

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Rodbaston College

August 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 111/97

RODBASTON COLLEGE

WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Inspected February 1996-May 1997

Summary

Rodbaston College has responded well to changes in the rural economy. It has developed a wide range of courses to meet the needs of part-time students in employment. It works successfully with schools and other colleges and has strong links with the Staffordshire TEC. There is a good range of programmes for full-time students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college has exceeded its growth targets for full-time students in the last two years. Staff give good support to students in literacy and numeracy. Careers guidance and advice is effective. The quality of teaching is variable. On many courses, examination pass rates are satisfactory or good. Pass rates in animal care, however, are poor. Teaching areas are well equipped and the extensive estate is used well to support the curriculum. The college has suffered from inadequate strategic planning and an absence of targets and performance indicators. Its self-assessment report overemphasised some of its strengths and underemphasised weaknesses. The college should: address the narrowly defined aims and strategic direction of the college; strengthen management at all levels; improve the quality of its teaching; develop tutorial support for students; take steps to increase retention rates on some full-time courses; develop its quality assurance systems; extend opportunities for staff development; increase the time given to the development of students' information technology skills; and monitor and review teachers' workloads.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision		Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision		2
Governance and management		4
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		3
Quality assurance		4
Resources:	staffing	3
	equipment/learning resources	2
	accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Horticulture and countryside	3	Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	3
Equine studies	3		
Agriculture	2		
Animal care	4		

INTRODUCTION

1 Rodbaston College was inspected between February 1996 and May 1997. Nine inspectors spent 45 days on the inspection. They visited 71 classes, involving 781 students, and scrutinised students' work. Meetings were held with members of the corporation, senior managers, staff, students, parents, local employers and representatives from local schools. Discussions also took place with representatives of the Staffordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Inspectors examined college policy statements, the strategic plan, minutes of committees, working papers and documents.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Rodbaston College was founded in 1921 as the Staffordshire Farm Institute. It is situated in south Staffordshire between Stafford and Wolverhampton. The college occupies an estate of 156 hectares which is run on a commercial basis. There are centres at Weeford near Lichfield, Walton near Eccleshall, and in the town of Leek in the north of Staffordshire. Some agricultural day-release courses are run at a rented site near Uttoxeter. The college was established originally as a centre for agricultural studies. By the early 1980s, its programmes included courses for farm secretaries, veterinary nurses and horticulturists. Equine studies, animal care, floristry, countryside studies, business studies and courses designed for students with special learning difficulties have been added relatively recently.

3 There are 1,268 students enrolled at the college, of whom 423 are studying full time and 845 are studying part time. One hundred and seventy-three students are enrolled in non-vocational classes. 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 proportion of students from urban areas has increased in recent years and the number of residential students has fallen. There are 116 full-time equivalent staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

4 There are five agricultural and horticultural colleges within a 40-mile radius of Rodbaston College. A major higher education provider for agriculture and land-based industries is 20 miles away. Seven general further education colleges in Staffordshire and four other general further education colleges to the south compete for non-specialist students. Farming in Staffordshire is diverse, ranging from hill farms in the north to market gardening around parts of the urban conurbation in the south. Traditional family dairy farms are found throughout the county. There are approximately 5,000 agricultural holdings in Staffordshire with a total workforce of 11,000 people.

5 The mission of the college is 'to provide high-quality education and training for the land-based and allied industries enabling our clients to

fulfil their potential'. The aims of the college over the next three years include expanding recruitment within the available funding; increasing the level of involvement with the further education sector; extending provision into new land-based areas such as fisheries and game keeping; and working in collaboration with other providers locally to attract new students by offering a wider range of courses.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 The college has responded to changes in the rural economy and its range of courses covers all of the main land-based industries. There are Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first diploma programmes in agriculture, animal care, floristry, horse studies, horticulture, and rural studies. The college has developed courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are interested in working in land-based industries. 'Countrystart I and II' are foundation level programmes providing a high level of supported learning. A number of courses have low enrolments. The college acknowledges that the action it has taken to deal with the problem of low numbers of students on some courses has been inadequate. A more structured approach to decisions on course viability is being introduced.

7 There is a range of full-time courses at intermediate and advanced levels in the college's main vocational areas, with the exception of countryside studies. In agriculture and horticulture, there are clear progression routes and good opportunities for students to transfer between courses in these areas. In other areas, progression routes are not always appropriate. Agriculture students are able to gain qualifications in practical skills which supplement their main qualification and improve their employment prospects. In other subject areas these opportunities are not fully developed.

8 The college recruits students from a wide rural catchment area and from urban centres at some distance from the college. It has adjusted the starting and finishing times of lessons to assist these students. Buses are provided to supplement public transport. The college uses its four 'outreach' centres to improve access for agriculture day-release students.

9 Overall arrangements to promote courses and recruit students are effective. Work with schools and the careers service is well developed. A four-day 'taster' course for school pupils in year 10 is held at Easter each year. Careers officers from Staffordshire and the West Midlands regularly attend the college and are given the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of its courses. The college was represented at over 75 careers events last year, many of them in schools. Methods used to promote the college and its courses include open days, attendance at a wide range of trade shows and articles in local newspapers. The prospectus promotes the positive features of the college, but does not contain sufficient detail about opportunities for progression. The college

is making arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of its promotional and recruitment activity.

10 Marketing is not always given sufficient consideration when new courses are being developed. The college acknowledges that there is a need for it to acquire better knowledge of the labour market to inform its current planning cycle. The college has analysed information on where its students come from and has identified urban areas where its recruitment of students is low. The college's promotional work has increased the number of students from these areas. There is scope to develop this work further.

