

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Skelmersdale College

June 1997

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

College grade profiles 1993-96

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 82/97

SKELMERSDALE COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected September 1996-March 1997

Summary

Skelmersdale College is located in the rural area of west Lancashire. The main centre is in Skelmersdale, a new town with many of the economic and social characteristics of an inner-city area. Governors and senior managers work well together and have effectively directed the rapid expansion of the college. The highly successful marketing unit supports a variety of fruitful research and promotional activities. The college has extensive links with the local community which have led to joint activities and courses. Adult provision is a strong feature of the wide range of general education and vocational programmes which the college offers. The college has developed various measures to attract students from groups which have not usually entered further education. Relationships with employers and with the TEC are positive and productive. Rigorous financial management ensures the efficient use of resources. The college has developed its estates carefully. Students enjoy a range of modern amenities and facilities, many of which are available for use by the local community. Adults perform well on access courses and many progress to degree courses which the college provides in collaboration with a local university college. The college should: increase the effectiveness of its management information system; implement consistent and effective systems for tutorial and learning support; improve retention rates on all courses; raise levels of achievement on GNVQ, GCSE and GCE AS/A level courses; and ensure that course evaluation procedures are used consistently by all curriculum sections.

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	3
Quality assurance	3
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science and mathematics	3	Art and design	3
Computing	3	English and languages	3
Engineering	3	Other humanities	2
Business studies	3	Adult basic education	2
Hairdressing and beauty therapy	3	Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2
Health, social and childcare	2		

INTRODUCTION

1 Skelmersdale College was inspected between September 1996 and March 1997. Inspectors spent 110 days in the college. They inspected enrolment and induction procedures, observed 257 classes, examined students' work and held discussions with staff, students, governors, parents, employers and representatives of local schools, higher education institutions, community groups and the Lancashire Area West Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). They attended college meetings and examined college documents.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Skelmersdale College was established in 1977 as a sixth form college and became a tertiary college in 1984. In 1986, the college amalgamated with the West Lancashire Adult Education Service. It serves the towns of Skelmersdale and the adjacent market town of Ormskirk, both set in the rural area of west Lancashire. Skelmersdale was developed as a new town in the 1960s to accommodate the growing population of Liverpool. It has developed a culture which is very different from that of its rural surroundings and resembles that of an inner-city area. The college has grown by 37 per cent since incorporation. It provides an extensive curriculum for a wide range of students on two main centres, one in Skelmersdale the other in Ormskirk. There are also over 500 courses for adults at 24 centres located around west Lancashire. Within a radius of 10 miles of the main centres, there are three large tertiary colleges, two large further education colleges and three sixth form colleges. There are two schools with sixth forms in the town of Ormskirk.

3 In 1995, 80 per cent of 16-year-old school-leavers in Ormskirk stayed on in education; the equivalent figure for Skelmersdale was 50 per cent. In 1996, the proportions were 80 per cent for Ormskirk and 47 per cent for Skelmersdale. Recruitment of 16 to 18 year old students reflects this trend. The proportion of students in this age range at the Ormskirk centre rose from 16 per cent in 1995 to 21 per cent in 1996, while at the Skelmersdale centre it declined from 39 per cent in 1995 to 38 per cent in 1996. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

4 The college operates in an area of transient employment and high levels of unemployment. The 1991 census records the population of west Lancashire as 107,978, of which 43,571 were living in the Skelmersdale district and 25,912 in the Ormskirk district. In 1996, unemployment in the Skelmersdale district was 11 per cent compared with an average of 6 per cent across the United Kingdom. One of the wards served by the college had the highest recorded percentage of long-term unemployed in Lancashire while three other wards had the highest unemployment for 16 to 24 year olds. The college is the second largest employer within the town of Skelmersdale.

5 The college is organised into curriculum schools and college-wide support services. Each school contains a number of curriculum sections each led by a curriculum manager who reports to a head of school. Each support service has a manager who reports to the appropriate director. The college has formed a subsidiary company, Skelmersdale Training and Consultancy Ltd, which has responsibility for managing training courses funded by the local TEC. Skelmersdale Training and Consultancy Ltd has recently achieved the Investor in People award.

6 The college aims to be the leading provider of further education and training in the west Lancashire district. Its mission can be summarised as 'provision of the widest range of learning opportunities to meet the needs of clients delivered to the highest possible standards'. The mission, vision and college charter are widely publicised to all students and staff. To achieve its mission, the college is committed to 'an ethos of teaching and learning and quality improvement which places the learner at the centre of planning and delivery.' The college states that it aims to provide each learner with a framework of opportunities which includes learner support, access to new learning technologies, vocational and academic courses and tutorial support.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The local communities see the college and its amenities as a resource available to them and appreciate its commitment to provide a sufficiently broad range of courses to enable all groups to participate in education and training. It has established strategic alliances with partner organisations to make a significant contribution to local economic regeneration. The new centre in Ormskirk has enabled the college to expand and diversify its provision, in some cases, through partnerships with higher education, high schools and businesses within the town. The college provides a broad range of general education and vocational programmes. It offers:

- extensive provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- courses in adult basic education
- national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in nine areas, six at level 1, nine at level 2 and five at level 3
- general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) in seven vocational areas, two at foundation level, seven at intermediate level and seven at advanced level
- Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first diplomas in four subjects and national diplomas in 13 subjects
- BTEC higher national certificates in computing, electrical/electronic engineering, business and finance, early childhood studies and design

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- a range of other basic, intermediate and advanced vocational and professional courses accredited by City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G), RSA Examinations Board (RSA), the National Examinations Board for Supervisory Management, and the Institute of Legal Executives
 - 31 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects
 - 27 general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects and two GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects
 - access to higher education programmes in humanities, information technology, science and business studies
 - degree courses in partnership with Edge Hill University College and the University of Central Lancashire.

In a number of programme areas, opportunities for progression are few. For example, there are no courses in computing at GNVQ foundation, GNVQ intermediate, GCSE or GCE A level. NVQs and GNVQs are not available at any level in engineering. Plans are well advanced to expand these areas of provision. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have limited access to mainstream courses.

8 Students benefit from a range of activities which enhance their academic or vocational programmes. For example, students on foundation studies found a cycle trip to the Outer Hebrides a valuable experience which contributed to their personal development. Educational visits to match the career aspirations of students are organised in some subjects. Students have access to a sports and leisure programme which has recently been established and to enrichment activities in arts, languages and technology. However, no one is responsible for co-ordinating the extensive enrichment programme and it is not well publicised or linked to accreditation opportunities or records of achievement. Little analysis has been undertaken to measure the extent to which students engage in the activities offered.

9 The college has a highly efficient marketing unit led by a marketing manager who reports directly to a senior manager. The comprehensive marketing plan identifies targets and actions specifically linked to strategic objectives. The unit has established good relationships with the local press which have led to a significant amount of favourable press coverage. As a result of thorough evaluation of promotional activities in 1995-96, publicity materials, including the college prospectus for 1996-97, were carefully redesigned by a consultative group of school pupils, careers officers and college students and staff. The new prospectus has attracted favourable comments in a survey of views involving staff, prospective students and employers. The marketing unit gathers and analyses an extensive range of market information from sources such as Lancashire Area West TEC, Careerlink, which is the local careers service, and internally managed surveys. The college has used the outcomes of this analysis to inform the development of new courses in a variety of curriculum areas. In some

areas, marketing targets are not being met. For example, there has been little progress in attracting a greater proportion of school-leavers from Skelmersdale. Training for course teams, to raise their awareness of marketing issues and to promote more effective use of marketing information in assessing the viability of courses, has yet to take place.

