

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Sandwell College

September 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

By June 1995, some 208 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 208 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-95

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	60%	28%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	13%	51%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	11%	56%	29%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 116/96

SANDWELL COLLEGE
WEST MIDLANDS REGION
Inspected May 1995-May 1996

Summary

Sandwell College is a major provider of post-16 education and training. It has good links with the local community, employers, schools and the local TEC. Marketing is increasingly effective. The strategic plan is based on a clear planning cycle and effectively addresses local needs. Some progress has been made in reducing high costs. Close attention is paid to the setting and achievement of enrolment targets. Enrolment and induction procedures are efficient. Tutorial and guidance systems are effective. There is a strong commitment to equal opportunities and good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The quality of teaching and learning varies: there are particular strengths in performing arts and particular weaknesses in art and design. Examination results are good in some curriculum areas but poor in others, including many GCE A level and GCSE subjects. Students' attendance and completion rates are low on some courses. Quality assurance is effective at strategic levels but less so at course level. A more rigorous approach is required to the collection and analysis of data on students' achievements and destinations. Management information systems do not always give easily accessible information and frequently fail to command staff confidence. Staff appraisal is incomplete. There are no replacement strategies for equipment, including information technology. The college is continuing to improve its accommodation.

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		2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		2
Quality assurance		2
Resources:	staffing	2
	equipment/learning resources	3
	accommodation	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science including mathematics and computing	3	Health, social care early years and hairdressing and beauty	2
Construction	3	Art, graphics design and media	4
Engineering	2	Performing arts	1
Business studies, management and accountancy, office technology	2	English	2
Catering, leisure and tourism	2	Other humanities	3
		SLDD/ABE/ESOL	2

INTRODUCTION

1 Sandwell College was inspected between May 1995 and May 1996. Specialist inspections took place between May 1995 and March 1996. These included outreach and community provision as well as courses offered on the college's main sites. Students' enrolment and induction were inspected at the beginning of the 1995-96 academic year. Aspects of cross-college provision were inspected in May 1996. The inspection involved 22 inspectors and used 115 working days. Inspectors visited 378 classes and examined students' work. Meetings took place with members of the corporation, senior managers and other staff, students, employers, members of the community, parents and representatives of the Sandwell Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Inspectors also examined a range of college documents.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 The college was formed in 1986 by the merger of West Bromwich and Warley Colleges. It is located in the middle of the West Midlands conurbation and operates on three major campuses in Wednesbury, West Bromwich and Smethwick. The college provides outreach work in a variety of centres in Sandwell and beyond and is a partner in Tipton College, a community-focused initiative.

3 The college operates within a densely populated conurbation. Sixty-four per cent of students live locally; some courses recruit both regionally and nationally. The college has made a considerable investment in the resources needed to run high technology courses and to provide updating for industry. It has links with Sandwell TEC and is a major provider of skill development training. The college has substantial provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, many of whom are adults. Basic skills and courses in English for speakers of other languages are offered at venues throughout Sandwell. The college also has courses designed to provide access to further and higher education. Sixteen per cent of its enrolments are to higher education courses.

4 Until recently, the local economy was dominated by manufacturing industry. Manufacturing remains an important source of employment but there has been a major diversification into other areas of industry and commerce. There are few large companies and many of the smaller ones do not have a strong commitment to training. Unemployment stands at 11.2 per cent. Only 54 per cent of 16 year olds continue in full-time education. Many adults do not possess formal qualifications of any kind. Minority ethnic groups make up 15 per cent of the population of Sandwell and 29 per cent of college students.

5 The college operates alongside a wide range of competitors. These include 14 other further education colleges, private training providers, six sixth form colleges and eight schools with sixth forms. There are six universities within the West Midlands. The borough of Sandwell has nine 11 to 16 schools.

6 At the time of inspection, the college had 17,046 enrolments of which 16 per cent were by full-time students and 84 per cent were by part-time students. About 80 per cent of students were aged 19 and over, including 1,161 on full-time courses. Although the overall number of full-time students has increased in recent years the proportion of full-time students aged 16 to 18 has fallen. Enrolments by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

7 The college has 349 full-time equivalent academic staff and 287 full-time equivalent support staff, of whom 121 directly support learning. Since incorporation there has been a reduction in the number of academic staff from 463 full-time equivalents, including a reduction of middle and senior managers from 210 to 128. While the overall number of support staff has been reduced by 14 per cent, over 40 new posts have been created to provide direct learning support. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

8 The college is organised into 13 schools, based within three divisions. The principal is supported by an executive of seven directors who have corporate and individual responsibilities which include strategic planning and marketing, curriculum and quality development, performance monitoring, client services, finance and administration, human resources and estates.

9 The college's mission says that the college aims 'to provide a quality service which responds effectively to the needs of the community and employers and which enables all students from all sections of the community to achieve their personal, educational and employment goals'. The college aims to raise the aspirations of, and increase access for, the local population by expanding its outreach provision. It also seeks to maintain its high-skill and high-cost curriculum, particularly in technology, in order to play a full part in the regeneration of the region's industrial base.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

10 The college provides an extensive range of vocational and general education courses which are offered in various modes of study. The further education curriculum includes National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) at advanced, intermediate and foundation levels, Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national diplomas, General Certificate of Education advanced levels (GCE A levels), General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects, access courses and accredited foundation and pre-foundation programmes. The college offers courses leading to a range of specialised vocational and professional qualifications to meet both regional and national demands. Higher education provision includes degrees and BTEC higher national diploma and higher national certificate courses.

11 The decline in the number of post-16 school leavers enrolling on full-time courses at the college has been offset by growth in the number of part-time courses for the service industries and, to a lesser extent, growth in the provision made for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Despite the introduction of vocational courses in local schools, which has increased the staying-on rate for 16 year olds in the borough by some 8 per cent, relationships between schools and the college remain good. A schools liaison team works closely with some neighbouring schools and with the Black Country Careers Service. The college's successful bid under the Further Education Development Agency GNVQ development support programme has assisted a partnership arrangement with a local secondary school to pilot pre-16 GNVQ programmes. The development of this GNVQ pilot will support students' progression from key stage 4 to post-16 GNVQ programmes. Membership of the Sandwell Strategic Forum and the Training Providers Network enables the college to work with others to encourage post-16 school leavers to take advantage of further education.

12 The college aims to provide for school leavers and for adults who have not previously undertaken further education or training. It responds to business needs, particularly those of small and medium size enterprises. It continues to offer courses which do not recruit well, particularly if similar courses are not available elsewhere in the area. A community liaison post, established to strengthen the college's links with the local community and local businesses, has resulted in an expansion of outreach and short course work and has enabled the college to respond more rapidly to the needs of adults. An example of this has been the college's involvement in the provision made by Tipton College, which resulted from a City Challenge project. Carefully-aimed English for speakers of other languages programmes are offered for groups with differing levels of need at a number of centres.

13 The college has greatly extended the range of opportunities open to students through franchising, outreach work, open learning and the Saturday college. A board of senior staff analyses new proposals and oversees the delivery of courses franchised to other centres. Such courses have to meet the college policy for franchising and the funding criteria of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college has decided that no more than 6 per cent of its provision should be delivered on a franchise basis. To date, the college's four franchise contracts cover approximately 3 per cent of its total provision. Quality is assured through internal verification procedures operated by college or other trained staff and through audits conducted by the college quality manager. The college policy is to extend its outreach work rather than to enter into further franchising agreements. Many employers have taken advantage of this and have welcomed the college's flexible approach to course delivery.

14 Over 400 students are studying through the college's open and distance learning programme. Of these, 100 are outside the local area,

including some overseas. The programme includes: home study, supported by tutorials at the college or other venues; programmes which students can attend as and when it suits their circumstances; distance learning; and company-based and community provision. Fifty students employed in the paint industry follow open learning programmes leading to British Coatings Federation or BTEC certification. Open learning students are provided with study packs, some of which are produced commercially and some by college staff. They are also able to use all the college's facilities, including the support available to develop literacy, numeracy and information technology skills. The college has responded to the particular needs of 16 year old Plymouth Brethren children by helping them to continue their education through a combination of open learning and part-time study. The further development of open learning is being inhibited by the lack of teachers with appropriate experience and by problems in obtaining or producing relevant up-to-date materials.