11 Most curriculum areas have productive links with the industries they serve. Employers make a substantial input to the curriculum. They offer valuable and extensive opportunities for work experience. Employers who spoke to inspectors were complimentary about the support they receive and the responsiveness of the staff to requests for help. Many staff maintain close personal links with the agricultural industry through membership of professional groups and committees. Most course submissions are firmly based on consultation with the industry. There are consultative committees in all areas and they provide a useful forum for general discussion and exchange of views. However, they do not sufficiently focus on planning and development of the curriculum.

12 In most subject areas there is good provision for students who are in employment. This includes national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in agriculture and horticulture at levels 1 to 4 and floristry and equine studies at levels 1 and 2. The college has responded constructively to the needs of industry for training and updating. It supports a local employer-based training group and offers a wide range of short courses. There has been a substantial growth in the range and diversity of this provision over the last few years. Much of the development is based on initiatives by individual staff, effectively encouraged and administered by the college. In some areas, there is scope for further development. Cross-college management of this area of work is underdeveloped and it is not effectively integrated with other aspects of the college's marketing.

13 Curricular links with schools and other colleges across the region are strong. Many pupils visit the college estate and farm to carry out project work. The type of work undertaken varies widely and the college is flexible in meeting individual needs. In addition to visits by primary pupils, the college co-operates with 12 secondary schools to help their students complete various parts of their qualifications, including NVQs. The college runs a higher national diploma in animal care in partnership with a local higher education agriculture college. The staff have been involved in overseas work for many years and have built up considerable expertise. They have provided training and consultancy in more than 10 countries over the last five years. Much of this work has been undertaken in collaboration with a local higher education institution and other further education colleges.

14 There is a good working relationship with the local TEC. Liaison is effective at strategic and operational levels. The TEC is highly complimentary about the college's responsiveness to new initiatives and its flexibility in negotiating training contracts. The college supports the wider rural community in a number of ways. It acts as a base for several special interest groups, including a smallholder group and the local Young Farmers Club. There are over 250 leisure courses catering for a wide range of interests in the community.

15 The college is responsive to the types of students who have not usually entered further education, such as those with emotional and behavioural problems. It has a good range of programmes for full-time students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and there are opportunities for such students to progress from college programmes into further training or employment. However, the scope of the college's provision for part-time and adult students with learning difficulties could be increased. There is close co-operation with the careers service to ensure that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are aware of the opportunities open to them. A specialist adviser visits the college once a week. The college is careful to ensure that its promotional material does not reinforce gender stereotypes but there have been few specific initiatives to redress imbalances in the number of male and female students within programmes.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

16 The corporation has 18 members including the principal and a nominee from the Staffordshire TEC. One post is currently vacant. Members have a wide range of backgrounds in land-based industries and bring valuable expertise and experience to the college. Some have experience in the public services. Three of the governors are women. There are no members from minority ethnic backgrounds. The work of the governing body is supported by the clerk to the corporation who is also the director of personnel and corporate services. Records of the meetings of the corporation and its subcommittees are kept meticulously. There is a register of governors' interests.

17 There are the following appropriate corporation committees with recently-revised terms of reference: audit; employment policy and finance; remuneration; governance; staff and student appeals; and special purposes. Governors have concentrated strongly on evaluating the way they have organised their business. They have set up a governance committee to improve their procedures and have agreed a code of conduct. Members have completed a wide-ranging questionnaire on their satisfaction with the way the corporation is organised and a skills audit is being completed. The work of the audit committee has been more sharply focused. Governors were not closely involved in the process of preparing the college's self-assessment report and did not approve the document before the inspection.

18 Governors discuss the college's mission and objectives and they have recently considered their own objectives as a governing body. The college would benefit from a clearer statement of overriding aims and educational ethos. Governors have not established comprehensive performance criteria by which they can monitor the college's work. The full board receives regular financial management information showing income and expenditure in comparison to the amounts allowed for in the college's budget. The information they receive on students' retention rates and achievements does not include sufficient analysis of the issues needing attention. It does not help them in making relevant decisions. The college's key aim of providing high-quality education and training has not been met; only one curriculum area had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses.

19 Strategic planning has been ineffective and slow to improve. The college has suffered from a long period without well-defined priorities for its future development. The time taken to appoint a new principal and to allow a settling-in period have held back decisions since 1995. The college does not have an accommodation strategy. There are few medium-term objectives in the strategic plan for 1996 to 1999. No college-wide targets have been set relating to attendance, retention and achievements. The objectives in the strategic plan do not specify the resources or costs involved in projected developments. For 1996-97, there is no operating statement to show the college's detailed plans for the year and how these are to be achieved. Planning is generally in need of improvement. In recognition of these shortcomings the college is preparing a new strategic plan. Operating statements from key areas of the college for 1997-98 are well advanced; greater attention is being paid to setting targets and identifying measures of performance.

20 The college's senior executive team comprises the principal, the vice-principal and the director of personnel and corporate services. It is supported by the senior management team comprising the senior executive team, two directors of resources, the director of academic management and the finance officer. The college's current management arrangements do not meet its needs. Some cross-college functions are not well developed and responsibilities have not been clearly allocated. There are weaknesses in the development and use of information technology in the curriculum, quality management and student support. At the time of the inspection, the roles and responsibilities of senior managers were being reviewed and there was uncertainty amongst managers about the nature and process of any reorganisation. Responsibility for marketing has recently been reassigned.

21 Curriculum management is of variable quality. Some courses are well organised and effectively administered. Records are up to date and comprehensive documentation helps to keep course teams and students well informed. Management roles and responsibilities sometimes overlap.

Weaknesses include some curriculum areas which are not always appropriate, poorly-planned assessment loads on students, a lack of balance between the teaching of theory and practice, and inappropriate allocations of time given to teaching different parts of the curriculum.

