

North West Kent College of Technology

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
2000-01

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
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 1999-2000: 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

North West Kent College of Technology

South East Region

Inspected December 2000

North West Kent College of Technology has four sites. The two main sites are at Dartford and Gravesend. It has an additional site at Gravesend at which its specialised maritime and firefighting courses take place. The fourth site is a new, impressive training centre at the major Bluewater shopping centre. This centre provides short courses for adults, and facilities which are used by other college students. The college offers a wide range of courses for students aged 16 to 19 years and for adults. Since the last inspection, the college has produced a self-assessment report each year, drawing upon the results of its quality assurance procedures. The latest report, which was used for the inspection, was long but clear. There was no external validation of the full report. While inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the report, they considered that several strengths had been overstated and some weaknesses had not been given sufficient weight. Inspectors identified several weaknesses that the college had overlooked and considered that insufficient attention had been paid to the quality of teaching and learning.

Provision in performing arts and maritime studies is outstanding. There are high pass

rates on some secretarial and childcare courses. Enrolment and induction procedures for students are good. Most of the accommodation is accessible for students with restricted mobility. The college has improved the accommodation and facilities at its main site at Gravesend. There is good staff induction and appraisal. The corporation is committed to open governance and its audit committee is effective. There are significant weaknesses in science and in basic skills provision, and quality assurance systems have insufficient impact. The college enjoys extensive and productive partnerships with a wide range of external organisations. In order to address weaknesses the college should: increase the attention paid to teaching and learning; improve the accuracy of its computerised student data and strengthen the rigour with which teams analyse retention and pass rates; improve the tutorial system and the consistency with which it is operated; improve resources and IT facilities in the learning resources centres; improve the consistency with which quality assurance procedures are followed; review arrangements for setting targets for improvement; monitor the adequacy and implementation of action plans; strengthen financial management procedures; and increase governors' oversight of the college's academic performance and their monitoring of the achievement of operational and strategic objectives.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	4	Support for students	3
Maritime studies	1	General resources	3
Secretarial studies	2	Quality assurance	3
Business, retail and professional studies	3	Governance	3
Health and childcare	3	Management	3
Performing arts	1		
Basic skills	4		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 North West Kent College of Technology has two main sites, one in Dartford and the other in Gravesend. It also has a small site on the banks of the River Thames in Gravesend where it has run specialised maritime and firefighting courses since 1996 when the college took over, and significantly improved, the work of the former National Sea Training College. The facilities on this site enable the college to offer national and international training and education to meet the needs of the maritime industry. The college maintains strong links with the National Sea Training Trust. The 'learning shop' at the Bluewater retail centre, approximately 7 miles from Gravesend, operates in partnership with another organisation. The 'learning shop' offers short courses for adults and its facilities are also available to 16 to 19 students at the college. Additional short courses are offered at various other locations in the local community.

2 There has been significant economic development in the Kent Thameside area that the college serves. The opening of the Bluewater centre, which is the largest retail complex in Europe, created approximately 7,500 jobs in the area. Further employment opportunities are being created through the development of Crossways, a very large multi-purpose commercial development adjacent to the M25 motorway and Ebbsfleet high-speed rail link station.

3 The six selective grammar schools in the locality and most of the non-selective schools have sixth forms. However, the number of students aged 16 to 19 years at the college has increased despite the growing employment opportunities locally and the intense competition from the local schools. There has also been a significant increase in the number of trainees at the college whose programmes are funded by the training and enterprise council (TEC). The college's income has risen from £8.6 million at

the last inspection to an estimated £16.3 million in 2000-01. Further growth is planned. The college offers courses in all Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas.

4 The college works productively with a wide range of partners and several development projects have been undertaken. In particular, it is the lead partner in a single regeneration project, which has expanded provision for a wider community. The college has increased the number of higher level courses it offers; it is an associate college of the University of Greenwich and there are plans to develop foundation degrees with the university. It is the recipient college for the Kent and Medway learndirect hub and, at the time of the inspection, had 360 students enrolled for this provision. There are strong links with the Kent Association of Further Education Corporations.

5 The college's mission is 'to provide high-quality education, learning and training which offers people the opportunity to achieve their potential and contribute to the success of the community in the north Kent area'.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in December 2000. Inspectors had previously evaluated its self-assessment report and information held by other directorates of the FEFC. The college had experienced problems with new computer software for student data but had not had time to re-submit its individualised student record (ISR) to the FEFC. Inspectors used ISR data for 1998 and 1999 and data produced by the college for 2000. However, inspectors considered that ISR data were unreliable in several curriculum areas. They used, instead, data provided by the college which could be corroborated by source evidence, such as registers and computer printouts of pass lists. The college plans to re-submit its ISR data to the FEFC in January.

Context

7 The inspection was carried out by 12 inspectors and an auditor for a total of 51 days. They observed 77 lessons, evaluated students' work and examined college documents. Meetings were held with students, governors, managers, teachers and support staff, and an inspector attended a corporation committee meeting. Nine inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) worked with the inspection team during the college inspection. The TSC inspectors concentrated on work-based training supported by the college in construction, engineering, administration, retail and customer service, and hairdressing and beauty therapy. They examined relevant documentation, interviewed 70 trainees, visited 43 workplaces and observed and graded 16 training sessions.

8 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, 64% were rated good or outstanding and 3% were considered

unsatisfactory. These figures compare favourably with the national averages recorded for colleges inspected in 1999-2000.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	0	3	3	0	0	6
GNVQ	0	6	8	1	0	15
NVQ	0	0	2	0	0	2
Other vocational	15	23	8	0	0	46
Other	0	3	4	1	0	8
Total (No.)	15	35	25	2	0	77
Total (%)	19	45	32	3	0	99
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

9 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000. Attendance ranged from 66% in business, retail and professional studies to 92% in performing arts.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
North West Kent College of Technology	11.2	80
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 4

10 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering vocational and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) courses. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but identified some additional weaknesses. They considered that action plans failed to address weaknesses in students' achievements.

