

Swindon College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education 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

Swindon College

South West Region

Inspected February 1998

Swindon College is a general further education college in north-east Wiltshire. The college offers a broad range of courses in the 10 FEFC programme areas. Provision in six of these was inspected. Governors and staff at all levels were involved in the production of the self-assessment report. The process was linked to strategic planning. The basis of the report is an assessment of strengths and weaknesses produced by each substantial curriculum and cross-college area. The self-assessment report was thorough and was underpinned by the college's well-established quality assurance system. The inspection team agreed with the majority of the judgements in the report.

The college has many partnerships and links with the world outside the college. It is responsive to the needs of the local community and has strong links with local schools. It offers courses tailored to meet the needs of part-time students. Much of its curriculum is devised to attract people who would not normally enter further education. There are close and effective working relationships with industry and commerce, with whom the college has developed a significant amount of collaborative

provision. There is a well-established culture of open and productive self-criticism in the college and an effective quality assurance system.

Much of the teaching is effective. The college has achieved good pass rates in many subjects and an improving position in the Department for Education and Employment performance tables. The strategic planning process is consultative and well documented. A wide range of advice and support services are available to students. Marketing draws on the findings of effective market research. The college benefits from the experience and effective work of the governing body. The college should: improve the quality of some teaching; improve attendance, retention and pass rates in some subjects; ensure that the tutorial system operates more consistently; improve the accuracy of the management information system and the reliability of data on students' achievements; improve the monitoring of attendance and retention; and continue to improve its accommodation.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	2	Support for students	3
Engineering	2	General resources	3
Business	3	Quality assurance	1
Hospitality and catering, leisure and tourism	2	Governance	2
Art, design, media and the performing arts	2	Management	2
Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and basic education	3		

Context

The College and its Mission

1 Swindon College in north-east Wiltshire is a large general further education college. It offers full-time and part-time courses from pre-foundation to degree level and is a major provider of adult and continuing education. There are strong links with employers and many courses are specifically designed for local and national companies, often in collaboration with other training providers.

2 The college serves Swindon, north-east Wiltshire and parts of Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire. It operates from four main sites in Swindon town centre and also provides education and training at 100 centres within north-east Wiltshire, and at centres in Bristol and Slough. North-east Wiltshire has a population of approximately 200,000. It has some small pockets of rural deprivation. Swindon has a population of approximately 170,000 and is well served by public transport. It is a thriving industrial and commercial centre. Its main industries are concerned with distribution, the public services, financial and business services, engineering and automobile manufacture. Companies range in size from large multinationals to small owner-manager enterprises. Unemployment is low at less than 2 per cent.

3 In 1996-97, the college had over 49,000 enrolments, of whom approximately 90 per cent were part-time students aged 19 or over. There were approximately 2,700 full-time students mostly aged 16 to 18. Part-time student numbers have doubled since 1993. The college competes for full-time students with seven further education colleges within a 30-mile radius of Swindon. The majority of the college's students are on courses leading to vocational or professional qualifications. In June 1997, the college employed 439 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 219 teach or directly support learning.

4 Swindon College's mission is to 'provide comprehensive high-quality education and training services which are relevant and accessible to the communities which it serves'. It aims to 'put the needs and interests of the learner first by providing a range of quality services' which are:

- 'relevant to peoples' needs and opportunities
- accessible to all on an equal basis
- flexible in matching peoples' preferences for how and what they learn
- affordable by giving value for money and financial assistance where it is both possible and appropriate'.

The Inspection

5 The college was inspected during the week beginning 2 February 1998, at a time when an acting principal was in post following the tragic death of the college's long-serving and well-respected principal in September 1997. The vice-principal had left the college to take up another post only a few weeks earlier. The current acting principal had been in post as vice-principal for only one month.

6 Prior to the inspection, the inspection team evaluated the college's self-assessment report. The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years 1995 to 1997 which were checked by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies.

7 The college was notified of the sample of its provision to be inspected approximately two months before the inspection. This included provision in six of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) programme areas and covered: science, mathematics, computing, engineering, business, hospitality and catering, leisure and tourism, art, design, media, the performing arts, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and basic

Context

education. The inspection was carried out by 18 inspectors and an auditor, working for a total of 69 days. They observed 145 lessons including provision at off-site centres and examined samples of students' work and a wide variety of college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, college staff and students.

