

# Skelmersdale College

REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE  
**1999-00**

THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

*Cheylesmore House  
Quinton Road  
Coventry CV1 2WT  
Telephone 024 7686 3000  
Fax 024 7686 3100  
Website [www.fefc.ac.uk](http://www.fefc.ac.uk)*

© FEFC 2000 *You may photocopy this report and use extracts in promotional or other material provided quotes are accurate, and the findings are not misrepresented.*

# Contents

Paragraph

---

## Summary

---

### Context

The college and its mission	1
The inspection	5

---

### Curriculum areas

Computing and information technology	8
Health and care	15
Art, design and performing arts	21
English and access to higher education	26
Basic skills	31
Foundation courses	38

---

### Cross-college provision

Support for students	44
General resources	51
Quality assurance	57
Governance	66
Management	74
Conclusions	81

---

### College statistics

## Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	10	53	30	7	–
Cross-college provision	14	54	23	7	2

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*  
Sample size: 104 college inspections

## Student Achievements

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

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

# Summary

## **Skelmersdale College**

### ***North West Region***

#### **Inspected November 1999**

Skelmersdale College is a medium-sized tertiary college with two main sites in Skelmersdale and Ormskirk and 20 outreach centres throughout West Lancashire. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report. Since the last inspection, extensive training of senior and curriculum managers has helped to shape and establish the procedures now used. The self-assessment process has been further improved by developments in the capacity and reliability of the college's computerised management information systems. The process included opportunities for all staff to make contributions to the report. Governors were involved in the self-assessment process.

The college offers courses that range from foundation to higher levels in all of the 10 programme areas funded by the FEFC. The inspection covered provision in five programme areas, together with aspects of cross-college provision. Much of the teaching is good. The proportion of lessons judged to be outstanding and good was just above the national average, for the sector, and the proportion judged less than satisfactory was below the national average. On some courses, rates of achievement and retention of students are weak. Attendance rates during the inspection were below the

averages for the sector. The college has improved its accommodation since the last inspection. Staff and students work in a welcoming and safe environment. Students are well supported by their teachers and tutorial arrangements have been strengthened since the last inspection. Quality assurance procedures are clear and comprehensive, but have yet to result in significant improvements in teaching and learning, achievement and retention rates. Governance at the college is weak. Although governors have a strong commitment to the college and its mission, there is insufficient attention to the full range of the college's performance and educational character. Management of strategic and operational planning is good. There are effective links with the community and with industry. The college is widening participation as it succeeds in recruiting students from groups which have not usually entered further education. The college should improve: the rates of student retention and achievement at all levels; the provision of careers guidance and education; procedures for quality assurance; the monitoring by governors of the full range of the college's performance and educational character; and the use of management data.

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

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Cross-college provision</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Computing and information technology	3	Support for students	2
Health and care	3	General resources	1
Art, design and performing arts	3	Quality assurance	4
English and access to higher education	2	Governance	4
Basic skills	2	Management	3
Foundation courses	2		

## The College and its Mission

1 Skelmersdale College was established in 1977 as a sixth form college and became a tertiary college in 1984. In 1986, the college amalgamated with West Lancashire Adult Education Service. Since incorporation, and particularly since the last inspection, the college has: diversified its curriculum; grown in overall student numbers; increased the number of part-time courses; and invested in more accommodation. The college has sites in Skelmersdale and Ormskirk. It also offers courses at 20 other centres. The college is part of the extensive provision of sixth form and further education that is available to students in the West Lancashire area.

2 A number of wards in Skelmersdale are assessed as amongst the most depressed in socio-economic terms in Lancashire. The college operates in an area with transient employment opportunities and high levels of unemployment. Current unemployment in the Skelmersdale district is 10.1% compared with the national average of 4.8%. The college remains the second largest employer within the town of Skelmersdale. In Ormskirk, 80% of school-leavers remain in formal, maintained education; in Skelmersdale the proportion is approximately 50%. In 1998, the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) score for 16-year-old school-leavers in Skelmersdale who had achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above averaged 24% compared with the national average of 46%.

3 The college offers provision in all 10 of the programmes areas funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). In July 1999, the college recruited 1,380 full-time and 11,497 part-time students. Over 75% of students are aged over 25 years and more than half are studying at foundation or intermediate level. The college's curriculum provision is organised into 10 curriculum sections, which are grouped together and managed through five schools. Three schools are responsible for the

delivery of courses and programmes. These are: the school of humanities and applied sciences; business and creative studies; and adult and community education. The remaining two schools offer 'cross curricular services' and are responsible for supporting learning. In addition, they provide some teaching.

4 To achieve its mission, the college is 'committed to providing the highest possible standard of education and training for the people who live and work in the community'. The following aims are inherent in the mission of the college:

- 'to address lifelong learning interests in West Lancashire
- to promote self-esteem and quality of life
- to empower learners and increase the range of life chances
- to enable learners to contribute fully to the economic, social and cultural development of the community
- to offer equal right to access the services of the college irrespective of age, race, disability and social background
- to aspire to excellence through continuous improvement
- to achieve through active partnerships and common interests'

## The Inspection

5 The college was inspected in November 1999. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. Inspectors used data on students' achievements derived from the college's individualised student record (ISR) for 1997 and 1998. The college submitted its own data on students' achievements for 1999. The data were checked by inspectors against primary sources of evidence, for example registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies, and were found to be reliable. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors and

# Context

an auditor working for a total of 53 days. The inspection team observed lessons, examined students' work and scrutinised college documents. They held meetings with governors, managers, staff and students and with other interested persons, including representatives of local schools, the local training and enterprise council (TEC) and franchise partners.

6 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons observed and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the lessons observed 66% were judged to be good or outstanding and 4% less than satisfactory. This compares with the national average of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all colleges inspected during 1998-99.

## Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	0	3	1	0	0	4
GCSE	1	0	2	0	0	3
GNVQ	0	4	3	0	0	7
Access to higher education	1	3	0	0	0	4
Other vocational	2	15	6	1	0	24
Other*	5	15	10	2	0	32
Total (No.)	9	40	22	3	0	74
Total (%)	12	54	30	4	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*  
\*includes tutorials and basic education

7 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

## Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Skelmersdale College	7.9	74
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

# Curriculum Areas

## Computing and Information Technology

### Grade 3

8 Eleven lessons were observed. Inspectors broadly agreed with key strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They found that some strengths identified by the college were not significant and that some significant weaknesses had been overlooked.

