

Sparsholt College, Hampshire

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
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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

Sparsholt College, Hampshire ***South East Region***

Inspected May 1999

Sparsholt College, Hampshire is a large agricultural college near Winchester in Hampshire. The college produced its third self-assessment report in preparation for the inspection. The self-assessment process was thorough, and inspectors agreed with most of the findings of the report. Since the self-assessment report was written, the college has remedied some of the weaknesses identified. Statistical data on students' achievements provided by the college contained some errors, but these were corrected before the inspection.

Sparsholt College, Hampshire offers land-based courses from foundation level to higher national diplomas and degrees. Inspectors considered provision in game, wildlife and countryside management to be outstanding; horticulture and animal studies provision was good. Teaching is good and a high proportion of the lessons inspected were good or outstanding. The facilities of the college's estate are used well in relating theory to practice. Levels of achievement and retention rates are generally good and, in some cases, outstanding. A high proportion of students progress to employment. The college benefits from the strong links it has with industry. Full-time students are well supported. Governors make a significant contribution to the college's strategic direction and draw on a wide range of expertise in

supporting the college. The college has a new management structure and is well managed. Since the last inspection there has been a strengthening of the learning support available to students. There have also been significant additions and improvements to buildings and plans are in hand to remove most of the temporary classrooms. The different aspects of quality assurance, some of which work well, do not yet form a coherent system. The college should improve: the take-up of available support by part-time students; the recording of decisions made in tutorials; the integration of all aspects of the quality assurance process including the involvement of support staff. It should: review and monitor its equal opportunity policy; replace its temporary classrooms; improve its computerised management information system; increase the clarity and content of the monthly financial reports.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Horticulture	2	Support for students	2
Game, wildlife and countryside management	1	General resources	2
Animal studies	2	Quality assurance	2
		Governance	1
		Management	2

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Sparsholt College, Hampshire in central Hampshire is an agricultural college. It offers a very wide range of land-based courses which reflect both the diversification of traditional industries and the emerging leisure-related employment sector. The college campus is located near the village of Sparsholt, 4 miles north-west of Winchester.

2 Courses include agriculture, horticulture, equine studies, game and wildlife and countryside management, aquaculture and fishery management, forestry, woodland and engineering, golf and sports turf, leisure and tourism, and business management. Further education courses are offered at foundation and national vocational qualification (NVQ) levels 1, 2 and 3 in most land-based subject areas. The college has its own direct allocation of places funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The three degree programmes offered are validated by the University of Portsmouth. A fast-track route to a first degree for students studying the higher national diploma in agriculture has been arranged through a partnership with the University of Reading. A schools centre at the college provides a valuable link for county schools, and a small number of 14 to 16 year olds also attend the college on a link programme.

3 The college has excellent facilities for its educational work. The estate is covered by a conservation plan which has been devised by college staff. It presents many opportunities for students' practical projects involving conservation and habitat improvement. Feed trials work for commercial companies are conducted in the fish hatcheries, as well as native crayfish trials for research being conducted by the Environment Agency and English Nature.

4 The college provides training for 50 trainees on modern apprenticeship and national traineeship programmes under contract to

Hampshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). A small number of full-time students on New Deal programmes work with a larger number of part-time New Deal trainees from other training providers. Other projects receiving funds from non Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sources include: a two-year collaboration/skills development project with five other land-based colleges in the south east to develop key skills and information/communication technology training for rural businesses; a long-standing European Union project in Central America; the Carrefour of agricultural colleges in Europe.

5 Hampshire is a large county with a dispersed population. It includes the new unitary authorities of Portsmouth and Southampton. The college has recently developed a small centre at Havant. It also operates some provision at Farnborough College of Technology. In 1998-99, over 35% of college students came from outside the Hampshire area. Several specialist programmes recruit internationally. By November 1998, the college had enrolled 1,988 students, of whom 1,230 were full time and 785 part time. There were 72 full-time teachers, 27 technicians and 23 other staff supporting aspects of curriculum delivery.

6 The mission of the college is 'to expand opportunities for access to quality education and training for the land-based industry and to become our customers' first choice in all our activities'.

The Inspection

7 The college was inspected in May 1999. Inspectors had previously examined the college's self-assessment report. The college submitted data on students' achievements for 1998. These data were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and awarding body pass lists and found to be reliable. Data for 1996 and 1997 were taken

Context

from the FEFC's individualised student record (ISR). The inspection was carried out by eight inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 31 days. They observed 36 lessons and examined students' work and college documents. Meetings were held with students, governors, managers and staff. In the same week as the FEFC inspection, four inspectors from the Training Standards Council assessed the quality of the college's work-related provision.