10 There is a comprehensive equal opportunities policy and associated procedures. An enthusiastic equal opportunities committee co-ordinates its implementation. Equal opportunities issues are integral to staff development and student induction. The number of staff and items of equipment to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been increased. The committee quickly met the requirement to produce a college statement in response to the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995*. In addition, it has produced a summary statement for staff and a series of posters to raise awareness of the support available for students with disabilities. The college has taken extensive measures to remove barriers to study. Financial support packages are available to students and fees are varied according to personal circumstances. Free transport is provided between the main sites. Access and other courses aimed at adults are timetabled to take account of domestic and childcare responsibilities. Large creches on three centres provide places for 60 children. At each main centre, there are workshop areas, called 'flexi-learning centres', which are staffed by teachers and equipped with a range of computers, audio-video learning resources and packages of learning materials on a variety of topics. Students can call into the centres to study on their own or obtain help with study problems. The college has secured grants and supplemented these with its own resources to support the participation of groups usually under represented in further education and training. Such provision includes: education for travellers and for children under 16 who have no permanent home; youth programmes, in liaison with the youth service, for young people not in education, training or employment; a training initiative for carers of homebound adults funded by the European Union; and a programme for school refusers. Disaffected pupils who complete this programme are often enrolled on mainstream college courses.

11 The college has extensive links with the community. There are productive working relationships with the local education authority (LEA) which funds the college to supply a large number of non-vocational courses. Many of these courses provide routes to further qualifications. Twenty-five per cent of the present full-time students have previously taken part in evening classes funded by the LEA. Constructive links with higher education institutions have resulted in a number of joint activities. For example, the college collaborates with Edge Hill University College to provide the first year of a modular degree programme leading to degrees in English, social sciences and history. The college enjoys a cordial and mutually beneficial working relationship with Lancashire Area West TEC at both strategic and operational levels. It provides a wide range of TEC-funded training courses, including modern apprenticeships in five

vocational areas. The chairman of the college board is a TEC director and college staff participate in various joint working groups. The TEC considers the college to be responsive and flexible and a provider of good-quality training. The college is represented on a range of external working groups and committees. For example, the principal is a director of Careerlink.

12 Curriculum sections have responsibility for liaison with schools on curriculum matters and are represented on the schools liaison committee. Some sections have been more effective than others in developing projects to support links with schools. For example, the computing section is working with schools to encourage the use of the college information technology facilities by pupils and the humanities section has set up a homework club. The engineering section has secured the support of the Construction Industry Training Board for its work with three local schools to develop a construction-based approach to GCSE technology. Foundation studies staff work with schools to enable pupils to progress to college courses. Mathematics, humanities, social studies and science sections are insufficiently involved in liaison work and their curriculum links with schools are weak.

13 The college has extensive and productive links with employers, though these are not always reflected at curriculum section level. Employer liaison is managed largely through the external funding unit and Skelmersdale Training and Consultancy Ltd. Both are effective in forging strong links with employers and generating income. The external funding unit has responsibility for courses funded by the European Union, full-cost courses for employers and special projects. For example, it has developed a range of information technology related products, including a distance learning course which leads to a nationally recognised information technology qualification. This course has been extremely successful in recruiting large numbers of employed students, many of them from other regions. In 1996, it reached the finals of a competition to find the best 'self-study' course of 1996, after being nominated by the Institute of Information Technology Training. The external funding unit has international links to nine countries through its involvement in European Union funded initiatives. However, its establishment as a separate unit has led to it becoming to some extent isolated from the college. For example, there are no curriculum links between the European work of the external funding unit and language courses in the college.

14 Skelmersdale Training and Consultancy Ltd has responsibility for the co-ordination of work experience placements. The well-organised system of work placements for college students is managed by a work placement administrator who is responsible for liaising with placement providers. The system is carefully monitored and is continually improved. For example, a recently introduced placement request form has made it easier for course tutors to match placements to the particular needs of students. The database of about 700 placement providers is regularly updated. Some curriculum sections, such as childcare studies, use the system to give their students the benefit of well-managed placements

which develop and extend their vocational skills. However, the college has several curriculum sections such as business studies, science, languages and humanities that do not liaise closely with industry or provide their students with sufficient opportunities for work experience. In an attempt to develop closer curriculum links with employers, the college's schools have formed advisory boards for each programme area. Most of these have not yet formally met.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 Members of the board are highly committed to the development of the college. They have played an important role in directing the successful strategy for expansion and growth in recent years. Most live within the west Lancashire area and are familiar with the context within which the college operates. Six of the 12 governors are business members, including the chairman who is the TEC nominated member. The other members comprise two head teachers, a recently retired deputy director of a university college, an officer of Lancashire county council, the principal and a staff representative. At the time of the inspection, the one vacancy for a business member was in the process of being filled by the search committee set up by the board to review membership and fill vacancies as appropriate. Governors collectively have a broad range of expertise. Two are managing directors, one of a large, local manufacturing company and the other of an international company. Other members have experience in accountancy, education, industrial relations and public sector management. The college's director of finance is the clerk to the corporation. With the exception of one governor whose attendance has been poor due to ill-health, members have an average attendance at meetings of 87 per cent.

16 Meetings are conducted effectively. All members contribute to the issues under discussion. There is a constructive working atmosphere in board and subcommittee meetings. Relationships between members and senior managers are positive and congenial. Members are involved in college activities in a number of ways and attend open evenings and all other college events. Governors are concerned to operate effectively. They undertake training and receive regular briefings on key aspects of their work. They are clear about their responsibilities and are careful not to get involved in operational issues. Their annual residential two-day meeting is timed to coincide with their review and development of the strategic plan. Over the last two years, reports from the three subcommittees, audit, remuneration, and finance and general purposes, together with the board's oversight of the college's building and expansion programmes, have focused discussion by members on financial issues. This focus has started to widen and become more concerned with curriculum issues.

17 The senior management team comprises the principal, vice-principal and the three directors of finance, studies, and human resources and development. Senior managers have a clear vision for the development of

the college. They provide effective leadership and encourage staff to contribute their ideas for development and improvement of all aspects of college work. A recently formed strategic planning and development group has reviewed the college's mission, values, learning vision and corporate objectives and is consulting widely on proposed changes. The strategic planning process is complemented by a management development programme for senior and middle managers. This programme, led by an external consultant, has helped managers to clarify their roles and style of management. They have applied the skills they have learned to real projects, for example, the management of learning resources across the college. Participants are enthusiastic about the way in which the programme has prepared them to face the challenges which may arise.

18 The college has developed a wide range of policies to assist the achievement of its mission and to meet legal requirements. All policies are linked to strategic objectives and have clear aims and outcomes. Responsibilities for their implementation are allocated to named individuals or, more often, to committees. Generally, arrangements for monitoring the implementation of policies are inadequate. Policies are monitored through the 'course log review'. This system for evaluating courses and identifying issues which are then reported to the academic board is not consistently effective. Even when issues are reported there is no clear procedure for dealing with them. The large number of college committees and working groups enables staff at all levels to be involved in college developments but it also leads to some confusion amongst staff about the purposes of the various groups and their membership. Staff are not always clear about the impact of policies on their work.

19 The quality of planning at course level varies. Though some curriculum sections have development plans which identify strategic and operational objectives which are clearly linked to the college's strategic plan, many others do not define future developments clearly, set measurable targets or identify timescales and those responsible for action. Some curriculum section meetings are almost wholly concerned with day-to-day business matters. Little attention is devoted to reviewing and increasing the effectiveness of courses. Some curriculum sections plan their meetings and maintain records of the actions agreed and taken. Others rely on informal meetings, especially with part-time staff, and do not keep records of agreed actions. In many sections, staff belong to a number of teams and find it difficult to attend all meetings. There are a few instances of poor leadership and organisation in curriculum sections, for example in the management of part-time staff and in the co-ordination of courses across centres.

20 The curriculum is managed through five schools: business and creative studies; foundation and community studies; humanities and social sciences; technology and applied sciences; and adult and continuing education. The heads of schools report to the director of studies. Roles and responsibilities within the management structure are well defined

and understood by staff at all levels. All staff have job descriptions. Senior managers devolve much accountability for curriculum management and cross-college services to heads of schools and service managers. They make extensive efforts to ensure that staff feel that they are making an effective contribution to the work of the college. All staff are consulted routinely on a range of issues, including new developments and modifications to existing provision. For example, teaching and support staff at all levels were extensively consulted on the designs for the new resource centre, and hairdressing and beauty therapy staff were fully involved in determining the features of the beauty and sports therapy facility. Effective systems of communications ensure that staff at all levels are kept well informed. Curriculum and cross-college meetings are timetabled and there are frequent newsletters and bulletins. Minutes of most cross-college meetings are placed in school offices. Minutes of corporation meetings are available to staff on request. At the time of the inspection, there was no teachers' representative on the academic board. Teachers express confidence that the views they put forward in curriculum and college meetings are represented fairly at a range of levels in the organisation.