Key strengths

- good retention and pass rates on two of the vocational courses
- well-managed vocational courses

Weaknesses

- poor retention and pass rates on GCSE and GCE A level courses
- some poor pass and retention rates on the national diploma in science course
- insufficient academic support for GCSE and GCE A level students
- lack of differentiated methods and materials for students with varying abilities

11 The college provides a good range of courses. These include GCSE, GCE A level, access to science courses and national diploma and certificate courses in science and applied science. The college introduced the advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) in science in September 2000. Science courses are located in two separate faculties. The management of vocational courses is effective, but there are no meetings to discuss issues or share good practice across the science provision as a whole. There is no cohesive strategy for

addressing the poor performance of students on GCE A level and GCSE courses. The tutorial system does not focus sufficiently on identifying the support GCSE and GCE A level students require to raise their achievements. Intervals between student progress reviews are too long. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

12 Teaching is satisfactory and some is good. Most lessons are well planned. Practical work is carried out safely. While some handouts have been carefully crafted and are helpful to students, others merely consist of photocopied sections from books. In the most successful lessons, teachers help students to think for themselves. In a sports studies science lesson, students considered various approaches to training which were designed to overcome the effects of energy depletion during physical activity. Students demonstrated knowledge and understanding of different 'energy pathways' and how they relate to different sports activities. The teacher reinforced students' previous learning and was able skilfully to build students' confidence. In some weaker lessons, the pace at which students are expected to work is sometimes slow. Students spend too much time copying from the whiteboard. Teachers' expectations of students are insufficiently high and the needs of weaker students are not given sufficient consideration. There are no differentiated materials for use in classes that contain students with mixed abilities. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

13 The development of key skills is integrated with vocational courses. However, schemes of work and lesson plans for GCE advanced subsidiary (AS) courses do not include the development of students' key skills and students are unclear about their purpose and value. There are few information technology (IT) facilities in classrooms and little use is made of them in lessons either for teaching or learning.

Curriculum Areas

This is not mentioned in the self-assessment report. There are no subject-specific workshops or other support facilities for science students who need additional help.

14 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that performance in GCSE and GCE A level science is a weakness. Retention rates on GCSE and GCE A level courses were well below the national average in both 1998 and 1999 and just below it in 2000. Pass rates on these courses have been well below the national average for three consecutive years. Indications are that GCE A level students completing in 2001 are performing better than in previous years. Retention and pass rates are good on the national certificate in science and the national diploma in applied science, sports studies. The pass rate on the access to science course fell to below the national average in

2000, having previously been high. College data for the national diploma in science show that pass rates and retention rates were sometimes poor. Only just over half the students completed their course in 2000. The quality of students' work is generally better on vocational courses than on GCSE or GCE A level courses. Written work is marked carefully, but sometimes teachers give insufficient written feedback to students to help them improve their performance.

15 Teachers are well qualified and have relevant industrial experience. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that, except for biology, laboratories are good or adequate, and that the lack of preparation facilities at the Gravesend site adversely affects lessons.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
GCSE chemistry, human biology and physics	2	Number of starters	64	43	17
		Retention (%)	66	51	71
		Achievement (%)	10	35	17
National certificate in science	3	Number of starters	8	10	10
		Retention (%)	88	100	90
		Achievement (%)	0	100	100
National diploma in applied science (sports studies)	3	Number of starters	24	15	14
		Retention (%)	71	87	100
		Achievement (%)	76	100	92
National diploma in science (laboratory science)	3	Number of starters	*	*	24
		Retention (%)	*	*	54
		Achievement (%)	*	*	85
GCE A level (biology, chemistry and physics)	3	Number of starters	37	21	67
		Retention (%)	62	63	73
		Achievement (%)	30	13	27
Modular access programme in science	3	Number of starters	13	6	13
		Retention (%)	77	67	79
		Achievement (%)	100	100	82

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Maritime Studies

Grade 1

16 Inspectors observed 13 maritime studies lessons. They agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but considered that one weakness had been overstated.

Key strengths

- much high-quality teaching
- good curriculum management
- outstanding retention and pass rates on college-based short courses
- good specialist resources
- effective links with the marine industry and professional bodies

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement rates on a distance learning course

17 In 1996, prior to the college's last inspection, the college took over provision in maritime courses from the National Sea Training College and it now offers a wide range of specialist short courses in maritime studies. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the range of provision is a strength. Most students are employed ships officers or ratings and their employers sponsor their studies. Most of the maritime courses last for a week or less. The majority lead to statutory Maritime and Coastguard Agency qualifications. The college also offers distance learning national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses in merchant vessel operations and engineering and provides tutorial support for students on these courses. Some aspects of the NVQ are taught in the college.

18 As mentioned in the self-assessment report, schemes of work for all courses are

based on guidelines produced by the Merchant Navy Training Board, which is the industry's national training organisation, and have also been approved by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency as part of their quality assurance arrangements. Students are provided with comprehensive course notes and learning materials. Teaching to illustrate principles and practice is good and, in some cases, outstanding. Teachers effectively use a range of teaching materials and demonstrate using ships' equipment. In most lessons, teachers check regularly that students are learning what is intended. Teachers also make good use of their own and students' seagoing experience. In a lesson on meteorology, the teacher used helpful overhead transparencies to explain basic weather systems. Current weather charts were discussed in detail. A recording of a shipping forecast was played which students were required to note on a map divided into sea areas. They were then given the weather chart for the same period to compare. Students were kept to task throughout the lesson. In another lesson, a fire brigade officer taught the basic theory of combustion and fire development. The students later went to the fire training ground where, under close supervision, they were shown the dangerous effects of using water to extinguish burning oil. They also practised extinguishing controlled fires using carbon dioxide, dry powder and foam.

19 Students' retention and pass rates are high for all college-based maritime study courses. Achievement levels have significantly improved since the provision was last inspected. Pass and retention rates have been 100% for the last three years in basic sea survival, proficiency in survival craft, fire fighting, seamanship, chart work, and the global maritime distress and safety system courses. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that this is a strength. The poorest retention and pass rates are on the marine engineering course. This course lasts 10 weeks and is the longest offered by the college.

Curriculum Areas

In 2000, the retention rate for this course fell to 86% and the pass rate fell to 50%. Retention and pass rates on the NVQ level 3 distance learning course have been consistently poor. The college reports that this is often because seafarers are on board ship for long hours and have difficulty setting aside regular time for study. It is trying to improve its contact with them in an effort to increase their chances of success.

20 Teachers are well qualified. Since the integration of maritime courses with the college, the number of specialist teachers has increased, as has the range of specialist qualifications they hold. Most teachers have seagoing experience

and some have ship command experience. Teachers have good links with shipping companies, the Kent Fire Service and professional organisations. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college has a wide range of specialist facilities, which includes a swimming pool for sea survival courses, a comprehensive range of sea survival craft and equipment, a computer based navigation simulator and an engineering simulator. The college has large specialist fire fighting training facilities that are often used by the Kent Fire Service for its own training. Teachers and Kent Fire Service officers teach together on most fire fighting courses.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
Maritime short courses	1	Number of starters	975	782	758
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	99	99	100
Maritime short courses	2	Number of starters	634	675	746
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	100	99	98
NVQ maritime studies	2	Number of starters	12	24	24
		Retention (%)	100	96	100
		Achievement (%)	100	61	92
NVQ maritime studies	3	Number of starters	*	*	*
		Retention (%)	*	*	*
		Achievement (%)	*	*	*

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Secretarial Studies

Grade 2

21 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering the Institute of Legal Executives certificate and diploma, the junior secretary's certificate, the certificate in secretarial and administrative procedures, and office technology courses at both the Dartford and Gravesend sites. The inspection also included franchised computer literacy and business technology courses at the training and business group centre at Gravesend. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report but considered that insufficient attention had been paid to weaknesses in teaching and learning.

