

Somerset College of Arts and Technology

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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

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

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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

Somerset College of Arts and Technology

South West Region

Inspected November 1999

Somerset College of Arts and Technology is a general further education college principally serving the population of Taunton and the surrounding area. The college offers a broad range of courses in the 10 FEFC programme areas. Provision in five of these was inspected. The college's first self-assessment report was produced for the inspection. The college carried out a thorough self-assessment process involving staff and governors and produced a clear report. Inspectors agreed with all five of the college's assessments of the curriculum areas inspected and four out of five assessments of aspects of cross-college provision.

The college has made a significant contribution to widening participation in education. It effectively integrates students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with its full range of programmes. The tutorial and learning support for all students has improved since the last inspection. Teaching and learning is effective in many theory and practical lessons. There are poor achievements on some courses and in several areas there are low levels of retention. Some lessons are affected by lateness and poor attendance. Good specialist resources, a well-stocked resource centre and modern computers with specialist software effectively support teaching and learning. The college has

some poor-quality buildings and unsatisfactory classrooms, although it has improved aspects of its accommodation since the last inspection. A significant proportion of the accommodation is not accessible to people with restricted mobility. Governors have guided the college through a period of change. They have good links with curriculum and support areas. However, they have not been sufficiently rigorous in their oversight of the college's financial position. Management teams are developing well and communications are effective. There are productive links with external organisations. Changes to quality assurance systems have yet to result in significant improvements in teaching and learning or in students' achievements. The college should address: low retention and achievement on some programmes; the unreliability of some data on students' achievements; poor attendance and lateness in some areas; insufficient monitoring of tutorial programmes; the underdeveloped use of targets and performance indicators; the lack of comprehensive staff appraisal; weaknesses in financial forecasting; weaknesses in the management of franchised provision; the insufficient oversight by the corporation of the college's financial position; and the poor quality of much of the accommodation.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Construction	2	Support for students	2
Business	3	General resources	3
Hospitality and catering	3	Quality assurance	3
Art and design	2	Governance	3
Humanities	3	Management	3

The College and its Mission

1 Somerset College of Arts and Technology is a general further education college serving Taunton, the county of Somerset and parts of east Devon. It was established in 1974 following the merger of Somerset College of Arts and Taunton Technical College. Over 80% of students are based at the main site in Wellington Road, west Taunton, about half a mile from the town centre. Most accommodation at Wellington Road was purpose built between 1960 and 1980. There are three further sites in Taunton: the Bishops Hull Annexe, the Collinson Centre and the Staplegrove Centre. The Collinson Centre is to close shortly and a new business centre will open in central Taunton in 2000. The college has residential accommodation for 190 students 3 miles from the college in Staplehay to the south east of Taunton. About 12% of college provision is delivered by franchise partners in the South West region, for example in Seaton, Ashburton and Newton Abbot.

2 The district of Taunton Deane, which includes the county town of Taunton, has a population of 100,000. It is one of the fastest growing regions of the United Kingdom. However, there are pockets of high unemployment and socio-economic deprivation in some rural areas. The local economy is diverse and generally sound, although many businesses in the agriculture sector are experiencing economic problems. In general, fewer firms are at financial risk than is the case regionally or nationally. The key industrial sectors are engineering, food processing, packaging, printing, publishing and information technology (IT). Employers in the area are mainly small businesses. Half employ one to four people. Of the 17,000 businesses large enough to be registered for value-added tax, only 84 employ over 200 people.

3 The college offers courses in all 10 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas. There are courses at all levels from basic skills to postgraduate. The college also has a managing agency offering modern apprenticeships, New Deal and national traineeships. In 1998-99, the college enrolled over 13,000 students, of whom 83% were part time. The majority of students were aged 19 or over. The college employs 323 full-time equivalent staff who teach or directly support learning, and 118 full-time equivalent administrative staff. There are three members of the executive: the principal and chief executive; the deputy principal and director of curriculum; and the deputy chief executive and director of finance. There are 10 directors responsible for functional management of the organisation. Curriculum management is the responsibility of 16 heads of school.

4 The college has links with a range of local businesses, community organisations and schools. There are four general further education colleges within 25 miles of the college at Bridgewater, Street, Yeovil and Tiverton. There is a sixth form college in Taunton. The closest university is in Exeter. Achievements at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) in Somerset's schools are better than the national average. In 1999, 53% of year 11 pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, compared with 48% nationally.

5 The college's mission is 'to make a significant contribution to the economic, cultural and social life of Somerset, the south west and the United Kingdom through being a learning organisation and creating a broad range of high standard learning opportunities'. Its vision is to be the lead provider of further and higher education in Somerset. The college expresses its core values as integrity, customer focus, responsiveness, creativity, inclusivity and commitment.

Context

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 29 November 1999. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. Some data on students' achievements drawn from the college's individualised student record (ISR) returns to the FEFC proved to be unreliable. Consequently, the report contains some incomplete tables of students' achievements. Inspectors based their judgements on both college data and ISR data.

7 The inspection was carried out by a team of 11 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 53 days. It included inspection of provision delivered by franchise partners based in Seaton and Ashburton. Meetings were held with governors, managers, employers, college staff and students. Meetings were also held with managers, staff and students at franchise centres. Inspectors observed 72 lessons and examined students' work and college documentation.

8 Four inspectors from the Training Standards Council (TSC) worked with the inspection team during the inspection. The TSC inspectors concentrated on work-based training supported by the college in engineering, hairdressing and business administration. They spent 20 days based at the college. They observed instruction sessions and interviewed trainees, employers and college staff. Where it was appropriate to the FEFC inspection framework, evidence gathered by TSC inspectors was taken into account when grading college provision.

9 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, 61% were judged to be good or outstanding. This figure is below the average of 65% for all lessons observed by inspectors in 1998-99.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	1	7	2	0	0	10
GCSE	1	2	5	1	0	9
GNVQ	1	3	1	1	0	6
NVQ	1	9	7	2	0	19
Other vocational	4	7	8	1	0	20
Other	2	6	0	0	0	8
Total (No.)	10	34	23	5	0	72
Total (%)	14	47	32	7	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

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

Context

10 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 (%)
Somerset College of Arts and Technology	11.3	77
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

Construction

Grade 2

11 Inspectors observed 12 lessons covering all areas of construction crafts and national certificates and diplomas in construction and land surveying. Inspectors agreed with some of the college's judgements about strengths and weaknesses, but considered that the self-assessment report placed insufficient emphasis on students' achievements.

