

Newcastle College

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
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

Newcastle College

Northern Region

Inspected May 1999

Newcastle College is a large general further education college on Tyneside in the north-east of England. The college operates on four major sites in the city and in a number of smaller centres some distance away. The college produced a self-assessment report which identified many of the strengths and weaknesses of its provision. The self-assessment process was thorough and well planned. Judgements on teaching and learning were insufficiently critical. Apart from this, inspectors agreed with most of the judgements about the curriculum areas but were more critical than the college about the quality of the cross-college provision. At the time of the inspection, the college was undergoing a major reorganisation and the chief executive and director of finance were absent from the college.

The college provides a wide range of courses in all 10 of the FEFC's programme areas. Programmes in seven of these were inspected, together with aspects of cross-college provision. Governors have extensive experience that is well used to the benefit of the college. Recently, long-standing shortcomings in budgetary planning and control have been identified. The profile of

lesson observation grades awarded by inspectors is close to the national average. Provision in art and design and performing arts is outstanding. Student achievement rates are mainly good. Much of the accommodation is of a high standard and in some vocational areas it is excellent. The college should improve: the poor retention rates on many courses; variability in the provision and quality of tutorials; shortcomings in the quality assurance system and particularly in the use of evaluation questionnaires; the use of management information; the monitoring of the college's performance by governors; clerking arrangements; financial controls; and the review and implementation of college policies.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Mathematics, computing and information technology	3	Support for students	3
Construction	2	General resources	2
Engineering	2	Quality assurance	3
Business studies	2	Governance	3
Hospitality and catering	2	Management	3
Art and design	1		
Performing arts	1		
Humanities	3		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Newcastle College is a large general further education college that recruits most of its students from the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne but also has over 1,000 students from overseas. The college has four main sites within the city and a number of additional centres some distance away, for example at Cramlington and Hexham. The area known as Tyneside has a population of 833,000 and within this the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne has a resident population of 282,000. People from a minority ethnic background make up only 1% of the population. There are high levels of persistent unemployment amounting to 7.2% across the city compared with a national average of 4.8%.

2 Newcastle-upon-Tyne local authority is one of the 44 English districts recognised as having a high level of deprivation. Compared with the national average, these authorities have:

- two-thirds more unemployment
- one-and-a-half times as many lone parents
- one-and-a-half times as many under-age pregnancies
- 10% more children growing up in families on income support
- at least twice the levels of poor housing, vandalism and dereliction.

3 Approximately 60% of young people leaving school at 16 years of age in Newcastle continue in full-time education. Their educational achievements fall below those obtained nationally. For example, only 31% of pupils achieve five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) qualifications at grade C or better, compared with the national average of 46%. The Tyneside population in general has lower than average literacy and numeracy levels.

4 Newcastle College offers courses in all 10 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas. It has developed a range of training courses for employers and is heavily

involved in delivering courses under the New Deal programme. At the time of the inspection, the college had 38,772 enrolments of whom 5,209 were full time. Over half come from disadvantaged areas as defined in the Department of the Environment index of local conditions.

5 The college's executive team comprises the chief executive, the deputy chief executive (curriculum), the deputy chief executive (corporate services) and the director of finance. The curriculum is organised into 10 schools and the service areas into functional units each headed by a director.

6 The college's mission is 'to develop people through learning for the benefit of themselves, society and the economy'. There are four related aims covering access, quality, resources and the environment and a mission statement intended to achieve a sense of commitment, trust and mutual support amongst the college's students, customers and partners. As part of its mission, the college has developed a range of external links with other colleges, universities, local schools and the community.

The Inspection

7 The chief executive and the deputy chief executive (corporate services) were appointed in 1998. The post of deputy chief executive (curriculum) has been filled on an acting basis. Since these appointments were made, the college has been undergoing a restructuring process. There has been a complete reorganisation of the senior management team and a change from four large faculties to 10 schools. At the time of inspection, the reorganisation was still in progress, and the process was having an unsettling effect on middle managers below head of school level. Managerial difficulties have been exacerbated by the protracted nature of the reorganisation, the long-term absence of the chief executive and the more recent absence of the director of finance.

Context

8 The college was inspected during the week beginning 10 May 1999. Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. The inspection was carried out by 16 inspectors and one auditor working for a total of 73 days. Meetings were held with governors, managers, other college staff, students and a representative from the Tyneside Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

9 Student retention and achievement data for 1995-96 and 1996-97 were analysed using the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR). There were some errors in the data, most of which related to incorrect coding. The college

provided data on students' achievements for 1997-98 which were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by awarding bodies. This information was carefully organised by the college and was judged by inspectors to be reliable.

10 The following table shows the grades given for the lessons inspected and the national profile for all college inspected in 1997-98. Of the 134 lessons observed, 67% were judged to be good or outstanding and 8% less than satisfactory. This is close to the 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	3	10	7	3	0	23
GCSE	1	1	4	2	0	8
GNVQ	6	11	6	3	0	26
NVQ	2	12	2	0	0	16
Other vocational	7	24	8	2	0	41
Other	4	9	6	1	0	20
Total (No.)	23	67	33	11	0	134
Total (%)	17	50	25	8	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

Note: includes four tutorials

Context

11 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The highest attendance was 78% in engineering and the lowest was 54% in humanities.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Newcastle College	10.6	69
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

Mathematics, Computing and Information Technology

Grade 3

12 Inspectors observed 24 lessons in mathematics, computing and information technology (IT). They agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. However, the report overstated the quality of teaching and learning, and insufficiently emphasised the weaknesses in students' retention and achievements.

Key strengths

- a broad range of mathematics, computing and IT courses
- well-managed computer workshop lessons
- high-quality learning materials
- good achievement rates on foundation level IT courses
- well-resourced mathematics workshop and computer learning centres

Weaknesses

- inadequate co-ordination of computing and IT courses
- some ineffective teaching
- declining retention rates
- lack of work experience opportunities for full-time computing and IT students
- insufficient use of IT in mathematics or of visual aids in computing

13 As indicated in the self-assessment report, the college offers a broad range of mathematics, computing and IT courses which provide students with opportunities to progress from foundation level to higher education. Many computing and IT courses, particularly those at foundation level, allow students to start at different times throughout the year. The courses are taught at the main college campus and at a

number of centres in the surrounding area. The mathematics, computing and IT provision is managed through a number of the college's schools. Co-ordination, curriculum planning and monitoring of computing and IT are poor. Good practice is seldom shared between course teams. Action-planning and target-setting are poor, and are rarely reviewed during course team meetings. There are insufficient work experience opportunities for full-time students and links with commercial or industrial organisations are weak.

14 Many computing and IT foundation courses are organised in a way which enables students to work at a pace that suits them. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers manage these courses well. The learning materials they provide are generally of good quality, and the help they give to students is appropriate. However, some lessons are not well planned. Teachers use inappropriate teaching methods and fail to check that students understand what they have been taught. In a few of these lessons, the standard of students' work is below that required for the course. Teachers' written comments on students' work does not always provide sufficient guidance on how to improve. Suitable teaching aids are not always used. For example, little use is made of IT in mathematics lessons. These weaknesses in teaching quality and standards of work were not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

15 Pass rates on some courses are good. The number of students taking level 1 courses in computer literacy and information technology has expanded rapidly in recent years and achievement rates were above the national average in 1997 and 1998. Achievement rates were also above the national average in 1998 in general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and the higher national certificate in computing. On the other hand, results were poor in 1997 and 1998 in GCSE mathematics and IT. Retention rates declined on almost all courses between 1997 and 1998 and the self-

Curriculum Areas

assessment report did not give sufficient emphasis to this serious weakness.