8 Of the lessons inspected, 59 per cent were rated good or outstanding and 6 per cent were less than satisfactory. This compares with 61 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all colleges inspected 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 during the inspection was 77 per cent; the same as the average recorded by inspectors for general further education colleges in 1996-97, according to the same report. The following table shows the grades awarded to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	2	8	5	1	0	16
GNVQ	3	19	16	2	0	40
NVQ	1	14	6	2	0	23
Higher education including access courses	5	3	2	1	0	11
Other vocational	2	8	8	1	0	19
Other*	5	15	14	2	0	36
Total	18	67	51	9	0	145

*other includes GCSE, basic education and further education access

Curriculum Areas

Science, Mathematics and Computing

Grade 2

9 Twenty-two lessons were observed covering a range of vocational qualifications at intermediate and advanced levels, general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE). Inspectors agreed with most of the college's judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective curriculum management in computing
- well-managed practical teaching and some good theory teaching
- wide variety of learning activities in science
- large numbers of students studying information technology (IT) at times that suit them in centres away from the college
- specialist equipment and laboratories for science and computing
- good retention and pass rates on IT courses

Weaknesses

- below average retention on GCE A level courses
- poor GCSE results for students aged 16 to 18
- limited range of learning opportunities in science and mathematics for less able students

10 The college provides full-time courses leading to general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at intermediate and advanced level and an extensive range of part-time courses in computing and IT. Courses

are held at centres across parts of Wiltshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire, and in major towns such as Bristol and Slough. In 1996-97, over 5,000 people who wished to update their skills in IT enrolled at the college's Learning City centre in Swindon where they can work at times and at a pace that suits themselves. There are science and mathematics courses at GCSE and GCE A level and courses providing access to higher education, but no vocational courses. This restricts the range of learning opportunities available to students. For example, there is no alternative to GCSE mathematics for less able students.

11 In most lessons, teachers use a variety of teaching methods and up-to-date learning materials. They help students to understand the work, and maintain their interest. Lessons are well structured and the links between theory and practical work are clear. Teachers set assignments regularly and assess them accurately. Work is marked and returned to students with helpful comments. Students understand the objectives of most lessons, but in some too little explanation is given to students to enable them to work on their own. In a minority of lessons, the pace of work was unnecessarily slow and some students had to wait a long time before receiving attention. Inspectors considered that some weaknesses in teaching and learning were not adequately addressed in the self-assessment report.

12 Courses are well organised and effectively managed. Computing and IT teachers pay considerable attention to course planning. In science and mathematics, the curriculum is less well planned. Teachers are well qualified and many have appropriate industrial experience, but some are out of touch with current practice in industry. Science and computing equipment and laboratory accommodation is of a high standard.

13 Students' work is generally of good quality. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that clear records are maintained and students

Curriculum Areas

are regularly informed of their progress. Pass rates on most courses exceed the national average rates for general further education colleges. Since 1995, retention and pass rates on the GNVQ intermediate course in IT have been consistently above the average for 16 to 18 year old students. Similarly, high pass and retention rates were achieved in 1996-97 by 1,844 part-time students on the college's newly-introduced City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) certificate in IT. GCSE pass rates are low for students aged 16 to 18 but better for students aged 19 or over. Retention rates on most courses are good. GCE A level retention rates, however, are low; a fact which is evident in the college's data but not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

Examples of students' achievements in science, mathematics and computing, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
First diploma/GNVQ intermediate IT	Retention (%)	62	77	81
	Pass rate (%)	100	97	73
C&G 726/1 IT	Retention (%)	*	*	85
	Pass rate (%)	*	*	93
GCE A level	Retention (%)	*	40	40
	Pass rate (%)	74	77	77
GCSE mathematics for students aged 19 or over	Retention (%)	81	26	68
	Pass rate (%)	25	42	46

Source: college data

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 2

14 Inspectors observed 22 lessons covering foundation, intermediate and advanced level courses in engineering. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good teaching
- well-structured schemes of work
- teachers' awareness of the individual learning difficulties of students
- well-organised course documentation
- assignments supported by appropriate marking schemes
- pass rates at and above national rates on most courses
- refurbished classroom accommodation