Key strengths

- good achievement rates on most programmes
- the high standard of teaching
- the effective development of key skills
- good support for students with learning difficulties
- the high standard of students' written and practical work
- good specialist resources

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on some programmes
- failure to mark some students' work in conformity with awarding bodies' requirements

12 A wide range of provision, from pre-national vocational qualification (NVQ) construction crafts to an honours degree in building, is offered to students. Enrolments on the NVQ level 2 plumbing and NVQ level 2 painting and decorating programmes have steadily increased over the last three years. In the same period there has been a decline in enrolments on the NVQ level 3 plumbing course and the national diploma in surveying. The school has no clear marketing strategy, although good links exist with the Somerset Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and the Construction Industry Training Board. Courses are provided

through a number of managing agents for trainees using training credits. Links with higher education institutions are expanding. The college is active in promoting careers in construction. It offers 'taster' courses to year 10 and 11 pupils, accredited programmes for disaffected 14 to 16 year olds and 'on-site' NVQ level 1 courses in bricklaying at two local schools in partnership with local construction companies.

13 Construction provision is well managed. There are regular course team meetings. The merging of the former schools of construction professions and construction crafts in January 1999 into a single school has enabled students and staff to work together. However, it has not yet led to an increase in students' progression from craft to technician courses. The take-up of progression opportunities within the school remains low. Full-time students have a one-week industrial placement in each year of their course. Tutors monitor their progress during the placements. Visits to industrial sites are also arranged for full-time students.

14 Teaching and learning activities are planned effectively. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. Good schemes of work are closely related to syllabus requirements. Almost all of the observed lessons were good or outstanding. Teachers make use of an appropriate range of teaching methods, including demonstrations to improve students' understanding of construction principles. Theory is taught with reference to its industrial context. Practical work is carried out safely and competently. Assignments and laboratory worksheets are set at an appropriate level and enable students to develop a suitable range of key skills. One national diploma assignment was enhanced by an element of competition between the students. They designed and constructed a variety of beams made of balsa wood. They then tested the beams to destruction and calculated the efficiency factor. A computer programme was

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used to help them to optimise the shape of their beams. Teachers make appropriate arrangements for students who have difficulty with numeracy or communication to receive additional help. Students who experience difficulties with the technical aspects of their programmes are helped through a combination of in-class support and one-to-one tutorials.

15 Students complete written work to a high standard. For example, a group of students designed self-contained living units for a sheltered housing project. They prepared a feasibility study and produced high-quality working drawings using computer-aided design. Laboratory reports and portfolios of evidence are well presented. Teachers assess students' work regularly. Some of the assessed work is internally verified. Some written feedback to students is constructive and helpful, but this is not always the case. Numerical marking is used to assess students' work. This is contrary to the awarding bodies' requirements that assessments are graded by reference to specific criteria. In the last few years, construction students have won regional and national prizes. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that achievement rates for some programmes are good and above national averages. In contrast, the achievement rate for the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) 6000 in construction crafts supplementary studies has fallen over the last three years. Retention rates are above average for some programmes, but are unsatisfactory on others. For example, in 1997 and 1998, retention rates on the national diploma in construction were 57% and 56%, respectively. These rates are 11% below national averages. There was no reference to retention rates in the self-assessment report.

16 Teachers are appropriately qualified and have good industrial experience. Most have assessor and verifier qualifications. Construction provision is located in purpose-built accommodation. Classrooms are of good size, well decorated and suitably

equipped. Practical training and assessment facilities enable teachers to simulate realistic working environments. For example, carpentry and joinery students have constructed a large roof truss. Students use modern computing facilities with up-to-date industrial standard software for computer-aided design, cartography, structural design and project management. There are specialist laboratories for construction science and materials. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that construction facilities are a strength.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ construction crafts	2	Number of starters	*	*	153
		Retention (%)	*	*	65
		Achievement (%)	*	*	60
NVQ construction crafts	3	Number of starters	*	*	44
		Retention (%)	*	*	93
		Achievement (%)	*	*	80
National certificates and diplomas	3	Number of starters	22	*	25
		Retention (%)	55	*	64
		Achievement (%)	92	*	80
Chartered Institute of Building certificate in site management	3	Number of starters	20	40	18
		Retention (%)	95	90	72
		Achievement (%)	47	92	100

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 3

17 Inspectors observed 18 lessons covering business studies, management, secretarial and public service programmes. Franchised provision in Seaton, Ashburton and Newton Abbot was inspected. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report, but the college failed to identify weaknesses in its franchised provision. Inspectors from the TSC observed work-based training in business administration for 16 youth trainees.

Key strengths

- much well-planned and effective teaching
- good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- effective use of the resource centre
- well-managed programmes at school and programme team level
- flexible arrangements for adults to return to study

Weaknesses

- below average retention on some programmes
- unsatisfactory assessment practice on the national diploma in public service
- unsatisfactory achievement rates on some franchised programmes
- incomplete data on franchised provision
- the failure of franchise partners to encourage students to seek appropriate accreditation

18 Two schools, the school of business and IT and the management school, teach most of the college's business studies programmes. In addition, some courses are provided under franchised arrangements with adult education centres. The college offers general national

vocational qualification (GNVQ) business programmes at intermediate and advanced level, the BTEC national diploma in public service, part-time professional courses in business, management, marketing, personnel and training, and a wide range of full-time and part-time secretarial and business administration programmes. The framework for many of these programmes is sufficiently flexible to appeal to adults with a range of commitments. Programmes range from level 2 to higher education. Level 1 programmes have been discontinued following several years of low recruitment and poor achievements. Student numbers on other programmes are generally increasing. In part, this is due to an expansion of programmes delivered by the school of management in partnership with employers.

19 The business curriculum is well managed. Both heads of school have an open management style. Course leaders carry out their roles with professionalism and enthusiasm. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that, in both schools, there are good working relationships between staff and students. Teachers also work well with learning support staff. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are included on business studies courses and given good support. One blind student benefits from specialist resources and effective additional support from specialist staff. Teachers are well qualified. Two recent appointments to the management school improve the proportion of staff with recent commercial and professional experience. Several staff are studying for postgraduate or other qualifications as part of their professional development.

20 Most teaching is well planned and effective. In many lessons, enthusiastic teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods to involve and motivate students. In one lesson, public service students were encouraged to draw on personal experiences to improve their understanding of how the lifestyles of different social groups might affect the long-term health

Curriculum Areas

of those groups. In another lesson, for part-time students, the teacher involved the whole class in an examination of their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to their job role. In some weaker lessons, teachers were unable to maintain the interest of all the students. In one lesson, attended by less than half of the students in the class, the teacher taught in a formal way that was inappropriate for so few students. In another lesson, the teacher confused the students by presenting them with factually inaccurate information.

