

**REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE**

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# **Northumberland College**

**September 1997**

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**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

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**THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL**

*The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.*

*College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.*

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## **GRADE DESCRIPTORS**

*The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.*

*The descriptors for the grades are:*

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

*By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.*

### **College grade profiles 1993-96**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Inspection grades</b>				
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

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# FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 110/97

**NORTHUMBERLAND COLLEGE**

**NORTHERN REGION**

**Inspected September 1996-May 1997**

## Summary

Northumberland College is a well-managed general further education college serving the county of Northumberland. It offers a wide range of vocational courses at all levels and it is enthusiastically extending its provision within the local community. The college has increased the flexibility of its arrangements for students' attendance and for modes of study. The members of the board of corporation are energetic, committed to the college and provide effective leadership. Managers at all levels of the college are accessible and efficient. Almost all teachers have professional teaching qualifications. The college has made good progress in promoting key skills and ensuring that they are integral to all courses. A particular strength of the college is its commitment to education for students with special learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college should: improve students' attendance rates and examination results in some areas; continue to work for better links with the county's high schools; further develop its systems of quality assurance; replace some specialist equipment which is outdated; and improve its accommodation.

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

<b>Aspects of cross-college provision</b>		<b>Grade</b>
Responsiveness and range of provision		2
Governance and management		2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		2
Quality assurance		3
Resources:	staffing	1
	equipment/learning resources	3
	accommodation	3

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Science, mathematics and computing	3	Health and social care	2
Construction	2	Hair and beauty	2
Engineering	2	Art and design	2
Business	2	Humanities	2
Hospitality and catering	3	Adult basic education and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	1

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1 Northumberland College was inspected between September 1996 and May 1997. Fourteen inspectors visited the college for 70 days. The enrolment and induction of students were inspected at the beginning of September 1996. Inspection of curriculum areas took place in February and March 1997. Aspects of cross-college provision were inspected in May 1997. Inspectors visited 173 classes, evaluated a range of students' work and scrutinised documentation. Inspectors met representatives from the Northumberland Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), institutions of higher education, governors, head teachers, college staff and students, local employers and members of the local community.

## **THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS**

2 Northumberland College is the only college of general further education in Northumberland. It is the most northerly college of further education in England. Its catchment area is large and covers an area of 5,026 square kilometres; it stretches from the edge of the Tyneside conurbation in the south to the Scottish border over 60 miles to the north, and from the North Sea in the east to within 20 miles of Carlisle in the west. The county of Northumberland has a population of 307,000 with an average population density of 61 per square kilometre, compared with the national average of 242. The population is unevenly distributed; two-thirds are concentrated in the urban south-east corner of the county and most of the remainder are in a few market towns separated by considerable distances. Much of the county consists of upland moors and forests. Transport in most of the county is difficult: with the exception of the east coast and Newcastle to Carlisle routes, the road network consists of country roads. Public transport in rural areas is minimal, and car ownership is low.

3 The main site is in Ashington, which is a small town of 29,000 people, 15 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. The college began as a mining school in the 1920s in a joint venture between the county council and local mining employers. The present site was opened in 1959. There is a small centre in Berwick-upon-Tweed, four miles from the Scottish border and the college also leases two centres in Amble and Blyth. The college has its own hall of residence with 54 study bedrooms, for weekly or termly boarders from rural areas of the county.

4 The overall unemployment rate in the county is 7.4 per cent compared with the current national average of 6.2 per cent. In Ashington and Blyth there are wards where male unemployment approaches 40 per cent, much of it long term. The south-east of the county previously had an economy based on coal mining, with, at the height of its activity, over 80 deep coal mines. Only one working mine remains. With the exception of a small area to the north west of Newcastle, the entire county is eligible for European structural fund support in recognition of its endemic problems

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of industrial decline and rural deprivation. Tourism and agriculture are the main occupational areas: other employment opportunities exist in the pharmaceutical, engineering and service industries.

5 There are 16 community high schools in the county, which provide education for 13 to 18 year old students. The county council is recognised by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) as a designated institution and each high school receives FEFC funding, through the county council, to provide adult education. The only other FEFC-funded college in the county is a college of agriculture. There are other further education sector colleges in Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. Local training organisations provide training in business studies and information technology. The college recruits students from all the county's high schools, and attracts small numbers from Tyneside. In 1996, 67 per cent of Northumberland school-leavers remained in full-time education and this proportion is above the national figure of 63 per cent. The destinations of all school-leavers in Northumberland are: 52 per cent to school sixth forms, 12 per cent to Northumberland College, 3 per cent to other further education providers, 6 per cent to employment, 12 per cent received youth training, and 5 per cent remained unemployed. The destinations of 10 per cent were unknown.

6 The college provides courses in all 10 FEFC programme areas. It is committed to maintaining a broad curriculum. In 1995-96, a total of 9,570 students enrolled on college programmes. Less than 20 per cent of enrolments are for full-time courses. Three-quarters of the student population are aged over 19 years. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. The curriculum of the college is divided into nine programme areas, each led by a programme area leader. The senior management team comprises the principal, the vice-principal and the directors of curriculum and finance. The college employs 339 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 71 are part time. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

7 The mission of the college is 'to provide education, training and services of quality to the region's community, its business and beyond'. In pursuing its mission, the college is committed to: 'fostering a culture of personal growth and development which enhances institutional growth and success; promoting an environment which encourages learning and progression; facilitating access to college services that are cost effective, flexible and quality assured; treating all members of the community with respect; contributing to the cultural life of the community; providing a comprehensive range of learning opportunities and services that meet the needs of clients'.

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## RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

8 The college is rapidly expanding its range of provision and improving its responsiveness to the needs of its community. It has made considerable progress in developing national initiatives; it has enthusiastically devised courses which lead to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and it promotes modern apprenticeships. Staff are generally well informed about national issues and developments affecting further education. Key reports such as the Dearing report on the *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* and the Tomlinson *Inclusive Learning Report of the Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee* provide a stimulus for curriculum development.

9 Approximately 90 per cent of college enrolments are for vocational courses. Excluding basic education, all programme areas offer vocational courses at levels 1 (foundation), 2 (intermediate) and 3 (advanced). Level 4 courses are operating in most areas and a minority of areas offers courses at level 5. Students can study full time or part time at each level; there are clear progression routes between levels. There are few opportunities for students who cannot attend the college regularly to take vocational courses. Fifty students are, however, following subjects in business and management at level 4 through open learning and they study on their own, using learning materials which are tailored to their individual needs. The range of subjects in some programme areas is limited. The college has developed specialist courses which have attracted students; for example the NVQ level 3 for street masons and paviours is unique in the region. In 1996-97, the college's managing agency has 90 trainees on modern apprenticeship schemes.

10 The county's high schools compete strongly with the college for students of school-leaving age who wish to take general education courses. The choice of such courses offered at the college is wide. The college offers 27 subjects at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and 24 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects. There are low enrolments for some subjects and the college is undertaking a review of its provision. All subjects can be studied through part-time attendance or as part of a full-time programme. Approximately half the students on GCE and GCSE courses are aged over 18. One hundred and twenty students are currently taking GCE A level and GCSE subjects through open learning and 15 subjects are available through this mode of study. Students progress to courses of higher education within the college and at local universities. Representatives from establishments of higher education with which the college works closely speak highly of the quality of the college's co-operation and involvement with them.

11 The college works well with students who have a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It has strong links with external agencies and special schools; 106 pupils from these schools attend link courses at the college. Staff from all programme areas teach elements of the 'skillpower' and extended education programmes which are the basis



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of the college's specific provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Almost 300 students are on these programmes. Careful thought has been given to enabling students to progress to more advanced programmes. Eighteen students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are on the college's general or vocational education courses and care is taken to ensure that they benefit from them fully. Their integration is well managed. The college is increasingly responsive to the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who cannot easily get to Ashington: for example, 35 students are taking courses at Bedlington day centre.

12 The timetable has a 'matrix' structure which is flexible and allows students to take courses which are additional to their main programme of study. Two hundred and forty-four students on general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) courses also study for an NVQ, 236 GNVQ students take GCSE or GCE A level subjects, and 88 students on the full-time GCE A level course are involved in various additional studies. Eighteen courses, mainly those leading to an NVQ, can be joined at any time and students take their NVQ when they are ready to do so. Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) key skills units in communication, number and information technology are offered as an integral part of courses; in 1996-97, 140 students were taking these units at various levels. Some full-time courses have classes timetabled over two or three days partly to suit students who have to travel some distance. The college is accrediting an increasing range of courses at its main site and in the community through the recently-established Northumberland Open College Network. Students from an exceptionally broad range of courses are involved in exchanges with partner institutions in the European community. For example:

- under the Lingua programme, nursery nursing students exchange with students from Greece, and beauty therapy students exchange with students from Finland
- under the Leonardo programme, catering students study fish cookery in Finland, and travel and tourism students exchange with students from Greece.