16 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are extensive, good-quality computing facilities. However, some of the computer suites lack adequate ventilation and in a few lessons, the lack of suitable specialist equipment prevented students from carrying out assignment work to the required standard. The

mathematics workshop contains useful learning materials to support the range of courses on offer and is well used by students. There is a large stock of computing and IT textbooks and periodicals in the college's library, although a few are out of date. Teachers are well qualified, but computing teachers lack recent commercial or industrial experience. Technical support is prompt and efficient.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in mathematics, computing and information technology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
IT, computer literacy and information technology and C&G 7261 part 1 (one-year courses)	1	Expected completions	1,151	1,869	2,836
		Retention (%)	70	85	77
		Achievement (%)	50	71	71
GNVQ intermediate and precursors IT (full time)	2	Expected completions	12	46	44
		Retention (%)	67	91	52
		Achievement (%)	100	49	74
GCSE mathematics and IT (grades C or above)	2	Expected completions	*	485	385
		Retention (%)	*	74	63
		Achievement (%)	*	24	27
GNVQ advanced IT and precursors (full time)	3	Expected completions	26	60	104
		Retention (%)	96	87	58
		Achievement (%)	95	67	84
GCE A levels mathematics, computing and IT	3	Expected completions	114	*	141
		Retention (%)	75	*	50
		Achievement (%)	31	*	67
Higher national certificates computing and IT applications	4	Expected completions	16	31	38
		Retention (%)	94	72	50
		Achievement (%)	80	76	84

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

*reliable data not available

Curriculum Areas

Construction

Grade 2

17 Inspectors observed 12 lessons from a broad range of provision leading to technician awards and national vocational qualifications (NVQs). Although inspectors confirmed most of the strengths identified in the college's self-assessment report, they found further strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- high-quality training and assessment facilities
- a broad range of courses
- innovative curriculum developments
- well-planned and effective teaching
- high-quality learning resources
- students' good achievements

Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in programme planning, review and evaluation
- insufficient formal links with construction employers and provision of work experience
- failure of course teams to share good practice

18 There is a broad range of courses in construction crafts, building services engineering and technician areas. The college has increased the participation in construction courses of school pupils with behavioural problems, unemployed adults and women. Despite this, enrolments on many courses, particularly those at technician level, are declining. These trends have not been addressed effectively by course teams. Inspectors did not agree with the college's claim in its self-assessment report that all courses except brickwork have increasing enrolments. Course teams operate in different ways and rarely share good practice. They keep adequate

records of students' progress while they are at college, but pay little attention to their destinations after leaving. Course reviews lack rigour. Students' opinions about course quality are generally positive. There are few formal links with employers and insufficient work experience for students.

19 Lessons, particularly in the crafts, are well planned. This strength was noted in the self-assessment report. Careful thought has been given to the teaching of craft students, who have a wide range of backgrounds and previous achievements. They use IT well and are effectively encouraged to develop their research skills using the Internet. Some innovative teaching occurs. For example, multimedia software is used well in the construction curriculum centre on a school link programme that supports the national curriculum. As part of another successful programme, students built a house to professional standards in partnership with a national builder. The proceeds from its commercial sale went to a local children's charity. Teaching strategies take account of those who enrol at different times of the year, but lesson plans do not identify how the learning needs of individuals might be met. The methods of identifying and recording key skills gained by students are thorough. Some theory lessons failed to achieve their objectives because teachers did not encourage students to participate in discussions and attempts to demonstrate theoretical concepts were not effective. Teachers' marking of assignments sometimes fails to indicate clearly the errors in the work or ways in which it might be improved.

20 Most students apply themselves well to practical and project work. Students participate well in team activities and technician students make good presentations. For example, teams in a higher national certificate lesson presented their research findings well to the class and an employer. Many students have good writing skills. However, those lacking these skills do not always receive appropriate specialist help. Most

Curriculum Areas

students' portfolios and logbooks are thorough and well presented. Retention and achievement rates are good and improving on most courses. For example, in 1998, all students completing the higher national certificate in building studies achieved the qualification. On the other hand, retention and achievement on the NVQ level 1 programme in 1997 were poor. This weakness was identified in the self-assessment report.

21 Part-time teachers have recent industrial experience which is used effectively. Curriculum support staff, who combine supervision of practical work with other technical support duties, provide a good service. The college has responded well to remedy the weaknesses in accommodation identified in the previous

inspection report. Excellent realistic training and assessment facilities are provided in most workshops. A new learning centre close to the workshops is well staffed, of high quality and is well used by students. There is a good range of surveying equipment. Equipment stores in the electrical installation area are immaculately maintained. Risk assessments in workshops and the testing of electrical equipment are thorough and up to date. Health and safety notices are up to date and prominently displayed in all workshops. There are attractive and informative construction-related displays giving a strong subject identity to student work areas.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Foundation vocational (construction skills)	1	Expected completions	33	33	151
		Retention (%)	64	70	77
		Achievement (%)	65	91	57
Intermediate vocational (construction crafts)	2	Expected completions	*	*	155
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	76
Advanced vocational (construction crafts)	3	Expected completions	103	78	105
		Retention (%)	89	88	88
		Achievement (%)	75	80	83
Advanced vocational (technician studies)	3	Expected completions	*	110	87
		Retention (%)	*	83	61
		Achievement (%)	*	65	74
Higher vocational (technician studies)	4	Expected completions	*	*	30
		Retention (%)	*	*	90
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100

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

*reliable data not available

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 2

22 Inspectors observed 13 lessons in general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) and technician courses in engineering. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- strong links with industry and other education and training providers
- some exemplary course planning
- comprehensive mathematics learning support
- some good achievement rates
- well-structured student portfolios
- exceptional resources for computer-aided engineering

Weaknesses

- insufficient rigour in assessing key skills
- poor retention and achievement rates in national certificate courses

23 The college specialises in electronic, mechanical and production engineering courses from level 2 to higher education. Progression is possible through full-time or part-time routes. Course structures allow students with other commitments to extend their period of study in order to gain their qualifications. Higher national certificate and diploma courses recruit well. NVQs, and courses in some specialisms such as automotive engineering, have not been developed because there are other major training providers locally. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the strong and long-standing links with engineering employers in the region, particularly in relation to the extensive day-release provision, are a strength. The college is recognised locally as the centre of excellence for computer-aided engineering in a rapidly developing collaborative

initiative involving all the main training providers in Tyne and Wear.

24 Courses are generally well managed. Course reviews and evaluations were insufficiently rigorous until the production of the self-assessment report for 1997-98. Considerable care has been taken to develop course structures which are both effective and efficient. Members of subject teaching teams often work closely together. For example, the computer-aided engineering team has combined three course modules. Students can start at a level appropriate to their previous experience and develop expertise at a rate suited to themselves. The combination of modules enables large groups to be taught together and makes the best use of teaching resources. The team has developed shared lesson plans and common learning materials of high quality.

