps stock funded by the college, but the number of books is inadequate to meet students' needs. Each library has a range of CD-ROMs and access to the internet. Students' use of these facilities is carefully monitored. The self-assessment report did not highlight weaknesses in the library provision.

56 Development of the college's IT provision is effectively overseen by a co-ordinating group. Software and hardware is compatible and effectively maintained. The educational technology centre at Hartford is spacious and well resourced. It has 38 networked computers for students to use on a drop-in basis, although occasionally classes are timetabled in the centre, restricting students' access. On all sites computers are up to date with industrial-standard software. Portable computers are used effectively in the centres in the community and are loaned to students at weekends. There is a high ratio of computers to students of 1:6. The college is developing an intranet to support teaching and college administration, but at the time of the inspection students could only access it at the Hartford site. There are few electronic mail facilities. The student development centre includes computers for visually impaired students.

57 The college provides good childcare facilities in a day nursery at Hartford, a sessional crèche at Verdin and a crèche for the use of part-time students at a local community centre. The sports hall has been refurbished and provides good facilities for a range of sports. The main hall is used flexibly to support lunchtime activities such as table tennis, bowls and computer games. The fitness centre has up-to-date equipment and is well used by students and members of the public.

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These strengths were not identified in the self-assessment report. There are few recreational facilities at Winsford and London Road. The 'Food Court' at Hartford is pleasant and has a wide choice of food. Cafeteria facilities on the other sites are limited, although vending machines are available. The students' coffee bar and lounge at Verdin has been recently improved.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

58 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment of its quality assurance, but considered that there were weaknesses not fully covered by the report.

Key strengths

- clear, systematic policies and procedures
- comprehensive and effective self-assessment process
- good use of lesson observation outcomes to inform self-assessment
- good staff development arrangements
- effective use of benchmarking data by managers

Weaknesses

- poor quality of some course reviews
- insufficient monitoring of course action plans
- lack of improvement in retention
- weak internal verification in a few curriculum areas
- underdeveloped service standards

59 A clear commitment to quality improvement is set out in the college mission and quality policy. Annual reports and action plans for improvement are submitted to the

college's academic board and the corporation. Despite several strategies and actions, there have been no significant incremental improvements in college retention or achievement rates over the last three years. The college is at or above national benchmarks for students' achievements. Retention is more mixed, and is below national benchmarks for students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses. Management responsibilities for quality assurance are well understood, though some staff are unclear about the remits of the various committees concerned with quality assurance.

60 A significant tool in assessing and assuring quality is the course evaluation and review framework. The best reviews report specifically and systematically on performance against targets. They include explicit reference to students' views, external verifier reports and course trends and clearly identify the key strengths and weaknesses. Poorer course review reports do not show targets for retention and achievement, nor do they critically evaluate poor course performance. Some staff are unaware of the targets set for the courses on which they teach. A minority of reports are carelessly completed and action plans fail to address key issues.

61 At faculty and senior management levels, review processes are more consistently rigorous and have led to a comprehensive and self-critical self-assessment report. Faculty managers analyse course retention and achievement, increasingly using benchmarking data to inform judgements and assist with target-setting. Team and programme area self-assessment reports were scrutinised by an internal quality audit committee which included a governor. The views of representatives from local organisations informed both judgements and grading decisions in the report. Classroom observations of full-time and part-time teaching staff were used effectively to inform judgements. A trained team of managers observes lessons and ensures that observation outcomes are

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appropriately documented and analysed. Of the 298 observations undertaken in the past two years, the college noted a higher proportion of lessons graded as outstanding in the second year. Inspectors agreed that there was a high proportion of outstanding lessons, but graded a significantly greater proportion of lessons as poor or less than satisfactory. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment grades in 10 out of 11 cases.

62 The college systematically collects and analyses the views of students on the quality of its provision. Overall, levels of student satisfaction have improved over the last three years. However, students do not always receive feedback on the outcomes of such surveys. On many courses, student representatives attend course team meetings and consider their contributions are valued. Information from staff, parents and employers is not always used effectively in reviewing overall college performance. The college charter sets out key statements for students relating to admission arrangements, their courses of study and the support services available. Some statements within the charter are too broad to give a clear indication of students' entitlements. In a recent exercise, the college was not able to measure specifically how far it has fulfilled its charter commitments. Some support services do not use specific standards to monitor and improve performance, though they review their services annually and publish development plans. Quality assurance arrangements for the 6% of the college's curriculum which is delivered through collaborative agreements are good and include lesson observations, regular visits to providers and involvement in the self-assessment process.

63 The college quality committee rigorously monitors external verifiers' reports and requests action plans to address resulting issues. It does not, however, ensure that its internal verification policy is implemented consistently. Although there is some excellent practice, there is also

some ineffective assessment and verification. The policy states that all courses leading to a recognised qualification should be subject to internal verification. Planned strategies for the training of internal verifiers have not been implemented and there is no meeting forum for internal verifiers to share and standardise good practice. The self-assessment report recognised these weaknesses.