An exchange of staff with a community college in the United States is leading to the productive development of new learning materials for the higher national certificate in business studies.

13 The college has successfully built positive relationships with some middle and primary schools. Well-received 'taster' days, attended by 105 pupils from two middle schools, were held in 1996; four additional schools will be involved in 'taster' days in 1997. Thirty primary schools sent a total of 1,200 pupils to the construction curriculum centre in 1996-97. There are no curriculum links and few co-operative arrangements with the county's high schools.

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14 Before incorporation, the college's involvement with community work was limited as a result of the county's decision to develop high schools and some middle schools as community schools. The college's community-based work has developed rapidly in recent years, particularly through the centres at Berwick, Blyth and Amble. Each has a community guidance worker to develop provision in the local area, and is linked to the college's computer network for communication purposes. Berwick and Blyth have video-conferencing facilities which are used on courses, for example by the teachers of the University of Sunderland's information technology degree course, and to enable staff at the centres to participate in meetings without travelling. The college has constructive working relationships with local agencies, for example, borough councils and social services. It meets representatives from the local authority and community schools in a successful county-wide exercise to co-ordinate community provision. A number of college schemes enable women to re-enter, or maintain their involvement in, education and training. Courses are increasingly run in other locations, such as community halls and working men's clubs. The college is successfully attracting support for community provision through collaborative bids for European and other funds.

15 The college's business development unit is responsible for the organisation and co-ordination of short courses and consultancy for industry and commerce. The unit has been set an earnings target of £300,000 in 1996-97; all programme areas have individual targets, which some are more likely to achieve than others. Particular successes include a programme of food hygiene courses which led to a follow-up programme related to the E.coli infection: this involved 193 delegates from 156 different organisations. The college has provided training needs analysis, and assessor and NVQ training and accreditation for the local plant of a major pharmaceutical company which involved 198 employees. It is using this experience to inform further developments of similar work. Representatives from local businesses confirmed that some areas of the college responded to their needs more positively than others. The formal links between programme areas and businesses are similarly varied. In construction, there is a lively and productive industry advisory group; a major construction company has placed all its trainees in the region at the college. Other programme areas have less effective links with industry and commerce. Working relationships, and communications, with the Northumberland TEC are good at operational level. The director of curriculum chairs the region's lifelong learning group of the National Task Force. In 1995-96, the TEC placed youth and adult training contracts amounting to £570,000 with the college's managing agency. Some tensions at executive and board level have, in the past, hindered the effectiveness of the TEC's working relationships with the college.

16 The college has made determined and successful efforts to raise the community's awareness of the opportunities it offers. The small publicity and promotions unit is responsible for advertising and for organising

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information and promotional events. Publicity materials are generally in a consistent house style. The unit advertises the college in the local free press, by targeted mail shots and, in the Berwick area, on local radio. However, broader marketing activities are underdeveloped. For example, the publicity and promotions unit has insufficient information to evaluate the effectiveness of its strategies. There is no central co-ordination of local labour market intelligence, although there are examples of good information being gathered by individual programme areas, for example catering. A recently-constituted strategy group is intended to address these shortcomings.

17 It is only recently that the college has begun to promote the principles of equal opportunities. The equal opportunities group, which is a standing committee of the academic board, has been reconstituted under the leadership of a senior manager. It now has 10 voluntary members drawn from various levels and areas of the college, including a student. Not all programme areas are represented on the group. A revised policy with operational objectives has been agreed but the policy objectives have not yet been formally translated into specific targets or an action plan. The group has led a 'watch your language' campaign, and produced a disability statement relating to students. The latter is also available in Braille. Some staff training in equal opportunities has taken place, for example in relation to differentiated learning materials and working with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. On a few courses, equal opportunities issues are actively addressed: for example, GNVQ art and design students had an assignment brief to design posters promoting equal opportunities. Vocational courses follow traditional gender patterns of recruitment. The engineering staff have made efforts to improve the image of engineering for women through running 'taster' events for girls in years 10 and 11 from a local school, and arranged for a publicity bus from the Women into Science and Engineering organisation to be stationed at the college.

## **GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

18 The board of the corporation is properly constituted and is seeking ways to improve its operations. It includes the principal and two members of the teaching staff. There is a nominee from the Northumberland TEC. The membership of the board of corporation has been expanded recently from 12 to 14 in an attempt to bring in staff and members with community interests. There are currently three vacancies. Business members bring particular knowledge of quality assurance and personnel matters. Two of the governors are female. The board has six committees: membership and development; estates and buildings; remuneration; finance and personnel; audit; and student services. The student services committee provides good opportunities for governors to consult with students. It includes five members of the corporation, and 10 students including the president and vice-president of the student association. Board members

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have established a register of interests, agreed a code of conduct, reviewed their effectiveness and taken part in training. The college's director of finance acts as clerk to the board and to most of its committees, including the audit committee.

19 Members of the board have a clear understanding of their roles and are effective in setting the strategic direction of the college. The board has agreed six strategic priorities. The chair and principal work well together. The board has recently made changes to improve its operation. For example, it has specified the form in which it receives financial reports and is considering adopting a set of standing orders. The schedule of meetings is aligned with the college's planning and financial cycles, but does not include a timescale for the receipt of important reports.

20 Managers are consultative and supportive: staff find them accessible and approachable. Senior management team meetings focus in turn on financial, personnel, curriculum, student services and estates matters. Senior managers hold constructive, fortnightly meetings with the nine programme area leaders. There is no forum for senior managers to meet cross-college managers. At the time of the inspection, the college was undergoing changes to its organisational structure because of an emerging financial threat caused by changes to the demand-led element of funding. As a result of these organisational changes, some members of staff have experienced personal uncertainty about their roles within the college.

21 The college's strategic plan for the next three years is the result of collaboration between the board of the corporation, the local education authority (LEA), Northumberland TEC, college managers and staff throughout the college. The current strategic plan contains corporate objectives, operating targets and performance criteria to help managers and governors to monitor progress. Each programme area and college team has a detailed operating plan which is clearly linked to college strategic objectives. The quality and style of these plans vary. A useful summary of the college's operational plan is provided to all staff and governors on a single sheet. The college has not produced an accommodation strategy, although a draft was recently considered by the estates and buildings committee.

22 The academic board has a membership of 15 drawn from teachers, managers and support staff. The majority of members are college managers. The board is chaired by the principal. It operates primarily through its five committees, including those for the review of quality, student services and equal opportunities. Some committees work well and encourage staff involvement in developing policy and defining standards. The college became aware that some other committees were moribund and has taken steps to revitalise them.

23 The programme area leaders report directly to the principal. Cross-college co-ordinators, for example for each of the key skills of communication, number and information technology and for each of

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the programme levels, are responsible to the director of curriculum. The relationship between the programme area leaders and the cross-college co-ordinators is creative and productive; their respective roles and responsibilities are usually well understood. In general, programme areas and courses are well managed. Most vocational areas have sound leadership. In the best programme areas, course teams meet regularly to consider matters such as curriculum planning and quality assurance, the progress of students and the development of new courses. Many teams set targets for recruitment, retention and achievement. In other areas, teams are less involved in planning; communications between teachers and managers are poorer; course administration is weaker, and some part-time teachers receive insufficient help and support.

24 The college has a wide range of policies on, and it has clearly-defined standards for, the curriculum. The policies are in a consistent style and have been drawn together into a widely-distributed, loose-leaf handbook which is updated as necessary. The academic board receives and comments on new college policies before recommending them to the principal. However, it has no role in monitoring the implementation of these policies. There are no policies or standards for key areas of the college's work such as accreditation of students' prior learning, management information systems and marketing.

25 There are good arrangements for consulting staff and for keeping them well informed about developments in the college. In April 1995, the college established a communications policy. In addition to the communication links established through line management structures and cross-college meetings, a valued weekly 'college bulletin' is sent to all full-time staff, part-time staff and to the board of the corporation. The principal holds a full staff meeting at least three times a year. Despite these arrangements, however, some staff believe that some recent decisions were taken without sufficient consultation. The members of staff who sit on the academic board and the board of the corporation do not report back effectively to their colleagues on decisions taken by these bodies.