21 Pass rates on some programmes are above the national average, for example, the Association of Accounting Technicians intermediate level, and the private secretary's certificate. Some secretarial and business administration students achieve qualifications which are additional to their main goal. Public service students also achieve additional qualifications, for example the community sports leader award. On many programmes retention rates are below the national average, for example, the GNVQ advanced programme and the general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) business studies. Students' portfolios, written work and project work on continuously assessed programmes, are of an appropriate level for the grades awarded. Detailed records of students' progress are maintained. They include students' own judgements on the quality of their work. This good practice is supported by positive comments in external verifiers' reports. The self-assessment report identified the poor assessment practice on the national diploma in public services. Action has been taken to address this. This programme has suffered from falling enrolments and unsatisfactory retention and achievement rates. Achievements on the NVQ management programme were also unsatisfactory and the programme has been discontinued.

22 Over one quarter of the business studies provision is taught by franchise partners. Inspectors were unable to obtain complete and reliable achievement data for one major franchise partner for 1996-97 and 1997-98. The data that are available indicate that retention levels are generally high, but achievement rates for some programmes are unsatisfactory. This is partly due to the failure of the franchise partners to overcome the reluctance of many adults to follow courses that would give them accreditation for the IT skills that they have acquired. IT facilities on franchise partners' main sites are good, although IT and library facilities are lacking at some of the centres used by the franchise partners. Some programmes run with low numbers. In one case, this led to the combination of a business studies course with an IT course, a compromise which does not meet the needs of some of the students.

23 Specialist facilities on the main site are suitable for business, secretarial, management and IT courses. The management centre provides high-quality accommodation. The resource centre has a good stock of books, magazines, CD-ROMs and other resources. Tutors based in the centre work well with staff and students to support assignment and project work. Students make good use of the Internet.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Legal secretaries certificate	2	Number of starters	15	20	27
		Retention (%)	93	100	96
		Achievement (%)	100	95	100
GNVQ intermediate business studies	2	Number of starters	20	17	11
		Retention (%)	65	88	91
		Achievement (%)	85	100	55
GNVQ advanced business studies	3	Number of starters	23	26	38
		Retention (%)	61	54	68
		Achievement (%)	64	57	84
Association of Accounting Technicians intermediate NVQ	3	Number of starters	12	23	27
		Retention (%)	92	57	93
		Achievement (%)	55	75	48
National diploma in public service	3	Number of starters	*	14	**
		Retention (%)	*	29	**
		Achievement (%)	*	25	**
GCE A level business studies	3	Number of starters	26	14	21
		Retention (%)	77	57	72
		Achievement (%)	70	75	85

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

*course not running

**too few students for tabular presentation

Curriculum Areas

Hospitality and Catering

Grade 3

24 Inspectors observed 11 lessons covering the provision in hospitality and catering. These included theory and practical lessons, production work and tutorials. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- modular programme structure that meets individual needs
- effective integration of students with learning difficulties
- good opportunities for work experience
- the relevance of assignments to industrial practice
- high level of attendance at lessons

Weaknesses

- failure of teachers to give sufficient attention to basic catering skills
- low retention and achievement on NVQ programmes
- some poor-quality kitchens, classrooms and service areas
- inaccessibility of the training restaurant for people with restricted mobility

25 Most of the theory and practical lessons observed by inspectors were satisfactory. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that teachers maintain the interest and enthusiasm of students. Teachers use an appropriate variety of methods, including group work and role-play. In the better lessons, they ensure that students make good use of their personal experience. Practical lessons with students from different year groups are well managed. In some lessons, teachers' effective questioning encouraged students to contribute to

discussions. At the end of most theory and practical lessons students have the opportunity to evaluate the lesson in a brief meeting with their teacher. Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment judgement that most teaching is of a high standard. In practical lessons insufficient attention was paid to basic catering skills such as bread roll service, glassware handling, hotplate techniques and basic hygiene. In these lessons, supervision was not sufficiently attentive and students' errors were not always corrected. In a few theory lessons, teachers did not make effective use of the teaching resources available. For example, in one lesson, handwritten overhead projector slides were very difficult to read.

26 Hospitality and catering teaching is based on a modular structure. Programmes are structured in five-week modules. Students may join a programme at the start of any five-week period. Assessment takes place at the end of each module. These flexible arrangements effectively meet students' individual needs. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well integrated with catering programmes. NVQ level 1 students said how much they looked forward to their practical lesson in the staff restaurant. All students have good opportunities to develop their numeracy and communication skills. Work experience is available and is often provided locally, although some students are able to undertake their work experience in Jersey. Where students complete competences in the workplace, there are witness statements and appropriate records in students' portfolios. Assignments are set at the appropriate level and are relevant to industrial practice. However, some teachers' marking of students' work does not correct spelling and grammatical errors.

27 There are low levels of retention and achievement on some NVQ programmes. Unreliable ISR data about the final outcome of students who did not complete within the year prevents tabular presentation of some retention

Curriculum Areas

rates and pass rates. In 1997-98, of the 63 students who started the NVQ level 2 food production programme, only 17 successfully completed within the year. In 1998-99, of the 43 students who started the course, only six completed within the year, although a further 11 subsequently achieved the qualification. On the national diploma in hotel and catering, in both 1996-97 and 1997-98, retention rates and pass rates were at, or above, the national average. Students' attendance at lessons observed by inspectors was good at 86%. Students' work experience helps them to build effective relationships with local hotels, restaurants and charity organisations. They become involved in a range of projects.

28 Teachers have appropriate qualifications. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that they lack recent industrial experience, although they have good links with local industry and actively promote the school of hospitality and catering in the local area. The self-assessment action plan for the school provides for two staff to undertake industrial updating in Jersey next summer.

Some basic food hygiene training is given by a local franchise partner. The management and quality assurance of this provision is effective and students' achievements are good.

29 Classrooms, kitchens and service areas are rather dreary and in need of redecoration. In one kitchen, three ovens were out of commission. Some areas are not large enough for full groups of students. There are not always enough working surfaces for food preparation. Funds have been allocated to improve resources and some new cook/freeze equipment arrived during the inspection. There is no passenger lift to the public restaurant on the top floor. It is not easily accessible for many of the elderly visitors who use these facilities. Some library stock in the resource centre is out of date and some is little used. Students enjoy good access to computers and have a dedicated room in the school for classroom and 'drop-in' use. The specialist software is imaginative and up to date and effectively supports theory work and enables students to study on their own.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ food service	2	Number of starters	*	*	48
		Retention (%)	*	*	77
		Achievement (%)	*	*	54
NVQ food production and preparation	2	Number of starters	35	63	43
		Retention (%)	*	*	50
		Achievement (%)	*	*	77
National diploma in hotel and catering operations	3	Number of starters	14	20	16
		Retention (%)	93	80	75
		Achievement (%)	100	94	100
National licensees certificate short courses	3	Number of starters	189	232	189
		Retention (%)	100	100	100
		Achievement (%)	98	86	94

