

South Cheshire College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100
Website <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>*

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	-
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	-

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

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

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given 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 the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). 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 shown.

Summary

South Cheshire College

North West Region

Inspected February 1999

South Cheshire College is a highly successful tertiary college in Crewe. It provides a broad range of provision for school-leavers and for mature students who wish to return to study. The college produced a comprehensive self-assessment report in preparation for the inspection. The report covered all aspects of the college and drew upon the self-assessment reviews produced by curriculum and service areas. It was evaluative and identified strengths, weaknesses and actions for improvement. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report which were based upon the outcomes of quality assurance and self-assessment processes which had been further developed and refined since the last inspection. College staff had been fully involved in the preparation of the report. Judgements were internally moderated and had been informed by an inspection undertaken by staff from another college.

The college offers provision in nine of the FEFC's 10 programme areas and a large adult education programme. Provision in six of these areas was inspected together with aspects of cross-college provision. The wide range of provision has been developed to meet the needs of the local community. The college has

succeeded in its aim to provide high standards of teaching and learning in all subject areas. It has productive links with local schools, the TEC and employers. Governors take an active interest in the work of the college and conduct their business openly. The college is particularly well managed. It benefits from strong leadership which encourages staff individually and through an extensive network of teams to take responsibility for meeting the needs of students. A wide range of information to support management is available to staff on the college intranet. There is a comprehensive range of support services for students. Tutorial arrangements are especially good and give due attention to the needs of the individual student. Arrangements for quality assurance are robust and give priority to improving teaching and learning. Students' achievements are generally good and some are outstanding. Teaching accommodation is maintained to a high standard. There is a wide range of recreation and sports facilities. The college should: develop further the analysis it undertakes of students' achievements to identify specific areas where improvement could be made; improve the service provided by the college refectory; and integrate more effectively the development of students' key skills with course work in some curriculum areas.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science and information technology	2	Support for students	1
Business administration	2	General resources	1
Catering and hospitality	2	Quality assurance	1
Leisure and tourism	1	Governance	2
Child, health and social care	1	Management	1
Creative and performing arts	2		
English	1		

The College and its Mission

1 South Cheshire College recruits students predominantly from the south and mid-Cheshire boroughs of Crewe and Nantwich, Congleton, Vale Royal and Macclesfield. Since incorporation in 1993, overall recruitment has risen by almost 40%. The college is located on a single campus situated in a residential area about 1.5 miles from Crewe and 0.5 miles from the mainline railway station. In addition to the range of provision it offers on its main Crewe site, the college offers a large adult education programme in nine high schools in the area and two leased properties situated in the town centres of Middlewich and Congleton. It has established links with primary schools, community centres and voluntary sector organisations to extend its provision as a part of its strategy to widen participation.

2 The population of Crewe and Nantwich in May 1998 was 113,700. The unemployment rate in December 1998 was 3.7%. This compares with 7.1% in the north-west and a national rate of 6.2%. Employment in the locality has changed markedly over the last decade. The predominance of two major engineering companies has given way to an expansion of small and medium size enterprises. Growth in the local economy is forecast in distribution, hotels and catering, education and health, public administration and business services. Employment prospects in agriculture and the manufacturing sector appear likely to continue their decline.

3 The college is the major provider of courses of study for school-leavers in the locality. There is also one 11 to 18 school and an agricultural college within the borough of Crewe and Nantwich. The nearest further education college is 15 miles away. The college is the lead partner in a consortium of Cheshire colleges which has secured the New Deal contract for the young unemployed and 25 plus age group. Funding from the European Social Fund has been used to extend provision for businesses and the local

community. The college has several links with higher education institutions including Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Staffordshire University and The Victoria University of Manchester.

4 The level of courses offered range from basic education to higher certificates and diplomas. The range includes:

- 33 subjects for general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and 14 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects
- 18 subject areas ranging from levels 1 to 5 for national vocational qualifications (NVQs)
- four courses at entry level, two at foundation, eight at intermediate and 10 at advanced level leading to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs)
- nine national diploma/certificate courses
- eight higher national diplomas/higher national certificates
- over 150 vocational leisure and recreation courses.

5 Each year the college provides opportunities for school pupils and members of the community to sample its provision through its 'primary, secondary and senior colleges'. Its 'weekend college' offers a range of family activities on a Saturday morning. Approximately 1,300 primary pupils attended its fifth annual 'primary college' last year. Links with partner secondary schools have been improved by the introduction in the summer of 1997 of a 'secondary college' in which all year 10 pupils from five partner secondary schools attend a three-day programme of activities. 'Senior college', designed for the 'mature student', operated for the third successive year in summer 1998 attracting over 200 people. 'Weekend college' has operated for each of the last four years with an average of 250 family enrolments weekly.

6 The college management structure has remained relatively stable since the last

Context

inspection. The college strategic management team comprises the principal, the deputy principal, who is also director of studies, and five other directors responsible for finance and administration, marketing and commercial activities, organisational development, student support and operational services, respectively. The curriculum is managed in 10 college programme areas. Each has a programme developer responsible for effectiveness, who reports to the director of organisation development, and a programme manager responsible for efficiency who reports to the director of studies. There is also a structure of cross-college co-ordinators working within the functional areas and across curriculum areas. In 1998, the college employed 174 full-time equivalent teaching staff on full-time or fractional contracts together with 130 full-time equivalent non-teaching staff.

7 The college mission emphasises the promotion of high-quality teaching and learning, flexible provision to meet the training needs of its communities and efficiency and effectiveness in identifying and meeting these needs.

The Inspection

8 The college was inspected during the week beginning 22 February 1999. Before the inspection, inspectors reviewed the self-assessment report and considered information from other directorates of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college provided data on students' achievements for 1997-98 which it derived from the individualised student record (ISR). These were checked by inspectors against primary sources of evidence, such as registers and the pass lists issued by examining bodies, and were found to be mostly reliable. These data together with ISR data for 1996 and 1997 were used to compile the tables in the curriculum area sections of the report. The college was notified of the sample of work to be inspected two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by 13 inspectors

and an auditor working for a total of 55 days. Inspectors observed 93 lessons and examined students' work and college documents. They also met students, college governors, managers, staff and representatives of local schools.

9 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 83% were judged to be good or outstanding. Only one was rated as less than satisfactory. This profile of grades compares very favourably with the average figures of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Context

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	5	11	2	0	0	18
GNVQ	17	14	6	0	0	37
NVQ	5	10	3	0	0	18
Other vocational	4	6	3	1	0	14
Other	3	2	1	0	0	6
Total (No.)	34	43	15	1	0	93
Total (%)	37	46	16	1	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

10 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
South Cheshire College	11.2	80
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

Curriculum Areas

Science and Information Technology

Grade 2

11 The inspection covered provision in computing, information technology (IT) and science. Inspectors broadly agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good teaching, particularly in practical sessions
- above average pass rates on most courses
- good range of provision
- effective curriculum organisation and management
- well-developed liaison activities and progression opportunities
- mainly good provision of equipment and learning resources

Weaknesses

- declining retention rates on many courses
- low proportion of higher grades in most GCE A level subjects

12 Inspectors agreed with the business and computing programme area's self-assessment that courses are offered in response to local needs. Specialist IT courses range from foundation to higher education levels and are available at the main site and at several locations in the surrounding area. Instead of GCSE science subjects, which the college no longer offers, students are now advised to consider the GNVQ intermediate science programme in which pass rates for students who complete the course have exceeded 80% for the past three years. Students' progression to

higher education and employment is carefully monitored. Productive links have been developed with schools, higher education and employers to facilitate staff development and work placements for students.

