

The Solihull College

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 024 7686 3000
Fax 024 7686 3100
Website www.fefc.ac.uk*

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 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

The Solihull College

West Midlands Region

Inspected November 1999

The Solihull College is a large general further education college based at three sites in the borough of Solihull. It also runs courses in 30 centres in the local community and on the premises of 125 companies in the West Midlands region and across the country. About one-third of the college's provision is based away from the main sites. It offers a wide range of courses from entry to degree level. Just over a quarter of students are recruited from areas of economic and social disadvantage. The college produced its second self-assessment report for the inspection. All staff and governors were involved in the self-assessment process.

Judgements in the self-assessment report were supported by a large body of evidence.

Inspectors agreed with many judgements in the self-assessment report but considered that some weaknesses were understated.

The college offers a broad range of courses in all of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Most teaching is satisfactory. Despite efforts to improve student achievement rates these remain below the average for the sector. Some aspects of curriculum management are weak. The teaching of the key skill of communication across the college is particularly effective. Governors and staff are strongly committed to

fulfilling the college's mission and strategic objectives. The college works in partnership with an extensive range of organisations. Communications in the college are good. The corporation has effective procedures for ensuring the openness of its proceedings and the accountability of governors. Recruitment strategies have helped to widen participation. Applicants to the college receive good help and guidance. Induction for students is effective. Almost all the students identified as needing additional learning support receive it. Careers education and guidance are good.

Improvements to accommodation are made in close accordance with the college's strategic aims. Facilities are of particularly good quality at the Blossomfield site. Computing equipment and library facilities are of a high standard. Staff are strongly committed to improving the quality of provision. Staff appraisal and staff development procedures are effective and the college's complaints procedures are rigorous. The college should improve: the quality of teaching and students' achievements; initial assessment for part-time students; the rigour of course reviews and action-planning; its use of performance indicators and setting of standards and targets; arrangements for monitoring work-based and franchised provision; IT facilities in community centres; management information and the monitoring of the college's overall performance.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Information technology	3	Support for students	2
Engineering	3	General resources	2
Business studies	3	Quality assurance	3
Health and community care	3	Governance	3
Art and design	4	Management	3
English, communication and general studies	2		
Basic skills	3		

The College and its Mission

1 The Solihull College is a large general further education college with three main sites. Some 10 years ago, the college established a campus in the north of the borough where there are high levels of unemployment and social and economic deprivation. In 1998-99, the proportion of those aged 16 who stayed on in full-time education in the north of the borough was 56%, compared with 77% in the south. The college has given high priority to improving its accommodation. It plans to close its site at Sharman's Cross and relocate that at Chelmsley Wood. Almost half of the college's full-time students are from the city of Birmingham. Courses are offered in over 30 centres in the local community and on the premises of 125 companies in the West Midlands region and across the country. About one-third of the college's provision is away from the main sites. In 1998-99, some 3% of the college's work was franchised provision.

2 Solihull has a strong economy. Unemployment levels are below the regional and national averages. Growth sectors in the local economy include business services, construction, retailing and hotel and catering. There are skill shortages in a number of professional and managerial areas and a lack of workers in low-skilled jobs in service sectors. A new business park in Solihull is attracting a range of computing and service industries. There is a large sixth form college about 1 mile from the college and two other colleges within 5 miles. Five secondary schools in the borough have sixth forms.

3 The college offers a wide range of programmes at all levels. The college has organised its curriculum more flexibly to help students negotiate individual learning programmes and work towards qualifications or units of qualifications that meet their needs. In 1998-99, 21% of students enrolled on a programme combining units from more than one qualification. The college offers a large number of courses leading to a wide range of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs), national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and credits of the National Open College Network (NOCN). It also offers courses in 37 general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects and 36 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects. The college has 20 well-established access to higher education courses. Partnerships with universities include Coventry University and the University of Warwick. A substantial number of students enrol on higher education programmes at the college. The college offers a range of community education, family learning and leisure classes and these are also available at weekends and during holiday periods. The college works with local and regional partners to support New Deal clients. In 1999-2000, 53 clients enrolled on the full-time education and training option and 47 on other options. Through their success in gaining qualifications, the college's students are helping towards the achievement of the national learning targets.

4 In the year to July 1999, the college enrolled 35,611 students of whom 4,329 were on full-time programmes; 82% were aged 19 or over and 7% were from minority ethnic groups. In 1998-99, according to college data, 22% of full-time students were from minority ethnic groups. Over a quarter of the college's students live in postal districts designated by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) as deprived. The college employs 800 full-time equivalent staff.

Context

The college's mission is to:

- 'promote educational opportunities for all
- give best guidance and support to all students
- provide pathways to qualification and success
- invest in the development of people.'

The college's six key strategic objectives are to:

- 'strive to be world class
- be recognised as contributing fully to community and economic development
- re-target programmes and support systems towards changing client groups and changing client needs
- increase capacity to be flexible and responsive
- improve efficiency through maximising the use of available resources
- diversify income streams.'

The Inspection

5 The college was inspected during week beginning 22 November 1999. A sample of franchised provision and programmes offered on the premises of companies and in centres in the local community was inspected during the week commencing 8 November 1999.

Inspectors had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. This included data on students' achievements for 1997 and 1998 derived from the individualised student record (ISR). The college supplied data on student retention and achievement rates for 1999. Inspectors checked these against class registers and pass lists issued by awarding bodies. The inspection was carried out by 13 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 72 days. Inspectors observed 116 lessons, including some tutorials, and examined students' work and documentation about the college and its courses. Inspectors held

meetings with governors, staff from franchise partners and other agencies, college managers, staff and students. They also consulted the local training and enterprise council (TEC) about its relationships with the college.

6 Eight inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) worked with the inspection team during the college inspection. The TSC concentrated on TEC-funded work-based training programmes the college provided in engineering, forklift truck training, business administration, hospitality, hairdressing and foundation for work. Inspectors observed 18 training sessions and met with employers, workplace assessors, college managers, staff and trainees. They examined a range of students' portfolios and college documentation. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC inspection framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the lessons inspected, 51% were judged to be good or outstanding and 7% were less than satisfactory. This is below the averages of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed in colleges during 1998-99.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	1	1	5	1	0	8
GCSE	1	2	2	0	0	5
GNVQ	2	4	11	2	0	19
NVQ	2	13	5	0	0	20
Basic education	1	5	13	1	0	20
Access to higher education and further education	0	3	0	0	0	3
Other vocational	6	18	13	3	1	41
Total (No.)	13	46	49	7	1	116
Total (%)	11	40	42	6	1	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*

8 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 (%)
The Solihull College	8.9	73
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

Information Technology

Grade 3

9 Inspectors observed 19 lessons, including a sample of franchised and community-based provision. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made in the self-assessment report but considered that weaknesses in students' achievements and specialist resources were underestimated. Inspectors from the TSC observed work-based training in information technology (IT) for 18 trainees.

Key strengths

- the wide range of courses and clear progression routes
- flexibly arranged courses
- good course materials
- the good quality of students' assignments

Weaknesses

- students' low retention and achievement rates on many courses
- some students' poor attendance and lack of interest in studying
- some inadequate teaching accommodation and IT resources
- ineffective quality assurance of computing courses

10 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that a diverse range of courses is provided for full-time and part-time students. It includes opportunities to study business IT and specialist computing from level 1 to level 4 in a variety of locations, including students' own homes, centres in the local community and large IT centres at the college's main sites. The self-assessment report identified as a strength, the distinctive courses in IT for students with disabilities that combine teaching in their home with teaching and tutorial support from the college by telephone and electronic mail.

