

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

South Cheshire College

April 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-95

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 47/96

SOUTH CHESHIRE COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected April 1995-January 1996

Summary

South Cheshire College is a tertiary college located in the Borough of Crewe and Nantwich and serving a wider community. It has good links with an extensive range of outside bodies, including many overseas. It enjoys a high profile in the local community. It provides a wide range of courses based on well-developed labour market intelligence. The college has a supportive board of governors and a well-developed planning cycle. An effective management structure encourages staff to work in teams. Communications are good at all levels. Students are supported by a personal tutorial system and effective learning support. Assessment of students' work is well done. The majority of students who complete their courses achieve good results. Examination pass rates have shown an upward trend in the last three years. There is an effective system of quality assurance and a comprehensive college charter. Staff are well qualified. The accommodation has some impressively renovated areas and is generally good. The college should address the gaps in its foundation level programme. An integrated computer-based management information system is needed to meet the information requirements of the college. In some teaching sessions, staff expectations of student performance should be higher and student participation is insufficiently encouraged. There is poor student retention on some courses.

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

| Aspects of cross-college provision | Grade |
|---|--------------|
| Responsiveness and range of provision | 2 |
| Governance and management | 1 |
| Students' recruitment, guidance and support | 1 |
| Quality assurance | 2 |
| Resources: staffing | 2 |
| equipment/learning resources | 2 |
| accommodation | 2 |

| Curriculum area | Grade | Curriculum area | Grade |
|--|--------------|---|--------------|
| Science, mathematics and computing | 2 | Art and design, creative and performing arts | 3 |
| Construction | 2 | Humanities, languages and teacher training | 1 |
| Engineering | 2 | Adult education and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities | 2 |
| Business | 3 | | |
| Catering, leisure and tourism | 2 | | |
| Health and community care, hairdressing and beauty therapy | 2 | | |

INTRODUCTION

1 South Cheshire College, a tertiary college, was inspected between April 1995 and January 1996. Arrangements for the enrolment and induction of students were observed at the beginning of September 1995. Specialist subject areas were inspected in April and December 1995 and aspects of cross-college provision were inspected in the week beginning 8 January 1996. Twenty-one inspectors spent a total of 100 days in the college. They visited 236 classes, examined students' work and studied a wide range of college documents. They held discussions with governors, college managers, teaching staff, support staff, students, former students, parents and representatives of partner schools, the South and East Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), the local community, industry and institutions of higher education. Inspectors attended meetings of the college council, the student council, the senior management team, and the annual retreat meeting of the corporate/strategic management team.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 South Cheshire College was established as a tertiary college in 1982. Its history as a provider of further education dates back to its origins as a mechanics institute founded in 1843. Students mainly live in the borough of Crewe and Nantwich, where the college has links with eight partner schools. The college also attracts students from over 40 schools within a 25-mile radius.

3 The college is located on two sites in the Crewe area. The main campus is a pleasant greenfield site of 6.8 hectares on the south-west fringe of Crewe, about 1.5 miles from the town centre. The Bedford Street centre is a converted former school building half a mile away from the main campus. Plans are already well advanced to concentrate provision on the main site. Nine outreach centres have been established in local secondary schools. The college also uses other venues in the South Cheshire area, including 24 primary schools, to provide an increasing number of courses for local communities. Within the locality there are two other post-16 providers, an 11 to 18 school and an agricultural college. The nearest further education college is some 15 miles away.

4 The population of Crewe and Nantwich is approximately 103,000. Within the Crewe travel-to-work area the unemployment rate in March 1995 was 8.4 per cent. This compares with 7.5 per cent in Cheshire and 10.3 per cent for the North West. Crewe has five wards in the 35 areas of highest economic and social deprivation in Cheshire. Two of these have unemployment rates in excess of 16 per cent. Ten years ago employment in Crewe was heavily reliant on two major engineering companies which employed over half of the town's workforce. Subsequently, there has been a reduction in this manufacturing base and a diversification into the

business and service sector with the emphasis on small and medium sized employers. In Crewe and Nantwich, the full-time participation rate in education at 16 has increased from 41 per cent in 1990 to 65 per cent in 1995.

5 At the time of inspection, there were 9,565 enrolments on all courses, of which 2,046 were by full-time students. This compares with 9,158 at the same point in 1994-95. Subsequently enrolments on courses funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for the whole year reached 11,048, of which 2,084 were full time. In addition, 3,600 enrolments were recorded on adult education courses under a separate contract with the local authority and 149 students under franchise arrangements with higher education institutions. Of the students enrolled, 85 per cent were part time and 15 per cent full time. Twenty per cent of students were between 16 and 18 years of age, 13 per cent were between 19 and 25 and 67 per cent were over 25. Thirty-five per cent were male and 65 per cent female. Students from minority ethnic groups accounted for 1 per cent of the total which reflects the local population profile. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. The college has achieved growth in student numbers of 7 per cent each year since incorporation.

6 South Cheshire College employs 174 full-time and 210 part-time lecturers. There are 98 full-time and 57 part-time support staff. Forty-five per cent of the full-time staff and 62 per cent of the part-time staff are female. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The college has developed a wide range of courses in keeping with its tertiary status. The level of courses on offer ranges from basic education to a franchised degree course. In the current year there is a programme of 32 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) and 14 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. There is an access to higher education course for mature students. Staff show good awareness of national developments and the college now offers 17 General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) courses at advanced and intermediate levels. There are also 24 different National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programmes. Students are able to follow programmes which combine GNVQ and GCE A level provision. There are some gaps in the range of courses available to students, particularly in the foundation level programme. The college has identified the need for further foundation provision.

8 South Cheshire College has links with a wide range of educational establishments. It takes pains to meet the requirements of individual schools. Headteachers praise the responsiveness of the college. The schools liaison service is well organised and effective. The college is an

associate college of Staffordshire University. It also has close connections with the Crewe and Alsager Faculty of Manchester Metropolitan University. There are twinning arrangements with Kansas City Community College in the United States of America and the Berufsschule Gross Gerau in Germany. Active links exist with colleges in Spain and France. The extensive international links have a beneficial effect on the curriculum. For example, the link with Germany provides a valuable extension to classroom activities for language students, including work placements in Gross Gerau. Ten out of the 13 curriculum areas in the college have links with other countries. There is scope to develop links which would be of benefit to staff and students between the childcare and health and beauty sections and higher education.

9 The college enjoys a high profile in the local community. Outside agencies comment on the quick response of the college and the high level of its commitment to the local community, even when there is no immediate gain for the college. Refurbished facilities, such as the theatre and restaurant, are widely used by groups from outside the college. The 'primary college', developed in conjunction with the primary schools adviser, is an innovative example of community involvement. This involves 1,200 primary school children coming into college for a week in July to participate in a range of activities, including the use of computers. As a result, other initiatives have developed, such as the provision for adults in 24 primary schools. There is evidence of adults attending this outreach provision progressing to further study.

10 The college has successfully encouraged participation by students who might not normally enter further education. A successful programme, organised quickly to respond to closures in local industry, was targeted at people who had recently lost their jobs. There is scope to attract higher numbers of mature students onto mainstream courses.