Key strengths

- good pass rates on Institute of Legal Executives programmes
- good student progression to higher level courses and employment
- students' active and varied participation in lessons
- effective balance of theory and practice in most lessons

Weaknesses

- some poor lesson planning
- inappropriate target-setting

22 The college offers a wide range of secretarial and administrative courses at its Dartford and Gravesend sites, and provides in-company training to numerous local businesses. The provision is effectively managed. Meetings are held regularly and recorded, and the roles and responsibilities of staff are clear. Targets have been set for each course, but these are not based on previous students' achievements and are not used

properly for measuring annual performance. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there are good opportunities for students to progress to higher level courses. In 2000, 23% of students who completed a secretarial studies course returned to the college to study at a higher level. Others find employment quickly, either locally or in London. There is a good range of IT courses at the training and business group centre. The centre is well managed and there is good liaison with the college. Students can begin a course at a time to suit them and there is a good system for monitoring students' progress which is reviewed regularly.

23 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that most of the teaching is good. In the most successful lessons, teachers use a good mix of theory and practice to ensure students' attention and to involve them fully in classroom discussion. In a secretarial certificate lesson, students were given the task of identifying the qualities of a good receptionist. Students were urged to produce their own lists and to think for themselves before entering into a lively discussion about which qualities were most appropriate. The teacher explained concepts clearly so that students could understand their implications. In most lessons, teachers put questions to individual students and provide instant feedback to help them improve their understanding. In shorthand lessons, teachers check students' penmanship and the size of shorthand outlines to ensure that they can be transcribed accurately. In most lessons, teachers stated the aims and objectives of the lesson and checked regularly to ensure that they were met. In some lessons, the pace at which students were expected to work was slow and more could have been achieved in the time. Courses are well planned and there are appropriate schemes of work. However, most lesson plans are insufficiently detailed and sometimes they fail to identify what students should gain from the lessons. Key skills are

Curriculum Areas

developed in discrete lessons and also by integrating them with normal secretarial lessons. In most lessons, teachers emphasise the importance of correct spelling and grammar.

24 Students' work is of a high standard and they make good use of their IT skills. Teachers mark assignments fairly and provide constructive feedback to help students improve their work. Students' portfolios are generally well organised. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that pass rates are consistently high on most diploma and certificate courses and all were significantly above the national average in 2000. Secretarial students take a number of additional single subject examinations and the pass rates are also high on these programmes.

25 As mentioned in the self-assessment report, teachers are well qualified and appropriately experienced. Two teachers have redesigned and written an information processing module for the Institute of Legal Executives certificate and diploma courses for use internationally. Students at the college have good access to up-to-date IT facilities.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
Institute of Legal Executives certificate	2	Number of starters	*	28	37
		Retention (%)	*	75	86
		Achievement (%)	*	81	100
Certificate in administrative and secretarial procedures	2	Number of starters	*	29	22
		Retention (%)	*	87	78
		Achievement (%)	*	88	96
Office technology (beginners)	2	Number of starters	*	24	31
		Retention (%)	*	85	88
		Achievement (%)	*	95	95
Junior secretary's certificate	2	Number of starters	*	50	47
		Retention (%)	*	83	76
		Achievement (%)	*	71	79
Institute of Legal Executives diploma	3	Number of starters	*	14	20
		Retention (%)	*	93	90
		Achievement (%)	*	92	94

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Business, Retail and Professional Studies

Grade 3

26 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate and advanced level courses in business and in retail studies and professional accounting courses. Inspectors judged that the self-assessment report was not sufficiently rigorous and that some strengths were overstated. They identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good pass rates on all GNVQ courses
- high retention rates on GNVQ intermediate courses
- good internal verification

Weaknesses

- failure to differentiate work or materials to meet the varying abilities of students
- inadequate development of key skills at GCE AS
- narrow range of teaching and learning methods
- poor retention and pass rates on part-time accounting programmes

27 The college offers GCE A/AS levels in business studies, GNVQ and part-time NVQ courses in business, retail and accounting, and a certificate in management accounting. Full-time students are predominantly 16 to 19 years old. About 60% of GNVQ intermediate business students progress to advanced level programmes. The business provision is administered effectively by the head of school and two divisional leaders. School and course team meetings are held regularly.

28 The self-assessment report stresses the good quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors agreed that the majority of lessons are well organised and competently taught, but judged that teachers use too narrow a range of teaching and learning methods. In some good lessons, teachers gave the students challenging work and checked their understanding carefully. In a GCE A level business lesson, the teacher explored expertly the product life cycle of a popular music group by asking detailed questions to clarify and develop students' understanding of the concept of product life. While some whole-class teaching was good, there was little variation in the way whole class activities were managed. The only visual aids used were a whiteboard and an overhead projector. Teachers employed no differentiated materials or methods to meet the varying abilities of students. In some poor lessons, the level of student participation was minimal. Teachers engaged students in work in pairs or groups in only one lesson. Teachers monitor individual students' progress termly; student action plans are agreed and then reviewed. However, the action plans are insufficiently specific or demanding.

29 Key skills are assessed and developed in discrete key skills lessons. Although the college has used software to assess the level of students' key skills, some students do not yet know the results of these assessments. The development of GCE AS students' key skills is inadequate. There are no opportunities, for example, for students to display communication skills during lessons. Student attendance at key skills lessons is very low.

30 GNVQ assignments are set at an appropriate level. Students' completed assignments are sometimes presented inappropriately. Teachers' grading of students' work is subjected to a rigorous and comprehensive verification procedure. All GNVQ students benefit from work experience placements, which they organise themselves and

Curriculum Areas

about which they report positively. This strength is not included in the self-assessment report. Pass rates on GNVQ advanced and intermediate courses have been consistently above the national average for the past three years. On the GCE A level business course, pass rates have fluctuated widely over the same period. Student retention rates are significantly above the national average on GNVQ intermediate courses but below them on GNVQ advanced courses. Retention on NVQ accounting programmes is below the national average but is improving. Both recruitment and retention rates on the certificate in management accounting course are low and the college has increased the tuition time in an attempt to address the problem. Weaknesses in retention are not referred to in the self-assessment report and appropriate strategies for improving retention have not yet been devised. The college has a system for monitoring students' attendance and reporting absences. However, the average level of attendance in lessons observed was only 66%. This issue is recognised in the self-assessment report.