#### Key strengths

- a wide range of courses
- appropriate computing facilities in specialist areas
- well-planned teaching and learning
- committed and well-supported students

#### Weaknesses

- declining rates for retention and achievement on some courses
- poor achievement on franchised programmes
- inadequate resources in learning centres
- insufficient industrial and assessor training for staff

9 There is a wide range of computing and information technology (IT) courses for 16 to 19 year old full-time students. The college also provides distance learning programmes and an extensive range of part-time courses at adult centres. The college has a mobile IT unit, which enables courses to be offered throughout West Lancashire. In collaboration with a local school the college also offers courses for general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) computing.

10 Of the lessons observed six were judged to be good or outstanding. None were less than satisfactory. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that teachers plan lessons well

and use standardised planning documents effectively. Schemes of work specify a good range of teaching and learning methods. Lessons benefit from good-quality handouts. Students work purposefully. They readily join in question and answer sessions. In a telematics lesson, students were developing their own web pages and were excited about their new skills and the standards that they could achieve. In practical activities, students work individually at a pace which suited them and their progress was monitored effectively. In a lesson on programming, sixth form students and college students worked effectively at a variety of levels on individual projects. In a few lessons small group sizes hindered the range of student activity.

11 Informative handbooks give students essential information about their course, assessment and assignments. Assignment front sheets are standardised and assignments are marked and returned promptly. Assessment is accurate but, in some cases constructive feedback is minimal. Recent staff absence has caused disruption to the progress of general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate students in timetabled classes. Students reported that they receive good individual support from staff outside timetabled classes.

12 Computing and IT courses are well managed. Each fortnight full section meetings alternate between the two main sites. Part-time staff are well supported by a senior tutor who communicates effectively with them. Course team meetings are held regularly. Students play a full part in them and achieve improvements to the courses. Students are assertive, committed to their work, and demand high standards.

13 Students' work is well presented and makes effective use of IT. The standard of written work is good. In first award courses in IT the rate of retention exceeded national averages in 1996-97 but declined in 1997-98.

# Curriculum Areas

The college's self-assessment report claimed as a strength that achievements on courses on computer literacy and information technology exceeded national averages for the sector in 1997-98, but inspectors noted declining retention and achievement over the past three years. In City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) 4242 the retention rate is falling and now both retention and achievement are below national averages. Retention has increased in C&G 726 to above national averages but achievement is now below. Retention and achievement rates in advanced programmes in computing and IT fluctuate but are currently close to national averages. Programmes delivered through franchise partners show retention rates at the national average but completion dates are often unrealistic. As a consequence achievement rates are poor. Flexible and distance learning programmes have achievements below national averages.

14 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that there are insufficient qualified staff to undertake the internal verification duties that have been planned. Staff also lack recent opportunities to update their industrial experience. Several teachers are now studying for assessor awards and industrial placements are arranged for the year 1999-2000. The standard of equipment and learning materials is good. Self-study packages are particularly clear and helpful. Technical support for computing is adequate. All students on main sites have electronic mail addresses and Internet access. In contrast, the availability of machines in the learning centres at Ormskirk during the day is poor and the number of textbooks is too small. There is a dependence on the Internet for resource material. Accommodation is appropriate for current activities. On one site there is disruption for staff and students because access to some rooms is through adjacent classrooms. Room layout generally allows a mix of practical and theory sessions.

## A summary of retention and achievement rates in computing and information technology, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Computer literacy and information technology (long)	1	Number of starters	353	389	379
		Retention (%)	84	80	75
		Achievement (%)	84	67	54
C&G 4242	1	Number of starters	1,466	889	303
		Retention (%)	96	80	71
		Achievement (%)	69	26	45
First certificate, first diploma and GNVQ intermediate IT	2	Number of starters	122	15	11
		Retention (%)	86	100	73
		Achievement (%)	81	64	75
National diploma, national certificate and GNVQ advanced computing and IT	3	Number of starters	17	33	31
		Retention (%)	35	79	71
		Achievement (%)	77	47	75
NVQ IT - franchised provision	various	Number of starters	66	148	115
		Retention (%)	95	92	90
		Achievement (%)	0	31	41

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

# Curriculum Areas

## Health and Care

### Grade 3

**15 Ten lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They found that some strengths were overstated and identified additional, significant weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- good teaching
- well-planned lessons
- good opportunities for full-time students to develop IT skills
- well-organised arrangements for marking and verifying assignments
- effective flexibility in the structure of part-time courses

#### Weaknesses

- deteriorating retention rates on all full-time courses
- poor pass rates on most courses
- low attendance on some courses

16 The section runs a range of courses from foundation to higher level. Numbers on most courses are good but have declined recently on the certificate in childcare and education and GNVQ intermediate courses. Inspectors agreed that the college has made successful efforts to attract students from groups who are often not well represented in further education. For example, the national certificate in child studies course is organised flexibly to cater for students who would have difficulty in attending conventionally timetabled provision. Numbers on this course are high. The course attracts working mothers, single parents and shift workers. Students appreciate the opportunity to pursue a course of study which they can fit around their domestic and work commitments.

The college runs part-time national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses on employers' premises. Numbers on these courses at level 2 have almost doubled recently.

17 Seven of the 10 lessons observed were good or outstanding. Most teachers used an appropriate range of methods. They ensured that students had many opportunities to contribute through activities such as brainstorming, small group tasks and effective question and answer techniques. In a childcare lesson, the teacher's appropriate sequencing of activities helped students to understand and learn a complex topic. Activities early in the course focused on theoretical aspects including terminology and made use of clear handouts. An appropriate video extract was used to reinforce and consolidate learning. A well-designed sheet of questions helped students to study the video programme effectively and to be well prepared for a group task. In most lessons, appropriate teaching aids enhanced learning activities. Most students were attentive and interested. Lesson plans were clear, well structured and showed thoughtful design of activities that helped to achieve learning objectives. These strengths were identified in the self-assessment report. In a few lessons, the pace of work was too slow and students made insufficient progress. In a childcare lesson, students embarked on a small group activity with insufficient understanding of the purpose and scope of the task. After over an hour, most groups had only produced a simple poster picture; one group had produced nothing at all. Teachers did not always take opportunities to alert students to good vocational practice or support ways in which they could improve their performance. There was insufficient reference to or use made of students' work experience. These weaknesses observed in a few lessons were not identified by the college.

# Curriculum Areas

18 As the self-assessment report recognises, there are good arrangements for issuing and marking assignments. Teachers use an agreed checklist for scrutinising assignment briefs. Each brief is verified against this checklist before it is issued to the students. Marking criteria are specified and referred to in written feedback. Teachers' written comments are helpful and designed to encourage the student. Cross-marking takes place regularly. Teachers check the accuracy of the assessment of assignments already marked by colleagues. Over 10% of marked work is internally verified in this way. Most assignments are wordprocessed, well structured and well presented. Students have good opportunities to develop key skills. Timetabled lessons for development of IT skills enable students to gain an award for computer literacy and information technology. Short workshops are held in the study centre on IT applications and are popular with students. Communication and other required skills are monitored through coursework and then clearly recorded and verified. The records show that, while most students reach good levels in IT and communication skills, they are slow to develop satisfactory application of number skills. All full-time students have the opportunity to undertake work placements and most do so. These placements are well organised and well monitored.