8 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 observed 80% were rated good or outstanding. This figure is well above the average of 65% for all lessons observed by inspectors during 1997-98. It is also above the 73% of lessons which were good or outstanding during the last inspection of the college in February 1997. No lessons were rated less than satisfactory.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GNVQ and NVQ	2	3	1	0	0	6
Other vocational	10	14	6	0	0	30
Total (No.)	12	17	7	0	0	36
Total (%)	33	47	20	0	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*

9 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. The average level of attendance during the inspection was 88% compared with an average of 84% for specialist colleges.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Sparsholt College, Hampshire	12.3	88
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

Horticulture

Grade 2

10 Inspectors observed 13 lessons, covering the range of full-time and part-time courses. They agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. By the time of the inspection, action had been taken to address some of the weaknesses identified.

Key strengths

- well-planned, varied lessons
- good retention and achievement rates in 1995 and 1996
- students' achievements of additional qualifications
- the high rate of progression to employment or further education
- effective course management
- flexible modular provision enabling full-time and part-time students to be taught together
- well-planned assignments with clear assessment criteria

Weaknesses

- some students' lack of involvement in their classwork
- the decline in some retention and achievement rates in 1997
- missed opportunities for key skills assessment

11 The college offers a wide range of full-time and part-time provision in horticulture enabling students to progress from foundation to advanced level. Most courses offer options in either amenity horticulture or golf course and sportsground management. The modular structure of the courses enables full-time and part-time students to be taught together, where appropriate. The progress of all students is

reviewed at the end of October and opportunity is taken to transfer those who would benefit to more appropriate courses. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that courses are well planned and well managed. Comprehensive course files are maintained for all courses. Schemes of work and lesson plans are regularly updated.

12 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement in the self-assessment report that most of the teaching is good. In the better lessons, teachers share their objectives with the students and check their understanding of previous work. Lessons are well planned and students experience a range of appropriate learning activities. In many of the theory lessons, teachers made good use of their experience and of the facilities of the horticultural unit to enhance the vocational relevance of their teaching. Practical teaching is of a high standard with appropriate emphasis on health and safety and the progressive development of students' skills. In a few lessons, the learning process is not so well managed. Teachers do not involve all students in classroom discussion; weaker students, in particular, make little or no contribution.

13 Assignment briefs are comprehensive and follow a common format which includes detailed assessment criteria. Many of the assignments involve the application of information to solving a realistic practical problem. The standard of marking is appropriate and in most cases there is comprehensive feedback. Internal verification is effective. As identified in the self-assessment report, key skills are now an integral part of NVQ provision. There are plans to ensure that this becomes the case for all remaining courses, from September 1999.

14 Retention and achievement rates on most full-time provision are good. However, achievement rates on the national certificate in 1997-98 and retention rates on the national diploma ending in 1997-98 were below the relevant national benchmarks. The college has

Curriculum Areas

responded positively by restructuring the national certificate course to make it a modular course with options. The low retention rates on the national diploma were largely due to students leaving during the first year of the three-year sandwich course and subsequent action has improved first-year retention rates. There are good achievement rates for additional awards such as certificates in proficiency with sprayers, first aid, chainsaws, numeracy and Wordpower. Retention and achievement rates in part-time courses leading to NVQ awards are also good although there is a drop in retention rates on some of the level 2 courses ending in 1997-98. Achievement rates on the Royal Horticultural Society general certificate are poor. This is due to the low proportion of students completing the course who enter the

examination. Pass rates for those who take the examination are high. Progression to employment or to other further education courses is also high. Few students progress to higher education.

15 The horticultural unit is well managed and is used effectively as a teaching resource. There is a good range of practical resources including glasshouses, playing fields, a nine hole golf course and college grounds. Effective use is made of the resources, particularly the glasshouses, to link theory and practical classes. Some of the temporary classrooms are stuffy. Staff are well qualified with relevant industrial experience. They work well together as a cohesive team. The section has strong links with industry and outside organisations.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma horticulture and floristry (full time)	2	Expected completions	23	25	31
		Retention (%)	91	88	84
		Achievement (%)	95	82	85
National certificate in horticulture (full time)	2	Expected completions	43	26	25
		Retention (%)	93	77	84
		Achievement (%)	78	100	67
Royal Horticultural Society general certificate (part time)	2	Expected completions	*	69	52
		Retention (%)	*	73	65
		Achievement (%)	*	25	38
NVQ level 2 horticulture (part time)	2	Expected completions	*	43	56
		Retention (%)	*	100	73
		Achievement (%)	*	98	90
National diploma in horticulture (full time)	3	Expected completions	29	27	32
		Retention (%)	100	78	59
		Achievement (%)	100	86	100

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*course not running

Curriculum Areas

Game, Wildlife and Countryside Management

Grade 1

16 Inspectors observed 12 lessons on the full-time courses in the game, wildlife and countryside management section. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report, but found a few were overstated. They also found some additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- high standards of teaching
- highly-motivated, knowledgeable students
- effective use of assignments
- high levels of retention and achievement
- good progression
- productive links with industry

Weaknesses

- inadequate records of individual action plans in tutorials

17 The range of courses caters well for students interested in game and wildlife management. The section has recently been reorganised and is responsible for first and national diplomas courses, and a national certificate in gamekeeping and waterkeeping. The self-assessment report did not identify the range of game and wildlife management courses as a strength, nor did it note as a weakness the restricted provision in countryside management. The section offers a national certificate in countryside related studies but it did not recruit enough students this year. Another section of the college offers a first diploma in countryside skills. Although the gap in provision was not referred to in the self-assessment report, it is recognised and the section is restructuring its courses in response. One outcome of the

restructuring will be an increase in the number of curriculum modules available to students, and staff are currently involved in the awarding body work that will influence this development. The only part-time provision is for a small number of students compiling portfolios for NVQ level 2 in environmental conservation. The section's first cohort of general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced land and environment students complete their studies this year. Inspectors agreed that there are close links with industry. Advice from a college-employer liaison group has led to curriculum improvements. At present, however, the range of industries represented is too narrow.