26 Internal budgetary control is effective. Staffing costs are centrally managed and are modest compared with similar colleges. The budget delegated to each programme area is determined by a historical allocation which is modified in the light of enrolments. Programme area leaders and other budget holders receive thorough monthly financial reports. Team leaders are uncertain about the process for bidding for capital items. The college does not monitor unit costs for each course. The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 was £19.11 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges was £18.13 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

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27 Most managers and programme area leaders have recently been connected to the college's computerised management information system. Many need training to ensure they are able to use the system to full advantage. Several managers and course leaders have developed their own ways of storing information which are not compatible with college systems. For example, enquiries for courses are logged on a system developed by staff; marketing staff have a database of contacts made at promotional events. The quality and quantity of recent reports to senior and middle managers have improved; staff have increasing confidence in the data provided on attendance and course completion. Not all staff rooms contain computer workstations and many staff have to use the resource centres to gain access to the electronic mail facility, and other software packages. The college successfully collects destination data on a high proportion of students who leave the college. Details are available for the destinations of 94 per cent of all students who complete their course, and for 62 per cent of those who leave before they complete their course of study.

### **STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT**

28 The college sets clear and realistic strategic goals for its services to students. There are detailed policy statements and standards for pre-course counselling, careers education, and key skills. There are no policy statements on students' guidance and support, or on tutorials. The absence of such statements makes it difficult for staff to set standards for the support and guidance of students and for them to monitor how these are achieved. Recently, however, the college conducted a review of its tutorial system and a working group has been established which will identify and define good tutorial practices.

29 The provision of information and advice to prospective students is well organised. A 'family open day' provides an opportunity for large numbers of local people to sample a range of activities and to view facilities at the college: over 2,600 visitors attended this event in 1996. Pre-course guidance and counselling are provided to applicants by a team of trained advisers from the teaching staff who conduct interviews throughout the year. Individual courses adapt existing guidance materials to suit the particular needs of their students. Information and advice are recorded systematically and thoroughly. All students are offered a firm or conditional acceptance, or they receive impartial advice on suitable alternatives, including youth training, foundation learning schemes or information on other providers. It is college policy to give 'associate student status' to all applicants who accept the offer of a place before the enrolment period in September. As a result of this successful practice, associate students are able to use the college's facilities before they join their course. In addition, the college cements its relationship with associate students by regularly sending them information bulletins.

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30 Enrolment and admissions procedures are efficiently organised and well managed. Enrolment events are well publicised in local newspapers and in leaflets in libraries and community centres. Enrolment processes are efficient; application forms are checked and fees are assessed speedily. Specialist staff are available during enrolment to offer advice and guidance. Staff conduct individual interviews with sensitivity and they all use a helpful checklist. Decisions taken during interviews are scrupulously recorded and learning agreements are completed. The overall design of the induction programme is good and the quality of many of the presentations about college services is high. In some programme areas, induction is too general and students find the experience unhelpful.

31 The initial identification of learning support needed by students is good. All new, full-time students take tests. Their performance in these enables staff to identify the additional help students need with communication, numeracy and information technology. Where necessary, an agreed programme of support is included in the students' learning agreement. The personal tutors ensure that the support is included in the timetable, and monitor their students' attendance at additional support sessions. In September 1996, of the 895 newly-enrolled full-time students, 14 per cent, 10 per cent and 34 per cent were identified as needing support in communications, numeracy and information technology, respectively. Some students fail to attend the workshops provided for them. In addition to the initial assessment processes, there are clear procedures whereby students are referred for additional support for their learning during their studies. Basic skills support is provided by a team of qualified staff. The college successfully achieved a national award entitled Positive About Disabled People, for its provision for students with disabilities. Additional support for students identified as having disabilities is readily available from specialist staff and is well co-ordinated across the college. The support ranges from providing access to diagnosis for dyslexia to the lending of equipment to students. In 1995-96, 16 per cent of full-time students received some form of additional, practical support.

32 All full-time students have a personal tutor and one hour a week is timetabled for group tutorial contact. Tutorial provision is overseen by a curriculum co-ordinator. A comprehensive resource pack for personal tutors contains much useful information, guidelines for the various roles a tutor is expected to fulfil, and a suggested programme of topics to be covered during tutorials. The programme covers study skills, action planning, portfolio building, preparation for work and interviews for higher education. There is some variability in the quality and delivery of the tutorial programme. Tutors have considerable autonomy to decide what topics will be covered in the tutorial programme. As a result, there is variation in the content of tutorial programmes and in some instances, there are significant gaps in the students' tutorial experience. Tutorial support for some part-time students is inadequate, and these students do not always receive sufficient information about the college and its facilities.

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The systems to identify, monitor and track students' attendance and to follow up persistent absenteeism are effective.

33 Careers guidance in the college is provided by a full-time careers officer based in the college through an agreement with an external agency. As well as offering careers advice on an individual basis, the careers officer holds careers workshops. Provisional figures for the academic year 1996-97 suggest that only a minority of full-time students have had individual interviews. Students can also get careers advice elsewhere in the county, but the college is unable to monitor the coverage and quality of this. The work of the careers officer is supplemented by personal tutors who provide advice on progression to employment or higher education. The college staff provide a free adult guidance service at its main site and its other centres. The service is well publicised and marketed. Last year, 750 clients were seen, of whom 38 per cent subsequently enrolled in the college. The service is impartial, provides a valuable service for the community, is thoroughly documented and is well evaluated. Adult students have good access to systems to accredit the skills they use in their current jobs: 50 students are currently making use of such accreditation.

34 The provision of student services has greatly improved over the last year. The advice centre has been expanded and refurbished: there is now a team of trained advisers and an extensive information and resource bank for staff and students. Advice on matters such as personal finance and housing is available. The hall of residence sometimes provides students with overnight accommodation in cases of emergency. The college has a 15 place nursery which is full. The college also pays for subsidised childminding, to supplement the nursery provision. Bus services provided jointly by the college and the county council serve the outlying areas.

35 The long-established counselling provision for staff as well as students is well regarded. It is located in separate and discreet accommodation. There are three counsellors, of whom one is full time and two are part time. All are professionally qualified and their work is regularly supervised. Good confidential records and statistics are kept. Some tutorial staff fail to make sufficient distinction between counselling on personal problems and advice and guidance on welfare issues. As a result, students take their problems to the counselling service and this has unrealistic and unnecessarily high demands made upon it.

36 The student association has recently been revitalised following a dormant period. The appointment in September 1996 of a student liaison officer has led to a re-awakening of students' interest in the association, although many students are still unaware of its existence. Part-time students are under represented in the association. The turnout of students in the recent election for the executive officers was low. The present office facilities for the student association are cramped. An extensive and well-attended programme of sporting and social activities, organised by the liaison officer, is now available. This includes sports fixtures with



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football and hockey teams playing in local league competitions, trips to the theatre and opera, excursions to theme parks and to Dublin, and sailing activities.

### TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

37 Most of the teaching observed during the inspection was of a high standard. Of the 173 lessons inspected, 70 per cent had strengths which outweighed weaknesses. This proportion is higher than the average of 63 per cent for all sessions awarded grades 1 or 2 during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Five per cent of lessons were judged to have weaknesses which outweighed strengths. The overall attendance rate in the classes observed was low at 73 per cent of those on the register: the average class size was nine students. The grades awarded to the lessons inspected are shown in the following table.

#### Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	1	9	4	3	0	17
GCSE	1	10	3	0	0	14
GNVQ	3	11	11	3	0	28
NVQ	8	31	12	0	0	51
Basic education	1	7	0	0	0	8
Other vocational	9	20	8	3	0	40
Other	2	8	5	0	0	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>173</b>

38 In the best sessions, teaching is characterised by:

- good relationships between staff and students
- knowledgeable and professional staff
- a sound focus on meeting examination requirements
- good management of students who have had different kinds of experience
- lively discussions
- good use of independent learning packages and course guides which students can use on their own, often devised by college staff
- successful integration of key skills with the main content of the course
- an emphasis on reaching professional standards in vocational areas.

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39 In the weaker sessions, teaching and learning is marred by:

- teaching styles which are not suitable for small classes
- insufficient use of group work
- inconsistency in the quality, and use, of lesson plans and schemes of work
- insufficient use of information technology
- the late arrival of some students
- outdated teaching aids
- over reliance on dictation.