11 The college has increased enrolments by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. School support staff, social services and the careers service work closely with the college to ensure that students join appropriate mainstream courses. However, the curriculum for separate specialist courses for students with learning difficulties is not always appropriate.

12 The college needs to address the lack of flexibility in the opportunities for study available to students. The college's self-assessment report outlines the need to 'extend the common timetable so that student choice is increased and develop open learning programmes as well as increase the number of courses which offer start times throughout the year'. Progress is being made. For example, there has been a substantial increase in the number of courses which students can start in January 1996. A successful weekend college is in operation where adults and children can attend a range of courses at a time convenient to whole families.

13 Labour market intelligence is well developed in the college. A district profile group meets termly. This provides a useful forum for sharing information between agencies, including the local authority, the careers service, the jobcentre and the TEC. The college co-operates well with the TEC and is generally able to offer appropriate provision in response to community needs.

14 There are sound links with employers in many curriculum areas. Employees from over 200 companies are registered on various part-time courses, including provision on employers' premises. Employers are generally positive about the responsiveness of the college. Each programme area in the college has a consultancy group which includes representatives from commerce or industry. In some vocational areas employer liaison should be widened. There are few links with commerce and industry in the humanities curriculum area.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 Governors are effective in fulfilling their responsibilities. They have a clear perception of their role and are active in supporting the college. Strong links have been forged between governors and staff. Individual governors are paired with a member of the strategic management team and with a programme area manager to encourage working relationships and to give each governor a detailed knowledge of aspects of the college's work. Governors contribute to the strategic management team's work. They regularly review the key strategic aims and objectives of the college. College performance is monitored against these key aims and objectives.

16 There are 15 members of the governing body. There are eight independent members, three co-opted members, a nominee of the TEC, the principal and two staff representatives. Three members are women. Currently, there is one vacancy. There is no student representative. Members have experience of personnel management, finance and business. There is currently no-one on the governing body with estates management experience. Legal advice is provided by a recently-appointed independent clerk. He is a solicitor who is employed by the college solely in this capacity for two days a week so that independence is preserved. This arrangement is proving to be successful and beneficial to both the governors and the college. Subcommittees for audit, finance, remuneration and human resources have been formed and these, and the full board, meet on a regular basis. Attendance of members at these meetings is generally good. Several governor training activities have been organised to ensure that all governors are aware of issues affecting the further education sector.

17 The management structure within the college is clear and it particularly encourages and supports staff working in teams. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and well understood by staff at all levels. The principal and eight directors, three of whom are women, form the strategic management team. The director of studies acts as the deputy

principal. Other directors are responsible for human resources, operational services, finance, student services, student administration, programme support and marketing. In addition to carrying out their management responsibilities, the principal and directors have some teaching duties.

18 Management at programme level is the joint responsibility of 13 programme managers and programme developers. Programme managers are responsible for staffing, resources and for course management; programme developers lead curriculum developments and are responsible for quality assurance in their programme areas. The arrangement is effective and all managers and developers work well together. All managers at this level have, or are in the process of receiving, certificated management training. Eight co-ordinators, including three for GCSE, GCE A levels and NVQ/GNVQ, have cross-college roles. These staff provide effective support to programme areas.

19 The college has developed efficient and structured communication systems. A cycle of meetings involves staff at all levels. In the main, meetings take place every week during sessions which are kept free from timetabled classes. There are weekly meetings of the strategic management team. Directors meet regularly with programme managers and programme developers. Course teams meet regularly. The principal produces a weekly newsletter and invites all staff to a monthly meeting with him at which any outstanding issues can be raised and discussed. Monthly meetings are also held between the principal and the staff unions. The regular schedule of meetings, in addition to teaching duties, puts heavy demands on some members of staff. Absence at some meetings has been high. A review of communication systems in the college resulted in a detailed report. Subsequent action has been constructive. Staff now speak positively about their awareness of college issues and the ways in which they can contribute to developments in the college.

20 The college's strategic plan has been jointly developed and agreed by college staff and governors. This is a comprehensive document to which all internal college plans are closely related. Contents include the mission for the college, organisational values, a needs analysis, a review of present provision and targets for the future, including an operating statement for the current session. The plan contains eight key strategic aims and 50 college objectives which are regularly reviewed and updated. It also indicates the range of performance indicators to be used for the whole college. There is a detailed planning cycle. As part of the planning process each director and programme area is required to produce an annual development plan which links to the college's strategic plan. At the end of the cycle, progress on the agreed objectives is reviewed before the development and agreement of future plans and targets. The process of planning at course and programme level is well developed, though plans vary in quality.

21 A college council acts as an advisory committee to the principal and meets on a regular basis. It is chaired by the principal and comprises 30 members, including representatives from each programme area and the student body. Although the membership of the full council is large, much of the detailed work associated with its agendas is carried out by subcommittees. The council guides the work of the subcommittees and receives reports of their work, including specific recommendations. There are currently six subcommittees covering staff development, programmes, equal opportunities, student services, programme support and quality assurance. Student representatives are encouraged to make substantial contributions to the work of the council.

22 Central computer-based management information systems require further development. Although management processes and decisions are frequently supported by a range of high-quality information, this is sometimes provided by independently operating systems or by unwieldy manual methods. There is no computer-based monitoring of attendance. The software currently in use had not produced an acceptable July individual student record return to the FEFC at the time of the inspection. Direct access to the main system is very restricted, particularly for teaching staff.

23 Staff and other resources in the college are generally well deployed. There are currently 30 cost centres, including eight relating to directors and 13 to programme areas. Budgets delegated to programme areas are based on units. Staff generally appreciate the openness of the process of resource allocation. Budget holders receive monthly reports indicating their expenditure to date. Similar aggregated reports are regularly produced for the governors and the strategic management team.

24 The college's average level of funding is £16.05 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £17.84 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

25 Support for students at South Cheshire College reflects the commitment of staff to meet the needs of each individual. Students are appreciative of the friendly support staff provide and their willingness to respond quickly to requests for help through well-organised and easily accessible arrangements.

26 The college provides good guidance and support services to prospective students and to those studying at the college. Student services are located close to the main reception in an area known as 'student street', which is a converted industrial workshop area and corridor. The refurbishment provides inviting, high-quality accommodation for central admissions, student services, careers education and guidance, counselling and welfare services, two student lounges and the college shop.

27 The central admissions unit provides an efficient clearing system for all applications. Students who are unsure of their programme of study are offered an interview with qualified careers staff. The cross-college co-ordinators for GCE A level, GCSE and GNVQ/NVQ programmes are located in the unit to help with enquiries, as are staff who co-ordinate specialised support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and general learning support across the college. The college guarantees a programme of study to any local 16 to 18 year old progressing from one of its feeder schools. There is a variety of arrangements which enable prospective students to sample courses before making an application to the college and coming for interview. Of particular note are the information technology workshops, other core skills workshops and taster days. Headteachers speak highly of the smooth transition for pupils entering the college. A student questionnaire records a high degree of satisfaction with the interview and acceptance procedures.

