

New College, Swindon

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
2000-01

THE
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FUNDING
COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1999-2000, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	6	44	44	7	0
Cross-college provision	9	45	38	8	0

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

Sample size: 112 college inspections

Note: percentages subject to rounding

Student Achievements

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

- as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1996, would appear in the results for 1997-98 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. 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 included.

Summary

New College, Swindon

South West Region

Inspected November 2000

New College, Swindon is a medium-sized tertiary college serving Swindon and East Wiltshire. The college offers provision in all programme areas funded by the FEFC. The current college accommodation is to be replaced by a new building in 2002. Provision in four programme areas was inspected together with some of the franchised provision and aspects of cross-college provision. The self-assessment process involved all teaching and support staff. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the report, but identified a number of additional weaknesses not noted by the college. They agreed with the four curriculum grades and three of the cross-college grades awarded by the college, but judged that the college had been overgenerous in grading two of the cross-college areas.

Teaching and learning is effective in most subjects and courses are well managed. Students' achievements are good but retention rates are below the national average in some subjects. There is strong support for full-time

students, but support and pre-entry guidance for part-time students is underdeveloped. Working relationships between staff and students are good and there are effective links with a wide range of external agencies and franchise partners. There is good access to IT on the main site and it is used effectively in many lessons. The current accommodation has been maintained and improved without incurring unjustified expenditure on premises with a limited life. Financial management is good and governors have effective oversight of the college's financial position. The quality assurance process is thorough, but some unreliable data have impeded the analysis of trends in students' achievements and retention. The college should address: low retention rates; weaknesses in guidance and support for adult part-time students; the unreliability of its data regarding students' achievements and retention; the lack of links between programme area staff and franchise partners; ineffective monitoring by the corporation of students' achievements for part-time and vocational courses; and some weak aspects of governance.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	1	Support for students	2
Business	2	General resources	3
Health and care	2	Quality assurance	2
English and languages	2	Governance	3
		Management	2

The College and its Mission

1 New College, Swindon was established in 1984 as Swindon's sixth form college under further education regulations. In 1993, post incorporation, it was designated as a tertiary college. The college is located to the south east of Swindon in two refurbished school buildings and five mobile classrooms. A brand new college on the current site is being built with approval from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and is scheduled to open in September 2002.

2 The college's immediate catchment area is Swindon, north east Wiltshire and the Gloucestershire, Oxford and Berkshire borders. Full-time students are recruited from 25 schools. There are seven other providers of post-16 education in the area, five schools with sixth forms and two further education colleges; the nearest college is Swindon College just 2 miles away. The post-16 participation rate for Swindon is 70%.

3 The college provides courses in seven of the FEFC programme areas. Courses range from foundation to higher national diploma level. The college intends to develop its core business through curriculum 2000 and steady growth is forecast in the full-time 16 to 18 cohort for 2000 to 2003 as the local school-leaver population grows. In the summer of 2000, 56% of 16 to 18 leavers progressed to higher education. Thirty-five students have won places at Oxford and Cambridge universities in the last four years.

4 Swindon is one of the fastest growing towns in Europe and in October 2000 had only 1.9% unemployed. It has the highest gross domestic product per head outside London. However, there are several wards with high deprivation indices including the immediate catchment area of the college. Swindon's economy is typical of the M4 corridor with a wide travel-to-work area and a large number of hi-tech companies. It is home to several large company headquarters.

5 Since the last inspection in November 1996, the college has adopted a new mission that aims to provide high-quality education, training and services that puts customers first. The college has increased and widened participation partly through opening centres in the community around Swindon. Distance learning and out-of-area franchise activity constitute 10% of the work. The college plans to reduce its distance franchised work in line with FEFC policy. The college's business services unit is responsible for work-based training and has worked in partnership with local companies in information and communications technology, management, trainer training, call centre operations and basic skills. Since the last inspection there has been a significant growth in student numbers. In July 2000, there were 6,756 students at the college of whom 1,365 were full time. Of the college's students, 78% are aged over 19. There were 2% of students on higher education courses and 23% of students on leisure and recreational courses (non-schedule 2). The college employs 129 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 92 are involved in teaching and learning.

The Inspection

6 Provision at the college was inspected during the week beginning 27 November 2000. During the previous two weeks the college's franchised provision was inspected. Before the inspection, inspectors studied the college's self-assessment report and reviewed information about the college provided by other directorates of the FEFC. For 1998 and 1999, data contained in the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR) were used to provide information on students' achievements for the curriculum areas. The college submitted data on students' achievements for 2000 which were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. Some of these data were found to be unreliable. In these cases the data held by

Context

curriculum managers were found to be sufficiently reliable to provide a basis for inspectors' judgements. The college was notified in September 2000 of the sample of its provision to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 50 days in the college. Three inspectors also spent five days inspecting franchised provision. An inspector looked at basic skills provision but there was insufficient work to award a grade. Inspectors observed 54 lessons. They also examined students' work

and college documents. There were discussions with governors, managers, staff, students and partner organisations.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000. Of the lessons inspected, 65% were judged to be good or outstanding and 5% were less than satisfactory. This compares with the national averages of 62% and 6%, respectively.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	7	9	6	1	0	23
GCSE	0	2	1	1	0	4
GNVQ	4	4	2	0	0	10
NVQ	1	1	1	0	0	3
Other vocational	1	2	0	0	0	3
Other	1	3	6	1	0	11
Total (No.)	14	21	16	3	0	54
Total (%)	26	39	30	5	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1999-2000 (%)	17	45	31	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report*