22 Senior managers meet regularly and have worked as a cohesive and co-operative group. The group's business has been too much concerned with operational matters and steps are being taken to establish a more strategic approach and a greater concentration on higher level decision making. There are regular meetings of all staff at least once a term. Heads of section and course leaders consider that their directors keep them well informed of developments. Managers of the college are seen as easy to contact. However, not all staff were well informed about what was happening in other sections of the college. The college has recognised the need to revise the terms of reference of the academic board; currently, it does not have a well-defined role.

23 Staff understand the basis on which budgets are set. To a large degree budgets depend on the spending levels agreed in previous years. Budget holders may bid for additional resources to cover new costs arising from developments in their areas. Budget controls are well established. The college is taking action to improve the accuracy of its financial forecasts. The finance officer has recently developed data on unit costs and the college intends to make use of these in the near future.

24 The college's management information system is capable of producing reports on enrolments, finance, retention rates and students' achievements. The fact that data are held in separate computer packages limits the kind of analyses that can be carried out. The system does not produce overall data of students' attendance for use by managers and staff. Direct access to computerised management information is limited to a small number of senior managers. Other staff receive the information they need at set intervals or when they make special requests. Information on students' progress into jobs or into further and higher education is incomplete.

25 The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £19.71 per unit. The median for agricultural and horticulture colleges is £22.86 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) provided 52 per cent of the college's total income in 1996-97. The number of students increased substantially just before incorporation and the college has met its targets for increasing full-time student numbers in two of the last three years. Targets for part-time students were not met in 1995-96 and 1996-97. Over the three-year period from 1994 to 1997, full-time student enrolments increased by 19 per cent and part-time enrolments decreased by 14 per cent. The number of funding units achieved increased substantially between 1994 and 1996.

26 The college has policies for equal opportunities, health and safety, and information technology resources. Recently some updating has been agreed. The responsibility for health and safety is clear. Health and safety is regularly monitored though reports are mainly concerned with individual incidents. The monitoring of other policies has been generally weak. Reports are limited in number and their content is thin.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

27 Arrangements for processing students' applications and setting up interviews are well managed. There are clear procedures for following up enquiries and tracking the progress of applications. Most interviews are well organised. Interviewers are friendly, provide impartial advice and give a clear and realistic picture of jobs in the land-based industries. Many interviews are followed by a tour of the college estate. Some interviewers failed to provide clear information on course costs and on the additional learning support that is available.

28 The college has a statement on the accreditation of students' prior learning and three teachers are qualified assessors. However, accreditation of prior learning has only occurred in a few instances.

29 Enrolment and induction are well organised. Most students considered induction useful and found the staff helpful and welcoming. Most course induction handbooks are comprehensive and detailed, although some lack information on the tutorial system. Induction sessions covered key topics, such as practical work and looking after livestock but did not provide sufficient explanation of tutorials, learning support and health and safety. Sessions generally lacked clear objectives and some were poorly structured. Little effort was made to cater for students' differing requirements; students returning for a second year received the same information as those just starting. Teachers did not often invite contributions from students and a number failed to identify and respond to students' concerns. Although there is a checklist of the issues and activities to be covered during induction there are no effective mechanisms for ensuring that this is done.

30 Tutorial support for students is weak. There are no timetabled tutorials and no planned and co-ordinated programme of tutorial activities. All full-time and some part-time students are allocated a tutor. Some tutors have to supervise an excessive number of students. Each full-time student is entitled to two individual tutorials a term. For a number of students this commitment is not met. The content of tutorials is left to individual tutors' discretion. Most tutorials lack a clear structure, there is no systematic review of students' progress, little evidence of action plans for learning, and no provision for social or personal education. The use of students' records of achievements is not well developed; records are not checked to ensure that students are maintaining them.

31 The college provides help for students when it is required through the services of the student support officer, the wardens and course tutors. College staff do not offer counselling to students. Those who need counselling are referred to outside agencies for specialist help.

32 Students receive effective additional support to improve their key skills of communications and numeracy. All full-time and some part-time students complete a literacy and numeracy screening assessment. Learning materials are adapted to meet the needs of students requiring support. For example, some students are provided with audio cassettes and lesson notes in large print. Attendance at support sessions is good. Absences are notified to tutors. Detailed written documentation is kept on all students receiving support. There are termly reports on their progress but these are not followed up in tutorials. There is good use of external expertise to support students who are deaf or hard of hearing and those with visual impairments or dyslexia.

33 Students receive effective careers' guidance and advice. There is a contract between the college and Staffordshire Careers for the delivery of careers advice and guidance. Staff from Staffordshire Careers visit the college regularly to interview students and give careers talks. They also provide a specialist service for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The library contains useful information on further and higher education courses and careers. Some agriculture students are unaware that individual careers advice is available.

34 The college monitors students' attendance effectively. There are clear reporting procedures for students when they are absent. If they do not attend for more than three sessions, enquiries are made to find out the reason. Course tutors and heads of section take action if absence persists.

35 Students are provided with a helpful handbook and diary. The handbook contains a brief outline of the facilities and support the college will provide and what is expected of students. There is a range of useful information about transport arrangements and catering services. However, neither the diary nor the handbook contains information on the college complaints' system. Students receive a copy of the charter at induction but their awareness of it is limited. The charter is not in a form easily accessible to students with learning difficulties.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

36 Of the classes inspected, 46 per cent had strengths which outweighed the weaknesses. Eleven per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. This compares with figures of 63 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all lessons observed in colleges during 1995-96, according to figures published in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Average attendance in the classes inspected was 87 per cent. The average class size was 11. The grades awarded to the teaching sessions inspected are shown in the following table.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Vocational	9	18	21	6	0	54
Basic education	0	5	7	2	0	14
Other	0	1	2	0	0	3
Total	9	24	30	8	0	71

37 In most areas, the curriculum is relevant to the needs of the students. In some areas insufficient attention has been given to ensuring that it is taught at a level appropriate for the students. Some programmes of study have not been effectively adjusted following a reduction in the number of hours for which they are taught. On most courses, information technology skills are poorly developed. Opportunities for students to develop other key skills are also underdeveloped and the monitoring and recording of students' progress in acquiring these skills varies significantly between courses. Personal profiles are used effectively to assess and record the progress of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Most students undertake work experience. Good use is made of the equine unit and college farm to provide students with supervised experience of work. However, work experience is underdeveloped on the animal care courses.