18 Theory lessons are interesting and informative. They are effectively linked to other aspects of the students' studies. Lessons are developed logically and good examples are used to illustrate the vocational relevance of topics. Many teachers have a thorough understanding and experience of the sector and use it effectively. They also make good use of students' own experience, eliciting information and ideas with challenging, well-directed questions. In a few lessons, discussion is not well managed and only a minority of students are drawn into making a contribution. Some students need better guidance on taking notes. In longer lessons, a range of well-chosen activities kept the students interested. Class exercises and site visits gave them a better understanding of the theory. Students are highly responsive and many show good levels of understanding. Attendance rates are high and students are punctual for classes.

19 Much of the practical teaching is outstanding. Lessons are well planned and prepared, and there is effective use of resources both on and off-site. Habitat surveys are particularly well conducted. Students are clear about the tasks and well supported by teachers.

20 Students are well informed about assessment and consider that their workloads

Curriculum Areas

are reasonably balanced. They appreciate the prompt return of their work. Assignments are vocationally relevant. Most tasks are clearly specified and written feedback from teachers highlights areas in which students can improve. Students' assignment work is generally well researched and clearly presented; some of the advanced level material is of a high standard. Teachers could help students to consolidate their knowledge by drawing together the conclusions of the assignment work. Students are well informed about their progress and value the substantial amount of informal support they receive from their tutors. Records of individual tutorials are often not comprehensive enough; planned actions are not always clearly specified or monitored.

21 Inspectors agreed with the findings of the self-assessment report that there are high levels of achievement and retention on most courses. Over the last three years, almost all students on the national diploma in game and wildlife management and the national certificate in gamekeeping and waterkeeping passed at the end of their course. The national certificate in

countryside-related studies is the only full-time course which has had a low retention rate over the last few years, and the rate significantly improved to a reasonable level last year. About half the students on the part-time course, however, are taking longer to complete than was anticipated by the college. Most national certificate and diploma students gain employment and a high proportion of first diploma students on game, wildlife and habitat management courses continue their studies at the college.

22 Facilities for the practical work are good. Good use is made of the college estate which includes a game unit, a shoot, a deer unit and a craft centre. There is also extensive use of off-site areas, such as a shoot, and an ancient woodland and nature reserve, which complement the college resources. Local sites are used for practical work and employers provide work experience for all certificate and diploma students. Inspectors agreed that there are close links with industry including Hampshire County Council, the National Trust, Forest Enterprise and numerous private estates.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in game, wildlife and countryside management, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma game, wildlife and habitat management	2	Expected completions	44	30	28
		Retention (%)	86	93	93
		Achievement (%)	82	96	88
National certificate in countryside-related studies and national certificate in gamekeeping and waterkeeping	2	Expected completions	31	34	33
		Retention (%)	90	85	91
		Achievement (%)	89	75	90
National diploma in game and wildlife management	3	Expected completions	23	23	26
		Retention (%)	96	78	77
		Achievement (%)	100	100	95

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

Curriculum Areas

Animal Studies

Grade 2

23 Inspectors observed 11 animal studies lessons and reviewed students' work and course documentation. They agreed with the majority of strengths identified in the self-assessment report and all the weaknesses. They also identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-planned teaching
- the effective management of groups
- the wide range of formal and informal support available to students
- good retention rates and above average achievement on all programmes
- strong attention to animal welfare
- strong links to the industry
- access to a wide range of animals

Weaknesses

- failure to provide opportunities for additional NVQs
- inadequacies in support for learning
- some weaknesses in the accommodation of specialist resources

24 Sparsholt College, Hampshire offers full-time animal studies programmes which enable students to progress from first to higher national diploma and degree courses. There is relatively little part-time provision. Course tutors and technicians manage programmes well. In determining the size of teaching groups, the college takes account of student ability, the resources available and the planned learning activity. The first diploma group has been streamed for the teaching of science in order that appropriate support can be given to those students who hope to progress to the national diploma and as a means of improving

progression and retention on the national diploma. There are some opportunities for students to gain additional qualifications; for example, general certificate of education advanced levels (GCE A levels), and awards for information technology (IT), veterinary medicine and the Kennel Club. However, opportunities for students to gain additional NVQ units across all full-time programmes is not yet fully developed, as the college has identified.