31 Teachers are well qualified and the proportion of teachers with a teaching qualification is higher than the national average. Classrooms are adequate but are largely bare and uninviting. A few rooms are small and restrict the range of teaching and learning activities. The deleterious effect of high staff absence is recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report. Staff absence is monitored centrally, but the school has not received appropriate data and insufficient action is being taken to remedy the problem.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Number of starters	35	35	26
		Retention (%)	91	89	92
		Achievement (%)	81	84	100
NVQ accounting	2	Number of starters	76	72	62
		Retention (%)	67	75	75
		Achievement (%)	27	58	55
GNVQ advanced (business and retail)	3	Number of starters	67	47	55
		Retention (%)	66	66	73
		Achievement (%)	88	87	92
GCE A level business studies	3	Number of starters	*	*	30
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	71
NVQ accounting	3	Number of starters	75	88	74
		Retention (%)	76	72	76
		Achievement (%)	23	38	31
Chartered Institute of Management Accountants certificate (stage 2)	4	Number of starters	6	6	20
		Retention (%)	100	84	70
		Achievement (%)	0	17	21

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Health and Childcare

Grade 3

32 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering health and childcare courses, and visited one work experience placement. They agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but considered that some strengths were overstated and some weaknesses were understated. Actions to remedy weaknesses were vague.

Key strengths

- good teaching on childcare courses
- extensive links with the community
- good displays of students' work

Weaknesses

- poor retention and pass rates on some full-time courses
- too many undemanding tasks for students
- inadequate and little-used IT resources
- insufficiently clear actions to remedy weaknesses

33 The college offers a wide range of full-time and part-time courses, from level 1 to level 4, in two schools of study; community studies and childcare studies. There is a vacancy for the head of the school of community studies. The school of childhood studies is well managed. In September 2000, there were insufficient students enrolled to run the GNVQ foundation course in health and social care and students were enrolled on the GNVQ intermediate level course instead. The appropriateness of this decision is to be reviewed. The college has increased significantly its vocational and part-time courses as a result of productive partnerships in the local community and improved links with the local hospital trust.

34 Inspectors agreed that the quality of teaching and learning on childcare courses is good. Lesson plans and schemes of work are comprehensive. In most lessons students are expected to work at a lively pace. In the most successful lessons, teachers ensure that the content extends students' abilities and maintains their interest. In a BTEC first diploma lesson, the teacher introduced events which change people's lives and included consideration of Buddhist and Chinese perspectives on the significance of some of the events. The teacher successfully related the topic to the students' own experiences. Students then worked in three groups to explore how events change lives by using examples of three babies born at the same time. Students clearly found the topic demanding but responded well. Their discussions demonstrated thoughtful and objective approaches to the issues raised. Inspectors considered that the profile of lesson observations in the school of community studies did not justify the judgement in the self-assessment report that teaching and learning was good. Weaknesses in lessons in both schools included the setting of tasks which were too easy for students and the failure to set deadlines by which the tasks had to be completed. Teachers made spelling mistakes when using the whiteboard, tended to answer their questions themselves rather than allowing students to do so, and made too much use of the whiteboard instead of employing appropriate handouts. They sometimes failed to complete lessons properly and ran out of time, so that students were prevented from consolidating their understanding of the points covered in the lesson. Few of these weaknesses were recognised in the self-assessment report. Work experience placements for students are well planned and well managed. There is a close working relationship between the college and organisations offering work placements.

35 Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report that the pass rates overall

Curriculum Areas

compare favourably with national averages. Pass rates on the certificate in childcare and education are the only ones among the full-time courses that have risen above the national average. Pass rates on other courses often fluctuate significantly from year to year. Retention rates are equally variable but on most full-time courses they are at, or above, the national average. Some students' work is good and demonstrates their successful development of their research skills.

36 Most of the resources and accommodation for these courses are good. Students' work is displayed widely in classrooms at the Dartford

site and improves them significantly as places in which to learn. The displays also indicate the ambience of the work placements which students will visit. This strength is not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Some small rooms, however, inhibit the range of teaching and learning methods which can be used. There is little use of IT for teaching and the availability of appropriate CD-ROMs is inadequate. Some part-time teachers use their experience to keep the curriculum up to date, but a few full-time staff need to update their knowledge and practices through work placements.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
Certificate in childcare and education	2	Number of starters	38	27	15
		Retention (%)	76	93	67
		Achievement (%)	66	80	90
GNVQ intermediate health and social care	2	Number of starters	11	12	18
		Retention (%)	64	100	76
		Achievement (%)	100	33	50
CACHE diploma in nursery nursing	3	Number of starters	37	31	31
		Retention (%)	84	81	77
		Achievement (%)	73	60	86
National diploma in childhood studies (nursery nursing)	3	Number of starters	36	37	34
		Retention (%)	78	79	79
		Achievement (%)	75	81	79
GNVQ advanced health and social care	3	Number of starters	29	18	10
		Retention (%)	66	78	70
		Achievement (%)	56	43	71
National diploma in science (health studies)	3	Number of starters	19	10	11
		Retention (%)	68	90	73
		Achievement (%)	85	75	86

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

Curriculum Areas

Performing Arts

Grade 1

37 Inspectors observed 11 lessons, rehearsals and performances covering vocational courses in drama, music, and technical theatre studies. They agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- a team of committed, hard-working and well-qualified teachers
- all teaching good or outstanding
- high standards of performance
- retention and achievement rates consistently above national averages
- good progression to further study and employment
- a learning environment of professional standard
- good work experience

Weaknesses

- some poor accommodation

38 The school of performing and technical arts is based at the college's Misken Theatre at the Dartford site. The school offers a BTEC first diploma and a BTEC national diploma in performing arts. Students may also pursue the Northern Council for Further Education award in sound recording and the music theory qualifications of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. The college introduced additional courses leading to the National Open College Network (NOCN) qualifications in September 2000. The school runs a level 4 course in a small-scale touring theatre for which it is seeking accreditation. All students are enrolled in the Misken Theatre Company and participate as actors, musicians or technicians in a series of productions around which

assignments and assessments are organised. The provision is well managed. The school's strong leadership, sense of identity and clear strategic vision contribute to its excellence, but detach it somewhat from college systems and procedures.

39 There are excellent opportunities for students to perform. At the time of the inspection, about 50 students were involved in the Christmas production of *Alice*. Music students contribute to performances by composing or performing. Technical students design, prepare and manage sets, costumes, sound and lighting. Students create their own shows, but also gain good work experience crewing for professional companies playing at the Misken Theatre. Technical students have regular work experience behind the scenes at the English National Opera. Level 4 students devise, prepare and manage their own touring productions. There are fewer opportunities for students on popular music and music technology courses to gain experience of the music industry.