Note: percentages subject to rounding

Context

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
New College, Swindon	10.4	81
National average, all inspected colleges 1999-2000	10.3	76

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 1

9 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and GCE advanced subsidiary (AS), general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and access courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective teaching and learning
- good pass rates on most courses
- well-managed area with effective teamwork
- good practical, oral and written skills of students
- good progression to higher education
- effective technical support for teaching and learning
- well-equipped and well-organised laboratories

Weaknesses

- retention rates below the national average in GCSE human biology
- underdeveloped links with industry

10 The college offers full-time science courses mainly to 16 to 18 year olds, including GCE A/AS levels in biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy and electronics, GCSEs in human biology and astronomy and access courses in biology and science. There are no adult education courses in science. The department has good and improving links with feeder schools and takes part in a 'gifted scientist scheme' to encourage school pupils to continue with their science studies at the college. All science students undertake a key skills information technology (IT) course when they join the department. Staff attend regular updating courses, but links with industry are underdeveloped. Inspectors agreed

that science courses are well managed and well organised. There is an excellent team spirit in the department and effective teamwork.

Detailed and useful course handbooks are provided for students.

11 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of teaching and learning is good. The majority of the lessons observed by inspectors were outstanding or good. Lessons are well planned and well presented with clear and useful handouts. Useful practical task sheets are used in all lessons. These include reference to health and safety factors and computer material. Teachers encouraged students to contribute verbally during lessons by directing questions to individuals. In all lessons, inspectors observed good relationships between students and teachers. Some teachers had a very lively style which aroused the enthusiasm of the students for the subjects they were learning. Complex concepts were explained in a simple fashion at a level appropriate to the students. Theory and practical work were closely integrated so that one helped to illustrate the other. In some lessons the use of everyday materials and the application of science to everyday matters maintained students' interest. For example, in physics, everyday household materials were used to illustrate the concept of elasticity.

12 Inspectors agreed that students have good practical, oral and written skills. Students discuss their work confidently and work well to support each other in practical lessons. They are set appropriate work on a regular basis and teachers give them good feedback on their work through oral and written comments. Students' files are well organised and neat and show skills appropriate to the subject and the course level. Due regard is given to health and safety matters in practical lessons. Students evaluate their courses on a regular basis. Effective systems are in place for the setting of targets and monitoring of students' progress. All students have an individual interview with their personal

Curriculum Areas

tutor each half term. Students are made aware of their progress at all times and value the personal tutor system.

13 Pass rates in two-year GCE A level courses in biology, physics and chemistry and in GCSE human biology are all well above the national average for further education colleges. A high proportion of students achieve grades A to C in GCE A level subjects. Retention rates have increased in all GCE A level subjects in 2000. Retention rates in GCSE human biology are below the national average. There is good progression to higher education for the majority of advanced level students.

14 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that there is effective technical support for teaching and learning. Communication between all staff is good.

Teachers are well qualified and suitably experienced. Inspectors agreed that the laboratories are well equipped and that laboratory preparation areas are well organised. The majority of laboratories are well equipped with computers. The IT provision is particularly good in physics. A member of the science team has developed an interactive CD-ROM, which has been integrated with physics practical work and is popular with students. Equipment is well maintained and generally up to date. Small, quiet study areas are also located on two levels within the science building. The science department has a good range of scientific journals within the department. Course text books are available in each classroom for reference and copies are also available in the library.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in science, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
GCE A level biology (two-year course)	3	Number of starters	105	81	72
		Retention (%)	66	67	78
		Achievement (%)	91	89	93
GCE A level chemistry (two-year course)	3	Number of starters	80	63	53
		Retention (%)	75	62	79
		Achievement (%)	95	97	95
GCE A level physics (two-year course)	3	Number of starters	86	69	47
		Retention (%)	70	67	84
		Achievement (%)	85	96	89
GCE A level sciences (one-year course)	3	Number of starters	16	46	14
		Retention (%)	69	54	71
		Achievement (%)	60	60	50
GCSE human biology	3	Number of starters	32	13	13
		Retention (%)	75	54	53
		Achievement (%)	82	86	86

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 2

15 Inspectors observed 17 lessons across the range of provision. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but concluded that some strengths were given undue emphasis. Some weaknesses had been addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- good pass rates in business studies GCE A level and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced
- effective academic monitoring of students' progress
- well-managed courses
- highly motivated students

Weaknesses

- lack of variety and differentiation in teaching and learning in some lessons
- insufficient use of resources other than textbooks

16 The college offers a range of courses, primarily designed for full-time 16 to 18 year olds, including GCE A/AS levels and GNVQ intermediate and advanced in business studies. Part-time provision consists of a professional course in accounts and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in management which are provided by the college's business services unit. A number of franchised programmes are taught at other centres. These include a range of NVQ programmes at levels 2 and 3. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that courses are well managed. Each course has a detailed and informative handbook which students find helpful. Assessment schedules have been well designed for GNVQ courses. Schemes of work are detailed and shared with students. Surveys

of students' views are used effectively to obtain feedback and issues raised are acted upon promptly. Issues raised by the external verifier are also dealt with speedily. Team meetings are held regularly, but minutes do not identify when action needs to be taken or by which staff. There are good arrangements for work experience for GNVQ students and course related visits for GCE A level students, but links with industry are underdeveloped.

