

Rycotewood College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	-
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	-

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

Rycotewood College

South East Region

Inspected March 1999

Rycotewood College is a specialist college in Thame, Oxfordshire. The college offers further and higher education courses in art, design and engineering and recruits nationally and internationally. It has recently introduced new programmes to meet local needs, including IT and holistic therapies. The college produced its first self-assessment report in July 1998, in a process which involved staff and governors. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses which had been omitted. Action plans arising from self-assessment were clear, and many weaknesses had been addressed before the inspection. The inspection covered provision in three curriculum areas and five aspects of cross-college provision.

The college has made many improvements since the last inspection. It has a new management structure and is beginning to develop appropriate policies and procedures. It has introduced programmes to provide access routes into the curriculum and broaden the curriculum offer, and has invested in IT and some other aspects of its equipment and accommodation. The standard of teaching and learning is good and there are some excellent pass rates. Students' attendance and retention rates have improved greatly in the past two years, although

enrolments remain low in some areas. Students are well supported and are fully involved in the life of the college. Governors need to review the college's mission and make decisions about its strategic direction. The college should: address its weak financial position; produce a more coherent marketing and publicity strategy; develop further its quality assurance processes; implement its equal opportunities policy; invest in specialist IT facilities to support curriculum delivery; improve student accommodation and social facilities; make better use of its teaching space; and encourage the take-up of study support by students identified as needing it.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Information technology	2	Support for students	2
Engineering	2	General resources	3
Design crafts and restoration	2	Quality assurance	3
		Governance	4
		Management	3

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Rycotewood College is a small specialist college situated in the market town of Thame, Oxfordshire. Thame has a population of 11,000 and is 10 miles from both Oxford and Aylesbury. The college is well situated for public transport and motorway links. The area has a high wage economy; unemployment is currently 1.6%. The majority of the population is employed in the service sector. At least 85% of adults locally are qualified at national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 3 and above. The college operates on a single site, with residential facilities for 74 students. The main building, constructed in 1853 as a workhouse, is a grade II listed building.

2 Rycotewood College was founded in 1935 by the philanthropist Cecil Michaelis as a residential establishment which provided educational opportunities for young men from the north-east of England who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Originally, the subjects taught were gatemaking and wheelwrighting; these evolved into the making of fine furniture and agricultural engineering. Design crafts, restoration and engineering continue to be dominant aspects of the college's provision, and the majority of full-time students follow courses in these areas. The college began to recruit female students in the 1960s. It now recruits nationally and internationally for its specialist courses. In recent years, it has introduced courses intended to serve the needs of the local community, such as information technology (IT) and holistic studies. Self-financing and training and enterprise council (TEC) funded courses, including modern apprenticeships in motor sports and handmade furniture, have also been developed. In all, the college offers courses in eight of the programme areas of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

3 The college claims a long tradition in working with those who are educationally disadvantaged and believes that the founder's

original intentions are reflected in its present mission statement which is: 'to promote high-quality lifelong learning skills that will help people achieve personal growth, gain knowledge, create opportunity and encourage them to play an active and creative part in society'. Its corporate objectives are to:

- continue to reposition the college to become the local provider of further education and training, and to strengthen its national position
- increase full-cost work by 40%
- evaluate, improve and strengthen the curriculum by broadening the course portfolio
- achieve further education and higher education income.

4 In November 1998, the college had 962 enrolments. Of these, 60% were over 25 years of age, 27% were women, and 4% were people of minority ethnic origin. Approximately one-quarter of the students were enrolled for study on full-time courses. In February 1999, the college employed 52 full-time equivalent staff on a permanent basis, of whom 32 were not involved directly in teaching.

5 The nearest general further education colleges are in Oxford and Aylesbury. Because of its specialist nature, Rycotewood College regards these establishments as neither competitors nor collaborators. Discussions have taken place over recent years with local further and higher education colleges with a view to arranging a merger. No merger plan has yet resulted. In Thame, the 11 to 18 comprehensive school, which has a large sixth form, offers some general further education courses. The Heart of England TEC is supportive of the college's work and its chief executive is a member of the corporation. Relationships with the local authority's community education service are weak. Rycotewood College is experiencing considerable financial difficulties and will be operating in deficit in the current financial year. To create viable groups, students

Context

working towards different qualifications are sometimes taught together.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in March 1999. Inspectors had previously studied the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. The college submitted data on students' achievements for 1998. These were checked by inspectors against class registers and awarding body pass lists and were found to be generally reliable. Data for 1996 and 1997 were taken from the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR) of achievement. The college was notified approximately three months before the inspection of those aspects of provision that

were to be inspected. The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors working for a total of 24 days, and an auditor working for three days. They observed 34 lessons and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with students, governors, managers and staff.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 74% were rated good or outstanding, 9% better than the national average recorded for all lessons inspected in 1997-98, and none were less than satisfactory. This represents a considerable improvement since the last inspection in 1994, when strengths outweighed weaknesses in only 34% of the lessons observed.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GNVQ	0	8	2	0	0	10
NVQ	0	3	2	0	0	5
Higher education	1	3	2	0	0	6
Other vocational	3	4	3	0	0	10
Other	1	2	0	0	0	3
Total (No.)	5	20	9	0	0	34
Total (%)	15	59	26	0	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