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

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Art and Design

Grade 2

30 The inspection covered visual arts and design provision in four of the college's schools. Courses inspected included access to higher education, C&G, GNVQs, national diplomas and GCE A level. Twelve lessons were observed. Inspectors largely agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified by the college in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- well-planned courses and lessons
- teaching of high quality
- clear and imaginative assignment briefs
- regular and fair assessment with prompt feedback to students
- the high standard of practical work
- the high level of achievement of most students completing courses
- broad range of programmes with good opportunities for progression

Weaknesses

- poor attendance and punctuality
- low retention on the national diploma design fashion course
- some small workshops and a lack of storage space for three-dimensional design work

31 There is a wide range of vocational full-time and part-time courses in the visual arts and design. Students also have good opportunities to obtain qualifications in addition to those for their main courses of study. For example, an increasing number of students are achieving computer literacy qualifications. Some students also study a GCE A level. In 1999, 19 students passed a GCE A level, in addition to their vocational art and design qualification. The curriculum area contributes fully to the college's objective of widening

participation. Well-thought-out programmes and timetables maximise opportunities for adult students to return to study. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are effectively integrated with vocational courses. There are also separate specialist courses for students with learning difficulties. There are well-structured opportunities for progression within the college and to higher education courses at other institutions. The school of design and fine arts has some innovative international links. In particular, the Norwegian art and design curriculum is taught to 15 full-time Norwegian students. These students are effectively integrated with three national diploma groups. They receive additional tutorial and pastoral support. Links with Norway are maintained through regular video-conferencing sessions.

32 Students and staff clearly enjoy teaching and learning. Students value the support they receive from their teachers. There is strong one-to-one tutorial support. Teaching is carefully planned. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that courses are well structured and have clear schemes of work. On one course, informative text in student assignment briefs is brought to life by imaginative illustrations and images. On all the programmes inspected there are similar examples of good project briefs. Practical teaching is effective. Students prepare well for sessions by producing comprehensive written and visual research notes. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that there are clear and fair criteria for the assessment of students' work. Another strength, which is appreciated by students across the range of provision, is the prompt return of assessed work and the valuable feedback given by teachers.

33 Students on many courses produce a high standard of written and practical work. The majority of students who complete their courses achieve their qualifications. For example, in 1998-99, the one-year foundation art and design course had a 100% pass rate. Most of these

Curriculum Areas

students progressed to their first choice higher education destination. The National Open College Network (NOCN) courses have grown rapidly over three years. Student numbers on the level 2 course have risen from 23 to 171 over this period. At level 3 there has also been a significant increase in enrolments and both achievement and retention figures are above national averages. Retention rates are unsatisfactory on a few courses. For example, retention on the national diploma design fashion course was almost 50% below the national average in both 1997 and 1998. Retention improved in 1999, but it remained below the national average. The self-assessment report noted that poor attendance and punctuality adversely affected teaching and learning. Attendance at lessons observed by inspectors

was 79%. In some lessons, less than half the students were present. This had a detrimental effect on group activities.

34 Some workshops and studios are well equipped and space is well utilised. Large studios and practical workshops have been partitioned. On occasions, noise from adjoining areas can be distracting for both students and staff. In the three-dimensional design area some workshops are too small for the size of groups using them and there is a lack of storage space. Most full-time students are allocated a base room. Students on the main site have easy access to the art and design resource centre, which is well equipped with modern computers with industrial standard software. The library is well stocked with journals and periodicals. Technician support for the curriculum area is barely adequate following the recent growth in the number of students on both further and higher education courses.

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
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	Number of starters	13	16	**
		Retention (%)	69	81	**
		Achievement (%)	44	77	**
National diploma fashion	3	Number of starters	13	13	16
		Retention (%)	38	*	63
		Achievement (%)	80	*	100
National diploma for foundation studies in art and design	3	Number of starters	48	56	60
		Retention (%)	94	86	85
		Achievement (%)	96	96	100
National diploma art and design	3	Number of starters	64	36	34
		Retention (%)	*	78	70
		Achievement (%)	*	89	96
GCE A level photography (two years)	3	Number of starters	17	22	10
		Retention (%)	*	64	30
		Achievement (%)	*	93	100
GCE A level art (techniques) (one year)	3	Number of starters	16	32	28
		Retention	100	91	89
		Achievement	88	79	68

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

*data unreliable

**too few students for tabular presentation

Curriculum Areas

Humanities

Grade 3

35 Inspectors observed 19 lessons covering GCE A level and GCSE English language, English literature, psychology, sociology and access provision. The inspection included franchised provision in Seaton and Ashburton. Inspectors agreed with some strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning identified in the self-assessment report. Weaknesses in students' achievements were understated and there were few references to franchised provision.

Key strengths

- much well-structured and lively teaching
- detailed, critical and helpful subject tutorials
- good support from the resource centre

Weaknesses

- low and declining levels of retention
- low attendance in many lessons
- too little contact with teachers from franchised provision centres
- some poor accommodation

36 Most of the courses inspected are offered as both day and evening provision. Over 90 students study GCSE English. Half of these are full-time 16 to 19 year olds, the remainder are full-time or part-time adult students. On many GCSE and GCE A level social science courses, failure to retain students beyond their first year results in small second-year groups. Several groups have less than 10 students. English literature has only seven first-year and two second-year students. They are taught together in one class. In 1999-2000, 52 students enrolled on English and social science programmes with franchise partners in Seaton and Ashburton.

37 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that there is a good rapport between staff and students. Most lessons are well prepared and structured to sustain students' interest. Teachers' explanations of complex ideas were clear and interesting. Teachers use a variety of appropriate teaching methods, including lively question and answer sessions, work in pairs and groups and presentations by students. In one lesson, GCSE English students studying Shakespeare's *Macbeth* argued enthusiastically for Macbeth's status as a tragic hero having been stimulated by the teacher's comparison with Sophocle's *Oedipus*. In a lesson on the access course, students working in groups examined crime statistics in order to trace the development of policies to fight crime. Individual students then reported back effectively. Psychology students studying the investigation of the human brain had the opportunity to use brain scan negatives.