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates on some courses
- insufficient or out-of-date industrial experience of some staff
- students' understanding of topics not always checked by teachers
- some unsatisfactory workshop accommodation

15 The range of engineering programmes is wide. The self-assessment report regards this as a strength and inspectors agreed. Full-time provision includes GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses in engineering, computer systems engineering and multimedia studies and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at level 2 in engineering manufacture, motor vehicle repair and servicing, electronics and computer maintenance. Students can progress to higher diplomas in engineering and in computer systems engineering. Opportunities for part-time study include: NVQs at levels 1 and 2

in electrical systems, electronics, computer-aided design and electronic servicing; NVQs at levels 1, 2 and 3 in motor vehicle maintenance, repair and servicing; C&G qualifications in electrical equipment maintenance, welding and fabrication; a BTEC national certificate in engineering; and BTEC higher national certificates in engineering, electrical, electronics and computer systems.

16 Teachers use a broad range of teaching methods. Aims and objectives are clearly stated at the start of each lesson. New topics are introduced in a way that makes clear their relevance to the course. Questioning of students is effective in generating group discussion and in helping students understand some difficult concepts. The interactive style of teaching is particularly well suited to adults, who are encouraged to contribute from their own experiences. Students are provided with detailed learning materials. The self-assessment report draws attention to a number of strengths in the teaching of engineering and the inspection confirmed most of them. However, a few teachers lack confidence in using group work. Some spend too much time talking to the class and do not give students enough time to complete the task set. In some lessons opportunities to test students' understanding of the subject were missed.

17 Teachers pay due attention to health and safety issues. Full-time and part-time teachers hold appropriate professional qualifications, although some teachers' industrial experience is not up to date. Significant progress has been made in improving classroom accommodation to provide a more stimulating working environment. However, some workshop accommodation is unsatisfactory. Specialist equipment is generally of a good standard and well maintained, although some is ageing. The computer-aided design facility is well equipped with modern computers.

18 Courses are well managed. There are well-planned, regular team meetings. Teachers

Curriculum Areas

and course leaders keep thorough records of students' progress. Teachers inform students regularly of their progress and provide detailed guidance on how they can improve their work. The quality of students' work is generally good. Pass rates have improved over the last three years on the GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses, NVQ level 1, the national certificate and the higher national certificate. In 1997, most pass rates were at or above the average for general further education colleges. However, retention rates on some courses have been below average. For example, in 1996 the overall retention rate on the college's intermediate level courses was 62 per cent compared with the national rate of 78 per cent. Efforts to improve retention have included the introduction of a foundation level motor vehicle course and the development of learning materials to help students with learning difficulties. Although the self-assessment acknowledges that retention should be improved, inspectors considered that it does not deal in sufficient detail with students' achievements.

Examples of students' achievements in engineering, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced vocational	Retention (%)	68	51	63
	Pass rate (%)	41	47	51
Intermediate vocational	Retention (%)	*	62	65
	Pass rate (%)	*	44	60
Higher national certificate	Retention (%)	72	65	68
	Pass rate (%)	51	51	63

Source: college data

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 3

19 Thirty-three lessons on courses at intermediate, advanced and higher levels in business for full-time and part-time students were inspected including provision at off-site centres. Inspectors concluded that some weaknesses were overstated or overlooked.

Key strengths

- a broad range of business-related courses
- some effective teaching, particularly in simulated work environments
- good use made of students' own work experience

Weaknesses

- poor co-ordination between curriculum divisions
- some poor punctuality and retention rates
- over-reliance on formal lectures on some courses
- declining pass rates on the GNVQ advanced business course

20 The college offers an extensive range of full-time and part-time business courses from foundation level to higher education. They attract students of all ages and aspirations ranging from professionals who wish to update their high level skills to adults who have not participated in education for many years. Professional courses are provided for the employees of several large businesses through outward collaborative provision.

21 Seven curriculum divisions are involved in the delivery of the college's business courses. Many are effectively planned and managed. Comprehensive course files are maintained. Communications within divisional teams are

generally good. However, weaknesses arise as a result of the poor co-ordination of some administrative arrangements, failure to give students consistent advice and variation in the quality of course documentation. There are also some instances of failure to act over poor levels of student attendance and punctuality. Staff from the divisions worked together to produce the self-assessment report which acknowledges that the weaker aspects of business provision tend to be linked to weaknesses in co-ordination across the divisions.

