

South College, Bolton

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
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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 according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report.* Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement.*
Sample size: 122 college inspections

Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

Summary

South College, Bolton

North West Region

Inspected October 1997

South College, Bolton is a small sixth form college. The college offers courses in five of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Provision in two of these areas was inspected, together with aspects of cross-college provision. A cross-college team of managers, teaching staff and support staff produced the college's self-assessment report; no students or representatives of external bodies were involved. In the main, inspectors found the report to be honest and successful in identifying the college's strengths and weaknesses, and the judgements and grades reached by the college to be well founded.

The college has close relations with several local schools, the local authority and the TEC. Its governors, managers and staff promote an atmosphere in which people from different cultures and backgrounds are valued and respected. Standards of teaching are good. The quality of provision for students on business courses is outstanding. Pass rates are at or above national averages in many subjects. The college has effective systems for supporting students. Attendance and retention rates are good in most subjects. Staff and other resources are prudently managed. The buildings are well maintained and provide a secure and pleasant

environment. Most classrooms are well equipped. If it is to continue to improve the quality of its provision, the college should address the following weaknesses: poor or declining pass rates and retention rates in a few subjects; weak and under-resourced systems for providing students with additional learning support; inadequate library stocks in some subjects; and the inadequate staff development programme.

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

Curriculum areas	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Mathematics	2	Support for students	2
Business	1	General resources	2
English	2	Quality assurance	3
Social sciences	2	Governance	3
		Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1 South College, Bolton, is a small sixth form college. It is set in extensive grounds, in a semi-rural location a mile and a half to the south west of Bolton town centre. The college was established in 1982, following the reorganisation of post-16 education in Bolton. It draws most of its students from four wards in the centre and south of the borough. Indicators of disadvantage are significantly higher for three of these wards than those for the borough as a whole. For example, levels of unemployment are around 25 per cent.

2 Bolton has nine schools for pupils aged 11 to 16. The educational achievements of leavers in the schools from which the college draws most of its students are below the national average. In 1996, 41.9 per cent of all pupils in Bolton in year 11 gained five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) passes at grades C or above, compared with 44.5 per cent for the whole of England. In 1994-95 the post-16 and post-17 participation rates for Bolton were 67 and 55 per cent, respectively. These figures compare favourably with the corresponding rates for the north west of England of 65 and 53 per cent. Post-compulsory education in Bolton is offered in two sixth form colleges, a general further education college, and in the sixth forms of four high schools, one of which is Roman Catholic. There is also an independent school with a sixth form. At the time of inspection, the college was preparing a proposal for a merger with North Bolton Sixth Form College.

3 The college offers 25 subjects at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and six programmes at both the advanced and intermediate levels of the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ). It also offers students the choice of 10 GCSE subjects. In 1995 it introduced courses for adults in collaboration with the local education authority's (LEA's) community education service.

4 In July 1997, the college had 594 students, of whom 72 per cent were aged between 16 and 18 years. Just under 15 per cent of the students were studying part time. On 1 November 1997 it had 571 students. Over 50 per cent of South College's students are from minority ethnic groups. This reflects the proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups in the surrounding area. People from minority ethnic groups make up 9 per cent of Bolton's population as a whole. The majority are of Indian heritage, but a significant number have their origins in Pakistan. The college employs 54 staff, of whom 11 are support staff. At the time of the inspection the college had recently restructured its senior management team. It now comprises the principal, the chief administrative officer, the finance manager and four assistant principals. One assistant principal is responsible for the organisation and management of the curriculum; one for pastoral support; one for students' admissions; and one for staffing matters. All assistant principals also have responsibility for supervising a group of tutors, as well as a substantial teaching commitment. There are eight academic departments, each with its own head. Inspection took place in four of these departments.

5 The college's mission is to 'develop the intellectual, social and personal potential of all students by offering an enriched and diverse curriculum based on quality and care'. The mission is elaborated in 12 more specific aims.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 13 October 1997. The college inspector and the reporting inspector had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1994 to 1997 which were

Context

validated by an inspector against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college was notified of the sample of its provision which was to be assessed approximately two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by seven inspectors working for a total of 20 days and an auditor working for five days. They observed 41 lessons, and examined samples of students' work and a variety of college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students. A discussion was held by telephone with a representative of the Bolton and Bury Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

7 Of the lessons inspected, 76 per cent were rated good or outstanding. No lesson was less than satisfactory. The profile of the college's lesson grades compares well with the average for all lessons observed during 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was above the average for the sector, at 86 per cent. The highest attendances were in business at 90 per cent and in social science at 89 per cent and the lowest in English at 79 per cent. The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	8	7	6	0	0	21
GCSE	1	4	4	0	0	9
GNVQ	4	4	0	0	0	8
Other vocational	1	2	0	0	0	3
Total	14	17	10	0	0	41

Curriculum Areas

Mathematics

Grade 2

8 The inspection team sampled all of the department's work. Ten GCSE and GCE A level mathematics lessons were observed. Inspectors agreed in general with the college's judgements about the quality of mathematics. However, the college's self-assessment report failed to identify weaknesses in teaching and learning or to take full account of students' achievements.