38 There is wide variation in the quality of assignments and their assessment. Some tutors set realistic assignments which make good use of the college's practical units and enable students to develop their understanding of the topics concerned. Local sites which have a broad range of habitats are used effectively for assignments in countryside studies. Most assignments in horticulture and for first diplomas have a detailed and comprehensive written brief which contains background information, clear guidance on the tasks to be undertaken and detailed assessment criteria. In contrast, many other assignments do not give enough detail about what is expected of students. The content and level of some animal care assignments do not take sufficient account of the ability of the students. The quality of teachers' written comments on students' assignments varies widely. Some comments are clear and instructive but others give insufficient guidance on how the work could be improved. The assessment programme is made known to the students well in advance. On a few courses, the students' workloads are not evenly spread throughout the year. Equine studies students would benefit from having more of their assignments at the start of their course to give them an early indication of the standard of their work.

39 In equine studies, most practical sessions were of a high standard. Objectives were clearly specified by the tutor and discussion with the students enabled tutors to develop effective links between theoretical and practical work. The students were clear about the procedures to be followed. They received sound individual attention and were encouraged

to assess their own work. In a minority of the practical lessons, teachers failed to give enough attention to individuals. In theory lessons, teachers often made good use of the college's equine unit and of students' work experience to illustrate the topic in hand. In a number of these lessons, however, insufficient account was taken of the differing needs of the students in the group. Teachers failed to vary their teaching methods sufficiently and some students became bored. Discussions often involved only a minority of students. Students who were slower writers spent much time copying notes, and as a consequence, did not participate fully in other activities.

40 In many of the theory classes in horticulture and countryside studies teachers made frequent and effective reference to well-chosen examples from the college estate and horticulture unit to illustrate the topic. In the best classes, teachers used suitably varied teaching methods, including individual and group exercises, which provided good opportunities for teachers to provide additional support to students who needed it. Teachers made effective use of questions to encourage students to contribute in class and some interesting discussions developed. In a number of lessons, the learning outcomes were unclear. On some occasions, sessions were not well managed; the more experienced students dominated the discussion and, as a result, others lost interest. Although practical lessons were generally well structured, there were weaknesses in the organisation and management of many of them. Equipment and materials were not always readily available and lack of clarity about procedures meant that students spent too much time waiting for guidance.

41 In agriculture, lessons were well structured. Teachers had clear lesson plans and theory and practice were integrated effectively. Most teachers provided a variety of appropriate learning activities. In some lessons, the theory period at the start of the lesson was followed by related practical work on the farm. These sessions sometimes included a guided walk or students worked on their own to find information which was later discussed with other members of the class. Most practical classes were well organised, enabling all students to become effectively involved in activities. Teachers gave effective demonstrations of practical skills and supervised students' work closely. Some of the handouts used in lessons were of poor quality. In some lessons too much time was devoted to relatively low level work whilst more complex areas of study were given too little attention.

42 In animal care, much teaching lacked clear relevance to practical work and included little reference to commercial applications in industry. In many of the half-day theory lessons, the teaching lacked variety and the work did not make sufficient demands on the more able students. Duties in the animal care unit were not challenging and did not enable students to develop appropriate levels of skill. Practical teaching was generally effective; all lessons ended with effective conclusions and feedback to

students. The best practical lessons were well planned and followed the scheme of work. Teachers provided a variety of activities, including individual and group work, and took care to explain tasks clearly.

43 Programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well designed and have clear aims. Practical classes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were generally well taught. Good relations between staff and students encouraged students to learn. However, teachers did not always check students' understanding sufficiently. In the better sessions, teachers gave thorough explanations, made good use of students' experience and took care to develop key skills. Some of the teaching of basic skills to students with learning difficulties was not effective. Assessment of students' learning difficulties or basic skill needs and the briefing of vocational staff after assessment were at early stages of development. Some work has been undertaken to brief vocational teachers on the learning difficulties of students but it is at an early stage of development.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

44 Students generally demonstrate a satisfactory level of understanding and knowledge, but some have gaps in their knowledge of the more theoretical subjects. Many agriculture, horticulture and equine studies students showed a good understanding of the industry, often based on considerable practical experience gained outside college. Students are careful and conscientious in carrying out practical work. The level of competence varies between subjects and students, often depending on their pre-course experience. Most students achieve satisfactory standards of performance. In addition to their main course of study, many agriculture students gain supplementary qualifications in specific skills such as the safe application of chemicals. However, a relatively low proportion of equine studies students gain such qualifications. The practical ability of animal care students is underdeveloped. Skills in information technology are inadequately developed on most programmes. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do not have enough opportunity to take part in group work or to develop their numeracy and study skills.

45 Most students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are highly motivated and show considerable vocational commitment. A few BTEC first diploma students appear to lack motivation. Equine studies students do not always appreciate the relevance of some of the less applied aspects of their course and this adversely affects their participation in class and their attendance.

46 Students' written work is appropriate to the level at which they are studying. Although the quality of assignments varies widely on most courses, there is evidence of a good deal of effort on the part of students. Assignments requiring reports are clearly presented. Consistently high standards are achieved by national certificate and diploma horticulture students. Their assignments are thoroughly researched and most are

effectively structured; they have clear objectives and reach sensible conclusions. The assignments of first diploma students provide evidence of progressive development of study skills but some lack depth in their coverage of vocational aspects. In other areas of work, many assignments are heavily factual; students do not adequately apply their knowledge. Some students' work on the countrystart courses is incomplete. Most students have class notes and coursework carefully filed and divided into modules.