17 Inspectors agreed that students are highly motivated. They make progress in lessons and are willing to engage in active debate. There were some good group activities involving real-work problems, particularly on the management course. In a GNVQ lesson, students organised themselves into career-related groups and effectively used their recent work experience to supplement their research. Inspectors did not agree with the judgement in the self-assessment report that differentiation in teaching is a strength. Some teachers planned well to vary the pace of the lesson and introduced different methods of teaching and learning to meet the needs of students of different abilities. However, in some other lessons teachers talked too much and did not ensure that the work met the needs of all students. The use of overhead transparencies was sometimes ineffective. There is effective academic monitoring of students' progress. Teachers and students are very clear about levels of current performance and predicted grades. Progress sheets are used to record grades and comments made on them are used to inform the one-to-one tutorials. Students have a high regard for these tutorials. Assessment is always thorough and tutors give detailed oral feedback which is appreciated by the students.

18 Inspectors agreed that results for GCE A level business studies are good. Value-added scores are significant, particularly as the GCSE grades of students on entry are lower in this area than in most other subjects. The retention rate on GNVQ intermediate has been below the

Curriculum Areas

national average for this area. Achievement on the franchised NVQ programmes is above the national average where trainees complete their course, but some retention rates are poor. The management courses have small numbers of students, but achievement rates are good. Inspectors considered that achievement on the Institute of Credit Management modules is satisfactory. Good results were achieved in accounting and business environment modules. Inspectors found significant differences in the

centrally held data and the data held by course leaders on retention and achievements.

19 Inspectors observed little use of learning resources other than textbooks. There is a well-equipped training room with modern computers, but some specialist rooms are too small for the large size of classes. Staff are well qualified and part-time professional and management students are taught by those with recent, relevant commercial experience.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in business, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
Book-keeping (short)	1	Number of starters	21	*	17
		Retention (%)	90	*	*
		Achievement (%)	60	*	80
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Number of starters	14	16	16
		Retention (%)	50	*	*
		Achievement (%)	100	100	*
GCE A level business studies (two-year course)	3	Number of starters	112	88	62
		Retention (%)	80	91	*
		Achievement (%)	91	88	98
GNVQ advanced business	3	Number of starters	27	*	*
		Retention (%)	*	*	*
		Achievement (%)	95	100	*
NVQ accounts, administration, customer service, telesales, management (one-year course)	3	Number of starters	12	128	48
		Retention (%)	75	95	75
		Achievement (%)	60	78	*

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Health and Care

Grade 2

20 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in health and care programmes covering GNVQ intermediate and advanced, the national diploma in childhood studies and the NVQ in care. Inspectors largely agreed with the college's judgements, but concluded that some weaknesses in teaching and learning were not identified and that some strengths in students' achievements were not acknowledged.

Key strengths

- well-planned lessons
- good links between college learning and community-based experience
- good achievements on all courses
- good vocationally oriented enrichment opportunities
- effective working relationships between staff and students

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to meeting the individual learning needs of some students
- some poor retention rates on GNVQ intermediate and advanced
- small teaching groups on some courses hindering effective group work

21 The college offers GNVQ health and social care at intermediate and advanced level and the national diploma in early years (childhood studies). These are full-time day courses. A certificate in counselling skills is offered at level 2 as a part-time evening course. The majority of the students in this curriculum area are on part-time courses in first aid and NVQs in care at levels 2 and 3 with franchise partners. There is a good progression rate from GNVQ intermediate to the advanced courses in care

and childcare. Students who successfully complete level 3 courses progress to higher education or to work. The management of the courses is effective. Course teams set and monitor performance targets, evaluate course teaching and respond to students' evaluations. The college is committed to the development of care studies. It recognises that the current offer is narrow and that there is a need for diversification.

22 Inspectors agreed that most lessons are well planned with clear aims and objectives that are shared with the students. Good practice was observed in many lessons. A wide range of appropriate teaching and learning methods was used by most teachers. Many teachers encourage students to use a range of sources for research and data collection including the Internet, newspapers, journals and books. In a GNVQ lesson, students were encouraged to use the information they collected on inherited diseases to prepare a poster and give a presentation. There was ample evidence of key skills, particularly IT and communication, being integrated with the curriculum. GNVQ level 2 students are taught study skills and given language support that prepares them for the specific language requirements of their vocational units. Small teaching groups on some courses hinders effective group work. Some teaching did not take sufficient account of individual learning needs. There are effective working relationships between staff and students. Teachers regularly monitor students' progress and encourage students to prepare and use action plans to monitor their own performance. Students' work is assessed regularly and most, but not all, receive sufficient feedback from teachers to enable them to improve their performance.

23 Pass rates on all courses are above the national average. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that retention is a weakness on health and care courses. Retention rates are below the national

Curriculum Areas

average for GNVQ advanced and retention patterns are erratic on the GNVQ intermediate course. On the national diploma in childhood studies, retention has been declining over the last three years. On some courses there are indications of improvements in retention. Pass rates and retention on the recently introduced first-aid courses have been excellent. ISR data for this programme area were unreliable, but the data held by the curriculum manager were found to be reliable.