Key strengths

- effective organisation of GCE A level provision
- appropriate professionally produced schemes of work and learning materials for GCE A level students
- good teaching and varied learning activities, particularly at GCE A level
- a high level of interaction and mathematical debate amongst GCE A level students
- high and increasing GCE A level pass rates
- written work and class work of a good standard across all courses
- plentiful and appropriate materials and equipment for all students

Weaknesses

- very low pass rates in 1997 in GCSE mathematics
- little attention to spreading best practice in teaching methods
- some uncomfortably small classrooms

9 The largest element of work in the mathematics department is the GCE A level course. Students have the opportunity to follow a course in further mathematics, but very few do so. There is a growing GCSE programme for

the many students who have not previously achieved a grade C or above. Mathematics is also taught on the full-time vocational courses offered by the college, using materials developed for the purpose by specialist teachers. The college's self-assessment fails to assess fully the effectiveness with which provision below GCE A level meets the needs of the many students who lack confidence in their mathematical ability.

10 The GCE A level course is well planned and well managed. Teaching is based on a high-quality commercially produced scheme. The scheme provides a clear framework for teaching. It incorporates students' workbooks, mathematical investigations, practical work and tests. Staff keep detailed records of their students' progress and regularly review their work. Better planning of the pre-GCSE and GCSE work is needed, including more ambitious targets for GCSE pass rates at grades C or above. Inspectors agreed with the college's identification of the strengths of GCE A level organisation. However, weaknesses in the organisation of GCSE work were not recognised in the self-assessment.

11 In the GCSE and GCE A level lessons observed, teachers gave a good deal of help to individual students who were working on mathematical problems. Most teachers encouraged students to play an active part in lessons and to ask questions. In the best GCE A level lessons this led to valuable mathematical debate. In one particularly interesting lesson, the teacher gave a clear introduction to the concepts of mean and standard deviation. Students reinforced their understanding by working through a problem using a prepared set of data. The teacher then gave them a more challenging exercise which involved manipulating and adjusting data. This encouraged considerable debate amongst the students and deepened their understanding of the concepts. At the end of the lesson the teacher gave a well-constructed summary of

Curriculum Areas

what had been covered. The department does not do enough to spread good practice in teaching.

12 Students had access to a plentiful supply of course texts and computers. Nearly all had bought their own graphical calculators.

Teachers did not use visual aids to illustrate their teaching. Some teaching rooms were uncomfortably small. This made group work difficult. Students' written work was well presented and of an appropriate standard. Teachers gave them helpful guidance on making notes.

13 Students' achievements at GCE A level were very good. Pass rates have improved steadily and, for the last two years, have been above the national averages for grades A to E and A to C. The college has its own system for analysing the value added to students' achievements by comparing their performance at GCE A level with predicted grades based on GCSE achievements. The college's analysis indicates that the majority of students now exceed their expected GCE A level grades. The GCSE pass rate in 1996 was slightly above the national average, and an improvement on the previous year. However, the pass rate in 1997 was very low. The college attributes this to an increase in the size of teaching groups coupled with a reduction in teaching time. It is addressing the problem by reducing the size of teaching groups and by reviewing its provision for pre-GCSE study.

Examples of students' achievements in mathematics, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS levels	Retention (%)	77	75	83
	Pass rate (%)	86	93	94
GCSE	Retention (%)	74	84	81
	Pass rate (%)	38	48	17

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 1

14 Inspectors observed 11 lessons, covering GNVQ intermediate and advanced programmes, GCE A level business, secretarial studies and information technology. The college's self-assessment concentrates on teaching and learning and students' achievements. Inspectors confirmed the college's judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of provision.

Key strengths

- effective curriculum management
- highly motivated staff with relevant work experience
- well-planned lessons
- very strong links with industry and the world of work
- the integration of key skills with assignments and class work
- thorough correction of written work and constructive feedback to students
- examination pass rates consistently above national averages
- good attendance rates and high and improving retention rates on most courses

Weaknesses

- teaching methods which do not meet the needs of a few students in mixed ability groups
- poor integration of information technology with other aspects of the courses

15 Business studies provision in the college is very well managed. The business studies team is close-knit. Its members meet regularly to discuss curriculum issues and to plan improvements to the quality of provision. Students contribute to the departmental meetings, and their suggestions are often acted

upon. Meetings are carefully documented and any action points arising out of them are rigorously followed up. All of these strengths are recognised in the college's self-assessment report.