40 All teaching is good or outstanding. Lessons are well planned and effectively managed and often involve students in a variety of challenging activities. In a first-year level 3 acting lesson, the teacher set small groups of students short extracts from Brecht plays to rehearse and perform. The teacher then engaged the whole class in a lively debate about acting techniques. Dividing into pairs, students discussed a pertinent handout and then took part in a further, lively, discussion. A class made up of level 2 and level 3 music technology students were learning how to record music tracks in the recording studio. Students took responsibility for all aspects of the process and all were fully involved in discussing related issues. As mentioned in the self-assessment report, assignments are set at an appropriate level and are carefully designed. Teachers monitor students' work thoroughly.

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41 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that pass rates are consistently above national averages. According to college figures, retention rates were above national averages in 1999 and 2000. Music students' ensemble work is of a high standard. Students studying technical theatre are able to operate theatre sound and lighting with confidence. Acting students move very well on stage, although their vocal and textual skills are less well developed. Students in all areas develop high levels of autonomy. For example, student musicians rehearsed numbers they had composed and arranged themselves for the production of *Alice* under the direction of a student musical director. Progression to related work or further study is good. In 2000, 62% of level 3 leavers gained employment, went on to higher education in the performing arts, or progressed to the college's own level 4 course.

42 Teachers are well qualified and all have relevant industrial experience. The quality of some teaching accommodation is poor. Music lessons take place in a block scheduled for demolition and much teaching takes place in small, airless general-purpose rooms with no windows. Drama and technical theatre students work in a number of temporary huts which are in poor decorative condition. These weaknesses are included in the self-assessment report. Music sound recording facilities are of a professional standard, although there are too few computers for music technology. The Miskin Theatre has professional standard technical equipment, but front-of-house facilities are poor.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
BTEC first diploma in performing arts	2	Number of starters	30	*	24
		Retention (%)	90	*	88
		Achievement (%)	100	*	100
Northern Council of Further Education certificate in sound recording and studio administration	2	Number of starters	19	56	64
		Retention (%)	100	80	97
		Achievement (%)	100	100	*
BTEC national diploma in performing arts	3	Number of starters	74	41	62
		Retention (%)	68	*	81
		Achievement (%)	96	*	100

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Basic Skills

Grade 4

43 Inspectors observed seven lessons and one tutorial. They agreed with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- effective basic skills teaching in learning support centres

Weaknesses

- no effective college strategy for basic skills
- inadequate basic skills provision
- insufficient diagnostic testing of students
- overemphasis on basic skills qualifications
- insufficiently qualified teachers

44 Most of the college's basic skills teaching takes place in the vocational access programme, which offers an important progression route for students who have learning or behavioural difficulties, or both. Basic skills support is also provided by teachers in the learning support centres to help students on some of the vocational courses, such as motor vehicle and pre-uniform courses.

45 The support for basic skills development in the learning centres is good. Inspectors considered this provision a strength, but it is not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Following induction and diagnostic testing, students may be referred to the centres through their links with vocational areas. Alternatively, students may refer themselves. Teachers in the centres develop individual learning plans for students using the results of the diagnostic tests. They focus their teaching to meet individual students' needs and to build their confidence to

function independently by developing their literacy and numeracy skills. Students value the support they receive in the learning centres. There is regular review of students' progress and feedback to teachers in the relevant vocational areas.

46 The college works closely with organisations such as 'The Foyer' at Dartford and the employment service at Bluewater. The college has recently identified the scale of help needed locally in basic skills. However, the size of basic skills provision in the college is too small, a weakness not recognised in the self-assessment report. The college intends to increase support in basic skills and recently appointed a new head of school for key skills and basic skills. However, developments are still at the planning stage and do not yet include a clear definition of basic skills work in the college or targets to increase and improve provision.

47 The self-assessment report did not identify any particular strengths or weaknesses in teaching and learning, but inspectors did so. The proportion of good or outstanding lessons observed is well below the national average for this area. Some lessons are managed skilfully and there is a supportive working relationship between students and teachers, which enables students to gain in confidence. Students participate fully in class discussions and work well together. Teachers review the work covered previously and explain clearly the objectives for the lesson. However, in many other lessons, teachers use too narrow a range of teaching methods to be effective and pay little attention to the specific learning needs of individual students. There is insufficient diagnosis of students' learning needs, and students' individual learning plans are poorly developed. Teachers tend to focus on tasks which meet the requirements of Wordpower and Numberpower qualifications and they do not pay sufficient attention to methods which help students to develop their skills. For example,

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many students require help with their spelling, but teachers fail to explore different approaches to developing techniques for improving spelling. Some teachers encourage students to proofread and use dictionaries, but students who have difficulty relating sounds to symbols find it difficult to work with dictionaries. Homework is not set on a regular basis and teachers' comments tend to contain hints for preparing portfolios rather than hints to help students improve their performance. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that using learning support assistants in lessons is a strength. However, they are not always effective in helping students to make appropriate progress.

48 Basic skills teaching is organised to satisfy the requirements of Wordpower and Numberpower qualifications. Data on students' achievements are unreliable and incomplete, and inspectors could not construct a table of results for this area. College figures indicate that although the number of students being assessed for the qualifications is growing, pass rates have fallen significantly. The college does not have targets or performance indicators against which to measure retention and pass rates. The college has collected the destination details of students, and data in October 2000 show that 48% of vocational access students found employment and 18% went to further education.

49 Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report that basic skills is taught by qualified staff. Few teachers have appropriate basic skills qualifications. The college intends to identify the need for basic skills support in curriculum areas and to develop a training plan which reflects the need. Accommodation is adequate, although little attempt is made to make it a stimulating place in which to learn. The college recognises that resources, including IT facilities, for basic skills teaching are inadequate.

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 3

50 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that a number of significant weaknesses were not identified.

Key strengths

- good welfare and guidance services
- well-organised and efficient admissions process
- well-managed student support services

Weaknesses

- some unsatisfactory arrangements for learning support
- inadequate evaluation of the quality of tutorial support
- few opportunities for extra-curricular activities for students

51 The college produces informative course literature. It has close links with 12 local schools and three 'open' days a year for prospective students. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that student services, which include admissions, guidance and learner resources, are well managed. A free 'helpline' telephone number is available for prospective students to make enquiries. Calls are logged and enquiries are answered within one working day. A central admissions team interviews effectively all full-time students and many part-time students. Standard documentation is used to record outcomes of interviews, including any identified additional actions needed. Students speak highly of the process. The induction programme is good, although induction arrangements for students joining courses later in the term are sometimes inadequate.