28 The college produces high-quality corporate promotional material. The latest prospectus was produced in-house by a graphic designer on the college staff. A national award was gained for a promotional campaign entitled 'All Change at Crewe' aimed at unemployed adults. The college advertises in local newspapers, on local radio, on buses and trains and through supermarkets and local agricultural shows. Programme area fact sheets, the college charter, student handbook and service guidance leaflets extend the information available. Summer advice and guidance sessions, organised by student services, occur from July to September. Enrolment takes place on six occasions each year but the major event occurs in September. Helpful support is available during this time through programme advice, careers guidance, the provision of information about welfare benefits, counselling, learning support and the provision of creche facilities.

29 Accreditation of prior learning is at an early stage of development. It is operating in at least six of the 13 programme areas. A notable example is the accreditation of prior learning provided for employees at a local hotel which leads to NVQ level 2 qualifications in reception, book-keeping or food and drink service.

30 The induction programme is well planned and thorough. It enables students to familiarise themselves with the college, to understand their programme of study and to develop working relationships with other students. A useful checklist of activities has been produced to support tutors. At the beginning of their programmes all full-time students and many part-time students are screened at either an intermediate or an advanced level in numeracy, communications skills and in information technology. Out of a total of 9,565 students enrolled since September 1995, 2,822 students have been screened and 142 (5 per cent) have requested additional support. Those requesting additional support are sensitively handled and are provided with structured workshop support through the learning resource centres, individual support in class or in separate group sessions.

31 Significant numbers of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities join mainstream programmes. In addition, there are students on separate specialist programmes. Detailed planning and support ensure that students' needs, including the provision of equipment, are met. Personal tutors are informed of the capabilities and needs of their students. There has been a 39 per cent increase this year in students with learning difficulties on separate specialist programmes. These students are separately assessed. Mainstream courses, with additional learning support, were considered appropriate provision for six out of the 32 students with learning difficulties from separate specialist programmes. Of these six, only three remain on their programmes. Some part-time mature students would benefit from support in study skills early in their courses.

32 The college expects every enrolled student, including all part-time students, to sign an individual learning agreement or contract. This process is rigorously monitored. It complements the 'partnership for learning document' found in the student handbook on student rights and responsibilities.

33 All full-time and part-time students studying for more than a few hours a week are allocated a personal tutor. Policies for the college tutorial system arise from strategic college objectives. New arrangements were piloted in 1993-94 and from September 1995 are being implemented across the college. A comprehensive guidance file together with planned staff-development workshops support the role of personal tutor. Working in conjunction with the two counselling staff, the tutorial co-ordinator has identified staff-development themes related to student counselling issues. For example, workshops on mental health and World Aids Day were run for staff by the Crewe Health Promotion Unit. Future topics will include equal opportunities, recognising stress in students and crisis management for students. Plans are well developed for a college certificated programme in personal tutoring to operate from next year. There are helpful guidelines to steer the tutorial programme, which includes careers education and guidance at specified times during the year. An informative advisory pack on higher education has been prepared for students. The preparation of curricula vitae and the maintenance of a college record of achievement by students will take account of the national record of achievement which is now used in all partner secondary schools.

34 Each full-time student has a progress file which is monitored as part of the tutorial programme. A student record card has been specifically designed for those part-time students attending at least two sessions a week. The tutor's record of work is expected to contain progress records for part-time students attending two-hour classes. Despite a monitoring process in operation, in a minority of programme areas some personal tutors are failing systematically to maintain records of achievement or progress files.

35 Additional support is provided for students by the college careers education and guidance, counselling and welfare services. Staff are well qualified and one of the two trained careers personnel is seconded full time from the previous local education authority careers service. Good working relationships have been maintained with the new privatised local service. The college contracts three careers officers for one-and-a-half days a week to supplement its own provision and link the college with the school careers network. Between September and the time of the inspection the service dealt with 227 student interviews and provided 46 workshops to support the student tutorial system. In the same period, the counselling service dealt with 102 students and the welfare service dealt with 390 enquiries.

36 A 24-place childcare facility of good standard is located on the ground floor of the childcare centre, adjacent to the main building. It takes children aged two-and-a-half to five years old from 08.15 to 18.00 hours each day at a modest cost to students. Currently 34 students make use of this facility. Some students are given a proportion of the financial costs towards childcare by the college. A further twenty students benefit from access funds for support towards child-minding costs. This facility is also used as a work placement for nursery nurse students and for students with learning difficulties. In the recent October student satisfaction survey users of the childcare support facilities registered a 98 per cent satisfaction with the service.

37 The college student council, a body of volunteer students, is supported by a full-time youth and community worker. It runs both social and charitable events. Monthly social events such as theatre visits are planned. The council is also collecting cans to help cover the travel costs of a local autistic child for treatment in North America and plans to hold a sponsored overnight camping session using cardboard boxes to support the charity Shelter.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

38 Inspectors observed 236 teaching and learning sessions. Of these, 64 per cent had strengths which outweighed weaknesses. Seven per cent had more weaknesses than strengths. The inspection grades awarded to the sessions inspected are shown in the following table.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

| Programmes | Grade | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Totals |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|---------------|
| GCE AS/A level | | 10 | 8 | 16 | 2 | 0 | 36 |
| GCSE | | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| GNVQ | | 7 | 21 | 9 | 3 | 0 | 40 |
| NVQ | | 8 | 34 | 18 | 5 | 0 | 65 |
| Other vocational | | 12 | 22 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 46 |
| Basic education | | 3 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 13 |
| Other | | 3 | 14 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 28 |
| Total | | 45 | 106 | 68 | 16 | 1 | 236 |

39 The average level of student attendance for the teaching sessions inspected was 76 per cent of those enrolled. The highest average attendance was in basic education sessions, at 91 per cent. The lowest levels, at 70 per cent, were recorded in mathematics and in information technology sessions. An average of 10 students were present in the classes inspected. The largest groups observed were in computing with an average of 13 students present; the smallest in basic education where attendance averaged five students.

40 Clear, comprehensive and effective documentation has been prepared to support teaching and learning. In the best practice, for example in humanities and in leisure and tourism, detailed schemes of work, sometimes prepared to a common format across the programme area, provided good guidance to students on both teaching and supplementary learning activities. Schemes of work were generally in place, but some did not clearly identify opportunities for monitoring students' progress other than to certify achievement for external validating bodies. The majority of teaching sessions were carefully planned, thoroughly prepared and related to schemes of work. Across the college, most lesson plans were competently constructed and sufficiently detailed. In many cases, they gave good structure to learning sessions and enabled aims and objectives to be shared with students. However, some did not pay sufficient attention to learning outcomes.

41 Working relationships between students and lecturers were uniformly good. Students were interested in the work and were satisfied with the teaching and tutorial support which they received. In catering classes, the friendly but firm relationships between staff and students did much to promote learning. In general, classes had a good working atmosphere, though in some instances teaching did not take account of individual students' needs. Students worked well together and valued each other's contributions to discussion and debate. Most students enjoyed their studies. In art and design, for example, students worked well both individually and in groups and were mutually supportive.