24 Teachers and students make effective use of the community-based experience which is provided. Childcare students have weekly work placements in local nurseries and schools. Students receive regular placement supervision from college staff. All GNVQ students are

introduced to relevant service providers where they gain first-hand experience pertinent to their vocational studies. GNVQ students also undertake voluntary work and often the first contact for such work is made as a result of a visit to a community service. Students are offered vocationally relevant enrichment opportunities such as visits to health and care establishments in Africa and Europe, the opportunity to shadow a local authority health board and the opportunity to have focused preparation for understanding the professional requirements of nursing and social work. Accommodation is fit for the purpose. Library resources are good and are well used by students. Teachers have qualifications appropriate for the courses they teach.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in health and care, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
St John Ambulance Brigade first aid at work	1	Number of starters	†	†	494
		Retention (%)	†	†	100
		Achievement (%)	†	†	99
St John Ambulance Brigade re-qualification first aid at work	1	Number of starters	†	†	218
		Retention (%)	†	†	100
		Achievement (%)	†	†	100
GNVQ health and social care	2	Number of starters	14	†	*
		Retention (%)	79	†	*
		Achievement (%)	*	†	*
GNVQ health and social care	3	Number of starters	25	22	*
		Retention (%)	44	68	*
		Achievement (%)	82	*	*
National diploma in childhood studies	3	Number of starters	16	12	†
		Retention (%)	81	75	†
		Achievement (%)	100	100	†

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)
 †course not running
 *unreliable data

Curriculum Areas

English and Languages

Grade 2

25 Inspectors observed 12 lessons and one tutorial in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian covering GCSE and GCE A level provision. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but considered that it did not pay sufficient attention to prioritising the strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good achievements in GCE A levels
- well-planned and effective teaching
- good use of the foreign language in lessons
- constructive, careful marking of modern foreign language students' work

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on GCSE Spanish and English language courses
- insufficient management time to address course development
- underdeveloped application of information and communications technology to develop students' learning

26 The college offers an appropriate range of provision in English and modern foreign languages from foundation to advanced level. For example, three foreign languages are offered at both GCSE and GCE A level. Other part-time foreign language courses include Italian, Russian and Japanese. English language and literature are offered separately and in a combined course. English teachers also teach an access to higher education course. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the day-to-day management of courses is good. However, the curriculum manager has little time to address the strategic development of courses. Teams have worked well together to plan

courses in preparation for curriculum 2000. Whilst informal arrangements have been established whereby part-time evening staff can communicate with course leaders, these are not adequate to ensure effective interaction within the team.

27 As the self-assessment report notes, most teaching is good. Lessons are carefully planned and well resourced. Teachers use a wide range of teaching methods successfully. They vary activities appropriately and effectively sustain the students' interest. Most modern language lessons are conducted successfully in the language being learned. For example, GCE AS French language students discussed the differences between being at school and college. In a GCE AS English lesson, students were split into male and female groups to discuss the differences in the use of language between men and women as part of a process of making a cassette recording on this topic. The teacher's effective management of the lesson ensured that the students enjoyed the task and developed their understanding of the nuances of language. In English literature lessons, discussion of literary texts led students to formulate judgements that showed insight. For example, GCE A level English literature students rigorously debated the motion that Marlowe's portrayal of Edward II was a tragic figure who must evoke the reader's sympathy.

28 In a few lessons, teachers failed to engage all students sufficiently in the activities and, at times, group work went on too long so that students lost interest. Homework and coursework are set regularly. Modern foreign language teachers mark work carefully and write constructive comments to help students improve their performance. Teachers monitor students' progress closely. Inspectors agreed that the use of IT as a tool for learning is not yet developed across all subjects. For example, whilst there is evidence that in French progress is being made to integrate IT with the curriculum, it is apparent that in English and

Curriculum Areas

Spanish, there is no overall policy for incorporating IT into classroom activities.

29 GCE A level achievement rates are good. For example, the 100% pass rates in English literature and 92% for French and German are well above the national average for general further education colleges. GCE A level retention rates have improved over the last two years to become comparable with the respective national averages. GCSE Spanish achievement rates are good. However, retention rates for GCSE English and Spanish are significantly below the national average. The self-assessment report did not place sufficient emphasis upon the weaknesses in student retention. Most English students demonstrate good powers of critical analysis and the ability to express their personal response to texts

clearly in speech and in writing. However, the quality of some GCSE English and GCE A/AS level English language students' written and oral work was poor. Students of foreign languages take a lively part in lessons and have good pronunciation.

30 Teachers are well qualified and suitably experienced. Good use is made of the two language laboratories. Students benefit from regular discussion with foreign language assistants in French, German and Spanish. The base rooms display a good subject identity and are well stocked with learning materials. The library has a good range of English and modern language literature, journals and language texts. However, there are few specialist materials in the learning centre.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in English and languages, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
GCSE English language	2	Number of starters	66	77	114
		Retention (%)	65	60	61
		Achievement (%)	100	98	82
GCSE Spanish	2	Number of starters	24	41	54
		Retention (%)	75	46	48
		Achievement (%)	78	94	100
GCE A level English language and literature	3	Number of starters	121	99	100
		Retention (%)	75	75	81
		Achievement (%)	96	85	90
GCE A level English literature	3	Number of starters	56	53	37
		Retention (%)	75	75	81
		Achievement (%)	95	97	100
GCE A level French and German	3	Number of starters	48	43	33
		Retention (%)	79	65	79
		Achievement (%)	76	86	92