15 The 'Saturday college' was introduced two years ago. The number of courses has grown from 20 to over 40 and a further increase to over 50 is planned. Over 350 students currently attend the college on Saturdays, 60 per cent of whom are employed people in the 30 to 49 age range. The provision of courses for children makes it easier for parents to attend.

16 The college's marketing plan relates directly to the achievement of its strategic aims and objectives. It is informed by market research which draws on local labour market intelligence reports from Sandwell TEC, the Responsive College Unit and an employers' survey by the college's business services development team. Such research enables the college to make well-informed choices about its curriculum and its strategies for publicity and promotion. The low level of participation in further education locally means that the potential for growth is considerable.

17 The college's publicity campaigns and its relations with the press are managed centrally. Direct liaison with the press ensures that college activities are reported accurately and regularly. This helps the college to promote itself positively. Steps have been taken to promote a more focused corporate identity in the prospectus and other advertising material. Recommendations on publicity received from the Responsive College Unit have been acted on. The college aims to evaluate its advertising on both a formal and informal basis: the evaluation process includes the monitoring of students' applications, and the use of feedback from the schools liaison team and from section heads.

18 The college has sound strategic and operational links with the Sandwell TEC. Senior managers of both organisations meet regularly to discuss strategic issues. The principal is a member of the TEC board. Some 450 students are funded annually by the TEC to attend college courses on the development of skills and through training for work contracts. The college has established a unit to strengthen its liaison with the TEC and its responsiveness to employers. An early joint initiative between the college and the TEC was the development of a centre for the

accreditation of students' prior learning. The centre not only undertakes accreditation of prior learning but also training and development. A major focus of its work has been to accredit college and school teachers, and trainers in industry, for training and development lead body qualifications. So far some 200 teachers and trainers have obtained these. TEC officials believe that, within the constraints of a large and diverse organisation, the college is responsive. They also believe that the college ought to play a stronger role in the economic regeneration of Sandwell and would like to see the college develop specialist courses in niche markets, such as management and accountancy.

19 The college's business development unit has promoted tailor-made courses for employers in addition to providing information about current college courses. It is represented on local committees and working parties, such as the Single Regeneration Partnership and the Training Provider Network. The college has entered into a service-level agreement with the Sandwell Business Link to strengthen its links with employers. A member of the college staff is based at Sandwell Business Link for up to three days a week. The college has also established contracts with a number of prominent local, national and international companies in order to assess and attempt to meet their training requirements.

20 Sandwell College is clearly committed to equal opportunities. Its equal opportunities policy recognises and encourages the valuable contribution which people from a diversity of backgrounds and with a range of experiences can bring to the college. Equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination is evident in the support the college provides to all students and in its employment practices for staff. An equal opportunities committee has recently been re-established to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy. The college also has a black and ethnic minorities committee which advises on policy and its implementation in respect of the specific needs of black and ethnic communities. The college encourages and supports students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A staff-development programme has led to a raised awareness of the needs of such students. Some students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities study with students on mainstream courses and, where necessary, are provided with additional support. Others, who need it, are provided with a separate specialist curriculum. A team of support officers work alongside teachers with these students both in and out of the classroom. A number of external agencies also provide advice and assistance.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

21 At incorporation, Sandwell College had a low student-to-staff ratio, high unit costs and a varied and partly superfluous stock of accommodation on six sites. The corporation and the management have made determined attempts to deal with these issues in the last three years. There has been

a major restructuring of staffing and a reduction in the number of teaching sites from six to three. A campus project, planned to focus on the curriculum and management of each teaching campus, is now being implemented. The college faces the challenge of continuing to improve its cost-effectiveness, while maintaining the quality of its provision.

22 The corporation has 16 members; eight independent members, the former chairman of the TEC as its TEC nominee, three co-opted members including the college's director of finance, two staff members, one student member and the principal. Three members are female and two are from minority ethnic groups. Members have a broad range of expertise in industry and commerce, education and local community affairs which they use effectively to support the college. The lack of a member with expertise in property is a weakness. The board has, however, retained the services of a chartered surveyor as a consultant. A useful resource file of key information is provided for all governors. New members have received helpful induction and some members have attended training courses. The chairman visits the college regularly. The corporation has four committees: resources; audit; management development and remuneration; and corporation nominations. All committees have clear terms of reference. Attendance at meetings of the corporation and its committees is generally good and the corporation's business is well managed. All members have completed a register of interests and a code of conduct has recently been adopted. The minutes and papers of the corporation and its committees are clear and give a thorough record of debates and decisions. The clerk to the corporation has attended relevant training courses. She is a member of the college staff but is confident of her ability to offer independent advice to the corporation.

23 Scrutiny of strategic policies is thorough. The corporation's papers and minutes provide clear evidence of the careful evaluation of policy proposals such as the accommodation strategy and consideration of future funding. Regular, timely and thorough reports are provided about the extent to which the college is meeting its financial and corporate objectives. Governors reported that the clarity of management accounts submitted to them had substantially improved. The audit committee examines in detail the reports from internal and external auditors. The corporation's recent review of its effectiveness led to changes in the structure and responsibilities of some of its committees and to the election of staff and student members of the corporation. The corporation and the management understand their different roles, and relations between them are based upon mutual respect.

24 The academic board meets regularly and pays close attention to funding issues in its evaluation of curriculum. Its subcommittees have played an important part in matters such as the evaluation of new course proposals, the management of quality assurance, staff development, student support and equal opportunities. A significant weakness is that

neither the academic board nor the corporation review assessment and examination results.

25 Strategic planning is strengthened by the wide consultation which takes place throughout the planning cycle. All members of staff were informed of the college's operational objectives, and invited to contribute to the form in which they were finally expressed. The corporation, which has monitored the strategic plan, is aware of the need to become more actively involved in its development. The chairman of the corporation has joined the strategic management group which is composed of all senior and some middle managers. The strategic management group is composed of all senior and some middle managers together with the chairman of the corporation. This year all schools and cross-college units have produced business plans to a common format. Draft targets are attached to each plan and these are evaluated by the strategic management group to ensure that they are consistent with objectives in the college's strategic plan. The strategic plan is clear, realistic and well informed by local labour market intelligence. The college is committed to the use of performance indicators and these have been further developed and expanded in the updating of the strategic plan. Specific and realistic targets for retention rates have been set and achieved. The college makes a commitment in its strategic plan to improve the situation in which so many people in Sandwell lack appropriate skills and qualifications and, in so doing, to help meet national targets for education and training. Not all the college's aims have been achieved; for example the 1994-95 plan made a commitment to increase the number of foundation level students. This was not achieved, but the commitment has been restated in the 1995 updated plan and is now being implemented.

26 There is careful planning of enrolment targets. These are set by schools and subsequently examined by senior managers to ensure that they are consistent with the college's financial plan. Significant variations from previous years are scrutinised and enrolments are checked against targets three times a year. Substantial under recruitment leads to course closures, provided students can be found places on alternative courses. When courses are discontinued, efforts are made to redeploy the staff, for example to the Saturday college or the summer programme. Work has begun on the development of unit costing but this is still at an early stage. A survey of course costs based on salary costs, consumable material costs and overheads was carried out in 1995. This was useful in alerting heads of schools to variations in the costs of their courses and led to some courses being discontinued and to the delivery patterns of others being changed.

27 The college achieved its funding target in 1994-95 and expects to do so in 1995-96. The college's average level of funding in 1994-95 was £24.15 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges was £17.97. The average level of funding for 1995-96 is £23.10 and the median £17.84 per unit. Staffing costs have been reduced as a result of the restructuring and now account for 62 per cent of the budget.