13 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that lessons are well planned and provide students with an appropriate variety of learning opportunities. Practical work is used extensively to illustrate both scientific principles and IT practice. In a typical practical lesson, students worked on their own and carried out simple investigations effectively. As the self-assessment report stated, they were given good individual attention by their teacher who probed their understanding and corrected minor errors. Students' responses to questions were good and demonstrated clear thinking about a new topic.

14 As identified by the self-assessment report, students' achievements are generally good. In vocational programmes, achievement rates for students who completed the GNVQ advanced science or IT programmes or the BTEC national diploma courses that preceded them have exceeded 80% for the last three years. In computer studies pass rates have declined slightly over three years from a high level of over 90%. There have been 100% pass rates for groups of students who complete the GNVQ advanced science programme and for students who complete GCE A level physics. For two years in GCE A level chemistry, and last year in GCE A level biology, all students who took their examinations were successful, although the number of students who completed their courses but did not take the biology examination brought the pass rate down to just below the national average. Students who completed GCE A level physics have consistently achieved better pass rates than the national average. However, only in GCE A level physics have pass rates, at the higher grades A to C, been consistently better than the national average over the last three years. Students' achievements on the foundation IT courses have been a little above the national average. There are some good

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student retention rates though there has been some decline in the last three years in the majority of programmes. Retention on the GNVQ intermediate science programme has not reached the national average and has declined over the last three years. Retention rates on both foundation programmes in IT, which have large numbers of students, have been good.

15 As noted in the self-assessment report, teachers are well qualified with appropriate degrees and teaching qualifications. There has been considerable and appropriate staff development which has included industrial placements and IT training. Technical staff offer efficient, high-quality support. Staff and physical resources are effectively deployed and managed. Student groups are large for the size of some laboratories, particularly when the full group attends. Good use is made of posters and wall displays to promote laboratory discipline, create a subject identity and display students' work. IT equipment is readily available in resource centres close to both the science laboratories and the computing suite. There are good examples of original learning resources that students use frequently. Although as noted in the self-assessment report, the best accommodation is of a high standard, refurbishment is required in a few laboratories. Computers and software are up to date. A number of computer rooms have recently been refurbished to a good standard, but there remain some which contain seating and desk spaces which are in need of attention.

Curriculum Areas

A summary of achievement and retention rates in science and information technology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
RSA computer literacy and information technology	1	Expected completions	85	665	1,098
		Retention (%)	94	85	86
		Achievement (%)	67	63	62
GNVQ intermediate science	2	Expected completions	7	12	14
		Retention (%)	71	67	64
		Achievement (%)	80	88	88
BTEC national diploma computer studies or GNVQ advanced IT	3	Expected completions	40	42	56
		Retention (%)	98	86	77
		Achievement (%)	92	84	80
BTEC national diploma science or GNVQ advanced science	3	Expected completions	16	19	15
		Retention (%)	44	84	80
		Achievement (%)	100	71	100
GCE A level biology	3	Expected completions	36	36	49
		Retention (%)	97	81	78
		Achievement (%)	86	89	74
GCE A level chemistry	3	Expected completions	15	20	18
		Retention (%)	87	90	78
		Achievement (%)	62	73	86
GCE A level computing	3	Expected completions	15	22	28
		Retention (%)	87	91	71
		Achievement (%)	69	76	81
GCE A level physics	3	Expected completions	15	20	25
		Retention (%)	87	90	72
		Achievement (%)	100	100	83

Source: ISR data

Curriculum Areas

Business Administration

Grade 2

16 The inspection covered administration provision within the college's business administration programme. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment.

Key strengths

- well-organised teaching in most lessons
- effective curriculum management and planning
- good opportunities for students to obtain accreditation for key skills
- effective support for students
- high retention and achievement on most courses

Weaknesses

- some classroom management techniques
- examples of mismatch between tasks set and the needs of students

17 The college offers a wide range of business administration courses. With the exception of the courses for medical secretaries and practice administrators, the provision is located in the college's business and administration programme area. In order to share good practice and ensure that the quality of provision is consistently high, the college has recently brought courses which are offered at centres in the community under the responsibility of the programme area. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that management in the programme area is a strength. The programme manager and a programme developer work closely together. Course planning is comprehensive. Lesson plans and detailed schemes of work are available for all sessions. Teamwork is effective. Meetings are timetabled and minutes are

circulated. On NVQ administration courses staff who teach at centres in the community are invited to the course review meeting. However, there are few other opportunities for staff who teach the same course in centres away from the main site to meet and share good practice. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college-wide internal verification procedures are a strength. They operate effectively in the programme area and ensure that assessment is standardised. Staff monitor students' progress carefully and keep good records.

18 Most of the teaching was effective. The best lessons were well planned and teachers communicated aims and objectives clearly to students. Teachers used an appropriate variety of teaching methods and took care to check that students understood what they had learned and encouraged them to consolidate their learning. Teachers drew effectively on the work experience of students to ensure that they could apply theory in an appropriate vocational context. In a minority of lessons, there was ineffective classroom management and teachers failed to set sufficiently demanding work to keep the interest and attention of students. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report. All full-time NVQ administration students have opportunities to develop numeracy, communication and IT key skills for which there is appropriate accreditation. In one NVQ lesson, two students were using the internet to research information on the Data Protection Act. Students from the college took part in the national pilot key skills project, one of whom was the only student nationally who fully achieved all the criteria for success.

19 Assignments are set at an appropriate level and are marked to meet examination board and/or NVQ requirements. All full-time NVQ administration students have work placements for two days a week. Students are encouraged to produce evidence of competence from their work placement. NVQ portfolios are well

Curriculum Areas

organised and provide a thorough record of students' achievements. Most students' assignment work is of a high standard and its presentation is enhanced by the regular use of IT. Student retention rates are high in all vocational courses with the majority exceeding the college target of 89%. In most subjects achievements exceed the national averages. One exception is the 1998 results at stage 2 where the level of achievement dropped from 90% in 1997 to 45% in 1998. According to the college these figures were adversely affected by the decision of many adult students to follow the programme of study but not to enter for the examination.

20 Students speak highly of the support they receive from their tutors. Working relations

between staff and students are good. Inspectors agreed with the statement in the self-assessment that all staff are well qualified and have made excellent progress towards the acquisition of the assessor and verifier awards. Teachers have appropriate knowledge and experience, and all have access to programmes of staff development.