25 Most teaching is good. In the better lessons, careful planning results in rewarding learning experiences for students. In poorer lessons, teachers are insufficiently familiar with subject matter, their explanations lack clarity, or they fail to check on individual students' understanding. Students are successfully encouraged to study on their own and receive considerable support for their learning outside formal lessons. Students starting level 3 courses take a comprehensive diagnostic test in mathematics. Their learning needs are met through specific learning materials, additional lessons and the 'drop-in' mathematics support sessions provided in the second year. These strengths in student support were included in the self-assessment report. For GNVQ students, the teaching team has developed clear common formats for assignment briefs, and for filing and cross-referencing portfolio work. Teachers generally mark the engineering aspects of students' written work accurately and helpfully. However, insufficient regard is paid to assessing the quality of the key skills aspects of their courses and to checking related supporting evidence.

Curriculum Areas

26 Students' work is often of a good standard, particularly on level 2 courses. Portfolios are well maintained. Students on level 3 courses use IT confidently in their assignment reports. The GNVQ intermediate course has retention and achievement rates above the national average for the sector. The GNVQ advanced course had poor retention, but high achievement rates in 1998. Retention and achievement rates on the first certificate course have improved to the national average figures. In 1998, higher national certificates and diploma courses had retention rates below the national average, but good achievement rates. Retention on national certificate courses fell sharply in 1998. The achievement rate on this programme is also poor. Most of these strengths and weaknesses in retention and achievement were identified in the self-assessment report.

27 Teachers are well qualified. Some specialist teaching rooms are excellent. The extensive accommodation and equipment for computer-aided engineering is outstanding: computers, software and machinery are of a high industrial standard. The traditional engineering workshop has been remodelled and contains a reduced stock of machinery. The self-assessment report acknowledged shortcomings in electronics instrumentation and in equipment for teaching engineering science. Investment is taking place in both areas. At the time of the inspection, the specialist engineering learning resource centre had not been available to students for some months.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	+	41	37
		Retention (%)	+	59	76
		Achievement (%)	+	75	71
First certificate	2	Expected completions	42	76	52
		Retention (%)	81	70	81
		Achievement (%)	36	65	73
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	51	24	51
		Retention (%)	71	83	59
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73
National certificates	3	Expected completions	151	135	126
		Retention (%)	89	81	59
		Achievement (%)	*	*	58
Higher national certificates and diplomas	4	Expected completions	*	*	156
		Retention (%)	*	*	71
		Achievement (%)	*	*	79

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

+course not offered

*reliable data not available

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies

Grade 2

28 Inspectors observed 24 lessons in business studies, management, administration, accounting, public services and business technology. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths in the self-assessment report but judged that some key weaknesses were omitted.

Key strengths

- a good range of courses organised with ease of access in mind
- effective use of good-quality handbooks and learning materials
- students' high levels of competence in practical IT skills
- regular and careful assessment of students' work
- good achievement rates on most courses
- well-appointed and resourced teaching rooms

Weaknesses

- some unsatisfactory retention rates
- poor co-ordination and evaluation of the curriculum by course teams
- insufficient encouragement to students to work on their own in some lessons

29 A wide range of business courses is offered. Students are able to progress from foundation level through to higher education. Account is taken of community and employment needs in the design of many courses. For example, many adults attend workshops and short courses which are adapted to the needs of individual students. A business excellence programme is available through distance learning. It incorporates high-quality learning materials, frequent telephone contact with students and regular assessment of their written

work. Enrolment on this programme has been exceptionally high.

30 Course teams meet regularly. Teachers on each team work well together to plan courses and review the progress of individual students. Course tutors maintain comprehensive course files. They have begun to set some targets and to monitor performance against these targets and other benchmarks, but much remains to be done. Recent changes to the management structure have encouraged closer links between curriculum planning and college objectives. However, the teaching of business studies takes place in several departments across the college. Opportunities for teachers to meet and share good practice are few and there is insufficient cohesion in the overall planning and evaluation of the curriculum. The self-assessment report did not recognise this weakness.

31 Much of the teaching is good. Many teachers make effective use of well-designed learning materials to support their lessons. For example, teachers on supervisory management and administration courses use handbooks and study booklets which guide students through their courses and test their understanding. A notable recent development is the Newcastle College Management Association which is promoting the exchange of good management practice amongst management students, local employers and the management course team. In the better lessons, the use of effective questioning encouraged students to think critically and imaginatively. Students worked effectively in groups, for example, GNVQ business students conducted meetings and role-play interviews in a professional manner. Residential and outdoor activities enabled students on a public services course to develop an excellent team spirit that helped further in the development of group work. Students on trade union foundation and national certificate business courses were given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the workplace and contributed enthusiastically to discussions.

Curriculum Areas

A few lessons were unproductive: teachers relied too heavily on direct instruction and provided too few opportunities for students to relate theory to current business practices. As a result, students failed to learn how to solve problems for themselves and to develop the skills of research and presentation. Assessment across a range of courses was thorough and feedback, both oral and written, was exemplary.

32 In its self-assessment report, the college drew attention to some consistently good students' achievements, for example, those on higher national certificate, public services, personnel, NVQ accounting, and NVQ administration courses. In 1998, achievement rates for the national diploma in public services and NVQ level 2 administration courses were both significantly above national averages at 95%. NVQ level 1 administration achievement rates are consistently good and many students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are given excellent support to achieve success. Achievements on business studies courses are more mixed. Achievement rates on GCE A level and GCSE courses have been low for the past three years. Retention on a few courses is poor. For example, retention on GNVQ advanced business has been consistently below the national average since the last inspection. In 1998, only 29% of enrolled students completed the course. Recent strategies to improve retention are having some success. However, at the time of the inspection, retention rates on level 3 courses remained below the national average. Students' portfolio work is particularly well organised. Students present their assignment and project work effectively and demonstrate high levels of confidence and skill in IT.

33 Accommodation for business students is excellent. Rooms are spacious, well appointed and appropriately furnished. IT workshops have up-to-date computers and business software including internet access. Students also make good use of the open access IT centre and the extensively stocked library.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ administration and accounting	2	Expected completions	98	130	128
		Retention (%)	66	74	65
		Achievement (%)	86	82	83
GNVQ advanced business	3	Expected completions	*	*	79
		Retention (%)	*	*	29
		Achievement (%)	*	*	83
National diploma public services	3	Expected completions	+	47	33
		Retention (%)	+	62	58
		Achievement (%)	+	92	95
GCE A level business	3	Expected completions	58	117	102
		Retention (%)	78	72	74
		Achievement (%)	52	42	57
NVQ administration and accounting	3	Expected completions	97	60	81
		Retention (%)	73	73	78
		Achievement (%)	91	78	56
Higher national certificate business and finance	4	Expected completions	54	*	95
		Retention (%)	63	*	65
		Achievement (%)	89	*	87

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

*reliable data not available

+course not offered

Curriculum Areas

Hospitality and Catering

Grade 2

34 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in hospitality and catering. They agreed with much of the college's self-assessment of the provision. However, one significant strength and some weaknesses were not identified by the college.