47 On many courses, the pass rates for those students who complete their courses are consistently good. Of the 221 full-time students completing their studies last year 88 per cent passed. However, high withdrawal rates are a problem on some full-time courses. In 1995-96, 74 per cent of the 265 full-time students originally enrolled on courses completed their studies; the retention rates ranged from 65 per cent to 100 per cent. On approximately one-third of courses, 20 per cent of full-time students left early. By contrast, a high proportion of part-time students completed their course and achieved the award they were seeking.

48 Pass rates for full-time agriculture, countryside and equine courses are good. Over the last two years, 90 per cent pass rates have been achieved on most of these courses. For the national diploma in environmental management course, a relatively high proportion of students leave the course during the first year. As a result, the success rate at the end of the second year was relatively low last year, at 62 per cent. Completion rates have varied widely in recent years. The rate on agriculture courses has ranged between 60 and 100 per cent. Completion rates for equine studies students are poor and on some courses reach the lowest levels in the college.

49 Completion and pass rates for horticulture courses are satisfactory. Over the last few years, students on the national certificate course in horticulture have achieved better results than those on the national diploma course. Last year, the success rates for both courses were good. Approximately 86 per cent of the students originally enrolled passed. Completion rates on the countrystart course are satisfactory. Over 80 per cent of students passed last year, and a high proportion achieved nationally-recognised accreditation. On animal care courses, pass rates on the national certificate have been satisfactory, but there were poor results on the national diploma course. Last year, 40 students enrolled at the start of the national diploma course and only 18 of the 26 students completing their studies passed.

50 Full information on the destinations of students is recorded for most areas. A high proportion of students completing their course go on to further study or enter employment. Overall, approximately two-thirds of these students continue their studies, most of them at Rodbaston College. A high proportion of national diploma agriculture and horticulture students enter employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

51 In its mission statement the college commits itself to providing 'high-quality education and training', but there is no clear vision of how this will be achieved. There is no college policy on quality assurance. The strategic plan contains few references to quality assurance and there is no indication of how strategic objectives relating to quality are to be met. No overall leadership or responsibility for quality assurance has been allocated.

52 The college has set up a structure of committees and meetings that is intended to support its system of quality assurance. The major elements of the structure are the academic board and the academic standards subcommittee which reports to it, annual course consultative meetings, termly course review meetings and course team meetings. With the exception of the academic standards subcommittee, none of these groups has a clear remit or systems for reporting. The structure lacks coherence and for the most part does not function effectively. The links between the different elements are weak and there is little evidence of issues being followed through. The academic board has put much effort into discussing the progress of individual students. Its monitoring of the quality and standards of teaching and students' learning in the college, however, is not well organised. The academic standards committee is active in pursuing its responsibilities. It has paid particular attention to developing and operating the college's system of internal verification.

53 The college's 21 course teams have a major role in assuring quality of provision through course review and evaluation but the review process lacks rigour and breadth. There is a useful and regularly updated handbook of procedures and standard documents, but not all course managers comply with its requirements. Minutes of meetings lack necessary detail; they do not clearly identify the action to be taken and by whom. Course managers draw on a restricted range of data to inform course review and planning. They do not analyse trends in recruitment, retention, achievement and progression from year to year. Course teams do not set the rigorous targets against which improvements can be measured. A particular weaknesses is the lack of response to low retention rates.

54 Students' representatives attend course review meetings and course consultative meetings. This gives them a useful opportunity to air concerns, but opportunities are missed for them to contribute effectively to planning and review. In June 1996, a formal college-wide survey of students' views was completed. However, there was a delay of more than nine months in reporting the results of the survey to the academic board; the findings have not been formally addressed by other groups; and there is no plan for communicating findings to students.

55 The college has so far set few standards for the quality of service it provides. Performance against the standards that do exist, such as those

specified in the students' charter, is generally not monitored. Administrative, domestic and catering staff have worked in accordance with clearly-defined procedures since 1993. At the time of the inspection, they were beginning to consider setting standards for their work. The college's training department works to the standards of ISO 9002 and it is an objective of the strategic plan for 1996-99 to spread the good practice from this area of the college's work. No plan exists to indicate how this will be done, however.

56 Staff appraisal consists of a system of annual staff-development reviews. Some observation of teaching takes place and staff who have been observed confirm that they find the feedback from such observations useful. Observation is not used to inform course review. During staff-development reviews, staff-development needs and personal targets are identified. The records of the interviews vary greatly in their detail and usefulness. Each year, the senior management team sets college-wide priorities for staff development. Training for the awards of the training and development lead body has been the major focus for some years. There is otherwise no college-wide co-ordination of staff development and no college-wide staff development and training plan. This, together with the small amounts of money devolved to directors for training, has meant that some urgent needs remain unmet. Each member of staff who undertakes training completes a short and simple evaluation form. No use is made of this valuable information to inform future planning. New staff undertake an induction programme that takes account of their particular needs. They speak appreciatively of its usefulness. The college made its first commitment to becoming recognised as an Investor in People in 1992. It has recently renewed the commitment and is hoping to achieve recognition in 1998.

57 The college produced a self-assessment report based on the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The report had a clear layout and was easy to understand. It made helpful reference to sources of evidence but did not link these references to strengths and weaknesses. The report overemphasised the college's strengths and failed to identify some of its weaknesses. The college graded each cross-college area. In general, the grades were slightly higher than those awarded by the inspectors.