11 Courses in business administration IT are managed effectively and the course files are well maintained. Arrangements for the management and quality assurance of computing courses are unsatisfactory. The post of programme area leader for computing had been vacant for three months. Some course documentation for computing is poor. Some course files do not include details of course reviews, data on student retention and achievement rates, analysis of feedback from students, and information about targets. They do not help staff to monitor students' performance and make improvements to the course. Several weaknesses, for example in specialist resources and the organisation of courses, have yet to be addressed. Links between staff and local IT companies are underdeveloped. Steps are being taken to address students' low retention and achievement rates on the GNVQ intermediate IT course. For example, the college has recently introduced the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) programming course. The mode of attendance for this course is flexible and students' overall attendance is electronically monitored. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of this development.

12 Teachers prepare detailed schemes of work. Most teachers plan lessons well and combine successfully the teaching of theory and practical skills. The quality of nearly half the teaching observed was satisfactory and most of the remainder was good. In a significant minority of lessons, some students arrived late and lacked a positive attitude to learning. Teachers mark students' assignments carefully and make helpful comments indicating how students can improve their work.

13 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement in the self-assessment report that student retention and achievement rates are a weakness. Student achievement rates have been consistently high on very few courses. One example is the BTEC national certificate in computing where the student achievement rate has been 90% or 100% during the last three

Curriculum Areas

years. Fewer than 20 students enrol on this course each year. Student retention and achievement rates often fluctuate considerably from year to year. On some courses, student achievement rates have been consistently poor over the last three years. For example, the proportion of students gaining grades A to E in GCE A level computing has been around 40% each year, well below the national average for the sector. Inaccurate statistics prevent the college from determining achievement rates on some courses correctly. Students develop skills in IT and many use these effectively in research work. The quality of students' portfolio work is high. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. Students' work is of a particularly good standard in IT provision accredited by the NOCN.

14 Inspectors agreed that paper-based learning materials are of high quality. Teaching accommodation used in the business administration area is good. Teaching areas used for computing in the college and elsewhere are less satisfactory. A large open-plan area in the college where computing is taught provides an inappropriate learning environment during the daytime and it is not well managed. Some students use the area as a social and 'drop-in' facility while lessons are taken there and they disturb the students' learning. Computing resources are good for general IT courses but inappropriate for some specialist computing. There is insufficient provision of hardware, software and networking facilities for courses in computing at higher levels. Additional weaknesses include students not having personal code identifiers, and the lack of a college-wide electronic mail facility for students. In several lessons, there were not enough computers for the students in the group. The wide availability of the Internet is a strength. As recognised in the self-assessment report, little use is made of the intranet in teaching and learning. There is well-used and up-to-date library stock of IT-related materials.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
RSA computer literacy and information technology	1	Number of starters	1,137	619	1,382
		Retention (%)	94	65	90
		Achievement (%)	27	63	42
C&G 7261	1	Number of starters	28	18	73
		Retention (%)	90	100	81
		Achievement (%)	7	*	**
Diploma in IT	1	Number of starters	34	32	144
		Retention (%)	92	72	94
		Achievement (%)	32	78	9
Work-based learning and franchised provision	1	Number of starters	439	30	595
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	68	62	22
GNVQ intermediate	2	Number of starters	18	20	26
		Retention (%)	78	80	76
		Achievement (%)	39	25	62
GCSE IT	2	Number of starters	19	14	28
		Retention (%)	68	74	68
		Achievement (%)	38	54	7
National diploma	3	Number of starters	74	29	+
		Retention (%)	48	78	+
		Achievement (%)	51	100	+
GNVQ advanced	3	Number of starters	+	+	22
		Retention (%)	+	+	35
		Achievement (%)	+	+	50

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college 1999

*inaccurate data

**incomplete data, only some returns received from awarding body

+course not offered

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 3

15 Inspectors observed 17 lessons, including some on the premises of companies in the region and further afield. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report on franchised and work-based provision. The engineering self-assessment report did not place sufficient emphasis on weaknesses in students' achievements and resources. Inspectors from the TSC observed work-based training in engineering for 60 trainees.

Key strengths

- effective teaching in most lessons
- retention rates above the national average
- students' good achievements on technician courses
- good-quality course materials

Weaknesses

- students' low achievement rate on craft programmes
- weak course management of craft programmes
- disruption of learning in work-based provision
- inadequate specialist resources

16 The college offers a wide range of craft and technician courses from level 1 to level 3 in all main engineering subjects. Courses are arranged flexibly and students can join them at any point in the year. Through the widespread and effective practice of giving students learning materials they can work through on their own, small classes are amalgamated successfully and efficient use is made of specialist teaching areas. The amount of education and training provided in the workplace is growing. For example, the college has a contract with a major telecommunications company to provide a substantial amount of education and training

leading to NVQs. Courses are designed to be accessible to a wide range of students and to help the college to achieve its commitment to widen participation.

17 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that management of franchised and work-based provision is good. Quality assurance systems for franchised and work-based provision are effective. This provision is reviewed regularly and action plans are drawn up to improve it. Internal verification procedures are sound. Regular checks are carried out on the suitability and effectiveness of learning materials the students work through on their own. Students' assessments and details of their progress are carefully recorded. The management of craft programmes is weak. Course files contain some course information but few records of course team meetings and reviews of students' progress or achievements. Targets are not set for student retention or achievement rates. Technician courses are effectively managed. Staff development activities have focused on effective teamwork, the setting and marking of assignments, quality assurance, and ways of increasing student retention and achievement rates. Full-time students have tutorials in which they receive help in maintaining their portfolios and in developing action plans for improving their work. A student helpline is available to students on courses which are part of franchised and work-based provision.

18 Most teaching is effective. Teachers question the students skilfully to engage them in discussion, encourage them to draw upon their own experiences and to gauge the extent of their learning. In one lesson, the teacher successfully used a team game to strengthen students' learning of the theory of force vectors. In other lessons, students were taught both the theory and practice of mathematical techniques for manipulating data in practical applications. In one lesson, the teacher set the students an assignment in which they had to design and make an elastic-band powered vehicle. This assignment covered many of the course

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requirements and key skills areas such as working in teams, creating an original design, building a functional model and working to a deadline. The students tested and evaluated the models they had made. Students acquired a variety of skills and the assignment motivated them. Teachers follow appropriate schemes of work. Most teachers prepare lesson plans. Safe working practices are observed in workshops.

19 Over the last three years, the average retention rate on engineering courses has been about 90%, which is almost 10% higher than the national average for the sector. The self-assessment report did not identify as a significant weakness students' low achievement rates on craft courses. The proportion of students who achieve a craft qualification is about 31%, compared with national averages of between 55% and 60% for various craft courses. Student achievement rates on most technician

courses are good. In work-based provision, students' learning is frequently disrupted by changes in shift work and various problems in the workplace. Planned course activities are often cancelled and rescheduled. The self-assessment report acknowledged that many students take considerably longer than originally planned to gain a qualification.