Key strengths

- well-planned and effective teaching and assessment
- rigorous monitoring and recording of students' progress and achievements
- good achievement rates on NVQ programmes
- effective course and curriculum management
- provision of vocational learning support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- comprehensive course documentation and learning materials

Weaknesses

- low retention on some courses
- insufficient attention to key skills on NVQ programmes
- poor written feedback by some teachers

35 The college offers courses in hospitality and catering leading to GNVQ, NVQ, higher national diploma and other professional qualifications. Regular meetings at course and section level assist in planning and teaching courses. Course documents are comprehensive and generally well produced. The effective course management was not identified as a strength in the college's self-assessment report. Full-time students have the opportunity to review their choice of course during their first few weeks in college. Some GNVQ intermediate students

choose to transfer to the NVQ programme which is more appropriate to their needs. Students' progress and achievements are rigorously monitored. The needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are effectively met on mainstream courses. If necessary, they receive appropriate assistance during practical and theory lessons from learning development assistants, teachers and other students.

36 Teaching and learning activities are generally well structured although learning objectives are not always made clear to students. Schemes of work are detailed. Lessons usually include appropriately varied learning experiences. In one lesson on the GNVQ advanced course, students worked through a range of activities to determine the feasibility of establishing a catering operation in a local public house. They were provided with well-presented and relevant materials to support their learning. Teachers pay careful attention to preparing students for examinations. Some of the teaching is lively and offers opportunities for students to contribute effectively in class. In a few lessons, teachers talk for too long. Written feedback provided by some teachers is poor and information on marking criteria is insufficiently explicit. GNVQ students have frequent opportunities to develop and record their key skills both in class and through assignment work. This is not the case for NVQ students, a weakness not identified during self-assessment.

37 In practical lessons, students work safely, competently and with enthusiasm. NVQ assessments take place in, and make full use of, the realistic work environments. Staff frequently give good demonstrations. Students value the systematic assessment and monitoring of their performance and the regular, detailed feedback they receive. As recognised in the self-assessment report, work experience is well managed and makes an important contribution to students' learning. Students on GNVQ advanced courses spend one day each week on work experience for the first two terms. This

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experience is used well to help the students develop vocational competencies and interpersonal skills. Local chefs provide regular cookery demonstrations in college. Strong links have been established with a large local brewery to promote hospitality and tourism.

38 Assignment briefs are varied and interesting. Students on the GNVQ advanced course are provided with a handbook containing copies of all assignments for the year and their submission dates. Most students produce good, well-planned assignments. Course files and assessed work show evidence of progress, good personal organisation skills and the effective use of IT. Achievement rates on the GNVQ and NVQ courses at levels 1, 2 and 3 are good. On completion of the GNVQ advanced course, the majority of students progress to higher

education courses. On GNVQ and NVQ level 3 courses, retention rates are poor. The self-assessment report did not mention the weaknesses in retention rates.

39 Standards of accommodation and learning resources are good. A wide range of industrial-standard equipment is available. The computerised restaurant booking system is a valuable development. Ventilation is poor in the kitchens where the temperature rises to uncomfortable levels. Students make effective use of the learning centre where the access to computers is good. A wide range of books, journals and CD-ROMs are held in the library. Teachers are well qualified and some have recently undertaken short periods of industrial updating.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ	1	Expected completions	55	83	109
		Retention (%)	85	77	83
		Achievement (%)	79	84	76
NVQ	2	Expected completions	153	98	92
		Retention (%)	79	50	70
		Achievement (%)	86	96	89
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	11	10	16
		Retention (%)	73	30	56
		Achievement (%)	60	0	89
NVQ	3	Expected completions	13	16	27
		Retention (%)	77	63	37
		Achievement (%)	60	88	100
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	14	30	23
		Retention (%)	50	80	43
		Achievement (%)	86	67	80

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

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 1

40 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in art and design, media and graphic design. The self-assessment report was comprehensive and inspectors agreed with the judgements provided for this outstanding provision.

Key strengths

- wide range of courses
- well-planned and well-resourced courses
- highly effective teaching
- good project briefs and learning materials
- high achievement rates
- enthusiastic and articulate students
- high standard accommodation and equipment

Weaknesses

- poor retention on the GNVQ advanced art and design course
- inequalities in the distribution of some specialist resources

41 The college offers many part-time courses, for example, those giving access to higher education, and those leading to City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G), national and higher national certificates. Full-time courses include those leading to advanced GNVQs in art and design, media and communications; a range of six specialist national diplomas; a diploma in foundation studies in art and design; and higher national diploma courses. Students benefit from the progression opportunities offered by this wide range of courses. The provision is well planned and well managed. Good links exist with industry and local schools. An ex-student now acts as a course adviser for GNVQ media and organises a work experience programme. Pupils from local schools attend the college for work experience in art and design.

42 Much of the teaching is good or outstanding. A range of teaching and learning strategies is used. These include lectures, practical projects, written assignments, group critiques, tutorials, studio and workshop activities. Students are enthusiastic about their teaching programmes and the opportunities they are given to develop their independent learning skills. Project briefs are detailed, challenging and provide clear information about learning objectives and the assessment criteria. Detailed written feedback is provided by tutors. Educational visits and field trips are used as a basis for the development of project work. In one lesson, individual students were presenting design work inspired by a trip to Madrid. Their teacher took the role of client. His questioning and debriefing of students was clearly focused and students' responses were perceptive. Students were given clear guidance on ways in which their work could be improved. In a tutorial, there was a lively discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each student's recent performance. The tutor provided useful advice about how the students could improve their work. Opportunities were created for students to provide feedback to the tutor about the course.

43 Students produce good work, some of which is attractively displayed in many areas of the art and design accommodation. Students of photography keep detailed records which track their learning and progress. Those on the GNVQ media course produce well-written assignments which include self-evaluations of their work. Portfolios and displays of students' work in fashion and three-dimensional design are of high quality and are well presented. During the inspection, the foundation diploma students were holding their end-of-year exhibition. The work displayed in textiles, photography and fine art was lively and experimental. Written reports on historical and contemporary studies were well argued and researched. Foundation diploma students designed and constructed an exhibition about a nationally famous writer for a local museum.

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Photography students have produced photographs for the local health authority's annual report. Students' achievements in art and design are consistently better than the averages for the sector. For example, the GNVQ advanced course had achievement rates in excess of 97% for the last three years. However, retention rates are declining on this course. Staff are implementing strategies to address this weakness which was identified in the self-assessment report.

44 Students benefit from a high-quality learning environment. The main art and design building is modern, purpose built and welcoming. It includes studios, seminar rooms, a specialist computer suite and library, workshops for wood, metal and ceramics and other specialist facilities. Media courses are located in spacious accommodation at a separate site. Art, design and media equipment is of a professional standard. There are

inequalities in the deployment of accommodation and equipment. For example, whereas most rooms are of sufficient size, that used to teach art history is too small. Similarly, equipment levels are generally good but students on GNVQ advanced courses find it difficult to access equipment for photography and fashion. Staff are aware of these weaknesses. Some technicians have had their job descriptions extended and are designated as curriculum assistants. They provide help and support to students in practical lessons. Learning materials include good-quality study packs and specialist IT programmes for art, design and media work. Staff who teach historical and contemporary studies have produced an interactive CD-ROM to guide students in the research and development of their reports. The library organises collections of books and other materials which are held in reserve to support specific project briefs.