25 Inspectors agreed that teaching is well planned with clear links to the syllabus. In the majority of lessons, resources are appropriate and students often receive additional opportunities to handle and observe animals. In some lessons, tutors were able to draw on their own industrial experience to support learning. In a lesson on pet store management the tutor provided a business perspective to the responsible sale of animals by explaining the benefits of additional equipment that could be sold. In lessons where learning was less effectively managed, tutors did not give enough time to the exploring of students' knowledge and experience and made few checks on students' understanding. Teaching methods in some lessons were insufficiently varied. Students have access to learning support informally and through the tutorial system. However, there was a failure to record properly the actions agreed in tutorials, a matter not recognised in the self-assessment report. Students gain experience of work through blocks of work experience and regular duties with the college animal management unit. Opportunities are missed to verify the quality of work experience, as there is little visiting and inadequate monitoring. Assessment opportunities are missed for the same reason. The reports which some students and employers keep contribute to the college's assessment of each student. Students are encouraged to participate in and organise events such as school visits and the college open day. During the inspection students were observed hosting a

Curriculum Areas

school visit. They showed a clear regard to health and safety and ensured that the children took care in handling the animals.

26 As identified in the self-assessment report, retention and achievements are high compared with national averages. Retention and destination data are well documented and reviewed in course reports. Students present their written work in a well-structured format and the work is often wordprocessed to a high standard. Assessment of students' work varies in quality. Some students do not receive enough feedback on their work or advice on how they can improve their performance.

27 Resources are well managed. They meet the requirements of the large number of students and there is appropriate attention to animal welfare. The animal studies management unit provides accommodation for a range of small mammals, birds, reptiles,

amphibians and invertebrates. There are also some rhea and goats, kennelling for up to eight dogs and a small cattery. The unit is fairly compact. Limitations of accommodation are to some extent overcome by planned management of the animals and the size of student groups. Some of the animal housing, however, is not appropriately located in terms of proximity for related activities. Although the college has identified this weakness, and has plans for alternative and additional housing, there is no reference to it in the self-assessment report. Students can gain experience of other animals through visits and close links with organisations such as the Blue Cross, which provides the college with valuable access to large dog kennels. There is also access to other animals within the college estate, on the farm, in the equine, fish and countryside enterprises, and at a nearby zoo.

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

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
First diploma in animal care**	2	Expected completions	45	50	71
		Retention (%)	89	90	87
		Achievement (%)	98	93	95
National certificate in animal care	2	Expected completions	33	22	37
		Retention (%)	88	82	87
		Achievement (%)	90	89	79
National diploma in science (animal care)**	3	Expected completions	29	52	64
		Retention (%)	76	88	64
		Achievement (%)	77	93	98
Veterinary nursing certificate	3	Expected completions	*	*	10
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	57

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*course not running

**for further education funding purposes these fall into programme area 1

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 2

28 The colleges's self-assessment was thorough and detailed. Inspectors agreed with the strengths but considered one weakness had been underestimated and another not recognised.

Key strengths

- comprehensive pre-course guidance to inform students' choice of course
- a thorough induction process, including the assessment of learning support needs
- effective learning support for full-time students
- comprehensive careers information and guidance
- good supervision of residential students
- staff dedicated to students' needs

Weaknesses

- poor take-up of learning support by part-time students
- variability in the completion of students' tutorial records

29 The college uses a range of activities to inform potential students about its courses and careers in the land-based industries. They include: 'taster' courses, attendance at school careers events and specialist trade events throughout the country, and contributions to specialist journals. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that it produces a wide range of high-quality literature and activities to advise and inform prospective students. Teachers maintain close links with employers in the land-based industries and many students attend the college as a result of personal recommendations. A pre-enrolment charter advises applicants on how their application will be handled, and provides information about the

timing of each stage of the process. Applicants and their parents, attending for interview during the inspection, expressed satisfaction with the interview day.

30 Students' induction is comprehensive. They receive information on the wide range of college services and the college charter, and are given an information booklet and diary. All of them are given a literacy and numeracy assessment to determine whether they require additional learning support and tutors and students are informed quickly of the results. Full-time foundation and intermediate students who need support are required to attend the learning support centre. Students on advanced courses are advised to attend the centre and a period is added to their timetable to enable them to do so. Part-time and block-release students who need support are advised but not required to attend the learning centre if they have identified learning support needs. This results in a poor take-up of support by part-time students. This was a weakness which was not given sufficient weight in the college's self-assessment.

31 Inspectors agreed that learning support is a strength for those who receive it. Students who attend numeracy support, work towards an externally assessed numeracy award. There is no equivalent assessment for literacy. Students who are dyslexic receive good support without which many would not complete their course. Course tutors are informed about the attendance and progress of their students attending the centre. The college employs learning assistants to provide individual support for students with learning difficulties.

32 Tutorial support is generally good. Tutorial time is mainly devoted to meetings between tutors and students on an individual basis. Tutors are required, together with the student, to complete the learning agreement, to determine objectives and plan future action, and to review performance, progression and career objectives. They are required to complete a

Cross-college Provision

proforma at each tutorial which includes a statement of agreed actions for the student. Subsequent tutorials should begin with a review of these actions. Whereas, in some tutorial records, the actions are not recorded in enough detail or are missing, the effectiveness and usefulness of the tutorial are limited. This was not identified in the self-assessment report.