40 Work experience is an integral part of many vocational courses. In the current year, 800 students will be involved in work experience. It is underpinned by a policy statement which requires course teams to monitor and report on work experience in the annual course review. There are good examples of work experience which is valuable and vocationally relevant. The college does not as yet maintain any central data relating to work experience and work placements. Arrangements for work experience are not co-ordinated centrally. There are no targets against which the extent and quality of the college's provision of work experience may be measured. A procedure is currently being introduced to register attendance in the workplace. Key skills are integrated with all vocational subjects across the college and in many areas, such as hair and beauty, they are encouraged and promoted. A significant number of students attend specially-designated workshops to develop their portfolios for the BTEC key skills award. Information technology is an integral part of most learning programmes. The communications, information technology and mathematics workshops provide further opportunities for students to develop key skills, but they are underused.

41 Teaching is confident and competent in computing and information technology. Lessons are well planned, and they are supported by detailed schemes of work. Teachers give effective help in lessons to individual students. They make students work regularly and they monitor and review the progress of individual students conscientiously. When making a presentation, some teachers do not ensure that they have the attention of all students and they allow students to engage in distracting keyboard activity. The teaching approach is sometimes insufficiently challenging for the more able students. Mathematics lessons are generally well taught. Schemes of work ensure coverage of the syllabus content. Considerable care is taken to ensure that all students of mathematics make progress, irrespective of their abilities. The short bridging course to help some GCSE students to progress to GCE A level mathematics is helpful. There are weaknesses in the teaching and learning of science. In the weaker lessons, learning objectives are unclear, inattentive students are not made to concentrate, and teachers accept written work of poor quality. The marking of students' work lacks rigour and is seldom moderated by

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other teachers. Assignments are often returned to students late. Many lesson plans in science are rudimentary; they do not specify the resources required or the teaching methods to be used; and they are not routinely used by teachers.

42 The teaching of construction is good. Students and staff work well together. In many lessons, staff ensure that there is a clear relationship between industrial practice and the topics studied. Lessons are generally well planned and assessment processes take account of employers' specific needs. In NVQ craft programmes, high-quality learning materials are specially designed to allow students to study on their own. Key skills are successfully integrated with many programmes. For example, a teacher encouraged students on a highways course to calculate the total length of kerbing required on a housing estate. Exciting project work undertaken by advanced GNVQ students is linked to local environmental issues, and involves students from the Netherlands. A few teachers do not check sufficiently the quality of students' practical work or correct students for poor or unsafe tool handling. Though teachers try hard to work flexibly, they are sometimes overtaxed by having to manage groups of students working in different workshops and resource centres.

43 Students on engineering courses are well taught. In many theory lessons they are provided with good-quality workbooks and other learning materials, some of which have been designed by their teachers. The teachers' methods for monitoring, assessing and recording students' progress in workshop based subjects are thorough. Teachers are skilled at managing groups containing students of different abilities engaged in widely different tasks. Students in one welding class had a wide range of abilities and were working toward either NVQ level 1 or NVQ level 2. The teacher had prepared a wealth of learning materials to assist the development and assessment of the necessary underpinning knowledge. In one workshop, the assistance of an experienced technician enabled the teacher to demonstrate a particular welding process to a small group in a welding bay, whilst others could safely continue to work on the tasks in hand. In classroom lessons, teachers sometimes fail to involve all members of the group. Many students on GNVQ courses do not keep their key skills log books up to date. Students are insufficiently encouraged to plan their work. For example, many students in a class on a GNVQ intermediate course had not yet handed in assignment work set in the previous term, although they were already working on the next assignment.

44 In business management and administration studies, teachers are good communicators. They set assignments in a realistic vocational context, encourage students to contact local industries and businesses and enable them to develop key skills. Some teachers, however, fail to test these skills appropriately and they do not check sufficiently that students understand what is being taught. Teachers achieve a good balance between developing students' knowledge and assessing this through assignments. Lessons are generally well planned, and teachers adapt

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their styles to meet the needs of adult and younger students. Some teachers make good use of simple visual aids. In a well-managed lesson for students on an NVQ accounting course, the teacher showed an overhead transparency of a balance sheet on which preliminary details had already been entered. This was projected on to a whiteboard and the teacher worked through the example using students' contributions for each entry.

45 Teachers on catering and leisure courses have good technical skills. Some teachers plan their lessons well and they exude energy and enthusiasm which motivate students. Other teachers make minimal use of lesson plans and students do not fully contribute to the discussion. In those lessons where students are challenged with direct questioning and well-planned tasks, good learning takes place. In practical lessons, teachers do not always ensure that students carry out tasks to a professional standard. Teachers are able to enrich the quality of learning through their contacts with industry. Students are involved in a wide range of commercial activities. For example, students provided the catering for a wedding on the island of Rhum and they have managed a ski slope in Morpeth. Students frequently take part in local and national competitions and make overseas visits. Some students have insufficient access to realistic work environments and information technology equipment. Progress is being made to establish a travel agency within the college, linked to a commercial agency, which will allow travel and tourism students to practise their skills.

46 Most health and social care teachers are enthusiastic in their teaching. All lessons are well structured and the best have detailed plans which specify the learning methods as well as the teaching methods. In a minority of lessons, the teachers are too dominant and do not sufficiently involve all students in the learning activities. In the most effective lessons, students are fully engaged in the learning process; teachers continually strengthen learning by encouraging the students to draw on their vocational experience. Relationships between staff and students are positive and mutually respectful. The principles of client care, equal opportunities and individual rights are properly valued in the classroom.

47 In the hair and beauty sections, the teaching is of good quality. Teaching aids are used effectively. Teachers manage small group work well. Schemes of work are well organised and coherent but lesson plans vary in quality. Professional standards are promoted and encouraged: teachers demonstrate techniques proficiently. The files, portfolios and written work of most students are of an appropriate standard and they are marked effectively. Good use is made of packages of learning material which students may work through by themselves; some packages are commercially produced and others have been designed by teachers. Students are not encouraged to make sufficient use of new technology. At the end of practical lessons, some teachers fail to check on the extent of learning which has taken place. Students on the NVQ level 2 beauty therapy

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course receive insufficient challenge to complete their studies and take their qualification within a reasonable and clearly-specified timescale.

48 Teaching on all art and design courses is sound and effective. Staff work co-operatively together and ensure that students can perceive clear links between lessons taken by different teachers. Most groups contain students with different levels of attainment and ability, and staff teach these groups effectively and sensitively. Teachers place appropriate emphasis on the importance of drawing and students on design programmes receive good tuition on visual research. There are insufficient opportunities for three-dimensional design work. Field study visits are organised to London and to museums and galleries in Bradford and Edinburgh in order to broaden students' knowledge and understanding of art and design. The art and design section has productive links with other areas of the college: for example first-year graphic design students were commissioned to design a logo for a project by media students. This brought art and design students and media students together in simulated client presentations which provided a valuable learning experience for them all. Information technology is an integral part of courses at all levels. In their theoretical and practical studies students are given work which they find challenging and demanding. A recent project involved German students working with college students to design a web page for the Internet.

49 In general, relationships between staff and students in the humanities programme area are purposeful. Teachers excel in promoting lively discussions in classes of mature students of English. They have developed useful, illustrated study guides for their students. In psychology, teaching is effectively supported by a topic book on space and territory which was devised by teaching staff. Schemes of work and lesson plans concentrate on subject content and do not sufficiently cover skills which students need to learn. Assessment activities are suitably linked to the demands of the external examining bodies. Teachers regularly set questions from past examination papers; in law, teachers made routine and effective use of model answers. The small size of groups restricts the scope of classroom activities and has an adverse effect on the quality of the students' learning experience. Staff are making little effort to adapt their teaching styles and make them suitable for a small class.

50 Much of the teaching on programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is of excellent quality. Teachers have high expectations of their students. Lessons are well structured to meet the needs of individual students. Teaching and learning styles are discussed with students and they are developed to suit diverse individual needs. The teachers ensure there are a variety of different practical activities to motivate students and maintain their concentration. A lesson for students with severe learning difficulties was planned carefully to help students learn general skills needed in employment, such as listening and following instructions. A series of activities involving counting and sorting was

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devised, following an earlier visit to a print works. The students were given various practical tasks which enabled them to practise these skills and required them to think for themselves. Students' understanding is checked throughout the lessons. They are encouraged to assess their own work and to take responsibility for ensuring that they succeed in their learning. Teachers work hard to ensure that all students participate fully in lessons. In some lessons, additional support workers help students to learn. Inappropriate behaviour is carefully checked. Students benefit from studying vocational subjects taught by specialists in practical environments.