21 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the standard of accommodation and resources is high. Computer rooms are well equipped with up-to-date hardware and software and laser printers. All rooms have whiteboards, overhead projectors and screens and some also have videos. In most rooms there are stimulating wall displays.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in business administration, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ administration (one year)	2	Expected completions	38	97	59
		Retention (%)	86	82	87
		Achievement (%)	87	76	71
NVQ administration (one year)	3	Expected completions	28	15	74
		Retention (%)	97	83	95
		Achievement (%)	29	67	70
NVQ administration (two year)	3	Expected completions	8	21	27
		Retention (%)	89	81	87
		Achievement (%)	100	62	56
Other vocational	1	Expected completions	431	231	154
		Retention (%)	97	98	92
		Achievement (%)	81	84	69
Other vocational	2	Expected completions	24	152	139
		Retention (%)	92	93	91
		Achievement (%)	88	90	45
Other vocational	3	Expected completions	46	86	24
		Retention (%)	100	97	86
		Achievement (%)	72	77	96

Source: ISR data

Curriculum Areas

Catering and Hospitality

Grade 2

22 The inspection covered all college-based hotel and catering courses. Inspectors agreed with the majority of strengths identified in the self-assessment report. However, they considered that the strength of course management was understated. They also thought that the significance of some weaknesses was underestimated.

Key strengths

- well-planned and effective teaching
- good retention and achievement rates
- effectively managed courses
- the quality of support for individual students
- the recent industrial experience of teachers
- effective industry links
- good specialist resources and technician support

Weaknesses

- failure of teachers in some lessons to ensure that students are fully engaged in relevant activities
- key skills not effectively integrated with NVQ programmes
- decline in retention and achievement rates

23 The college offers courses in hospitality and catering leading to GNVQ and NVQ qualifications and various professional qualifications. The range addresses the needs of 16 to 19 year old students, adult students and industry. NVQ level 1 provision is specifically designed to provide training and progression for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

24 The management of hospitality and catering courses is effective. This is not fully

recognised in the self-assessment report. Lines of communication and roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. Teamwork is effective both for curriculum planning and for monitoring students' progress. Staff respond swiftly to internal quality audits and external verifier reports. Course documentation is comprehensive, well designed and appropriate for students' use. Lesson plans are detailed and include achievable outcomes. Students are able to access all tracking and recording documentation through the college intranet. The review of course performance gives rise to action plans. Performance indicators and target-setting are not widely used. There are some gaps in the analysis of information gathered from the course review and evaluation surveys.

25 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of teaching and learning is good. Lessons were well organised and teachers used a variety of appropriate activities to engage students in learning. In practical lessons, students were able to apply their theoretical knowledge to culinary and service tasks and problems. In a minority of lessons, students who were using incorrect techniques were not always advised of their error. In some lessons, teachers failed to ensure that all students had enough work to do and did not provide additional work for those students who completed tasks early. Key skills are developed and assessed on all full-time and part-time courses. They are not fully integrated with NVQ programmes. Students are taught how to work in teams.

26 A group drawn from GNVQ and NVQ courses successfully managed and ran a hotel for a weekend. This provided opportunities for practical skills development and for verification of key skills. There is a well-organised programme of work experience. Some students have benefited from a short placement in a theme park in Missouri and at the time of the inspection, three students were on a one-year

Curriculum Areas

work experience programme at a holiday resort in the United States of America. Students are encouraged to bring evidence from their part-time employment to supplement evidence gained in college.

27 Student retention and achievement rates are generally above the national average for the programme area. Although the rates are good, there has recently been some decline in both retention and achievement. Absenteeism, attendance and students' progress are rigorously monitored. Students are encouraged to set themselves goals and to draw up action plans to achieve them. Students who need additional support and guidance are identified and extra help is provided. Portfolios of evidence are of a good standard. Teachers' written feedback on GNVQ students' work indicates clearly how they can improve their performance. All students achieve the primary hygiene certificate. Students have the option of acquiring additional qualifications such as the wine and spirit awards and sugarcraft examinations.

28 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the standard of accommodation and physical resources is good. The restaurant and kitchen facilities are flexible in design to allow students to experience different forms of food service and production. Students make good use of the curriculum area resource centre which is staffed by a vocationally-qualified assistant. The centre is well equipped with a good range of appropriate books, videos, CD-ROMs and other learning materials. All teachers and some support staff have recently undertaken periods of industrial updating in a range of hospitality sectors. Links with industry are strong. The recently formed 'consultant group' includes representatives from four major sectors of the industry. Teachers are involved in work-based training and assessment. The department has responded to the needs of the industry by providing British Institute of Innkeeping courses and additional hygiene qualifications.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in catering and hospitality, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate hospitality and catering	2	Expected completions	14	11	10
		Retention (%)	93	100	90
		Achievement (%)	100	91	89
NVQ catering and hospitality	2	Expected completions	14	28	63
		Retention (%)	93	86	95
		Achievement (%)	100	*	76
GNVQ advanced hospitality and catering	3	Expected completions	*	13	15
		Retention (%)	*	92	87
		Achievement (%)	*	100	83
NVQ catering and hospitality	3	Expected completions	*	7	14
		Retention (%)	*	100	86
		Achievement (%)	*	100	80

Source: ISR data

*data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Leisure and Tourism

Grade 1

29 The inspection covered GNVQ intermediate and advanced leisure and tourism courses, higher national certificate programmes in leisure and tourism and part-time courses for the travel industry. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- consistently high standard of teaching
- good retention and achievement on GNVQ and higher national certificate courses
- well-managed courses
- wide choice of leisure or tourism specialisms at both intermediate and advanced level
- excellent travel office and fitness centre
- well-qualified staff with relevant commercial experience

Weaknesses

- low achievement on the NVQ sport and recreation course in 1998

30 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that teaching and learning is a strength. The majority of lessons observed by inspectors were outstanding. Teachers clearly state the objectives for learning at the start of lessons and usually give a summary at the end. Individual and group activities are lively and demanding. Teachers pay close attention to the needs of individuals and monitor their progress carefully. They make sure that students' note-taking is effective. They check that students understand their work through carefully-constructed questions and class discussion. In one lesson, following a clear introduction by the teacher, students were given

a written brief to develop an unspoiled Caribbean island for tourism. They worked well in small groups for 20 minutes after which a representative from each group gave a short but informed presentation to the rest of the class. In a minority of lessons, teachers failed to make appropriate links between related topics or did not explain the rationale for the class exercises. Inspectors considered that most weaknesses in teaching identified in the self-assessment report have been addressed by the course team.

31 Inspectors concurred with the judgement in the self-assessment report that students' achievements are a strength. GNVQ students' achievements generally exceed the national average. At intermediate level, in 1996 and 1997, retention and achievement rates were both above the national average. At advanced level, retention and achievement rates were above the national average in 1997. The achievement rate further improved to 84% in 1998. In 1996, retention and achievement rates on the national diploma programmes were outstanding at 100% in each case. In 1998, the achievement rate for college-based NVQ sport and recreation programme fell from 71% to 64%. If students studying away from the college are included in the 1998 figures, the overall achievement rate is less satisfactory at 37%. Effective action has led to improved retention in the current year.