38 Teachers readily help students who need support with their work. Tutorials leading to the completion of GCE A level English language coursework were detailed and critical and clearly valued by students. The self-assessment report identified as weaknesses the lack of involvement of students in classroom activity in some lessons, and the failure of teachers to check students' learning. Inspectors agreed with these weaknesses. In addition, in some lessons teachers allowed group activities to go on for too long or failed to make sure that students were concentrating on the tasks set. At times, teachers talked too much and failed to make students work hard enough. Students are enthusiastic participants in class discussions, and enjoy them. Most students' written work is well organised and of an appropriate standard. A few pieces are particularly good. One student's sociology GCE A level coursework project on 'gender and everyday social situations' was short-listed in 1999 for the national coursework award. In 1999, GCSE examination results were close to, or above,

Curriculum Areas

national averages. In GCSE English language 52% achieved A to C grades in 1999. In sociology and psychology, pass rates were 50% and 62%, respectively. Although data on students' prior achievements are not systematically analysed, it is clear that many students have low achievements when they enrol at the college. GCE A level pass rates are generally satisfactory. GCE A level English literature results have declined during the last three years, but remain at the national average. Sociology GCE A level pass rates were below the national average in 1997 and 1998, but improved considerably in 1999. In psychology pass rates have been consistently below the national average. There are low levels of retention on the majority of courses. Retention on GCSE courses has declined over the last three years. The self-assessment report comments on weaknesses in retention, but it does not include sufficient analysis. Attendance at a number of lessons was poor. Overall the attendance at lessons observed by inspectors was 73%.

39 Communication between teachers on the main site is good. Sharing of good practice and teamwork has contributed to well-planned courses and lessons. However, the lack of contact between college staff and teachers working for franchise partners is unsatisfactory. Almost all teachers are qualified. All teaching for the subjects that were inspected takes place in huts. Two of these are small and draughty. The rooms are adequately furnished and decorated with posters and students' work. The resource centre provides a good stock of resources for the social sciences. There is a wide range of books, videos and IT facilities. Video and audio recorders are readily available to support teaching.

Curriculum Areas

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE English language	2	Number of starters	197	170	173
		Retention (%)	78	67	61
		Achievement (%)	51	60	52
GCSE psychology	2	Number of starters	65	52	53
		Retention (%)	54	62	55
		Achievement (%)	74	69	62
GCSE sociology	2	Number of starters	26	26	19
		Retention (%)	54	50	32
		Achievement (%)	71	77	70
GCE A level English language	3	Number of starters	73	76	59
		Retention (%)	*	*	61
		Achievement (%)	*	*	81
GCE A level English literature	3	Number of starters	35	29	48
		Retention (%)	63	86	58
		Achievement (%)	91	88	82
GCE A level psychology	3	Number of starters	95	70	51
		Retention (%)	68	58	67
		Achievement (%)	66	70	51
GCE A level sociology	3	Number of starters	68	44	41
		Retention (%)	74	*	61
		Achievement (%)	48	*	80

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

*data unreliable

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

40 Inspectors considered that the self-assessment report was detailed and useful. They agreed with most of the college's judgements.

Key strengths

- effective liaison with schools
- good relations with community organisations
- comprehensive induction of full-time and part-time students
- well-managed and responsive learning support service
- good support for and integration of students with sensory and physical impairments and mental health problems
- well-regarded careers, welfare, counselling and chaplaincy services

Weaknesses

- little systematic monitoring of the quality of tutorials
- some inadequacies in tutorial provision
- insufficiently detailed individual learning plans for students receiving additional learning support

41 The college has reorganised and improved its support for students since the last inspection. There is much good practice. However, the systems necessary to ensure that high-quality support is consistently available to all students are not yet in place.

42 There are sound arrangements to provide guidance for students before they apply to the college. The schools liaison officer co-ordinates links with local schools. Open evenings and 'taster' days provide good opportunities for school pupils to visit the college. Pupils appreciate the college workshops on application

procedures. The college is well represented at schools' careers evenings. Effective advice from course tutors, which focuses on individuals' needs, enables applicants to make well-informed decisions about their course of study. Publicity information is widely distributed, although some foundation level course leaflets are difficult for students to understand.

43 The college has valuable partnerships with community groups. This has significantly increased the participation of adult students from groups who were previously under-represented at the college. For example, links with the National Health Service Trust and social services department have increased the participation of students with mental health problems. In 1998-99, there were 116 of these students studying on a wide range of courses. Many progressed to employment, further education or higher education. Links with the local authority and the National Children's Home has led to effective provision for over 150 pre-16 students. A group of 15 have been excluded from local schools. The remainder are at risk of disaffection with school and attend the college for one day a week.

44 Effective induction programmes are well regarded by students. They receive information about their rights and responsibilities, college support services and social facilities. The student handbook and diary is issued to all students. It is a useful reference document. However, the college charter is not well designed or read by many students.

45 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the college provides a well-managed and responsive learning support service. Specialist staff have experience in areas such as dyslexia, visual impairment and mental health. The college is committed to inclusive learning and takes care to ensure that each individual is put on a course which takes close account of his or her needs. Consequently more students with learning

Cross-college Provision

difficulties and/or disabilities have enrolled on a wide range of courses. On entry, all full-time and some part-time students are screened to identify additional learning support needs in literacy and numeracy. A range of tests is used which meets the needs of students at different levels. Individual learning plans are drawn up for students who need support. Many of these plans are insufficiently detailed. Some teachers do not get enough information to adapt their teaching to meet students' needs. Learning support is provided to students on a one-to-one basis and in small groups. In some lessons a learning support tutor teaches alongside the subject teacher. On some foundation programmes this has contributed to improved retention.

46 Students feel well supported by their personal and academic tutors. All students have a personal tutor. They are entitled to at least one individual tutorial a term and a programme of group tutorials. The college tutorial support team provides on request supplementary sessions on issues such as drug awareness, although only a minority of groups take advantage of this. Guidelines for tutors are set out in a useful handbook. The schools have responsibility for implementing the guidelines, and some do not implement them fully. Most tutorial programmes are comprehensive, although some omit important aspects such as careers education. Most tutorial sessions are well run and productive. In a minority of cases students do not receive effective individual advice because their tutorials take place during group sessions. The recording and monitoring of students' action plans is not uniformly good. The self-assessment report does not fully recognise these weaknesses in tutorial practice, nor does it refer to the insufficient central monitoring of tutorial programmes.

47 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report that refer to the good opportunities for students to receive careers advice. There is a well-equipped careers centre

on the main site. A partnership with Somerset Careers Service ensures that students have access to careers guidance on request, in addition to advice from the college staff. Students report that the help with curriculum vitae, applications and interviews is very useful.

48 Specialist welfare advice, counselling and chaplaincy services are provided at the Wellington Road and Staplegrove sites. There are valuable links with specialist agencies. For example, an advocacy service is provided in partnership with Barnardos. This provides for a member of staff to speak on behalf of students who lack the confidence to speak for themselves. The college supports the student union. There are good opportunities for additional activities, including the Duke of Edinburgh Award, leadership courses and team sports.