16 Teachers in the department are well qualified. Most have relevant industrial experience which they use to good effect in their teaching. They are taking steps to keep their industrial experience up to date. A number of the teachers are also following formal courses leading to relevant qualifications.

17 Inspectors' observation of lessons confirmed the judgement in the self-assessment report that the quality of teaching is very good. Teachers favour a balance of exposition, individual work and small group work. For example, one class involved a review of questionnaire design. Following a short explanation from the teacher, students were given time to read through a handout on the principles of questionnaire design. In small groups, each with an elected leader, they reviewed the questionnaire and reworded confusing questions. The exercise worked well and stimulated interest and debate. Consideration needs to be given to meeting the needs of a few students in mixed ability groups who do not respond well to the teaching techniques that are most commonly used in the department. Teachers give GNVQ students opportunities to acquire and develop key skills. Key skills are beginning to be introduced in the teaching of GCE A levels. Better use could be made of information technology within teaching programmes, particularly where the application of number is concerned. Students pay attention to presenting their work well. Their files and portfolios are well maintained. Their written work and class work both show evidence of interest and commitment. Teachers correct students' work carefully and return it quickly, in accordance with departmental policy. In most cases, the feedback students receive is encouraging and detailed.

Curriculum Areas

18 The best possible use is made of rooms, many of which are very small and inconveniently shaped. The rooms are well maintained and clean. The walls are decorated with lively and relevant displays of students' work. Targets are set and monitored for enrolment, retention and achievement. Examination results are well above national averages in both GNVQ and GCE A level. In 1997, advanced GNVQ students achieved a pass rate of 100 per cent compared with a national rate of 50 per cent. In the intermediate GNVQ, students achieved a pass rate of 86 per cent compared with a rate of 60 per cent nationally. Retention rates are high in most areas; they are improving in all except the advanced level of the GNVQ. Many students progress to higher education; other forms of progression are not monitored systematically.

Examples of students' achievements in business, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A/AS level	Retention (%)	78	79	84
	Pass rate (%)	96	86	92
Advanced GNVQs	Retention (%)	92	73	54
	Pass rate (%)	94	93	100
Intermediate GNVQs	Retention (%)	64	84	86
	Pass rate (%)	64	71	83

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

English

Grade 2

19 The inspection covered English GCE A level and GCSE courses. Inspectors agreed with many aspects of the college's self-assessment report, although it did not contain all of the weaknesses identified by inspectors.

Key strengths

- good management and effective deployment of resources
- helpful guidelines for staff and students in schemes of work and course handbooks
- generally well planned and effective lessons
- attentive and conscientious students who achieve appropriate standards in their coursework and homework
- generally good examination success rates

Weaknesses

- insufficient encouragement of students to work independently or to acquire key skills
- a lack of consistency in documenting lesson planning
- insufficient resources for students to use outside lessons
- insufficient attention given to catering for the full range of abilities

20 The English department is well managed. Classes are well organised. Teachers set clear standards and work well together. They have produced course handbooks which give clear information on the content of courses, teaching and assessment methods and the department's homework policy. Students' progress is monitored carefully. A self-assessment sheet

helps students to prepare for progress reviews. Teachers correct homework promptly and in detail. Books and other resources are adequate but more materials are needed to enable students to work independently.

21 The self-assessment report indicates that students experience a variety of teaching and learning styles and this was true in most of the lessons observed. A class of second-year students was analysing a speech from *King Lear*. The students worked in small groups, recording their ideas on flipcharts. They then presented their ideas to the whole class. This exercise allowed students to develop their oral, analytical and presentational skills, and to demonstrate their understanding of the text. In some weaker lessons, teachers did not have a lesson plan which made clear what the students were expected to learn; they did not encourage students to work independently, did not vary the pace of work to sustain the students' interest, and did not carry out sufficient checks on students' understanding. The self-assessment report does not identify the need for strategies to cope with the wide ability range in some classes.

22 Students are punctual and settle quickly at the start of lessons. They are polite and listen carefully to instructions. The standard of work they produce in assignments is appropriate and, in some cases, very good. They display a mature approach to working together and helping each other. The majority of students make good use of aids to their learning, such as essay writing guides. They are encouraged to broaden their experience by reading around the set texts; visits to productions of plays are arranged.

23 The self-assessment report states that students' performance in public examinations is generally good. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. Of the 96 students entered for GCSE English in 1997, 74 per cent passed against a national average for sixth form colleges of

Curriculum Areas

65 per cent. The GCE A level English literature pass rate was 100 per cent in 1996, against a national average of 93 per cent. This included a higher percentage of A to C grades than the national average. In the GCE A level language and literature course the pass rate for 1996 was 91 per cent against a national average of 88 per cent, although A to C grades were lower than the national average. In 1997, the GCE A level results were lower than the national average. In particular, the language and literature pass rate was 64 per cent, which was considerably below the national average of 92 per cent. This poor result has been analysed by the college management. Value-added data show that the students who started their courses in 1995 had lower GCSE scores than those in previous years. The college will use its system of target grades with the aim of ensuring that this poor result is not repeated.