21 College targets for students' recruitment have been exceeded every year since 1994. In some curriculum sections, the numbers recruited vary widely from the targets set. Course teams tend simply to set targets which are higher than the numbers recruited in the previous year. They make little use of market information or performance indicators such as retention rates and students' achievements. In some cases, for example in hairdressing and humanities, poor retention results in very small classes. Curriculum sections vary in the care they give to monitoring retention and attendance and in the effectiveness with which they deal with students who leave courses early or who have poor records of attendance. Where courses attract low numbers, they are made viable by combining groups for teaching or by allowing more flexible patterns of attendance.

22 The college has a rigorous financial control system. It works well and generally leads to efficient management of resources at course level. The college finance director has issued guidelines for financial control to all budget holders. In addition, they receive frequent, helpful briefings from the college accountant. Budget holders monitor expenditure and income, identify variance as it occurs and take necessary action. Heads of schools work together to adjust allocations to programme areas so there are few objections to the consumable and capital budgets allocated. Monthly reports to governors and senior managers identify income and expenditure against projections with details of and reasons for overspend or surpluses. The board and senior managers discuss year-end and mid-year financial statements and forecasts and circulate extracts from these to heads of schools. Curriculum sections are encouraged to generate income and are allowed to keep a proportion of their earnings. As yet, there are few incentives to increase Further Education Funding Council

(FEFC) recurrent funding, for example, through improving retention rates. In 1995-96, the college's average level of funding was £14.77 per unit. The median for all general further education and tertiary colleges was 18.13 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

23 Computerised management information has, until recently, been too inaccurate to support strategic planning and review. External factors caused the computerised system to fail completely in September 1995. It has taken over a year to rectify the problems. The new system is now fully operational and capable of producing reliable and useful information for managers. Senior managers are the main users of the system and employ it to monitor enrolment, recruitment and attendance. The integrity of the information produced is beginning to be accepted at other levels. The college has begun to train staff in the benefits and uses of the system though most curriculum managers are not yet aware of its potential for informing course planning and review.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

24 The college has developed comprehensive, well-planned systems for the recruitment, enrolment and induction of students. Policies for each aspect include clear aims and advice on implementation. Guidelines issued to staff are succinct and supportive. However, learning support and tutorial systems are not implemented consistently. Curriculum sections do not have adequate procedures for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the systems or their impact on students' progress and achievements. Information on students' support which is gathered at college level is not shared routinely with curriculum sections in a way which would encourage them to review their practice.

25 Recruitment is supported by a marketing unit which produces highly effective publicity material. In addition to distributing information to relevant organisations and agencies, it uses local radio, press and cinemas to publicise the college. Courses are promoted to local schools through open days, 'taster' days, during which pupils sample the range of college opportunities available to them, and longer link courses arranged for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. College staff attend parents evenings, and careers conventions and visit schools on request. Course enquiries are logged centrally and the time taken to respond to these generally meets the standards laid down in the college charter. Information sent to students is clear and informative. Enrolment takes place at the Skelmersdale and Ormskirk centres. The process is efficient and speedy, often taking no more than 15 minutes. Prospective students can immediately obtain impartial advice of a general nature and can make appointments for longer, more specialist guidance interviews.

26 College procedures for induction are well planned and allow each curriculum section to devise appropriate programmes. Though many

students thought that their induction programme was too long, most found that it provided a good introduction to the course and to the college charter and learning agreements. During induction, and for the following few weeks, students are given the opportunity to change their course. Initial assessments of all full-time students are carried out to identify those who need learning support if they are to meet the demands of their chosen courses. The results are processed quickly and personal tutors are informed of the learning support needs of students within their group. Students are introduced to the college student services which include welfare guidance, financial advice, information on social security benefits, and counselling services. Two full-time guidance officers, who are trained counsellors, provide a confidential service across all the main sites. Students talk favourably of the supportive nature of the guidance they receive.

27 Students may receive learning support, as appropriate, through workshops, group tuition, individual tuition or in class where subject specialist and learning support staff often work co-operatively. The number of students taking advantage of learning support arrangements varies considerably from section to section. The health, social and childcare section is particularly effective in identifying students' additional support needs and in using the full range of delivery modes to support its students. Other curriculum sections place less emphasis on the need for learning support outside the course and have identified very small numbers of students needing such support. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported at every stage. They are carefully placed in courses which meet their needs. Where appropriate, their assessments are carried out in liaison with relevant external agencies. Assistance is provided for those with a physical, sensory or communication difficulty.

28 All full-time students and those part-time students who attend for more than 10 hours a week have an 'entitlement' to tutorial support. The frequency, length and content of tutorials are not specified, although there are minimum requirements. There is considerable variation in the type and amount of support which students in different programme areas receive. For example, within foundation studies there are group tutorials which support students in developing social awareness, general employment skills and other life skills. In other curriculum sections, students receive individual tutorials focused almost exclusively on the progress they are making in their courses. Some tutors arrange visits and speakers to encourage and inform students' career planning. Students who are applying to higher education institutions benefit from general information-giving sessions, visits to higher education institutions, access to a well-stocked information bank and constructive guidance on their applications and personal statements. The tutorial entitlement includes the development and maintenance of records of achievement. Students have access to specially designed computer software to help them in this

but less than 10 per cent have made use of it. Tutors declare a reluctance to treat records of achievement as a priority, particularly for students intending to progress to higher education and for adult students who question the value and currency of such records.

29 Central to the tutorial entitlement is the review process, which is intended to enable students to assess their progress and set targets for improvement. Its effectiveness is lessened by inconsistencies in the way subject tutors record students' achievements and lack of precision and clarity in the learning goals agreed by students and personal tutors. Examples of such goals include 'improve attendance' and 'continue to work towards accreditation'. Though the intention in the entitlement is that learning goals should be agreed through negotiation, there is little evidence that this consistently happens. Few review sheets contain comments made by the student, most being made by the tutor. The personal tutor is required to monitor individual students' attendance and take action on unauthorised absences. Often this requirement is not met due to variations in the completion and accuracy of attendance records within the different curriculum sections.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

30 Strengths outweighed weaknesses in 60 per cent of the teaching sessions inspected. This compares with an average of 63 per cent for all colleges inspected during 1995-96, as reported in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in 8 per cent of sessions which is the same as the average of 8 per cent for all colleges inspected in 1995-96, according to the same report. The grades awarded to the lessons inspected are shown in the following table.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	11	11	10	1	1	34
GCSE	4	13	17	5	1	40
GNVQ	2	6	8	1	0	17
NVQ	5	12	6	0	1	24
Higher education	2	6	3	0	0	11
Access to higher education	3	2	0	0	0	5
Adult basic education	3	9	5	1	0	18
Other*	18	47	33	8	2	108
Total	48	106	82	16	5	257

* includes foundation, intermediate and advanced courses leading to vocational diplomas and certificates and to qualifications awarded by professional bodies.

31 The average attendance at classes observed was 71 per cent, compared with 73 per cent for all general further education colleges inspected, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Average levels of attendance ranged from 64 per cent in business studies to 77 per cent in science. The average number of students present in the lessons inspected was eight.

32 Effective course planning was a feature of most programmes. Comprehensive schemes of work and detailed lesson plans included learning objectives and recommended methods of teaching and assessment. In the best lessons, schedules of work, assessment criteria and lesson objectives were shared with students. On most courses, assignments were set at an appropriate level and teachers kept records of their students' progress. On a minority of courses, criteria for assessment were not made clear to students and marking standards and methods lacked consistency. Written feedback on assignments was not always sufficiently detailed to help students to improve their work.