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

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8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The average level of attendance was almost 90% and showed a high degree of consistency across all curriculum areas.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Rycotewood College	11.5	90
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

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

Curriculum Areas

Information Technology

Grade 2

9 The inspection covered IT provision at access, intermediate and advanced levels, as well as short courses in business-related IT. Inspectors observed 11 lessons. Inspectors did not agree with all the judgements in the self-assessment report, some of which were not supported by evidence. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-planned teaching and learning
- effective support for individual students
- rigorous monitoring of attendance against targets
- improvements in students' achievements
- accessible and up-to-date IT equipment

Weaknesses

- failure to provide sufficiently demanding work for some students
- key skills not integrated with courses
- poor retention on national diploma course

10 The college has introduced IT courses over the past three years and has recruited significant numbers of part-time students from the local area. The IT section is well managed and has a team of enthusiastic staff keen to provide students with a high-quality learning experience.

11 Teaching and learning activities are well planned. Schemes of work are comprehensive and set out expected learning outcomes. Students understand the objectives of lessons and are aware of teachers' expectations. In the majority of lessons, teachers use a variety of appropriate methods including the exposition of

theory, technical practice and project work based on realistic case studies. In a general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate assignment, students produced a range of good-quality promotional materials for the college that were used on the college's open day. Students felt that their work had been taken very seriously. On part-time IT courses, inspectors observed some excellent teaching, with students working in an atmosphere of mutual support and excitement about new skills acquired. In a small number of lessons, teachers did not sustain students' interest and failed to provide more able students with sufficiently demanding work.

12 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that key skills are not integrated with course activities. Students viewed additional key skills classes as irrelevant to their needs, although some good teaching practice was observed. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that students with learning difficulties are effectively supported. Two students with autism are successfully following a GNVQ programme benefiting from support in lessons and specially adapted software. One student has a guide dog which is readily accommodated in all lessons. Students' attendance had been identified as a particular cause for concern and teachers have taken rigorous and concerted action to improve it. In the lessons observed, overall attendance at 92% was 15% better than the average for all lessons inspected in 1997-98.

13 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that improvement in students' achievements is an area of strength. College data for 1998 show improvements in achievement rates. For example, students' achievements in computer literacy courses have improved from 24% in 1996 to 66% in 1998, which compares favourably with national levels of achievement. Short courses in computer-assisted design have also shown an improvement from 20% in 1997 to 68% in 1998. Retention is generally very good. There is a

Curriculum Areas

notable exception to this in the national diploma course in IT which retained only 43% of students in 1998. The college has decided to discontinue this course.

14 The IT section is well managed. Team meetings allow staff to share good practice and discuss the needs of individual students. Staff in the IT section have appropriate qualifications and relevant commercial experience. They participate positively in the college's staff training and development programme.

Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that students have good access to information communication technologies and that there is adequate technician support. Printers and scanners are less well provided. Inspectors observed examples of effective use of electronic mail. For example, students are encouraged to report technical difficulties by electronic mail. There are few books and periodicals relating to IT in the resource centre, especially in business-related areas.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Computer literacy and information technology	1	Expected completions	112	222	177
		Retention (%)	98	100	92
		Achievement (%)	24	50	66
Computers for the terrified (own certificate)	1	Expected completions	*	*	48
		Retention (%)	*	*	92
		Achievement (%)	*	*	93
GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Expected completions	*	*	5
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	80
Computer-aided design	2	Expected completions	*	20	56
		Retention (%)	*	100	70
		Achievement (%)	*	20	68
National diploma in IT	3	Expected completions	10	6	7
		Retention (%)	90	83	43
		Achievement (%)	100	100	100
IT courses for business (programme 5)	**	Expected completions	12	169	192
		Retention (%)	100	100	91
		Achievement (%)	25	47	57

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

*course not running

**various levels

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 2

15 The inspection covered GNVQ and NVQ courses in engineering, including NVQ programmes in construction plant engineering. Nine lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report. Action plans to address weaknesses had been prepared and there was evidence that they were having a positive effect on the curriculum.