42 In the better sessions, teaching was challenging and conducted at an appropriate pace. It frequently made use of students' experiences, involved clear exposition and summarised the work at the end of each lesson. Teachers frequently provided students with a good range of support materials, both for class and assignment work. Effective learning packages and other appropriate teaching aids were used in sessions in hairdressing and beauty therapy programmes. In construction, well-developed learning packages were relevant to the industry. A well-resourced flexible learning centre had good information technology facilities with software of industrial standard.

43 In poorer teaching sessions, students had insufficient opportunities to participate. For example, some sessions in a few GCE A level humanities courses, were monopolised by teachers and student activity was confined to taking notes for lengthy periods. The teaching of NVQ administration sessions overemphasised theoretical work and provided few opportunities for students to prove competence in areas not covered by work placement. Some business classes included outdated information and incorrect calculations. In others, the standard expected of students was low and the more able students were insufficiently stretched. The depth of work was limited, illustrative examples were superficial or simplistic and tasks set were too easy for the level of study. In a few lessons in science, the work lacked rigour and pace. In hair and beauty therapy, where students at differing stages of their programmes were taught together, there was insufficient differentiation in the work.

44 Assignments were well balanced and reflected course aims and objectives. Students' work was conscientiously marked and returned promptly, often with appropriate comments. There were some good examples of the use of an assessment proforma to record students' progressive development of skills. The planning, execution and evaluation of assignments were particularly competently undertaken in catering. Engineering students' work was thoroughly marked by teachers who often included comments to help students to understand why marks had been awarded. Marking of students' work in all areas of humanities was thorough and encouraged students to improve their performance. In poorer examples, marked work included little guidance on how grades might be improved and written feedback was critical rather than supportive in its style. While student note taking was encouraged, some student files were not checked for accuracy or organisation.

45 Clear records were maintained of students' progress. There was effective co-ordination between work placement and college work on administration courses. Students' files were well organised in mathematics and indicated a comprehensive coverage of material. Staff on health courses keep detailed records of students' progress. However, some classes included few opportunities to monitor students' understanding and applications. Teachers did not check that learning had taken place in a number of lessons.

46 During practical lessons in catering high standards were set. The work often followed well-devised demonstrations. However, a clear distinction was not drawn between the need for students to acquire individual skills and the other demands which work in realistic environments make. In particular, there was a need for more training on aspects of food service. There were a number of examples of good practical work in construction where good support was provided by tutors and technical staff. However, in a few instances the pace of the work was slow and supervision insufficient. Students were sometimes not offered work-based assessment and job experience. Students in hairdressing and beauty therapy programmes were developing practical skills and sound professional practice. In some areas tasks were sometimes set without sufficient, clear guidance to allow students to proceed confidently. Few opportunities were taken on business courses to relate issues and concepts to students' work experience or to a business context. In art and design the work did not always introduce students sufficiently to the degree of professional rigour required.

47 College policy is for core skills development to be integrated with students' main studies. In social sciences and teacher education core skills including study skills were well integrated with teaching and learning. Common elements between subjects were emphasised so that students were able to transfer knowledge and skills from one area to another. In engineering, core skills were explicitly identified in course and unit documentation, and in the assessment framework. Skills were identified for the different units in each teaching scheme to ensure that all were adequately covered. Students gained credit from a number of sources including the workplace, social activities and elements of college courses. Records were kept in a logbook. In catering, core skills were fully integrated and assessed within the technical subjects. They were also taught and assessed as distinct subjects, which enabled students to extend the level of their competence. Some foreign language work was incorporated into most catering programmes. There was specific assessment of core skills in GCE A level art. In some health and care courses there was little evidence of students consolidating or developing their mathematical skills. Core skills, including information technology, have yet to be fully integrated with the curriculum in hairdressing and beauty therapy.

48 In adult basic education, strong emphasis was placed on individual learning. Programmes were negotiated with each student. Documentation which included learning plans, session records and review sheets was of a high standard. Work was regularly reviewed with students and tasks matched to their needs. However, teaching methods lacked variety and relied almost exclusively on the use of worksheets. Assessment was often verbal and written comments on students' work were rarely made. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who were integrated with mainstream courses were well supported by tutors, though some classes were too large to operate effectively without a learning support

assistant. Students on separate specialist programmes ran a coffee shop for staff and students as a commercial operation. A range of skills was practised and students mixed with other students in the college.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

49 The majority of students achieve well. Students show interest and commitment to their studies and both school leavers and adult learners respond enthusiastically to the educational and training opportunities on offer.

50 Students increase their knowledge and understanding on the majority of programmes and demonstrate a grasp of relevant concepts and their application. In humanities subjects, students apply and understand a range of research methods and are able to criticise methodology and content. In GCE A level and GCSE courses essay work is often well structured and students' written assignments reveal development of reasoning and maturity of expression. In some areas, particularly in science, students' performance is less good; there are gaps in their understanding and knowledge of examination syllabus content. On GCE A level programmes, the majority of students' course files are of a high standard; they are well organised and comprehensive, revealing the students' pride in work undertaken. A significant proportion of GCE A level students progress to higher education. While some are already confident as independent learners, a number need further development of their study skills in preparation for higher education.

51 In general, students on vocational courses develop appropriate skills and knowledge. Many achieve progression to higher level programmes. Good-quality assignment work is a feature of most vocational areas. This is often well designed to allow the students to apply their understanding to the vocational context. In construction excellent practical assignments in brickwork are carried out by 'skillbuild' unemployed adult students who demonstrate high levels of commitment and good standards of finished work. Students on childcare courses are stretched intellectually and use a wide range of sources in their assignment work. In engineering, some imaginative assignment work is based on a link programme with Spain. Mixed national groups complete assignments on the production and testing of a piece of engineering equipment and the development of a related manual in English and Spanish. This activity enables students to broaden their common technical knowledge and skills. Achievements to date have been outstanding.

52 In some instances, assignment work does not encourage students to produce work appropriate to the level of the programme. In hairdressing and beauty therapy, while much of the work is of an appropriate standard, occasionally tasks do not stretch students and underachievement results. Students in art and design and fashion are developing a broad range of skills and understanding of their specialist studies but, in some parts of

the course, appropriate drawing skills are not being fully developed. On GNVQ intermediate and advanced programmes, good progress is being made by many students. However, in some areas, such as GNVQ information technology, some students do not plan their work effectively and some assignment work lacks rigour.

53 Opportunities for students to develop their confidence in speaking and presentation skills are features of many courses. In humanities classes, students' contributions to classroom discussions show perceptive and well-focused debating skills. On language courses, a good proportion of students speak with confidence in the foreign language. Most students develop interpersonal skills on vocational programmes. In performing arts and music, for example, students' group work and self-expression is of a high standard. Students are articulate and able to communicate in an informed way. The development of other core skills is more uneven. Information technology is well integrated with student learning in some areas but not sufficiently encouraged or promoted in others. There is a general weakness amongst students in the acquisition of numerical and mathematical skills in some craft areas.