19 Retention rates have declined on all full-time courses over the last three years to below the national average for the sector. Conversely, retention rates have improved on part-time NVQ courses and are significantly above national averages. Pass rates are poor on most courses. On GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses, both retention and pass rates are significantly below national norms. On the certificate in childcare and education and the diploma in nursery nursing courses, pass rates have recently improved to above the national average, though retention rates have declined

significantly in each case. The curriculum area has taken little effective action to improve retention and achievement. Recent measures by the college to ensure a quick response by teachers to poor attendance by students have not yet had much impact. The average attendance on the 10 lessons observed was below the national average for the sector for this programme area.

20 Students have access to a large study centre which contains a reference library and 14 networked computers that give access to the college intranet, the Internet, CD-ROMs and printers. The broad range of specialist texts available includes nursing and childcare magazines. Students can only use books for reference. Many books are only available if staff are on hand to admit students to the book room. There is no loan system, though students can borrow books for home use through the learning resource centre. Some students make use of the public library.

# Curriculum Areas

## A summary of retention and achievement rates in health and care, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GNVQ intermediate	2	Number of starters	14	15	11
		Retention (%)	64	73	55
		Achievement (%)	13	9	33
NVQ intermediate (includes courses in care and childcare)	2	Number of starters	37	27	52
		Retention (%)	81	93	92
		Achievement (%)	54	40	10
Certificate in childcare and education	2	Number of starters	20	13	8
		Retention (%)	75	77	63
		Achievement (%)	73	60	100
GNVQ advanced	3	Number of starters	17	8	13
		Retention (%)	82	50	46
		Achievement (%)	40	33	60
NVQ advanced (includes courses in care and childcare)	3	Number of starters	43	13	15
		Retention (%)	98	100	100
		Achievement (%)	40	50	38
Other advanced vocational*	3	Number of starters	85	92	92
		Retention (%)	98	92	70
		Achievement (%)	40	54	66

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

\*includes national diplomas in child studies and nursery nursing and national certificate in child studies

# Curriculum Areas

## Art, Design and Performing Arts

### Grade 3

**21 Inspectors observed 11 lessons. They agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but found that two weaknesses were omitted.**

#### Key strengths

- a good range of provision
- most teaching good or outstanding
- good rates for achievement and retention on part-time courses
- students' work of high quality in fashion and photography

#### Weaknesses

- some low rates of retention and achievement on full-time courses, in particular performing arts
- insufficient book resources

22 The college provides a wide range of art, specialist design and performing arts courses including popular music. Part-time access courses have been extended and offer good opportunities for progression to further and higher education at all levels. For example, level 3 interior design students have progressed to the new higher national diploma textiles course. There are good links with the professions and industry through work experience. The programmes are strengthened by educational visits to London and abroad. The college's Phoenix Theatre is a good venue for a wide range of performances in music, theatre and poetry and is well promoted. The Northern Ballet has run one of the recent workshops. Art and design students have completed a sculpture trail in a country park in collaboration with the district council.

23 Most teaching is of a high standard. Nine of the lessons observed were judged to be good or outstanding. The teaching is appropriately varied and reflects thorough planning, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. Studios and workshops are used effectively to develop students' skills. Second-year fashion/textile students made a confident presentation of their swimwear design project to first-year students. They were encouraged to grade their work and identify where they had achieved key skills. There was constructive and critical feedback from tutors and students that emphasised individuality and progress in the work. The standard of work was notably high for this early stage in the second year of the course. Theory lessons occur within a practical context where appropriate in both performing arts and GNVQ intermediate art and design. In a music theory class designed to develop aural perception skills, students were given useful visualisation techniques to help notation. The teacher followed a well-thought-out sequence and checked each student's understanding carefully. In art and design there is an emphasis on drawing from observation and the figure. Inspectors agreed with the college assessment that teaching approaches are appropriately varied and extend students' experience in the use of materials. There are additional workshops for life drawing. In the less effective lessons, students did not come suitably prepared for the work, accommodation was unsuitable or lessons were not sufficiently structured. Assessment is thorough in all courses and teachers provide regular and effective feedback.

24 Part-time courses have good levels of achievement and retention. Achievement rates have shown steady improvement and reached 91% in 1998-99 in national diploma design courses. Achievement on performing arts courses is poor. Some students take a long time to achieve their qualifications. Retention rates have declined on most courses and are now

# Curriculum Areas

below average figures on full-time courses for the sector. Inspectors agree that there are good progression rates to higher education and to types of employment that involve skills in art and design. This was noted in the self-assessment report.

25 Accommodation and specialist equipment is good in workshops, theatre, and studios. Computer facilities for graphic design are being gradually upgraded. The resource for photography is appropriate but only suitable for small classes. One design studio is affected by noise and interruptions from adjacent rooms. Students make extensive use of the Internet for research in a learning centre of high quality. There are suitable periodicals, videos and CD-ROMs. The bookstock is small which severely limits the scope for contextual studies

and practical work. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment. Specialist staff have relevant professional experience which they use effectively in their teaching. The specialist team has been well supported by two artists-in-residence in print and three-dimensional work. Technician support is insufficient in some curriculum areas as identified in the self-assessment report.

## A summary of retention and achievement rates in art, design and performing arts, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
First diploma performing arts	2	Number of starters	20	9	16
		Retention (%)	95	44	75
		Achievement (%)	73	75	50
GNVQ advanced art and design	3	Number of starters	7	16	12
		Retention (%)	86	75	67
		Achievement (%)	100	70	75
National diploma graphic design, design (photography) fashion/textiles	3	Number of starters	27	46	33
		Retention (%)	74	67	72
		Achievement (%)	*	*	91
GCE A level art	3	Number of starters	*	37	11
		Retention (%)	*	83	55
		Achievement (%)	*	39	100
National diploma performing arts	3	Number of starters	11	23	29
		Retention (%)	91	78	59
		Achievement (%)	44	29	69
National diploma performing arts (popular music)	3	Number of starters	*	29	23
		Retention (%)	*	72	48
		Achievement (%)	*	8	67

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

\*incomplete data

# Curriculum Areas

## English and Access to Higher Education

### Grade 2

**26 Inspectors observed 10 lessons. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- good teaching
- flexible learning opportunities
- good rates of retention, achievement and progression on access courses
- well-developed key skills and study skills
- well-planned and well-managed access courses

#### Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in monitoring student performance at GCE A level

27 The college is responsive to the needs of a broad range of students. The access courses both full time and part time, are taught in different venues. They have recently recruited more men, who were previously under-represented on these courses, by extending the units offered to include sports studies and sociology. English language and literature are offered in the daytime and evening at both GCSE and GCE A level. Staff are kept well informed through regular team meetings. English courses are co-ordinated across sites, syllabuses have been rationalised and evening tutors attend moderation meetings.