Key strengths

- good teaching
- well-managed courses
- good student retention and achievement on NVQ programmes
- productive links with employers
- innovative modern apprenticeship scheme in motor sports

Weaknesses

- no access route to advanced level
- lack of specialist use of IT in the curriculum

16 Courses are well managed and schemes of work are thorough and comprehensive. There is a regular course review procedure with action plans leading to continuous improvement of curriculum delivery. Enrolments on some courses are low, but flexible timetabling allows students following different modes of attendance to share resources. Good planning of courses ensures that the learning experience of students is not affected. The college is currently seeking approval to offer GNVQ intermediate in engineering as a progression route to advanced level. The college believes that this will help to address issues of underachievement by some students on the GNVQ advanced programme.

The college has been approved by the Heart of England TEC as a recognised training provider for an innovative modern apprenticeship scheme in motor sports.

17 The self-assessment report identified good teaching as a strength of the provision and inspectors agreed. Course files are well organised and there are established procedures for recording students' achievements. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods and relate classroom teaching to practical applications in the workshop. Assignment briefs are well planned and give students clear guidelines on assessment criteria. The self-assessment report identified as a weakness the difficulty some GNVQ students have in completing their evidence portfolios in the allocated time. The assessment plan for the programme has now been modified to ensure that students do not face unnecessary overload of assignments at key times. There is an effective tutorial system in place and students appreciate the accessibility of their tutors. Key skills are integrated with GNVQ courses but have only recently been introduced to NVQ programmes. Students are encouraged to use the open access IT facilities to ensure that their coursework is well presented. The use of IT in teaching is inhibited by the lack of specialist engineering software.

18 Students produce work of a high standard in the workshop. They are enthusiastic in the classroom and readily take part in class discussions. They are keen to relate their theoretical studies to practical situations. The results on NVQ courses are good. Attendance and retention rates improved after a new monitoring system was introduced. The retention of some GNVQ students is poor. When the GNVQ was offered as a sandwich course, some students were offered jobs during their year in employment and did not return to complete the course. This mode of delivery has now ceased. There is a progression route to higher education for successful students.

Curriculum Areas

19 Staff in the engineering department have appropriate qualifications and experience. Most have undertaken assessor and verifier training. Classroom and laboratory accommodation is of a good standard and most teaching rooms are designed to be used flexibly. Workshop areas are generally of a good standard and are well maintained. The department is planning to reorganise its workshop accommodation to ensure more efficient use. Both NVQ programme areas demand access to

sophisticated and expensive machinery. The college relies on its close contacts with engineering companies for the loan of equipment and uses a short-term hire facility when necessary. The department has good contacts with industry. An engineering consultative committee held during the inspection was well attended and employer representatives were involved in reviewing the self-assessment report and advising on action plans.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ construction plant maintenance	2	Expected completions	19	45	34
		Retention (%)	100	73	97
		Achievement (%)	95	76	94
NVQ agricultural mechanics	2	Expected completions	9	16	17
		Retention (%)	100	75	82
		Achievement (%)	88	91	64
NVQ construction plant maintenance	3	Expected completions	*	20	24
		Retention (%)	*	90	96
		Achievement (%)	*	100	100
GNVQ advanced engineering	3	Expected completions	16**	14	16
		Retention (%)	94**	86	63
		Achievement (%)	73**	50	30

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

*course not running

**national diploma in engineering

Curriculum Areas

Design Crafts and Restoration

Grade 2

20 The inspection covered design crafts, furniture restoration and conservation, general art and design and modelmaking. Inspectors observed 14 lessons. The college's self-assessment was comprehensive and clearly identified strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements identified by the college in the self-assessment report. Action had been taken to address some weaknesses before the inspection.

Key strengths

- well-planned schemes of work and lessons
- varied and effective teaching methods
- professional standard of students' work
- constructive feedback to students
- good achievements on most courses amongst students completing
- high level of technical expertise amongst staff
- well-equipped workshops

Weaknesses

- some courses with low recruitment
- lack of specialist computer facilities for design students
- crowded working conditions in some studios

21 The college offers full-time and part-time further and higher education courses in design crafts, furniture restoration and conservation, and modelmaking. GNVQ art and design courses have been recently introduced and are still being established. As the self-assessment report acknowledged, numbers are low on some courses. Some groups are combined to maintain viable provision. The college is taking

steps to improve enrolments, but it is too early to assess whether this has been successful. The self-assessment process, which included critical analysis of teaching and learning and students' achievements, has led to improvements in course and lesson management. Courses are effectively managed, well designed and well planned. Documentation used by course teams is detailed and comprehensive.

22 Overall, the quality of teaching is good. Of the 14 lessons observed, eight were judged to be good or outstanding. Teachers use an appropriate range of teaching methods, a strength noted in the self-assessment report. Assignment briefs clearly identify objectives to be achieved, skills to be developed, deadlines and assessment arrangements. Teachers' expectations of students are high. In the best lessons, students take part in a variety of learning activities which enable them to develop existing skills and gain new ones. Students are encouraged to play an active part in lessons and express their opinions when discussing their own and others' work. Teachers are skilled in relating theoretical knowledge to professional practice. They have strong links with industry. Students can take advantage of a wide range of work experiences. Emphasis is placed on safety. Teachers ensure students learn to use equipment competently and safely. In a few lessons, teachers failed to check that students understood the work. Students learned little and failed to finish work in the time allowed. There was insufficient guidance and instruction for some students on design practice and little use of computer-aided design.