32 Leisure and tourism programmes are well managed. Detailed records of students' academic progress are kept. Close attention is paid to attendance and unexplained absences are promptly followed up. Programme area staff generally know why individual students leave before completing their course. There is a flexible approach to meeting the needs of individuals. For example, when two students recently moved to Ireland, electronic mail, post and telephone were used to enable them to complete their GNVQ advanced course. On both GNVQ intermediate and advanced programmes students may choose either leisure or tourism

Curriculum Areas

specialisms. The self-assessment report highlighted the wide range of additional qualifications available to students, including NVQ level 2 travel services, sports coaching awards, first-aid qualifications and the community sports leader award. Students are offered a range of educational visits in the United Kingdom and abroad. Work experience is part of the GNVQ advanced course, but it is not offered at intermediate level. As noted in the self-assessment report, the team has good links with local commercial and community organisations.

33 The self-assessment report recognised the excellent resources for leisure and tourism courses. Some handouts consist of miniaturised copies of overhead transparencies and have spaces for students' notes. Classrooms are equipped with whiteboards, overhead projectors and screens, televisions and videos. Carefully-

selected posters improve the environment. Classrooms are located together, adjoining staff accommodation. A dedicated leisure and tourism resource centre is well equipped with computers and resource packs for countries and topics. The college travel centre is an excellent, purpose-built facility. Students use the centre for their NVQ studies, receiving support from a full-time staff member. The centre has up-to-date travel industry software and conducts significant business for students and staff. The college also has a large sports hall and a new fitness centre, equipped with a wide range of modern exercise equipment. Courses are mainly taught by full-time teachers. All full-time teachers have teaching qualifications; several have higher degrees. They have a wide range of experience in the travel, tourism and leisure industries.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in leisure and tourism, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
NVQ sport and recreation	1	Expected completions	34	20	30
		Retention (%)	100	70	67
		Achievement (%)	71	71	64
GNVQ intermediate leisure and tourism	2	Expected completions	15	43	30
		Retention (%)	100	78	80
		Achievement (%)	93	74	79
GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism	3	Expected completions	19	86	85
		Retention (%)	63	76	75
		Achievement (%)	58	82	84
National diplomas in travel and tourism and leisure studies	3	Expected completions	67	*	*
		Retention (%)	100	*	*
		Achievement (%)	100	*	*
Higher national certificate leisure studies	4	Expected completions	*	16	20
		Retention (%)	*	100	100
		Achievement (%)	*	80	88

Source: ISR data

*course not available

Curriculum Areas

Child, Health and Social Care

Grade 1

34 The inspection covered child, health and social care and counselling courses. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college self-assessment report. They also identified some additional strengths and weaknesses in teaching, learning and students' achievements.

Key strengths

- good and some outstanding teaching
- good links between separate course elements to consolidate learning
- high students' achievements on advanced level courses
- good provision and support for mature students
- well-structured, effectively managed courses
- good and some outstanding resources

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of opportunities to develop key skills

35 The broad range of provision enables students to progress from foundation through to advanced level. Inspectors agreed with the college that its provision for mature students is a significant strength. They can enrol at different points in the year and, where appropriate, receive recognition for their previous learning and experience. This flexibility allows students to achieve their learning goals in the shortest possible time. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that course management is a strength. Courses are well planned. The links which the college has with other organisations enable students to have a wide range of work experience opportunities. Courses are regularly reviewed and take account

of the views of students. For example, on one course, students felt unprepared to carry out creative activities with children. As a result, the creative activities component of the course has been extended. Induction programmes are effective and help students to familiarise themselves with the college and their courses. If students have need of additional support it is identified at induction. The progress students make with additional support is recorded and reported back to personal tutors.

36 Most of the lessons observed by inspectors were good or outstanding. Teachers are well qualified and professionally experienced. They use a variety of appropriate learning activities to encourage students to develop and demonstrate knowledge, understanding and vocational skills at appropriate levels. Teachers relate theory well to current work practices. They encourage students to make links between their learning in different parts of the course. They check that students understand what they have learned and encourage them to draw on their own experiences. Teachers use methods which enable students to identify, apply and build on what they already know about a topic. In the best lessons, teachers set learning activities which help students to identify the factors which influence the development of vocational skills. For example, in one lesson students identified the skills necessary to conduct clear interpersonal communication. The class observed one student giving instructions to another on how to replicate an unseen diagram. The student produced a copy of the diagram and, focusing on what they had seen and heard, the class identified the skills required. The teacher introduced technical language at appropriate points. In the less-effective lessons class discussion was not well managed and teachers missed opportunities to develop students' key skills. Work experience is well integrated with full-time and substantial part-time courses. Carefully designed assignments link and reinforce college and workplace learning. The college self-assessment

Curriculum Areas

report recognised the significant strengths but not the occasional weaknesses in teaching.

37 In lessons and in the workplace most students, through their oral contributions and their written and practical work, demonstrate standards appropriate to the level of their course. On all advanced level courses students' achievements are above the national average. On the GNVQ advanced level course students' achievements are well above the national average. Pass rates on the intermediate courses have been above the national average for the last three years. Retention rates on advanced level courses although above the national average have declined from 100% to 75% between 1996 and 1998. The decline in retention has occurred alongside a large increase in student numbers, from 13 in 1996 to 96 in 1998. The college has taken action to address retention issues and the current year's

figures indicate a substantial improvement. Students' written work is accurately marked and teachers' grading of work is in line with the appropriate criteria. Teachers provide constructive written and verbal feedback to students which indicates how their work can be improved. Students' portfolios are clearly indexed, well organised and well presented. Internal verification systems are thorough. A 10% sample of all students' work is cross-marked in addition to the verification of assessment judgements. Most students who complete their courses achieve their awards and progress to further or higher education, professional training or employment.

38 Accommodation for care courses is good. There is excellent specialist accommodation for counselling courses. There are good-quality resources including a vocational resource centre where access to IT resources is good.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in child, health and social care, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ foundation health and social care	1	Expected completions	*	16	16
		Retention (%)	*	50	81
		Achievement (%)	*	100	54
GNVQ intermediate health and social care	2	Expected completions	37	70	31
		Retention (%)	76	63	77
		Achievement (%)	68	67	75
GNVQ advanced health and social care; national diplomas in health studies and nursery nursing	3	Expected completions	13	74	96
		Retention (%)	100	91	76
		Achievement (%)	100	75	86

Source: ISR data

*course not available

Curriculum Areas

Creative and Performing Arts

Grade 2

39 The inspection included courses in art and design, performing arts, textiles, media and film studies. Inspectors agreed with the main strengths and weakness identified in the college self-assessment report but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good teaching and learning
- effective teaching of basic visual research and drawing skills
- high standard of students' work supported by a range of enrichment activities
- well-resourced specialist accommodation

Weaknesses

- some subjects with low or declining achievement rates
- low retention in 1998 in level 3 courses
- lack of target-setting against appropriate benchmarks

40 There is much good teaching and learning. Assignment briefs and lesson plans are comprehensive. Teaching and learning methods take account of the needs of individual students. In a life drawing lesson, GNVQ and foundation students were encouraged to use a variety of mark making tools in the figure study. The lesson was divided into short, timed periods in which students drew different poses and this successfully catered for the differing levels of ability in the student group. In a dance lesson, a series of controlled and timed movements were effectively used in the warm-up. The students responded well and developed the exercise with improvised gestures to develop their own interpretations. In an intermediate

art lesson, an exercise which combined the use of different media and techniques, including printing, batik and sewing, helped students to develop a variety of skills.