20 Following recent alterations to teaching areas, the IT and computer-aided design areas have inadequate facilities, are often overcrowded, and the main workshop is noisy. Neither area is conducive to effective teaching and learning. Teaching rooms where students work on their portfolios are well furnished. Staff have appropriate engineering and teaching qualifications and verifier and assessor awards. All course materials are well designed and of good quality. These include course notes, assignments, details of grading criteria, guidance on how to achieve an NVQ and information about the theoretical aspects of the course.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in engineering, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
C&G	1	Number of starters	114	187	237
		Retention (%)	94	97	92
		Achievement (%)	28	46	33
C&G	2	Number of starters	218	242	210
		Retention (%)	97	96	89
		Achievement (%)	20	31	29
NVQ	2	Number of starters	177	116	122
		Retention (%)	96	96	80
		Achievement (%)	24	29	44
NVQ franchised and work-based provision	2	Number of starters	1,518	1,558	2,493
		Retention (%)	100	98	100
		Achievement (%)	35	42	*
GNVQ intermediate technician	2	Number of starters	23	30	28
		Retention (%)	83	77	79
		Achievement (%)	79	89	100
GNVQ advanced technician	3	Number of starters	114	135	98
		Retention (%)	84	76	61
		Achievement (%)	65	66	80

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

*incomplete data, only some returns received from awarding bodies

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies

Grade 3

21 Inspectors observed 21 lessons covering a range of courses, including some work-based learning on the premises of companies. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths in the self-assessment report and identified some additional strengths and weaknesses. The college had given insufficient weight to weaknesses in students' achievements. Inspectors from the TSC observed work-based training in business administration for 17 trainees.

Key strengths

- the wide range of courses
- productive links with employers
- students' good achievements on office skills courses
- good-quality library resources
- robust internal verification processes

Weaknesses

- poor teaching in some areas
- students' poor attendance and lack of punctuality on some courses
- poor lesson plans and underdeveloped schemes of work
- students' low achievement rates in work-based provision
- lack of a business learning environment in the sixth form centre

22 Business studies constitute a significant part of the college's provision. In addition to courses in the college, there is substantial work-based provision across England. Some contracts are with major national firms. Courses range from level 1 to postgraduate level. Students can enrol at any time of the year on the modular programmes in management and office skills. This flexibility over recruitment

aims to further the widening of participation. Inspectors agreed that links with employers are beneficial. Staff make good use of their extensive links with employers to organise educational visits and engage speakers, to enrich the students' experience. The management of provision is satisfactory. Internal verification procedures are robust.

23 Schemes of work and lesson plans are good on some courses, for example on office skills and GNVQ courses, but for other courses, they are inadequate. Most teaching is effective. One strength not mentioned in the self-assessment report is the teachers' skilful use of group work to ensure that students are fully engaged in their learning. For example, students on a national diploma course in public services studying political awareness, worked purposefully in groups on contentious issues, such as the advantages and disadvantages of arming the police and policies for 'care in the community'. The teacher's references to a topical criminal case and the subsequent public inquiry provided a good stimulus for discussion. Students made effective presentations and conducted a secret ballot to determine the overall views of the group. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that students' work is carefully marked. Students benefit from well-organised work experience that includes systematic assessment of their learning during placements. Some teaching, however, is ineffective. In less successful lessons, teachers fail to clarify the aims and structure of the lesson. They use a narrow range of teaching and learning methods and inadequate techniques for questioning. A significant number of students arrive late for lessons. Attendance rates are poor on some courses.

24 Students' pass rates on skills-based programmes in office technology are good. For example, the pass rates on text processing and wordprocessing courses are above the national average for the sector. The college's self-assessment gives insufficient weight to the

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students' poor achievement rates on GNVQ courses. The proportion of students who obtain grade C or above in GCSE accounting is increasing but is below the national average for the sector. The pass rates on GCE A level in business have improved, and in 1999 they were above the national average for the sector. In 1998-99, students on the Institute of Personnel and Development graduate programme achieved more than one-third of all the distinctions awarded nationally. The self-assessment report understated the low rate of achievement of NVQs in customer service and management by students on work-based programmes.

25 Many part-time teachers are employed in professional occupations and use their up-to-date commercial knowledge, for example in marketing and managing brands, in their teaching effectively. Full-time teachers have opportunities to attend workplace refresher training to update their commercial skills and understanding. The library has a good selection of relevant resources and books. The quality of teaching accommodation is good at two of the college's sites. The sixth form centre at Sharman's Cross, where most of the GNVQ and full-time GCE A level and GCSE courses are based, does not provide a suitable business learning environment. The teaching accommodation and equipment in some work-based provision are of particularly good quality.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in business studies, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE accounting	2	Number of starters	38	37	30
		Retention (%)	92	73	70
		Achievement (%)	9	31	33
GCSE business	2	Number of starters	33	48	32
		Retention (%)	94	90	56
		Achievement (%)	26	16	67
GCE A level business	3	Number of starters	59	50	80
		Retention (%)	81	70	31
		Achievement (%)	36	73	80
Certificate in personnel practice	3	Number of starters	24	30	37
		Retention (%)	92	97	86
		Achievement (%)	91	93	*
Text processing	3	Number of starters	31	50	36
		Retention (%)	97	86	94
		Achievement (%)	27	81	*
NVQ customer services	3	Number of starters	1,527	9	176
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	4	56	9
GNVQ advanced business	3	Number of starters	115	104	72
		Retention (%)	66	52	56
		Achievement (%)	35	63	*

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

*incomplete data, only some returns received from the awarding body

Curriculum Areas

Health and Community Care

Grade 3

26 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in health and social care and in early years. They agreed with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They found some additional strengths and weaknesses that the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- the wide range of provision
- effective coverage of discrimination and prejudice in courses
- productive partnership with local social services department
- good retention rates on most courses
- extensive and up-to-date library resources

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped schemes of work
- below average pass rates on some courses
- ineffective use of questioning in some lessons
- little use of teaching aids
- inadequate specialist equipment
- unsatisfactory teaching accommodation in some areas

27 The college runs a wide range of courses in health care and early years. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. Programmes are offered at the three main college sites from entry level to higher education level. The college offers a BTEC national certificate and a diploma programme in childhood studies as well as courses in nursery nursing. Following a review, courses leading to the BTEC first award in care and the national diploma in care have been introduced to replace GNVQ courses in health and social care. The provision also includes courses leading to NVQs in care, a diploma in welfare studies, a programme accredited by NOCN in social care practice and a large number of first-aid courses.

28 Teachers carefully evaluate and develop the programmes of study offered. The college works closely in partnership with the local social services department and also contributes to the Solihull 'Early Years Development Partnership'. The partnerships have led to some useful curriculum initiatives at the college, for example, a modular programme at level 3 in early childhood studies. The college is carefully reviewing the first year of this course. Regular meetings of team leaders and course teams are appropriately minuted and include decisions on future action. The development plan for the curriculum area contains a number of targets relating to widening participation and improving teaching.

29 Teaching is carefully pitched at the right level to help students achieve the standards set by awarding bodies. The subject of anti-discriminatory professional practice is covered well in lessons. Students are encouraged to consider suitable ways of dealing with prejudice. Half the lessons observed were of good quality and most others were satisfactory. In the best lessons, students contribute effectively to discussions. They draw well on their knowledge to ask searching questions and express opinions. In advanced level courses, teachers frequently challenge students to explain and further develop their responses. They encourage students to explore relevant concepts and to apply them in their work. In contrast, in several lessons teachers continuously ask questions but generate very little response from students. Few teachers use teaching aids, such as overhead projectors, to present material. They laboriously write information on whiteboards for a significant part of lessons. Schemes of work are insufficiently detailed. Many indicate only broad topics to be covered, and few give comprehensive accounts of the activities planned on a programme.