23 The college identified in its self-assessment report that students achieve well on the majority of courses. Students' work is generally of a high standard. Most students demonstrate appropriate levels of knowledge, understanding and skill in their practical work. Students' portfolios, files and log books are generally well kept. Furniture restoration students are particularly thorough in the research of

Curriculum Areas

materials using historical references. Teachers provide students with strong personal support and carefully record individual progress. Practical competence is thoroughly assessed. Students are encouraged to develop the ability to work effectively on their own and in teams. The pass rate on most courses is above the national average. The higher national diploma courses in furniture restoration and conservation achieved pass rates of 100% in 1997 and 1998, as did the higher national diploma in modelmaking in 1998. Retention rates of 100% were achieved on both the full-time and part-time professional development certificate in furniture restoration and conservation in 1998. However, retention on the higher national diploma in furniture restoration and conservation dropped dramatically between 1996 and 1998 to 40% which is well below the national average. Pass rates on the part-time professional development certificate in furniture restoration and conservation were below the national average in 1996 and 1997 at 50% and 67%, respectively.

24 There is an adequate number of specialist workshops which are generally fit for purpose and well equipped. A few workshops and studios are overcrowded and cluttered. There are no specialist computer design facilities. There is a good range of small equipment and consumable materials. Appropriate text books and journals are provided in the learning resource centre. Since the last inspection, the college has created a large new furniture restoration centre which allows students to work at individual workbenches. Students have timetabled sessions in the centre and can use it at other times. Teachers are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their subjects. The professional expertise and experience of staff as identified in the self-assessment report is a strength.

Curriculum Areas

A summary of achievement and retention rates in design crafts and restoration, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
National diploma in design (design crafts) two year full time	3	Expected completions	21	14	18
		Retention (%)	95	79	84
		Achievement (%)	90	100	86
Higher national diploma in design (furniture restoration and conservation) two year full time	4	Expected completions	13	8	8
		Retention (%)	100	88	40
		Achievement (%)	84	100	100
Higher national diploma in design (modelmaking) two year full time	4	Expected completions	17	20	7
		Retention (%)	76	85	72
		Achievement (%)	42	82	100
Professional development certificate (furniture restoration and conservation) one year full time	4	Expected completions	14	18	14
		Retention (%)	86	83	100
		Achievement (%)	58	92	83
Professional development certificate (furniture restoration and conservation) two year full time	4	Expected completions	4	8	7
		Retention (%)	84	82	100
		Achievement (%)	50	67	71

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

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

25 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgements in the self-assessment report but identified some additional strengths and weaknesses. The college had taken action to address some weaknesses before the inspection.

Key strengths

- effective tutorial system
- high-quality study support
- well-planned induction
- high level of students' involvement in college life
- good range of student services

Weaknesses

- lack of initial information and guidance
- low take-up of study support
- underdeveloped careers education programme

26 Prospective students have to request information about the college. The prospectus is well designed and illustrated. However, the college takes too little initiative in providing publicity and information. Links with local schools are limited to attendance at careers events. A 'taster' week is provided for the neighbouring school in Thame. There is no structured guidance provision and some part-time students are enrolled without any advice or guidance. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report. Senior staff have been directly involved in interviewing students for the past three years which has reduced the number of course changes and complaints following enrolment. A detailed interview checklist is now used to ensure that students gain full and accurate information.

27 All full-time students receive a welcome pack comprising an induction checklist, health and safety information and the college charter. A student handbook contains college and course information. Surveys of students' opinion reveal a greatly improved level of satisfaction with the induction process over the past two years (51% in 1996-97 to 90% in 1997-98). The college recognised its induction programme as a strength in its self-assessment report.

28 The college has concentrated attention on the development of its tutorial system. All students have a nominated tutor whom they meet on a regular basis and who also teaches them. Students value tutors' accessibility and willingness to help. Tutors keep detailed records of students' progress. Students' attendance is rigorously monitored and printed records are provided for each week and for the year to date. This enables tutors to take swift action and, as a result, student retention has improved. The college identified tutorials as a strength and inspectors agreed.

29 Students' additional learning support needs are assessed during induction. Both students and tutors receive feedback, and support plans are created for each student. A range of strategies is used including support in lessons. Students can work independently or with a tutor in the college study centre. Individual progress is carefully monitored and the value of the service is assessed on a college-wide basis. Students who took advantage of study support last year were all retained on programme. A high proportion of those identified as needing support do not use the service. In 1997-98, this was over 70% and, of this group, 24% did not progress to year two. This issue was not addressed in the self-assessment report, although, as the college identified, the study support service is a strength.