33 Students are well supported by a team of staff working across the college. About 40% of full-time students, of which nearly half are female, live in college hostels, and a further 6% with local families. A team of wardens is responsible for students' welfare, guidance, behaviour and discipline. All have a job description and are aware of their roles. They are trained in basic first aid, informed about the misuse of drugs, and understand fire procedures. A male and female warden supervise students each weekday evening and one is on duty at weekends. They organise and supervise sports training and organise sports fixtures. Wardens are assisted by senior resident students. These live in hostels with younger students to maintain a responsible level of behaviour and to report incidents to the wardens. Wardens have recently reviewed their supervision of young students to ensure procedures for monitoring abnormal behaviour are adequate. Student support is also provided by the college nurse, the student liaison assistant and the college counsellor. The college nurse sees students for minor ailments and a doctor holds a surgery twice a week. The student liaison assistant provides general financial and welfare support. Students in need of specialised support are referred to the college counsellor or to an outside agency.

34 Students receive good specialist careers advice from their teachers, who are regularly informed by their contacts in industry about job opportunities suitable for students. The college careers co-ordinator provides sessions for students in job seeking skills and maintains a jobs noticeboard. The careers library is good; there is comprehensive information about

opportunities for employment in the land-based industries, and in a wide range of other occupations, and on progression to other further education courses or to higher education. A careers officer from the local careers service attends the college two days a week.

35 The students' association is well organised and active. The student committee meets regularly to organise social and sporting events. They also have a weekly meeting with the warden and a fortnightly meeting with the principal. Members of the student committee are represented on all important college committees including the corporation. Inspectors agreed that the work of the students' association is a strength.

General Resources

Grade 2

36 Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They identified one additional weakness.

Key strengths

- the diversity and quality of the estate
- excellent library facilities
- good IT resources
- high-quality residential accommodation
- good social and sporting facilities
- a well-equipped learning skills centre

Weaknesses

- some poor temporary classrooms
- low space utilisation

37 Within the college estate there is a diverse range of farming enterprises and a wide variety of habitats. The 176 hectares include the teaching campus, farm, woodlands and ponds. The farm has a dairy, a pig unit, an equestrian centre, beef fattening and sheep enterprises, and a commercial game rearing unit.

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The horticulture unit contains a retail centre. Additional facilities include a golf course, a fish hatchery, timber processing, and the National Aquatic Training Centre. Each area or enterprise is managed in a way which provides good support for the educational work of the college.

38 The buildings and estate are used extensively by outside organisations. There are over 150 buildings, the majority of which are in good condition and well suited to the purposes for which they are used. However, there are 23 temporary classrooms which are old and, though maintained in an acceptable internal condition, often suffer from heating and ventilation problems. They have reached the end of their useful lives, as the self-assessment report acknowledged. The college has well-developed plans to finance the replacement of these temporary buildings. It has designed a new teaching block which will contain 16 classrooms and three science laboratories.

39 The college has made significant improvements to its accommodation in the two years since the last inspection. The Westley Court management centre has been extended and fully refurbished and now offers a high-quality conference centre for 100 delegates. New residential blocks have been constructed which have rooms equipped to a high standard with en-suite facilities, self-catering kitchens and lounge facilities. A staff house has been converted to provide a high-quality nursery for the children of staff, students and the general public.

40 The college has residential places for 419 students. All of the residential accommodation is of good quality and much of it is excellent. Students have access to a wide range of sporting amenities. There is a restaurant, coffee shop, bar, bank, medical facilities and a well-stocked shop on campus. The strengths of the college's residential accommodation and associated social and recreational facilities were emphasised in the self-assessment report.

41 The grounds and buildings are well managed. Most of the objectives in the college's accommodation strategy have been achieved and the strategy is currently being rewritten. There is a well-developed maintenance plan and day-to-day maintenance requests are dealt with efficiently. Room utilisation is analysed by means of a timetabling package. Overall, space utilisation has improved over the last three years but it still remains relatively low. Planned changes involve the removal of more temporary classroom space than will be replaced by the new teaching block and the introduction of a more efficient timetable for the next academic year. Although the college was aware of the weakness in its utilisation of space and was addressing it, the matter was not identified in the self-assessment report.

42 The library was acknowledged as a significant strength in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed. It is housed in an attractive purpose-built building opened in 1993. The library subscribes to 350 periodicals, has 680 video tapes and 20,000 books and other catalogued items. Holdings were considered to be satisfactory in all the curriculum areas inspected. There are 120 study places. The library is open for 62 hours a week during term-time including Saturday. An attractive learning support centre adjacent to the library provides valuable additional study facilities. A major change since the last inspection has been the rapidly growing use of the internet by both staff and students, supported by the researches of library staff. The library is well managed and a consistent quality of service is provided at all times. The computerised library management system is used effectively to inform planning. Liaison with curriculum areas is good.