Examples of students' achievements in English, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A levels	Retention (%)	65	68	87
	Pass rate (%)	97	95	71
GCSE	Retention (%)	86	87	86
	Pass rate (%)	77	83	74

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Social Sciences

Grade 2

24 The inspection covered law, psychology and sociology at GCSE and GCE A level. The findings of the inspectorate generally concur with those of the college's own assessment.

Key strengths

- effective curriculum management and teamwork
- a variety of appropriate teaching and learning methods
- ample support for students in developing the skills required in social sciences
- clear explanations of aims of lessons, criteria for assessment and schedules of work
- well-organised students' files showing evidence of independent reading
- excellent pass rates and a high proportion of higher grades in GCE A level psychology
- good retention rates for all GCSE courses
- very good specialist resources

Weaknesses

- a few inappropriate tasks and teaching materials
- some inadequate correction of students' work
- declining retention and pass rates in GCE A level law and sociology
- low GCSE pass rates in 1997
- insufficient staff development

25 Teachers in the social science department work well together; they share ideas and resources. The curriculum is managed effectively. There is a growing social science enrichment programme which has resulted from

good evaluation, planning and organisation at team level. Teachers are well qualified but they have become somewhat isolated from developments outside the college. They would benefit from greater access to training materials and information produced for the further education sector, from more links with professional associations and from opportunities to undertake staff development activities. Specialist resources are very good. Staff and students have access to a wide range of books, handouts, audiovisual aids and information technology. There are excellent displays of students' work and other stimulus materials throughout the department.

26 The college's self-assessment report indicates that students experience a variety of teaching methods which was borne out by inspectors' observation of lessons. The methods are specified in schemes of work and lesson plans. Teachers explain all aims and criteria for assessment to their students to help them understand what is expected of them. The working atmosphere in lessons is good. Occasionally teachers use teaching materials and set tasks that are inappropriate for some students.

27 Students work diligently in class and at tasks set for homework. Their course files are generally well organised. The department uses a cover sheet for marked work which highlights the importance of skill acquisition and allows students to appraise their own work. In some instances, teachers' written comments on students' work are too brief and do not indicate what students should do to improve. Not all factual errors and errors in English are corrected.

28 Results in GCE A level psychology are excellent. The pass rate in 1997 was 100 per cent with 73 per cent of entrants gaining grades of C or above. The college's value-added data for that year show that 21 candidates achieved a higher grade than that predicted from their entry qualifications. GCE A level achievements

Curriculum Areas

in law and sociology are declining, especially in terms of the proportions of higher grades awarded. Although pass rates in 1997 were similar to the national average in law, those in sociology were well below at only 40 per cent. College value-added data show that 10 sociology and eight law students achieved at least one grade lower than predicted. Retention rates are identified as a weakness in the college's self-assessment report. Three-quarters of GCE A level law students and two-thirds of GCE A level sociology students completed their courses in 1997. GCSE results were good in 1995 and 1996. Results in 1997 were poor; only one-third of students studying social sciences at this level achieved above a grade C and none achieved an A or B in law or sociology. Retention rates were good for all GCSE courses.

Examples of students' achievements in social sciences, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A levels	Retention (%)	90	74	74
	Pass rate (%)	81	79	79
GCSE	Retention (%)	77	73	88
	Pass rate (%)	94	74	48

Source: college data

Cross-College Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

29 The college's self-assessment was supported by inspection findings. The college had, for the most part, identified the same strengths and weaknesses as inspectors.

Key strengths

- effective and supportive admission and induction programmes
- good careers education and guidance
- a consistent, accredited tutorial programme
- interesting tutorial assemblies covering a wide range of topics
- regular and effective reviews of students' progress
- an efficient system for monitoring attendance
- well-used national records of achievement linked to applications for employment and higher education
- effective counselling and support for students with personal problems
- an active students' council

Weaknesses

- some unproductive tutorials which make poor use of tutorial materials
- ineffective systems for identifying students' learning needs
- poorly developed systems and insufficient resources to support students receiving additional learning support
- weak links between courses and learning support

30 In its self-assessment report the college identifies its admissions and induction systems as a key strength. Students spoke highly of the advice and support they received before entering the college and on starting their

courses. The college has made strenuous efforts to treat all students fairly and consistently. Senior staff conduct all pre-entry interviews, and do so in accordance with strict guidelines. The college analyses the results of interviews to monitor whether the interviewer exerts any undue bias on students' choice of course. The college's induction programme is well planned and thorough. Students interviewed in the sixth week of their course were very knowledgeable about the college, their course and its requirements and the support services available to them. They were aware of and valued the contract that they had signed on entry to the college.