Cross-college Provision

General Resources

Grade 3

49 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report. Although the college was aware of weaknesses in its general accommodation, it made little reference to this in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good resource centres at Wellington Road and Staplegrove Road
- good access to up-to-date computing facilities
- the wide range of sports and recreational facilities
- good-quality refectories and social areas

Weaknesses

- some poor-quality buildings and unsatisfactory classrooms
- underuse of some accommodation
- no access to some parts of the buildings for people with restricted mobility

50 The college's main site and three smaller sites are located close to each other, near the centre of Taunton. The main site in Wellington Road was built in the 1960s and 1970s. It accommodates 80% of the college's students. The Bishops Hull and Staplegrove Road sites consist of Victorian buildings. Their complex arrangements of classrooms and corridors are poorly suited for educational use. Each site has a number of temporary buildings. Most of the buildings at the Collinson site are huts that are in poor condition. Parts of some buildings are unused because they are unsuitable for either teaching or administration. All of the buildings are expensive to maintain and heat. The college has carried out an appraisal of its buildings to identify how the quality of accommodation

might be improved. It concludes that continued maintenance and development of four sites is not cost effective. The preferred long-term strategy is to undertake a major building programme at Wellington Road and locate all provision on this site. Planning has begun, but it is at an early stage.

51 Despite its poor buildings, the college has improved some facilities through imaginative refurbishment. Examples include the IT helpdesk, the 'drop-in' computer-aided design suite, and the remodelled refectory with its adjoining social areas. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that these are good facilities. The college's student residence, built in 1996 at Canonsgrove, is also a good-quality facility. It provides accommodation for 190 students. Almost all these students are taking higher education courses.

52 A programme of work is under way to achieve a minimum standard of decoration in general teaching rooms. Some huts have been refurbished and are well decorated. However, as recognised in the self-assessment report, most of the temporary classrooms are unsatisfactory for teaching. The self-assessment report also acknowledges that space utilisation is low. Timetabling and room use are not managed centrally. In some areas space is not used efficiently. Some staff rooms and support staff work areas are comfortable and provide good working spaces, but others are barely satisfactory.

53 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the college provides students with sufficient access to up-to-date computers and software. There are over 300 computers at the main site and at Staplegrove Road. These are located in the resource centres, in specialist curriculum areas and in general computer rooms. Students have free access to any machines, including spare machines in rooms being used for teaching. Some computers are adapted for visually-

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impaired students and those with restricted mobility. Students have good access to the Internet, electronic mail and the college intranet. Students and staff are effectively supported by the IT helpdesk.

54 The resources centre on the main site combines library and IT resources. It has good facilities for students. There are 240 study places, 96 quiet study places, five small silent study rooms, a video-conferencing room and an editing suite. It is well stocked with over 65,000 books, 500 periodicals, 30,000 slides, 5,000 videos and 100 networked CD-ROMs. Staff from the resources centre work closely with teachers to develop appropriate library and learning resources. Staplegrove Road has a smaller resources centre with a large collection of health and social care books and periodicals. There are adequate materials and computers for the number of students who wish to use them. Both centres are open for long hours from Monday to Saturday for students and members of the public. A separate learning support centre combines computing facilities with specialist resources to assist the development of students' key skills. The centre provides a welcoming environment and it is well used by students.

55 The self-assessment report acknowledges that, except for the ground floor, access for staff and students with restricted mobility is inadequate on most sites. Only 62% of the accommodation is easily accessible. The resource centres, the learning support centre and the refectories at Wellington Road and Staplegrove Road are easily accessible, but the main training restaurant is not. Recent improvements at Wellington Road include additional ramps, more toilets for people with disabilities, electronically controlled fire doors, and increased parking for students with disabilities.

56 The cafeterias at Wellington Road and Staplegrove Road offer a wide choice of good-quality food. Refreshment facilities on the other sites are very limited. Staff have their own restaurant and common room where food is made and served by students with learning difficulties as part of their training. There are good childcare facilities in the day nursery at Staplegrove Road. The college has installed security systems for its buildings and car parks. There is a wide range of recreational and sporting facilities. These are well used by students.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

57 Inspectors agreed with some of the judgements identified in the self-assessment report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses. Some weaknesses had been omitted.

Key strengths

- thorough self-assessment process involving all staff
- good measures to disseminate effective teaching practice
- comprehensive staff development programme

Weaknesses

- some unsatisfactory programme reviews and school reports with poor use of targets and performance indicators
- slow progress with the introduction of staff appraisal
- poor quality assurance of some franchised provision
- inadequate internal verification

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58 Many aspects of the quality assurance system are new. The self-assessment report submitted to inspectors was the first to be produced by the college. Lesson observation was introduced in September 1999. New staff appraisal procedures have only recently been piloted. The governors' standards committee was established in July 1999. Other aspects of the system, for example the appointment of a lead internal verifier, are recent developments. The newness of these features, combined with the unreliability of some data on students' achievements, precludes judgements about the impact of the quality assurance system on students' achievements.

59 A thorough self-assessment process involved all college staff. However, the franchise centres were not sufficiently involved in the self-assessment process. Self-assessment of teaching was well informed by 183 lesson observations carried out in 1998-99. The grades awarded by the college were significantly higher than those awarded by inspectors. The college judged 88% of lessons to be good or outstanding, compared with 61% of the lessons observed by inspectors. The college's moderation of its self-assessment findings recognised that the observation grades were overgenerous. The final grades awarded by the college for the five curriculum areas selected for inspection were agreed by inspectors. Evaluation of the lesson observation programme has led to improvements. A smaller team of observers will be used and observation findings will be subject to internal verification. The profile of grades for lessons observed by the college between September and November 1999 closely matches the grades awarded by inspectors. The college has begun to take action to disseminate good teaching practice. Three staff have been designated as 'teaching excellence tutors'. One supports new teachers, another leads the development of IT in the curriculum, the third oversees the lesson observation programme.

60 Programmes are reviewed annually by teaching teams using standard procedures and documentation. Reviews address a wide range of issues including teaching and learning methods, equal opportunities, widening participation, resources and students' views. Strengths and weaknesses are identified and action plans are produced. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment judgement that there is some poor use of targets and performance indicators in programme reviews. Value-added analysis is not carried out. Some programme reviews are comprehensive, but some teams do not pay sufficient attention to attendance, retention and achievement. Programme reviews are used to inform the annual quality review reports prepared by each school. Some of these reports are detailed and analytical but others make insufficient reference to students' achievements.

61 There are several groups responsible for aspects of quality assurance in the college. The governors have recently established a standards committee to strengthen their oversight of students' retention, achievements and destinations. The quality council, a subcommittee of the academic board, monitors quality assurance procedures. The quality review board reviews school annual reports and action plans. This year school reports have usefully identified the best and worst performing 10% of programmes. This will help the board to identify good practice and to focus on the college's weaker areas of provision. These groups provide a sound basis for the development of quality assurance, but it is too early to evaluate their impact.