43 The college's computer network has just been redesigned. It incorporates 121 high specification machines giving a ratio of computers to full-time equivalent students of approximately 1:10. Some older computers are

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available on loan to students for wordprocessing. Whilst the ratio of computers to students is modest, students have access to the machines for 84 hours a week including evenings and weekends. Technical support for the system is good.

44 Almost all staff are well accommodated in pleasant offices or workrooms. Teachers' workrooms are equipped with computers, printers and scanners. There are good reprographic facilities and teachers receive assistance in producing teaching materials. Secretarial help is available in each department.

45 The self-assessment report concluded that the layout and size of the campus causes problems for people with restricted mobility. Considerable progress has been made since the last inspection through minor adaptations and the ground floors of most buildings are now accessible to wheelchair users. There are 16 toilets for people with disabilities around the campus and seven bedrooms in different hostels are designed for students with disabilities or visitors. Modifications have been made to suit the particular needs of individual students.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

46 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements contained in the self-assessment report, but judged that some of the strengths had been overstated and some important weaknesses overlooked.

Key strengths

- a thorough system of course review
- regular assessment of academic performance by senior management and governors
- clear policy statements covering many aspects of college work
- many, varied opportunities for staff development

- the positive impact of the lesson observation scheme

Weaknesses

- variable involvement of support staff in quality assurance
- some aspects of quality assurance not sufficiently well established

47 The college has a quality and procedures manual. It also has well-devised policies and procedures which contribute to quality assurance. These include: the internal verification policy and handbook; the accreditation of prior learning policy; and guidelines for appraisal of staff and for lesson observation. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the documentation on quality assurance is a strength.

48 This was the college's third self-assessment report, but the first developed with reference to the present inspection framework. Staff identified the strengths and weaknesses of their provision, and offered supporting evidence. Governors undertook an assessment of their own performance during a one-day workshop. Staff subsequently considered a draft report, and departments and sections proposed their own grades. The college's quality development group verified the self-assessment. External verification was undertaken first by staff from another college, and then by the TEC-nominated college governor and the college's Edexcel case manager. The finalised report was ratified by the college's quality assurance committee, reporting to the board of governors.

49 Self-assessment operated in tandem with the college's well-established course review procedures, which are the driving force for quality improvement within the college. There is a set format for course reports, with some variation allowed for local circumstances. The reports include students' views, data on retention, achievement and progression, external verifiers' reports and feedback from

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employers. Trends are identified. Overall, academic performance is high. Where there are retention and/or achievement issues to be addressed, staff take appropriate action. Retention on the first diploma in fishery studies has improved from 79% last year to 92% this year, through more careful preparation of students for the demands of the course. The college cited its course review system as a strength. Inspectors agreed.

50 The senior management team reviews retention and achievement data regularly, as does the academic board. Governors are kept informed of the college's academic performance through workshops and regular bulletins, and through reports from the academic board and the quality assurance committee. Inspectors agreed with the college's assertion that procedures for monitoring academic performance were a strength.

51 The college's quality assurance arrangements are intended to embrace all aspects of its operations. Service standards have recently been agreed for sections within the two support directorates, but no targets agreed. Support staff had little involvement in self-assessment, although some contributed to course reviews. Despite proposals two years ago for reviews of support sections which would mirror course reviews, few such reviews have taken place. The issue was also raised in the last inspection report. It has yet to be fully addressed. Inspectors judged that the college in its self-assessment report had overestimated its progress in introducing reviews of its support sections. The college is now putting in place appropriate arrangements.

52 Appraisal is well established within the college. There are two schemes: one for academic staff, the other for support staff. Staff are positive about their experience of appraisal. Both place a strong emphasis on personal and professional development; personal targets are discussed and links made to the objectives of the curriculum areas from which staff come.

53 Staff have access to a wide range of high-quality staff development opportunities and appreciate the encouragement they are given to take these up. Inspectors agreed with the college's assertion that this was a strength. The college has set training priorities, starting with initial teacher training, which embrace 10 categories of activity. Course reviews and appraisals are used to identify staff development needs within academic areas. The staff development function is managed by two members of staff who hold separate budgets and there are separate policy statements relating to support staff and teaching staff. There is no overall evaluation of the impact or costs of staff development, and the senior management team have not sought reports on the staff development function. These weaknesses were not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. The college has had its Investor in People status reaffirmed.

54 The college operates a long-established lesson observation scheme which is well documented and highly valued by staff. Observations are carried out by managers. Lessons are graded. The grades informed the self-assessment process. The scheme has a developmental focus. It has led to improvements in classroom practice, helped in providing support for new staff and enabled others to update their skills. The college cited the scheme as a strength. Inspectors agreed.

55 The college requested a second inspection within two years of the publication of the previous report. A significant number of organisational and systems changes have been made during the intervening period, which have had little time to show benefits. Senior managers have begun to create a single framework for planning and review. Changes have still to be made to streamline the reporting structure. There is duplication of effort from staff in the current action-planning process, a matter which was not addressed in the self-assessment report, although the senior

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management team has recently recorded as an outstanding action point the need to ensure 'the proper connection of new structures to produce a robust quality loop'.