31 After induction, students review their progress with their personal tutors in the first of a series of reviews. An action plan for improvement is drawn up if appropriate. Personal tutors play an important role in the life of students. They meet them daily, check attendance, refer them to other support services in the college when necessary, and give a tutorial lesson once a week. The tutorial programme is consistent across the college. Tutorial materials for both staff and students are interesting and well prepared, though tutors do not always make good use of them. The majority of students interviewed felt that tutorials were not always productive. The college has recently introduced an accredited tutorial system, which it is piloting with first-year advanced level students.

32 Careers education and guidance is good. There is a well-organised programme for those who wish to seek employment or training or to continue in further or higher education. It includes an industry day, speakers in tutorial assemblies and visits to careers events. Individual careers interviews are available with advisers from the local careers services or from the college's own careers advisers. The college has encouraged teaching staff to think about including careers education in their teaching programmes. Clear links are made between the updating of records of achievement and

Cross-College Provision

applications for jobs or places in higher education. The library has a careers section which is well stocked with general and specific literature, videos and computer programmes. There is access to a range of careers programs to help students make informed decisions and a good supply of careers videos. The college has recognised the strength of careers education and guidance in its self-assessment report.

33 There are good levels of support for students on personal issues. There is a qualified college counsellor and arrangements exist with external bodies for the referral of students who require more specialised support. The college has a system of 'peer mediation', whereby students are trained to act as intermediaries for their colleagues within the local community as well as in the college.

34 The college acknowledges in its self-assessment that its arrangements for learning support do not meet the needs of all students. The systems for identifying students in need of extra help with their studies are rudimentary. It is assumed that those with grade E and above in GCSE mathematics and/or English do not require learning support. Not all staff who teach learning support sessions are qualified to do so. They need training in order to be more effective. There is no one place in the college set aside as a focal point for learning support, though the library contains good materials to help students improve their skills of numeracy and literacy. Attendance at some learning support sessions has been poor. The links between learning support staff and course teachers are weak. As a result, support teachers cannot help students to prepare for tasks they will be asked to do on their main course or build upon skills they have learnt in their mainstream lessons. The college has recently reviewed its arrangements for providing study support and is taking steps to improve them.

General Resources

Grade 2

35 The section on resources in the self-assessment report is comprehensive. Judgements made by the college are generally in accord with those made by inspectors. The supporting documentation which provided evidence for the self-assessment was thorough.

Key strengths

- well-maintained buildings providing a pleasant, secure and litter-free environment
- a majority of classrooms which are well decorated and appropriately furnished and equipped
- an effective programme for maintaining equipment
- a new building that has helped to counter overcrowding
- significant investment in computers
- adequate recreational and sporting facilities

Weaknesses

- a few classrooms that are too small
- open access information technology facilities which cannot meet demand at peak times
- inadequate library stocks in some subjects
- poor access to most buildings for students with restricted mobility

36 The buildings comprise four main blocks, three of which were constructed in the 1950s. The fourth block was added in 1995. It provides spacious accommodation for the library and careers resources and houses information technology rooms. There is also a creche, which is open when adults are attending the college.

Cross-college Provision

The new block has done much to ease problems of overcrowding. All buildings are well maintained and provide a pleasant, secure and litter-free environment for students and staff. The college's self-assessment identifies a few weaknesses, including the need to upgrade the science laboratories, the language laboratory and the art and design suite. In a few curriculum areas, large groups are unnecessarily assigned to small rooms.

37 The majority of classrooms provide a good environment for learning. The college embarked on a refurbishment programme in 1988. To date, 45 out of 60 classrooms have been redecorated and refurnished. Most have basic teaching equipment, such as whiteboards. Overhead projectors and audiovisual equipment are located on all floors, but are not always available when needed. There is an effective system to ensure that equipment is well maintained, and replaced when necessary.

38 All students are shown how to use the library, which includes periodicals and CD-ROM database materials. Students who complete the full library induction programme receive a college certificate. There are sufficient textbooks, but little extra material to broaden students' reading. The self-assessment concludes that the stock is too small for the size of the college, despite significant improvements in recent years. The budget for the library is small, at approximately £6,000 a year or £10.50 a student.

39 The college has introduced a policy which entitles all students to acquire skills in using information technology. It has recently invested heavily in computers. The ratio of machines to students is now 1:5. The library building houses a heavily used open access information technology room with 30 up-to-date networked computers. There are also drop-in computer rooms in two other blocks. These rooms are not always open and some of the equipment is outdated. The college's self-assessment

recognises that there is pressure on the availability of computers at particular times of the year.