30 The college's disability statement makes clear its commitment to supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A hearing-impaired student has a signer who

Cross-college Provision

attends all taught sessions. The signer works in partnership with teachers advising on strategies to support inclusion. A visually impaired student on an IT course was provided with specialist software which was also installed on his home computer.

31 CfBT Thames Guidance Ltd rents an office in the college. This is open to students and the public for careers information and advice. An up-to-date range of resources is available for student and staff use. The careers service offers interviews to all students, but the response rate is less than 50%. There is no dedicated noticeboard in areas of the college used regularly by students, and so communication regarding careers information is minimal. There is no structured programme of careers education.

32 Students have access to a good range of specialist support services. Financial advice and support is given to eligible students. The college has secured specialist scholarships to support individuals. There is a professional counselling service which monitors the concerns raised by students. The college responds to overall trends by providing information or briefing sessions on particular themes, for example, drugs awareness. An accommodation service is provided, including hostels on site. Hostel accommodation is unsuitable for female students, who have to live off site. A welfare officer works with residential students and, along with wardens, provides an appropriate framework of discipline and support. In 1998, 92% of students were satisfied with the support services available to them. Inspectors agreed with this strength as stated in the self-assessment report.

33 Students play an active part in the life of the college. They are well represented by the student association executive which arranges events and activities. Students have organised go-karting, paintballing and canoeing. Financial support for special activities is available through the recreation, social and welfare fund. The

executive meets regularly with the principal to discuss matters of student concern. Students are represented on the academic board and the corporation, as well as on a range of consultative committees. The college listens to and acts on feedback from students.

General Resources

Grade 3

34 Inspectors agreed with the majority of the college's judgements in its self-assessment report, but considered that a few of the strengths were overemphasised and some weaknesses were understated. The college had taken action to address some weaknesses before the inspection.

Key strengths

- attractive college environment
- improvements to accommodation and resources since the last inspection
- up-to-date computers and software
- good provision of specialist books and periodicals

Weaknesses

- underused teaching and learning space
- limited opening hours of the learning resource centre
- inadequate common room and recreational facilities
- poor access to first and second floors for students with restricted mobility

35 The college is located on an attractive site close to the centre of Thame. Its buildings range in age from eight to 164 years old. The college has improved the quality of its accommodation since the last inspection, but there is still much to do. Three of the buildings are temporary and, of these, one is no longer suitable for teaching and is used for storage.

Cross-college Provision

The site is tidy, most of the accommodation is suitable for its purpose and the college has made progress in dealing with maintenance problems created by the range, type and age of the buildings. There is a planned maintenance schedule.

36 The use of teaching and learning accommodation is not monitored. In its self-assessment report, the college stated that the provision of specialist equipment in many workshops limits flexibility in the use of accommodation. However, it does not acknowledge fully that accommodation in the college is underused. There is residential accommodation for 75 students and this is not all used currently. There are no women resident in the hostels because of the type of accommodation which is available. Facilities in the hostels are basic and some of the accommodation is shabby. However, efforts have been made recently to improve the environment. The study bedrooms are of a good size. Access for people with restricted mobility is limited to the ground floor of most of the buildings and residential accommodation is not accessible. The college does not currently have any plans to improve this, as the costs would be prohibitive in the current circumstances.

37 The resource centre houses the library and some computers on open access. It was enlarged in the summer of 1998. There are sufficient study spaces for current demand. One part of the library has been designated as a quiet area, but silence is not maintained. The provision of books, periodicals and CD-ROMs is satisfactory in most areas. The specialist bookstock for furniture, woodworking and engineering courses is good. The library is open for 44 hours each week; this includes only one evening and no weekends. In its self-assessment report the college acknowledged that the limited opening hours are a weakness.

38 The college has made significant investment in up-to-date computing equipment since the last inspection. There are 72 modern,

networked computers with appropriate software. All have electronic mail and access to the internet. There is one scanner and one colour laser printer for use by students. There are computers on open access in the resource centre and in the IT suite. These are well used. Students have access to computers in other rooms when they are not being used for timetabled lessons but this use is not monitored. Students are unclear about how to gain access to these computers and technical support is not always available. The college intends to improve students' access to computers but, as yet, does not have any costed plans.

39 The college refectory is pleasant and attractive and has increased its opening hours recently. It is not open in the evening, and residential students have to purchase their meals by 17.30 hours. The students' common room is run-down, untidy and smoky. It is used mostly by younger students and its ambience does not encourage use by older students. The college has plans to improve this accommodation and to provide a dedicated space for older students' use next to the college bar. Although the television lounge in the residential block has been painted recently, the furniture is worn. There are no sports and few recreational facilities for students on site. The college has made adequate arrangements for students to use the town's local sports and arts centre. There are insufficient toilets for women students. For example, there are none in the furniture restoration block, where there are many women students, nor any in the buildings which house the machinery workshops.