30 Inspectors considered that the college overestimated the strength of students' achievements. There are wide fluctuations in pass rates from year to year. Several pass rates

Curriculum Areas

improved markedly in 1998 after poor results in 1997. For example, pass rates on the national diploma in childhood studies course increased from 63% in 1998 to 100% in 1999. In contrast to these improvements, the pass rate on the GNVQ advanced course declined from 80% in 1998 to 56% in 1999. In 1999, many students did not complete their NVQ courses in the designated time. As the college recognised in the self-assessment report, retention rates are good on most courses. In 1999, retention rates were high on GNVQ courses in health and social care.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education	2	Number of starters	26	21	37
		Retention (%)	81	52	73
		Achievement (%)	81	82	74
GNVQ intermediate health and care	2	Number of starters	29	16	18
		Retention (%)	90	88	89
		Achievement (%)	0	71	37
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education diploma nursery nursing	3	Number of starters	117	31	63
		Retention (%)	66	87	48
		Achievement (%)	53	85	87
National diploma childhood studies	3	Number of starters	47	55	22
		Retention (%)	83	76	95
		Achievement (%)	69	63	100
Access to health studies	3	Number of starters	32	22	11
		Retention (%)	88	100	82
		Achievement (%)	18	62	79
GNVQ advanced health and care	3	Number of starters	54	18	17
		Retention (%)	65	83	94
		Achievement (%)	40	80	56
NVQ	3	Number of starters	98	*	**
		Retention (%)	97	*	**
		Achievement (%)	51	*	**

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

*data not reliable

**incomplete data, only some returns received from awarding body

31 Specialist facilities are inadequate. Students on courses in childcare and early years do not learn in a stimulating environment. Teaching areas used for this subject at each site fail to create an exemplary learning and caring environment for young children. There is little equipment in classrooms and key resources regularly have to be carried from one site to another. There is poor storage space, little display of students' work and there are not enough sinks in classrooms. The college has plans to improve equipment. Some teaching accommodation used for other subjects is also unsatisfactory. Some areas are poorly maintained. The library has a wide range of resources and books.

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 4

32 Inspectors observed 15 lessons. They considered that the self-assessment report over-emphasised strengths and underestimated shortcomings. Inspectors identified some weaknesses which the college had not identified. These included significant weaknesses in students' achievements.

Key strengths

- the wide range of courses
- good pass rates at GCE A level
- students' good levels of craft skills
- the range and quality of specialist equipment

Weaknesses

- some poor teaching
- students' poor research and drawing skills on vocational courses
- low pass rates on most vocational courses
- poor retention rates on some courses
- ineffective quality assurance
- shortcomings in accommodation

33 The college offers a wide range of courses in art and design. Specialist options in vocational courses include general art and design, photography, textiles and fashion, and graphic design. Programmes are offered on a full-time or part-time basis. The extensive range of art and craft courses offered in centres attracts a diversity of students and helps to widen participation. Students can progress from introductory part-time courses through to higher education. Part-time courses are well managed. The management of full-time vocational courses is less satisfactory. Weaknesses include the absence of thorough reviews of trends in recruitment and in student achievement and retention rates. Some

problems, such as those arising from late enrolments on the GNVQ intermediate course, are sometimes identified at regular course team meetings but insufficient action is taken to resolve them.

34 Although most teaching is well planned, some is poorly executed. Many teachers do not have sufficiently high expectations of students. Although teachers set the students clearly defined assignments, many do not specify the assessment criteria for these. In some of the less satisfactory lessons, teachers fail to exploit the potential of assignments as a means of challenging the students to use their initiative and skills to the full. In one lesson, students were asked to explore the three-dimensional qualities in clay relief from drawings but the teacher accepted flat drawings on the surface of the clay as sufficient. On part-time craft courses, teachers encourage students to achieve good standards. They assess students' work carefully and give useful written and verbal feedback indicating where improvements could be made. There is good internal verification of assessment on some courses, for example the textiles and fashion diploma courses.

35 Students' achievements on most vocational courses are below the national average for the sector. In 1997 and 1998, pass rates on the GNVQ intermediate course were significantly below the national average. This weakness was recognised by the college in its self-assessment report. Pass rates on the national diploma course in design and the pre-degree foundation course are below the national average. The pass rates on the GCE A level courses are improving and in 1999 were above the average for the sector. In 1999, retention rates on the GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses and the national diploma in design courses were low.

36 Students on courses in photography, fashion and textiles and part-time craft courses develop good craft skills. Photography students produce images of a good technical quality,

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using a range of camera formats. In fashion, students' knitwear and construction skills are good. Students on vocational courses, however, have insufficiently developed drawing skills and ideas on design for the level of their course. They carry out little initial research and do not work enough from primary sources. Many students' drawings are underdeveloped. Students do not explore form or use different media. They do not draw in sketchbooks on a regular basis.

37 There are good specialist resources at the Blossomfield site. These include photography, fashion and textile workshops and a well-equipped ceramics studio. The specialist suite of computers with advanced image manipulation software provides an excellent resource for graphic design. The library offers a

good range of art and design books and journals and there are useful guides to Internet sites. The art and design block at Blossomfield has been refurbished to provide open-plan studios. Although classes using these studios can use space flexibly and to best advantage, they are disadvantaged by the noise from other groups using the open-plan facility and from equipment and extractors. Such distraction has an adverse effect upon students' learning, particularly when teachers need to address the whole group. There is no area where staff can hold tutorials and talk to individual students in confidence. Students report that work which they leave in these studios is not safe. There is insufficient storage space for students' work and some has been damaged or has gone missing. These weaknesses in the studio accommodation were not referred to in the self-assessment report, although staff in the divisions are aware of them.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NOCN part-time craft courses	1	Number of starters	782	1,045	1,135
		Retention (%)	96	93	85
		Achievement (%)	40	54	55
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	Number of starters	26	22	31
		Retention (%)	54	59	65
		Achievement (%)	50	14	69
GCE A level art and design (fine arts)	3	Number of starters	14	26	32
		Retention (%)	79	77	72
		Achievement (%)	*	80	96
BTEC national diploma design, graphic design, photography, fashion and textiles	3	Number of starters	51	35	43
		Retention (%)	98	88	63
		Achievement (%)	*	84	74
GNVQ advanced art and design	3	Number of starters	32	24	27
		Retention (%)	84	58	56
		Achievement (%)	*	93	67
BTEC diploma foundation studies (pre-degree) art and design	3	Number of starters	43	33	65
		Retention (%)	77	78	78
		Achievement (%)	79	*	84

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

*data not reliable

Curriculum Areas

English, Communication and General Studies

Grade 2

38 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in English, communication and general studies. They agreed with many of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report but considered that some strengths were overstated. They also found some weaknesses which the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- the wide range of courses
- the high quality of communication skills provision
- good-quality teaching in most lessons
- teachers' informative feedback on students' work
- good range of extra-curricular activities

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped schemes of work
- students' low achievement rates on GCE A level courses

39 The college offers a wide range of GCSE, GCE A level and other English courses on its three main sites, in centres in the local community, and through distance learning. As noted in the self-assessment report, these diverse courses provide good opportunities for students to progress to higher level study. Key skills in communication are an essential component of GNVQ programmes. The college also offers communication skills for many students on NVQ programmes. In most cases, the teaching of communication skills is an effective and integral part of vocational courses. General studies is offered as a one-year GCE A level option within the full-time GCE A level programme and attracts sufficient students to form one group each year. A good range of

extra-curricular activities is arranged for students on courses in English. These activities include visits to the theatre, cinema, exhibitions and guest lectures.