40 Students have adequate recreational and sports facilities. The sports facilities are shared with a school on the site. They include a sports centre, an all-weather pitch, three tennis courts and a five-a-side football pitch. The college has attempted to improve overcrowding in the refectory and students' common room through staggered timetabling and by providing additional spaces for private study. The college identifies overcrowding of recreational areas as a problem in its self-assessment. Inspectors' observations and feedback from students indicated that this was not the case.

41 The college is aware that access to some areas for students with restricted mobility is difficult. The three older buildings have ramps at most entrances and exits, but the upper floors are inaccessible. The new block has a lift, ramps and a toilet with appropriate facilities. There is a detailed draft accommodation strategy, and it will not be finalised until a decision on the proposed merger has been made.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

42 The college has identified the progress it has made since the last inspection to develop a whole-college approach to quality assurance. It is, however, too early to state that the system is coherent and links the separate components together so that they inform and complement each other. Although most of the weaknesses identified by inspectors were also recognised by the college they tended to be understated in terms of their significance within the college's self-assessment report.

Cross-college Provision

Key strengths

- close monitoring of students' achievements against predictions based on value-added calculations
- annual reviews by course teams and cross-college teams
- good use of college performance indicators to evaluate success
- effective training, standard setting and team building for support staff
- ownership and innovation encouraged by the devolution of quality assurance responsibilities to individual managers

Weaknesses

- new and important elements in the quality system not yet evaluated
- tenuous links between annual reviews, staff development, individual performance review and planning
- little action planning and target setting following annual reviews
- insufficient staff development
- weaknesses in the questionnaires used to obtain feedback from students

43 The college has developed its approach to quality assurance since it was last inspected. It has identified a range of performance indicators. The college's self-assessment report identifies the indicators as a key feature of its quality assurance system. Individual managers are required to report annually upon progress against these indicators. The quality of managers' reports has improved over the years, but still varies greatly. As the self-assessment acknowledges, the conclusions which stem from the reports do not always lead to clear and demonstrable action. The principal reviews the reports with managers early in the academic year. Further reviews are needed later in the year to identify progress towards targets. The views of students are obtained primarily through questionnaires which are issued at various times during the year. In the main, the

questionnaires do not encourage students to suggest improvements or to explain why they might be dissatisfied.

44 All staff have a responsibility for maintaining the quality of all aspects of the college's work. The quality systems and procedures are clearly laid down in handbooks. The quality assurance policy emphasises the importance of the commitment and professionalism of staff rather than a system of controls to maintain quality. It is not clear how this commitment will be evaluated and maintained. A system of staff performance reviews was introduced in the last academic year. It is based on interviews with line managers. Each interview results in a confidential report which is sent to the principal. The system is designed to relate the review of an individual's performance to the duties he or she is expected to perform. It represents a significant departure from the previous appraisal system. Until it has been evaluated, the claim in the self-assessment report that it is a strength of the quality assurance system cannot be justified.

45 The quality assurance arrangements include a focus on teaching and learning and students' achievements. The college has recently required managers to observe teaching and to identify good practice and areas which need improving. In the business department, staff have benefited from observing each others' lessons. They plan to continue the practice alongside the new college system. It is too soon to evaluate the success of the system. Tutors monitor closely the progress of students and carefully analyse their achievements. There is some evidence to support the claims in the self-assessment report that the system of termly reviews with tutors and the use of target grades for achievement based on value-added calculations have contributed to the improvement in students' achievements. The value-added calculation has the weakness that it uses national data from one subject as a benchmark.

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46 An assistant principal has responsibility for staff development. The budget for staff development is small, at around £11,000 for 1996-97. The college has prioritised much of the budget for staff to obtain the training and development lead body awards for those teaching on GNVQ programmes. The staff development programme has, to date, been dominated by external courses and events. It is not routinely informed by the outcomes of curriculum evaluation and individual staff performance reviews. The team of support staff has clearly benefited from a staff development programme to raise awareness of quality assurance issues. They have developed a statement of values and beliefs and understand the importance of monitoring their progress towards the targets they have set themselves. The self-assessment report does not recognise this. There has been no comparable programme for teaching staff. Some remain sceptical of the college's commitment to quality assurance processes. The college decided not to apply for the Investors in People award following its failure to meet enrolment targets in 1995 and the consequent reduction in staffing which ensued.

47 A cross-college team of managers, teachers and support staff drew together the college's self-assessment report. The team received contributions from individuals and groups across the college. There were no contributions from students or representatives of external bodies. The corporation approved the report. The production of the report did not form part of the revised college cycle of quality assurance. The report is set out under the headings of Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. An action plan follows each section, with responsibilities and timescales identified. In some parts of the report, there are references to evidence which confirms compliance with a performance indicator. Elsewhere, there are more subjective judgements about the quality of the provision.