40 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement in its self-assessment report that staff accommodation is mostly satisfactory. However, the workroom for the professional and training services staff is too small. All staff have access to computers and most of these are linked to the college network, with the exception of computers in the engineering staff room.

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Quality Assurance

Grade 3

41 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-planned self-assessment
- good course review documentation
- well-managed staff development and training

Weaknesses

- immature quality assurance system
- undeveloped use of performance indicators
- lack of centralised system for evaluating student complaints

42 The college has improved its arrangements for quality assurance since the last inspection. Senior managers have given an effective lead in building on existing practices to establish a more formal quality assurance system. A quality assurance manual, published in early 1999, includes a clear statement of policy and identifies action to be taken throughout the annual quality assurance cycle. The corporation has maintained an interest in quality assurance through its steering committee. One governor has been appointed to meet regularly with the principal to review the development of the quality assurance system and another attends the academic board which has oversight of quality assurance. Staff are aware of the key elements of the quality assurance system, particularly the course review arrangements. At course level, review files contain thorough documentation. A course evaluation scheme has been introduced for short courses and has proved beneficial in the redesign of programmes. A senior manager with specific responsibility for quality assurance has been recently appointed but, as the self-assessment

report recognised, the review and evaluation process is in its infancy and a full cycle of quality action has still to be completed. The involvement of support areas in the process needs to be clarified.

43 The college produced its first self-assessment report in July 1998. While inspectors agreed with most of the judgements, evidence was not always marshalled in such a way as to distinguish clearly between a strength and a weakness. The self-assessment process involving staff and governors was well planned and closely monitored by the academic board through its self-assessment group. This group has continued to steer and monitor the early period of the self-assessment cycle and effective updates on action plans in the report have been produced. The responsibility of both cross-college and curriculum groups to contribute is clearly established and the ongoing process has already led, for example, to improvements in the internal verification arrangements for NVQs. There is a clear link to strategic planning and this is reflected in the operational plans produced by curriculum sections.

44 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that one of its strengths is the implementation of a human resource development policy. This provides opportunities for both academic and support staff to attend appropriate training courses and for new staff to have effective induction. The staff training plan is directly related to needs identified in the strategic plan or through the appraisal scheme. One example is the provision of opportunities for staff to gain assessor and verifier awards in order to support internal verification. The head of human resources development reports on progress to the academic board although at present there is no evaluation of training against the objectives of the policy. Investor in People status was achieved in 1998.

45 The appraisal scheme concentrates on personal and professional development. All permanent staff have been appraised once.

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Part-time staff and some support staff are not yet included. Observation of teaching has been organised separately from the appraisal system using external consultants. Managers do not conduct observations. The programme is well planned and has now been in operation for three years. Observations have provided opportunities for constructive feedback to individual staff and to section teams. Observations have been graded since the last series completed in January 1999, but a clear link with self-assessment has yet to be made. The observation scheme is not fully integrated with the quality assurance system, and this was acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

46 In the strategic plan the college has adopted a range of performance indicators concerned with academic performance. Because of problems associated with the management information system, regular and secure data have not been available to course managers until this academic year. Therefore the regular scrutiny of performance against agreed indicators is just beginning. The self-assessment group and senior managers have been reviewing progress closely since September 1998 and course teams have begun to set targets on attendance, retention and achievement. Service standards and performance indicators for support areas are in the process of being developed. Whilst governors have been kept informed of progress against the agreed performance indicators, their involvement in the establishment and monitoring of targets has been minimal.

47 The college reviewed its student charter in 1998. The charter is clearly written and is explicit about the standards the college aims to achieve. Students' complaints arising from the charter have been addressed, but arrangements to develop a centralised system for recording and evaluating all complaints have not been established. Students' views are sought through consultation committees and surveys, and points arising are acted upon.

Governance

Grade 4

48 The board used its own established performance evaluation system as a basis for the self-assessment report. Only one significant strength was included. Inspectors and auditors found additional strengths and significant weaknesses.

Key strengths

- dedicated governors with relevant expertise
- successful process to recruit and induct new governors
- comprehensive standing orders for the conduct of corporation business

Weaknesses

- insufficient oversight to ensure financial viability
- failure to define appropriate strategic direction
- poor compliance with the instrument and articles of government
- insufficiently rigorous monitoring of college performance
- delay in authorising some key appointments
- little training for governors
- some key information withheld from the full board

49 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The corporation does not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also does not substantially fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. There has been insufficient oversight and monitoring to ensure the financial viability of the college. Key financial information concerning the

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college's current position has not been shared with the full corporation board.