64 The annual professional review of staff is well established and includes all full-time and part-time staff. Each review results in an individual development plan which takes account of personal training needs and college strategic objectives. There is no formal system for appraising staff performance against job descriptions. The college places a high priority on staff development; each member of staff spent an average of eight days in training and development in 1997-98. A recent commitment to all teachers and curriculum managers allocates five days annually for commercial and industrial updating. The college has recently achieved the Investor in People award for the second time.

Governance

Grade 2

65 Inspectors and auditors broadly agreed with the college's assessment of governance. They considered, however, that some strengths were overstated and identified some weaknesses not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Actions to remedy weaknesses which had been identified in the report were completed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- effective use of members' expertise
- detailed consideration of students' performance
- good knowledge of the curriculum

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- active involvement in the college's self-assessment process

Weaknesses

- failure to monitor rigorously some aspects of financial performance
- incomplete monitoring of progress towards the achievement of strategic objectives
- no performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of governance

66 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. 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.

67 The corporation has a determined size of 20 members. At the time of inspection, despite the college's efforts, there were six long-standing vacancies. The current membership comprises seven independent members, two community representatives, two staff members, a student, the principal and a person nominated by the TEC. A strength identified in the self-assessment report is the broad range of skills and experience which governors bring to the college. Their collective expertise in accountancy, law, education, IT and personnel management is well used in committees and in support of appropriate college activities. For example, one governor sits on the college's IT co-ordinating group; another has brought her expertise in art and design to the work of that faculty. Thorough induction arrangements and well-attended training events help governors to understand their roles and responsibilities and the context in which they are working. However, there is no procedure to identify and analyse individual members' training needs in order to inform the planning of a training programme.

68 The corporation takes seriously its responsibilities to determine the mission and educational character of the college. Governors played a full part in establishing the mission and corporate objectives for the current period. A system which pairs them with faculties and some support services enables governors to keep abreast of developments which directly affect staff and students. Consideration of academic board minutes at each corporation meeting provides governors with up-to-date information about curricular issues. Detailed reports enable them to monitor student retention and achievement rates against local and national averages, and to set targets for improvement. Information relating to students' destinations is also reported to governors. These strengths were identified in the self-assessment report. Through the work of its committees, the corporation monitors progress towards other strategic objectives but uses few quantifiable measures to aid this process. The mid-year reviews undertaken by committees are not brought together systematically to enable the full board to judge the extent to which the college is on course to achieve its strategic objectives. These weaknesses were not included in the college's assessment of governance.

69 Inspectors and auditors agreed with the college that members of the corporation contribute effectively to the self-assessment process. Governors devoted one of their meetings to careful scrutiny of each section of the college's self-assessment report. Their recommendations on grades and other comments were forwarded to the quality audit committee. The corporation reviews its own performance carefully, using a range of evidence, but the process is not sufficiently rigorous. There are no formal targets and performance indicators to help members evaluate the effectiveness of governance.

70 Meetings are well supported by comprehensive briefing papers which are circulated in advance. At the time of the

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inspection, the average level of attendance at corporation meetings in 1998-99 was good at 85%. Relationships between members of the corporation and the college's managers are productive and professional. Members are not afraid to ask searching questions to clarify issues and to aid decision-making. There are well-established reporting arrangements to the corporation from the seven committees: finance and general purposes; audit; personnel; remuneration; premises; marketing; and the search committee. The finance and general purposes committee does not receive frequent enough reports on the college's financial performance. It has not maintained sufficient oversight of the financial performance of the college's outward franchising. These weaknesses were omitted from the self-assessment report. The search committee has initiated a process to identify potential governors in line with new statutory requirements but it has not conducted a formal skills audit to assist the selection process. There is no publicly available policy regarding appointments to the corporation.

71 Inspectors and auditors partially agreed with the college's judgement that the corporation actively develops and reviews its procedures to ensure that it operates openly. Minutes of meetings of the corporation and its committees are available for public scrutiny in the library but their availability is not publicised. There is a code of conduct for members, a policy on 'whistleblowing' and a register of interests relating to governors and staff with significant financial responsibilities. However, there is no written guidance to ensure that all relevant interests are declared and included in the register.

Management

Grade 2

72 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. However, the report overstated some strengths. The college has made progress in implementing its action plan to address weaknesses in management.

Key strengths

- well-developed framework for strategic and operational planning
- good use of market information
- clarity of management structure
- productive links with external organisations
- open and responsive management style
- exemplary health and safety practices

Weaknesses

- gaps in arrangements for communicating with staff
- the quality of monitoring and review of performance

73 The college mission statement was developed through extensive consultation with staff, governors and representatives of external bodies and employers. As the self-assessment report indicated, the strategic planning process translates the mission into six corporate objectives which set the framework for operational plans. The planning process is informed by a sound analysis of information about the needs of the local community's economic and employment trends and the programmes offered by other training providers.