40 The college has a detailed policy on helping students to develop key skills, and this focuses on the importance of communication skills within GNVQ programmes. Inspectors agreed that the college's development of teaching and learning in communication skills is particularly successful and they agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report for this area of work. Management arrangements for communication skills are clearly defined. The co-ordination of communication skills provision across the college is effective. Highly skilled teachers, appointed as communication consultants, work well with vocational tutors in helping students on vocational programmes to become proficient in communication skills. They also act as internal verifiers. Students receive an initial test in communication skills. Teachers take the students' results in this test into account when they plan their lessons and they provide the students with appropriate activities through which they may improve their communication skills.

41 Most teaching is of good quality and some is outstanding. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods. In the best lessons, students are challenged to think and to use their skills to the full and they respond well to a range of imaginative learning activities. For example, in a GCSE English literature lesson, the teacher played the role of the central character in the text being studied, and answered students' questions about her character and role. Students were totally absorbed in the exercise and it was particularly effective in helping them to explore and understand different aspects of characterisation. Teachers are particularly supportive towards students and are responsive to their needs, both during and outside lesson times. Most schemes of work for English and general studies are no

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more than lists of topics to be covered each term. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge as a weakness, that schemes of work and lesson plans do not state clearly the aims and objectives of courses. Teachers mark students' work carefully and their assessment includes constructive comments to help the students to improve their performance. In a few lessons, students' attendance rates were poor.

42 The quality of most students' work is good. In many instances, students are given assignments which have a standardised front coversheet. This contains space for students to offer comments on the usefulness and effectiveness of the assignment and the teacher's assessment of their work. Students are attentive in lessons and usually contribute well to discussions. They make good progress in communication skills. College data show that students' achievements in the key skill of communication are good. Retention rates in

GCSE English literature have been consistently high for the past three years. In 1999, the previously good retention rate on the GCSE English language course declined. In 1999, the proportions of students who gained grade C or above in GCSE English language and GCSE English literature were close to the national average for the sector. However, the proportion who gained grades A* to E improved considerably to 92% in English language and 94% in English literature, significantly above the national average. Pass rates for GCE A level English have improved steadily over the last three years but, as the self-assessment report acknowledges, they remain below the national average. Students' pass rates for GCE A level in general studies were high in 1998, but were below the national average in 1999.

43 The college has good learning resources. These include videos, CD-ROMs and ready access to the Internet. Libraries at the main sites have adequate collections of up-to-date and appropriate texts for English language and literature.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in English, communication and general studies, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE English language	2	Number of starters	293	413	366
		Retention (%)	92	89	58
		Achievement (%)	40	26	48
GCSE English literature	2	Number of starters	36	15	18
		Retention (%)	97	87	94
		Achievement (%)	69	38	41
GCE A level English language/language and literature	3	Number of starters	106	84	126
		Retention (%)	73	83	37
		Achievement (%)	43	71	70
GCE A level English literature	3	Number of starters	118	83	54
		Retention (%)	71	75	74
		Achievement (%)	40	69	68
GCE A level general studies	3	Number of starters	17	19	29
		Retention (%)	88	74	72
		Achievement (%)	21	86	57

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

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Basic Skills

Grade 3

44 Inspectors observed 20 lessons in literacy and numeracy, including 12 which took place in centres in the local community. They agreed with many of the strengths in the self-assessment report, but found some weaknesses the college had not identified. Inspectors from the TSC observed work-based training for 40 trainees on a foundation for work programme.

Key strengths

- extensive provision in community-based centres
- high retention rates on most programmes
- strong links with a range of partners
- successful family literacy provision

Weaknesses

- narrow range of teaching methods
- lack of precision in setting and reviewing learning goals
- incomplete monitoring of students' achievements and progression
- inadequate specialist resources

45 The quality of most teaching is satisfactory. In the best lessons, teachers help students to become proficient in basic skills through a wide range of appropriate learning activities. In most lessons, however, teachers seldom extend the students' learning beyond what the students need to cover in order to obtain a qualification. Teachers make all students complete a series of worksheets and they do not differentiate learning activities to suit the aptitudes of individual students. Teachers seldom give students the opportunity to work together to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. A notable exception is the family learning provision offered in some primary schools. This

provision offers students the opportunity to develop language skills through reading and writing. Teachers emphasise the importance of reading and writing for shaping and recording a wealth of ideas, facts and opinions.

46 There is clear and accessible documentation on initial assessment, regular target-setting and procedures for reviewing students' progress. Some teachers use this documentation carefully and thoroughly, involving students fully in the process of planning, reviewing and recording learning. Many teachers, however, set students imprecise learning goals and unrealistic timescales within which to achieve them. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report. There has been little systematic training for teachers on assessing the learning requirements of basic skills students. There is no policy or guidance on initial assessment in basic skills. There is no standardised method of initial assessment. Individual teachers carry out initial assessment in different ways. In some instances, the assessment lacks rigour and is of poor quality.

47 Students' retention rates are good on most courses. The college does not have reliable statistical information on students' achievements or their progression to more advanced study. Students' work in lessons is at an appropriate level for their ability and goals. Students' achievements are celebrated. For example, at Keepers' Lodge there are mounted photographs of students receiving awards, and displays of students' work. In a lesson on numeracy which took place at a family centre, some students lacking in confidence had achieved high test scores. In order to help these students recognise their achievements and increase their self-esteem, the teacher recorded these results on their learning records with them, and offered encouragement and praise. Some students on literacy and numeracy courses progress to more advanced study. In 1999, a successful summer school on basic skills recruited 60 new students, of whom 40 continued with other further

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education courses. Few students at the centres in the local community progress to further education courses at the college's main sites.

48 As the self-assessment identified, basic skills provision is offered across an extensive network of centres in the local community and it has helped to widen participation in the college's courses. The college has productive relationships with a variety of agencies, including schools, family centres and large manufacturing companies and these have led to increased participation in basic skills provision. Provision in community centres is well organised and communications between the centres and the college are effective.

Management of the curriculum is satisfactory. The college expects students to work towards national awards. Some students, however, are not yet ready or confident enough to work towards a qualification but staff have not identified alternative ways of meeting their learning needs. Systems for monitoring students' progress and their achievements are underdeveloped. A system of lesson observation is well established and findings from this are taken into account in the quality assurance process. Staff who observe lessons identify ways in which classroom practice may be improved. Many of the lesson observation findings are, however, insufficiently evaluative. Overall, staff awarded higher grades for lessons than those given by the inspectors. Volunteer tutors are encouraged to gain appropriate qualifications, but there is no formal staff development programme to help them do so.

49 Some learning materials, such as handouts, are of poor quality and out of date. Teachers make little use of everyday materials such as magazines, advertisements or price lists through which literacy and numeracy may be taught. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that IT resources are inadequate in community-based centres. They found, however, that little use was made of the IT suites at the college's main sites. The stock of

basic skills software is small. Teachers are experienced and well qualified, although most recognise that they need to update their IT skills. Most teaching accommodation is suitable for courses offered. The learning centres at the main sites are well equipped and may be used for a variety of learning activities. Some of the centres in the local community lack key resources such as audiovisual aids. The centres provide comfortable and accessible learning environments, however, for students. Some teachers have shown considerable initiative in creating a stimulating learning environment in the centres in the community, which were not designed for teaching purposes.