28 There is much good teaching. Seven out of 10 lessons were judged to be good or outstanding. In most lessons teachers encourage students to think for themselves and to express their opinions. English teachers pay attention to developing language skills and students' responses to literature. For example

in a GCE A level English literature lesson on *Alice in Wonderland* the teacher led a wide-ranging discussion, and gained good responses from students who were preparing for coursework. Different interpretations were welcomed and comparisons were made with films that the students had seen. Access tutors provide an appropriate variety of activities which stimulate students' interest and provoke a good level of response. For example, in a history lesson students worked in groups to prepare presentations on the causes of the First World War. At the end of the lesson they evaluated the learning process and related the activity of the lessons to the skills required in handling evidence in support of an argument. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teachers' expectations of students are high. Teachers on both English and access courses encourage students to develop skills of independent study and research. As a result, many students produce coursework of a high quality. They make good use of IT in their own research and in redrafting written assignments. Students benefit from a programme aimed at developing key skills and study skills as a part of their course. In a few lessons the pace of the teaching was too slow and insufficient demands were made on students.

29 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that achievement rates on the access course are high. The majority of students from the access course progress to appropriate higher education courses. Students appreciate the disciplined but supportive environment, which helps to develop their confidence and skills to study at a higher level. Both retention and achievement rates on GCSE courses are above national averages for the sector. Rates of retention and achievement on GCE A level courses show more fluctuation. There are weaknesses in monitoring student performance in GCE A level courses and in setting specific targets for improvement. As a result the college is piloting an incentive scheme to encourage

# Curriculum Areas

high levels of attendance, good punctuality and satisfactory completion of work by offering computers or vouchers to students who achieve the targets set. Significant steps have been taken to integrate IT skills with subject provision in order to improve students' ability to work independently. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that this is a strength of the provision. Students of English have a useful pack on using the Internet. Most coursework is well planned and well written. Assignments are carefully marked and graded. In English there are good arrangements for the moderation of coursework and a shared marking policy to which teachers conform.

30 Teachers are well qualified and suitably experienced. Lessons take place in well-equipped, dedicated classrooms. IT and reference materials are available in the learning centres but the college does not have its own

library which means that some students do not read enough. Access students are able to use the library of a higher education institution and many students use the town libraries. In one English class students did not each have a copy of a text they were studying, which impeded their work in college and at home.

## A summary of retention and achievement rates English and access to higher education, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE English language (grade C or above)	2	Number of starters	*	156	139
		Retention (%)	*	70	76
		Achievement (%)	*	56	53
GCSE English literature (grade C or above)	2	Number of starters	*	18	13
		Retention (%)	*	78	77
		Achievement (%)	*	71	60
GCE A level English language (two year)	3	Number of starters	*	14	21
		Retention (%)	*	100	71
		Achievement (%)	*	71	58
GCE A level English language and literature (one year)	3	Number of starters	*	51	22
		Retention (%)	*	82	64
		Achievement (%)	*	43	100
Access to humanities and social sciences	3	Number of starters	*	57	31
		Retention (%)	*	74	81
		Achievement (%)	*	88	92

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

\*incomplete data

# Curriculum Areas

## Basic Skills

### Grade 2

**31 Inspectors observed 13 lessons across the range of provision. They agreed with most of the college's assessment of the strengths and weakness but they found that some strengths were understated and identified additional weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- effective teaching and support
- the high level of student involvement
- highly qualified specialist staff, volunteer tutors and learning support assistants
- excellent students' work and achievements
- imaginative approaches to learning

#### Weaknesses

- excessive influence on some teaching of the requirements of accreditation systems
- underdeveloped use of market research
- insufficient community-based provision in areas of high need

32 The inspection covered courses and support in literacy and numeracy. Support for students in literacy and numeracy was inspected in specific workshop sessions and, where appropriate, in lessons within vocational programmes. Lessons were observed in four vocational areas. Provision was also inspected for students who, while on various study programmes, were receiving support through the primary basic skills programme. At the time of inspection 114 students were enrolled on this primary programme: 85 were receiving literacy and/or numeracy support; and 191 were receiving cross-college support. Some students on the primary basic skills provision work towards nationally recognised qualifications.

33 Students attending primary basic skills provision are assessed prior to entry. This assessment forms the basis of the learning programme planned and agreed between teacher and student. The best of these plans incorporate the literacy and numeracy requirements of the student's main study programme. However, in a minority of cases the plan is not based on a sound knowledge of these requirements. Although they observed much sound practice, inspectors did not agree with the college's self-assessment that the individual learning programmes are a key strength. The student learns less when plans are not based on the requirements of the main study programme. There is effective monitoring and review of students' progress against short-term targets which, for students receiving literacy and/or numeracy support, contributes to the subject reviews.

34 Most teaching is effective. Of the 13 lessons observed, 10 were good or outstanding. The most effective lessons are clearly planned and take into account the needs of individual students. In these lessons there is an appropriate variety of activities that enable students to develop their skills. There are imaginative approaches to skills' development. For example, one student was involved in writing his life history and plans for the future, rather than just using worksheets, in order to help him improve his understanding of tenses. IT enabled students at different levels to engage in appropriate activities, from basic matching, everyday numeracy and wordprocessing, to research for projects that involved the use of the Internet. The inspectors agreed with the self-assessment that most lessons benefited from an appropriate variety of teaching styles and methods, and were a strength in the college's provision. In the few weaker lessons, an overemphasis on the requirements of accreditation systems hindered learning.

# Curriculum Areas

35 In basic skills courses, the measure of achievement is not only based on qualifications but includes the attainment of personal goals. In lessons, students were actively involved in developing their skills. Many students were able to explain the progress that they had made towards their goals. Some students had clearly made significant progress. One student explained that she had been unable to write simple business letters when she started the course, but could now see mistakes in letters which she received. Two adult students explained how the support in numeracy improved their ability and confidence to cope with their main course and to help their children with schoolwork. Students' written work is of an appropriate standard and sometimes excellent. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that students achieve well. Attendance in lessons varied; some rates reached 100%. The average attendance was 72%, just below the national average for the sector.