33 Good working relations between teachers and students encouraged effective learning. Students' involvement and progress were most noticeable in those lessons, for example in science, engineering, humanities, languages and health, where teachers had high expectations of their students and set appropriately challenging tasks. In a minority of lessons, particularly some of the lessons in art and design, business studies and mathematics, poor planning and unclear objectives resulted in students learning a limited number of skills rather than acquiring essential understanding. In most lessons, too few checks were made on students' understanding and progress.

34 Science students were attentive and eager to learn. In most lessons, teachers introduced a variety of activities, made effective use of questioning, provided individual support, and had high expectations of students. They made appropriate use of learning aids to help students to understand complex processes. In one class, for example, a cartoon style diagram was used effectively to illustrate the complex array of cellular reactions that constitute tissue respiration. The diagram simplified the process into a series of production stages, showing how a hopper device delivered glucose molecules into a vat to commence the process of glycolysis. The lesson built upon the model and ended by introducing the required equations for the process. In a minority of lessons, there were few activities to which students could contribute and little attempt was made by teachers to determine the extent of their understanding and progress. Students made little use of the library or the flexi-learning centre. In several mathematics lessons, teaching methods were inappropriate, questions to check students' understanding or to promote the sharing of ideas were infrequent, and students were not involved effectively in activities suitable to the stage they had reached. This was particularly noticeable at GCSE level.

35 In some of the better computing lessons, teachers made effective use of a range of learning materials and encouraged mature students to share their experience in ways which helped their own learning and that of younger students. In many classes, however, there were a significant number of absences and class sizes overall were so small that students had few opportunities to learn from others' experiences and ideas. The college has outward collaborative provision in computing at a number of centres, most of which are located outside the north-west region. Comprehensive schemes of work and lesson plans had been developed for these programmes. Detailed records of individual students and their progress were maintained. On recruitment, students had received copies of the college's mission and charter and had entered into a learning agreement with the college. The quality of the courses was generally good though, at some centres, the range of learning activities undertaken by students was narrow. For example, the students in one group worked entirely on individual tasks throughout a whole day, though tutor support was available.

36 On electronics courses, students enjoyed a range of opportunities to develop the key skills of communication, use of number and information technology. They were encouraged to use a mixture of texts and computer-based learning resources to develop their knowledge and skills. In work-based engineering programmes, careful records of progress were shared with the students. The content of lessons and the pace of work was appropriate to the students' differing levels of ability and understanding. Students worked well on practical tasks. In a few lessons dealing with theoretical aspects, the pace of the work was too slow and students quickly started to lose interest.

37 In business studies, the quality of teaching and learning varied considerably. In the better lessons, the handouts and overhead transparencies used by teachers were of a high standard of content and presentation. Students were involved in a range of tasks designed to develop their understanding. For example, in a well-planned marketing lesson for part-time students, learning objectives were clearly identified and students developed a good understanding of the issues by listening to a lecture, taking notes, working on tasks in small groups and presenting their findings to the class. Many lessons were well organised; students were able to work at their own level and received effective support from their teachers. On the course for legal secretaries, learning materials had been adapted to meet course and lesson objectives. In the fewer number of weak lessons, there was no attempt to relate work in class to students' experience in the workplace. Full-time NVQ courses contained insufficient practical work and students did not experience realistic work situations. The materials available did not enable students to work on their own or help them to develop their study skills. Teachers failed to direct questions at individual students or to use their questions to check students' understanding. In one three-hour-long lesson, students were given a

lengthy and poorly presented handout covering the topic for the session. The textbook, available to students, was more comprehensive and written in a more lively style but students were not referred to it. The tutor read the handout aloud slowly, occasionally pausing to ask questions but these encouraged students to make general comments without supporting evidence. On secretarial and office skills courses, the marking of written work was insufficiently rigorous. Errors were not identified or corrected.

38 In the majority of health, social and childcare lessons, the learning objectives were clear and students engaged in a range of appropriate activities as a means of achieving these objectives. Opportunities were provided to develop and assess students' key skills. For example, students in groups of three, planned, prepared and presented a topic to the rest of the class using learning materials they had produced and questions they had devised. On completion, the students evaluated their own presentations and then the class was invited to do the same. Students used information technology frequently to support their learning. Teachers kept records of students' achievements, informed them of their progress and helped them to draw up action plans for further learning. Students involved in work-based training had individual training plans, good opportunities to develop their practical skills and comprehensive systems for tracking and recording their progress. The quality of the work carried out on employers' premises was monitored by a placement co-ordinator, who attended regular assessor meetings. In a small minority of classes, teachers used too narrow a range of teaching methods or the work was conducted at too slow a pace to maintain students' interest.

39 In hairdressing and beauty therapy, the standard of teaching varied. Teaching was of high quality in NVQ level 1 lessons. Learning packages which included assessment exercises as integral elements were used effectively. Lessons were weaker at levels 2 and 3. The information given by teachers often failed to meet course requirements and students were not required to carry out salon activities at a commercial pace or to an appropriate standard. Schemes of work were structured in such a way that students had little choice of modules and few opportunities to progress quickly through course units. Teaching methods were not varied enough. Systems for recording students' assessments and tracking progress were not maintained accurately. During the inspection, students participated in a hair, beauty and sports therapy show open to the general public. This, together with visits to other shows in Blackpool and Manchester, helped to develop students' understanding of their subjects.

40 National diploma courses in art and design were structured and timetabled to enable students to take additional GCE A level and GCSE qualifications. In general, relationships between teachers and students were good, though some classes were poorly managed. Most assignments were creative, well written and relevant to the curriculum. An imaginative assignment in a media studies course effectively brought together the work from six study units. The work was carefully sequenced to help students

learn the processes required, step by step. With the exception of some photography and GCSE courses, the oral and written comments to students on their assessments were detailed and constructive. The criteria for success were clearly stated and targets were set for improvement. On most courses, opportunities for developing key skills were inadequate. Classes on the Skelmersdale campus were severely disrupted by the late arrival of students.

41 Humanities teachers used a wide range of teaching and learning methods. For example, in a psychology class, practical exercises were used to illustrate the topic of perception; class discussions and group tasks on related concepts then served to develop further students' understanding of the topic. In the majority of sessions, teachers used questioning effectively to develop and assess students' knowledge and understanding. The lack of sufficient textbooks and course-related study packs led to an over reliance on the use of handouts. Generally, students were set classwork and homework tasks appropriate to the level of the course. However, psychology and sociology students were often not aware of the criteria used for awarding the marks given to their assignments. Most marked work contained few written comments and English errors were not always corrected. With the exception of the access to higher education courses, there was little use of information technology to support learning. The small size of some evening classes restricted the range of teaching methods and students' opportunities to exchange ideas.

42 In English, teachers encouraged students to ask questions and express their ideas and they helped them to draw on their own experiences when discussing texts. Their relationships with students were good humoured and positive. The best lessons were carefully sequenced to include a variety of activities which held students' interest and enabled them to develop their literary, linguistic and presentational skills. Occasionally, the choice of stimulus material to promote personal writing was narrow or inappropriate. For example, a teacher read an extract from a book and followed this by repeating the same extract on a video. In weaker lessons, there were too few checks on students' understanding, opportunities for students to develop their oral presentation skills were restricted by the use of closed questions and the willingness of teachers to accept brief responses to more open questions. Some oral work was dominated by the more articulate students. Teachers too quickly accepted their responses. The management of modern language classes, where students' ages and abilities differed widely, was good. Lessons were thoughtfully planned and effectively organised. In some lessons, clear and achievable objectives shaped the planning of work. Students engaged in a variety of activities and were set appropriate tasks which involved them all fully. In many modern language lessons, the range of resources used was too limited. Some worksheets, although neatly presented, were visually dull. Often, they were not suitable for the group for which they had been prepared.