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Support for Students

Grade 2

50 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but found some weaknesses the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- effective arrangements for initial guidance and admission of students
- effective recruitment strategies for widening participation
- effective enrolment and induction procedures
- extensive range of careers facilities and services
- effective help for almost all students needing learning support

Weaknesses

- inadequate assessment of additional learning support requirements of most part-time students
- lack of rigour in monitoring students' progress
- insufficiently precise action plans to improve students' performance

51 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that most students receive effective guidance before enrolment. Staff interview prospective full-time students and part-time students on substantial timetables. Students who are undecided about which course to study are referred for a general guidance interview. Others receive more detailed information about the course and further guidance from curriculum specialists. Where appropriate, staff suggest suitable provision offered by other organisations. Informative prospectuses and other documents for students are well designed. Course leaflets are not available in minority

community languages. The college uses a range of effective recruitment methods including visits to local schools, newspapers, the radio, a website and posters in local libraries and supermarkets. There are well-organised procedures for admissions. Arrangements for enrolment and induction are carefully planned. Most students find the admissions interview process and induction informative and efficient. Some feel that the cost of materials for courses is not clearly explained by staff. The college has successfully increased recruitment of students from groups often under-represented in further education, particularly in the north of the borough. Between 1997 and 1999, the college more than doubled enrolments at the Chelmsley Wood site, from 1,250 to 2,640, where over half the students are from postcode areas that have high levels of social and economic deprivation.

52 The quality of academic tutorials is satisfactory or better. Students find tutors helpful and supportive. Each student has a personal tutor. For most part-time students, their class teacher is their tutor. Students receive both group and individual tutorial sessions. Teachers receive regular training on tutorial practice and there is a useful succinct guide on tutoring. The college has an established system for monitoring students' progress and for planning the improvement of students' performance. However, in many cases, the recording of students' progress is not sufficiently thorough and plans to improve students' performance often lack clarity. For example, staff use different definitions of what constitutes a target and most plans do not include timescales within which targets must be met. These weaknesses in tutorial support were not identified in the self-assessment report.

53 The college provides a useful range of services for providing students with additional learning support, including help with literacy and numeracy. Learning materials and equipment are adapted to meet the requirements of each student. Students can

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obtain support through timetabled group sessions, as part of their programme of study, through individual appointments or by using the learning centres at convenient times. Students receiving help from additional learning support tutors are given regular reviews of their progress. The quality of these reviews varies and some are inadequate. For example, the useful individual learning plans are not always completed. Full-time students receive a diagnostic assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills but many part-time students on substantial timetables do not, a weakness the self-assessment report did not record. Of those students that are identified as needing support, 95% obtain help. Until the inspection, the college had not monitored the extent to which this additional support is taken up. There is no formal system for informing course tutors how a student is progressing in additional support sessions.

54 The college provides an extensive range of careers services and facilities, a strength stated in the self-assessment report. The main careers area has a good range of resources and is well used by students. It is organised effectively and has up-to-date information, including software packages, books and university prospectuses. Other helpful careers services include regularly updated job boards prominently displayed throughout the college, talks from employers and a guide to Internet sites giving information on jobs. Full-time students receive careers education regularly as part of their tutorial programme, including guidance on progression to higher education. The college has a contract with the local careers service. Careers advisers give individual guidance interviews and talks to groups of students about careers. After the publication of GCSE examination results in August each year, the college, in partnership with the local careers service, offers guidance about courses and career options to students and, where appropriate, their parents.

55 Inspectors agreed that the college offers a useful range of personal and practical support services to students. These include advice on welfare rights, accommodation and travel. The student service area at the Blossomfield site is of particularly good quality and is located conveniently by the main entrance. A personal counselling service staffed by qualified counsellors is available at all sites. Where appropriate, staff refer students to other specialist counselling and advice agencies. The college offers a range of childcare arrangements. These include facilities at two of the college's sites for children aged between 18 months and five years old. The college also uses its access fund to provide financial support for some students to use childminders. Students who have used these services are pleased with their quality. The college's student liaison team offers a programme of sporting and social activities.

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General Resources

Grade 2

56 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report but considered that some weaknesses had been understated.

Key strengths

- improvements to accommodation carefully driven by the college's strategic aims
- good-quality refurbished and new buildings at the Blossomfield site
- good computing facilities
- ready access to the Internet and college intranet on all sites
- good support from staff in the library, learning centres and IT workshops
- well-stocked library with extensive opening times

Weaknesses

- poor-quality buildings at Chelmsley Wood
- shortcomings in the learning environment at Sharman's Cross
- underdeveloped formal links between the library and curriculum areas
- inadequate IT facilities in centres in the local community

57 The provision of good-quality accommodation is a key objective in the college's strategic and operational plans. The college has made major investments to improve the accommodation in order to meet the changing needs of students and to provide good facilities. The quality of some accommodation has improved significantly since the last inspection, particularly at the Blossomfield site. Each of the three sites has communication and key skill learning centres, a library and IT workshops. Accommodation for students and work areas for staff at the Blossomfield site are of good quality.

58 The site at Sharman's Cross, about a mile away, is the college's sixth form centre. In order to reduce unnecessary duplication of resources and to improve the quality of facilities for students, the college decided to move this provision from Sharman's Cross to a new purpose-built centre at the Blossomfield site. The move is scheduled to take place during this year. The accommodation at Sharman's Cross is poor. Teaching rooms and public areas are not well cared for and there is a lack of wall displays.

59 Some teaching and communal areas inside the buildings at the third site in the north of the borough at Chelmsley Wood provide a friendly and stimulating learning environment. The self-assessment report acknowledges, however, that there are weaknesses in accommodation at this site. Despite work undertaken to improve the buildings, they still look in poor condition. The college is seeking to move provision from these buildings to better-quality premises in the centre of Chelmsley Wood.

60 The new millennium building at the Blossomfield site houses a modern library and purpose-built learning centres. The college has increased the library stock to keep pace with growth in student numbers. The size of the bookstock and the level of its usage are good. Books have been effectively reorganised into subject-related study zones. Library staff are very responsive to the needs of students and staff. Many teachers use the library and benefit from the support the library staff give them in developing learning materials and using IT facilities. However, formal links between the library and curriculum areas are not well developed, a weakness recognised in the self-assessment report. The library staff use a range of performance indicators to measure the library's performance against various national benchmarks. Although the size and layout of the library are satisfactory, there is too little space for silent study. Library facilities are good at the other two sites.

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61 In line with its mission to use its resources and implement its courses flexibly, the college has created large open-plan areas in many of the new and refurbished buildings. Some of these areas have high noise levels and some are too small for the number of groups working in them. Staff are reviewing the most effective ways to use the open-plan areas and how best to manage them. The refurbished accommodation for college management and administration at the Blossomfield site is of good quality. Reception, advice and guidance areas on the Blossomfield site are spacious and modern. The reception area at Chelmsley Wood is small but welcoming. At Sharman's Cross the reception area is inadequate. The college provides a range of recreational and sporting facilities for students, staff and the community. A new sports hall has recently been completed at the Blossomfield site. There are good-quality social areas for students. Access for students with restricted mobility is good at two sites but poor at Sharman's Cross.