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

31 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment, but did identify additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- strong support by personal tutors for full-time students
- good links with schools
- effective help for students receiving learning support
- well-planned arrangements for consultation with parents
- broad range of enrichment activities

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped guidance and support for adult part-time students
- some unproductive group tutorial sessions
- low attendance for some enrichment activities

32 The college has developed good links with schools. A team of liaison tutors negotiates a calendar of activities annually with each partner school. The team attends a variety of school events to provide information and advice on post-16 opportunities. Promotional literature and a range of activities that include a 'college experience day' and open evenings enable prospective students to have a valuable introduction to courses. Pupils are interviewed on school premises and schools receive detailed feedback on destinations. Information and advice on part-time courses is available from a central admissions team; a brochure is produced each term and widely distributed. Specialist tutors interview adults recruited to substantive part-time courses. Open days have been introduced at community-based learning

centres. Induction is well planned for full-time students. Tutors receive well-designed packs of support materials. The college is taking steps to improve induction procedures for students who enrol late. Some part-time evening students found their pre-entry guidance and induction unsatisfactory.

33 The college provides effective help for students receiving learning support. Schools' liaison staff identify prospective students with additional support needs and all full-time students are assessed at induction using appropriate screening tests. The learning support team provides one-to-one support and group support for students with basic skills needs on GNVQ intermediate courses. At the time of the inspection, 60 students were receiving additional learning support on an individual basis. The college does not evaluate the extent to which the provision of support helps students to achieve. The basic skills provision is small, but the college plans to expand basic skills support as it expands its foundation and level 1 provision. A basic skills co-ordinator was appointed earlier this year to oversee the developments in this area. An assessment of students' needs and predicted levels of key skills achievement has been introduced, but at the time of inspection tutors had not received this information.

34 Inspectors agreed that strong support is provided for full-time students by personal tutors. However, support for the growing number of adult part-time evening students is underdeveloped. This weakness was not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. All full-time students are allocated a personal tutor and attend group and individual tutorials. Individual tutorials for first-year students are well structured and purposeful. The second-year tutorials are less focused. Students value their contact with tutors and action-planning, target-setting and the introduction of minimum target grades enhance students' motivation. Target-setting has been established effectively

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with most students. The process includes consideration of students' performance using value-added criteria. Some group tutorials are unproductive. Tutors use group tutorials as business meetings, sometimes followed by individual tutorials. Students not receiving individual support during these sessions do not always use their time productively. There is a calendar of activities for group tutorials, but it is not systematically used across the college.

35 There are well-planned arrangements in place for consultation with parents. A higher education event attracted 140 parents of first-year students. Parents receive written progress reports each term and attend tutor and subject evenings. Students receive comprehensive guidance on higher education and students on vocational courses progressing to employment are well supported by tutors. The college identified the reduced time for the careers adviser as a weakness and inspectors agreed with this judgement. The careers adviser is contracted to the college from Lifetime Careers Wiltshire. They provide individual guidance interviews and clinics, but reductions in the time allocation and a national focus on students at risk is reducing the general level of support available.

36 The self-assessment report identified the lack of a more flexible counselling service as a weakness. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. A member of the chaplaincy team is on site each lunchtime and the personal counselling service is available for 14 hours over three days a week. Numbers using the counselling service have grown but it is underused by adults. A range of people provides information on health and welfare, but there is no specialist in the team. Some financial support is available through the access fund and the college's own hardship fund, travel costs are subsidised and a few students receive funding for childcare.

37 The college offers a broad range of enrichment activities including sport, music,

drama and voluntary service. All full-time students are encouraged to participate in the enrichment programme, but there is low attendance on some of the enrichment activities and courses. The student union plays an active role in the college. It raises money for charity, organises activities and represents students' views to the corporation.

General Resources

Grade 3

38 **The self-assessment report for general resources contains many statements that are more appropriately located in other sections of the report. Inspectors agreed with most judgements about the library and learning resources, but the report did not comment on many key aspects of accommodation and computing facilities. The college's overall judgement of its general resources was overgenerous.**

Key strengths

- approved plans for the construction of a new college
- well-equipped classrooms
- good access to computers for students on the main site
- good accommodation for most support staff
- the use of centres in Swindon to widen participation

Weaknesses

- unsatisfactory building stock
- some teaching and computer rooms too small for the number of students
- inadequate study spaces in the library
- much cramped staff accommodation
- unsatisfactory IT facilities at some off-site provision
- lack of access in some areas for students with restricted mobility

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39 In April 2001 work will start on the construction of a new college on the existing site with new access from the main road. The project is scheduled for completion in summer 2002. The current accommodation, consisting of two former school buildings and five mobile buildings housing 15 classrooms, will then be demolished. In the lead up to this, the college has maintained and improved its current buildings without incurring unjustified expenditure on premises with a limited life. For example, both refectories have recently been decorated and refurbished and several classrooms have been decorated. Some aspects of the buildings are unsatisfactory. They are expensive to maintain and there is poor temperature control. Access to the site is unsatisfactory since it is along a narrow road through a housing estate rather than direct from the adjoining main road. The college site is not easily accessible to wheelchair users. Neither building has a lift, so there is no access to the upper floors for students with restricted mobility.