Governance

Grade 1

56 Inspectors and auditors agreed with the key strengths and weaknesses included in the self-assessment report. Additional strengths and weaknesses were also identified. Action is being taken to address the weaknesses identified in the report.

Key strengths

- the skills and commitment of governors
- effective induction and training programmes
- good procedures for the operation of corporation business
- effective links with curriculum and support sections
- the development and monitoring of the strategic plan
- awareness and adoption of best practice on issues of openness and accountability

Weaknesses

- lack of rigour in monitoring equal opportunities policy and practice

57 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.

58 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors bring to the college a wide range of expertise. Governors have been

instrumental in encouraging significant developments in the college estates and they help to establish excellent links between the college and land-based industries. The corporation has a determined membership of 16. There are two vacancies, which the corporation has decided to defer filling pending the revised instrument and articles of government. The governance committee has a remit to identify new members to fill vacancies based on a skills audit undertaken by governors. Advertisements are used to attract potential governors and candidates are formally interviewed. There is a comprehensive induction process and members each receive a detailed handbook. Members' training needs are determined annually. There are two formal training events, one a two-day residential conference, and attendance at these has been good. Governors receive presentations by college managers, and attend external training events.

59 Governors have a good understanding of educational issues and receive a range of reports on academic performance, including the minutes of the academic board and the quality assurance committee. The recently published benchmarking data are being used to inform debate on the relative strength of the college's provision. Targets have been set for 1999-2000. Previously, governors' oversight of students' achievements was limited to annually published data. Governors undertake an annual review of key policies. Detailed reports on health and safety issues are regularly received by the board. Monitoring of equal opportunities has yet to be developed to the same extent. Governors have regular contact with staff through individual links with curriculum and support areas of the college. These links are changed annually to help broaden governors' knowledge of the curriculum. Staff and governors appreciate this added insight.

60 Corporation members determine the mission and strategic objectives of the college in

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joint meetings with senior staff. They consider and agree the college and departmental targets in the strategic plan and monitor the college's progress in achieving the annual objectives through operating statements. Governors have agreed critical success factors for the college and identified key issues the college needs to address. The self-assessment report identified the corporation's involvement in determining and monitoring the strategic direction of the college as a strength and inspectors agreed.

61 As noted in the self-assessment report, the corporation is well supported by the clerk to the corporation who also acts as the college personnel officer. There is no indication of a conflict of interest. Agendas, supporting papers and minutes are produced promptly. Minutes and action points provide a clear record of the decisions of the corporation, but do not generally provide a clear sense of the debate that occurred. Governors' commitment to the college is demonstrated through a high level of attendance at board and committee meetings and through provision of specialist inputs to working groups established by the college to oversee specific projects. Committees meet termly to an agreed cycle, and operate effectively within appropriate terms of reference. All governors receive monthly monitoring reports on finance, student enrolments and other matters of current import.

62 Corporation papers and the register of interests are open to public scrutiny but are not easily accessible. The register of interests is completed by all governors and members of the senior management team and is updated annually. The college produces a comprehensive annual report, as does the audit committee. The corporation operates within an agreed code of conduct and appropriate standing orders. A 'whistleblowing' policy has been approved.

63 There is a clear, structured and rigorous process for the appointment of senior staff. This process has been applied in the past year

to appoint a completely new senior management team. The chair of the corporation undertakes an annual appraisal of the principal's performance. The outcomes of the appraisal, however, are not reported to the corporation, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. Governors prepared a self-assessment by analysing the board's performance against the published quality statements. They had previously assessed their own effectiveness. The corporation does not use formal performance indicators or targets in the assessment of its work.

Management

Grade 2

64 Inspectors and auditors agreed with the key strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, and identified further strengths and weaknesses. Action is being taken to address the weaknesses.

Key strengths

- an effective management structure
- competent management of the curriculum and support services
- an inclusive strategic planning process
- good communication
- innovative financial arrangements for capital projects

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped computerised management IT systems
- insufficient clarity and content within the monthly financial monitoring reports
- some inadequacies in the operation and monitoring of equal opportunities

65 There have been significant changes to the management of the college since the last

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inspection. A new principal and vice-principal were appointed in September 1998. A major staffing review and management restructuring reduced management posts by 25%. There are now five directors, who take responsibility for the curriculum and support functions. The reorganisation was well managed and outcomes are effectively monitored. Staff were fully consulted and involved throughout the process. They understand the management structure and are clear about their responsibilities within it. The curriculum and support services are well organised. Staff are well deployed. Communication within the college is good. Staff are kept well informed about college and national issues by regular staff meetings and briefings.