52 The college has made progress in addressing some of the deficiencies in tutorials identified at the last inspection. Full-time and part-time students are allocated to tutors and full-time students have a one-hour tutorial period each week. The adequacy of one hour to take account of the additional requirements set out in the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE's) publication, *Qualifying for Success: Post-16 curriculum reform* was not reviewed. Tutors receive a handbook containing a suggested tutorial curriculum and relevant materials. Alternatively, course teams may design their own tutorial programmes; some of these are of poor quality and a few course teams choose not to have formal tutorial periods for some courses. In a recent college survey, 82% of students considered tutors were generally helpful. However, there is inadequate evaluation of the quality of tutorials where students consider them unhelpful, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report. The minimum standard of two personal reviews a year for each student is not always achieved. Of full-time students responding to a college survey, 19% did not receive a formal individual review last year. Students are set generalised learning objectives by their tutors. Some students' learning plans, which contain the objectives, are vague. There is little use of value-added data to assist in setting target grades and targets are not used to measure students' progress to ensure that they achieve their goals. The college plans to review tutorial provision and there is a draft plan for the further development of enrichment activities for students.

53 Specialist teachers in the two learning centres are well qualified and provide good support. Students with specific learning disabilities are well supported by specialist assistants. Full-time students on foundation courses undergo diagnostic tests to identify the level of help they need to develop their basic skills. Those on intermediate level courses undergo similar testing, but for key skills. The

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key skills testing was not fully effective; some students clearly needed help with basic skills as well as key skills, and there was a delay in re-assessing the level of learning support they required. Students on full-time advanced level courses, for whom key skills are now compulsory, are not tested to diagnose the level of support they may need. Part-time students are assessed on request. Results of tests are sent to course tutors. However, the college does not ensure that all the students identified as needing learning support receive the necessary help, nor does it measure the impact of learning support on student retention and pass rates. There are few IT facilities in the learning centres. These weaknesses are not identified in the self-assessment report.

54 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that careers advisers are well qualified and provide good support for full-time students. The guidance policy applies to all students, although older students may not have equal access to advice on progression opportunities. Computer software for careers advice is good but problems with the college network sometimes prevents its use. Work experience placements are well managed by student services staff. Student progression rates to higher education and employment are in line with the national average.

55 Student advisers provide financial and welfare guidance for students. In 1999-2000, 655 students sought help from the student adviser. Students can receive financial help from the learner support fund. The method used for allocating money is to be reviewed because funds were initially over-committed. Students who require counselling are directed to an external agency. There is a crèche at both sites for the children of staff, students and the public. There are few extra-curricular activities for students. In 1999-2000, the students union organised a trip to Amsterdam and students at the Gravesend site can take part in sporting activities on Wednesday afternoons. There are no other clubs or societies.

General Resources

Grade 3

56 Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but considered that some strengths were overstated. They identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- the good learning centre at the Bluewater site
- the improvements to accommodation at the Gravesend and Thameside sites
- good access to most of the accommodation for students with restricted mobility

Weaknesses

- the slow development of an effective IT network
- the poor standard of accommodation at the Dartford site
- deficiencies in the resources and IT facilities in the learning resources centres
- the lack of social areas for students

57 The college occupies four sites in the Dartford and Gravesham areas. The largest, at Gravesend, includes specialist facilities for hospitality and catering, technology and construction, central administration services and the National Sea Training Centre. The Dartford site has a main building and specialist accommodation for performing arts, including the Miskin Theatre. The third site at Thameside is used for specialist maritime and fire training courses. The fourth is a new purpose-built training centre in the Bluewater shopping complex. The college uses the premises of its franchise partners for some IT courses.

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Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some significant improvements have been made to the accommodation at both main sites. Since the last inspection the college has upgraded accommodation for technology, engineering and construction, and provided a leisure suite, a children's day nursery and specialist facilities for sea training. The college has ambitious plans to redevelop the poor accommodation at Dartford and is awaiting planning permission.

58 There is access to most of the accommodation for students with restricted mobility. Classrooms at Gravesend and Thameside are generally suitably furnished and suitably maintained. However, some areas are in need of redecoration. The recent relocation of some provision to Gravesend has improved the space utilisation at that site. Plans to address underuse of space at Dartford are contained in the planned redevelopment project. Phase 1 of this project has already had an impact.

59 The college recognises the need to improve the IT infrastructure to support a planned college-wide IT network, but progress has been slow. Computer links, cabling and servers do not have the capacity to support an appropriate IT network. The curriculum network does not meet the needs of staff and students and is sometimes unreliable. Few classrooms contain IT facilities. The absence of a curriculum intranet limits the use of IT in lessons. The college has recently developed an intranet for administrative purposes but it is too early to judge its effectiveness. As noted at the last inspection, there are large IT centres on open access for students at both main sites. Much of the equipment has been upgraded recently. However, students are not always able to transfer their work between computers in the IT suites and those in the open access centres because the systems are incompatible. There is no access to email for students. While staff have access to email, they do not all have individual

addresses. The ratios of computers to full-time equivalent students and to staff are around the national average. While the self-assessment report cited progress made, it did not highlight the remaining weaknesses.

60 There is a learning resources centre at each main site, open from 09.00 hours until 19.00 hours during the week and operating throughout most of the year. There is a shortage of quiet study areas for students. As recognised in the self-assessment report, the budget for updating the bookstock is inadequate and there are few qualified library staff. Although additional funding was allocated to augment the bookstock in 1999-2000, there are still deficiencies in some curriculum areas, as teachers make too few requests for specialist volumes. This weakness was also identified at the last inspection. There are some computers on open access for students at the learning resources centres at both sites, but these are available only until 16.00 hours. Both main sites have insufficient computers and access to the Internet to meet demand. These weaknesses in the learning resources centres and the absence of a curriculum intranet inhibit students' access to electronic research facilities and other computer-based learning materials.

61 The college has a range of sporting facilities at Gravesend, including a sports hall, swimming pool, fitness suite and playing field. Students have some free access to these facilities. There are dedicated day nurseries at Dartford and Gravesend. Students at the Bluewater site use the crèche in the shopping centre. There are no common rooms or social areas for students at either of the main sites.

Cross-college Provision

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

62 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses cited in the self-assessment report and identified a few additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-documented, comprehensive quality assurance system
- helpful bi-annual senior management reviews of programme areas
- good staff induction and appraisal

Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in self-assessment and lesson observations
- inadequate use of data and survey evidence in some areas
- insufficient monitoring of action plans

63 The staff handbook contains the college's procedures for quality assurance and staff development, which cover all aspects of the college's work. They include the following procedures: programme team reviews each term; bi-annual reviews of programme areas by a college panel; annual self-assessment; periodic lesson observations, which include full-time and part-time teachers; and a detailed termly analysis of the views of students. However, there is no systematic analysis of the views of employers, and quality standards for cross-college services have been developed only very recently. Staff understand the different elements of the quality assurance system.