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
GNVQ art and design (two-year course)	3	Expected completions	42	50	54
		Retention (%)	90	64	63
		Achievement (%)	100	100	97
National diploma courses	3	Expected completions	193	198	196
		Retention (%)	78	78	72
		Achievement (%)	79	76	91
One-year diploma in foundation studies	3	Expected completions	199	192	199
		Retention (%)	95	88	90
		Achievement (%)	95	90	98
National certificate graphic design and national certificate printing	3	Expected completions	42	66	50
		Retention (%)	77	65	66
		Achievement (%)	52	65	88
Higher national diplomas	4	Expected completions	+	6	74
		Retention (%)	+	100	66
		Achievement (%)	+	83	94

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)
+course not offered

Curriculum Areas

Performing Arts

Grade 1

45 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in dance, drama, music, music technology and stage management at intermediate and advanced level. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements relating to this outstanding provision recorded in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- a wide range of courses
- much outstanding teaching
- high achievement rates
- excellent practical work
- high-quality specialist accommodation
- many productive external links

Weaknesses

- poor retention on some courses
- shortcomings in specialist equipment for music and music technology

46 The college offers an unusually wide range of performing arts courses. There are full-time courses in drama, dance and music at intermediate and advanced levels and part-time courses at foundation and intermediate levels. Applicants are frequently referred to intensive summer courses to prepare them for programmes starting the following September. Students can progress to degree level study within the college. Courses are well planned and effectively managed. However, there are no course-specific targets on achievement and retention rates.

47 Inspectors agreed with the claim in the self-assessment report that much of the teaching is outstanding. Assignments are well planned. Staff have a clear sense of appropriate assessment standards and offer firm and clear guidance to students. Large-scale projects are

well managed to exploit teaching and assessment possibilities. For example, a performance enabled first and second-year dance students to work together on a project which was lit and stage-managed by students in a realistic working environment. Past students, who are now working professionals, have returned to contribute to the development of new courses. The college has a close and productive working arrangement with a national dance agency.

48 Performing arts students achieve well and successfully progress to appropriate courses or employment. Achievement rates are above the national average. Inspectors agreed with the statement in the self-assessment report that retention is poor on some courses. For example, in 1998, the retention rate on the national diploma course in music technology was significantly below the national average. As a consequence, tutorial arrangements have been strengthened. In 1999, retention on the first year of the course improved from 70% to 82%. Part-time programmes, which have grown considerably in recent years, have good levels of achievement for a large and very diverse group of students. Standards of students' coursework are generally high. Some of it shows that students have exceptional confidence, creativity and maturity. For example, students showed accomplishments in dance and movement even though they were on drama rather than specialist dance courses. Some students on the popular music course showed more precision and control in their playing and singing than is often found in young professional musicians. Students work well in teams and are effective at managing their learning.

49 Staff have high levels of professional expertise. Several have contributed nationally to the development of qualifications in performing arts. Their links with external organisations help to maintain their own professional expertise and provide work experience opportunities and valuable contacts for students.

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There are many good-quality teaching rooms. Drama students have access to professional quality specialist equipment and work areas. The college libraries stock a good range of specialist journals and offer a particularly extensive range of music books, scores and records. The drama complex includes several large general-purpose drama studios, a large high-quality dance studio, wardrobe and workshop spaces. There is a well-equipped, dedicated studio for technical theatre designed to provide a safe working environment for

introductory work on lighting. The complex cannot be used by people with restricted mobility. The excellent recording and rehearsal studios are well soundproofed. The college's concert hall provides a realistic working environment. Specialist equipment for music and music technology has some shortcomings. When in need of maintenance, some of it remains out of action for too long. Music technology students lack appropriate access to the college's digital equipment and up-to-date editing software.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	*	48	62
		Retention (%)	*	73	63
		Achievement (%)	*	60	82
GNVQ advanced performing arts	3	Expected completions	*	*	57
		Retention (%)	*	*	68
		Achievement (%)	*	*	95
National diploma in music technology	3	Expected completions	*	*	61
		Retention (%)	*	*	54
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73
National diploma in performing arts (popular music)	3	Expected completions	*	15	38
		Retention (%)	*	73	76
		Achievement (%)	*	82	90
Part-time and short courses in music, dance and drama	1 to 3	Expected completions	290	298	824
		Retention (%)	83	81	81
		Achievement (%)	87	92	77

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

*reliable data not available

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Humanities

Grade 3

50 Inspectors observed 22 lessons in English, modern foreign languages, sociology, psychology, history, law and geography. They considered that the college's self-assessment report overstated the strengths of the provision, and they identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a wide range of accessible provision
- well-planned and effective teaching of GCE A level English
- high achievement rates on some courses

Weaknesses

- low retention rates
- poor attendance
- some dull and undemanding teaching

51 As the self-assessment report stated, the college offers a comprehensive range of courses in the humanities programme area for students across a wide ability range. The programme includes level 1 courses in eight modern foreign languages, pre-GCSE courses, GCSE and GCE A level courses and an access to higher education programme. Students have a good choice of when and where to study. For example, beginners' language courses are available on Saturday mornings, and students on the access to higher education programme may start their courses in September, January or June. A number of programmes are offered at sites away from the main college campus. GCE A level subjects are offered over one or two years, in the daytime or in the evenings. Many of the action plans derived from the self-assessment process are insufficiently precise, and some lack timescales for their completion. Subject teams make insufficient use of data to monitor and

evaluate the provision. For example, subject reviews contain no analysis of retention or achievement rates, or comparison with targets or national data. In some humanities subjects, teachers meet regularly to plan and review provision; in others, meetings are infrequent and the minutes do not identify sufficiently clearly the action to be taken.

52 Most teaching is satisfactory or better. In the best lessons, teachers communicated their enthusiasm for the subject to their students. Activities are imaginative and interesting. For example, in a GCE A level English literature lesson, students were shown a video of two different productions of a scene from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Students were encouraged to adopt a critical and analytical approach to the comparison and showed a mature understanding of the text. Most lessons use well-devised lesson plans which give clear indications of timings and the resources required. Some teaching is insufficiently demanding and students show a lack of interest and motivation. Many of the lessons observed were revision sessions which used past examination papers. In some cases, teachers did not vary the activity sufficiently and students became bored. Attendance rates are poor. During the inspection, the attendance rate in the lessons observed was 54%. Students frequently arrived late. The self-assessment report failed to recognise these weaknesses.

53 Student achievement rates are high in some humanities subjects. In 1998, achievement rates at GCSE grades C or above were above national averages for general further education colleges in English, German, Spanish, sociology and psychology. At GCE A level, achievement rates were above the national average in psychology, sociology, English language, law, history and the one-year English literature course. However, GCE A level results in modern foreign languages were below the national average. Retention rates were recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment

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report. They are below national averages in nearly all subjects, and in many areas they are declining. The standard of students' written work was generally satisfactory and some was of a high standard. For example, English language and literature assignments from the access to higher education course contained some impressive examples of descriptive, critical and analytical writing.