62 Students' views are surveyed through questionnaires completed at the beginning and end of their programmes. There are no mid-course surveys that would enable action to be taken before students finish their programmes. Action based on survey findings is largely left to programmes teams. This leads to ineffectual responses overall and the process has

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little impact on the self-assessment process. The college charter is comprehensive, widely distributed and regularly reviewed, although it is not clearly presented. It includes standards for many aspects of the college's work. Information on the complaints procedure is included. A full record of complaints is maintained.

63 Internal verification in some areas is not effectively planned and in other areas it does not cover all assessed work. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report. Internal verification procedures have recently been revised and a co-ordinator has been appointed. Central records are maintained of external verifiers' reports and grades, but there is inadequate monitoring of the required actions.

64 Support areas are not yet part of the quality assurance system. Some areas, for example learning resources and student services, have developed service standards and all areas completed self-assessment reports. Some support areas do not undertake systematic quality assurance activities.

65 The self-assessment report did not comment on the strength of the staff development programme. Priorities for staff development are identified in a strategic training plan. The programme is available to all teaching and support staff. The budget is allocated under appropriate headings, for example, conferences, curriculum development and in-house training. However, there has been insufficient evaluation of the impact of staff development. The college has been slow to introduce new procedures for staff appraisal. It was piloted in five curriculum areas in 1998-99. It will be implemented across the college in 1999-2000.

66 The quality assurance of some franchised provision is weak. Some key partners visited by inspectors have little systematic quality assurance. Course reviews are informal and unrecorded. There is little analysis of retention and achievement by managers of franchise

centres. The college's monitoring of partners' quality assurance arrangements has been ineffective. The college has not recognised or acted on some unsatisfactory achievements.

Governance

Grade 3

67 Inspectors agreed with the majority of strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. However, inspectors considered that weaknesses in financial monitoring had been overlooked.

Key strengths

- the skills, experience and commitment of governors
- efficient conduct of corporation business and efficient clerking arrangements
- detailed corporation policies and procedures
- effective links with curriculum and support teams

Weaknesses

- insufficient formal review of progress against strategic objectives
- insufficient oversight of the financial position
- inadequate monitoring of equal opportunities
- underdeveloped evaluation by governors of the corporation's performance

68 The corporation has helped to steer the college through a period of steady change over the past three years. Considerable time has been spent on key issues facing the college, for example, the need to change working practices, improve management information and develop accommodation. Governors are involved in the development of the strategic plan and they are well informed about national issues affecting

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further education. However, as identified in the self-assessment report, the corporation does not monitor progress made against strategic objectives in sufficient detail. They do not receive detail of the college's annual operating statement. This hinders their ability to monitor effectively the achievement of strategic objectives. The monitoring of college plans, finances and franchised activity is not fully effective. Strategic objectives are expressed in general terms which are not sufficiently linked to either the approved annual budget or the operating statement.

69 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.

70 There is insufficient corporate oversight of the college's financial position. Governors rely too heavily on managers to highlight financial issues. The information provided to the finance and general purposes committee does not include a month-by-month cashflow analysis with rolling 12-monthly forecast nor detail of key ratios and performance indicators. Governors who are not members of this committee do not receive any financial information apart from finance committee minutes. This year the financial forecast was approved by the chair of the corporation and the college forwarded the year-end accounts to the FEFC before approval by the corporation.

71 The corporation has received and discussed students' achievements data for the past three years. Since 1996, individual governors have had valuable links with curriculum and support areas. Prior to corporation meetings, college managers provide briefings on particular areas of work. However, the self-assessment report judged that the

corporation gave insufficient consideration to curriculum issues, in particular the analysis of students' achievements. To address this the governors established a standards committee in July 1999. The committee is beginning to make an effective contribution. It monitors quality assurance procedures and reviews students' achievements against national benchmarking data published by the FEFC.

72 There is a good balance between the continuity provided by long-serving governors and the skills contributed by recent appointees. The self-assessment report highlights the benefits that result from the governors' wide range of expertise, although it also identifies the need for an additional member with financial expertise. Inspectors agreed with these judgements. Governors' commitment to the college is demonstrated through a high level of attendance at board meetings, committee meetings, college events and the two-day annual residential conference.

73 The corporation has 15 members, seven of whom are women. At the time of the inspection there was one vacancy. The search committee operates effectively. It has identified the skills and expertise needed by the board and it has made nominating bodies aware of them. It has also produced a detailed person specification for potential governors. The corporation has effectively planned the changes required by the new instrument and articles of government which reduce the number of business members from eight to five. New governors receive appropriate induction. The corporation has recently approved a formal induction and training policy and procedure. To date there has been no structured training programme for all members of the corporation, although members have attended a variety of external training events. The remuneration committee has procedures for appraisal of the principal and senior postholders. Annual appraisal takes place against both joint and individual objectives. The outcomes are reported to the

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corporation. Objectives are more qualitative than quantitative and governors are seeking to establish closer links between the appraisal of senior postholders and the achievement of strategic objectives.

74 The corporation is well supported by the clerk. Agendas, supporting papers and minutes are produced promptly to an agreed timetable. Agendas clearly distinguish between business that is for approval, discussion or report. Minutes reflect the passage of debate and provide a clear record of decisions. The clerk monitors progress against actions agreed at meetings. The corporation has established an appropriate range of committees. These include finance and general purposes, audit, employment, search, standards and remuneration. The corporation and its committees have appropriate terms of reference and an agreed cycle of meetings. Additional special meetings are held as necessary. Corporation and committee meetings are effectively conducted. Governors have ample opportunity to comment and ask questions of managers and other members. Committee reporting arrangements are good. They include the presentation of written minutes and verbal reports to the full board.

75 Corporation papers are open to public scrutiny. Copies are available in the college library. Governors, members of the executive and members of the directorate complete the register of interests. It is updated annually. The corporation has agreed a code of conduct and 'whistleblowing' policy. The corporation has not formally monitored the implementation of the equal opportunities policy, which is an important aspect of the college's strategy to widen participation. The health and safety policy is effectively monitored. Although the corporation takes an active role in the college's self-assessment process, it has been slow to establish and monitor formal measures of its own performance.

Management

Grade 3

76 Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- successful management of change
- good working relationships and effective teamwork at all levels
- clear and effective lines of accountability
- comprehensive and productive links with external organisations
- close control of devolved budgets

Weaknesses

- inconsistency in the setting and monitoring of targets and performance indicators
- inadequate financial forecasting
- strategic decisions inadequately informed by market research
- shortcomings in the reliability and use of management information
- some poor management of franchised provision

77 The college has undergone a period of change during which it has widened participation, become more efficient and diversified its sources of income. Change has been achieved through devolution of responsibility, changes to the management structure and working practices and the encouragement of teamwork. There are good working relationships between all types of staff, who demonstrate effective teamwork.