The college had a large deficit in 1994-95, partly accounted for by the exceptional costs associated with restructuring and surplus accommodation. A surplus is anticipated in 1995-96, thus reducing the accumulated deficit, which the college expects to eradicate in 1997-98. The college's estimated income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

28 The senior management team is effective. It has recently been reorganised and now comprises the principal and seven directors, three of whom have responsibility for teaching schools and aspects of cross-college provision. The team meets regularly as 'the executive' to discuss key issues and take decisions. Minutes of the executive's meetings are then distributed to middle managers. The executive is effective at dealing with most issues. The relations between senior and middle managers are good. Most middle managers fully understand their roles and have a clear sense of purpose. A timetable slot on Fridays is kept clear for school and course meetings. This enables senior management decisions to be disseminated quickly and their implications for courses and teachers to be discussed.

29 Budgets are delegated to 63 budget holders. Some had found difficulty managing their budgets due to miscoding of budget headings and changes in the responsibilities of budget holders. The college believes that the introduction of a new finance software package, together with a review of the account codes, will ease this problem and ensure a more confident management of delegated budgets.

30 The college managers strive to ensure that the reasons for key decisions relating to accommodation and staffing are widely understood. Despite the very substantial redundancies, morale is generally good. Most staff are on new contracts. Communication of decisions to all staff is effective, both verbally and through the college's electronic mail system. A monthly college newspaper is issued to all staff. Communication upwards from teachers and middle managers to senior managers is less effective.

31 The college has experienced considerable difficulty in the use of computerised management information systems to assist the corporation and managers in carrying out their tasks. Much dissatisfaction has been expressed by staff. The production of accurate management accounts has been time consuming and few middle managers have faith in the figures produced. The student tracking system is capable of giving some detailed information about individual students but it cannot provide information on attendance or destinations. The monitoring of students' destinations is seriously inadequate. The college is now planning to upgrade its management information system.

32 The college has policies for student support, equal opportunities and health and safety, but no environmental policy. There is thorough attention to health and safety and the college's policy has been revised and expanded. Responsibilities are clearly allocated. There are safety committees for each campus and summary reports are produced for the governors on

accidents which occur. Each school carries out risk assessments and these are reinforced by audits undertaken by the college safety officer.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

33 The college has carefully considered policy statements, plans and guidelines for students' recruitment, guidance and support. These include published statements on admissions and guidance, induction, tutorial support and students' entitlement to learning support. The various statements provide practical support for tutors and identify criteria against which the effectiveness of the student support services can be monitored. Some policies and guidelines have only recently been implemented and have yet to affect students in all parts of the college equally.

34 The client services section of the college has overall responsibility for those student services not provided by academic tutors. The section is managed by a senior member of the college staff and is organised to reflect distinct areas of student need. It includes curriculum support, student support, and care and welfare services, each with a manager and staff. The roles of the specialist support staff are clearly defined and understood, within and between, the service teams.

35 Prospective students are able to obtain advice and guidance about college courses easily. Most approaches are made through the central enquiries unit or the 'advice shops' on each campus. All enquiries are logged. Enquiries are then passed to the programme area teams in order that they may be followed up by specialist subject staff. Students reported that enquiries are dealt with courteously and speedily but some felt that they were not fully informed in advance of the nature of their programmes or the costs they might incur.

36 The centrally-located and welcoming advice shops provide advice for prospective and existing students. Those at Smethwick and West Bromwich are heavily used, particularly by adult enquirers. In the eight months to April 1996, the shops logged 6,400 telephone, postal and personal enquiries. The college undertakes a systematic check of advice shop interviews through postal questionnaires; the response to these has been relatively high (34 per cent) and the comments very supportive. The commitment of advisory staff to provide accurate information and impartial advice is embodied in a code of practice, which is subject to external audit through the TEC-sponsored Fresh Start programme. Other opportunities for prospective students to learn about the programmes on offer include college open days, and the participation of college staff in careers events and events for parents and pupils in local schools. This commitment is appreciated by head teachers. Programme level activities include open events such as that in performing arts, where each visitor is paired with a performing arts student and given the opportunity to find out about the courses.

37 The enrolment of students is undertaken using agreed procedures set out in a published manual and the teaching and support staff who are involved are given appropriate training. Students are made welcome and provided with guidance on curriculum matters. However, advice is not always available on matters such as the level at which students should enter a programme. The accommodation in which enrolments take place is not always appropriate.

38 Most students receive a well-planned and informative induction, and find the experience valuable. However, some students claimed to have had insufficient information about their courses or about assessment arrangements. Many of the induction arrangements are documented, some in an attractive form for distribution to students. Staff in programme areas have the flexibility to devise their own induction schemes assisted by the guidance document produced by the quality assurance system. The document incorporates a clear rationale and a check-list of essential and optional topics but it fails to include an explicit reference to the college charter. Discussions with students revealed varying levels of satisfaction with the induction programme. Students' transfers between programmes are carefully supported: transfers between schools are normally arranged through support staff in the advice shops.

39 All full-time students and any part-time students attending for more than six hours a week are offered a diagnostic screening in literacy and numeracy. This is undertaken by the programme area staff, trained and helped by the student support services team. Of the 70 per cent of full-time students screened in 1995-96, about 36 per cent were identified as needing further support. Not all students were aware of the purpose of the screening and, in one programme area, not all had been given the results. Support for those who require it is provided through tutorials and through specific programmes agreed with the study link service, which has a welcoming base in each learning resource centre. However, the range of learning materials in the centres, designed for students to work on alone, is limited. From its diagnostic screening programme and other sources, the college has found that on some courses, such as foundation GNVQs, whole student groups had need of support in information technology, literacy and numeracy. Through its curriculum support unit, the college is establishing specialist units on each campus to develop core skills more systematically.

40 All students are issued with a student handbook which includes information on a range of college services as well as the code of practice and complaints procedures. Few of the students met by inspectors made much use of the handbook or were familiar with its contents. Full-time students and many part-time students maintain a personal portfolio. This incorporates an individual learning plan which forms the basis of a formal learning agreement. The portfolio belongs to the student and is the key component in developing and maintaining a personal record of achievement. Some personal portfolios offer a useful and extensive record

of students' commitments and achievements but others are of limited value. For example, some contain tutorial records that identify problems but offer little advice on appropriate actions. Adult returners, in particular, feel strongly that the development of personal portfolios contributes to confidence building. The commitment of the college to records of achievement is reflected in the emphasis given to them when interviewing school pupils for college places and in the recent achievement of external accreditation through the West Midlands group for the accreditation of national records of achievement. Although software for national records of achievement is available in learning resource centres, some students do not have the expertise to use it. The college has a policy on the accreditation of students' prior learning. The related procedures are documented but the extent to which they are implemented varies considerably between the different areas of the college.

41 The college has a clear commitment to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities which is set out in college literature. Students are supported by an effective team of 12 staff and an additional needs officer for students with physical or sensory disabilities. There are good links with external agencies, such as social services and job clubs, which also help in the recruitment of students. Initial guidance procedures are sensitively implemented and information about students is passed to tutors. Induction materials for students following courses in English for speakers of other languages are not always translated into the students' first language.

42 There is a policy on the tutorial support to which students are entitled. The curriculum support unit has produced a comprehensive handbook, which includes guidance for personal tutors and a useful bank of resource materials. Generally, students have a positive view of tutorials. However, there are some concerns. For example, in some programme areas where group tutorials are common practice, mature part-time students feel that tutorials take up an undue amount of time when they are in college for only one day a week.

43 The welfare service operates on all campuses and enjoys the confidence of students and staff. Although welfare staff have a heavy workload they respond sensitively and effectively to a range of student issues, providing advice on financial and accommodation matters, as well as personal and medical problems. The college has no qualified counsellors on this team. It uses a network of external specialised counselling agencies. Referrals to these agencies are made following a diagnostic consultation with a member of the welfare team, all of whom have had counselling awareness training. Students have access to a range of careers information through the learning resource centres and libraries based in each of the advice shops. Specialist careers officers are available in the college through a service level agreement with the Black Country Careers Service. There are also two adult guidance workers. The college has recognised the need

to provide more careers advice and careers advisers are now becoming more involved in group work with students.