54 Most teaching takes place in specialist classrooms which are well equipped, spacious and contain relevant displays. Teachers of

modern languages make good use of an up-to-date language laboratory but insufficient use of satellite television and computerised learning materials. The humanities workshop contains a good range of high-quality learning materials, designed for students to use on their own or with the support of tutors. The workshop is located close to the teaching areas, and provides easy access to IT. Staff are appropriately qualified and many have experience as examiners.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Basic foreign language courses	1	Expected completions	718	698	734
		Retention (%)	62	61	71
		Achievement (%)	51	70	66
GCSE modern foreign languages	2	Expected completions	134	223	75
		Retention (%)	69	60	57
		Achievement (%)	54	45	70
GCSE English	2	Expected completions	178	216	155
		Retention (%)	66	65	57
		Achievement (%)	60	84	89
GCE A level modern foreign languages	3	Expected completions	154	102	120
		Retention (%)	*	76	44
		Achievement (%)	*	65	62
GCE A level psychology and sociology	3	Expected completions	242	210	295
		Retention (%)	*	78	51
		Achievement (%)	*	44	65
GCE A level English courses	3	Expected completions	151	152	212
		Retention (%)	65	71	63
		Achievement (%)	74	91	81

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

*reliable data not available

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Support for Students

Grade 3

55 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements identified in the self-assessment report, but considered that some of the strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- good practical support for students
- well-organised induction programmes
- good facilities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- effective work with a wide range of community groups

Weaknesses

- low take-up of basic skills learning support
- inequality in provision and quality of tutorials
- lack of a tutorial curriculum and policy
- insufficient co-ordination of some support processes

56 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that it provides sound and impartial advice to prospective students through interviews and discussions. Course and careers advisers attend open days and many other events. The enthusiastic staff of the centrally-located student services unit work effectively together and provide good advice and guidance to students. Students from other college sites have to travel to the centre for advice and guidance. However, the college provides a free bus service between sites. A good range of publicity materials, press releases, a website and links with local radio ensure that the college maintains a high profile in the area.

57 The student services unit provides good-quality support. All students are offered help from professional counsellors, welfare advisers and the chaplaincy team. Students are helped

to make choices about courses and careers by internal course advisers and officers from the local careers service. The student services unit organises extra-curricular events and educational projects to help raise students' awareness of social issues. Good links with many local agencies ensures that an extended range of support is available. The students' union president and vice-president actively participate in key college committees. Students have free access to 28 sporting activities. The college provides financial help for students to purchase childcare facilities locally.

58 Induction programmes for full-time and substantial part-time students are well organised. Students are provided with a good introduction to the college and their courses. They receive a helpful induction pack. Some courses use second-year students to give useful presentations to new students. On others, students participate in external team building exercises to promote positive working relationships. Most students found induction helpful and valuable.

59 Full-time foundation and intermediate level students take initial literacy and numeracy assessments during induction. Where subsequent learning support is provided, it is well documented and students make good progress. However, inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that its provision for learning support is a key strength. The numbers of students receiving support is low in comparison to the number identified as needing it. Schools carry out additional initial assessments to identify who needs extra help. Support for English and mathematics is then provided either by the school or the learning support service. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good. The college has excellent links with a range of external agencies. These include educational psychologists, services for the hearing impaired, social services, the local authority and community groups. Students are helped in their

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transition from school to college. At the time of the inspection, there were 40 students from local special schools attending link courses and 90 students on two-week 'taster' programmes covering five vocational areas.

60 The college does not have a tutorial curriculum or policy. This weakness was acknowledged in the self-assessment report. There are no effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the quality of tutorial support. Inspectors found that some students received good, regular individual support but many do not. Group tutorials are less effective than those with individuals. Attendance at group tutorials is often low. Full-time students are entitled to three reviews of their progress each year. The quality of documentation used in these reviews and the action plans which result from them are of variable quality. Students receive good support and guidance on progression, particularly to higher education. However, the careers education programme does not meet the needs of all students.

61 Staff at the college work hard to develop effective links with the community and to encourage local participation in education and training. Courses are being developed to widen participation and offer learning opportunities to groups of potential students who would not normally progress to further education. 'Taster' programmes for disaffected young people from seven local schools have been organised. A family learning project to develop IT skills at a local school has recruited 30 young people and their parents.

62 There is no co-ordinated system for identifying students who do not attend regularly and are at risk of dropping out of courses. Each school within the college has adopted strategies designed to improve attendance, with varying degrees of success. The college has recognised this weakness and is developing a college-wide approach to the problem.

General Resources

Grade 2

63 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. A few weaknesses in accommodation were not identified.

Key strengths

- significant investment in resources to support learning
- effective libraries and curriculum workshops
- high-quality learning technology services
- good access for people with restricted mobility

Weaknesses

- poor reception and social areas
- some accommodation in need of refurbishment

64 The college is committed to the development of learning resources. The annual budget for centrally-held learning resources is just over £1 million. A particular strength noted in the self-assessment report is the wide range of services to support students. The introduction of a computerised control system in the library has resulted in a more efficient and effective service. There is a comprehensive stock of books, CD-ROMs, compact disks, videos and audio cassettes. Workshops within the curriculum areas are an integral part of the library service and provide 900 study spaces which students find are sufficient. Staff and students speak highly of the service provided in the libraries and workshops. Computers are available in these areas.

65 The ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students is 1:8. Most students report that computers are available for them at the times they need them. A recabling project

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across the whole college is currently under way and an integral part of this is the development of an intranet to which students have free access. The electronic link has helped to improve communications between the main college site and the more distant centres. Media services provide specialist services such as photography, video recording and editing for staff and students. There is state-of-the-art equipment and software enables a professional design service to be offered. A national agency has recognised the college as an example of good practice in the use of IT to support learning.

66 Staff and students have good access to photocopying facilities. The college's reprographic service produces over 11 million copies annually. There is a central graphics service which staff and students value highly. Colour photocopiers, desktop publishing facilities and a binding and laminating service are all used extensively. Inspectors agreed with the college that each of these provides very good support for staff and students.

67 Most classrooms provide an appropriate environment for learning. They are well decorated and equipped with modern teaching aids. Each of the lecture theatres is equipped with the latest presentation equipment. The main sites are well signposted and have good car parking. The newly-established centres distant from the main site are furnished to a particularly high standard. However, some accommodation on the main site is in need of redecoration. Reception areas are poor and unwelcoming. There are insufficient social facilities for students and workrooms for some staff are inadequate. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge these weaknesses. Accommodation for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved significantly since the previous inspection. The specialist accommodation has been relocated to two of the college sites which have been extensively refurbished. An external agency has

worked with the college to undertake an accessibility survey which has led to improvements. For example, colour is used to define specific areas and routes for students with visual impairments have been created. Additional improvements include: the modification of toilet facilities for people with disabilities; a new chair lift; adaptations to lift controls; and increased car parking spaces for students with disabilities. Most of the college is accessible to people with restricted mobility.