54 Students undertake practical work competently and with informed awareness of health and safety aspects. In construction and catering, most of the practical work is of a high standard. Students in social care show an ability to relate their work placement activities successfully to the theoretical components of their courses. In art and design, some students are not developing sufficient knowledge or vocational competence.

55 Eighty-seven per cent of students aged 16 to 18 in their final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education and Employment's tables for 1995 were successful. This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. This represents an improvement on the previous year's achievement of 79 per cent.

56 Across the range of full-time vocational courses at level 3, pass rates of students completing their Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national diploma courses are generally good. However, in some programme areas, for example hotel and catering, business and finance, and health and social care results have been poor. The BTEC national courses have recently been replaced by a new range of GNVQ advanced level programmes for which, as yet, there is no full cohort completion or final student achievements. On one-year GNVQ intermediate full-time courses students' achievements in terms of final course outcomes are above national comparators in all six curriculum areas where courses are available. Pass rates for those completing in the standard time are all in excess of 70 per cent. In GNVQ leisure, a high proportion of students progressed to the advanced level GNVQ and have so far achieved good results in the external tests.

57 The achievements of part-time students on vocational courses are variable. In some areas, for example in construction and catering, there are high levels of achievement of full awards. In other areas, many students successfully obtain individual units. However, there are relatively low rates of achievement of full awards in business administration and hairdressing. At level 3 the college could usefully review the timescale in which students of varying ability are expected to achieve full awards. The number of students successfully achieving certification in motor vehicle work is low. The overall results for RSA Examinations Board (RSA) single subjects are good although the proportion of entries in both wordprocessing and typewriting at stage 3 are relatively low. Students completing their studies in engineering, business and finance on part-time courses for higher national certificate achieve particularly good results. However, on the BTEC higher national certificate in business information technology only 37 per cent of those enrolled achieved the full award. The average pass rate for those completing BTEC national certificate courses was 79 per cent but the pass rate was less than this in computer studies and building studies. Of the 408 students who completed the final year of their vocational studies in BTEC national diploma or certificate courses covering 18 vocational areas of the college, 81 per cent achieved a full award and 13 per cent gained 'certificates of achievement'.

58 In 1994-95, 190 students aged 16 to 18 taking GCE AS/A level examinations scored, on average, 4.0 points per entry (where A=10, E=2) according to the 1995 tables published by the Department for Education and Employment. This places the college amongst the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. The overall pass rate for GCE A level at the college has improved from 74 per cent in 1994 to 79 per cent in 1995. This broadly equates with the provisional national pass rate of 82 per cent for all education establishments and is above the provisional national average pass rate of 69 per cent for all age groups in further education sector colleges. Pass rates are above national averages in art and design, English, economics, government and politics, history, languages, law, psychology and sociology. In sociology and psychology a high proportion of students gained A and B grade passes. Weaker results were obtained in biology, chemistry, communication studies and accounting. In general, pass rates on one-year GCE A level programmes were markedly lower than on two-year courses.

59 Of a total of 514 entries for GCSE in 1995, 60 per cent passed at grades A to C. This was an improvement on the pass rate of 52 per cent achieved in 1994. The majority of individual subjects achieved pass rates above the national average for the further education sector. Many of the college's full-time and part-time students study for mathematics and English which represent the largest subject entries. Achievements in English are good but the 42 per cent overall pass rate in mathematics represents a 9 per cent fall on the previous year's performance. GCSE

results in biology and physics, although improving, are below the national average.

60 Poor retention of both full-time and part-time students is a cause for concern on a number of programmes. The college sets a nominal benchmark of 80 per cent as its target for retention. On one-year full-time courses at level 2 the average retention rate is 82 per cent but in business and finance, art and science over 25 per cent of students do not complete their course. At level 3, the average retention rates over the full two years of BTEC national diplomas are generally poor. Few of these courses achieved retention rates above 70 per cent and non-completion was particularly marked in business, hotel and catering, engineering and beauty therapy. The college monitors both retention and pass rates and undertakes careful analysis and follow up of early leavers. Current analysis indicates that the main reasons for non-completion are to secure employment or because of family or personal problems. Non-completion is also an issue on part-time higher national certificate and national certificate courses. On average, some 30 per cent of national certificate course students do not complete their programmes of study; in engineering, computing and business studies an even higher proportion leave the course early. The college has developed a comprehensive mechanism within its quality assurance process to classify and track student withdrawals but this is not yet fully implemented. There is an urgent need to apply these procedures more rigorously in monitoring retention.

61 According to the college's published information on student achievements, of the 607 full-time students aged 19 who completed their studies in the academic year 1994-95, 34 per cent progressed to higher education, 43 per cent continued in further education, 9 per cent entered employment, 5 per cent went to other destinations, and 9 per cent of destinations were unknown. The numbers of students from BTEC courses entering higher education has increased from 125 in 1994 to 143 in 1995. Adult students achieve good progression rates to other training or to higher education. Mature students on the access to higher education programme are particularly successful in progressing to higher studies and gaining places in higher education. Of 51 students on the programme in 1994-95, 73 per cent successfully progressed to higher education. Students undertaking teacher training are successful in gaining accreditation and many progress to the certificate of education/postgraduate certificate of education course through recognition of prior achievement. Adult basic education students have opportunities to gain accreditation but not predominately through nationally-recognised qualifications.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

62 The college produced a well written and comprehensive self-assessment report based on Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The format of the report and the process of creating it was of value to the college. Staff intend to integrate the document with the

college's strategic planning cycle as the basis for an annual report to governors. The self-assessment report includes an overview of the college and provides analyses of strengths, with supporting evidence, and areas for development, with proposed actions. The analyses contained in the self-assessment report are generally objective, rigorous and self-critical. The judgements are broadly in line with the findings of the inspection.

63 The college's charter is one of five national winners of the college charter competition 1994, organised by the former Department for Education. The charter is comprehensive and attractively presented. It includes much information of value to students, staff, parents and other interested parties. Staff are aware of the charter and support it. Students are provided with information on the charter as part of their induction. They understand their responsibilities and the college's commitments under the charter. The charter contains, for instance, guidance for students on obtaining a place at college, financial charges and the help available. It describes the guidance and counselling arrangements and the policy on equal opportunities, including that for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and provides information on how to contact individual college governors. The college's complaints procedure, including a commitment to respond within 10 working days, is clearly set out. The college maintains full and careful records of complaints. Complaints are investigated promptly and appropriate action is taken. The content and presentation of the charter is being reviewed after two years.

64 The college has a comprehensive and effective system of quality assurance which applies to all college functions. The system has a strong customer focus and the many staff who have contributed to its development, willingly implement it and are committed to its further improvement. Governors and the strategic management team take a particular interest in quality matters. Quality assurance documentation is good. The marketing and quality assurance development plan is clearly and succinctly written. The quality operations manual is in a format designed to meet the requirements of ISO 9000.