### **STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

51 The standard of work produced by students is high. They manage their files well and keep their notes in order. Assignments are set which relate to the environment in which the students will work and students generally complete them on time. Standards in practical activities are good, especially in construction and in art and design. Practical work is undertaken safely. Key skills are developed. Most students value the relevance of their programme of study and are involved in purposeful and meaningful activities.

52 Students' success rates vary widely across the college. According to tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 79 per cent of students aged 16 to 18, who were in the final year of their advanced level vocational course, achieved their qualification in 1996. This puts the college in the middle third of all further education colleges on this performance measure. Sixty-one per cent of students achieved success in intermediate vocational qualifications, putting the college in the middle third of all colleges in the country, according to the same tables. Both these figures represent an improvement over those of the previous year. Students aged 16 to 18 years old perform poorly in most GCE AS/A level subjects. In 1996, students aged 16 to 18 who were entered for one or more GCE AS/A level scored, on average, 2.9 points per subject entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2). These figures place the college in the bottom third of further education colleges according to the tables published by the DfEE. Students aged over 19 performed better; their average point score was 3.6, compared with the national average for this age group of 3.7. GCSE results in most subjects were as good as, or better than, the national averages and results in languages were particularly good. Overall, the retention rate last year was 81 per cent. Sixty per cent of students progressed to higher education and 36 per cent took up employment.

53 The majority of students following computing courses are highly motivated. Results for GNVQ intermediate in information technology in 1996 were better than the national average. Completion and success on part-time courses are good. A majority of students demonstrate good practical skills and familiarity with a range of software. The work seen was generally of a high standard and it was well presented. In mathematics

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and science subjects, students over the age of 19 achieve better than the younger students. Pass rates for students over 19 years of age on GCSE mathematics and chemistry courses, and for those on GCE A level biology and chemistry are above the national averages for further education colleges. Results for students under 18 years of age on GCE AS/A level and GCSE courses in mathematics or science subjects are below the national averages for the further education sector. Many students do not fulfil their teachers' expectations of them which are based on their achievements on starting the course. The proportion of enrolled students who successfully complete GCSE and GCE A level courses in mathematics and science subjects is low. For example, approximately 130 students take the GCSE mathematics course each year and the percentage who achieve grade C or above has not been higher than 18 per cent in any year. In general, students on GCSE and GCE A level courses in these subjects do not take sufficient pride in their work.

54 Students on construction courses work hard on realistic projects and require minimal supervision. At the time of the inspection, some students were involved in building new car parking bays outside the entrance to the college. Their assignments and portfolios of work are well researched and attractively presented. Most advanced GNVQ students use information technology effectively to present their work. For example, they programmed the site preparation and building work of a lifeboat station and assessed the relative merits of each other's work. Students' retention and success rates are good on one-year programmes. However, the attendance and success rates of some students taking an NVQ in craft skills on the GNVQ foundation course programme are poor. There are poor pass rates on one-year NVQ level 3 programmes. The average retention and success rates for all two-year construction courses are lower than the national average.

55 There are some examples of exceptionally good practical work and classwork by engineering students. Portfolios are well structured and maintained. Achievements are high on NVQ and other skill-based courses. In 1995-96, all students who completed their course achieved their primary learning goals on courses in computer-aided design, and on programmes leading to NVQs in welding and manufacture. Completion and success rates have been poor on BTEC national certificate and diploma courses in electrical and mechanical engineering. As a result, the college has radically changed its course provision. The 1995-96 GNVQ intermediate results were above national averages. At the time of the inspection, the retention rate of students was improving. In 1995-96, all the college's modern apprentices in engineering obtained an NVQ at level 2 during their period of off-the-job training. Most of the successful national diploma students progress to higher education.

56 Retention rates on a range of business studies courses are good, particularly on some part-time professional courses in management and

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accounting. Retention rates on a number of other courses are poor. The achievements of those students who complete their courses are good. Pass rates on the GNVQ advanced business studies course and the GCE A level in business courses are above the national average. In class, many students are able to demonstrate that they understand what is being taught.

57 Students' achievements on many of the hospitality and catering courses are variable. The pass rate on the GNVQ intermediate leisure and tourism courses was 63 per cent and is above the national average. Results are good on those courses, such as that in practical food preparation, which are taken by a small number of students. Results on some courses which are taken by a larger number of students are, however, poor; for example, the pass rates on the GNVQ advanced hospitality course and the GNVQ leisure and tourism course were 22 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively. The students' attendance rate for all courses is 65 per cent. On some courses, the attendance rate is low. Too many students leave before they have completed their courses. Retention rates are low on some courses; for example, the retention rate on the GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism course was 38 per cent last year. All students completing the GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism course and course leading to an NVQ in hospitality progressed either to employment or higher education.

58 On the majority of health and social care courses, retention and pass rates are comparable with national averages. However, in 1996, the pass rate in the intermediate GNVQ in health and social care at 23 per cent was considerably below the national average of 49 per cent. Last year, there was a marked difference between the pass rates of students on the BTEC national diploma course in nursery nursing and the pass rates of students on the National Nursery Examinations Board (NNEB) diploma course; the pass rates on the BTEC course and on the NNEB course were 74 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively. Students' portfolios display a sound theoretical understanding of key issues and an appreciation of current work practices in client care. Work placement achievements are valued highly by students and lead to opportunities for employment or progression to higher level courses.

59 Students are developing the appropriate practical skills and professional practice in hair and beauty sessions. Retention is poor on some hair and beauty courses, partly because a significant number of full-time students successfully transfer to youth training and modern apprentice programmes. In 1996, the success rate of those who enrolled on hair and beauty courses was only 14 per cent.

60 Most of the GCSE results in a range of art and design subjects are above national averages. There are good results in some GCE A level subjects such as fine art and graphic design. Results on GNVQ advanced courses are better than national averages, and the results for the intermediate level GNVQ are improving. Results on part-time courses



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such as City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) photography and creative studies are good. Retention on vocational courses is high. Students attain high standards in drawing and the use of colour. Students' artwork is of a high quality and is used to decorate public areas of the college. Attractive tapestries designed and made by students were purchased by Northumberland TEC to enhance their nearby conference facility.

61 Examination results for the over 19 age group in psychology, sociology and law are above average for the sector. Results for 16 to 18 year old students are consistently below national averages in all subjects apart from psychology, French and Spanish. The overall pass rates for GCE A level English literature are good, but few students achieve grades A to C. In English language, GCE A level examination pass rates are generally below the national average for the sector at grade C and above. Results in GCSE English language are below the national averages for 16 to 18 year olds. Retention rates have been good on GCSE courses but recently they are showing some decline. The retention rate on the access to higher education course is poor but of those students who do complete the course, three-quarters progress to higher education. The quality of students' written work is sometimes undermined by spelling errors and poor grammar. Students of psychology handle statistical work confidently. The ability of law students to remember legal definitions is impressive: they recall case law, and make connections with previous topics studied. Adult students demonstrate that they read beyond the requirements of the examination syllabus. Oral presentations, as part of the GCSE English examinations, were given by students with confidence and they had prepared them carefully. Students chose a stimulating variety of topics relating to their interests, such as line dancing, Newcastle United Football Club, and The X Files. Some younger students lack confidence in oral work and in their spoken responses to teachers.

62 Many students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities respond with positive enjoyment to the challenges which teachers set for them. They are making good progress in their studies and have a mature approach. A wide range of nationally-recognised qualifications is available to these students. Those who are successful in obtaining one or more of these qualifications may progress to higher level courses. Of the students who completed their courses in 1996, 90 per cent achieved full or partial accreditation and the same percentage progressed to higher level courses, to employment or youth training. The retention rate is high at 95 per cent. Students work on their own with little supervision. They are actively involved in developing useful, detailed records of their skills and abilities in their records of achievement. They carry out practical tasks competently. Those students who are taking the introduction to catering programme worked capably in the kitchen. They followed instructions and wore appropriate uniforms. The meal they served was well prepared to a professional standard. Students have developed confidence and

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self-esteem. They join in activities and discussions willingly. Many students are able to make good use of information technology.

#### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

63 A clear commitment to the achievement of quality is made in the college's mission statement. Responsibility for quality assurance rests with the vice-principal. The system is at an early stage of development. As yet, it is not being implemented with consistency or with sufficient rigour. All staff receive a succinct printed summary of the college's quality processes. The college's policy on quality assurance is reviewed by the quality review committee which reports to the academic board. The quality assurance system is mainly concerned with courses. There are annual subject and programme area reviews. Key performance indicators and quality standards are being developed. The opinions of students on the quality of the college's provision are sought through questionnaires.