43 Adult basic education programmes were designed to enable students to work at a pace appropriate to their individual needs. Work was marked regularly, record keeping was thorough and students were encouraged to assess their own progress. In the better sessions, students were clear about the purpose of the tasks they were set. Learning support was provided in a variety of ways. It was particularly effective within vocational areas. For example, in one carpentry session a key skills worker worked with the class teacher to give students help on specific numeracy skills, such as measuring, which they required for practical work. In basic skills workshops, teaching and learning methods were too narrow in range and there was an over reliance on worksheets. These sessions were poorly attended. Teachers rarely made use of information technology to support learning. The support provided by some volunteer support workers was not always appropriate.

44 Carefully planned lessons provided varied and interesting learning activities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Opportunities for personal development and the development of key skills were a feature of most of the work. In most lessons, the methods of working and the nature of the materials used were based on teachers' thorough knowledge of course demands and students' abilities. Students' experience was used extensively and effectively to illustrate and structure learning. For example, in an entry level health care lesson, which included some students with significant learning difficulties, a handout was used to support revision of the previous week's lesson, add further information and discuss the implications of this. The handout was read aloud by students who volunteered to do this, with the tutor providing support. Subsequently, the information provided in the handout was placed in the context of the students' own experiences and a lively discussion ensued, involving all the students. Good relationships between the students themselves and between staff and students contributed to effective communication. In the less effective sessions, activities were badly designed. They failed to cater for the wide range of ability and made it difficult for students' progress to be measured. Tutors did not make sufficient use of opportunities to reinforce learning.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

45 The development of students' understanding and knowledge is uneven across and within programme areas. In design and performing arts, most students were developing a clear understanding of specialist principles. In engineering, the standard of knowledge and practical skills acquired by students was generally sound; on the BTEC national diploma in electronics it was high. Students on hairdressing courses at foundation level were developing good levels of understanding, but those on courses at higher levels were making slower progress and achieving less well. Practical skills were being developed effectively in science, health, electronics and information technology. Often, effective links were being

made between students' knowledge and understanding and their practical work. In hairdressing, students generally progressed too slowly through their practical assessments.

46 Standards of written and oral work varied. Coursework on humanities access courses was of a good standard and well presented. Mathematics students presented their work clearly and methodically. Students on engineering courses maintained neat and orderly files but their finished coursework was of variable quality. Students were too reliant on notes copied from the board or from handouts. In mathematics, many students failed to hand in their work to be marked. Modern languages students were developing good speaking skills and confidently volunteered answers to questions. In business studies, health care, and some humanities subjects, students were developing competence in oral work and team skills. In theory lessons, hairdressing students were difficult to motivate and slow to respond to questions. The numeracy and writing skills of many art students were weak. Science students performed poorly in group work. In hairdressing, modern languages, GCSE and GCE A level science, mathematics and humanities there was insufficient attention to information technology.

47 Retention rates are a cause for concern on most courses. The average rate of retention on two-year, full-time vocational courses in 1994-96 was 61 per cent compared with the national average of 81 per cent. There were particularly poor retention rates on national diploma courses. For example, the proportion of students who completed the course was 25 per cent of those on media studies, 34 per cent on computer studies and 50 per cent on performing arts. On one-year, full-time programmes the average retention rate in 1995-96 was 75 per cent compared with the national average of 79 per cent. Retention rates on GNVQ health and social care (44 per cent) and BTEC first diploma in information technology (54 per cent) were particularly low. On one-year, full-time GCSE courses, 50 per cent of students did not complete their course. The average retention rate on part-time courses was 82 per cent, which is slightly below the national average of 87 per cent for further education colleges.

48 The numbers of students, aged 16 to 18, entered for intermediate and advanced vocational qualifications are small. According to the information in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) performance tables for 1995-96, 56 per cent of the 27 full-time students, aged 16 to 18, who completed GNVQ and C&G intermediate level courses and BTEC first diplomas were successful. This places the college among the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. For students completing GNVQ intermediate level courses within the standard time, attainments are consistently weak across the vocational areas. The average pass rate was 23 per cent, less than half the national average of 52 per cent.

49 The DfEE performance tables show that, in 1995-96, 71 per cent of the 35 full-time students aged 16 to 18 completing GNVQ and C&G

advanced courses and BTEC national diplomas achieved their final qualifications. This represents an improvement from the previous year's figure of 61 per cent. It places the college in the middle third of sector colleges on this performance measure. Students of all ages completing GNVQ advanced courses achieved an average pass rate of 45 per cent which is substantially below the further education sector average of 58 per cent. There was wide variation in students' performance. For example, 81 per cent of students completing the GNVQ advanced art and design course passed, compared with the national average of 63 per cent, while results in business studies and health and social care were well below the national averages. Results achieved by students completing BTEC national diploma two-year courses varied. The average pass rate was 71 per cent. The pass rate of 89 per cent for the national diploma course in electronics compares favourably with the average of 77 per cent reported in the FEFC Curriculum Area Survey Report *Engineering*. Above average results were also achieved in nursery nursing. Results on business studies and media courses were below average and the results in computing were poor.

50 On other vocational courses:

- the overall achievement levels for students of all ages completing NVQ courses was 71 per cent at level 1, 62 per cent at level 2 and 69 per cent at level 3; these figures were better than national averages
- students on the legal secretaries course at level 2 achieved good results with a high proportion attaining distinctions or merits
- hairdressing students achieved average results at foundation level but poorer results at levels 2 and 3
- pass rates on the first diploma courses on information technology and the performing arts were well below national averages
- the pass rates achieved by students on the National Examinations Board for Supervisory Management certificate in supervisory management course and those taking RSA single subject examinations in office skills were poor.

51 In 1996, the 54 students aged 16 to 18 entering one or more GCE AS/A level examinations scored, on average, 1.9 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2) according to the 1996 tables published by the DfEE. This places the college in the bottom 10 per cent of colleges, according to this performance measure. This is similar to the points score achieved in the previous year. The majority of students entering GCE A level examinations are adults. Results at GCE A level include the following features:

- from a total of 89 entries by full-time and part-time students aged 16 to 18, covering 17 different subjects, an overall pass rate of 42 per cent was achieved at grades A to E; this is significantly below the national average pass rate of 74 per cent

-
- from 254 entries by adult students, covering 22 subjects, an overall pass rate of 62 per cent at grades A to E was achieved; this is slightly below the national average of 64 per cent for further education colleges
 - the overall pass rate achieved by students of all ages was 54 per cent compared with the sector average of 71 per cent
 - for subjects with entries in excess of 10 students, the results for students of all ages were above the national average in English literature and sociology, near the national average in psychology, history and English, and well below the national average in accounting, law, business studies and general studies
 - subjects with small entry numbers had varied results; there were good outcomes in geography, Spanish and government
 - of 44 students completing a two or three GCE A level programme in 1996, six gained three or more GCE A levels at grades A to E, 18 gained two and 20 gained one.

52 For GCSE subjects there was a total of 701 entries, 66 per cent of them made by adult students, covering 24 subjects. The overall pass rate for adults at grades C or above was 62 per cent which is the same as the national average for further education colleges. The overall pass rate for 16 to 18 year old GCSE students at grades C or above was 35 per cent which is below the sector average of 39 per cent. The largest entries for single GCSE subjects were 123 for English and 149 for mathematics. For English the pass rate at grades C or above was 63 per cent, slightly above the national average for the sector of 57 per cent. In mathematics, the pass rate was 34 per cent which is slightly below the national average of 37 per cent. Above average pass rates were achieved in GCSE English literature, accounting, business studies, history, psychology and sociology. A significant number of students enrolling for individual GCSE subjects do not subsequently enter for the examinations. Of the 90 students who originally enrolled for a full-time GCSE programme comprising four subjects, only 45 completed the course. Of these, four students gained four GCSEs at grades C or above, two students gained three, 16 gained two and the remainder did not achieve any passes at grade C or above.