64 Each term, programme area teams are required to consider their performance against documented criteria. Implementation of these aspects of the procedures is uneven across the college. Some teams follow the procedures

conscientiously while others give the process only token attention. When self-assessing, teams inappropriately use one year's retention data for analysing student retention rates, rather than figures which measure retention for the duration of two-year courses. The rigour of the analysis of students' achievements and the process for setting targets are hampered by the unreliability of the student data held on the college's management information system. The college acknowledged only some of these weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

65 The panel that reviews programme areas every two years includes the associate principal, a governor and a director of faculty not associated with the area. The panel meets representatives of the area and, separately, the associate principal and the governor speak to students to ascertain their views. After the review, the panel produces a report, which includes actions for the programme area team to consider. Inspectors agreed that the use of this panel is a strength. The team is required to write a response to the report three months later, and to include an account of progress made in achieving the necessary actions. Monitoring of these plans, particularly longer term, is inadequate.

66 The associate principal receives external verifiers' reports and, where appropriate, requests action plans to be produced to address issues. However, there are weaknesses in action-planning generally and in implementing the resultant plans. For example, actions to improve retention rates often do not include means to improve weaknesses in teaching and learning. Sometimes the implementation of actions is reported formally, but in some cases it is not. Some of the targets set for improving student retention and pass rates are inappropriate. There is no mechanism for ensuring the adequacy of plans or that relevant managers monitor their implementation appropriately.

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67 The college does not make full use of all the evidence it collects. For example, while some improvement targets are set, teams rarely measure performance against them. Actual performance, therefore, cannot be used systematically to inform judgements for the self-assessment report. Teachers make insufficient use of the views of students and of value-added data when conducting curriculum area self-assessment. The college awards grades for lessons observed which are considerably more generous than the national average and those awarded by inspectors. The college does not adequately analyse at college level the findings from lesson observations to inform any necessary staff development. The college recognises only some of these weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

68 The college's academic board meets termly. It receives faculty reports, the minutes of meetings of its three supporting committees, and a range of reports on curriculum matters. However, there is little consideration of some key matters, such as targets for students' achievements and the self-assessment report. There are no systematic procedures to govern the approval of new courses. The college monitors closely the level of complaints from students and reviews its charter regularly.

69 The college has produced three self-assessment reports since the last inspection using evidence collected through the college's quality assurance procedures. The latest report is long but set out clearly. Senior and middle managers validate each section of the full report. However, in many curriculum areas, inspectors considered that the report failed to identify weaknesses, for example, in teaching and learning and in students' achievements, and that it overstated some of the strengths. Both self-assessment and inspection were hampered by the lack of reliable data on students' achievements. Inspectors awarded lower grades than those awarded by the college in eight of the 12 areas inspected and awarded a higher grade in one.

70 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that staff induction and appraisal constitute a strength. There is induction for staff each term, supplemented by weekly briefings for those who join mid-way through a term, and mentors support new staff. Staff should be appraised every two years to assist in their development. By the time of the inspection, the college had reduced considerably the backlog of appraisals. The staff development programme is linked closely to the college's strategic plan and includes a good middle management training programme. It draws from the results of appraisal, self-assessment and external verifiers' reports, but does not consider evidence from lesson observations. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers need more industrial updating. While staff complete individual evaluation forms, an annual evaluation of all staff development activity is not undertaken. The college has been re-accredited for the Investor in People award.

Governance

Grade 3

71 Inspectors and auditors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report, but considered some of the strengths were overstated and they identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- governors' participation in programme reviews
- commitment to open style of governance
- effective operation of the audit committee

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Weaknesses

- insufficient oversight of the college's academic performance
- lack of rigour in monitoring achievement of college strategic and operational objectives
- some shortcomings in the administration of corporation business

72 The corporation has a determined membership of 18, comprising six business, three co-opted, two staff, one student, one local authority and two local community members, and the principal. There are two vacancies. Governors' attendance at corporation and committee meetings is good, averaging 85%. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors possess a broad range of expertise. This includes the expertise of a member who was previously a governor of the National Sea Training College. The group overseeing the proposed building project at the Dartford site draws appropriately on governors' experience and employs appropriate experts, where necessary. Governors have not conducted a formal skills audit, but they are aware that additional expertise among members would be useful, for example, knowledge of the school sector. As identified at the last inspection, their training needs have not been analysed formally and there is no training plan. Some governors have participated in relevant training courses; some have links with faculties. They also participate in the college's bi-annual reviews of programme areas and staff value their contribution. Governors have not devised indicators against which to measure their own performance.

73 Governors are involved closely in strategic planning. They work effectively with managers to formulate key strategic and operational objectives, mainly during review and planning days every November and May. However,

governors do not have formal mechanisms to assure themselves that strategic and operational objectives are being met. Neither the principal's termly reports to the corporation nor the annual review of the faculties' performance makes reference to the operational objectives set, or the extent to which they have been achieved. This weakness is not identified in the self-assessment report.

74 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.

75 Nine committees support the work of the corporation. There is a well-planned cycle of meetings for the committees and the corporation. The corporation meets at least once a term. Inspectors and auditors concluded that the audit committee operates effectively in accordance with Council Circular 98/15, *Audit Code of Practice*, and it submits an annual report of its activities to the corporation. There is some overlap in the work of the remuneration, 'ad hoc' and finance and general purposes committees. All have some responsibility in determining staff remuneration.

76 Governors do not exercise sufficient oversight of the college's academic performance, a weakness recognised in the self-assessment report and also raised at the last inspection. A standards committee has only recently been established to consider the quality of the curriculum and held its second meeting during the inspection. Members are still developing their understanding of how to interpret the often complex and extensive performance data the college provides for them. They expressed some confusion about the scope of the committee's remit, as well as the information they needed to review the college's academic performance effectively.

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77 Inspectors and auditors judged that there are some shortcomings in the administration of corporation business. This weakness was only partially acknowledged in the self-assessment report. It is not always clear from the agenda and papers provided for governors whether an item is for decision, discussion or information. Corporation and committee minutes do not always record clearly the actions required and by whom. Inspectors noted instances where requests for information to be brought to the next meeting were not met. The minutes regarding the corporation meeting to discuss the August and October 1999 modification orders to the articles of government are ambiguous. There is no reference to, or formal adoption of, the initial order. The search committee did not meet between October 1998 and February 2000. Changes to local unitary authorities have made it difficult to identify a suitable local authority nomination.