62 Over the last two years, the college has invested substantially in replacing out-of-date computer equipment with high specification machines. The college network has also been developed to improve further the ways IT is used for management and teaching purposes. The ratio of computers to students across the three main sites is good. There is an appropriate number of printers and scanners. Computers available for student use all have high-speed access to the Internet, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. There is a suitable code of practice for using the Internet and security software prevents access to inappropriate Internet sites. The college intranet is being developed to support wider use of learning technology in the curriculum. IT technician staff are well qualified and offer a useful helpdesk facility. There is a lack of IT in the centres in the local community.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

63 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the college's quality assurance arrangements given in the college's self-assessment report. They found some weaknesses which the college had not identified.

Key strengths

- firm commitment of staff to quality assurance
- effective staff appraisal and staff development procedures
- good internal verification arrangements
- effective complaints procedures

Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in course reviews and action-planning
- insufficient setting and use of standards, performance indicators and targets
- ineffective arrangements to assure the quality of franchised provision
- lack of annual reports for some aspects of cross-college provision

64 The college has a good range of procedures for quality assurance but they are not fully implemented. The college's commitment to improving the quality of provision is set out in the college's strategic plan and the 'quality policy'. A senior manager has overall responsibility for quality assurance and oversees arrangements for it with the help of a quality assurance steering group. Staff take individual responsibility for quality in their area. The quality assurance steering group receives annual quality reports and action plans for improvement. The 'curriculum and quality subcommittee' of the corporation receives reports from the quality assurance steering

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group. A recently revised quality assurance handbook provides a useful guide to the policy, procedures and forms to be used in relation to quality assurance. Electronic versions of the handbook are available on the college intranet. Team briefings by curriculum and service managers keep staff informed of amendments to procedures. However, many staff do not understand their role in the quality assurance procedures.

65 Annual course reviews are the foundation of the quality assurance process for the curriculum, but the quality of course reviews is uneven. Some course review reports are incomplete and lack rigour. They take insufficient account of data relating to student retention rates and achievement. In the weaker review reports, the action plans for improving provision do not identify staff responsible for taking action or specify how progress in implementing action will be monitored. A significant number of the course review reports do not include any analysis of students' opinions on the quality of provision. There is no systematic process for informing students of the main messages received through their responses to questionnaires. Employers' views are not collected and taken into account in course and service area reviews. Some course reviews make no reference to reports from external verifiers. These significant weaknesses were not mentioned in the self-assessment report.

66 The judgements in the annual reviews do not reflect whether the college has met specific standards or targets and they are not made against specific performance indicators. The setting of standards and targets and the use of performance indicators are not well developed. Some staff are unaware of targets set for their areas of work. Performance is not routinely judged against benchmarking data for the sector. Managers observe many lessons each year and have received training in lesson observation. Their detailed reports on the quality of teaching in each division do not

clearly identify strengths and weaknesses in individual curriculum areas. Procedures for moderating judgements on the quality of lessons observed are underdeveloped. Reports on the quality of provision across the college are not produced to a standard format. The lack of a common structure for the reports makes it difficult for the college to make comparisons between the quality of work in different areas. Some cross-college services, for example student services and learning development, have not produced an annual quality report.

67 In theory, the college's quality assurance arrangements cover franchised provision. However, there are no established procedures for gathering details of student retention and pass rates from franchise providers, and few performance indicators have been set for them. Franchise providers are not involved in the college's self-assessment process. Observations of lessons on franchised provision have not been undertaken.

68 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of staff development and appraisal for teaching and support staff is a strength. Overall priorities for staff development are reflected in the college's strategic objectives. All staff are appraised annually. Appraisal arrangements are well documented and effectively monitored. Appraisal helps to identify the training needs of individual staff and these are met through the staff development programme. Staff report high levels of satisfaction with training opportunities. The college has been revalidated as an Investor in People. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that internal verification procedures are effective. The procedures are clearly explained in the assessor and internal verifiers' handbooks. An internal verifiers' group provides a forum for the dissemination of good practice and discussion of issues arising from external verifiers' reports.

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69 The college charter is given to all students and is available in college reception areas. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report that students have a good understanding of their responsibilities, rights and entitlements. The college's complaints procedure is clear and investigative procedures are thorough. Response times for dealing with complaints are carefully monitored. Complaints are analysed and recommendations are made to avoid their recurrence.

70 The college's self-assessment report is the second the college has produced. The process used for its preparation was thorough. A large body of evidence was gathered to substantiate judgements. Findings from lesson observations contributed to the self-assessment of curriculum areas. All staff and governors were involved in the production of the report. Findings were subjected to moderation, which in some instances was carried out by external advisers. The self-assessment review group included governors and representatives from other organisations.

Governance

Grade 3

71 Inspectors and auditors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They considered, however, that some strengths were overstated and they found some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- governors' strong commitment to the college
- effective clerking arrangements
- comprehensive procedures to ensure openness and accountability

Weaknesses

- lack of systematic monitoring of the college's performance
- inadequate procedures for appraising senior postholders and determining their remuneration
- ineffective action to address deficiencies in monitoring of work-based learning

72 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

73 Inspectors agreed that governors are highly committed to the college. Governors' attendance at both corporation and committee meetings is good. Attendance is monitored and reported to the corporation each year and appropriate action is taken to remedy low attendance. The corporation makes good use of the wide-ranging skills and experience of its members. There are, however, no governors with expertise in

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property and the law. The corporation acknowledges that it does not have enough governors who are female or members of minority ethnic groups. The college has not advertised for governors. The search committee gives careful consideration to nominations. A specification of the expertise and experience expected of governors is publicly available. Governors clearly understand the distinction between management and governance.

74 The corporation has taken appropriate steps to implement the recent amendments to the instrument and articles of government. Membership of the corporation has been reduced to 15. The corporation has established appropriate committees to conduct its business and it has approved terms of reference for these, and suitable arrangements for elections of chairs and for determining the frequency of meetings.

75 As identified in the self-assessment report, arrangements for clerking of corporation business are good. The clerk's knowledge and independence are highly valued by governors. The clerk has an appropriate and detailed job description. The clerk is given enough time to carry out clerking duties, and receives appropriate training. The clerk organises the meetings of the corporation effectively and minutes them well. The corporation has a calendar for its meetings and those of its committees and this specifies the main areas of business to be dealt with each term.

76 The corporation has introduced good procedures to ensure its openness and accountability. This strength was not clearly identified in the self-assessment report. Codes of conduct and ethics for governors and a code of conduct for staff, including a 'whistleblowing' procedure, have been established. The governors' register of interests is properly maintained. Staff are required to disclose their financial interests as well, should these conflict with those of the college. Registers of interest

are available for public inspection upon request. The corporation has a policy on confidentiality but this does not specify the time limits on items of corporation business classed as confidential. Corporation minutes are available on the college intranet and in the college's libraries.

77 Governors recognised in the self-assessment report that they do not systematically monitor the college's performance. Although governors play a significant part in the development of strategic and operational plans, they do not receive adequate or timely information to allow them to monitor achievement of the requisite milestones in implementing the plans. In addition, the corporation has not systematically reviewed students' achievements and retention rates against national benchmarks.

78 Governors monitor the financial position of the college through scrutiny of monthly monitoring statements at meetings of the finance and policy committee and in corporation meetings. In the self-assessment report, the strength of the corporation's financial monitoring was overstated. Monitoring reports on franchised provision and the activities of the college's companies are not standard agenda items at meetings. In September 1998, governors identified a lack of detail in reporting of work-based learning activity and expressed concerns about whether planned units were being achieved or not. They made repeated requests for better information but it was almost a year before effective action was taken to identify the shortfall in this activity and quantify its financial impact.