64 A wide range of staff, drawn from both academic and support areas, has participated in working groups to develop standards for quality assurance. Some standards have been agreed but many are recent and the system for quality assurance at the college level is too new to have proved its effectiveness. Some existing standards are not being met. The collection and use of performance indicators and the setting of targets for improvement are recent developments. There has been little analysis of how the college has performed against the standards it has set itself or of the progress it has made in reaching its targets. The academic board has been slow to implement some important features of monitoring and evaluation and it has given an insufficiently clear lead to its standing committee for quality assurance.

65 The quality review committee meets frequently and conducts audits of the developing quality system. Since January 1996, the committee has audited students' retention and withdrawal procedures; training for carrying out self-assessment; and monitoring the impact of teaching and learning standards. It has also recently taken on responsibility for the four-yearly review of courses. Staff did not receive sufficiently clear guidance on the production of these reviews and the standard of the reviews was variable. The committee made clear recommendations to the academic board after conducting its review and highlighted one report as a model for good practice. The quality review committee issued its report before the academic board made clear what its own role in the process should be.

66 At the curriculum level, the central focus for quality assurance is the course team handbook. All course teams used the handbooks during 1995-96 and this contributed to a better awareness among staff of issues related to the quality of provision. As a consequence, course teams have started to achieve greater uniformity in recording quality assurance. The process has also provided senior management with knowledge of

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emerging issues concerned with the quality of provision. Course teams are required to comment on how they are meeting their targets in their annual report. There are significant variations in the quality of these commentaries and in the course teams' interpretation of the forms presented in the handbook. Course teams use the evidence gathered through their handbooks to present a formal end-of-year course report and action plan to a published schedule. The quality of these reports and plans is similarly variable. Each programme area leader has a quality manual which contains copies of all policies, entitlement statements and quality standards. The system of document control for the updating of these manuals is reliable but would be improved by better indexing and dating systems.

67 Students' perceptions of their courses are monitored through questionnaires which students are asked to answer at various points during the year. The amount of resulting information and analysis provided by course teams is variable. Some positive action has been taken as a result of students' responses, but on some courses, some problems identified by the students have not been addressed. The extent to which the college obtains the views of employers on the quality of provision is limited. The college has not developed a formal system of feeding back to students, and other clients, the analysis of responses to questionnaires and the action taken on these. Students are not represented on all course review teams. There is a 'complaints and praise' procedure. The academic board has reviewed this but some students are unaware of its existence.

68 The college has a professional development and training policy. Individual development plans were introduced for each member of staff during 1995-96 as part of the Investor in People action plan. Senior managers identify training needs in the context of the college's strategic plan and a comprehensive annual professional development plan is published. In order to meet its strategic objectives in relation to training and development, the college supports staff who require initial training and it assists staff to become trained assessors and verifiers. A major programme of training is provided for staff who counsel prospective students before they begin their courses. Other identified training needs have included training for personal tutors, managers, staff who provide customer care, and staff who develop courses leading to NVQs. The budget for professional development and training is 1 per cent of the staff budget. Fees for courses taken by staff in college are waived. Some programmes of individual professional development are not effectively monitored and staff who have taken part in them have not completed the necessary evaluation forms. There is an effective induction programme for full-time and part-time staff. The college introduced a mentor system for all new staff at the beginning of the academic year 1996-97.

69 The college achieved Investor in People status in May 1996 and holds the Northumberland TEC quality award. The college's charter is a

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clearly-written document which is distributed to all students including those enrolled on collaborative provision. Copies of college policies, specifications of standards and entitlement statements are available in the learning resource centre or from the student services centre. A promotional video highlights aspects of the charter and presents some of the quantifiable performance measures that it contains. These include the college's commitment to respond to enquiries within two days; to give pre-course counselling; and to interview prospective students within three weeks of their application. A working group, which includes students, has been formed to review the charter. The charter does not specifically address the needs of employers, or parents of students aged 16 to 18; there are, however, supplementary publications available to parents and employers. The college does not provide the charter in a form suitable for students with a sight impairment.

70 The college's first self-assessment report was published in February 1997. The report has many good features. It closely follows the format of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. Self-assessment reports were produced by programme areas. Training was provided for programme area teams to produce self-assessments but the initial reports were variable in their quality and some lacked sufficient depth. An annex to the college's report helpfully tabulates the sources of evidence on which judgements of strengths are based. The report includes sections on teaching and learning and students' achievements based on evidence obtained through lesson observations. The report realistically identifies strengths and weaknesses for each section of the report and grades aspects of provision. No action plan was included in the report but since its publication a supplementary document, produced in May 1997, lists actions subsequently taken to redress weaknesses or identifies issues to be addressed in the next strategic and operational plan. In general, the findings of the college's self-assessment accord with the inspectors' judgements. The self-assessment report is not an integral part of the quality assurance processes of the college.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Staffing**

71 Teaching and support staff are enthusiastic and experienced. A very high number of full-time teaching staff, 93 per cent, have professional teaching qualifications. Many staff have industrial and commercial experience, which they have extended through short secondments to industry. Some staff also have experience of working for examining and validating bodies. Those part-time staff who do not have qualified teacher status receive support from the college to achieve a teaching certificate or full teaching qualification through the college's own staff-development programme. Nineteen per cent of full-time academic staff have higher degrees. There are almost equal numbers of men and women on the

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teaching staff although in middle and senior management, 75 per cent of staff are men. A total of 117 staff have assessor and verifier awards: these staff are drawn from all programme areas and an unusually high proportion of humanities staff have obtained the award. Although most staff have job descriptions there is no system for updating these regularly. Detailed records of staff absence are kept. Care has been taken to appoint part-time staff who have current or recent industrial and commercial experience. The appointment of experienced and appropriately-qualified managers has improved college practice and procedures in estate management, personnel and finance.

72 Approximately 40 staff across the college, from all programme areas, are involved in the provision of programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Over 20 of these hold the University of Durham certificate in special educational needs. Three members of learning support staff have gained a certificate in learning support and their achievement reflects the positive approach to learning support taken by all who work in the college.

73 Support staff are well qualified and experienced. They are suitably deployed in a variety of locations and are highly regarded by other staff and students. They play a full and valued part in the corporate life of the college. All are members of teams which include teaching staff: in many cases, technicians are essential to the success of the teaching. The college has identified an insufficiency of support staff in some vocational areas where course provision has grown, such as plumbing, information technology, and health services. Some key part-time technician posts are currently vacant. The college employs trainees on its modern apprenticeship schemes to assist students with their learning. For example, the modern apprentices help to administer the activities provided by the outdoor pursuits team and they give assistance in the information technology centre.

#### **Equipment/learning resources**

74 The college places a high priority on improving information technology facilities on all its sites. There is a policy for, and a detailed strategy on, information technology. Cross-college representatives sit on a committee which receives all proposals for new equipment and software. Purchases are made with the aim of standardising all equipment wherever possible. An asset register has been developed which also acts as a maintenance log. Access to computers is good and the college has more than 200 modern machines. The information technology centre is open to all students and support from technicians is available. The demand for computers at peak times is high and the college is considering expansion of the 'drop-in' facility. There is no system for monitoring the current usage of computers. The computer network is reliable and provides access to a number of software packages. Two computers are connected to the Internet. Some rooms used for teaching information technology do not

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have large display screens or permanent, easily-connected multimedia machines which may be used in the teaching of software applications. There are insufficient areas in the centre large enough to accommodate a whole class of students. The learning resource centre has 15 additional networked computers for students' use and a bank of compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases. A number of laptop computers can be borrowed by staff and students. There is a specialist computer-aided design suite of 15 machines and this has been re-equipped to a high standard using part of a European Regional Development Fund grant of £225,000 for the engineering programme area. In catering, there is a lack of software which simulates industrial practice.

75 Most classrooms contain adequate furniture and teaching aids, although some have no whiteboards, or have blackboards which need renovating. Kitchen equipment is generally good, well maintained and clean. Although some equipment is old, it is all in good working condition. Workshops have an adequate amount of equipment although some equipment in the mechanical and electronics areas is at the end of its working life. In general, media and photographic resources, including the television recording studio, are generally good, although the sound equipment is in need of updating. The 10 dinghies and 18 canoes/kayaks in the sailing centre are generally well maintained. There is no formal programme for the replacement of equipment. The schedule for testing portable equipment for safety has fallen into arrears.