Governance

Grade 3

48 Inspection findings indicate that there were some notable omissions in the college's self-assessment report and that some strengths were overstated.

Key strengths

- a formal process to recruit new governors and to fill long-standing vacancies
- an appropriate committee structure
- an annual report to governors from the audit committee
- effective procedures for monitoring governors' attendance at meetings
- a formal review by governors of the principal's performance
- due attention to the best interests of students in maintaining financial viability

Weaknesses

- insufficient formal training to help governors discharge their responsibilities
- narrowness of expertise across the corporation as a whole
- an insufficiently comprehensive register of governors' interests
- an audit committee that lacks sufficient relevant expertise
- audit committee minutes that lack detail and fail to demonstrate compliance with its terms of reference
- a lack of independent clerking for the personnel committee

49 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business

Cross-college Provision

in accordance with the college's instrument and articles of government. It substantially fulfils its responsibilities under its financial memorandum with the FEFC.

50 Governors are enthusiastic and committed. They have a clear perception of their role and discharge their duties conscientiously. Attendance at meetings is monitored carefully and is consistently good. There are currently 14 members of the corporation: the principal, two members of staff, a parent, nine independent governors and a co-opted governor. The register of governors' interests and the associated guidance notes lack sufficient detail to demonstrate that all relevant information has been declared. At the time of the inspection, there were four vacancies: the TEC nominee, two independent members and the student governor. The corporation had actively sought new governors in line with its formal recruitment process and two new appointments, including that of the student governor, were imminent. The TEC, despite strenuous efforts over a long period, remains unable to supply a representative. Collectively, the present members do not have a broad range of experience. They have worked mainly in education. They have received insufficient formal training in their duties. In its self-assessment report, the college acknowledges that training of new and existing governors needs to be planned more systematically. Some meetings of the corporation have, however, included opportunities for governors to inform themselves on curricular developments.

51 Governors have established a committee structure that enables them to discharge their responsibilities appropriately. The corporation meets twice termly and receives minutes from all its committees: audit, finance, personnel, membership and organisation, premises and assets and remuneration. The assistant principal with responsibility for staffing is clerk to the corporation and minutes the personnel

committee meetings. There is a potential conflict of interest in his performing these two duties, though this has so far not given rise to problems.

52 Collectively, members of the audit committee have insufficient experience of business and audit matters. They have recently co-opted a member with the necessary expertise, in order in part to remedy this weakness. The committee prepared a useful summary of the reports which they had reviewed during the last year and their conclusions, for consideration by the corporation. However, the minutes of the audit committee are not sufficiently detailed to demonstrate that the committee is fully complying with its terms of reference. The college's self-assessment report rather overestimated the strengths of the work of the audit committee.

53 The principal and other members of the corporation have an effective working relationship. The principal was appraised formally by the corporation at the end of the last academic year. In reaching decisions about how to secure the financial viability of the college, governors acted humanely and in the best interests of the students whilst preserving the distinctions between their role and that of the principal. The quality of papers provided for agenda items is high. Governors appreciate the clarity with which complex issues are presented to them. They regularly receive details about students' recruitment, retention and achievements and the student governor has an input to each corporation meeting. Although each meeting includes items implicitly related to the achievement of corporate objectives, there is no single report which summarises overall progress.

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Management

Grade 2

54 In most respects, the inspection team agreed with the college's self-assessment of its quality of management. Some weaknesses were understated by the college.

Key strengths

- the success of senior managers and staff in revising the curriculum and its delivery
- realistic strategic development plans
- a clearly defined management structure
- prudent management of staff and other resources
- strong links with the TEC, the borough and local schools
- monthly financial reports, produced in accordance with required deadlines
- monthly management accounts circulated to all governors
- critical evaluation of the assumptions underlying financial forecasts

Weaknesses

- a lack of experience of strategic planning amongst most staff
- the multiple roles and responsibilities of senior managers
- a computer-based management information system which does not facilitate the use of data as a management tool
- few opportunities for staff in different departments to collaborate
- overdependence on a few key individuals for effective financial management and control

55 The inspection team agreed with the self-assessment report's claims that the college has responded 'expeditiously and effectively' to

changing circumstances. A failure to meet enrolment targets in September 1995 and demands for greater efficiency caused the college to review its range of provision and how it was delivered. The resultant changes have been successfully managed. The current strategic plan takes full account of the college's financial constraints and includes realistic objectives and targets in keeping with the ethos of the college. It draws on findings from a detailed analysis of admissions data and intelligence about local schools and the needs of the local community. However, apart from the principal, members of the college management team are not sufficiently involved in shaping and gaining understanding of the strategic plan. Few departmental managers link their development plans explicitly to the achievement of corporate objectives.