53 Students on programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are working towards externally validated qualifications. They are generally positive about their studies and understand the intended outcomes and available progression routes. Despite this, many students move from one course to another without making further progress. Few progress onto mainstream courses. On adult basic skills programmes, a range of accreditation opportunities are available. Many students are achieving full or partial awards and some progress to GCSE courses.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

54 The college has a comprehensive quality assurance policy clearly linked to its strategic objectives. Senior managers are responsible for its implementation. A widely circulated quality manual explains the policy and procedures and provides a readily accessible source of information for staff. Implementation of the quality assurance policy has been monitored and a review report was produced in June 1996. The report is brief, it does not identify instances of non-compliance and it does not report on the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures. The outcomes section of the report lacks specific detail and is not cross-referenced to supporting evidence. The quality assurance policy is supported by a college quality improvement process which requires each functional group in the college to work with the quality manager to identify quality indicators of the service they provide, set their own quality standards and establish arrangements for measuring their performance against these standards. This process has started to be implemented in the current year and there is evidence of some effective outcomes. The policy and the process form a framework for college self-assessment.

55 The 'quality' manager has responsibility for managing and recording the outcomes of all visits made to the college by external assessors and verifiers. External assessors' reports are examined by the quality manager, the curriculum manager and the course team leader. Their responses to these reports contribute to course evaluation. An internal verification system has been established but, in many curriculum sections, internal verification procedures have not, as yet, been carried out this year.

56 The college has fully complied with the guidance published by the FEFC in making arrangements for ensuring the quality of its outward collaborative provision. An independent consultant has been appointed as a 'quality' auditor. He examines outward collaborative provision documentation, visits each centre at least twice a year and reports to the college on his findings. Provision is reviewed each year in the light of the quality auditor's monitoring reports. Many of the outward collaborative provision centres have achieved nationally recognised quality standards such as the ISO 9000 series or the Investors in People award.

57 Course evaluation is being standardised and is becoming an integral part of the quality assurance framework. The course log review procedures provide a common format for course evaluation and are required to be undertaken four times a year. The reviews draw on the views of students, part-time and full-time teachers, course leaders, curriculum team leaders and senior managers, though not on the views of external customers such as employers. Reviews include reports on enrolment, attendance, retention and students' achievements. A report collating the outcomes of course log reviews is compiled by the director of studies and discussed by heads of schools, senior managers and the academic board. The report is copied to all staff involved in the courses which are included in the course log

reviews. At the time of the inspection, the process of course log reviews had yet to be completed. Though the second review of the year showed increasing levels of compliance with standard procedures, in many curriculum sections the reviews are poorly implemented. In these cases, performance indicators are not reported or are unreliable, documentation for course log reviews is weak or incomplete and inadequate analysis of examination results, retention rates and attendance patterns leads to superficial evaluation of provision. In many curriculum sections, the procedures for following up issues identified by course log reviews are unclear and there is little evidence that these issues have been addressed. There are no standard arrangements in place for the regular audit of course log review documents held by course and curriculum team leaders. Generally, students are insufficiently involved in course evaluation and have few ways of making their views known. Some staff are still unsure of the quality assurance procedures now in place and their role in implementing them.

58 There are comprehensive procedures for the recruitment, selection, induction and training of staff. Staff-development activities are linked to strategic priorities such as equal opportunities and quality assurance. The staff-appraisal process, based on annual reviews, is effective in identifying individual staff-development needs. Opportunities for training and development are well publicised and well supported. Large numbers of teaching staff participate in internal training activities and in external courses and conferences. Although limited as yet, the participation of part-time and business support staff is increasing. Four industrial secondments a year are available to teaching staff and most are used to update industrial or commercial experience. Arrangements for the induction of full-time and part-time staff are effective. Staff are satisfied with the development opportunities available, though some would welcome more training in the use of information technology and in the provision of learning support. The staff-development budget represents almost 2 per cent of the college's total staffing budget. In addition, a further £55,000 was spent on staff-development activities from other budgets in 1995-96. The college calculates that the staff-development budget as a percentage of gross income has increased annually since incorporation and is higher than both regional and national averages.

59 There is a comprehensive college charter which has been regularly reviewed and updated. It clearly and concisely sets out the college's responsibilities to students and other clients, such as employers, and the quality of provision and standards of service which they can expect to receive. In addition, it includes details of the college's complaints procedure. All students are introduced to the college charter during induction and each is provided with a shortened version. The charter is supported by four clearly written learner agreements which set out the rights and responsibilities of full-time and part-time students, and those on distance learning and short course provision. Students were aware of

the contents of their learner agreement and had discussed it with their tutors during induction. Some students were unsure of the content and significance of the college charter and were unaware of the complaints procedure. Each of the main centres has a suggestion box, called 'the listening post' which students are encouraged to use. There are examples of changes being made in response to students' suggestions. There are few formal structures which prompt the involvement and influence of students in relevant aspects of college life. Students are not included in course team meetings and do not contribute directly to course evaluation. Though surveys are carried out to collect students' perceptions, the number of responses is small. For example, 200 questionnaires were issued to survey students' views of initial assessment, a sample size of about 10 per cent. Only 86 were returned. The involvement of students in associations such as the student union is small and decreasing.

60 The college self-assessment report, produced in March 1996, follows the framework of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. College provision is graded against the main headings. The judgements in the report are generally objective and self-critical and are supported by evidence. The grades are broadly in line with those awarded as a result of the inspection, though for one cross-college aspect of its work, the college awarded itself grades lower than those awarded by inspectors. A progress report on the action identified in the self-assessment report produced in December 1996, focused mainly on the perceived strengths of provision. Grades awarded are higher than those included in the March 1996 self-assessment report but no clear justification is provided for this.

RESOURCES

Staffing

61 Teachers are generally well qualified for the range of courses that are offered. A staff skills audit has been used to match skills and experience to curriculum requirements. Fifty-eight per cent of full-time and 28 per cent of part-time teachers have degrees or professional qualifications and 75 per cent have assessor or verifier awards. At the time of the inspection, 84 per cent full-time teachers were on new contracts of employment. Technical and support staff are appropriately qualified and provide a high quality of support for teachers and students. Two art and design technicians have fine art degrees and sometimes act as demonstrators. The technical support manager in computing is supported by five technicians. There are positive working relationships between all the different groups of staff employed by the college.

62 The college is heavily dependent on part-time staff, of whom 20 per cent are on annually renewable contracts. Part-time staff give generously of their time. Many of them have recent industrial experience which contributes effectively to students' development of vocational skills and to updating the knowledge of those full-time staff who acquired their

industrial experience several years ago. The ratio of full-time to part-time staff limits the effectiveness of the staffing, management and administration of programmes in a number of curriculum areas. For example, the high proportion of part-time staff in hairdressing makes co-ordination of the range of courses difficult; and part-time evening class teachers find it difficult to attend meetings of their subject teams. Poor recruitment or retention sometimes leads to small classes and inefficient deployment of staff.

Equipment/learning resources

63 The college has made a significant investment in providing curriculum sections with modern, specialist equipment. For example, the hairdressing section has good-quality equipment which is of commercial standard and sufficient in quantity for the numbers of students. There is a computerised till which all students learn to use. Graphic design studios have been provided with new furniture and technical equipment. The sports therapy area benefits from modern equipment for fitness testing. In engineering, specialist resources have been provided to support a modular system for teaching electronics. The flexi-learning centres provide a comprehensive range of texts and computer-based learning resources including compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases. Most subjects have adequate resources to support learning. General teaching rooms at the main centres benefit from a good level of audio-visual equipment and other teaching aids. Many have extensive wall displays which are often used constructively for learning. The quality of paper-based learning support materials varies considerably across the outward collaborative provision centres.

64 The college information technology resource has been successfully developed to provide a flexible and up-to-date facility that is built and maintained by the computer technician staff. There are 421 modern computers available to all staff and students across the sites giving a ratio of full-time students to machines of 4:1. The quality of information technology equipment and learning aids for part-time courses at some outreach centres is poor, in most cases because the centres are located in premises which do not belong to the college. Students at the centres cannot always obtain the books they need for assignments. The college is working hard to develop better facilities at these centres. For example, it has installed a suite of computers at one centre in a school and has negotiated that the repayment for them will be taken off the room hire charges to the college. A mobile technology trailer equipped with 12 laptop computers visits 20 centres to support students on part-time day and evening provision.