22 Inspectors observed some well-planned, lively lessons conducted with sparkle and flair: for example, in a GNVQ class on consumer law, the enthusiasm and energy of the teacher ensured that the boisterous group were all actively engaged and learning. Practical sessions in realistic simulated work environments were particularly effective. In several lessons on professional management, personnel and accounting courses, teachers drew on the work experience and expertise of students, to the benefit of the rest of the class. However, inspectors also identified some weaknesses in the teaching which were not reflected in the self-assessment report. Some teachers relied too heavily on formal lectures. Insufficient use was made of prepared learning materials. Questions to students were not always well directed and the more knowledgeable students were allowed to dominate the responses.

23 Most of the specialist business accommodation is of a high standard and provides opportunities for students to work in a realistic business and commercial environment. A few rooms are unsuitable for their purpose; some are too large or too small for the student groups which use them. Most courses are well resourced, but a minority have inadequate resources, and a few students do not have sufficient access to IT. Most full-time teachers have academic, professional and teaching qualifications and many are trained assessors

Curriculum Areas

and verifiers. Part-time teachers who lack teaching expertise are encouraged to undertake teacher training. The college's self-assessment report provides a realistic evaluation of the quality of resources and accommodation for business courses.

24 In accounting, pass rates are good on NVQ, GCSE and GCE A level courses, although retention rates on the latter are low. Retention is also low on the GNVQ advanced business course, and the pass rate for this course has declined from 99 per cent in 1995 to below the national average rate in 1997. Retention and pass rates are generally good on the GNVQ intermediate and higher national certificate courses. In 1997, students' achievements on the national diploma in public services were poor: the pass rate was 58 per cent and the retention rate was only 43 per cent. As a result, only a quarter of the students who originally enrolled, successfully completed the course.

Examples of students' achievements in business, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GNVQ advanced	Retention (%)	64	53	57
	Pass rate (%)	99	53	49
GNVQ intermediate	Retention (%)	76	74	67
	Pass rate (%)	100	71	92
Higher national certificate	Retention (%)	62	66	72
	Pass rate (%)	79	78	81
GCE A level accounting (students aged 16 to 18)	Retention (%)	62	49	61
	Pass rate (%)	75	59	59

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Hospitality and Catering, Leisure and Tourism

Grade 2

25 Inspectors observed 25 lessons in hospitality, catering, leisure and tourism. Although inspectors broadly agreed with the college's judgement they concluded that the college's self-assessment report failed to identify a number of significant strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- much good teaching and learning
- key skills effectively developed on most courses
- well-planned lessons in leisure and tourism
- clear links between students' main area of study and NVQ and GNVQ units
- mostly good pass rates
- effectively managed courses

Weaknesses

- lack of industrial relevance of some aspects of the curriculum
- poor pass rates for a minority of courses
- inadequate schemes of work in hospitality and catering
- lack of up-to-date trade knowledge of some staff

26 The college offers a variety of courses in hospitality and catering, including full-time professional chef awards, intermediate and advanced level GNVQs, part-time and full-time NVQs at levels 1, 2 and 3 in food preparation, part-time C&G certificates, a higher national certificate and various professional qualifications. Leisure and tourism courses include full-time certificates in sport and recreation studies, intermediate and advanced

level GNVQs, and part-time courses in travel agency and sports and recreational management.

27 Inspectors agreed with the college that most courses are well managed. Lines of communication are clear and understood by staff. There are regular staff meetings. Most course meetings are thoroughly minuted. In leisure and tourism, lessons are well organised. In hospitality and catering this is not always the case. Part of the curriculum for food preparation no longer reflects current trade practice. There is much effective teaching and learning. Teachers involve students in a range of appropriate activities and give attention to the needs and progress of individual students. Students' key skills are developed and recorded effectively on most courses. Students are taught how to work in teams; for example, a group of advanced level GNVQ hospitality and catering students successfully managed the work of a public house for a week. There is a well-organised programme of work experience and overseas visits for students in leisure and tourism. In some lessons, a few students were poorly behaved. Sometimes teachers did not correct mistakes in students' punctuation and spelling.