40 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that the current accommodation does not fully meet the needs of students and staff. Some lessons take place in classrooms and computing rooms that are too small for the number of students. Many staff workrooms are conveniently located close to their teaching rooms but they are crowded and some do not have sufficient storage space. Some of the mobile classrooms are drab and do not provide stimulating learning environments. Most general classrooms are well equipped with whiteboards, overhead projectors and screens, and window blinds. Many rooms also have television and video facilities. Some classrooms have been recently redecorated. Many aspects of the general accommodation are satisfactory or better. Plants and students' work enliven many classrooms and common areas. The main reception area is well laid out and welcoming. Accommodation for support staff is good.

41 Students on the main site have good access to modern computers. The college has invested heavily in hardware and software over the last three years. Several new networks were installed in summer 2000. The 'drop-in' facilities in the library and in the open learning centre are well used. Since the last inspection the college has widened participation in education by running courses at four centres in Swindon. Approximately 50 computers are located at the centres used in North Swindon and Pinehurst. However, these networks do not have the capability to provide the range of IT courses for which there is demand. These machines, and some of the older machines at the main site, have suffered from poor reliability, a weakness noted in the self-assessment report. The problems are slowly being resolved, but some of the off-site IT facilities remain unsatisfactory. The college effectively monitors the use of each software package on each computer, but there is no current IT policy or code of practice for the most appropriate use of machines.

42 Since the last inspection the college has significantly improved the stock of library books and the quality of furniture for private study. The library is well used, but it is too small. Heating, lighting and ventilation are unsatisfactory. There is no access for wheelchair users to the careers section. The 71 private study spaces in the library are insufficient for the number of students. Additional study spaces are provided at several other locations in the college, but some of these areas are not conducive to study. Links between library staff and teaching teams have improved since the last inspection. The librarian is well informed about the textbooks required by teaching teams, but liaison about the learning resources needed for assignments is a weakness that is acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

43 The college has a well regarded, prompt and reliable reprographics service and good

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audiovisual services, but the resolution of technical computing problems is sometimes slow. The accommodation for computing technicians is also unsatisfactory. The college provides facilities for a wide range of sporting activities. It has a gymnasium, swimming pool, dance studio and four football pitches. The television and radio studios are good facilities, but they are not accessible to wheelchair users. The college does not have student common rooms or nursery facilities.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

44 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but identified additional weaknesses. Some weaknesses had been addressed by the time of the inspection.

Key strengths

- a comprehensive quality assurance framework
- quality assurance procedures which lead to improved pass rates
- detailed and effective course reviews
- well-developed service standards
- good staff development arrangements
- cross-college responsiveness to feedback from students

Weaknesses

- lack of impact of quality assurance on declining retention rates
- insufficient involvement of governors in quality assurance procedures
- lack of a consistent approach to the grading of lesson observations

45 Since the last inspection the college has made good progress in improving quality assurance procedures. The quality assurance

framework is comprehensive. The framework includes course reviews, internal and external verification, lesson observations, service standards, target-setting and review, and the monitoring of charter commitments. There is a well-planned annual quality assurance cycle, which is effectively integrated with strategic planning at the college.

46 The director of quality and a quality assurance team have responsibility for the oversight of quality assurance arrangements at the college. The academic board monitors the effectiveness of the arrangements. The quality development group, a subcommittee of the academic board, is responsible for the more detailed aspects of quality monitoring. This is a representative group of course managers, teaching and support staff. Not all staff are aware of the role, function and membership of this group, nor of arrangements for dissemination of outcomes from meetings. There is insufficient involvement of college governors in quality assurance procedures. For example, they do not routinely see information related to the quality of teaching and learning or the performance of part-time students taking vocational qualifications with franchise partners. This was not identified as a weakness in the college's self-assessment report.

47 Pass rates across most 16 to 19 and 19 plus provision are consistently above national averages for colleges in this sector. Inspectors agreed with the college that in most provision at levels 2 and 3 there has been clear and measurable improvement in student achievement. On some courses, however, retention rates have declined. This weakness was recognised in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed that the college's ability to judge accurately trends in achievement and retention has been impeded by unreliable centrally held data, but agreed that the data held by curriculum managers were largely reliable.

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48 Annual course reviews make an important contribution to the college's quality assurance arrangements. Courses are reviewed in May each year. Feedback from surveys of provision, internal and external verification and performance against the year's targets are all taken into consideration when reviewing courses. Procedures are rigorous and thorough and are validated by the director of quality, the quality development group and the academic board. Course reviews are aggregated into a programme area review. This review forms the basis for the area's self-assessment report. Targets for retention and achievement are set at college and course level and are monitored systematically. There are effective processes for gathering students' views on the quality of provision. Quality circles at course level involve teams working with students to review courses and implement improvements promptly. Questionnaires to students are issued at regular intervals. Effective use is made of feedback. Summaries of responses are disseminated promptly.

49 Inspectors agreed that the college has an extensive lesson observation programme. All staff have been trained in lesson observation techniques. Line managers carry out graded lesson observations. The college did not use a consistent approach to grade lesson observations. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement regarding the quality of teaching and learning in science and humanities. In care and business the college was overgenerous in its grading.

50 Inspectors agreed that the college's staff development programme is well managed and effective. Teaching and support staff value the opportunities provided for professional development. Staff development is closely linked to college strategic objectives. Personal development reviews, course reviews and lesson observations contribute to the assessment of individual's development needs. All staff development activities are evaluated and

outcomes disseminated quickly. All staff are now appraised annually. Arrangements are well established and effective.