78 The corporation operates in an open manner and in accord with relevant policies and procedures, including those for standing orders, a code of conduct, 'whistleblowing' and public access to information. There is a long-established register of interests which has recently been extended to include senior managers with significant financial responsibility. The minutes of corporation meetings and the supporting papers are available for staff and students in the learning resources centre. A public meeting is held annually to report on the achievements of the previous year.

Management

Grade 3

79 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report, but considered that some strengths had been overstated and some weaknesses understated.

Key strengths

- productive range of external partnerships
- effective management of franchised provision
- clear organisation structure
- open and consultative working between managers

Weaknesses

- uneven implementation of college policies and procedures
- insufficient attention given to financial management
- unreliable computerised management information
- insufficient progress made to address some issues identified at the last inspection

80 The college's organisation structure, which has been in place for five years, is reviewed annually and modified, where appropriate. The senior management team has 10 members, including four faculty directors. Every faculty comprises schools of study, each managed by a head of school. Accountability is clear. There are regular senior management and middle management meetings, at which strategic and operational matters are discussed openly. Working relationships and communication are good.

81 There is a well-established strategic planning process. Each autumn, managers consider key issues arising from the self-assessment report. During a planning day in May, which governors attend, managers identify priorities for the next year. However, staff below management level are unclear about the college's main priorities in the operational plan, and considered they had not made any contributions. There is an interim plan for

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2000-01, which combines strategic and operational priorities. There is wide variation in the operation and effectiveness of schools of study in addressing some of the college's key aims. Neither faculties nor schools have development plans identifying the actions required of them to achieve these priorities, nor are there clear plans or strategies for improving student retention. These weaknesses are not fully acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

82 Inspectors and auditors judged that insufficient progress has been made in financial management. The development of the annual budget and the financial forecast are not fully integrated with strategic planning. Projected costs are modelled independently of income. The college reviews the resulting budget and adjusts planned activities to ensure it reflects the aim of achieving a break-even outcome on an historical cost basis. The college, therefore, has returned an operational deficit since 1997, generally in excess of the deficit that was forecasted. This weakness was not included in the self-assessment report. Staffing costs are reviewed regularly; costs other than for staffing are controlled by stopping expenditure when the budget limit is reached. Clear monthly management accounts are now produced promptly, but have only very recently been included on the agenda for senior management team meetings. As identified at the last inspection, there is no comprehensive model for costing courses. New courses that are planned are analysed to ensure they contribute to the college's income, but there is no routine re-assessment of contributions from existing courses. The college recently appointed a director of finance and set up systems to strengthen consideration of financial management by the senior management team.

83 The college's average level of funding has always been below the sector average, and the valuation of its inherited assets has led to a high annual depreciation charge. Nonetheless, the

college has maintained good financial health. The financial regulations have been updated and reviewed by the finance committee, to be approved by the corporation. Internal auditors have not identified any significant concerns with the college's internal control systems. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college met FEFC growth targets in 1998, 1999 and 2000.

84 The college's student information data are unreliable. This was identified at the last inspection. Staff continue to use their own records to measure student retention and achievement. The college's change to new software has compounded difficulties with data. The college acknowledged this weakness in the self-assessment report and plans to resubmit its ISR figures for 1998-99. Inspectors' checking of data before the inspection identified many errors, in particular, overgenerous calculation of student retention rates on two-year courses.

85 As recognised in the self-assessment report, the college has extensive partnerships, which have helped to widen student participation in its provision. The college leads the North West Kent Partnership, which has provided employment opportunities for people in Gravesham and Dartford, and established the 'learning shop' at the Bluewater retail centre. It has a franchise agreement with an IT training company in Gravesend. The college ensures that staff monitor the agreement and provides a community co-ordinator who provides advice to learners about further training opportunities. The college has been successful in bidding for funds for a range of projects, including for the childcare initiative funded by the FEFC.

86 The college has a range of key policies. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of those that have only recently been produced, for example, for equal opportunities and information learning technology. The implementation of policies and procedures

Cross-college Provision

generally across the college is uneven and this was identified at the last inspection. For example, there are variations in implementing the tutorial programme, quality assurance procedures and internal verification on vocational courses. The health and safety policy is clear and supported by a committee that conducts internal inspections and monitors accident reports.

Conclusions

87 The inspection team found that the college's self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified by the college but considered some strengths were overstated, some weaknesses had not been given adequate emphasis, and that several key weaknesses had been missed. In eight of the 12 areas inspected, the college awarded itself a grade higher than inspectors did.

88 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	2
16-18 years	28
19-24 years	17
25+ years	53
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	15
Level 2 (intermediate)	29
Level 3 (advanced)	24
Level 4/5 (higher)	1
Level not specified	30
Non-schedule 2	1
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	326	644	11
Agriculture	0	7	0
Construction	66	702	9
Engineering	202	1,961	26
Business	380	649	12
Hotel and catering	260	735	12
Health and community care	542	722	15
Art and design	455	182	7
Humanities	133	83	3
Basic education	95	311	5
Total	2,459	5,996	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1998-99 ISR data, the college recruited 16% 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	166	3	55	224
Supporting direct learning contact	33	1	5	39
Other support	133	1	0	134
Total	332	5	60	397

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1998	1999	2000
Income	£10,825,000	£11,325,000	£12,700,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£15.75*	£16.20	£16.62
Payroll as a proportion of income	72%	71%	67%
Achievement of funding target	99%	101%	98%
Diversity of income	32%	34%	33%
Operating surplus	-£683,000	-£578,000	-£316,000

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 1997-98 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

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

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

*provisional data

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	378	618	791	781	529	727
	Retention (%)	81	86	86	76	79	82
	Achievement (%)	61	70	69	54	79	75
2	Number of starters	1,520	1,680	1,747	1,146	1,199	1,314
	Retention (%)	81	80	81	78	78	77
	Achievement (%)	63	71	75	62	70	77
3	Number of starters	629	866	996	867	869	803
	Retention (%)	77	77	79	78	76	81
	Achievement (%)	70	63	65	53	72	70
4 or 5	Number of starters	12	28	21	159	189	179
	Retention (%)	92	68	95	72	88	85
	Achievement (%)	82	87	25	33	47	57
Short courses	Number of starters	205	265	222	1,456	2,331	1,384
	Retention (%)	99	98	98	100	98	99
	Achievement (%)	88	94	93	95	98	98
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	240	179	124	269	39	99
	Retention (%)	90	94	94	88	95	77
	Achievement (%)	65	94	91	52	86	86

Source: ISR

*data unreliable

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