68 The college has a good range of catering facilities. These include refectories in three of the buildings at the main site as well as on other sites. In addition, there are two bistros and a restaurant. Care is taken to provide food which will appeal to the many different groups of staff and students who use the facilities. Catering staff survey customers' views twice each year and action is taken to respond to issues which are raised. Staff and students complain that the quality of the service provided is adversely affected by the poor condition of some refectories, overcrowding at certain times and the inappropriate behaviour of some students. This weakness was acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

69 The self-assessment report provided a succinct summary of the strengths and weaknesses in quality assurance. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements but identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- a comprehensive self-assessment process
- a broad range of cross-college service standards
- an established course approvals mechanism

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- the high priority afforded to staff development

Weaknesses

- revised quality framework yet to be fully implemented
- shortcomings in the student evaluation questionnaire
- slow progress towards target-setting at course level

70 The self-assessment report summarised the key revisions recently made to the college's quality assurance framework. Since June 1998, when the senior management structure was reorganised, a quality unit has been established to promote continuous improvement across the college. A major priority of the unit has been the validation of component self-assessment reports. A task group has been formed to interpret and manage performance data at college and course level. Some elements of the revised quality assurance framework are not yet fully functional. For example, the newly-constituted quality assurance committee has convened only once and some of the school boards of study have not yet met. The last inspection report commended the college for the thoroughness of its self-assessment report. However, the process was not repeated until new procedures were introduced to support the development of the 1997-98 report.

71 During the self-assessment process, course teams evaluated their work against a set of quality statements. Resulting reports were aggregated to area reviews and programme area summaries. Detailed guidance was given on the production of these reviews and summaries. A formal peer review group rigorously moderated the judgements in each report. When course reports were written, the 1997-98 student achievement data were incomplete. As a result, many of them contain insufficient analysis of students' achievements. The use of targets by

course teams, linked to historic performance indicator data, is also in its formative stages. Service standards have been developed for all the main cross-college functions. A number, such as those in student services and learning resources, are well established. Others have been developed more recently and the college intends to review them formally as part of the next self-assessment process.

72 There have been improvements in overall college performance. For example, retention on level 1 courses has improved steadily from 76% in 1995-96 to 88% in 1997-98. The achievement of overall qualification aims improved from 70% in 1995-96 to 78% in 1996-97. This places the college in the top 25% of all general further education colleges when they are ranked according to this measure. Some aspects of achievements are unsatisfactory. For example, retention on short courses is below sector averages, and the achievement of qualification aims at level 1 declined sharply from 87% in 1996-97 to 57% in 1997-98. The college attributes much of this to the poor success rates of a large number of students on distance learning programmes. The self-assessment report evaluated the process of data collection but not the outcomes.

73 There is a well-established course approvals and validation system. Existing courses are revalidated over a five-year cycle and those falling below defined minimum standards for retention and achievement are reviewed by the academic board. A condition of continued approval is that improvement targets, as defined in an action plan, are met. New course proposals are reviewed by the curriculum director in conjunction with the quality unit. The approval of a new course is subject to the decision of the validation panel. The evaluation of courses is informed by the use of a standardised student questionnaire. Responses are made on a six-point grading scale but no grade descriptors are provided. The first four grades on the scale are assumed to indicate

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a satisfactory level of performance. This leads to reported levels of satisfaction of over 90%. The system gives little indication of which aspects of college operations are performing well. This shortcoming was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

74 The self-assessment process was well planned and the resultant report was thorough. All course and functional teams, and governors were involved in its production. An extensive training programme on self-assessment took place. The inspectors' judgements about curriculum areas matched closely those of the college. Inspectors were more critical than the college when considering the cross-college functions. Judgements about teaching and learning in the self-assessment report were initially informed by a process of 'self-reflection' on the part of teachers. More recently these have been refined by lesson observations by peers. The lesson grades awarded were, on average, significantly higher than those given by inspectors. The final report is written so that curriculum sections match the FEFC programme areas, rather than the college structure. This was a sensible decision which enabled the self-assessment process to continue whilst the college was being reorganised.

75 The college makes a considerable investment in staff development. Contracts for full-time teachers and some other staff specify 17 days each year for personal and professional development. A budget is provided to support new approaches to curriculum or cross-college developments. In addition, a delegated staff development budget amounting to £250,000 linked to the achievement of key strategic objectives is provided for the academic schools. The resulting training plans are evaluated by the schools and the head of the staff development unit. The college recognises that reports have placed too much emphasis on levels of participation and the training activities rather than the impact training makes on performance.

Governance

Grade 3

76 The inspection team agreed with some of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. However, they felt that strengths had been overstated and that some weaknesses had not been identified or had been given insufficient weight.

Key strengths

- effective use of skills and experience of governors
- good recruitment procedures for new governors

Weaknesses

- insufficient monitoring of college's performance
- inadequate review by governors of their own performance
- some deficiencies in clerking arrangements

77 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.

78 There are 19 governors; including nine who are from business and five who are co-opted. There is one recent vacancy due to ill-health. The appointment of eight governors through revised selection procedures has improved the mix of experience, expertise, and gender since the last inspection. Two members of staff and one student are governors. Members have a wide range of experience from the public, private and voluntary sectors, including finance, personnel, architecture, education, and equal opportunities. Their

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experience is well used in the college. For example, a member with experience of human resource management has given helpful advice at a time of reorganisation. This strength was included in the self-assessment report. There is an annual audit of governors' skills and clear procedures for the recruitment and appointment of new governors. Vacancies are notified to outside organisations and publicly advertised which has resulted in a reserve list. Two external co-optees with accountancy expertise have strengthened the audit committee. A governors' handbook is being considered but the present draft document contains insufficient information.

79 The corporation has committees for finance and employment; audit; remuneration; and search. The search committee does not have terms of reference and the two meetings held were not minuted. In the last 12 months, the outcomes of four committee meetings have not been reported to the corporation. Finance and employment committee members only receive management accounts at formal meetings. None were received between May and November 1998. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report. The audit committee places particular emphasis on monitoring actions by management in response to audit recommendations. It has presented an annual report to the corporation, in advance of the requirements of the *Audit Code of Practice*. Senior managers present papers on the chief executive's behalf. Governors value their contributions. Comprehensive standing orders have recently been produced for approval by governors. Corporation meetings are well documented. Copies of minutes and papers are available in the college's documentation centre. The corporation publishes an annual report which includes financial information but little on overall educational performance. The corporation has yet to implement some of the agreed recommendations arising from the report of its Nolan committee working group. For example, the code of conduct has not been updated and there is no policy on

'whistleblowing'. The register of interests is available for public scrutiny but does not cover members of staff who have significant financial responsibility within the college.

80 As part of the self-assessment process, governors completed a questionnaire to review their own performance. This was the first time they had done so. Governors have recently been asked to assess their own training requirements and have identified the need for training in financial awareness. During the last year all meetings of the corporation have been quorate. Overall attendance at corporation and committee meetings is satisfactory but attendance by a few individual governors is low. Attendance is monitored by the clerk but targets have not been set and attendance rates are not reported to the corporation.

81 Governors are closely involved in the development of the college's mission and in determining the strategic direction of the college. They take an active part in developing and finalising the strategic plans. However, they do not receive adequate reports on the progress made towards the college's strategic objectives. For example, the financial reports, which have an accompanying commentary written by the director of finance, do not regularly include information on progress towards meeting key financial performance objectives. The self-assessment report recognised these weaknesses. A written report from the chief executive is presented at each corporation meeting. It refers to performance against the college's aims. However, the report contains insufficient data on, for example, the recruitment, retention and achievements of students. Reports on the activities of the college company lack detail. Presentations by managers have included developments in teaching and learning, partnerships with other colleges and the college's overseas activities. Governors are keen to debate issues which arise. The corporation reviewed the college's self-assessment report before its submission to the FEFC.