65 Quality assurance in programme areas is based on a system of course evaluation and review files, which form the basis for regular and routine evaluation of courses. The college council, strategic management team and governors receive an annual college report which summarises reports from each programme area. Programme area developers meet weekly and have the main responsibility for quality assurance within programme areas. They discuss quality issues with their associated programme area managers and course leaders. Record keeping in programme areas reflects the requirements of the college's quality assurance framework, the needs of courses and those of awarding bodies. Overall, there is good compliance with the requirements of the quality assurance system across the college and the few instances of non-compliance are quickly rectified.

66 Course evaluation leads to the identification of issues for action, including teaching strategies, resource provision and staff development. External assessors' and verifiers' reports are mainly complimentary. Their analysis contributes to the quality assessment process. Consultancy groups in each programme area include representatives from industry or commerce. Consultants have been employed to assess and help improve the quality of provision in science, engineering and for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

67 The quality assurance system places strong emphasis on student feedback. Surveys of students' opinions are carried out on three occasions each year. The outcomes are analysed to identify priority areas for development. However, questionnaires provide specific information on student perceptions of subject teaching only on GCE A level courses. Survey outcomes and actions to be taken are publicised throughout the college. Other surveys are made of employer and staff perceptions and there is a community survey. All contribute to the college's market intelligence and its perception of the needs of its clients and of its staff.

68 Each programme area, the functional areas of learning services and the professional development unit have produced self-assessment reports. These follow the format of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. They identify strengths and areas for development, but to differing levels of self-criticism and analysis. In construction, which was inspected before other programme areas, teachers have analysed the inspection findings and drawn up a realistic action plan. There is a clear long-term plan for assessing and inspecting the quality of provision in programme areas, including the observation of classroom teaching. In some areas, such as business studies, the internal verification of NVQs is still at an early stage of development.

69 In addition to college-wide performance indicators, there are specific targets for quality. The marketing and quality development plan identifies objectives and targets drawn from the strategic plan and presents action plans for 1995-97. Key measures of quality are identified in seven areas, including customer satisfaction, staff satisfaction, output quality, student destinations and repeat business. Staff in some programme areas such as catering, art and design, and health and care, are beginning to make use of performance indicators in their analyses of courses but other vocational areas have yet to do so. A 'value-added' analysis is being introduced for GCE A level teaching.

70 There is a clear and appropriate staff-development policy in the college. Its implementation provides good development opportunities for staff at all levels and functions, including staff on partial contracts. The college has established clear staff-development priorities based on its strategic plan. In 1994-95, these included the support of about 100 staff gaining Training and Development Lead Body D32/D33 awards. The college estimates that about 60 per cent of the teachers for whom these

are appropriate have now gained awards and the remainder are working towards them. Proportionately fewer staff have already gained, or are working towards, Training and Development Lead Body D34/D36 awards for internal verifiers but the college expects to achieve its planned target. The staff-development budget for 1995-96 represents 0.77 per cent of overall payroll costs. However, there is a substantial hidden investment in staff development in terms of the commitment of staff time. Much is achieved through the college's in-house staff-development provision. Overall, the college is committed to providing good staff-development opportunities for all of its staff and has applied for Investors in People status. The take-up of staff-development opportunities is high.

71 A well conceived induction programme for newly-appointed staff provides both general and subject specific support. New staff attend a two-day induction event which familiarises them with overall college policies and practice. This is followed by individually arranged induction programmes based in the programme areas. A relatively new feature is the appointment of mentors to provide extended but informal support and guidance to new staff.

72 There are weaker aspects of staff development in the college. There is a need for:

- further staff development in information technology
- staff development to help improve the practical experience in the workplace of staff in health and childcare
- the implementation of the planned staff-development strategy for teachers of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

73 Staff-appraisal policy has been developing for about two years and is now being implemented. At the time of the inspection, all senior staff, including programme area managers and developers, had been appraised. In some programme areas which include science, construction and art and design, appraisal has not resulted in the identification of clear individual staff-development needs nor action plans.

RESOURCES

Staffing

74 Teachers are well qualified for the subjects they teach. Just over 70 per cent of the full-time staff have degrees and 90 per cent have teacher training qualifications. Part-time teachers are well supported. They attend team meetings and a high proportion take up the training opportunities available to them. Some long-serving staff have limited recent knowledge of industry. Progress is being achieved through work experience programmes and the appointment of new staff with appropriate backgrounds. Eighty-five staff have been appointed since August 1994, of whom 49 are teaching staff and 36 support staff, including two learning

support assistants. Selection procedures incorporate skills tests, including the assessment of an academic staff candidate's ability to teach.

75 Staff who support learning are well organised. Their duties can include periods of tutoring as part of their contracts. This assists with student supervision and provides adequate help to students and staff. For example, in the learning resource centres technicians assist students. There is a need to increase the number of staff who support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Equipment/learning resources

76 In general, there is an adequate supply of equipment and materials to support the work in the curriculum areas. Teaching rooms are, in the main, well equipped with overhead projectors, screens, blinds and whiteboards. The new centre for engineering contains much new apparatus and the provision in performing arts has an excellent range of video equipment of industrial standard. In some areas, for example in applied mechanics, mechanical science, and in catering, some of the equipment is old.

77 An important strategy has been the development of the central learning resource centre with ancillary units on three other floors of the main building. There is also a learning resource centre at the Somerville building. The central learning resource centre is equipped with 120 study places and a drop-in computer workshop with 18 workstations. Further study places are provided in the ancillary centres. There is good access to information technology equipment in the learning resource centres. The college has sufficient computers, with one for every eight full-time students. The central learning resource centre has an Internet connection, three multimedia systems and a current library of 40 compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases. There is a standardised approach to the acquisition of software and hardware. The machine replacement schedule ensures that relatively up-to-date equipment is available.

78 The library operates within the main learning resource centre. It is well kept and, in the main, adequately stocked. There are too few books in some areas, for example in science. An automated library system was introduced in September 1994. There is a small library in the Bedford Street centre which supports students based there. It is intended that the stock will be transferred to the main site when the Bedford Street centre closes later this year. The college provides a £50 voucher to each full-time student. This is for purchase of their own course books or for equipment.

Accommodation

79 Since incorporation the college has invested over £2 million in updating and upgrading its teaching and community facilities. Recent developments at the college, such as the 'student street' have been completed to a high standard. Teaching accommodation generally has

clean and attractive rooms. Classrooms are well maintained, fit for purpose and in many areas furnished and decorated to high standards. Workshops and associated teaching areas are of good quality and the new centre for engineering has been refurbished to a high industrial standard. In catering and leisure there is a good range of specialist accommodation; the new restaurant and kitchen are particularly well appointed. Other developments which have resulted in good accommodation include the sports hall, theatre, salons for hairdressing and beauty therapy and the central learning resource centre. Refurbishment work is still to be completed and some accommodation, especially the art and design studios, the Dane Bank gymnasium and two science laboratories, remain in need of attention.