28 Most of the accommodation for hospitality and catering is adequate. However, the restaurant has no modern billing system and, as recognised in the self-assessment report, there is insufficient space for the storage of food service equipment. Some rooms are in a poor state of repair. Courses are generally well supported with appropriate, industrial standard equipment, but some small items of equipment are in poor condition and short supply. Most staff hold qualifications and have experience in the areas they teach, but some of the experience is out of date. Many are qualified assessors.

29 Pass rates are good on most courses. They are outstanding for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on the NVQ level 1 course in food preparation and cooking, and for

Curriculum Areas

students on the intermediate GNVQ leisure and tourism. Retention rates are below the national average in general further education colleges on the national diploma in hotel, catering and institutional operations and the advanced GNVQ in leisure and tourism. Inspectors concluded that the self-assessment report pays insufficient attention to retention and pass rates.

Examples of students' achievements in hospitality and catering, leisure and tourism, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
Advanced GNVQ leisure and tourism	Retention (%)	*	71	48
	Pass rate (%)	*	69	76
Intermediate GNVQ leisure and tourism	Retention (%)	76	74	90
	Pass rate (%)	91	88	100
NVQ level 2 food preparation and cooking	Retention (%)	80	63	80
	Pass rate (%)	100	87	67
NVQ level 1 food preparation and cooking	Retention (%)	80	75	75
	Pass rate (%)	100	100	97

Source: college data

*data not available

Curriculum Areas

Art, Design, Media and the Performing Arts

Grade 2

30 Nineteen lessons were observed on art, design, media and performing arts courses. Inspectors mostly agreed with the college's assessment of key strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- well-planned courses and lessons
- good variety of teaching and learning strategies
- challenging and interesting assignments
- well-executed and experimental students' work
- good pass rates for students who complete their course of study
- good progression rates

Weaknesses

- some poor classroom management
- weak links between subject areas
- some poor retention rates
- inconsistent assessment methods

31 Full-time general art and design courses include intermediate and advanced GNVQs, and the national diploma in foundation studies. There is a diploma in communication design, and students can progress within the college to higher diplomas or a degree in design. The college also offers a foundation dance course. Part-time courses include GCE A levels in art, media studies and performing arts; GCSEs in drama and theatre arts, media, and art and design; C&G photography, fashion and interior decoration. There are access programmes for both full-time and part-time students.

32 Most lessons are well prepared. Teachers are adept at encouraging and motivating students, many of whom work effectively on

their own and in groups. Teachers devise classroom activities which encourage students to develop practical skills, step by step. Most assignments are creative, well written and relevant to the curriculum. Students are allowed to experiment, but they also received careful direction. Weaknesses in teaching identified by inspectors, but not reflected in the self-assessment report, included some poorly managed lessons and some instances when the criteria for marking work were not made clear to students. Subject areas have tended to work separately from each other. This has hindered the spread of good practice and the development of cross-subject teaching projects.

33 Teaching staff are generally well qualified for the courses they teach. Many have relevant industrial experience. Inspectors agreed with the college that there are some very good resources. High-quality specialist accommodation for dance is provided off-site by the Swindon Dance Agency. Some of the other accommodation is less suitable for its purpose. Some teaching rooms are inappropriate in terms of size and layout. At the Euclid Road site, there is sufficient up-to-date specialist equipment in most curriculum areas. The majority of studios are equipped with suitable furniture.

34 Inspectors observed much good practical work. Many students demonstrate a thorough knowledge and understanding of their subjects which they are able to apply in a variety of contexts. Students on the foundation dance course achieve work of a high quality for the level of programme. Most, but not all, students on art and design courses demonstrate good standards of work in portfolios.

35 The self-assessment report claims that students' achievements in this programme area constitute a strength. In general inspectors agreed with this judgement. Pass rates on the national diploma in foundation art and design studies courses have been consistently high over the last three years. Access students have achieved a 100 per cent pass rate for the last

Curriculum Areas

two years. However, retention on GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses in art and design and on GCE A level performing arts have sometimes been low; for example, in 1997, only 58 per cent of GCE A level performing arts students and 56 per cent of GNVQ intermediate students completed their course of study. The majority of art and design students who apply to higher education are accepted by the institution of their choice.