44 There are nurseries on two of the college campuses. These offer 60 places for children of students, all of which are filled. The qualified staff provide a stimulating environment for the children, particularly at the refurbished nursery on the Smethwick campus which is able to take children from the age of six months. The childcare provision is particularly valued by women who are returning to study. Many students receive financial help from the college access and hardship funds. A regular and efficient bus service is provided for students to travel between the main college campuses. The amount of space devoted to student social areas, and the quality of these areas, varies between campuses. At Smethwick, some students dislike the noise and untidiness of the social areas.

45 Students' attendance is carefully monitored using class registers. There are established procedures for dealing with persistent absence, using standard proforma. The procedures are generally understood by course managers, but in a significant number of programme areas there has been little action taken in response to poor student attendance.

46 All of the parents spoken to during the inspection felt able to approach the college staff should the need arise. Some would appreciate more systematic feedback from college tutors on their children's progress, particularly in the early stages of programmes. At present, practice varies greatly between curriculum areas.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

47 Of the 378 teaching sessions inspected, 65 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses. In 6 per cent of sessions weaknesses outweighed the strengths. The average attendance at these sessions was 75 per cent and there was an average of 11 students present in each class. The distribution of inspection grades is similar to the national average, published in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1994-95*. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		3	16	8	3	0	30
GCSE		0	5	6	0	0	11
GNVQ		6	25	15	7	0	53
NVQ		17	22	17	4	0	60
Other vocational		30	51	28	8	0	117
Access to further and higher education		1	5	1	0	0	7
Basic education		3	13	13	1	0	30
Higher education		10	13	14	0	0	37
Other		9	15	8	1	0	33
Total		79	165	110	24	0	378

48 Much of the teaching was good. There were schemes of work and lesson plans for almost all courses, but their quality was variable. In several subject areas there were examples of teaching which lacked a sense of urgency and where the management of time was poor. In some sessions, teachers spent too much time dictating notes; there was little opportunity for students to think for themselves or for the effectiveness of their learning to be checked. Students were frequently late for lessons, especially in computing, construction and business studies. There were some good examples of the use of information technology in students' assignments but not enough use of information technology as an aid to teaching and learning. The college provides work experience for most full-time students. Most course leaders have well-established links with employers and arrange placements, the quality of which is checked by field officers.

49 Work in science, mathematics and computing had a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Chemistry students on the higher national certificate course received valuable practical experience in several advanced analytical techniques. Some science teachers made effective use of resources, such as models, slides and videos to motivate students and strengthen their understanding. However, a number of theory lessons in science were dull and did not always meet the needs of students of differing abilities. There was generally not enough opportunity for students to explore ideas through discussion and group work. Some of the teaching and assignments for science GNVQs lacked an appropriate vocational focus. Mathematics teachers encouraged students to ask questions and to express their own ideas, and helped them to develop their analytical skills through group work and presentations. There were some effective presentations, for example, on the sketching of mathematical curves. In computing, students worked with up-to-date equipment and software

packages. Good use was made of student presentations and peer assessment. Record keeping was inadequate on several science courses, and some students were late in handing in assignments. Lateness and high rates of absence also limited the rate at which progress was made on some mathematics and computing courses.

50 Construction lessons were generally well organised. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were successfully integrated with other students on craft courses. Realistic industrial projects enabled students to gain the skills of working on a site. Assignments were fairly marked and there was some second marking by different teachers to ensure that standards were consistent. Insufficient attention was given to core skills on some craft courses. In most lessons, building technology students were working at an appropriate level and learning effectively. However, most of the assignments for BTEC and GNVQ building technology lacked assessment criteria and some were not set at a high enough level. Use of imperial measurements, which was permitted in some lessons, is not in line with current professional practice.

51 Engineering courses were well planned and had clear aims and objectives. Varied teaching methods helped to maintain students' interest and enthusiasm. Teachers used their expertise and practical skills to make their teaching relevant. Courses which seek to encourage women to enter engineering were well managed; one women's group involved in practical electronics tasks was working well and individual students were obviously keen to make further progress. In some classes, too much time was spent copying notes from the whiteboard. Assignments for automotive engineering and electronics courses were set frequently and returned promptly to students after marking. There were a few examples of poor spelling in tutors' comments on assignments.

52 In business studies, management, accountancy and office technology teaching was generally good. There was good rapport between teachers and students. Lessons were well prepared. Staff used a variety of teaching methods which engaged the students' interest. Most schemes of work and lesson plans were well matched to course objectives. Learning materials were of good quality. In business studies, assessed work was set at an appropriate standard and was marked fairly. There were some inconsistencies in the marking of work in professional studies and in office technology. In accountancy and in management and logistics, some students were given insufficient opportunities to work on their own and teachers failed to make regular checks on what students had learned. No work-experience placements were arranged for GNVQ business studies students.

53 Courses in leisure and tourism were well planned and there were good systems for recording students' achievements. Some programmes included modern foreign languages among the core skills provision. Teachers' assessment of students' written work contained too few critical

or constructive comments. Most of the teaching on hotel and catering courses was sound. The teaching of kitchen skills was particularly good; teachers made use of a variety of appropriate methods of working. Learning programmes were carefully devised and there were clear assessment procedures. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities received good support; teachers were always ready to provide practical assistance where required. Partially-sighted students were able to work on their own using specially-designed learning packs with texts in expanded print. The simulated working environment did not enable students to develop their catering skills to the levels required in the industry and the service in the restaurant lacked commercial authenticity.

54 The simulated working environment for hairdressing was well designed and good use was made of it. When staff were unable to provide students with enough practical experience of certain beauty treatments, appropriate case studies were provided instead. Course documentation and planning were thorough. A programme of educational visits, including two overseas, provided students with useful professional experience. Assessments were of an appropriate standard; record keeping was conscientious and internal verification procedures were sound. Teachers' written comments on many assignments were too brief. Teaching in childcare and health and social care was generally good. A range of teaching and learning activities helped to sustain high levels of interest and motivation. Day-release students drew on their work experience and, for example, made effective use of a video camera during role-play exercises concerned with visual impairment. Teachers organised activity-based sessions in the learning resource centres to help students to integrate their professional knowledge and practical skills. In some health and social care lessons, teachers failed to use audio-visual aids in circumstances where they would have been useful, and there was not always enough attention to students' differing levels of ability. On childcare courses, some teachers did not give enough emphasis to the development of language and writing skills for students for whom English is a second language.

55 In performing arts, much of the teaching was excellent. Teachers were highly competent specialists who were aware of the standards required by the profession. They set challenging work and had high expectations of students. Public performances included entertainment for local community groups and pantomimes for local primary schools. Records of students' progress were maintained thoroughly. Individual learning plans enabled teachers to give effective support to each student. Students' pride in their achievements was evident.

56 The quality of teaching and learning in art and design was poor. The failure to allocate students to a studio in which to base their studies limited their ability to work in a professional atmosphere. The tasks required of full-time design students were insufficiently demanding. Teaching was not sufficiently sensitive to meet the needs of students in the same class,

who had differing levels of ability or who were drawn from different GCE A level year groups. The goals in students' individual action plans were not specific enough to guide their learning effectively. Many part-time courses would have benefited from the addition of business skills. There were few opportunities for students from different courses to work together and learn from each other. Students had insufficient opportunity to acquire information technology skills. Records of students' progress were thorough. The teaching of skills in photography, dressmaking and interior design was of a good standard.

57 English lessons were well prepared. Records of students' progress were good. In GCE A level lessons, teachers made imaginative use of audio-visual aids to illustrate set texts. In one effective lesson, students worked in small groups analysing poems and identifying unnamed poets from the characteristics of their writing. The students enjoyed the lesson and the key points were skilfully summarised by the teacher. Most teaching sessions in other humanities subjects were well structured and good handouts helped to strengthen students' learning. However, most students were reluctant to engage in argument or debate, and teachers were not always successful in dealing with the wide range of students' abilities.