79 The self-assessment report does not acknowledge that the appraisal process for senior postholders, through which their remuneration is determined, has not been formalised. An external consultant conducted the last appraisal process, based on objectives broadly derived from the strategic plan. Findings from the appraisals were considered

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by the remuneration committee but not reported to the full corporation. The self-assessment report does not mention that the remuneration committee is inappropriately clerked by a governor.

80 There are induction arrangements to help new governors but there is no systematic approach to the identification of the training needs of individual governors, and to ways of meeting them. Governors have attended useful development days to consider areas of corporate strategy, governance and self-assessment. Governors have not developed formal links with curriculum areas although some have had involvement in particular areas, for example, engineering.

Management

Grade 3

81 Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report but considered that some were overstated. They found additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- strong commitment by staff to fulfilling the college's mission and strategic objectives
- effective internal communications
- comprehensive and effective liaison with external organisations
- good support for budget holders

Weaknesses

- insufficient monitoring of progress towards reaching targets
- inadequate management information
- ineffective measures to address students' poor achievements
- inadequate systems to quantify the shortfall in provision

82 The management structure of the college was revised in August 1999. The curriculum is managed by four divisions: arts; business; services and technology. Divisions are complemented by a comprehensive range of service teams and support units. At the time of the inspection, it was too early to assess the effectiveness of the new structure. The senior management team comprises 14 managers and meets fortnightly. There is a large number of appropriate steering groups and cross-college committees, most of which have terms of reference. Some lines of accountability are not clearly understood by staff.

83 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that staff have a good understanding of the college's mission and a strong commitment to openness, making the college accessible to all, and the achievement of its excellence. The six strategic objectives are supported by staff and relate to all the college's work. The strategic plan, updated in 1999, is a brief and clear document. It contains key targets, although some are insufficiently defined or quantified. All staff have the opportunity to contribute to the strategic planning process.

84 The college's monitoring of achievements against targets is inadequate. The college recognises that it did not identify, until after the end of the 1998-99 financial year, that it had underachieved its funding target by approximately 90,000 FEFC funding units. Internal and external reports during the year had indicated that funding targets would be met. Many development plans for curriculum and support areas lack measurable objectives, contain insufficient assessment of previous performance and include inadequate processes for assessing progress. The senior management team does not systematically monitor the college's performance.

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85 The college has taken some measures to improve the level of students' achievements but these have not been sufficiently effective. In 1996-97 and 1997-98, the percentage of students who achieved their qualification aims was well below the national average. Despite efforts to improve students' achievements in some areas, achievement rates overall remain poor.

86 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that communications are effective. The management style of the college is open and consultative. A weekly newsletter in printed and electronic format is distributed to all staff with a modified version available to students. Other regular bulletins include one from the library and one for staff engaged in work-based provision. Nearly all staff have access to the college intranet. Electronic mail is effectively used throughout the college. Monthly team briefing sessions ensure that staff are informed of current developments. The principal addresses all staff at least twice a year. A comprehensive programme of meetings is prepared at the beginning of each academic year. Timetables are structured to enable staff to attend relevant meetings.

87 The self-assessment report identified that data on students were not always ready when needed. Many statistical returns to the FEFC have been late. The college recognises that some of the problems with their management information system have been due to under-investment and inadequate levels of staffing. Staff lack confidence in the accuracy of centrally produced college data, particularly in relation to students following non-traditional modes of study or franchised provision. Some staff make little use of management information for planning and monitoring purposes. The college has taken steps to improve the effectiveness of its management information system.

88 The college has productive links with a wide range of partner organisations. Effective liaison with local schools helps to facilitate pupils' smooth progression to college and encourage wider participation. The college works closely with community education providers, with six institutions of higher education and with an extensive range of local and national companies. Good working relations exist with the TEC and the college is an active and valued member of the Solihull Lifelong Learning Partnership.

89 The college's equal opportunities policy is complemented by a code of practice, a disability statement and related policies. An equal opportunities steering group, supported by two subgroups, has responsibility for the implementation of the policies and procedures for upholding equality of opportunity. The college does not produce an annual report on equal opportunities and there is no systematic reporting on equal opportunities to the corporation.

90 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The head of finance is a qualified accountant and is supported by a well-qualified and appropriately resourced finance team. Budget holders receive good support from the finance team, in terms of regular reports showing committed expenditure and positive responses to queries. The senior management team reviews monitoring statements monthly. Financial performance indicators are included in financial forecasts at the start of the financial year. However, there are no routine reports on performance against these indicators in the monthly financial monitoring statements or revised forecasts. The monitoring statements do not routinely include analysis of franchised provision and the activity of the college's companies. Management did not respond appropriately to governors' concerns about the reporting on work-based learning activity. A substantial shortfall in income from

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this activity, which will have an impact on the college's financial health, was identified after a significant delay. When the shortfall was identified, the college promptly started to plan improvements to its monitoring and reporting systems.

Conclusions

91 The self-assessment report prepared for the inspection was the second comprehensive self-assessment report the college has produced. It proved useful in planning the inspection. Governors and all staff were involved in the self-assessment process. The report was clearly presented and it contained an extensive amount of information. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the report and found several strengths the college had not identified. They also found weaknesses that were either understated or not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with only one of the grades for curriculum areas and with none of the grades for cross-college areas of provision. Most grades awarded by inspectors were one grade below those given by the college and two were more than one grade below.

92 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)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	1
16-18 years	16
19-24 years	18
25+ years	64
Not known	1
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1999)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation)	28
Level 2 (intermediate)	27
Level 3 (advanced)	25
Level 4/5 (higher)	3
Non-schedule 2	17
Total	100

Source: college data

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

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision (%)</i>
Science	766	3,773	13
Agriculture	105	178	1
Construction	27	88	0
Engineering	327	4,619	14
Business	441	7,896	23
Hotel and catering	312	2,340	8
Health and community care	605	3,189	11
Art and design	578	2,321	8
Humanities	1,137	6,140	20
Basic education	31	738	2
Total	4,329	31,282	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 27% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (October 1999)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	203	201	0	404
Supporting direct learning contact	64	0	0	64
Other support	291	6	35	332
Total	558	207	35	800

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£19,228,000	£19,218,000	£21,090,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£16.60	£15.26	£16.20
Payroll as a proportion of income	68%	70%	69%
Achievement of funding target	116%	101%	90%
Diversity of income	29%	27%	32%
Operating surplus	£361,000	£479,000	-£886,000

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

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

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

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

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

Operating surplus - Council Circular 98/43 (1997), college audited accounts (1998), college (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	283	485	367	1,105	2,541	1,937
	Retention (%)	93	88	86	95	90	81
	Achievement (%)	18	45	74	27	34	87
2	Number of starters	1,625	1,662	1,602	1,750	3,094	2,184
	Retention (%)	84	86	87	91	92	91
	Achievement (%)	29	35	60	23	28	61
3	Number of starters	1,854	1,599	1,339	2,427	4,426	2,724
	Retention (%)	91	80	74	93	94	86
	Achievement (%)	44	45	66	21	25	55
4 or 5	Number of starters	22	19	13	508	549	676
	Retention (%)	86	95	69	97	92	59
	Achievement (%)	11	50	38	21	25	43
Short courses	Number of starters	756	2,682	2,807	19,063	10,563	11,977
	Retention (%)	99	98	97	99	98	94
	Achievement (%)	73	83	84	89	51	73
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	640	1,503	1,349	7,072	8,026	8,958
	Retention (%)	92	87	87	98	93	92
	Achievement (%)	84	41	36	88	32	44

Source: ISR

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