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82 Governors have regular and useful contact with senior managers but there is little formal contact with other staff. The self-assessment report acknowledged that there is a need to improve communications between governors, staff and students. A system of linking governors with schools, functional areas, or sites is being introduced. Governors receive a detailed annual report on equal opportunities but have not received a report on health and safety since 1997.

Management

Grade 3

83 The inspection team agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, they attached more importance to some of the weaknesses than did the college.

Key strengths

- systematic approach to organisational change
- well-structured strategic planning and review process
- commitment to an open management style
- extensive working with external organisations

Weaknesses

- new structures which are not fully established
- weaknesses in the college's financial controls
- inadequate management information services
- failure to update college policies

84 The college is in the late stages of a major reorganisation which followed a wide-ranging review. The reasons for change were explained to staff through an extensive exercise in communication and consultation. Many senior

staff are new to their posts. The long-term absence of the chief executive and the more recent absence of the director of finance have increased their workloads. Significant operational difficulties have been caused by unfilled posts in the management information and finance departments. Some of the corporate services directorates have already developed some good practices. However, it is too soon to judge the effectiveness of the new arrangements. Some of the intended benefits of change, such as more consistent cross-school curriculum management are not yet apparent. Nevertheless, the quality of curriculum provision, as indicated by comparing inspection grades with those given in the last inspection report, is being largely maintained.

85 Inspectors agreed with the college's claim that strategic planning is systematic. The strategy is underpinned by labour market information. Strategic objectives are translated into operational plans. The implementation of plans is reviewed regularly but reports on progress contain insufficient numerical data. There is an open management style. Management groups have appropriate terms of reference and membership. Meetings are regular and clearly minuted. Schools and corporate services have their own meeting schedules. A summary of college committee business is distributed by electronic means so that managers can disseminate information quickly. A documentation centre, open to the public, keeps copies of college documents and committee minutes. Whilst communication within the schools is good, communication between schools is generally poor.

86 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The inspection team agreed with the college that there are long-standing weaknesses in budgetary planning and control. It became apparent in 1998 that, due to insufficient control over staff appointments, there would be an

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overspend on faculty staff costs of over £1.3 million. Steps to secure better control were taken, but this variance contributed to a substantial operating deficit for the 1997-98 financial year, against a large budgeted surplus. In September 1998, a predicted further overspend against the staffing budget was identified. Latest projections indicate an operating deficit for the year of £576,000. College managers identified these financial control problems and have appointed an external consultant who is currently undertaking a review into aspects of financial management. At 31 July 1998, the college had a balance on its general reserve of £5,427,000 and cash balances of £5,166,000. The college has met its funded unit targets for the last two years.

87 In the absence of the financial director and due to the lack of a deputy, a consultant is assisting with the preparation of the 1999-2000 budget. Detailed management accounts are produced monthly but do not include a 12-month rolling cashflow forecast, or comment on accounting ratio trends. The strategic plan includes a range of financial targets. Progress towards these targets is not routinely reported to managers or governors. The management accounts are reviewed as a formal agenda item at senior management group meetings. The reports of the internal and external auditors indicate that, in general, the college has adequate systems of internal control. In 1998-99, as a consequence of the management restructuring exercise, budgets to the schools were issued late.

88 The college recognises that its management information systems are inadequate. Delays have occurred in the submission of the college's returns to the FEFC. Regular reports on progress in achieving funding unit targets have not been routinely provided to senior managers. The range of reports available to directors of schools is limited. Teachers had to work with temporary registers for much of 1998-99. Inspectors found that there was inaccurate

information on these registers. New management information systems are being introduced.

89 The college's wide range of policies have not been reviewed or updated recently. The reconstituted equal opportunities advisory group has a wide membership and meets regularly. A subgroup is considering revisions to the policy. A range of events promote equal opportunities. An annual report is written but is insufficiently evaluative.

90 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are productive links with a wide range of external organisations. The college works well with the TEC, industry and a number of universities. The six colleges on Tyne and Wear co-operate on both provision and services. The college has responded quickly to identified needs, for example, the establishment of a call-centre training facility. A high proportion of the college's income is from non-FEFC sources. The college, working jointly with its company, has established a large open learning provision and a staff recruitment service to business.

Conclusions

91 The college's self-assessment report was thorough and well planned. It was supported by cross-referenced evidence. Inspectors' judgements of the curriculum areas generally coincided with that of the college. However, the inspection team found that the college had been insufficiently self-critical of teaching and in their consideration of students' retention rates. The grades awarded by inspectors to programme areas matched those of the college except for two areas where they were one grade lower than those claimed by the college. However, inspectors considered a smaller number of subjects within these programme areas than had been considered by the college. Inspectors were also more critical than the college when considering the cross-college functions.

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Inspectors awarded all of them one grade lower than the grades recorded in the self-assessment report.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1998)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	0
16-18 years	11
19-24 years	22
25+ years	67
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Foundation	27
Intermediate	19
Advanced	41
Higher education	7
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	6
Total	100

Source: college data

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

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	451	6,917	16
Agriculture	0	49	0
Construction	123	849	2
Engineering	341	2,325	6
Business	571	4,037	10
Hotel and catering	647	914	3
Health and community care	584	4,396	11
Art and design	1,667	2,315	8
Humanities	169	17,106	37
Basic education	187	3,321	7
Total	4,740	42,229	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 39% 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	224	81	73	378
Supporting direct learning contact	131	32	6	169
Other support	224	32	2	258
Total	579	145	81	805

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£30,467,000	£31,213,000	£31,115,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£18.76	£18.20	£16.27*
Payroll as a proportion of income	62%	62%	63%
Achievement of funding target	88%	98%	103%
Diversity of income	35%	35%	30%
Operating surplus	-£665,000	£560,000	-£490,000

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 – college (1996, 1997 and 1998)

*provisional data

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	1,596	1,827	2,777	3,299	6,034	14,582
	Retention (%)	76	84	86	79	90	88
	Achievement (%)	51	72	68	65	87	57
2	Expected completions	1,963	2,043	1,561	2,230	2,148	1,783
	Retention (%)	73	73	70	73	73	75
	Achievement (%)	66	62	74	75	64	78
3	Expected completions	2,485	2,629	2,408	2,899	2,728	2,346
	Retention (%)	75	75	75	73	73	72
	Achievement (%)	68	66	78	68	70	76
4 or 5	Expected completions	88	72	40	956	1,087	649
	Retention (%)	84	86	93	79	84	79
	Achievement (%)	78	70	89	79	76	88
Short courses	Expected completions	181	3,300	2,050	2,141	6,499	7,237
	Retention (%)	92	76	82	90	83	83
	Achievement (%)	85	68	85	91	69	80
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	946	2,511	1,666	2,922	4,007	490
	Retention (%)	93	89	77	73	81	69
	Achievement (%)	69	86	82	84	82	67

Source: ISR

FEFC Inspection Report 98/99

**Published by the
Further Education Funding Council**

Website <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>

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