RESOURCES

Staffing

58 Most staff are well qualified and have a wide range of industrial experience. Teachers keep well informed and up to date in their specialisms. They make effective use of current industrial developments in their teaching. Full-time staff in most areas have training and development lead body assessor qualifications but few part-time teachers have these awards. Staff teaching on foundation level courses lack

appropriate qualifications in the teaching of students with learning difficulties, and only two of the five full-time teachers in the animal care section have relevant qualifications or experience in animal care.

59 There are weaknesses in the way in which some teachers carry out key aspects of their duties, including tutoring, lesson planning and their management of assignments. All teaching staff carry a wide range of responsibilities. Tutorial and teaching loads are uneven and there is insufficient monitoring and review of the workloads of staff. Teachers and managers are not effective at identifying priorities in their work. Some duties currently performed by teachers could be carried out by support staff. Teaching time is not always used efficiently. The college has generally been effective in redeploying staff as its courses have changed.

60 There is good technical support for teaching and strong links exist between teaching and support staff in most areas. There is a technician who provides support for information technology across the college but because this role involves wide responsibilities the time that is available to help individual students is limited. Each year the technician position is filled by a university student on work placement. This system limits the continuity in the development of the college's information technology facilities and its support services. There is no technician support for countryside practical classes.

Equipment/learning resources

61 There is a good range of specialist tools and equipment to support teaching in most curriculum areas. The small animal unit has a wide range of animals and the grooming room is well equipped. Shortages of laboratory equipment affect teaching in some science classes. There are appropriate equine tools and equipment and the current range of horses is wide enough to ensure that horses are well suited to their riders in most classes. The farm is well equipped and has a good variety and quantity of farm livestock. Horticulture and countryside courses are supported by a good range of specialist equipment and plants. There are few learning materials suitable for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to use on their own in order to develop their key skills.

62 Most courses are supported by suitable texts, periodicals and audio-visual materials. Some horticultural texts are dated. The library has appropriate opening hours and is widely used. The computerised issue and security system has reduced annual losses to under 2 per cent of the stock. Links between library staff and teachers are generally good. There is congestion in the library at peak times and noise levels are often high. The use of the library as the base room for some students and for additional learning support adds to the congestion.

63 In the library there is an information technology area which has recently updated equipment to which students have open access. Adjacent to the library is an information technology room equipped with

10 computers which is available for teaching or students' use. Students are dissatisfied with the availability and maintenance of computers. There are appropriate information technology facilities for administration use. There are computers in most teaching staff offices but some need to be updated. With the exception of the farm, there is a lack of computers to support the specialist teaching units in the college.

Accommodation

64 The college's estate has been developed effectively to balance the needs of students and the demands of operating a country estate on a commercial basis. Careful attention is paid to conservation and good farming practice. The estate offers a wide range of habitats, including woodland, ponds, wet grassland, hedges and streams. Teaching accommodation is sufficient for demand. Rodbaston Hall includes the college's reception and staff offices. There is good provision for those with restricted mobility. The college has clear signposting.

65 The college farm is effectively used for practical work and assessments. The farm enterprises are well managed and buildings are generally in good condition. The 130 hectare farm enterprise is typical of the area and includes a 110 cow dairy herd, a flock of 110 ewes and a long-established pedigree pig breeding herd which produces breeding stock for sale at home and overseas. The animal housing provides a good example for students of modern animal welfare. There is an adequate amount of stabling and related accommodation.

66 Specialist horticultural facilities are good. The landscaping of the campus and the variety of plants and fauna in and around the glasshouses effectively demonstrate the skills that students are being taught. The hard landscape area which is being developed provides a useful asset for teaching. The college provides a stimulating and supportive learning environment for countrystart students; there are attractive base rooms and access to appropriate specialist accommodation. There are shortcomings in the specialist animal care accommodation which is housed in converted poultry houses. There is no area for students to gain reception or sales experience.

67 The standard of students' accommodation varies. For example, in one hostel there are only two toilets and one bath and shower to serve 12 rooms. The students association building contains a bistro and a shop with an area for eating. There is a bar and an adjacent television lounge but these facilities are inadequate for the number of students. There is a well-used farm common room.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

68 The major strengths of the college are:

- the range of programmes for those employed in the industry
- strong links with schools and other colleges
- the growth in full-time student enrolments
- good additional support in literacy and numeracy
- some good examination results for students who complete their courses
- the effective development and use of the estate and farm.

69 The college should address:

- the lack of clarity in the aims and strategic direction of the college
- weaknesses in college management
- the inadequacy of tutorial provision
- the lower than average quality of teaching sessions
- poor retention on some full-time courses
- the absence of strategies, policies, and clear leadership responsibilities for quality assurance
- deficiencies in staff development
- poor development of students' information technology skills on some programmes
- underdeveloped monitoring and review of the workloads of teachers.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1997)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1997)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1997)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at March 1997)

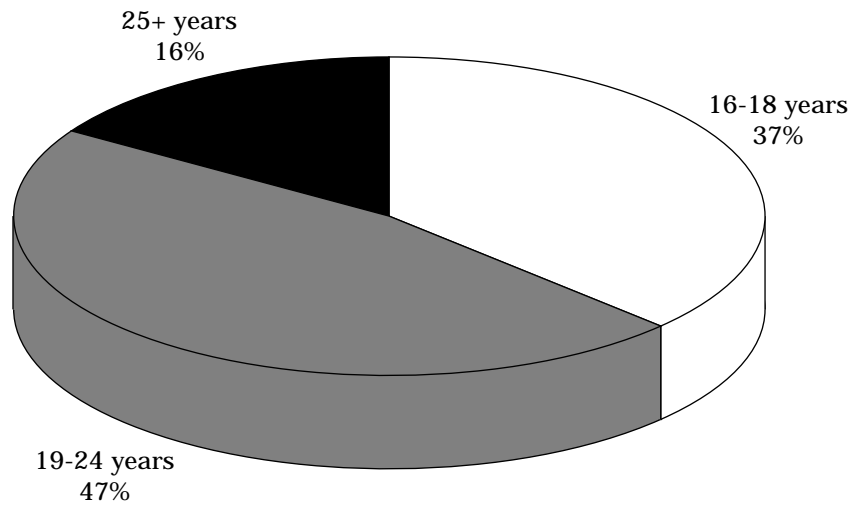
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