36 The basic skills section provides a wide range of support to meet the needs of students: one-to-one support; group support outside the main programme; support integrated within the main programme and support within the primary basic skills programme. Inspectors agreed that this provision is a strength. However, while providing a wide range of opportunities within the two main sites and the outreach centres, the college has not maintained its provision in community venues in areas of significant need. This weakness is not identified by the college. Much market research is not well used to plan provision.

37 A team of well-qualified staff teach basic skills across the area. Most staff have degrees and/or teaching qualifications, as well as appropriate specialist qualifications. All volunteer tutors undergo training to national standards. Inspectors agreed that the qualifications and training of the staff are a key strength of provision. Most teaching takes place in well-furnished rooms which contain appropriate displays. In each of the base rooms on the main sites, two computers linked to the Internet are available for students. In the outreach centre that was visited by inspectors, the basic standard of the accommodation which included a computer and font writer, did not reduce the effectiveness of the lessons.

# Curriculum Areas

## Foundation Courses

### *Grade 2*

**38 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering a range of courses in foundation studies, adult life skills and profound multiple learning difficulties. Inspectors agreed with the majority of strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment but identified additional weaknesses.**

#### **Key strengths**

- well-planned teaching for each student
- effective learning steps towards independent living and progress in studies
- a high level of support
- effective curriculum development
- effective links with external agencies
- good achievement at entry level and at level 1

#### **Weaknesses**

- insufficient rigour in monitoring students' achievements
- poor use of progression and destination data
- insufficient integration with mainstream provision

39 There is good provision for students with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Links with local schools and day centres are effective. Students are referred by local schools for vocational courses and so that they have the chance to benefit from a supportive environment. Most provision is based on the main sites but some adult provision is in the day centres. There has recently been considerable curriculum development at entry level. The curriculum is modularised to offer a wider choice of vocational 'taster' courses to students. The photography course, for example, attracts a number of adult

students who have gained one qualification and who are working towards a more advanced module.

40 The teaching is well planned, as the self-assessment notes. In the best sessions, students are engaged in practical activities which develop their vocational as well as their literacy and numeracy skills. Learning support assistants provide additional support in lessons and work alongside teachers. In one lesson, a dyslexic student effectively used computer software to improve their handwriting. Detailed records of this support are kept and work is planned with the class tutor. In a carpentry and joinery lesson, students worked with complex tools like jigsaws and lathes with care and confidence. In another lesson, students were encouraged to use their senses of touch, smell and sight while handling natural materials like leaves, tree bark and hay to produce ideas for their creative activity. However, in some lessons, the choice of activities fails to provide enough stimulation. In some cases, too much support inhibited students' ability to learn and to work on their own. Sometimes there was an overemphasis on teaching that focused narrowly on meeting the criteria of accreditation rather than more broadly on the learning objectives of the lesson.

41 The students who attend regularly improve their skills and confidence and successfully progress to other courses. 'Springboard' courses provide access to further education for students recovering from mental health problems. There are effective links with the mental health day units, community support and health promotion teams and local surgeries, all of which refer potential students to the college. Creative writing, art and computer courses enable students to gain confidence to progress to other courses. Students also benefit from the college entitlement to work experience. There are effective links with the employment service and other external agencies, which provide work experience or supported employment. For

# Curriculum Areas

example, a student on work experience gained a job as a hospital porter. Students from a number of vocational areas such as horticulture, catering, retail, and social and health care have benefited from work experience. There is good support from learning support assistants who provide personal care and assistance during work experience. There is, however, insufficient integration of students with mainstream vocational provision in the college.

42 There is a mismatch between the data produced by the curriculum area and the college management information system. Insufficient reliable progression and destination data are available for most of the students. There is anecdotal evidence on students who progress to other mainstream provision, and on students with profound and multiple difficulties who are successful in achieving their qualification. The achievements of foundation students are celebrated at an awards ceremony. Retention rates for 16 to 19 year old students exceed the national figures for the sector, but achievement rates fell well below the national figures in 1997-98. The college recognised this weakness. On the whole, achievement on entry level and level 1 courses is good.

43 There is a well-qualified and dedicated team of academic and support staff who are committed to improving provision for students. This strength was noted in the college self-assessment. Students on vocational courses benefit from lessons which take place in specialist accommodation. They are provided with appropriate equipment. Students have access to IT facilities and other specialist areas such as hairdressing and a retail workshop to practise vocational skills. There is a specialist light and sound environmental room for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

# Cross-college Provision

## Support for Students

### Grade 2

**44 The self-assessment report identified the main strengths of the provision and some of the weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- successful arrangements for pre-entry and enrolment
- good tutorial support
- effective learning support
- good access to welfare and personal guidance

#### Weaknesses

- restricted opportunities for self-assessment, action-planning and recording of achievement
- uneven provision of careers guidance and careers education

45 The college is a welcoming and friendly place. The staff are approachable and helpful and dedicated to providing effective support for their students. A range of publications informs the local community about the college. The comprehensive range of schools liaison activities provides appropriately for the differing requirements of 20 individual schools. The opportunity for year 10 pupils to attend a 'taster' day is included. There was a 60% increase in enrolments from local schools in September 1999. All curriculum sections provide link courses for pupils in local high schools. Currently 235 young people are taking a variety of school link courses, including 12 disaffected pupils on a year 11 alternative education project. Adult students have the opportunity to 'return to learn' on courses which are timetabled to fit with childcare commitments.

46 Significant improvements have been made to tutorial arrangements since the last inspection. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the system is rigorously managed and monitored. Changes to the programme have been well thought out. The system is clearly documented. Tutors speak appreciatively of the support provided by managers. The tutorial programme includes a set of essential elements and a related bank of resource materials which are produced centrally by the college. Curriculum area teams plan additional elements that are shaped to suit the learning and personal needs of students on a particular course. Most tutorial sessions were planned and delivered effectively. For example, with a mixed group of 16 to 17 year olds following an army preparation course, the tutor used skilful questioning and sensitive listening, coupled with well-chosen video extracts and contemporary news stories, to raise awareness of the issue of sexual harassment and the army's attitude to this issue. A less effective session, was marred by poor attendance. Although arrangements for GCE A level tutorials have improved since the last inspection, some students had not been offered a tutorial this year. The attendance rate of these GCE A level groups at tutorials on the Skelmersdale site is poor.

47 From the academic year 1999-2000, students are no longer entitled to negotiate an assessment of their progress with their subject teachers nor to engage in agreeing and recording targets for improvement with them. Reviews have been replaced with reports in a change that makes the students the passive recipients of their teachers' judgements and sits unhappily with the college's plan to encourage students to develop a record of achievement. Students remain entitled to three individual reviews of progress with their tutor but the guidelines for students for completing action plans confuse general aims with short-term goals and do not require students to record any action.