58 The teaching on courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was well planned. The learning needs of students on vocational access courses were carefully assessed. In the best lessons, teachers had high expectations of their students, questioning was used effectively to help students develop their ideas, activities were supported by varied and appropriate resources and, for some of the time, students were encouraged to work on their own. The imaginative work experience programme included a visit to Tenerife to take part in a whale and dolphin conservation project, garden design work and landscaping. Regular reports were given to students on their achievements. Many were making measurable progress. In a few cases, where the purpose of activities was not made clear to students, little learning took place. There was effective documentation for adult basic education courses and courses in English for speakers of other languages. Lessons were well planned and included a variety of suitable activities. Teaching materials were well produced. Many programmes emphasised students' personal development and the acquisition of basic skills. In some lessons in English for speakers of other languages lessons, teachers spent too much time addressing the whole class and failed to cater adequately for individual students' needs.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

59 Students were generally well motivated and enjoyed their studies, especially practical work. They spoke highly of the college and many indicated that they would recommend it to others.

60 Students gave appropriate attention to health and safety issues. On craft courses, they were helped in this by clearly-written booklets on safety. Catering students appreciated the need for cleanliness when

handling food. Leisure and tourism students operated a travel office effectively.

61 All full-time students, and a substantial number of part-time students, on GCE A level and GCSE courses have access to information technology as part of their core skills development. The majority of first-year GCE A level students achieve the RSA Examinations Board (RSA) computer literacy and information technology qualifications. However, in all programme areas except business studies, students fail to make enough use of information technology. Other core/basic skills were being effectively developed in many areas, particularly in business studies and engineering, and on GCE A level programmes. The main exception to this was in hairdressing and beauty therapy. There were also many students throughout the college who had poor numeracy skills.

62 In computing, automotive studies, hairdressing and beauty, childcare, photography and sound, and some leisure courses, the students' practical, assignment and portfolio work was of a high standard. Conversely, the standard of students' work in some science, construction, catering and art courses was poor. Most work produced by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was of good quality.

63 Over 7,500 awards were obtained in 1995 for a large variety of qualifications which are not recorded in national performance tables. This is a very substantial element of the college's work. On many of these courses pass rates were high; sometimes consistently so for the last three years. Of the 173 students in their final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education and Employment's 1995 performance tables, 75 per cent were successful. This placed the college amongst the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. There was no record of the college submitting this information for 1993-94.

64 The 133 students, aged 16 to 18, entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1994-95 scored, on average, 2.7 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2). This placed the college among the bottom third of colleges in the further education sector, based on the data in the 1995 performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment. The score represents a drop of 0.4 points over the previous year. The average pass rate for the 446 GCE entries at the college was 61 per cent. This was significantly below the average of 68 per cent for all general further education colleges. Only a small number of students achieved three GCE A level passes.

65 In 1995, there were 172 subject entries from full-time GCSE students and 37 per cent of these were graded A to C. This was some 4 per cent lower than the average for general further education colleges. The percentage achieving grades A to C was above average in mathematics and English, but below average in most other subjects. Forty-one per cent

of the 458 subject entries from part-time evening students were graded A to C, which was significantly below the national average. GCSE results for part-time students were below average in both mathematics and English. Having analysed its poor performance in GCSE examinations, the college now counsels students on possible alternative programmes of study.

66 Pass rates in the science and computing higher national certificate were good. The GCE A level pass rates for science and mathematics have been consistently below national average for some time. GCSE results in the sciences have been variable. GCSE mathematics results were poor in 1993 and 1994 but improved in 1995 when fewer full-time students were allowed to take the examination.

67 In construction, the pass rate for those who completed their courses was 92 per cent. However, because of the low completion rates, only 42 per cent of those who started courses were eventually successful. Students often obtain employment after gaining practical skills but before achieving their awards. Examination results in engineering were variable; the BTEC national certificate in motor vehicle results have been good for the last three years while other BTEC results and those for light vehicles have deteriorated. All students on the pattern and foundry courses and on the women into technology course have passed in each of the last three years.

68 In the areas of business studies and management, pass rates were very good and in some cases exceptional. The higher national certificate pass rates on most business courses were above 95 per cent in both 1993-94 and 1994-95. GNVQ intermediate and foundation pass rates were above the national average. In some management and professional examinations, results were up to 30 per cent better than the national average. In business administration, there were several high pass rates, particularly in stage 1 and stage 2 typing and wordprocessing.

69 In leisure and tourism, the examination pass rates were generally good. The BTEC national diploma in travel and tourism pass rate was particularly high, at 94 per cent. The college was unable to provide an accurate measure of students' achievements in catering.

70 The pass rates on beauty therapy programmes have been high over recent years; only one programme has had a pass rate below 75 per cent. Pass rates in hairdressing have been less good, although most students acquired good practical skills. Pass rates were generally high on childcare courses. Health care pass rates ranged from 40 to 69 per cent. The health and social care BTEC and GNVQ pass rates were around the national average and the results on the access course were above the regional average.

71 Students achieved good results in performing arts and many progressed into related employment. However, pass rates for the GCSE and GCE A levels in art were well below the national average. Drawing skills in art were generally poor; students' work was too predictable. Pass

rates on the BTEC national diploma in audio-visual design have been consistently high over the last three years.

72 On the GCE A level course in English, students wrote well and made perceptive contributions to group discussions. However, some GCSE written work was structured poorly and grammatically incorrect. In 1995, pass rates were near the national average for GCE A level English. GCE A level results in geography, history and sociology were well below the average for general further education colleges while those in law and psychology were above. GCSE results were above the national average in sociology but below for geography and history. Achievements on the access to higher education course were good. In 1995, only 34 of the 134 students who enrolled on the course which acts as a preparatory course to a law degree, achieved the award. The college is reviewing the low pass rates on this course.

73 Most students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were undertaking programmes of study which had some form of national accreditation, although in some cases these programmes were at an early stage of development. Students produced good-quality personal portfolio work on independent living. Twenty students from English for speakers of other languages courses and a similar number from 'New Beginnings for Women' courses progressed to other courses in the college.

74 The college has only just begun to look at the value added to students' qualifications on entry to the college as a performance indicator of students' achievements. It has recently joined the Advanced Level Information System. Value-added information is also being collected on a pilot basis for students on GNVQ courses in science and information technology.

75 Students' attendance at classes was poor on many of the lower level courses. Attendance rates varied from 47 to 90 per cent. The average attendance level on some courses was well below the current 75 per cent target set by the college. Some course completion rates were also low, particularly on GCSE and GCE A level courses. Completion rates on hairdressing courses have declined over the last three years. Some other curriculum areas have good completion rates; one childcare course retained all its students. The college-wide retention figure for 1995 was 85 per cent. A comprehensive process of monitoring the retention of students on a monthly basis was started in September 1995. Aggregated college-wide information on students' destinations and progression was not available to inspectors. Destination information is collected at course level. The college has undertaken little analysis of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service returns of students progressing to higher education.

76 Each division has an awards ceremony and there is a college-wide graduation ceremony. Individual successes in 1995 included one student who came fifth out of 5,000 in the Chartered Institute of Management accountancy examinations, one who was awarded a prize by Central

Television and one who won a place in the national finals of a bricklaying competition. Other substantial achievements included a student who gained top marks in the country for the export management diploma, the BTEC national photography student of the year, a female student who was automotive student of the year and a team of higher national diploma students who were major prize winners at a computer-aided design exhibition.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

77 The college has had a well-established policy on quality for a long time. It commits the college to providing education and training to defined and verifiable standards of quality and requires a common framework for monitoring and review to be used across the college. In 1991, the college became the first in the United Kingdom to achieve British Standard 5750 and this has remained the basis of its quality assurance. Staff are familiar with the college's approach to quality and many now work confidently with the standard (now ISO/EN9000) and consider it helps with recording and reviewing the way programmes are implemented. A few staff were insufficiently aware that it could be attuned to the needs of their particular courses. The policy on quality gives high priority to teaching, the assessment of students' work and the recording of programmes of study. At present, not all parts of the college are included in the system and further work is needed to incorporate the financial, administration and estates functions.