56 The management structure is straightforward and in most respects works well. Roles and responsibilities of members of the college management team are clearly defined and well understood by staff. The principal and four assistant principals carry heavy workloads. At present, the line management responsibilities of assistant principals are uneven, varying from 20 staff to 11. The self-assessment report draws attention to the value of college managers being closely involved in the life of the college but also highlights the difficulties in ensuring that they pay sufficient attention to strategic issues. Inspectors confirmed the college's findings that the pace of implementation of policies and procedures is sometimes hindered because managers are unsure about how they should prioritise the different elements of their work.

57 Strong informal links between staff and managers combined with a cycle of meetings, staff briefings and a weekly bulletin are effective in keeping staff up to date with operational matters. Meetings enable departmental staff to work effectively in teams but there are few opportunities for teamwork across departments.

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In its self-assessment report, the college acknowledges that it needs to improve this aspect of its communications policy. Meetings of GNVQ course leaders and an equal opportunities committee are examples of recently introduced collaborative working between staff from different departments. More formal arrangements are necessary to raise awareness of national developments and enable staff to consider the implications for their areas of work.

58 The college has a clear statement of its management information needs. The computerised systems which it has are not keeping pace with the identified requirements. Although the college is able to provide timely and accurate data to the FEFC for funding purposes, staff are not routinely provided with sufficient data to enable them to monitor progress and inform decision making.

59 Given its size, the college has made an important contribution to the work of the wider community through its links with the borough and the local TEC. For example, the principal chairs the group on education and employment which aims to secure funding from the single regeneration budget to help disadvantaged people who live in wards close to the college. To promote opportunities for adults who live nearby, the college has developed a collaborative programme of courses with the LEA's community education service. The college's contribution is comparatively small.

60 The college welcomes students from a range of backgrounds and cultures and is keen to promote equality of opportunity. The equal opportunities policy has recently been revised. The revised policy has yet to be considered by the corporation. Although the equal opportunities committee has given some consideration to how the policy should be translated into practice, the college acknowledges that it needs to take a more formal approach to ensure effective implementation.

61 Within the scope of its review, the FEFC's audit service concludes that the financial management of the college is good. The finance manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. There is some overdependence on a few key individuals for effective financial management and control. The college slightly exceeded its budgeted surplus in respect of 1996-97. Managers have budgeted for a small deficit in respect of 1997-98 and more substantial deficits have been forecast for future years. The risks underlying the forecasts were considered by governors and management. These forecasts are based on the assumption that the college does not merge. Management accounts are prepared promptly on a monthly basis and all governors receive copies of them. The finance committee and the corporation regularly review the accounts at their meetings. College managers are kept informed of the college's financial position but do not formally review the management accounts. This function is performed by the principal in collaboration with the finance manager.

Cross-college Provision

Conclusions

62 Despite the newness of the self-assessment process, the inspection team found that the self-assessment report provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. In the main, inspectors found the report to be honest and successful in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of provision. Many of the findings in the report are in agreement with those of the inspection team. The rigorous approach of the business studies department to assessing the quality of teaching and learning would provide a good model for other departments. Inspectors agreed with all curriculum grades awarded by the college in the areas inspected and with all but two of the grades for cross-college provision. In these two cases inspectors considered the college to be overgenerous in its grading.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	72
19-24 years	16
25+ years	12
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	0
Intermediate	33
Advanced	67
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	221	18	40
Business	75	41	20
Hotel and catering	27	0	5
Health and community care	18	0	3
Art and design	32	19	8
Humanities	132	11	24
Total	505	89	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	35	4	0	39
Supporting direct learning contact	4	0	0	4
Other support	11	0	0	11
Total	50	4	0	54

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£1,840,000	£1,884,000	£1,892,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£20.93	£20.55	£20.42
Payroll as a proportion of income	74%	76%	75%
Achievement of funding target	99%	90%	108%
Diversity of income	4%	5%	1%
Operating surplus	£57,000	-£41,000	£14,000

Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)

Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96)

Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	155	155	136
	Average point score per entry	4.4	4.5	4.1
	Position in tables	top third	top third	middle third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	31	55	40
	Percentage achieving qualification	90%	73%	83%
	Position in tables	top third	middle third	top third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	56	83
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	73%	73%
	Position in tables	*	top third	top third

Source: DFEE

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

Students' achievements

		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Advanced academic	Pass (%)	83	86	85
	Retention (%)	89	85	91
Intermediate academic	Pass (%)	62	65	45
	Retention (%)	71	77	85
Advanced vocational	Pass (%)	94	92	91
	Retention (%)	66	67	66
Intermediate vocational	Pass (%)	73	73	87
	Retention (%)	67	79	80

Source: college data

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