50 The board comprises the principal, 13 independent business members, the chief executive of the Heart of England TEC, two co-opted members, two staff members and a student member. Governors have expertise gained at a senior level in professional and industrial areas relevant to the college's activity, in higher education and the local community. Following the recent successful recruitment and induction of six new governors, there is now a balance of longer-serving and newer members. There has been little systematic training or identification of the training needs of the board as a whole. The board's self-assessment identified insufficient awareness of student matters and so a student governor was appointed. The self-assessment report acknowledged the need to develop further links with teaching staff and students.

51 The board has been slow to respond to the convergence of FEFC funding levels and its effect on the college's viability. Board members are clear that they wish the college to remain as a specialist centre in its existing location yet recognise the need to link with other institutions to ensure a viable future. Discussions with a range of potential partner institutions have not yet resulted in balanced proposals which would meet the aims of all parties. The strategic plan for 1998-99 to 2000-01 proposed a rapid increase in commercial and full-cost work from 10% of the college's total income in 1997-98 to 60% by the year 2001. The board has not taken sufficient steps to facilitate speedy progress towards this goal nor has it explored with managers how this ambitious target is to be achieved, or even if it is realistically achievable. The appointment of a commercial director was not authorised until 1999, a qualified finance director was not appointed until summer 1998 and the principal was acting in post for two years before being confirmed in her appointment. Some fruitful initiatives, including a major programme for the telecommunications

industry, have been successful, but the volume of new work to date has been insufficient to prevent the financial situation of the college from deteriorating further.

52 The college provides marketable skills to some students who are educationally disadvantaged, as its founder intended, but has not defined the ways it might promote lifelong learning and create opportunity for the comprehensive range of potential students implied in its mission. The board approves the college's strategic plan but is not sufficiently involved in its preparation. In their self-assessment, governors recognised the need to increase their involvement in the formulation of strategy and a strategic planning day was arranged. There was some lack of clarity in the aim to be achieved and consequently there was no agreement on strategy and targets. Governors receive regular reports from the principal on the performance of the college. Requests for clarification have sometimes been insufficiently searching. For example, full details on students' achievements in short-course provision have not been requested by the board, or provided by the college. The college has only recently begun to compare its students' achievements with performance elsewhere in the sector. The board, in fulfilling its responsibility under the instrument and articles of government for oversight of the curriculum, should have monitored progress against such targets more systematically. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

53 There are four committees of the board. Standing orders for the conduct of corporation and committee business have recently been updated and are comprehensive. The audit committee has been operating properly and has taken action to secure an effective internal audit service. Meetings of the governing body and its committees are generally well attended although one recent meeting was inquorate. A minimum attendance target for governors has now been set and is being monitored. The clerk is a partner with the college's solicitors and is

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supported in the administration of the role by the principal's personal assistant. Agendas and supporting papers provide good information and clearly distinguish between items for discussion and items for decision. Minutes are produced promptly and provide a good record of the business of the corporation. In preparation for inspection, the clerk produced a report for the corporation on the need to update the corporation's policies and procedures. The corporation authorised this work, but was not advised at the time of authorisation of the likely cost, which was substantial. The demarcation between governance and management is clearly understood and supported by the corporation's standing orders. The corporation is currently reconsidering its clerking arrangements.

Management

Grade 3

54 The college's self-assessment report was self-critical in stating weaknesses but also identified some strengths which were not supported by evidence. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements. The report did not take account of the quality statement on financial management set out in Council Circular 97/22.

Key strengths

- clear strategic planning process supported by staff
- wide range of curriculum-related external links
- effective internal communications
- good curriculum management
- careful attention to health and safety

Weaknesses

- slow response to underachievement of college objectives
- lack of appropriate expertise among some managers

- poorly co-ordinated marketing and market research
- low priority for equal opportunities issues

55 The college has successfully addressed fundamental weaknesses in management since the last inspection. There has been a major restructuring. The senior management team comprises the principal, director of curriculum and quality, the director of finance and the head of human and learning resources. A commercial director has recently been appointed who will also be a member of the senior management team. The team meets weekly to consider matters affecting policy and the operation of the college. Minutes are clear and identify responsibilities for action. Senior managers meet weekly with their teams as do heads of curriculum schools. Curriculum management is effective although, as acknowledged in the self-assessment report, some managers need to develop further their financial and planning skills. Training is being arranged to meet this need. Policies in areas such as quality assurance have been developed for the first time. However, delays in responding to adverse trends have been exacerbated until recently by unreliable management information.

56 The college has established a clear annual calendar for strategic planning. The process includes: an analysis of performance against previously defined success factors; self-assessment by teaching teams; action plans linked to budget and operational plans; involvement of teaching and support staff; scrutiny by the academic board and approval by governors. Targets for students' achievements derived from performance data for previous years have been introduced for all courses this year. They have yet to be actively used to best effect, as was recognised in the self-assessment report.