78 The management structure has recently been amended in response to changing demands. There is a directorate comprising 10 cross-college managers, and a three-person

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executive with an enhanced strategic role. Sixteen schools are responsible for the curriculum. The management structure provides clear lines of accountability, which are understood by staff. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. The weekly directorate meetings are minuted, but executive meetings are not, although an informative weekly management briefing sheet containing the key decisions of both groups is distributed widely. Other lines of communication work well. A weekly newspaper, 'Sc@facts', is circulated to all staff. An annual programme of staff meetings is prepared. Electronic mail and the college intranet are extensively used. Staff feel well informed of developments.

79 The college has successfully introduced a system of devolved responsibility. Managers are aware of the extent of their devolved powers, and the college benefits from the scope for local initiatives that this provides. Budgets have been fully delegated for three years, and cash balances are closely controlled on a daily basis. The financial controller effectively scrutinises these, and budget holders receive useful financial reports each month. Nevertheless, the FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. Although management accounts are prepared monthly, they do not include cashflow summaries and forecasts or an out-turn balance sheet. There is no detailed commentary to explain variances. Management accounts are not routinely provided to governors. They were not provided to the financial and general purposes committee for five months from April 1999. Consideration of the management accounts by the executive concentrates on the current cash position. The information presented to governors to inform their approval of the budget is insufficiently detailed. The processes for longer-term forecasting, especially in view of the intended major capital project, are not adequate. This

issue has been raised in several FEFC audit reports, but has not yet been adequately addressed.

80 The college has a history of late student data and financial returns to the FEFC. The financial regulations were updated in September 1999, although supporting procedures are not yet completely documented. The internal auditors raised a number of significant issues in 1998-99. It is too early to say whether the management response has been effective. There have been recent improvements in the quality of management information, although some staff still lack confidence in the accuracy of centrally produced data. In particular, students' achievement data from some key franchise partners is incomplete.

81 The self-assessment report recognises that targets and performance indicators are not used effectively by all curriculum areas, nor is their achievement monitored rigorously. The strategic plan and its updates for 1998 and 1999 are not sufficiently well linked to financial forecasts. A brief operating statement for 1999-2000 contains few quantifiable targets and is not costed. It is therefore not adequate as a basis for planning cross-college activities. Schools set targets for recruitment, retention and achievement in their three-year development plans. These are monitored by the biannual review boards. Some service areas have not produced their three-year plans. The self-assessment report recognises that both strategic development and marketing plans are inadequately informed by reliable market research.

82 There are comprehensive and productive links with a wide range of external partners. Close work with local schools facilitates smooth progression to further education for their pupils, and provision is made for disaffected 14 to 16 year olds. The expanding higher education programmes are primarily provided in conjunction with the University of Plymouth,

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with which there are also some joint research projects. There is effective liaison with a range of external bodies, including Somerset TEC, and the Taunton and Somerset Chambers of Commerce. Senior staff contribute extensively to the Somerset Lifelong Learning Partnership and the Somerset Economic Partnership. Employers generally regard the college as responsive and reliable.

83 Although not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report, some aspects of the management of franchised provision are weak. This provision currently accounts for around 12% of funding units. Formal contracts have not yet been issued to franchise partners for the current academic year. The college is seeking legal advice on these contracts. No targets have been set for the performance of students on franchised provision, and the quality assurance of this provision is weak. Some franchised provision is offered outside Somerset, but colleges in these areas have not been consulted, as required by the FEFC.

84 There is a strong commitment to equality of opportunity and the principles of inclusiveness, and the college has successfully diversified its student recruitment. A brief equal opportunities statement was introduced in 1994, and is currently under review. There is no harassment policy, but effective measures have been introduced to consider allegations. Staff applications and appointments are monitored. There is no annual report on equal opportunities, nor cross-college co-ordination or monitoring of equal opportunities issues.

Conclusions

85 The thorough self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and conducting the inspection. Useful information was set out in a clear introduction. Strengths, weaknesses and evidence were clearly set out for each area. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report. They found some additional ones and judged that some weaknesses had been understated. Franchised provision, which accounts for about 12% of the college's funding units, had not been adequately dealt with in the report. The final grades awarded by the college for the five curriculum areas selected for inspection were agreed by inspectors. Inspectors also agreed with four of the five cross-college grades. In one area they judged that the college had been overgenerous.

86 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	0
16-18 years	14
19-24 years	16
25+ years	68
Not known	2
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1999)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation)	27
Level 2 (intermediate)	21
Level 3 (advanced)	22
Level 4/5 (higher)	9
Non-schedule 2	21
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	198	1,204	11
Agriculture	10	45	0
Construction	146	533	5
Engineering	151	801	7
Business	203	1,357	12
Hotel and catering	418	785	9
Health and community care	313	1,654	15
Art and design	645	998	13
Humanities	160	3,023	24
Basic education	0	535	4
Total	2,244	10,935	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 3% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (November 1999)

	<i>Perm- anent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	224	6	2	232
Supporting direct learning contact	81	7	3	91
Other support	112	5	1	118
Total	417	18	6	441

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999*
Income	£13,670,000	£14,481,000	£14,792,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£17.12*	£16.75*	£16.57
Payroll as a proportion of income	60%	60%	60%
Achievement of funding target	99%	98%	97%
Diversity of income	28%	31%	34%
Operating surplus	-£469,000	-£281,000	-£143,000

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

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

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

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

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

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

*provisional data

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	399	570	639	1,376	1,297	2,320
	Retention (%)	95	83	86	92	83	84
	Achievement (%)	55	62	84	41	60	83
2	Number of starters	918	1,398	1,407	1,008	1,176	1,875
	Retention (%)	81	80	77	88	83	81
	Achievement (%)	67	65	71	77	77	83
3	Number of starters	1,367	1,163	1,550	1,122	1,357	1,300
	Retention (%)	81	80	83	84	73	76
	Achievement (%)	81	77	79	73	53	81
4 or 5	Number of starters	21	7	14	151	200	319
	Retention (%)	90	100	100	85	94	87
	Achievement (%)	68	71	75	90	90	89
Short courses	Number of starters	555	1,009	1,144	7,223	8,497	9,501
	Retention (%)	97	97	98	95	95	95
	Achievement (%)	78	74	83	61	74	87
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	822	374	459	1,780	1,276	1,865
	Retention (%)	92	87	84	89	87	81
	Achievement (%)	84	80	82	70	72	86

Source: ISR

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