51 The production of the college's fourth self-assessment report involved all teaching and support staff and it covers all aspects of the college's operations. Course self-assessment reports produced by teaching teams form the basis of departmental reports. Appropriate managers produced self-assessment reports for the aspects of cross-college provision.

Inspectors noted that a number of strengths and weaknesses had been overlooked in the self-assessment report and the significance of some strengths and weaknesses underestimated. Some of the report was too descriptive.

52 The students' charter, which clearly sets out students' entitlement and responsibilities, is monitored annually. Monitoring shows that complaints are dealt with effectively. There are service standards for all aspects of the college's provision. Thorough, effective and well-managed reviews of these standards are carried out annually. Inspectors agreed that the college has well-documented policies for franchised provision. The college makes regular visits to partner organisations. Inspectors agreed with the college that there have been improvements in retention and achievement in some areas. However, inspectors noted some weaknesses in the quality assurance arrangements for franchised provision and that there are delays in the reporting of achievements.

Governance

Grade 3

53 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report, but also identified some additional weaknesses.

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Key strengths

- effective use of governors' skills and expertise
- the corporation's role in determining the mission and character of the college
- governors' effective oversight of the college's financial position

Weaknesses

- governors' failure to give sufficient attention to statutory revisions to the corporation
- failure to meet training needs of clerk
- inadequate monitoring of students' achievements for vocational and part-time provision
- incomplete monitoring of progress towards corporate objectives

54 The corporation has overseen a recent period of substantial improvement in the financial position of the college. There is significant involvement by the finance and general purposes committee in translating the strategic plan into an approved three-year financial forecast and annual budget. The finance and general purposes committee meets six times a year and closely monitors the college's financial position. The corporation has approved a substantial phased withdrawal from franchised provision. Financial monitoring of these currently significant contracts is included within the monthly management accounts. A summary of each partner's financial performance is separately identified.

55 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The corporation does not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. Governors have failed to give sufficient attention to statutory requirements to revise the corporation structure. The search committee has not fulfilled its responsibilities. The corporation does, however,

substantially fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

56 Inspectors agreed that governors are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds including legal, personnel, IT, finance, property, and education. Governors' expertise has been used effectively, for example, in advising on the proposed new accommodation. Governors are clear about the distinction between the responsibilities of governance and of management. There are effective and productive relationships between the corporation and senior managers. Full meetings of the corporation are not always well attended. However, overall attendance at committee meetings is good.

57 New governors do not undertake a comprehensive programme to introduce them to the college. Although the college undertakes an annual skills audit of governors in post, little external training has taken place. This weaknesses was not identified in the self-assessment report.

58 The corporation plays an important role in reviewing the mission and educational character of the college. Members ensured that the revised mission statement properly reflected their view of the nature and direction of the college. The corporation considers the proposals for the strategic priorities of the college in the light of this mission statement. Any changes to strategies are debated at committees and meetings. Governors have a clear understanding of their role. However, there is no annual review of the progress made against corporate objectives. The 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.

59 Information on student recruitment and achievement rates for full-time GCE A level provision is regularly reported to the corporation by the principal. For GCE A level,

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good attention is paid to performance against national benchmarking data. The corporation have asked for more detailed information when results have been poorer than expected. The corporation does not receive student achievement and retention information for all of the college's provision, for example, part-time vocational courses. For part-time provision, governors have received little benchmarking information to enable them to assess college performance. Regular presentations and reports on the curriculum and college services are made to the corporation. In addition, there have been special presentations on future curriculum changes, such as curriculum 2000. The college has not established a formal quality assurance committee. However, two staff governors are members of the academic board. The corporation recognised in the self-assessment report that formal links between governors and areas of the college are underdeveloped.

60 A new clerk to the corporation has recently taken up post. Her training and support needs have not been met. The corporation was without a permanent clerk from April 1999 to May 2000. The corporation has established a 'whistleblowing' policy and maintains a register of interests, but there is no code of conduct. There are appropriate standing orders, although these have not been subject to regular formal review. The terms of reference for corporation committees is incomplete. The remuneration committee has, however, established clear formal performance indicators for evaluating the performance of senior postholders.

Management

Grade 2

61 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weakness identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- supportive and friendly atmosphere valued by staff and students
- effective links with a wide range of external agencies, including franchise partners
- consistent achievement of recruitment and funding targets
- successful introduction of an extended range of provision and a broader curriculum
- good financial management

Weaknesses

- some unreliable central retention and achievement data
- some unclear objectives in operating plans and action plans
- inadequate sharing of good practice between college-based curriculum managers and franchise partners

62 The college has made good progress since the last inspection. It provides good-quality education and training. It has met its mission by extending its range of provision for adults and introducing a broader curriculum for 16 to 18 year olds. Effective marketing has enabled it to meet its funding and recruitment targets.

63 Staff and students value the supportive and friendly atmosphere in the college. Courses are well managed. Teaching and learning is well planned and kept under review. Staff see managers as approachable and supportive. Inspectors found good teamwork in the areas inspected and agreed that communications are generally effective. There is an informative weekly newsletter and regular team and whole-college meetings. Communication with some local centres is less effective.