74 The outcomes of the self-assessment process are used, with performance indicators and improvement targets, to set the agenda for development for curriculum and functional areas. The targets within the plans are

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generally informed by a realistic view of previous achievement and increasingly by reference to appropriate national benchmarking data. The process is well documented and staff understand how the targets have been arrived at. Individual managers review progress with their teams. However, the evaluation of performance against the strategic objectives is not carried out systematically or rigorously. Inspectors identified a link between this weakness and the college's own view that senior managers are too involved in monitoring operational detail. As part of its action plan, managers have recently introduced a process to review progress towards meeting objectives. However, they identified weaknesses in the quality of judgements made by managers during the review. Staff development reviews do not consider the contribution which individuals make to the achievement of college or team objectives.

75 The self-assessment report identified financial management and control as key strengths. Inspectors and auditors agreed in part with this judgement. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college has recorded an operating surplus for each of the past two years. Budget holders receive timely reports of actual and committed expenditure against budget. Management accounts are produced each month but are not comprehensive and do not include forecasts of income and expenditure. The college management board does not review them often enough. The key assumptions underlying the current financial forecasts have been clearly defined and are understood by senior managers. The annual forecast of income and expenditure is not supported by a written commentary. Reports to the FEFC are made within the specified deadlines. Reports from internal and external auditors indicate no significant weaknesses in internal control.

76 The college's links with external organisations demonstrate its commitment to collaboration and widening participation. A community relations manager promotes opportunities to attract enrolments from people who have not usually entered further education. Inspectors recognised the strength claimed by the college of the range of links which it has established with local firms, community groups and the local authority. The strategy has raised the profile of the college in the local community, successfully obtained funding for projects such as the new multimedia suite and is already beginning to achieve a modest but significant increase in the recruitment of students from disadvantaged localities. Collaboration with one local high school is particularly productive and has led to around 120 year 10 pupils studying in four curriculum areas. The college's business development unit has exceeded its income targets and provides an expanding programme of training for local organisations. In faculties other than adult and community education the curriculum on offer has not, as yet, adapted fully to pursue the goal of widening participation.

77 Inspectors agreed that the management structure is effective. Staff understand their roles and those of the managers to whom they are responsible. Staff confirm that managers are approachable and open. Decisions made at management meetings are communicated to staff through timetabled faculty and team meetings. The college has recognised the need to develop further its internal communications. A draft strategy is in place to improve communication with part-time staff, to improve the scheduling of meetings to link more closely with the planning and review calendar and to introduce an internal electronic mail system to reduce the reliance on paper-based systems of reporting.

78 The college recognises that action to promote and monitor equal opportunities is effective. College facilities have been adapted

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for students with disabilities and equality of opportunity permeates employment policy and practice. A subcommittee of the academic board meets termly with the brief to develop and monitor the implementation of college policies. The committee has not established a clear programme over the last year to set targets or to monitor progress on equal opportunities issues. The college places a high priority on health and safety and its practices are exemplary.

Conclusions

79 The college was thorough in its approach to self-assessment. The report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report, found some additional ones and considered that some weaknesses had not been given enough significance. In all the curriculum areas inspected, inspectors agreed with the self-assessment grades. They agreed with all but one of the cross-college grades. Governance was felt to be over-graded in the update to the self-assessment report, but graded more realistically in the original.

80 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 (May 1999)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	2
16-18 years	25
19-24 years	11
25+ years	61
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (May 1999)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Foundation	38
Intermediate	19
Advanced	16
Higher education	2
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	25
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (May 1999)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	197	1,543	18
Construction	86	225	3
Engineering	160	566	8
Business	204	520	8
Hotel and catering	174	161	4
Health and community care	303	1,450	19
Art and design	340	1,018	14
Humanities	114	2,272	25
Basic education	28	38	1
Total	1,606	7,793	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 (May 1999)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	95	15	41	151
Supporting direct learning contact	38	7	0	45
Other support	86	3	0	89
Total	219	25	41	285

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£7,806,000	£7,821,000	£8,161,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£15.95	£15.61	£15.28
Payroll as a proportion of income	66%	69%	67%
Achievement of funding target	111%	114%	101%
Diversity of income	22%	18%	19%
Operating surplus	-£128,000	£23,000	£75,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Expected completions	278	764	755	685	1,077	1,071
	Retention (%)	83	88	83	82	84	82
	Achievement (%)	77	68	75	73	73	61
2	Expected completions	879	996	949	614	930	832
	Retention (%)	70	76	71	73	82	69
	Achievement (%)	69	67	78	78	63	65
3	Expected completions	792	935	838	463	674	508
	Retention (%)	74	74	63	76	77	74
	Achievement (%)	77	69	73	73	61	61
4 or 5	Expected completions	15	18	44	103	154	211
	Retention (%)	67	89	70	69	90	88
	Achievement (%)	90	36	81	75	58	46
Short courses	Expected completions	440	555	442	5,519	5,696	5,874
	Retention (%)	95	95	97	98	99	97
	Achievement (%)	82	86	87	88	96	87
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	993	1,238	962	1,463	742	275
	Retention (%)	90	77	78	81	85	74
	Achievement (%)	98	72	73	90	59	75

Source: ISR

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