41 Students' skills are well developed. Most are encouraged to develop evaluation of both their own and others' skills by considering each other's work. In contrast, in the weaker lessons, teachers failed to use methods which took account of the needs of the students in the class. In art and design, students' work is commonly used to illustrate good practice. In the best lessons, teachers encourage students to articulate their ideas and students respond well in discussion. In the weaker lessons, teachers fail to engage students in discussion. There is effective teaching of basic visual research and drawing skills in all courses. The key skills in drawing are carefully developed in life classes which all art students attend as part of their programme.

42 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that curriculum enrichment is a strength. Students on vocational courses are involved in work on live projects and this extends the range of their experience. Students of three-dimensional design have produced millennium designs as part of a product design assignment for a glass company. The performing arts group are collaborating with higher education students to produce a drama which will centre on contemporary issues to take into schools. Students can choose a good combination of options to enrich their programmes. Exhibitions of students' work, fashion shows and performances are well publicised. Students benefit from the opportunity to participate in visits, exhibitions and field trips.

43 Students' work is of a good standard. Sketch book and design sheets demonstrate well students' work in progress. Teachers' assessment of students' work is thorough. Students are given regular and supportive feedback on their work. In foundation studies

Curriculum Areas

there are improved rates of retention and achievement which compare favourably with national averages. In GCE A levels some achievement rates are below national averages. Retention rates are high at GCE A level but have declined markedly in level 3 vocational courses and GNVQ advanced art and design. The use of performance indicators to monitor achievement against national benchmarking data has not been adequately developed. The weaknesses in achievement are not identified in the self-assessment report or course reviews.

44 Accommodation in the programme area provides a stimulating learning environment. The specialist facilities are suitably equipped with up-to-date and relevant technology.

The accommodation for visual arts and the performance dance studio have been refurbished to a professional standard. New recording facilities are available for media students. Space is well used, particularly the drawing and painting studio, dance studio and theatre in which large groups can be accommodated. There is, however, an absence of individual workstations or base areas in art and design where students can work on their projects. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report. In film studies, students have access to an extensive range of film on videos. The IT suite provides a good facility for students to explore visual media and electronic art.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in creative and performing arts, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
Vocational courses (GNVQ intermediate, first diploma)	2	Expected completions	27	55	95
		Retention (%)	74	69	76
		Achievement (%)	90	66	68
Vocational courses (GNVQ advanced, national diploma)	3	Expected completions	50	72	68
		Retention (%)	94	79	45
		Achievement (%)	81	61	74
GCE A level	3	Expected completions	109	167	172
		Retention (%)	94	76	93
		Achievement (%)	58	64	60
Foundation studies	3	Expected completions	*	12	18
		Retention (%)	*	90	94
		Achievement (%)	*	90	100

Source: ISR data

*course not available

Curriculum Areas

English

Grade 1

45 The inspection covered GCE A level English literature, GCE A level English language and GCSE English. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report's identification of strengths. Inspectors did not consider significant the one weakness noted in the report, but identified an additional key weakness.

Key strengths

- good achievements at GCE A level
- very good teaching and learning
- effective support for students
- well-organised department
- high-quality resources
- good links with schools

Weaknesses

- aspects of the management of GCSE provision

46 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the standard of teaching and learning is high. Lessons have clear objectives which teachers share with their students and often revisit at the end of the lesson. In the most successful lessons, teaching is dynamic. Teachers make good use of the students' experience to provide the starting point for their learning activities. Students' own use of language as revealed in a quiz about 'Estuary English' gave one lesson a lively start. A video of Tony Blair speaking to Des O'Connor then allowed them to identify features of the accent at work. In a literature class, students explored different possible meanings in a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* after watching the scene in two different film versions. They reached a clear understanding of the way dramatic form affects meaning. Teachers always check

carefully that students are learning and keep their progress under constant review. Teachers value students' opinions. As a consequence, they develop confidence in expressing their views in class. In a small minority of lessons, teachers did not use question and answer techniques successfully. Students' written work is promptly and conscientiously marked, with helpful commentary. The experience of GCE A level students is enriched by a good range of extra-curricular activities.

47 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that, with the exception of GCSE courses, English courses are well managed. Progress towards retention and achievement targets is carefully monitored. Meetings of course teams are minuted and responsibilities for taking forward actions are recorded. Teachers work well as a team and share good practice. The good links with local schools developed by English teachers help their understanding of students' backgrounds. College staff run local competitions for school students, make frequent liaison visits and have engaged in work placements in schools.

48 The majority of students who take GCSE English do so as an additional qualification to their GNVQ courses. Progress reviews and reports to parents are compiled through their GNVQ course tutors. There is no formal mechanism to ensure that English staff can contribute to these reviews. These students' views about their English course are not reported to English staff and are, therefore, not taken into account in course reviews. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

49 The self-assessment report records as a strength the examination results of GCE A level students over three years and inspectors agreed with this judgement. In 1998, achievements on the GCE A level English language and GCE A level English literature courses were well above the national average. The pass rate in English literature was 98% as against the national

Curriculum Areas

average for further education colleges of 76%; the pass rate for English language was 93% as against the national average of 87%. The percentages of grades A to C for the literature course in 1998 of 73% and for the language course of 51% well exceeded the national averages of 46% and 36%, respectively. The GCE A level language and literature course in which students performed less well was withdrawn from the curriculum offer in 1998. On the GCSE course, the pass rate has been low but has improved over the last three years and in 1998 reached the national average for 16 to 18 year old students in colleges of further education. Retention rates on this course have been consistently good.

50 Teachers are well qualified. Their subject knowledge is good; several are examiners. Teaching materials are well produced and designed to be interesting and stimulating for

students. For example, a newspaper article on the dropping of Desperate Dan from the pages of the *Dandy* formed the basis of a structured discussion on the linguistic features of the piece. Teachers have developed a computer database containing a range of teaching resources which they all use and to which they all contribute. The humanities resource centre is well equipped with computers. Inspectors saw some interesting GCSE work which had been produced using the internet and desktop publishing software. English staff are developing a range of print-based materials for the resource centre and have a website on the internet. Teaching rooms are comfortable and adaptable for a variety of teaching and learning methods. They are enlivened by framed posters, but there is little display of students' work.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in English, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE English	2	Expected completions	183	175	173
		Retention (%)	98	78	77
		Achievement (%)*	33	35	45
GCE A level	3	Expected completions	106	128	94
		Retention (%)	95	82	70
		Achievement (%)	78	91	80

Source: ISR data

*grades A to C

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 1

51 The college has maintained and developed further the outstanding quality of support for students since the last inspection. The self-assessment report emphasised the college's strong commitment to support for students. Inspectors agreed with the judgements made by the college.