# Cross-college Provision

48 Inspectors judged as well founded the college's claim that students who require learning support have access to a wide and appropriate range of services. Initial screening is at three levels and is followed up with diagnostic assessment. Students can benefit from help with literacy and numeracy skills which are available in a workshop setting, or integrated within their course or provided on a one-to-one basis. Students value the support received and can demonstrate the benefits. Support of outstanding quality is offered to students with dyslexia by a team of seven staff all of whom hold a relevant specialist qualification. Inspectors met students who had gone through primary and secondary education with this disability undiagnosed and who were then correctly assessed and supported by the college from the early days of their course.

49 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that up-to-date, relevant welfare advice and a high level of practical support are available in the two student guidance centres at a variety of times to suit the needs of students. The service anticipates student requirements in a helpful manner. For example, staff have recently written to all single parents who had been interviewed for a college place advising them of their rights under the New Deal for lone parents. A trained counsellor offers a confidential counselling service. There are four college nurseries.

50 The provision of careers guidance is unsystematic and careers education is underdeveloped. The college identified the second weakness but not the first. There are well stocked careers libraries on the two main sites with up-to-date resources and computer programmes. However, there has been a reduction to 12 days in the service provided by 'Careerlink'. No careers training has been provided for tutors, and although most curriculum areas have developed elements of careers education, some have not. Inspectors met students who have received neither

information nor guidance. There are good arrangements for supporting students in making applications to higher education but no formalised procedures for advising GCE A level students about employment opportunities.

## General Resources

### *Grade 1*

51 Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report. Some weaknesses received undue emphasis. The college has already taken steps to remedy some of the weaknesses.

#### **Key strengths**

- extensive improvements to accommodation and facilities
- effective, efficient estates management
- attractive and well-equipped learning environments
- high-quality learning resource bases
- good level of provision of modern IT facilities
- extensive and well-used sporting and arts facilities

#### **Weaknesses**

- deficiencies in book resources in a few curriculum areas

52 The college occupies two main sites in West Lancashire. The Skelmersdale centre is located in six buildings close to the town's public library. There are two additional buildings within a 3-mile radius. The Ormskirk centre is located in a refurbished and extended building in the middle of the town close to the bus and railway stations. The college has implemented its accommodation strategy to meet the curriculum needs that it identified in the locality and to achieve withdrawal from leased accommodation. As a result, significant

# Cross-college Provision

improvements have been made to the accommodation and facilities at both sites. Governors intend to further develop the Skelmersdale centre in order to modernise buildings and improve access for staff and students with impaired mobility. A phase 3 development at Ormskirk is intended to improve facilities and extend the learning resource base. These improvements and extensions to the college's accommodation are identified in the self-assessment report. In addition to the main centres, the college continues to provide lifelong learning opportunities for adults through a number of outreach centres in local communities. Recently the numbers of computers in outreach centres has been increased and technician support has been provided.

53 As the self-assessment report identified, high standards are set, implemented and monitored for health and safety, cleanliness, maintenance and security. An efficient, effective estate management team carries out planned maintenance and refurbishment. Its efforts are supported, respected and appreciated by students and staff. All the main buildings provide an attractive learning environment that is clean, free from graffiti and litter, and well respected by users. Classrooms and specialist workrooms are well decorated, comfortably furnished and equipped with modern teaching aids. The learning environment of many rooms and corridors is enhanced by good displays of students' work and by specialist posters. The college identified the high commitment of governors and managers to providing access for students with physical disabilities. Improvements to accommodation have ensured that students have access to the majority of courses on one or more of the main college sites. Students and staff have good access to communal areas and to the learning resource centres.

54 Inspectors agreed that the college has made significant progress in implementing its strategic plan for IT. A high-quality, well-used network has been developed across the main sites. Through this network, students can gain access to learning materials, including materials to help them develop and gain accreditation for key skills and basic IT skills. They can also gain access to the Internet, college intranet and electronic mail. The learning resource bases at Skelmersdale and Ormskirk provide good 'drop-in' IT and study facilities for students, who also have good access to support from tutors and technical support staff. The bases also provide a small but growing number of courses, mainly in IT skills. In addition to computers and modern software, the resource bases have stocks of specialist books and periodicals. Both learning resource bases are well used and popular with full-time and part-time students. The college has identified that the learning resource base at Ormskirk is too small to meet the demand from students at peak periods. It has well-advanced plans to extend both the accommodation and facilities.

55 Since the last inspection the college has formally withdrawn from sharing library facilities with Skelmersdale and Ormskirk public libraries, though it continues to enjoy excellent relations with both and, increasingly, with the library at Edge Hill College of Higher Education. Students' main access to books is through the learning resource bases and through small study centres in most curriculum areas. Small libraries attached to curriculum areas vary in the range and quality of books available to students. Some have a wide range of modern and appropriate textbooks, but in a few others the bookstock is inadequate. In most curriculum libraries, students can readily use books for reference but cannot take them out on loan. Although there is an inadequate range of fiction or non-specialist books for art and English studies, students have good access to books kept in curriculum libraries.

# Cross-college Provision

56 Inspectors agreed that the college has high-quality sports and leisure facilities at the Skelmersdale centre. These include: a large swimming pool; a well-equipped sports hall; a multi-gym; football pitches; and user rights to an outdoor running track and other playing field facilities. In addition, the college operates a theatre which is used by curriculum areas involved in performance and for community entertainment activities. All these facilities are well maintained, well used and popular with students, staff and members of the community.

## Quality Assurance

### Grade 4

**57 Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths in the report but found that some significant weaknesses had not been identified.**

#### Key strengths

- a clearly articulated commitment to quality of provision
- the effective linkage of well-planned staff development to operational planning
- an effective complaints procedure

#### Weaknesses

- slow progress in improving poor retention and achievement rates
- the uneven quality of course reviews
- the underdeveloped use of quality standards to drive improvements
- the focus of lesson observation on teaching rather than learning
- underdeveloped systems for internal verification and moderation

58 The college has made progress since the last inspection in developing a comprehensive framework for assuring quality. There is a clear commitment to quality issues expressed in the

college mission statement, strategic plan, operational plans and job specifications. Good progress has been made in implementing consistent systems for tutorials and learning support and in the reporting of student enrolment and retention data. Staff demonstrate understanding of quality procedures and systems for reporting on quality.

59 There has been slow progress in addressing poor rates of retention and achievement. College-wide strategies to improve poor student retention rates include revised recruitment and induction procedures and rigorous monitoring of attendance in lessons. However, in lessons observed during inspection the average attendance was 74% compared with national figures of 78%. Retention and some achievement rates have declined over three years in many areas of the curriculum.