78 The college has made good use of the British Standards Institute quality management system to ensure that programmes are run according to required procedures. Carefully-organised manuals set out the procedures used for starting up, running and finishing programmes. All the forms, checklists, reports and guidance notes covering each curriculum area are included in each course manual. A working file is kept by course team leaders to record progress through the year and note all the action taken to comply with procedures. There is a well-organised system for conducting internal and external audits and co-ordinating the two. A number of staff are trained as quality auditors and assist the quality assurance unit with regular audits. External audits by the British Standards Institute are scheduled every six months to test how well the procedures are followed and evaluate how the system is functioning. No serious deficiencies were shown in the last report from the institute.

79 A number of additional arrangements extend and strengthen the monitoring and review of quality in the college. Programme teams and support units complete position papers each year. These give each team's assessment of their programme and the actions required to address any weaknesses. The papers help to bring together the expertise and ideas of the groups of staff involved with courses and encourage teams to record and analyse their strengths and weaknesses. Curriculum audits have been developing slowly in the college and have recently been relaunched after a

successful pilot in humanities programmes. The audits include classroom observations by heads of schools. The college has a quality and inspection team which meets regularly to review the quality systems. Quality monitoring at academic board and senior management levels is underdeveloped. A sub-group of the academic board reviews requests for approval of new courses and major alterations to existing courses but it does not review the performance of all courses. It does, however, review those which have received an unfavourable moderators' report or which are not subject to external moderation. The monitoring of students' course completions, achievements and destinations is not yet sufficiently systematic and rigorous.

80 The performance indicators in the college's strategic plan include a number of well-chosen targets relating to issues such as retention and students' achievements. Realistic targets have been set for improvement in each area over a three-year period. Each course team is required to set their own performance targets at the beginning of the year, in the light of the overall college-wide targets. However, course teams vary in their understanding of, and willingness to set, targets and in the degree to which they monitor progress towards achieving them. Even when the necessary information is collected, it is often not evaluated in order to inform the development of policy and practice. The college has made insufficient use of service quality standards. The client services agreement in the learning resource centres is an example of good practice, upon which the college could draw. There are plans to establish service level agreements between staff working in different parts of the college.

81 The college's internal quality systems are well integrated with arrangements for external moderation and/or verification of courses. The outcomes of moderation and verification are used to help the college identify areas for improvement. The FEFC inspection framework is increasingly being used by the college. For example, the position papers are laid out using the headings in the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*, and teaching observations are based on similar criteria to those used in inspections.

82 At the programme level, there are several significant weaknesses in the review process. There is scope for more attention to be paid to students' achievements. Data on destinations are rarely commented upon and poor completion rates are sometimes not adequately explained or confronted. Action plans are usually cursory. A more thorough and better timed review system is required.

83 Programme reviews take account of students' perceptions. In most programmes areas, students are invited to attend review meetings and to contribute their views. The use of surveys is not systematic, and some staff consider them to be of little use. Not all students have the opportunity to give their views anonymously. After a lapse in the use of cross-college surveys an outside organisation has been employed to conduct these surveys.

84 The college provides opportunities for staff to discuss their development needs and to undertake relevant activities. Each year, there is a careful and thorough analysis of staff-development priorities and a programme of activities is devised. This takes account of the corporate strategy and strategic priorities, business plans, position papers, and the views of staff expressed at their appraisal meetings. The college spends about 1 per cent of its staffing budget on costs directly associated with staff development; this rises to about 3 per cent when other supporting costs are included. Staff-development activities are evaluated and efforts are made to ensure that the benefits of attending training courses or other events are disseminated within the schools. Managers acknowledge that staff appraisal has been slow to develop. At the time of the inspection, 58 per cent of teaching staff and 18 per cent of support staff had been appraised.

85 The self-assessment carried out in preparation for the inspection was based on thorough discussion throughout the college. The self-assessment report is intended to be used as a significant reference point for the future development of quality in the college. Separate self-assessments were carried out in many areas of the college by groups of staff working together to consider and record their strengths and weaknesses. The approach taken was honest, self-critical and perceptive. Where weaknesses were identified the actions required to improve matters were also made clear. The self-assessment report followed the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The grades given in the report corresponded closely to those awarded by the inspection team.

86 Just under a half of the college charter is concerned with the college's code of conduct for students and the regulations with which students must comply. The other half indicates how students can obtain more information on various topics by contacting specific people in the college. All students and staff receive a copy. Separate versions of the charter are designed for employers and for the community. The charter says little about the standards the college expects to achieve. Reports on the college's performance on its charter obligations should be made available as required by the *Charter for Further Education*.

RESOURCES

Staffing

87 The number of full-time equivalent staff employed by the college has been reduced over the last five years from 876 to 636. The student to staff ratio is now 18:1. Since incorporation, 190 teachers have left through voluntary retirement or redundancy. The number of academic managers has been reduced from 77 to 42. Ninety-five per cent of teachers are now on flexible contracts of employment. The college has introduced 40 facilitators/demonstrators who are employed on support staff contracts. Further efficiencies are achieved by using part-time teachers, many of

whom hold associate lecturer status. Most of the staff on the adult basic education and community courses are part time. Some have insufficient knowledge and experience to meet the standards and procedures required by the college and are receiving training in these areas. All staff have a job description and these are reviewed and amended as job functions change. Some teachers have knowledge or skills, such as bilingual secretarial experience, which are not currently utilised. The college has undertaken a limited audit of the skills of its staff.

88 Most teachers are well qualified and experienced for the courses they teach. Of the 349 full-time equivalent teaching staff, 94 per cent are full time. Eighty-two per cent have a degree or a professional qualification, 57 per cent have a teaching qualification. Some of those who teach students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have no specialist qualifications for this work. A total of 138 teachers hold training and development lead body qualifications. Four of the 40 facilitators/demonstrators have a degree and 13 have training and development lead body awards. The achievement of training and development lead body awards by staff in such areas as business and construction, has been slow. Many teachers, especially those in vocational areas, have commercial or industrial experience but this is usually at least five years old and becoming outdated. Only six teachers have taken part in any form of industrial or commercial secondment over the last 12 months. Through one valuable initiative, however, some staff have had periods of work experience in the construction industry in order to update their knowledge of industrial practice.

89 Support staff are competent and experienced. Twenty-nine of them hold a degree. The finance and human resources directors are both professionally qualified. During the last year, 108 of the support staff have undertaken award-bearing courses of study. Many have attended in-house short courses relevant to their work and the college's objectives. In some subject areas there are not enough administrative support staff. The deployment of technicians was inappropriate in construction, information technology, and art and design. This issue has now been addressed and the introduction of facilitators/demonstrators has been helpful to students.

90 The proportion of staff from minority ethnic groups has doubled to 9 per cent over the last five years. Women are well represented at senior management level, but under represented at middle management and senior lecturer level. The average length of service for teachers and technicians is over 10 years and for support staff over seven years.

Equipment/learning resources

91 The college has adequate systems in place for the annual prioritisation and approval of equipment purchases. There is no longer-term policy on capital expenditure and equipment replacement. The strategic plan deals only with plans for the development of the learning resource centres.

92 Most curriculum areas have good specialist equipment. For example, there is a wide range of instrumentation available for science courses, good specialist equipment in catering and hairdressing, very well equipped photographic facilities and high standards of equipment in general and automotive engineering, including computer-aided design facilities and an engine test cell. In a few areas, learning was hindered by inadequate provision of some basic items. Overhead projector screens are not available in all rooms, for example in childcare and engineering. There were not enough chairs to seat all the students on the furniture making course. Hand tools in construction were not well maintained. Some humanities subjects had an inadequate stock of text books. Mathematics courses lacked learning aids such as graphical calculators.

93 The college has three learning resource centres, one on each campus, including a new one at West Bromwich. These provide attractive working environments and a comprehensive range of learning resources including books, periodicals, a compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database, audio-visual equipment, computers and copying facilities. The college has just begun to access the Internet. The centres are adequately staffed. A survey has been conducted to obtain students' views on the centres and performance indicators have been identified to measure their effectiveness. Most students are satisfied with the help they receive from the staff. The college has identified the need to strengthen links between the learning resource centres and the curriculum areas. At the time of the specialist inspections, bookstocks were adequate in computing, humanities subjects and accountancy but inadequate in construction, psychology, English and science. The college had improved some of its holdings of learning materials in the period between the inspection of curriculum areas and the team inspection. The opening hours of learning resource centres are reasonable overall and meet most students' needs. The new West Bromwich Centre closes at 18.30 hours Mondays to Thursdays and the college will review this when course changes are complete. It is also to review the limited times at which learning resource centres are open during vacations. The number of private study places at the Wednesbury Centre is low.