Key strengths

- well-managed and coherent arrangements for supporting students
- outstanding liaison with schools and the community
- high-quality publicity materials
- effective tutorial system
- responsive and purposeful learning support
- effective careers, welfare and counselling services
- thorough recording and analysis of students' use of support services
- a wide range of enrichment activities

Weaknesses

- there are no significant weaknesses

52 Support for students is well managed. Staff responsibilities are clear and teamwork is good. The college cares about its students and they value this. Throughout the college there is evidence of progress being made towards the implementation of inclusive learning strategies. Student services are located near the main entrance in a well-resourced suite of rooms which provide a welcoming environment. Clear information about the services and support arrangements are displayed throughout the college. Good use is made of the college's website and intranet to promote new developments.

53 Prospective students are well informed about the college and its courses. Prospectuses and course publicity are imaginatively designed. Links with partner schools are particularly strong. During the three-day 'secondary college' event organised in July to introduce school pupils to the work of the college, teachers record the key skills which pupils achieve for inclusion in their records of achievement. The principal and senior staff give informative presentations to prospective students at open days and evenings which are held throughout the year. A wide range of initiatives has been developed to inform adults of college courses and services. These include a 'senior college' focus week and advice and enrolment activities in community venues and employers' premises. Opportunities to accredit students' prior learning are identified before enrolment and over 300 students on NVQ courses undertook such accreditation in 1997-98.

54 Induction programmes are well planned and valued by students. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that its tutorial system is highly effective. Tutors work within a college-wide framework which outlines the content of and approach to tutorials. At the same time, the approach allows staff an appropriate degree of flexibility to adapt the programme to the needs of different students. All full-time students have a personal tutor who is one of their teachers. Most tutorials observed by inspectors were outstanding. As well as one-hour weekly group tutorials, tutors see students individually at least once each term. Each student has a progress card to record the initial action plan and subsequent reviews. These are well maintained by tutors. In a minority of cases, tutors have not sufficiently developed their skills in helping students to set clear targets for themselves. Tutors provide subject teachers with a swift response to 'concern notes' which alert them to issues of individual students' attendance and progress. Staff emphasise to students the college's high expectations of work and

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behaviour. Working relationships between tutors and students are good and based on the development of mutual respect.

55 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the college's provision for learning support is a major strength. Information from partner schools, interview records and initial screening are used effectively to identify students who need additional support. There then follows close liaison between the learning services team and teachers to determine the form such support should take. The informal ethos in the learning support centre encourages students to ask for help. Staff set learning targets for students and give them effective feedback on their progress. Many students attend on a 'drop-in' basis to obtain help with their coursework and projects. The college ensures that the support needs of students on courses at all levels are met. Recent initiatives include the provision of advanced mathematics workshops, note-taking and study skills for GCE A level students, and the provision of learning support in the catering and engineering resource centres. Specialist help for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is effectively identified and well organised. Arrangements to provide flexible learning support for students in community centres are less well developed.

56 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that its welfare, counselling and careers guidance services are responsive, well used and are provided by an enthusiastic team of staff. Arrangements for making appointments and the flexible 'drop-in' facilities are sensitively organised to ensure that students have an element of choice in how and when they seek support. The use of these services by students is carefully monitored and evaluated in order to improve the services provided. A youth and community development worker provides regular liaison with outside agencies and is accessible to students across the college. The college provided financial assistance, over and

above its specific allocation, to over 350 full-time students in 1997-98 and has recently extended this assistance to part-time students. Counselling and welfare services are less well used by part-time students. Links between the careers guidance team, central admissions and curriculum areas are productive. The college was awarded the Investors in Careers award in May 1998.

57 A range of opportunities is provided for students' personal development, including sport and recreational activities. Presentations, exhibitions and discussions on environmental, career and health issues are organised centrally as focus weeks. An active student council meets regularly and arranges visits and social and fund-raising events. A regular dialogue exists between the student council and college management to discuss areas for development.

General Resources

Grade 1

58 Inspectors agreed with many of the findings of the self-assessment report but identified an additional key weakness.

Key strengths

- good-quality accommodation
- high standards of maintenance, interior cleanliness and security
- good access to high-quality IT resources
- wide range of recreational and sports facilities available to students and staff
- good resources to support students with physical disabilities
- excellent and well-located retail and communal facilities for students

Weaknesses

- poor-quality service provided by the student refectory

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59 The premises are effectively managed. The college has adapted its accommodation to match the changes which have occurred in its curriculum profile. Approximately £1.5 million has been spent on accommodation refurbishments since the last inspection. The recent investment in buildings and equipment has produced a good-quality working environment for both students and staff. With the exception of a few areas which are currently being refurbished, all other areas at the main site are well maintained and furnished. A maintenance team works to a planned schedule and to high standards. A conference and higher education centre has recently been refurbished and is of particularly good quality. It includes a large lecture theatre with video-conferencing facilities. Attractive display materials are used in communal areas. Clear signing facilitates movement through and between the buildings. Security in the main buildings is provided by closed-circuit television cameras. General teaching rooms are suitable for the size of the classes using them and there is a good range of equipment to support teaching. However, some aspects of the accommodation, in particular in engineering, are underused. The college is aware of this and plans are in hand to develop it in collaboration with a local employer. There are good car parking facilities adjacent to the main buildings.

60 The college identified as a strength in its self-assessment report the range and quality of learning resources available to both students and staff and inspectors agreed. General resource centres are available at the main site. These are supplemented by centres, some recently developed, based in each of the programme areas. Each centre is staffed throughout the day and provides access to a range of resources, including books, journals and computer-based materials. A well-resourced centre has also been developed for staff use. The college has yet to develop a fully comprehensive catalogue of resources so that students can identify readily which resource is

located in which centre. Inspectors agreed that the range and quality of computer resources available to both staff and students is excellent. Approximately 550 modern computers are available in the college of which over 400 are for students' use. Most of the computers are networked and provide a wide range of facilities, including access to the internet, a college intranet and a range of CD-ROM materials. The college plans to increase further the range of learning materials available on the computer network. Adequate staff work areas are provided and there is a preparation and marking room for those who require a quiet area.

61 Inspectors agreed with the strength in the self-assessment report attributed to the extensive leisure and recreational areas that are available for both students and staff. Students make good use of the excellent facilities provided within 'Student Street'. These include student lounges, a travel agency and a high-quality and extensively stocked college shop which are all located in the vicinity of central admissions and student support. Elsewhere in the college there is a separate staff common room and two restaurants for joint use. A good-quality sports hall, theatre and playing fields add to the extensive facilities available. A well-equipped fitness studio has recently been developed to provide additional facilities for staff, students and the general public. A 44 place nursery is available at the main site. The service provided by an external contractor in the student refectory is poor. Students complain about the quality of the food and the poor value for money. Long queues for service are a frequent occurrence and, particularly at peak times, there is insufficient seating for those wishing to eat. Although the college is aware of the problem and is taking action to improve it, the weakness was not identified in the college's self-assessment report.