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57 The college aims to offset declining public funding by providing education and training on a commercial basis. Although there have been market research studies, the current strategic plan does not address how future patterns of growth will be achieved or how the college's broad mission will be met. A revised marketing strategy and action plan has now been agreed and is being implemented. Until now, the co-ordination of marketing was weak. The lack of focus in some marketing activity was recognised as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

58 Internal communications are good. Students, staff and governors are represented on the academic board. The principal briefs all staff each week and a staff newsletter is circulated bi-monthly. Informal internal communication has much improved since the last inspection. Daily contacts and informal meetings help ensure good communication in this small, close-knit college community. Staff have confidence in senior management and support the ethos of the college. Until last year the management information provided through an outside contractor was unreliable and unhelpful to managers. Management information concerning students has been greatly improved in the past year and now provides accessible, regular reports on students' enrolment, attendance and retention for curriculum teams.

59 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is now adequate. A new director of finance, who is well qualified and experienced, was appointed on a part-time basis in August 1998. Since then there has been an improvement in the regularity and quality of the financial information produced for management and the corporation. This includes the prompt production of monthly management accounts and a rolling cashflow forecast. A number of errors in the current budget and financial forecast have also been brought to light and a tight rein imposed on all expenditure. However,

the college remains in a weak financial position despite the fact that funding unit targets have been met in most years since incorporation. The college recorded operating deficits in 1995-96 and 1996-97. The small surplus recorded in 1997-98 was the result of a late and substantial accounting adjustment. The college is anticipating another significant operating deficit for the current financial year. Indicators published by the FEFC for 1996-97 show that the college's average level of funding was £28.01 a unit compared with the average for similar specialist colleges of £21.42 a unit. Convergence remains a significant issue for the college.

60 The college has good links with employers and other organisations. Leading practitioners and major industrial enterprises support the college with technical assistance and participate in employers' advisory committees. Joint projects with other colleges, higher education institutions and the local education authority (LEA) include a county-wide telematics project and a successful bid under the FEFC's widening participation initiatives. The college gives careful attention to health and safety policy and procedures and has recently appointed a full-time safety officer. The college accepts that there have been too few practical measures to promote equal opportunities. The equal opportunities policy has recently been reviewed and an action plan for improvement prepared.

Conclusions

61 The college's first self-assessment report was helpful and provided a useful basis for planning and undertaking the inspection. The college had made significant progress in addressing weaknesses identified in the last inspection. Detailed action plans arising from the self-assessment process were also presented, and inspectors observed that some weaknesses had been effectively addressed before the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements contained in the self-assessment

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report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses. In a few areas, evidence had not been presented in such a way as to distinguish clearly between a strength and a weakness. Where the grades awarded by inspectors differed from those of the college the former were mostly better, with the exception of the grade for governance. Two of the grades awarded in the curriculum areas were better than the self-assessment, and one was the same as that given by the college. In the cross-college areas, four of the five grades awarded by inspectors were in line with the college's judgements.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (February 1999)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	17
19-24 years	14
25+ years	68
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (February 1999)

Level of study	%
Foundation	15
Intermediate	15
Advanced	40
Higher education	8
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	22
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (February 1999)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	10	118	10
Agriculture	6	24	2
Construction	42	66	9
Engineering	58	51	9
Business	30	481	41
Health and community care	0	99	8
Art and design	162	103	21
Humanities	0	5	0
Total	308	947	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 8% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (February 1999)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	20	1	5	26
Supporting direct learning contact	9	0	0	9
Other support	23	2	0	25
Total	52	3	5	60

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£2,207,000	£2,144,000	£1,996,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£23.38	£28.01	£24.98
Payroll as a proportion of income	74%	53%	63%
Achievement of funding target	101%	96%	99%
Diversity of income	41%	46%	44%
Operating surplus	-£485,000	-£127,000	£18,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	0	0	1	0	4	11
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	100*	n/a	100	100
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	50	33
2	Expected completions	4	45	46	0	2	26
	Retention (%)	0	87*	74	n/a	100	100
	Achievement (%)	n/a	86	74	n/a	0	27
3	Expected completions	–	44	52	–	11	6
	Retention (%)	–	91	79	–	91	100
	Achievement (%)	79	92	94	90	90	80
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	3	6	–	27	22
	Retention (%)	–	100	67	–	85	91
	Achievement (%)	100	100	100	89	59	90
Short courses	Expected completions	2	64	43	5	150	429
	Retention (%)	100	100	100	100	98	100
	Achievement (%)	n/a	53	37	100	45	42
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	0	3	5	58	74	60
	Retention (%)	n/a	100*	100	83	91	85
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	100	90	69	90

Source: ISR

–ISR data not collected

*ISR data may not be reliable

n/a not applicable

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