94 The college does not have a formal information technology strategy. Its third audit of information technology provision took place during the period of the inspection. Hardware and software specifications are appropriate and most equipment is of industry standard. However, despite substantial recent investment, the overall number of computers, and the number available for students to use outside lessons at times which suit them, are both inadequate. Overall, the ratio of full-time equivalent students to workstations is 15:1. At Smethwick, where the ratio of students to machines is the highest, students found it particularly difficult to get access to a computer.

Accommodation

95 Since incorporation, the college has spent £2.6 million on refurbishing its accommodation. A major rationalisation has reduced the number of teaching campuses from six to three and the number of buildings used for teaching from 39 to 14. The college has a three-year plan to address the inconsistencies between the amount of specialist accommodation available and that required. Sites no longer used for teaching will be disposed of and the overall space will be reduced by about 40 per cent. The college is currently half way towards its space utilisation target.

96 Except for a former early Victorian grammar school, most buildings were constructed during the last 40 years. The campuses at Smethwick and West Bromwich are within a six-mile radius of the main campus at Wednesbury. The college also leases 32 self-catering flats for students' accommodation from the local authority in Tipton. The external fabric of the main buildings is satisfactory but some windows need replacing. All campuses have a mixture of good and poor accommodation. There are several poor-quality prefabricated timber buildings at the Wednesbury Centre. The high-quality accommodation includes the learning resource centres at the three main campuses, the AutoCad centre, the photo-imaging area, the hairdressing salon and the automotive block. The quality of internal finishes is variable. The better areas are well decorated and well maintained. However, there are many areas which are drab and require refurbishment, including the top floor at West Bromwich, the Victorian building and many classroom areas at Smethwick. These areas provide a poor learning environment. The foundry block has been partially redeveloped to form a pleasant student common room.

97 There are frequent mismatches between the size of classes, or the specialism being followed, and the accommodation which is allocated. For example, one business administration class took place in a plumbing room. A session involving office procedures theory took place in a cramped typing room where students had insufficient space to be able to write. Some classrooms are noisy. One large classroom is divided by filing cabinets and the noise makes it difficult for students to concentrate when two different classes use the room simultaneously. The use of wall displays in the form of posters, trade literature and students' work is good in construction, business administration and in health and care studies but poor in engineering, the humanities and in the college's general circulation areas. The refectories are of a satisfactory standard.

98 The entrance foyers and reception areas are not as welcoming as they might be. Access for those with limited mobility is good at Wednesbury and Smethwick but poor at West Bromwich, especially in the older blocks. Students complained that the lifts in these blocks frequently do not work. Some double doors are difficult for wheelchair users to negotiate and there are insufficient toilet facilities for students with restricted mobility.

99 The quality of the daily cleaning service in the college is good. External landscaping is pleasant and the grounds are reasonably well tended by external contractors. The employment of security guards has reduced vandalism on the main campuses. The main campuses are well signposted. The internal signs and room numbering should be improved. There is extensive car parking at Wednesbury. At West Bromwich and Smethwick students rely mainly on the use of nearby public car parks.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

100 The main strengths of the college are:

- the wide range of courses
- a well-developed strategic plan which addresses local needs
- good links with the community, employers, schools and the TEC
- effective governance and management
- good tutorial and guidance systems
- a strong commitment to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

101 If the college is to succeed in achieving its aims it should:

- address significant weaknesses in management information systems
- improve students' attendance and punctuality
- continue the initiative to improve its support for students in developing core/basic skills
- monitor examination results more closely
- improve students' completion and success rates
- obtain more information on students' destinations
- improve quality assurance at the course level
- complete its programme of staff appraisal
- improve further the quality of accommodation.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1995-96)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)

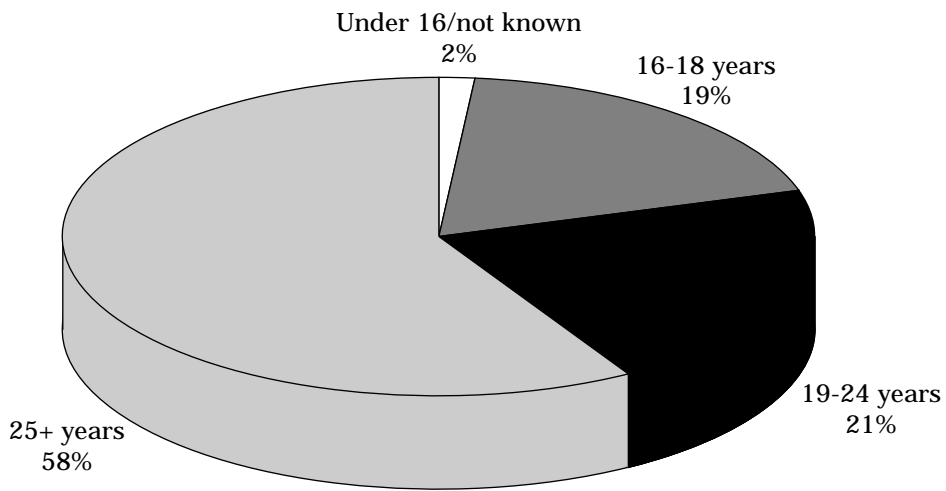
 - 5 Estimated income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Estimated 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

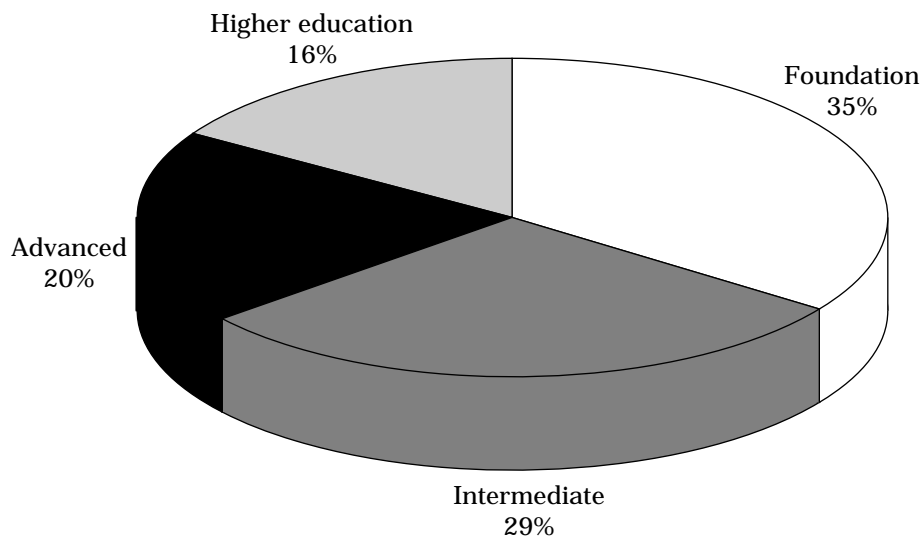
Sandwell College: percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)