80 Teaching accommodation is generally well used, but there are examples where room size is not well matched to the number of students in the group. The flexible timetable facilitates further efficiencies in the use of space. Separate special courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have recently been moved to a new suite of rooms at the Somerville centre, which has the appropriate facilities. The college has invited the South Cheshire Access group to assess its facilities with regard to access for wheelchair users. Some ramps, lifts and other facilities have been installed.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

81 The main strengths of the college are:

- good links with an extensive range of outside bodies, a high profile in the local community and the provision of a wide range of courses in response to well-developed labour market intelligence
- an effective and supportive board of governors
- a well-developed planning cycle with programme area development plans closely linked to the college's strategic plan
- a successful management structure which encourages staff to work in teams and which is supported by good communications at all levels
- effective counselling, guidance and welfare services available to students through a team of specialists
- a well-developed personal tutorial system, effective learning support and well-executed assessment of students' work
- improved achievements over the last three years for students who complete their course
- a comprehensive and effective system of quality assurance which applies to all college functions and offers clear evidence that the process is leading to an overall improvement in quality
- a charter which is comprehensive, attractively presented and provides a range of information of value to students, staff, parents and other interested parties

-
- generally good accommodation mainly on one site with some impressively refurbished areas.

82 In order to make further progress, the college should address the following:

- gaps in the provision, especially in the foundation level programme
- the need to develop an integrated computer-based management information system which meets the information requirements of the college
- classes where staff expectations of student performance should be higher and where student participation is not sufficiently encouraged
- poor retention on some full-time and part-time courses which require improved monitoring and action.

FIGURES

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- 1 Student numbers by age (as at November 1995)

 - 2 Student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)

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

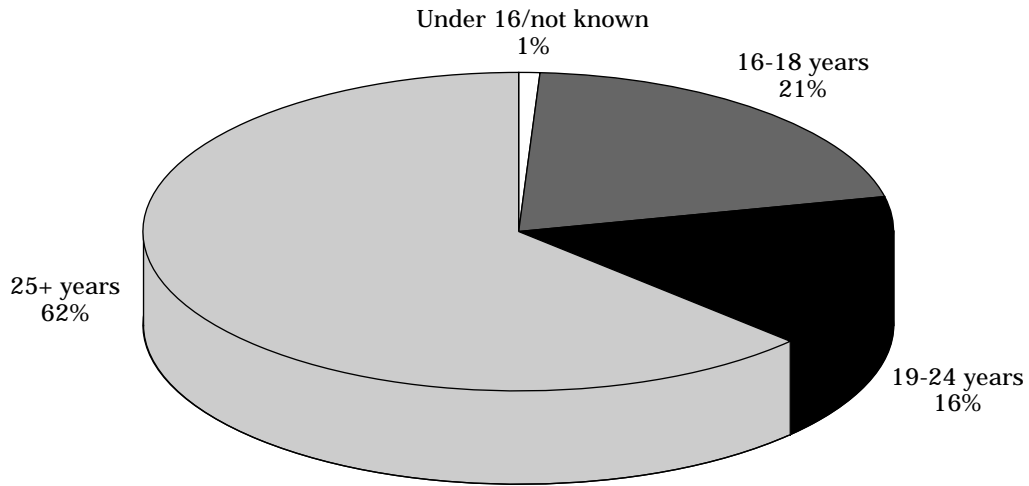
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

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

Figure 1

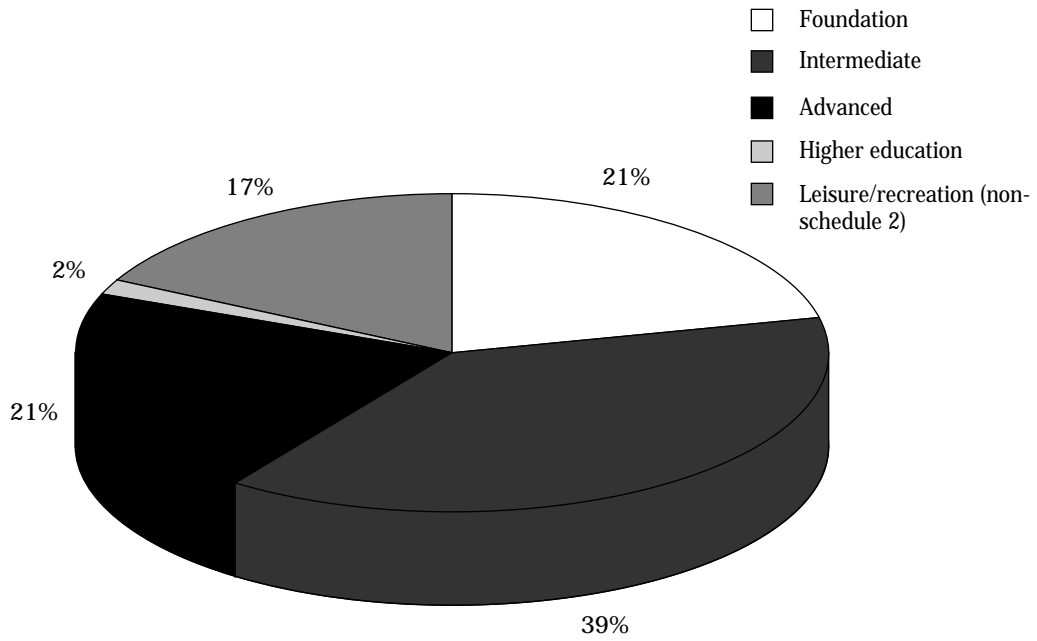
South Cheshire College: student numbers by age (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 9,565

Figure 2

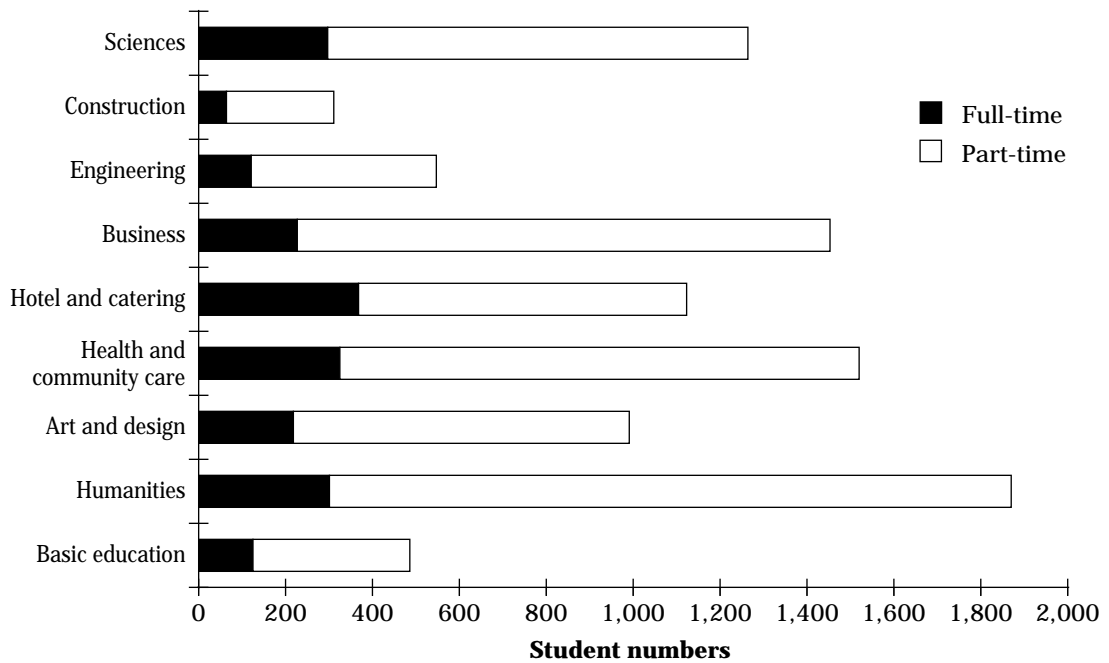
South Cheshire College: student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 9,565