62 The college has undertaken a full survey in conjunction with a local organisation for people

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with disabilities. As a result, it has made extensive modifications to improve access for those students with restricted mobility. Lifts, ramps and special doors have been installed and access is now possible to all the facilities at the main site with the exception of some administrative offices. Special resources, including modified computer hardware and software, have been purchased to support those students who need them.

Quality Assurance

Grade 1

63 The self-assessment report on quality assurance is comprehensive and judgements are clearly referenced to evidence. Inspectors agreed with the strengths but identified weaknesses not mentioned in the report.

Key strengths

- well-established culture of quality improvement
- high priority given to teaching and learning
- excellent staff development
- good links between strategic planning and quality assurance
- effective system of internal verification
- extensive collection and analysis of students' views
- effective self-assessment

Weaknesses

- insufficient analysis of some data on students' achievements

64 The college is committed to continuous improvement. Inspectors agreed with the college judgement that there is an effective quality assurance framework which covers all aspects of the work of the college. Staff understand and actively engage in the quality

assurance processes. There is continuous monitoring of performance at all levels which results in action-planning leading to demonstrable improvement in performance. A high priority is given to maintaining and improving the quality of teaching and learning and the students' experience. Procedures are contained within a comprehensive quality manual and are subject to regular monitoring by the quality manager and a team of auditors. A few records of the review process lack detail and evaluative content compared with others. This weakness was not recognised in the self-assessment report.

65 As the self-assessment report stated, there is rigorous and effective monitoring of teaching and learning, co-ordinated by a staff assessment and development unit. Since March 1998, over 300 lesson observations have been carried out. There is extensive analysis of the results. They are used in the staff appraisal process and, where appropriate, individuals are provided with development opportunities to improve their skills. A valued appraisal process is in place for all permanent and hourly paid staff. There has been substantial improvement in the teaching and learning grade profile of the college since the last inspection, from 64% to 83% of lessons graded good or outstanding and a reduction from 7% to 1% of unsatisfactory grades. The college grade profile for the 164 lessons observed since September 1998 matched that awarded by inspectors.

66 Most course reviews are effective. Course teams regularly monitor the progress of students. Inspectors agreed with the college self-assessment that students' views play a prominent role in this process. Student representatives attend some course review meetings. Surveys of students' satisfaction which are conducted three times a year are thoroughly analysed. Programme developers work with course teams to identify actions that need to be taken and to monitor progress. Internal verification is strong across the college.

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It includes moderation of the key skills development included in courses across programme areas. There is extensive training provided for the staff involved. Programme area review and planning meetings take place at least once a term. The principal holds termly meetings with programme managers and developers to review progress and set new targets in action plans. A number of strategies are in place to improve attendance and retention. Data for 1997-98 confirm these have been effective in several cases. Reasons for withdrawal are examined in detail and action taken where possible. For example, in some cases arrangements can be made for students to complete their studies by distance learning. Inspectors identified some examples of inadequate analysis of data on students' achievements both at course and college level. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

67 In addition to surveys, students' views are well represented through their role on the student council and the college council. The latter gives an opportunity for staff and students to be consulted formally on developments in college, and for them to raise issues of concern. Inspectors agreed with the college's own assessment that this is a successful vehicle for views to be heard. Implementation of the student charter is monitored by the college council's subcommittee on quality. Students are clear about their rights, expressed in the charter, and about the complaints procedure. Detailed records are kept of formal complaints, response is made within 10 days and action is taken quickly, where appropriate.

68 Staff development at the college is excellent. The college has successfully addressed a weakness identified in the last inspection report that staff did not have sufficient industrial/commercial updating. All staff now have an entitlement to five days work experience each year and inspectors agreed with the college self-assessment that this is

proving beneficial in developing the curriculum. Staff have access to a full-time IT trainer and this has resulted in all staff at the college having at least a minimum of basic IT skills. There is an effective staff development programme in the college as well as a high level of support for staff attending external courses. Staff development is well organised and monitored, and is clearly linked to the strategic priorities for the college.

69 The college has continued to develop its self-assessment processes since the last inspection. The most recent report was produced following an internal inspection, which involved working closely with another college. All staff were involved in the self-assessment process. Internal moderation was carried out and a number of external organisations, including the training and enterprise council (TEC), schools and other colleges in the Cheshire consortium, were asked to comment on the draft report. The final report is concise and evaluative, with clearly-referenced sources of evidence for most judgements. Occasionally judgements were not clearly spelt out in full. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements, although a few strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors were not mentioned in the report.

Governance

Grade 2

70 The self-assessment report lacked detail and did not identify all of the strengths of governance. Inspectors also identified some additional weaknesses. There is an action plan in respect of the one weakness identified in the self-assessment report and efforts have been made to address it.

Key strengths

- effective corporation involvement in strategic planning and review

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- rigorous monitoring of the college's finances
- effective committees
- particularly good clerking arrangements
- open governance

Weaknesses

- governor training underdeveloped
- weaknesses in the governance self-assessment process

71 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. 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.

72 The corporation has 15 members, comprising eight independent governors, three co-opted governors, one TEC member, two staff governors and the principal. The corporation's composition has remained relatively stable since incorporation; no new governors have been appointed during the last year and there are no vacancies on the corporation. The terms of office of two independent governors come to an end shortly and the corporation proposes to take this opportunity to redetermine its membership categories in line with new statutory requirements. Governors have a broad range of skills and experience which include human resources, accountancy, education, estates, local government, trades unions and business. A governor job description has been prepared, but there has not been a recent audit of the skills of existing governors.

73 Inspectors did not fully agree with the assertion in the self-assessment report that training has been arranged to meet the identified needs of governors. The corporation has introduced a system of allocating governors

to specific areas in the college to improve links between the governors and college staff. A governors' education forum has recently been established and some training events have taken place. However, there is no effective analysis of individual governor training needs and, therefore, no plan to address any gaps. The corporation has monitored individual governors' attendance records but individual governor targets have not been set. A few governors do not have good attendance records.

74 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the corporation plays an active role in the strategic planning process. Governors hold an annual planning conference to set the college's strategic direction and the strategic plan is approved by the corporation. The corporation is currently in the process of prioritising college objectives for the next academic year. The corporation has systematically monitored the achievement of the strategic plan throughout the year. The corporation has also monitored effectively the college's financial position. The corporation receives information on students' activities and students' views and the human resources committee has met directly with students. Individual governors take part in the appraisal of the principal and the other senior postholders.

75 As noted in the self-assessment report, governors undertook an assessment of their own performance. However, inspectors considered that the process was underdeveloped. Governors did not play a sufficiently active role in all stages of this process. Previously identified weaknesses, such as governor training, were excluded from the self-assessment report without evidence that they had been fully addressed. The corporation recognises the importance of measuring its own performance but did not establish performance indicators by which its contribution could be monitored.

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76 As identified in the self-assessment report, the corporation has good clerking arrangements. The clerk to the corporation has the necessary skills and independence to work effectively. His job description makes him directly accountable to the chairman of the corporation, who is also responsible for the clerk's annual appraisal. Corporation and committee agendas and supporting papers are comprehensive and are sent out in good time, in advance of the relevant meetings. Minutes are promptly prepared.