Enrolments: 17,046

Figure 2

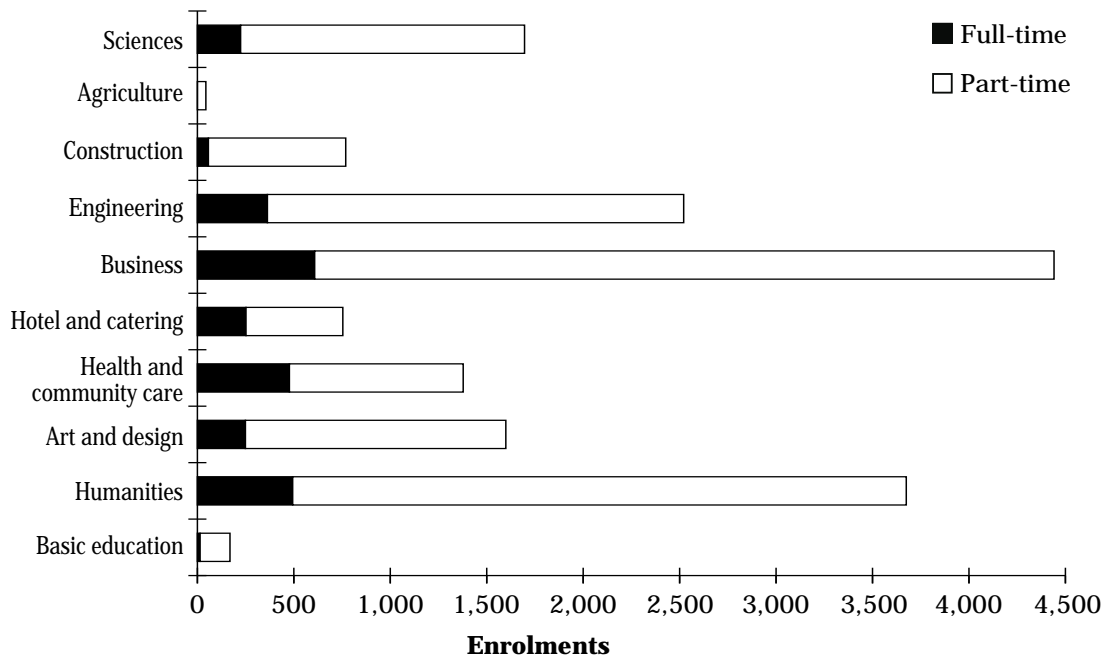
Sandwell College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)



Enrolments: 17,046

Figure 3

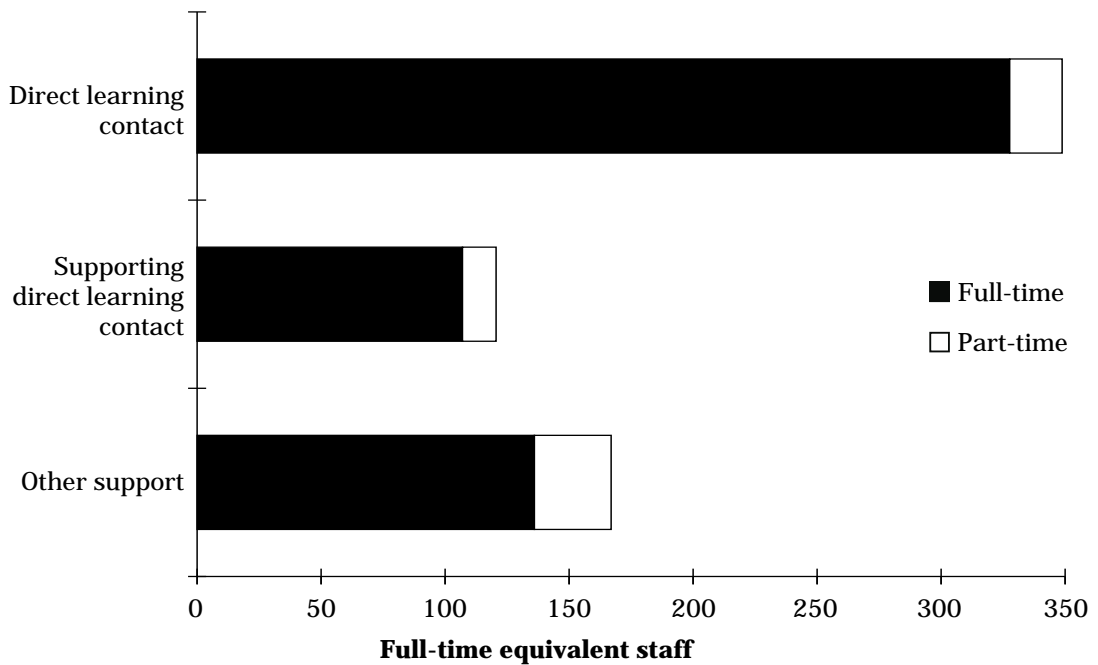
Sandwell College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1995-96)



Enrolments: 17,046

Figure 4

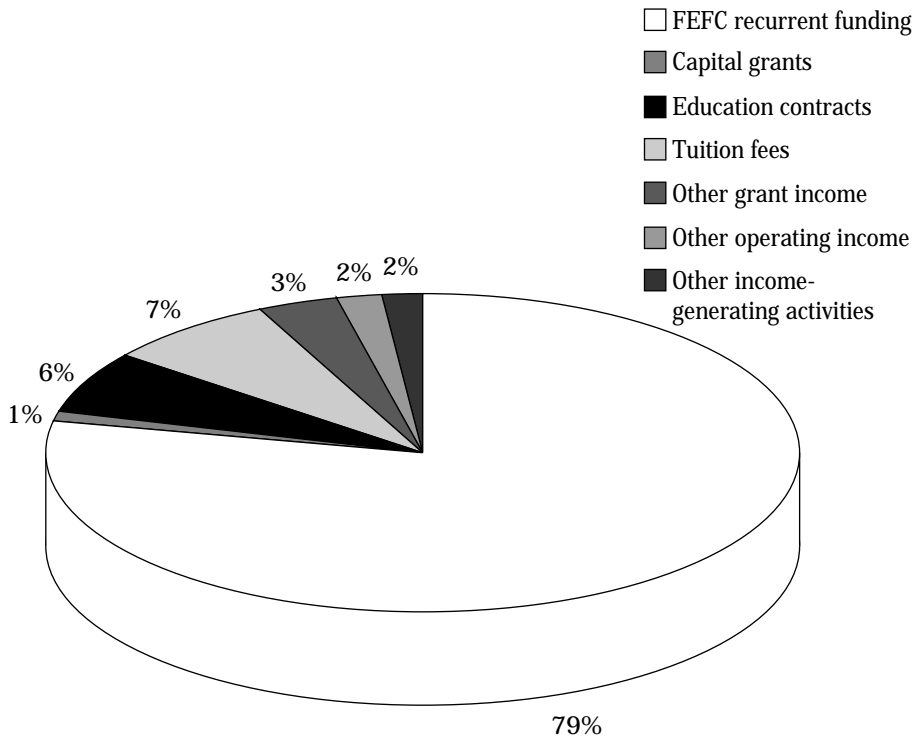
Sandwell College: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)



Full-time equivalent staff: 636

Figure 5

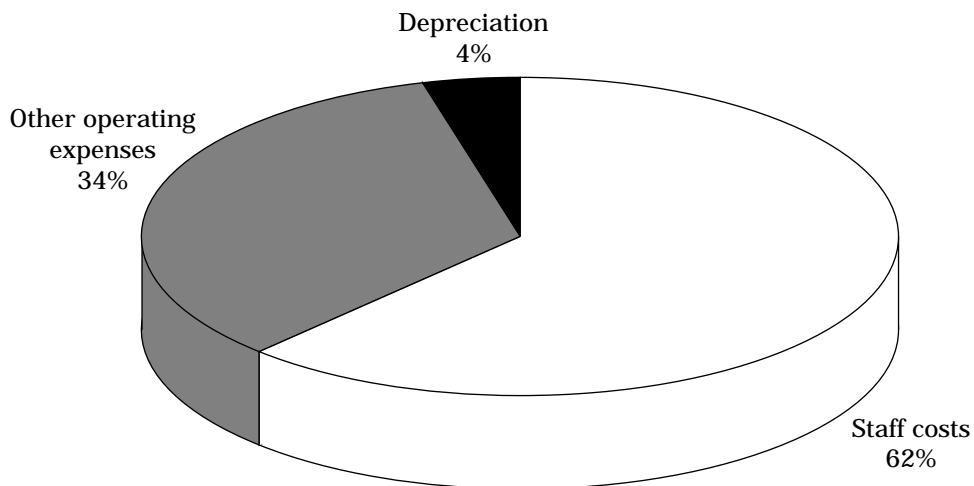
Sandwell College: estimated income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Estimated income: £23,024,440

Figure 6

Sandwell College: estimated expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Estimated expenditure: £23,756,024

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