64 The strategic plan clearly sets out the direction of the college. It is supported by operating plans in business support areas and by self-assessment action plans for curriculum

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areas. Most of these are of good quality, but some contain objectives that are unclear and difficult to measure. While most staff know the college's plans and have access to copies of the strategic plan, many of them are not closely involved in its preparation. Plans are monitored through senior management team meetings. Curriculum and cross-college managers give individual presentations identifying the progress made towards achieving objectives.

65 The college has developed its curriculum to support its mission. Preparations to introduce curriculum 2000 have been thorough. This broader curriculum for 16 to 18 year old students has been implemented well. The college offers students a wider choice of subjects and courses. Adult students have a much wider choice of programme than before, some of which is offered at centres in more disadvantaged areas of the town. Schools liaison is effective. The college holds a Beacon Award for its work with young gifted mathematicians from local schools. Links with community groups and businesses are effective. The college makes significant contributions to local networks such as the Lifelong Learning Partnership for Swindon. Most franchised work is well managed. Links between partners and the college are sufficiently strong to ensure effective oversight of the provision. There is little sharing of good practice between curriculum areas in the college and franchise partners. Some franchised work takes place at some distance from the college. However, in line with FEFC guidance, the college has a clear strategy to withdraw from distant franchise work.

66 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The college has significantly improved its financial position over the last five years. The director of finances and resources provides timely, detailed and appropriate financial information to governors, senior managers and budget holders. Financial

reports to governors and senior managers are closely reviewed each month and appropriate action is taken. The reports include relevant performance indicators and ratios with approved targets and ratios. They do not produce a rolling 12-month cashflow forecast, although the information is readily available in the finance department. The financial regulations are clear and regularly updated. The monthly management accounts separately identify income and expenditure by each franchise partner, but do not formally combine this information into a discrete summary by partner with reference to achievement and retention data. The internal and external auditors have not identified any significant weaknesses.

67 The self-assessment report acknowledges that some of its centrally held data regarding students' achievements and retention are inaccurate. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. This has been a problem for some time and the college has tried hard to find a solution. The quality of the data is improving, although problems remain, especially with the accuracy and timeliness of data from franchise partners. New systems to record achievements and retention and monitor attendance have been introduced over the last year. They have yet to prove their worth, but are starting to show improvements.

68 The college has an active and effective group that reviews and monitors equality of opportunity. There is a clear policy for the whole college and one specifically for employees. The group has led some wide-ranging improvements over the last two years. Application forms for employment and for a place at the college have been redesigned with the help of the Swindon Racial Equality Council to ensure applications are treated fairly. The group has updated the college's statement regarding its approach to equality of opportunity. It is undertaking a review of course literature to ensure it meets the required college standards.

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Conclusions

69 The self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. There was a useful introduction and executive summary. More contextual information would have been useful such as lesson observation grades and student enrolments in each area. All of the college's staff were involved in the development of the self-assessment report. Strengths, weaknesses, evidence and action plans were clearly

presented. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements given in the self-assessment report, but did identify additional weaknesses, mainly in the cross-college areas. Inspectors agreed with all the curriculum grades. They agreed with three of the cross-college grades, but considered the grades in two areas to be overgenerous.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 2000)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	1
16-18 years	21
19-24 years	13
25+ years	65
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 2000)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation) and entry level	19
Level 2 (intermediate)	25
Level 3 (advanced)	31
Level 4/5 (higher)	2
Level not specified	0
Non-schedule 2	23
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 2000)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision (%)</i>
Science	515	1,854	35
Agriculture	0	5	0
Construction	0	1	0
Engineering	2	15	0
Business	96	970	16
Hotel and catering	62	31	1
Health and community care	58	885	14
Art and design	149	258	6
Humanities	480	1,275	26
Basic education	3	97	2
Total	1,365	5,391	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1998-99 ISR data, the college recruited 19% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 2000)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	76	11	0	87
Supporting direct learning contact	5	0	0	5
Other support	36	0	0	37
Total	117	11	1	129

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1998	1999	2000
Income	£4,203,000	£4,546,000	£5,320,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£15.36	£16.20	£16.68
Payroll as a proportion of income	67%	63%	60%
Achievement of funding target	108%	97%	100%
Diversity of income	9%	11%	12%
Operating surplus	£122,000	£91,000	£317,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999), college (2000)

Payroll – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1998-99 (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

Diversity of income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Operating surplus – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1997	1998	1999	1997	1998	1999
1	Number of starters	463	393	225	200	256	387
	Retention (%)	89	89	74	96	65	88
	Achievement (%)	96	96	90	40	91	90
2	Number of starters	590	559	687	240	189	680
	Retention (%)	75	73	70	62	58	68
	Achievement (%)	91	93	95	81	80	96
3	Number of starters	2,472	2,735	2,817	326	420	467
	Retention (%)	75	73	82	71	78	77
	Achievement (%)	82	90	90	87	92	87
4 or 5	Number of starters	80	32	24	41	21	78
	Retention (%)	84	72	92	100	86	96
	Achievement (%)	100	100	100	100	100	92
Short courses	Number of starters	1,009	745	476	2,264	3,324	3,272
	Retention (%)	93	95	96	64	89	96
	Achievement (%)	93	87	88	64	89	96
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	188	110	109	124	172	53
	Retention (%)	77	82	82	81	75	84
	Achievement (%)	100	100	79	20	84	100

Source: ISR

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