76 The learning resource centre has an action plan but very few targets specified in this have so far been met. It contains a limited central bookstock. There are additional bookstocks in curriculum areas but these are not held on any central database. Much of the stock is dated. The expenditure in 1995-96 on books, both centrally and in programme areas, was £13.50 per full-time equivalent student. The college has no formal procedures for identifying what needs to be spent on resources or for ensuring dialogue between curriculum team leaders and those responsible for resources. Students report that they do not feel welcome in the learning resource centre. Students in the Berwick, Blyth and Amble centres have good access to data and library services via the network link to the main building.

### **Accommodation**

77 The college has a comprehensive draft accommodation strategy, which is clearly linked to the strategic goals in the operational plan. The main six-storey building is surrounded by a motley assortment of later buildings. Landscaped areas are well maintained. Viewed from the main road, the site has a coherent appearance but this masks congestion of the buildings at the rear. Internal signposting is largely temporary and is inadequate. External signposting is poor: there are insufficient signs from major roads and no sign on the main building itself. The number,

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size and diversity of buildings demonstrate the lack of planning and rationalisation of accommodation in the past. The practical instruction block is in poor structural condition and the majority of mobile classrooms are beyond their useful life. A converted row of seven terraced houses provides additional administrative and residential accommodation, but has many unusable areas and corridors. The practical workshops are well suited to their use and the highways workshop is good. The sports hall is hired by a variety of community groups and as a result, its facilities are occasionally not accessible to students. It is in need of redecoration and its changing rooms may only be reached from outside. The Welbeck and Hawthorn annexes are former primary school premises built in 1900. The building fabric is in poor condition but the specialist areas are well used by the art, design and media programme area. Their high running costs do not make these buildings cost effective as teaching areas.

78 Some teaching areas are illogically situated. Engineering courses are provided in three different buildings. The hair salon is in an outbuilding, whereas the beauty salon is on the fifth floor of the main block. There have been recent attempts to improve the disposition of teaching areas but significant operational targets for 1995-96, in relation to these, have yet to be met. All corridors in the main building are carpeted and students' artwork decorates the walls on the ground floor. A number of training areas, such as the Wansbeck restaurant which has been refurbished to a high standard, the hair and beauty salons and the training office provide students with good facilities to carry out learning in a work-related environment. The standard of decoration is generally adequate. Some rooms have been refurbished to a high standard while others remain drab and in need of redecoration. Students sometimes have to complete written work in the practical teaching areas, which are unsuitable for this purpose. The painting and decoration and the brickwork shops are too small for some classes. A recent college survey showed that almost all classrooms were not being used to capacity.

79 Despite recent changes, the main foyer area is insufficiently welcoming. Advice centres lead off from the foyer. Catering facilities in the college are variable in standard. The refectory has old and damaged furniture. The students' common room provides excellent multipurpose accommodation; it has a coffee bar and there is a neighbouring shop for the students. The rooms in the college's residential accommodation are barely adequate; they are small and old and have basic furnishings. The residential accommodation has minimal kitchen facilities and its external appearance is shabby.

80 All areas of the college have been surveyed to ascertain their accessibility to wheelchair users. The public areas of the main building are spacious. There are two lifts to the fifth floor, but some areas are not accessible to people with restricted mobility. Progress has been made in improving toilet facilities for those with a disability.

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81 The Berwick centre was purpose built in 1977 and it has recently been refurbished to provide a pleasant learning environment. It has three teaching rooms and a small resource centre. The Amble centre operates in partnership with a local school. The Blyth centre is advantageously situated in a main shopping area, and provides an eye-catching introduction to the college. Its success in attracting students means that its space has recently become too congested for the effective provision of courses and the college is looking for alternative premises.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES**

82 The main strengths of the college are:

- its highly-qualified and experienced staff
- the provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- the recent rapid growth in community provision
- the adult guidance and counselling services
- an enthusiastic board of governors, who provide effective strategic direction
- accessible and approachable managers
- the management structure and the processes for managing curriculum development
- the flexible timetable
- the provision of key skills as an integral part of all courses
- some teaching of high quality
- effective practical sessions
- well-managed expansion of the provision of information technology resources
- the accessibility of most of the accommodation to students with restricted mobility.

83 If the college is to continue to improve, it should:

- strengthen its marketing
- strive to develop curriculum links with the county's high schools
- improve the consistency of the tutorial programme
- further develop the quality assurance systems, including improving arrangements to monitor policies and the effectiveness of progress towards reaching targets
- improve retention rates and examination results on some courses
- introduce a formal appraisal system for staff
- embark on its programme to improve accommodation and make more rational use of its space.



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## FIGURES

1	Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)
2	Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)
3	Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)
4	Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)
5	Income (for 12 months to July 1996)
6	Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

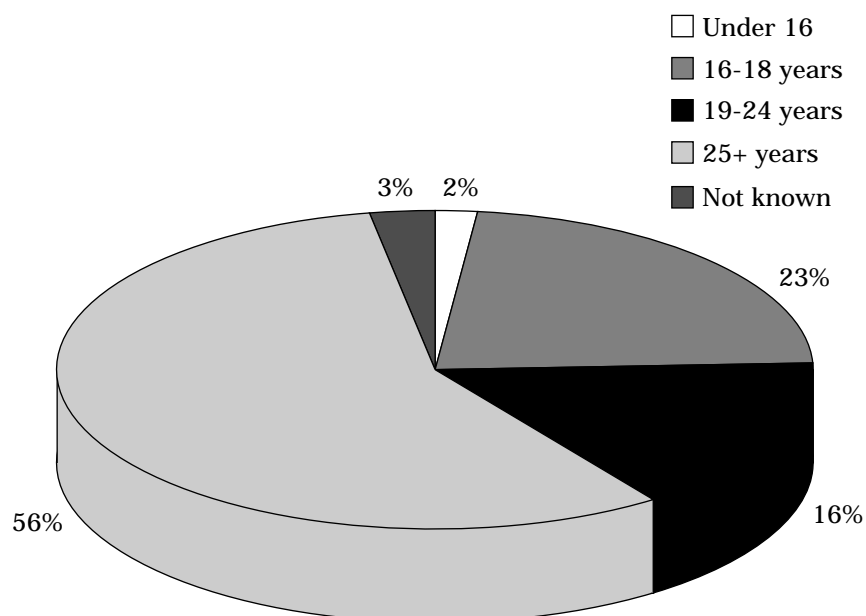
**Note:** the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

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**Figure 1**

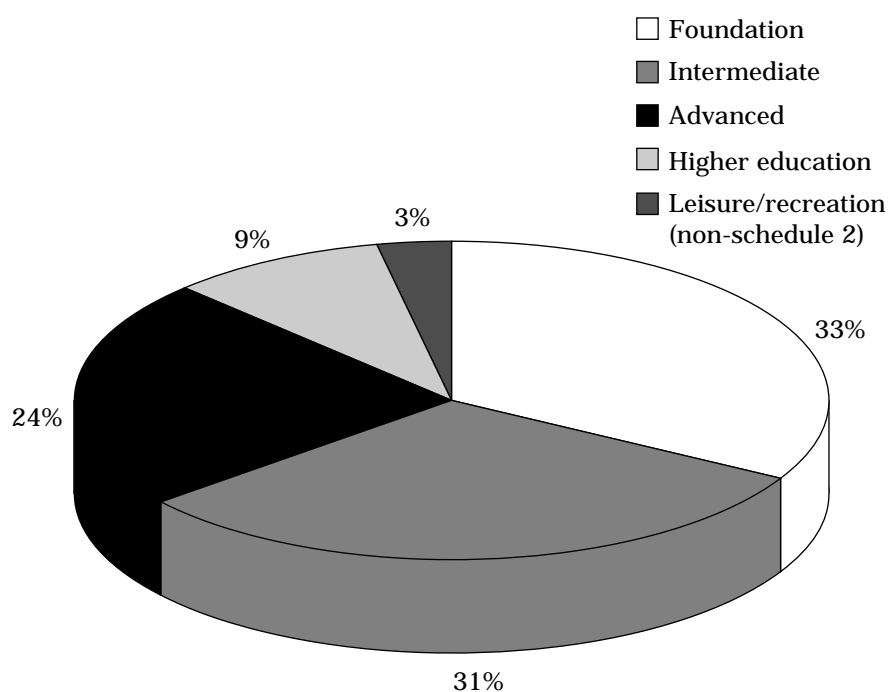
**Northumberland College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)**