Figure 3

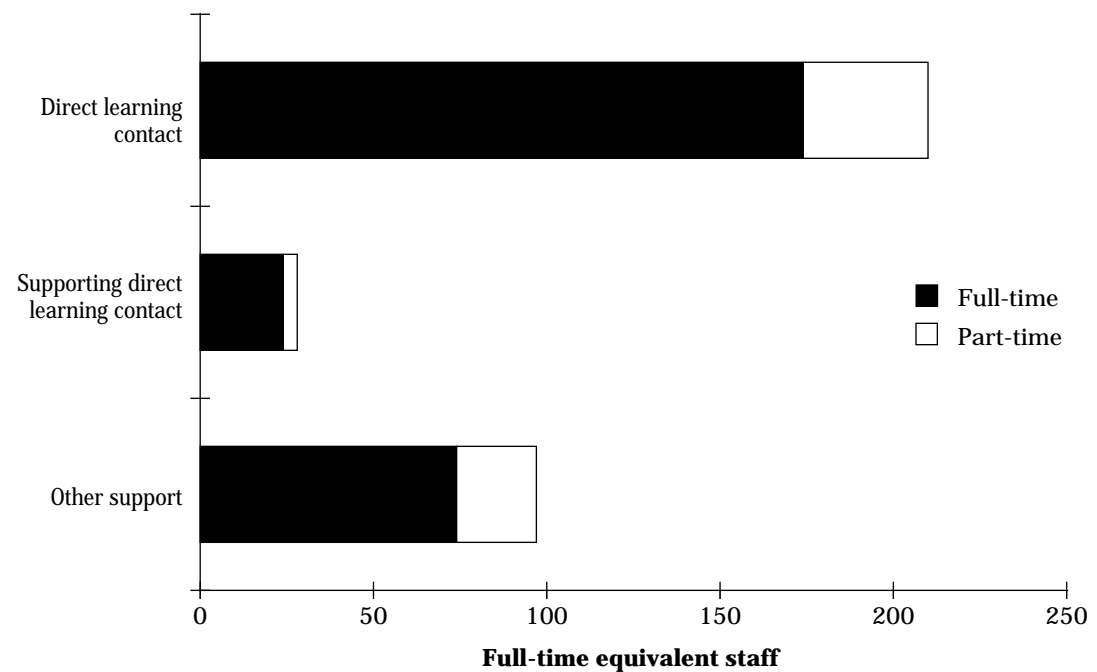
South Cheshire College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 9,565

Figure 4

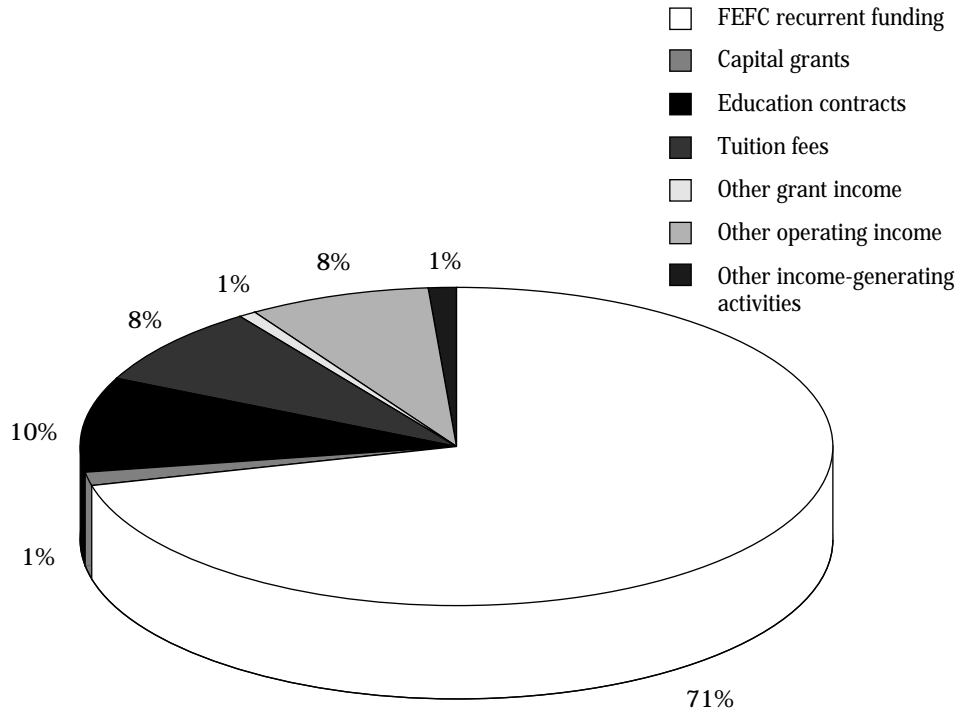
South Cheshire College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)



Full-time equivalent staff: 335

Figure 5

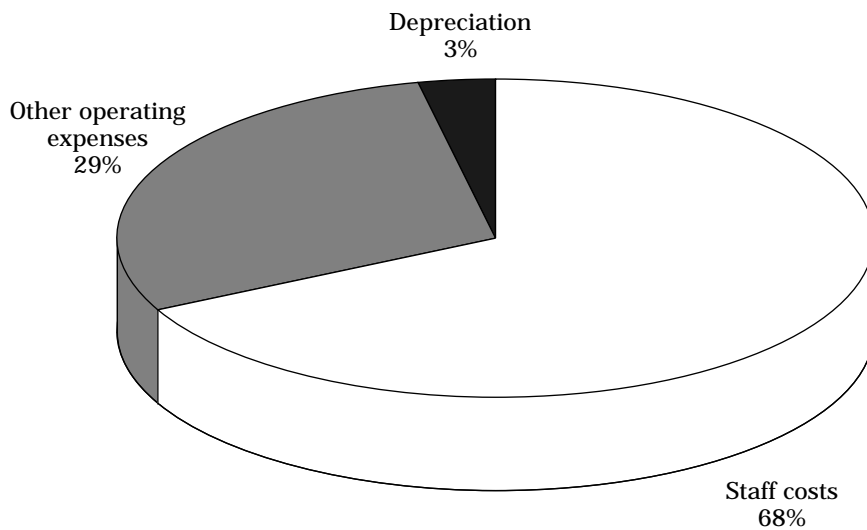
South Cheshire College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £9,393,000

Figure 6

South Cheshire College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £9,531,000

Note: this chart excludes £8,000 interest payable.

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