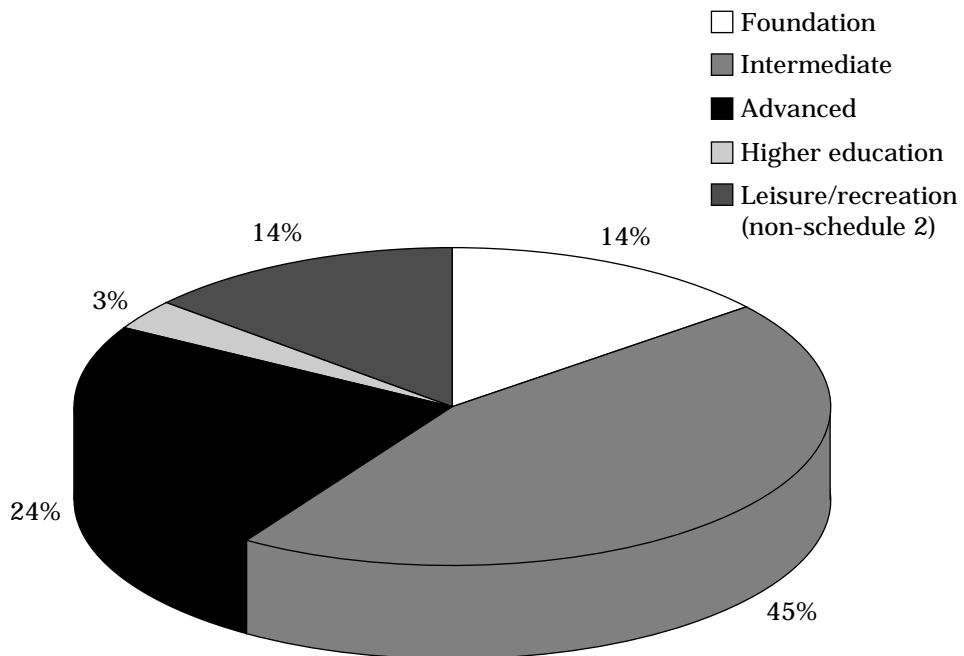
Rodbaston College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1997)



Student numbers: 1,268

Figure 2

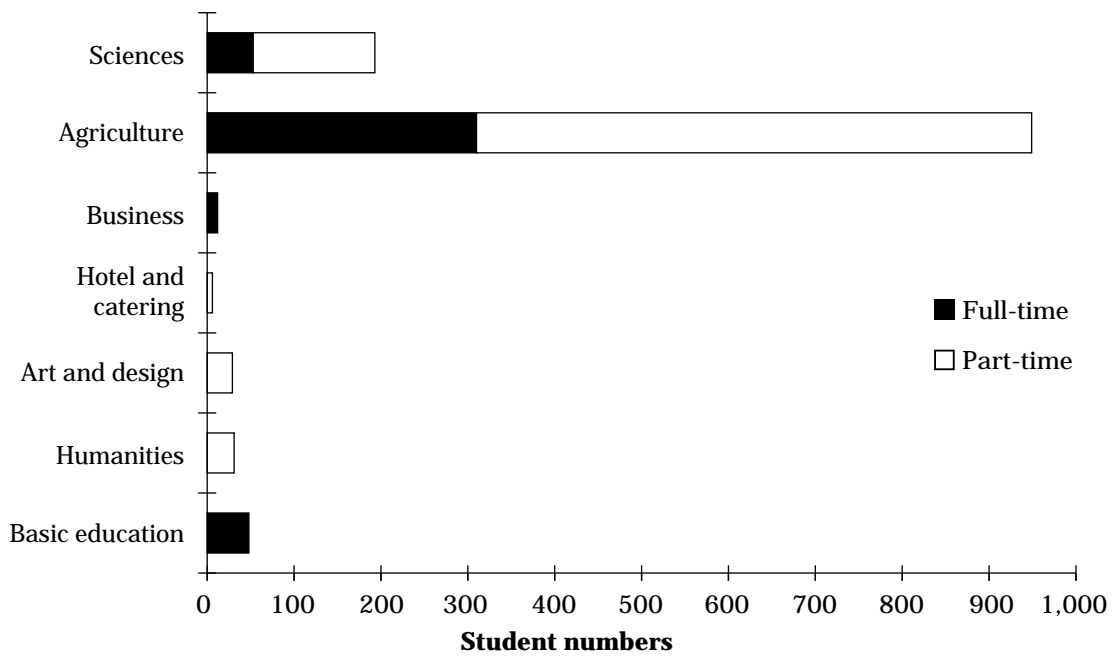
Rodbaston College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1997)