Student numbers: 9,570

**Figure 2**

**Northumberland College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)**

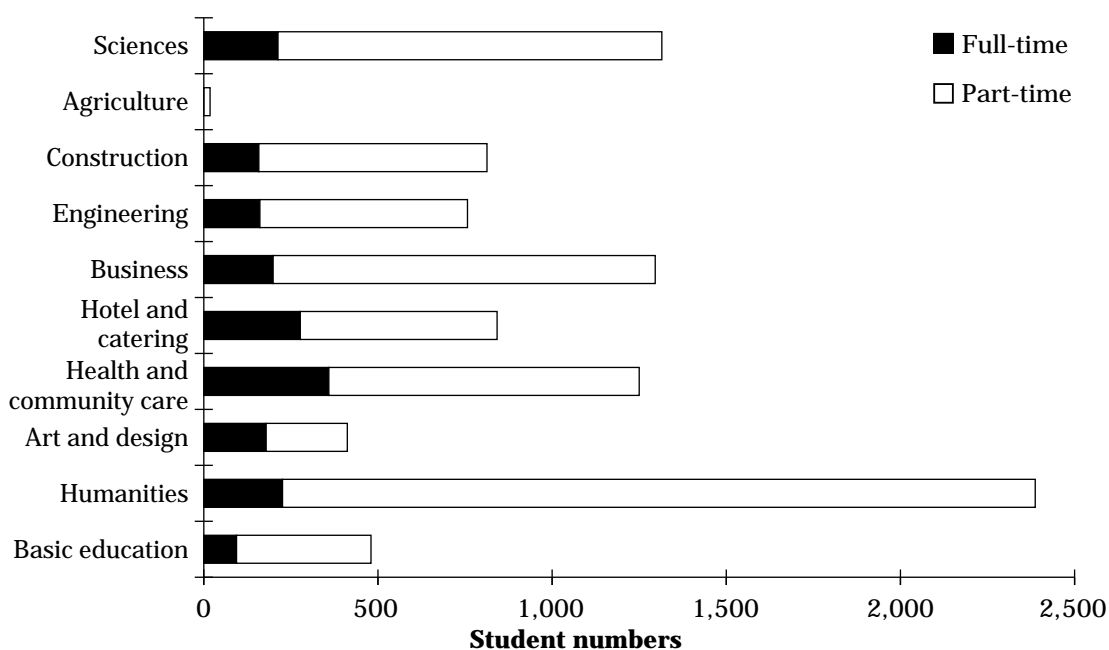


Student numbers: 9,570

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**Figure 3**

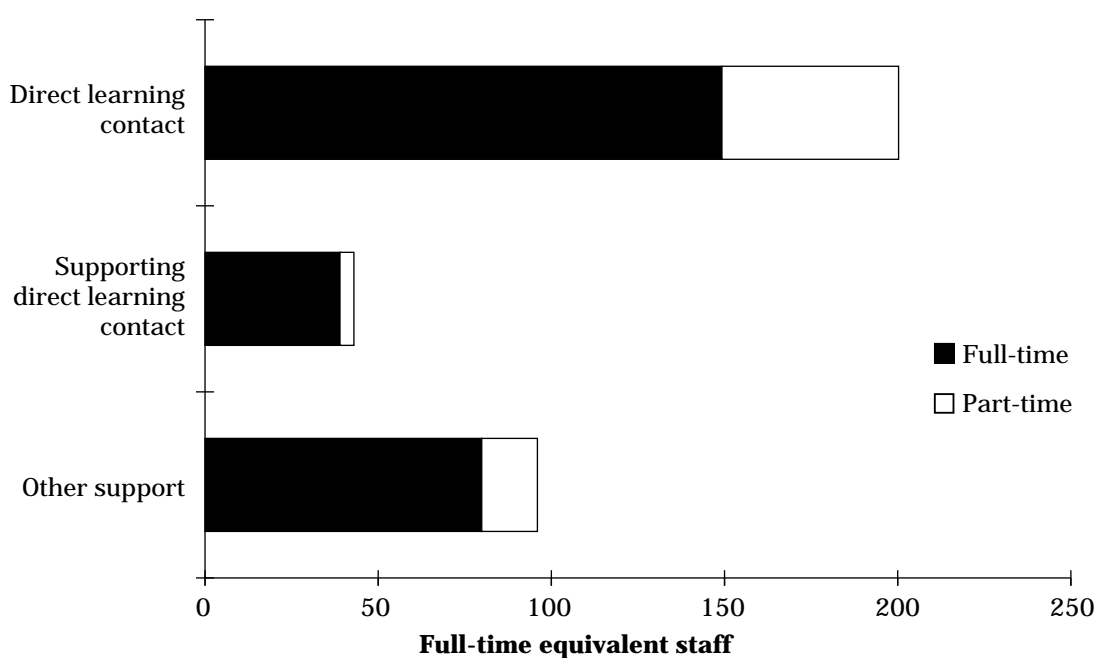
**Northumberland College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)**



Student numbers: 9,570

**Figure 4**

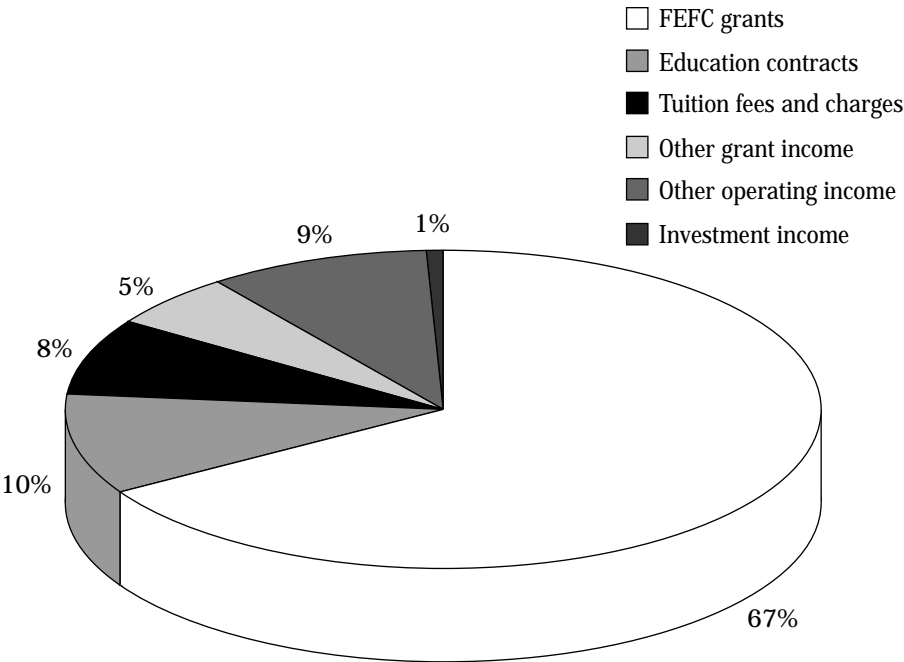
**Northumberland College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)**



Full-time equivalent staff: 339

**Figure 5**

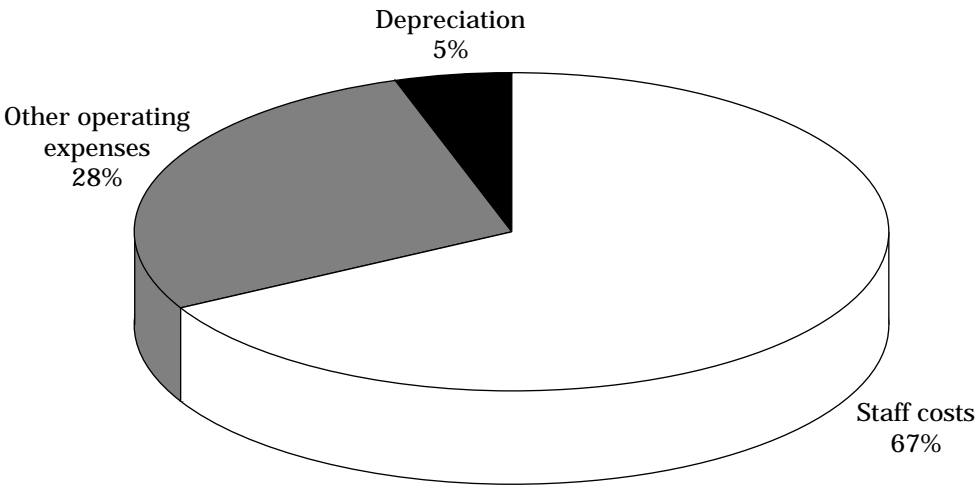
**Northumberland College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)**



Income: £9,625,000

**Figure 6**

**Northumberland College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)**



Expenditure: £9,937,000