77 The corporation operates openly. It has defined carefully those areas that need to be considered on a confidential basis. Corporation minutes are available on the college intranet and are publicly available in the college's library. A report is presented by the chair of the corporation at an annual public meeting. There is a comprehensive code of conduct for governors and a good code of practice on 'whistleblowing'. The register of interests is open to public inspection. The corporation has a well-defined set of standing orders. There are five committees: audit; finance; human resources; search; and remuneration. Each committee chair produces an annual assessment of the committee's work for corporation consideration. All committees have operated effectively in accordance with their terms of reference.

Management

Grade 1

78 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. Since the report was prepared a number of issues have been addressed.

Key strengths

- strong leadership and effective management
- consultative strategic planning process with clear goals

- well-established and effective lines of communication
- good links with educational institutions and other external bodies
- excellent computerised management information system
- effective team work

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped target-setting for achievement and retention at course and programme area level

79 The college is particularly well managed. It benefits from strong leadership with many initiatives emanating from the senior management team. Inspectors concurred with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the aims and objectives of the college are understood and supported by staff who work well in teams. The dual structure in curriculum areas of programme manager responsible for resources and a programme developer responsible for quality control is well established and working effectively. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the roles and responsibilities of staff and managers are well understood throughout the college.

80 The college has a good record of meeting its key targets over a number of years. It monitors carefully the numbers of students on roll, those retained and the units of activity generated. Data on students' achievements and retention, although showing some variability in the last three years, compare favourably with sector averages. The college uses a value-added analysis to compare the performance of its GCE A level students with other post-16 providers in Cheshire. By this measure, no other local authority school or sector college in Cheshire exceeded its score for 1997-98. Although college-wide targets are set for students' achievements and retention they are not set at course or programme area level. However, the

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college has begun to introduce targets for students' performance based on their entry qualifications.

81 The strategic planning process is thorough and well organised. Governors, managers and staff have opportunities to contribute to the production of the plan. Inspectors agreed with the claim in the self-assessment report that the final plan is informed by internal and external market research. Within the planning cycle there are clearly-defined occasions when managers meet formally to review progress and consider action plans. Members of the corporation are invited to attend one of these meetings. The strategic plan includes detailed targets and action plans for the following year. These are used along with action plans from the self-assessment report to monitor progress throughout the year. College policies which cover the main aspects of college operations are on the internal intranet. The implementation of these policies is monitored in various ways. For example, the equal opportunities co-ordinator reports to the human resources committee of the governing body.

82 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that communications in the college are excellent. The principal holds a monthly meeting with staff and other meetings are programmed in a college calendar. Minutes of all meetings are on the internal college intranet. Action points are clearly identified and rigorously followed through to completion. The extensive computer network allows all teaching and support staff and governors to communicate with each other through the electronic mail system. Students also use this system to communicate with staff. Management information is readily available and generally well utilised. Students' records, financial statements and trends in units of activity are available to all staff. Access to the database is well defined to appropriate users. Teachers use the 'staff folder' system to maintain schemes of work, lesson plans, students' project work and

teaching notes. These notes are also available to students who use them to update their work if they have missed lessons. This database is used to share good practice within programme areas.

83 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The finance team is appropriately structured, qualified and experienced. Managers closely monitor the college's financial position against established targets. The college had an average level of funding of £15.61 per unit in 1997-98, compared with a sector average of £16.98 per unit. The college is financially sound and has an action plan to improve further its financial position over the next few years. Monthly management accounts and budget holder reports are promptly produced, but the management accounts contain too much detail. The college's 1997-98 statutory accounts and student number returns were submitted by the required deadlines. The college's internal auditors concluded that the college had a sound system of internal control and the college's external auditors did not have any significant concerns. The college's financial regulations, available to staff on the college intranet, have been updated recently.

84 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that liaison with external agencies is effective. There are separate teams within the college who are responsible for school, community and industrial liaison. Primary and secondary school heads meet at the college. Staff development courses are run free of tuition fees for school staff. Courses have been run at the schools for parents who require assistance with English or to help them with their children's reading or mathematics.

Conclusions

85 The college's self-assessment report was well prepared and concisely written. The

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preparation of the report involved staff at all levels in the college. Staff from another college contributed to the moderation of judgements in the report. Outside organisations with links to the college were invited to comment on a draft. Inspectors found the self-assessment report useful in the planning of the inspection. In some curriculum sections the way in which the report had been edited to meet the recommended limit of 50 pages did not always allow for the strengths and weaknesses of the different subjects to be clearly identified. Inspectors found close agreement between the strengths and weaknesses and the grades recorded in the report and those identified during the inspection. A few strengths and weaknesses were identified which the report did not include. The profile of classroom observation grades awarded by inspectors closely matched those awarded by the college. Inspectors considered that the college had succeeded in the action it had taken to remedy a number of weaknesses identified in its self-assessment report. In one curriculum area, inspectors considered that the college had underestimated the strengths and awarded a better grade. In one cross-college area, inspectors awarded a worse grade than the college.

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 (November 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	31
19-24 years	13
25+ years	55
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (November 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	27
Intermediate	19
Advanced	35
Higher education	4
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	15
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (November 1998)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	451	797	18
Construction	134	126	4
Engineering	106	383	7
Business	310	713	15
Hotel and catering	303	211	7
Health and community care	398	352	11
Art and design	276	444	10
Humanities	469	1,367	26
Basic education	67	86	2
Total	2,514	4,479	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 13% 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 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	143	31	0	174
Supporting direct learning contact	33	11	0	44
Other support	83	3	0	86
Total	259	45	0	304

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£9,999,000	£10,044,000	£10,276,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£16.16	£16.30	£15.61
Payroll as a proportion of income	71%	67%	61%
Achievement of funding target	103%	101%	101%
Diversity of income	22%	20%	18%
Operating surplus	-£411,000	-£172,000	£227,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 97/35 (1996), 98/43 (1997), college (1998)

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
1	Expected completions	424	617	1,138	2,013	1,620	1,924
	Retention (%)	98	91	85	96	88	89
	Achievement (%)	91	68	61	74	62	84
2	Expected completions	811	897	1,195	961	1,152	1,286
	Retention (%)	89	74	80	94	83	86
	Achievement (%)	71	68	85	63	63	82
3	Expected completions	1,688	1,497	1,734	969	935	1,024
	Retention (%)	88	84	79	88	83	87
	Achievement (%)	76	78	86	56	70	84
4 or 5	Expected completions	38	22	26	326	253	363
	Retention (%)	87	95	100	93	89	88
	Achievement (%)	79	87	91	85	68	65
Short courses	Expected completions	329	792	718	3,400	5,062	5,059
	Retention (%)	98	95	97	99	95	95
	Achievement (%)	89	84	95	75	69	96
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	327	560	528	1,627	845	415
	Retention (%)	94	88	84	95	83	78
	Achievement (%)	72	74	86	68	67	85

Source: ISR

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