66 The strategic plan reflects the college's mission and its educational character. Staff are committed to the values, aims and objectives of the institution. Inspectors agreed with the college that it adopts a consultative and comprehensive approach to strategic planning. Corporate objectives are identified against seven key output areas essential to the achievement of the college's mission though performance indicators for some of the objectives are not expressed in clear, measurable outputs. Annual operating statements related to the strategic objectives are produced by departments and sections. Statements for support areas have been produced for the first time during the current academic year. Targets set by some teams are insufficiently challenging. Progress against the achievement of operating targets is reviewed termly and reported to governors and staff. Marketing is good. The college's marketing staff have a clear understanding of their role. Market research informs the strategic planning process and is based primarily on internally-derived information.

67 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report that the college has productive links with outside bodies. It plays a significant part in the life of the local rural community, where it enjoys a high reputation

for the quality of its provision and its responsiveness. The college is a partner in a number of collaborative ventures with other colleges.

68 There is no integrated management information system for meeting the increasing needs of management. The various elements of the system are not compatible and cannot provide a coherent service that is readily available to staff. New software for student information was installed in 1997. Staff make increasingly good use of the system and the information it provides. Timely internal management reports are used well in monitoring data on attendance, retention and withdrawals. Staff have increasing confidence in the accuracy of the information provided. The college recognises the need to develop more effective systems. The weakness was identified in the self-assessment report, and remedial action is already being taken.

69 The college has numerous policy statements which are reviewed annually by the corporation. There is evidence of activities which support equality of opportunity. However, there are limited references to the equal opportunities policy in the staff handbook and in job descriptions. There are also gaps in the monitoring of the policy. Directors are not required to report on equal opportunities and no reports are received by the academic board or the corporation on the implementation of the college's policy. These weaknesses were overlooked in the college self-assessment report.

70 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the college's financial management is adequate. In 1998, the college completed the construction of new residential accommodation and the refurbishment of a conference centre. Funding for these projects was carefully negotiated and arrangements for the disposal of part of the college estate have also been innovatively structured to maximise potential revenues which reflect the site's inherent value.

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71 Monthly financial reports are produced within a satisfactory period, discussed at senior management team meetings and distributed to all governors. It was acknowledged in the self-assessment report that the clarity of information provided in these reports could be improved. In addition, there is no overall profit and loss statement, rolling 12-month cashflow forecast or an analysis of the financial impact of movements in staff and student numbers. Changes to the report format, finance department structure and financial regulations are planned for the 1999-2000 academic year. This will coincide with the introduction of new financial software.

72 At the end of the 1997-98 financial year, a significant financial downturn was experienced which was not fully revealed until the year-end financial statements were prepared. In response to this, the college performed a comprehensive rebudgeting exercise for 1998-99 involving all budget holders. Areas where significant cost savings could be made were identified. Not all the college's commercial activities are fully costed, which restricts the college's ability to assess the financial contribution of this aspect of its operations, to provide a guide for strategic and operational planning. The weakness is acknowledged by management, but not referred to in the self-assessment report.

Conclusions

73 The self-assessment report provided a useful starting point for planning the inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the findings in the report, but found some strengths and weaknesses which had not been identified by the college. A few weaknesses were given greater significance by the inspectorate. Inspectors nevertheless agreed with the curriculum grades awarded by the college. In one area of cross-college provision they concluded that the college had been overgenerous in its grading.

74 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 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	4
16-18 years	27
19-24 years	28
25+ years	41
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	1
Intermediate	28
Advanced	30
Higher education	9
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	32
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	77	42	4
Agriculture	1,097	1,685	90
Engineering	0	7	0
Business	6	2	0
Health and community care	0	53	2
Humanities	0	124	4
Basic education	5	9	0
Total	1,185	1,922	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 6% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	59	6	0	65
Supporting direct learning contact	21	7	0	28
Other support	114	10	1	125
Total	194	23	1	218

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£8,723,000	£9,208,000	£8,521,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£22.13	£21.36	£18.13
Payroll as a proportion of income	59%	62%	60%
Achievement of funding target	112%	112%	100%
Diversity of income	49%	53%	51%
Operating surplus	-£370,000	-£593,000	-£724,000

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	16	23	248	8	2	47
	Retention (%)	100	65	85	75	100	91
	Achievement (%)	94	100	63	100	100	68
2	Expected completions	309	315	380	34	69	200
	Retention (%)	93	90	85	88	94	90
	Achievement (%)	85	93	82	97	85	66
3	Expected completions	–	62	142	–	58	126
	Retention (%)	–	85	82	–	83	86
	Achievement (%)	89	77	87	88	90	82
4 or 5	Expected completions	–	0	0	–	0	14
	Retention (%)	–	n/a	n/a	–	n/a	100
	Achievement (%)	88	n/a	n/a	92	n/a	100
Short courses	Expected completions	37	62	119	190	489	691
	Retention (%)	95	98	98	98	99	99
	Achievement (%)	97	83	76	96	94	91
Unknown/unclassified	Expected completions	124	137	111	211	443	181
	Retention (%)	86	91	81	81	95	88
	Achievement (%)	91	97	74	93	79	90

Source: ISR

-ISR data not collected

n/a not applicable

FEFC Inspection Report 94/99

**Published by the
Further Education Funding Council**

Website <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>

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