65 The college's libraries are located within Skelmersdale and Ormskirk public libraries. Skelmersdale public library is approximately five minutes walk away from the college. It contains a wide range of books and periodicals, relevant to college courses. There is a formal arrangement

between the public library and the college to provide students with special access to relevant texts but this is not working well. Library provision for students at the Ormskirk centre is limited. The public library branch is small. It has only a small stock of relevant texts and students do not have immediate access to them. As a result, many students are not developing study skills or broadening their understanding of their subject.

Accommodation

66 The college occupies two main centres in west Lancashire. The Skelmersdale centre is located in the middle of the town in two main groups of buildings, Westbank and Northway, which are about a quarter of a mile apart. The Ormskirk centre is accommodated in two recently refurbished buildings, Church House, built in 1909 and Brandreth, a former hospital, built in 1896. The college acquired the latter in 1995 to accommodate art and design, health and social care and business studies courses. It has been sensitively refurbished to reflect its new educational role whilst retaining many original architectural features, including some fine Victorian tiling. It provides limited space for the large numbers of students using it. The college uses 24 centres for its community education provision. The quality of accommodation in these centres is generally poorer than that of the buildings at the main centres, though their locations suit the communities they serve.

67 All the college's main buildings offer an attractive learning environment free from graffiti and litter. The college has a detailed accommodation strategy which supports its strategic objectives and is well implemented. Clearly defined targets for the maintenance and cleaning of the college-owned premises are achieved. The accommodation is kept in good repair by an efficient estates management team whose work is appreciated by staff and students. Teaching and specialist areas reflect the purposes for which they are used. General teaching rooms are well furnished and carpeted. They provide a comfortable environment conducive to study. There is a shortage of recreational space and common rooms for students resulting in overuse of the refectory as a meeting area for students.

68 Students with profound and multiple learning difficulties benefit from accommodation which is suitable for vocational programmes and for the development of independent living skills. A light and sound stimulation room has been built at the Westbank centre for use by these students. Access to some college buildings is difficult for students with restricted mobility.

69 A popular and well-used sports and leisure facility is recognised as a valuable resource by all who use it. Students and members of the community enjoy the wide range of leisure and recreational activities provided. It has a large-sized pool suitable for swimming, canoeing and other water sports, and is equipped with modern changing facilities and showers, a comfortably furnished lounge area and a viewing gallery.

A large sports hall has facilities for football, netball, table tennis and squash. The Arts Theatre is equipped to commercial standards and is used for performing arts and community entertainment activities. There is due regard for health and safety issues throughout the college and a well-defined health and safety policy is implemented meticulously.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

70 The college's successful curriculum expansion programme has enabled it to make significant progress in achieving its mission. The strengths of the college are:

- the effective measures taken to attract groups usually under represented in further education and training
- the highly successful marketing unit
- productive links with employers
- supportive governors who have taken effective oversight of the large expansion programme
- highly efficient management and use of resources
- the range of modern amenities and facilities enjoyed by students and the local community.

71 In order to build on these strengths, the college should:

- increase the use of its management information system by managers at all levels
- improve the consistency of planning and management at curriculum section level
- establish consistent and effective systems for tutorial and learning support
- develop strategies to increase retention rates in all programme areas
- improve students' achievements on GNVQ programmes at intermediate and advanced level
- improve the performance of students aged 16 to 18 on GCSE and GCE AS/A level courses
- ensure that course teams implement course evaluation procedures consistently.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)

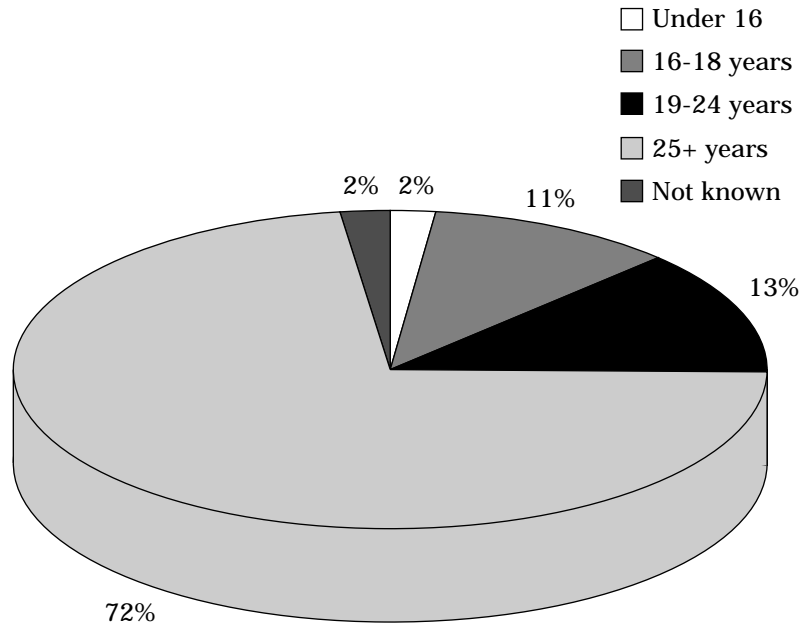
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

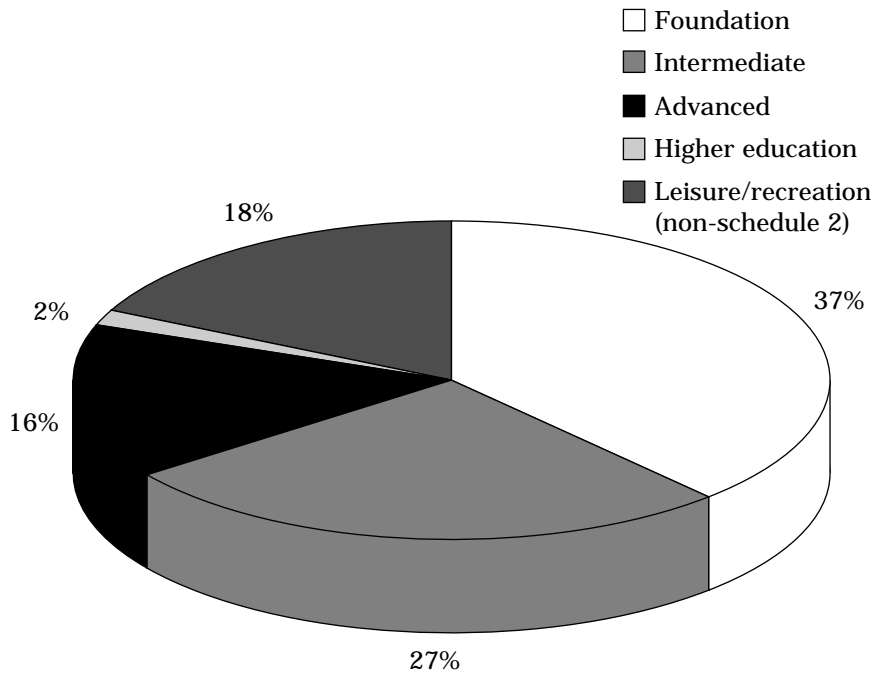
Skelmersdale College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 11,220