60 The course review process lacks consistency and sufficient rigour. The college has recently modified the process to include: analysis of student data against national figures; evaluation of the delivery of the student entitlements that are described in the charter; students' views of their courses and the support services; and the outcomes of lesson observations. Review meetings are held four times each year. There is little evidence of the systematic monitoring of the delivery of charter entitlements to measure improvements. There are efficient procedures for dealing with informal complaints through the college 'listening post' system. Formal complaints are followed up and clearly documented. Action-planning as a result of course review does not include the use of targets for improvement set against curriculum quality standards. The college acknowledges that quality standards are not used effectively to drive forward improvements in teaching courses.

# Cross-college Provision

61 Inspectors agreed with the college that a comprehensive programme of lesson observations has been developed and includes: the observation of tutorials; learning support; and the delivery of courses with franchise partners. Standard documentation is used to record judgements of learning experiences. Outcomes of lesson observations are discussed with teachers and used to inform staff development, staff review and judgements on teaching and learning. Records of observations show that observers focus more on teaching than on the quality of students' learning. During the inspection, 66% of lessons were graded as good or outstanding. This profile aligns closely with lesson observation grades awarded during the last inspection. College observers judged 70% of lessons to be good or outstanding.

62 College procedures for internal verification are underdeveloped. They focus on planning and assessment sampling activities and do not cover internal verification meetings, assignment standardisation or the cross-college verification of key skills. There is uneven application and rigour in the process.

63 The college identified its effectiveness in seeking the views of students and others involved with the college as a weakness. Inspectors judged that by the time of inspection the college had taken effective action to rectify this weakness. The views of students are regularly sought through surveys and focus groups. Changes made as a result of obtaining students' views include improving the student year book, rescheduling assignments and improving heating in a classroom. The college effectively utilised the views of the community to improve college marketing plans and of employers to drive forward course developments. The views of service users are not systematically sought to evaluate the delivery of the services process. Although service teams use quality standards to judge the quality of services, they do not all systematically set targets against the standards to improve

services. Service managers, however, ensure college procedures and internal audits are consistently applied across college sites.

64 The self-assessment process is well understood by staff. The majority of staff who were interviewed played a significant part in the process within their area of work. Some members of staff from support areas had little to do with the self-assessment process. A panel of senior managers, governor representatives and a member of staff from another college carried out the validation of self-assessment grades. The rigour of the validation process varied. Inspectors judged the self-assessment was mostly accurate in some areas, but in other areas some strengths were overstated and significant weaknesses were not identified. Statements in the report were factual rather than evaluative. Inspectors agreed with five out of six of the curriculum grades awarded and one out of five of the grades for cross-college areas.

65 Inspectors agreed with the college that staff development is well planned and well managed and is clearly linked to the achievement of college objectives. Staff training needs are effectively identified through staff review, appraisal, self-assessment and also through curriculum section or service area operational plans and lesson observation. New staff speak highly of their induction which includes introduction to their area of work, and college policies and procedures, and monthly reviews during their probationary period. Mentors are also assigned to provide support during the probationary period. The college achieved the Investor in People award in May 1999.

# Cross-college Provision

## Governance

### Grade 4

**66 Inspectors and auditors did not agree with many of the strengths in the self-assessment report. They considered that a number of significant weaknesses had not been identified.**

#### Key strengths

- governors' strong commitment to the college and its mission
- effective involvement of governors in setting strategic objectives

#### Weaknesses

- lack of attention to the educational character of the college and its companies
- inadequate clerking arrangements
- ineffective committees
- inadequate review by governors of their own performance
- the lack of formal training on governance issues
- the lack of openness

67 The FEFC audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The corporation does not conduct all of its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also does not fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

68 The 12 governors have appropriate links with senior managers. They regularly attend social and educational events at the college. The corporation meets twice each term. Attendance at corporation meetings during 1998-99 was good. There are currently three vacancies, but the search committee has not formally established plans for filling the vacancies.

69 The corporation has not performed an audit of its skills. Although there are frequent presentations from senior managers and other staff at corporation meetings, there has been no formal assessment of individual governor training needs and no formal training programme exists for governors. Inspectors and auditors did not agree with the statement in the self-assessment report that high-quality information and clerking arrangements make a good contribution to governance. Papers are not always circulated to governors well in advance of meetings. The college does not have an independent clerk to the corporation, as clerking is carried out by the director of finance. There is a clear conflict of interest in respect of the clerking of audit and finance committees. The performance of the clerk is not appraised by the chair of the corporation.

70 There is a lack of openness in the process of governance. There are no publicly available written nomination, appointment or re-appointment processes for governors. The availability of the register of governor interests and corporation and committee minutes is not openly advertised and minutes are not held in the college's resource centre. The staff governor does make available notes of meetings on the college intranet. The college has held open annual meetings in the past two years. A code of conduct has been adopted but it has not been updated to reflect the recommendations of the Nolan committee. The college does not have standing orders covering the operation of the corporation and its committees. The corporation has instituted a code of practice on 'whistleblowing'. The college has a register of interests that is completed annually by governors and senior postholders.

71 The corporation has four committees covering finance, audit, remuneration and search. The terms of reference of the search committee do not fully meet the specific requirements of the college's instrument and articles of government. The finance committee

# Cross-college Provision

receives monthly management accounts. The finance committee failed to adhere to its remit as the 1999-2000 annual estimates and 2001-02 financial forecasts were not considered in draft format. In an attempt to satisfy the statutory requirements to approve the annual estimates the incomplete documents were tabled at a corporation meeting in July 1999. They have only recently received a report on the non-financial aspects of franchised provision. The audit committee has not formally considered the requirements of Council Circular 98/15, *Audit Code of Practice*, and its terms of reference are not in accordance with the code. The audit committee did not subject the college internal and external audit services to compulsory tender after the required five-year period. The audit committee has not ensured that the work of the college's internal auditors has focused on the whole-college system of internal control.

72 The governors regularly monitor the college's performance against achievement of the tariff unit target. However, as noted in the self-assessment report, they have only recently begun to measure quantitative improvements in rates of retention and achievement of students. The governors have not rigorously monitored the quality of training in the two college companies. Governors review financial information relating to the college companies and franchised provision. As noted in the self-assessment report, the governors regularly measure and monitor the corporate mission and strategic direction of the college. Governors set strategic objectives that are used to inform the strategic direction and the strategic plan. The governors have little input into the development of the plan, which they receive for consideration and amendment at their summer meeting.

73 Governors were involved with the validation of the college self-assessment report. This was carried out with considerable rigour in the curriculum areas. Governors required hard evidence for the judgements made. At their autumn residential in 1998, the governors set

performance indicators for themselves. These were in the main qualitative. There is little evidence that these indicators have been monitored or reviewed.