Student numbers: 1,268

Figure 3

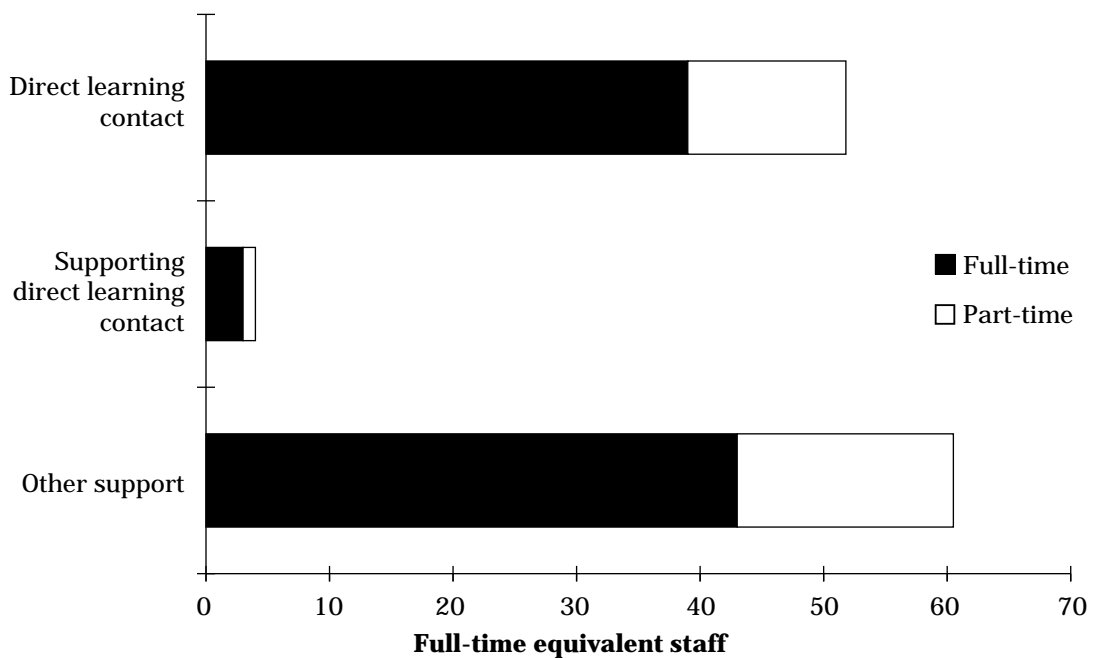
Rodbaston College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1997)



Student numbers: 1,268

Figure 4

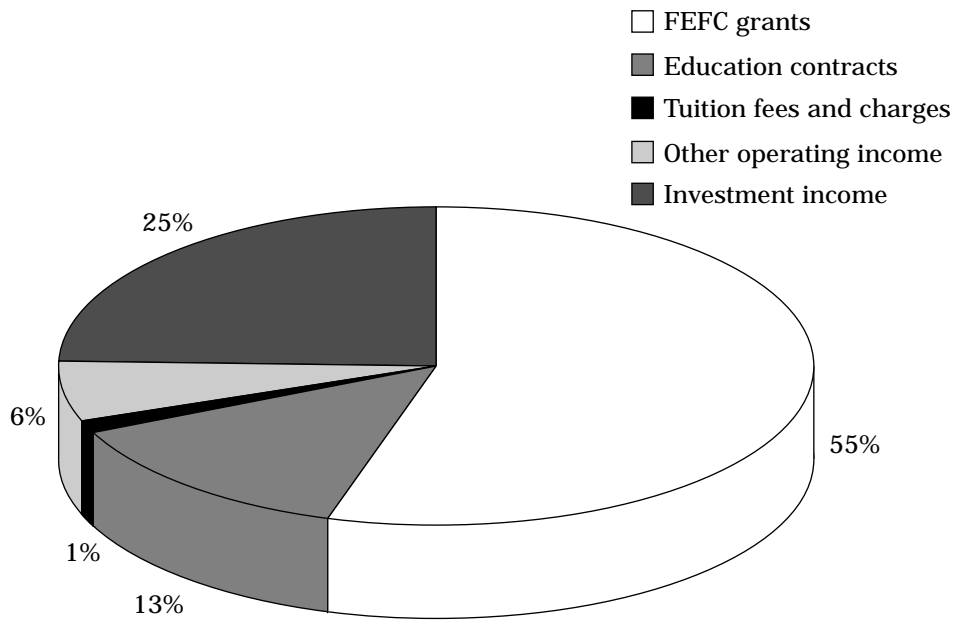
Rodbaston College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at March 1997)



Full-time equivalent staff: 116

Figure 5

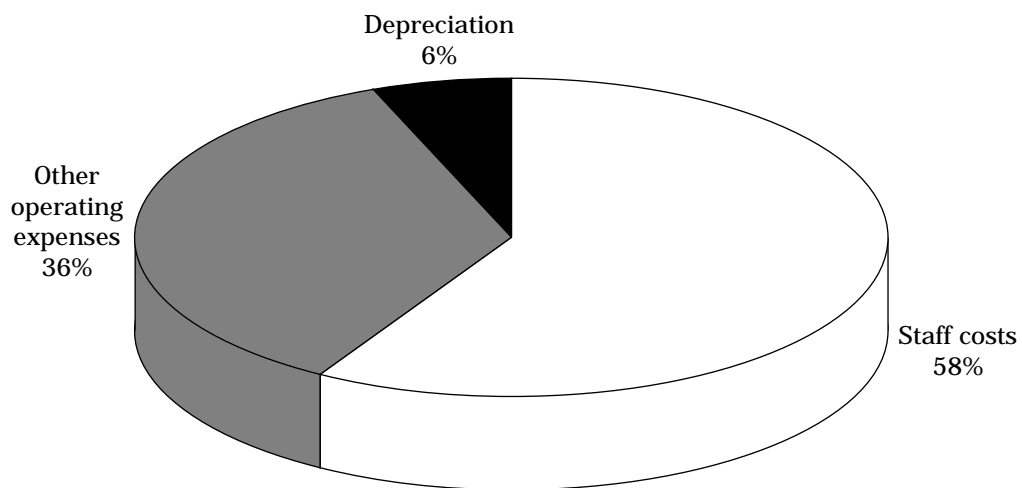
Rodbaston College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £3,904,252

Figure 6

Rodbaston College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £4,160,525

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
August 1997