Figure 2

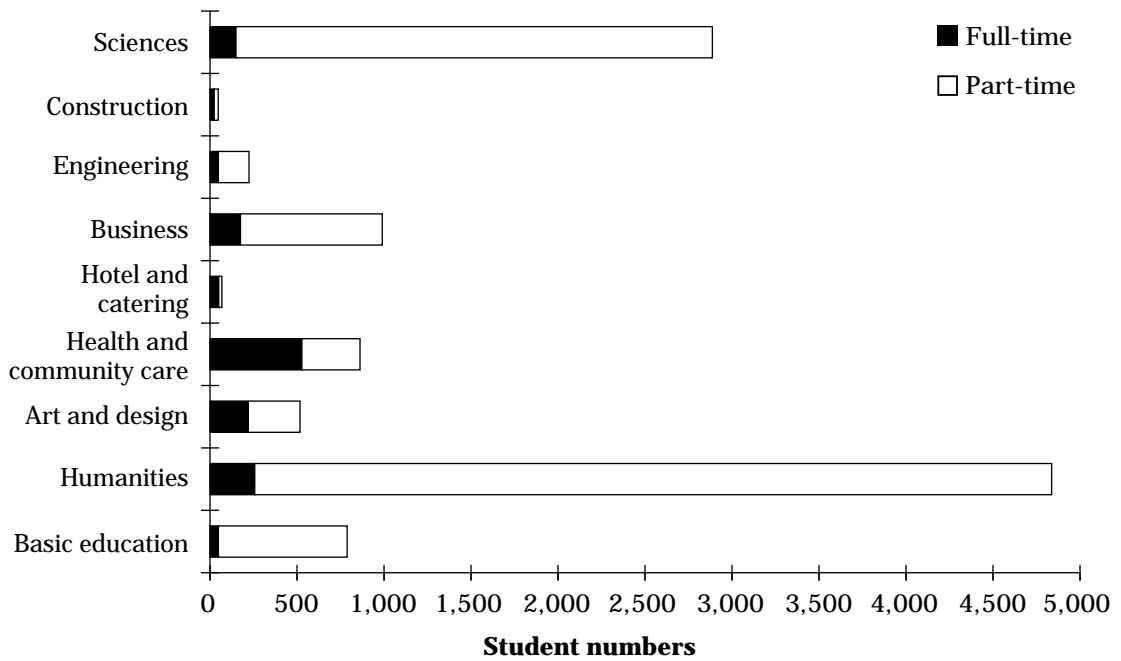
Skelmersdale College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 11,220

Figure 3

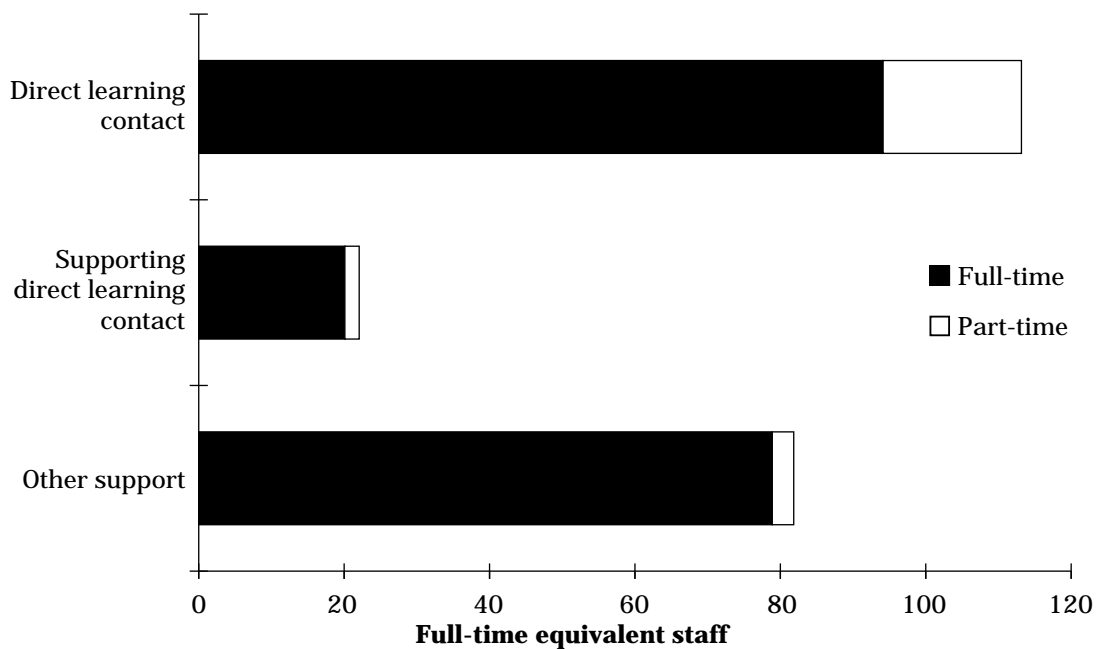
Skelmersdale College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 11,220

Figure 4

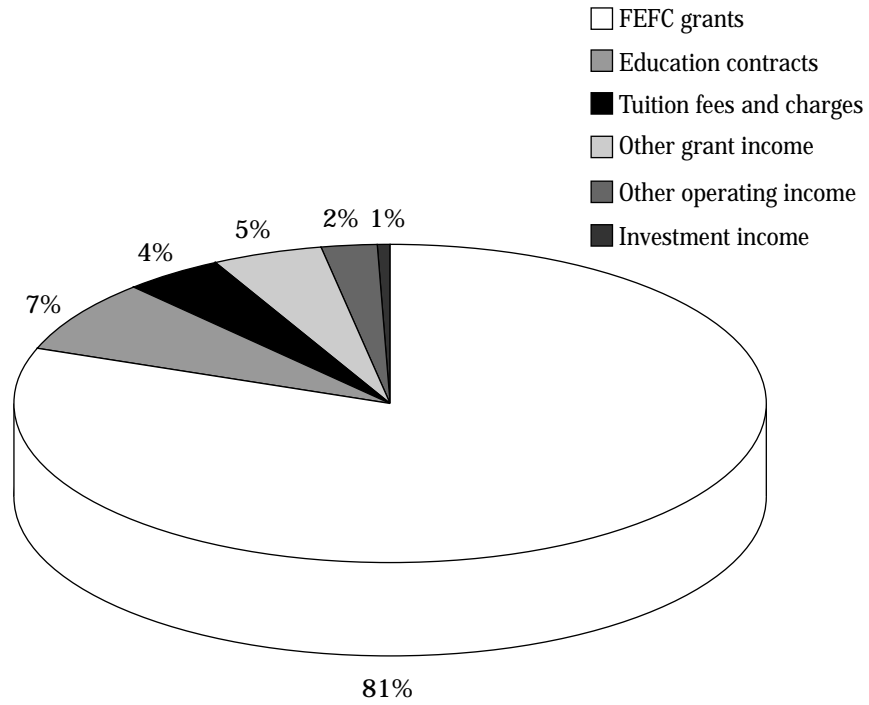
Skelmersdale College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 218

Figure 5

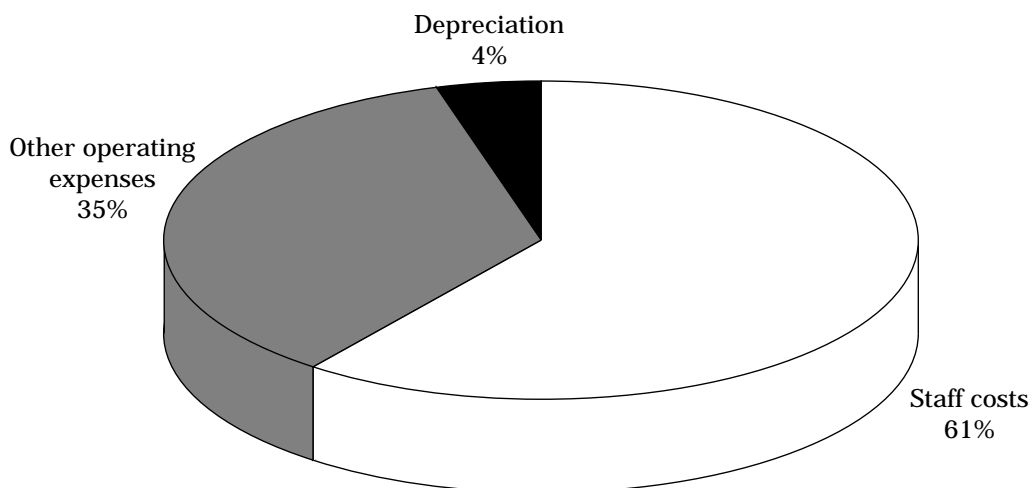
Skelmersdale College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £7,510,000

Figure 6

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



Expenditure: £7,289,000

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