## Management

### *Grade 3*

**74 Inspectors agreed with most strengths and weaknesses identified in the management section of the self-assessment report, though they considered that a few strengths were overstated. The college provided a separate section of the report that evaluated rates of student retention and achievement. Inspectors considered that some of the weaknesses in this section were understated.**

#### Key strengths

- the effective communication of values and aims
- extensive links and effective working relationships with the community and employers
- well-used market intelligence
- good promotion and management of equal opportunities

#### Weaknesses

- the lack of a college-wide strategy to address unsatisfactory rates of retention and achievement
- insufficient monitoring of some key policies
- underdeveloped use of management data by some staff

75 The college has developed a range of clear policies to assist the achievement of its mission and strategic objectives. The mission highlights equal opportunities, inclusiveness and widening participation. Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of policies, such as those for improving rates of retention and students'

# Cross-college Provision

achievements, are developing, though consistent approaches across the whole college are not yet evident. The college is successful in serving students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or those recovering from mental health problems and in supporting adult students. Many of these students subsequently progress to more advanced courses. There is a range of provision in the community and effective relations with the local authority. The college maintains good links with local industry and the TEC.

76 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that communications are effective. Staff are well informed about national and local community priorities and they contribute appropriately to strategic and operational planning. They are routinely consulted on a range of issues and understand how the implementation of college and national policies contributes to the furtherance of the college's mission. The college intranet contributes significantly in the rapid communication of a range of information to staff and students. A staff group has begun to develop key skills provision to meet the demands of 'Curriculum 2000'. Staff at all levels in college meet regularly.

77 There is a well-used market intelligence that informs strategic planning. The small, but highly successful marketing unit undertakes a variety of effective research and promotional activities. The staff of the unit are proactive in collecting and analysing market intelligence. They also undertake the analysis of some college students' perception surveys and produce internal publications such as staff and student handbooks. Local market intelligence is supplied to individual curriculum managers and used in improving the capacity of the curriculum to meet local needs in areas such as sports science and the range of GCE A level courses on offer.

78 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. Monthly management accounts are closely reviewed by the senior management team. Budget holders are provided with reports of actual expenditure, but not commitments. Reports are received five to six weeks after the month end. Budget holders supplement information from the finance system with their own monitoring systems. Despite a low funded average level of funding, the college has reported a surplus in each year since incorporation. The financial health of one college company, TP Training Limited, is weak and has had an adverse impact on the current financial health of the college. The college companies have not been subject to review by the college's internal auditors. Financial regulations have been revised recently, but require further enhancement. The college does not have approved expense rates for United Kingdom and overseas subsistence. Nevertheless, reports from the internal and external auditors do not indicate any significant internal control weaknesses.

79 Since the last inspection there have been significant improvements in computerised management information. The new system routinely produces reliable information for managers and staff. Application, enrolment and recruitment data are generated promptly. The system produces monthly data on attendance, retention and projected funding units for managers and course leaders. Changes to the college system have made it difficult to produce data over time that is sufficiently robust to give staff confidence. Management effort is wasted in duplication of activity in the monitoring of information.

80 Strategies to improve rates of student retention and achievement have not been developed alongside the improvements in data collection and analysis. The college self-assessment acknowledges that 1997-98 and 1998-99 achievement levels are below

# Cross-college Provision

benchmarks. There are low average GCE A level points scores. Monitoring of retention and achievement of students on franchised courses is underdeveloped. There is insufficient monitoring of progression and destinations of students. Significant numbers of students take a long time to complete qualifications. Data recalculated during the inspection seemed to indicate the beginning of improvement trends in both the rate of retention and achievement. It was not possible to determine whether these apparent trends were attributable to better record-keeping or to actual improvements. This uncertainty was acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

## Conclusions

81 The inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the report, identified some additional ones and considered that some weaknesses had not been given enough significance. Inspectors agreed with the grades awarded by the college in five out of six curriculum areas. In cross-college provision inspectors agreed with judgements in one area, and awarded a higher grade in another. They found that weaknesses had been underestimated in the judgement of three areas of cross-college provision: management, quality assurance and governance.

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

# College Statistics

## Student numbers by age (July 1999)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	10
19-24 years	11
25+ years	78
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by level of study (July 1999)

Level of study	%
Level 1 (foundation)	30
Level 2 (intermediate)	28
Level 3 (advanced)	14
Level 4/5 (higher)	4
Non-schedule 2	24
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	174	3,189	26
Agriculture	18	33	0
Construction	49	174	2
Engineering	188	572	6
Business	166	946	9
Hotel and catering	26	589	5
Health and community care	252	2,014	18
Art and design	209	992	9
Humanities	238	2,642	22
Basic education	60	346	3
Total	1,380	11,497	100

Source: college data

## Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 26% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

## Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1999)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	127	50	0	177
Supporting direct learning contact	19	2	0	21
Other support	110	5	2	117
Total	256	57	2	315

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

# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends

### Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£7,886,000	£9,282,000	£10,043,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£14.91	£14.78	£16.20
Payroll as a proportion of income	62%	60%	63%
Achievement of funding target	102%	100%	99%
Diversity of income	20%	29%	26%
Operating surplus	£296,000	£251,000	£126,000

Sources: Income - Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)

ALF - Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), Funding Allocations, 1998-99 (1999)

Payroll - Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)

Achievement of funding target - Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Diversity of income - Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)

Operating surplus - Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college (1998 and 1999)

### Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Number of starters	389	461	453	3,514	3,218	2,789
	Retention (%)	78	80	77	86	79	74
	Achievement (%)	17	41	38	39	46	43
2	Number of starters	733	603	554	1,728	1,736	2,193
	Retention (%)	70	79	68	80	46	43
	Achievement (%)	30	42	53	41	50	50
3	Number of starters	310	355	428	1,279	1,334	1,285
	Retention (%)	79	81	60	79	82	69
	Achievement (%)	42	47	55	45	48	52
4 or 5	Number of starters	7	2	22	161	212	349
	Retention (%)	100	100	86	79	93	94
	Achievement (%)	0	*	53	26	36	35
Short courses	Number of starters	778	1,322	889	4,795	6,135	6,816
	Retention (%)	95	97	96	95	96	95
	Achievement (%)	46	44	49	48	49	51
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	349	380	149	2,147	1,036	2,051
	Retention (%)	67	81	81	64	84	70
	Achievement (%)	*	16	9	*	32	18

Source: ISR

\*unreliable data

## **FEFC Inspection Report 27/00**

**Published by the  
Further Education Funding Council  
Website [www.fefc.ac.uk](http://www.fefc.ac.uk)  
© FEFC January 2000**