Examples of students' achievements in art, design, media and the performing arts, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GNVQ advanced art and design	Retention (%)	58	57	67
	Pass rate (%)	87	100	96
GNVQ intermediate art and design	Retention (%)	75	71	56
	Pass rate (%)	89	83	60
Foundation studies course art and design	Retention (%)	96	87	92
	Pass rate (%)	94	95	100
Access to higher education (art and design)	Retention (%)	96	82	92
	Pass rate (%)	91	100	100

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities and Basic Education

Grade 3

36 The inspection covered the college's provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, adult basic education and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Inspectors observed 24 lessons. The college self-assessment report identified a number of key strengths, but some weaknesses were understated or omitted, in particular those relating to students' achievements.

Key strengths

- the supportive learning environment
- courses that cater for a diverse range of students
- individual learning programmes for most students
- good provision for students with severe, profound and multiple disabilities
- good students' achievements in communication skills
- effective deployment of support staff

Weaknesses

- lack of an overall curriculum framework
- underachievement of some students
- some ineffective teaching
- inconsistent assessment practice
- inadequate analysis of data on students' achievements
- limited opportunities for vocational study

37 The college's basic education provision includes ESOL and courses designed specifically for students with learning difficulties and/or

disabilities. Programmes are delivered at three of the college's main sites, and also in local schools, community centres and residential centres. Students include young people with challenging behaviour in semi-secure accommodation, families who wish to learn literacy together and women who wish to improve their spoken English skills in the home. Inspectors agreed with the college that extensive support arrangements, including individual tutorials, assist students on their programmes of learning. Careful attention is paid to building students' confidence. Most students have individual programmes of learning. However, the process used to establish, prioritise and plan these programmes is not always rigorous. This sometimes results in a mismatch between students' skills and aspirations and their learning programmes.

38 Some lessons were carefully planned, included an appropriate variety of activities which sustained students' interest, and were taught in ways which encouraged students to learn. Educational activities for students with severe and multiple disabilities were particularly well planned and taught. Other lessons lacked an adequate structure and were based on activities which were of little relevance to students. Most teachers provided too few opportunities for students to learn on their own or to contribute their ideas in small groups. In many classes, learning aids and learning resources were not used in situations where they would have been helpful. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

39 The staff are well qualified. Most have a background in education and appropriate specialist knowledge. Support and voluntary workers are used effectively in the classroom to help students. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are given insufficient access to computers.

40 Inspectors did not agree with all the judgements in the college's self-assessment

Curriculum Areas

report relating to students' achievements. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities gain confidence in social skills and skills for everyday life. Students in basic education workshops spoke positively about the value of the courses and were able to work competently and confidently. Good progress is being made by students in the development of communication skills. Vocational work is carried out in the college's specialist accommodation, for example, in catering. However, some students are following courses which are inappropriate for their ability or level of study skills. Records of students' achievements are maintained, but their progress is not assessed on a consistent basis.

41 The college offers a range of courses accredited by appropriate validating and awarding bodies, but the levels of achievements on some courses are low and do not match the college's view of students' ability. The college has not yet developed an overall curriculum framework which includes all aspects of learning. Some students are set individual goals which they cannot achieve. There are too few opportunities for students to make choices within the vocational curriculum, as the range of vocational activities is narrow. Some students move from one course to another without making progress. The college failed to identify, in its self-assessment report, weaknesses in the way students' achievements and progression are analysed and used to support further development.

Cross-college Provision

Support for Students

Grade 3

42 Inspectors generally agreed with the college's self-assessment report. However, weaknesses in the quality and consistency of tutorial practice were understated.

Key strengths

- efficient recruitment and entry guidance procedures
- effective learning support for some students
- readily accessible and responsive counselling and welfare services
- effective careers guidance
- equal opportunities actively promoted

Weaknesses

- inconsistent quality of tutorial support
- variable quality of students' induction
- poor tutorial support for some part-time students
- learning support needs of some students not assessed

43 There are appropriate policies and procedures for the recruitment of students and the guidance they receive on entry to the college. Enquiries from potential students are dealt with effectively. The enrolment process is well managed. Most students who were interviewed felt that they had been well informed about courses and had received impartial advice. Liaison between school and college staff helps school-leavers to progress to appropriate college courses. Adult students are offered appropriate information and guidance on returning to study and are helped to devise appropriate programmes of learning.

44 All full-time students undertake an induction programme. The introductory sessions often include presentations from

specialist support staff. Most full-time students receive a students' handbook which gives a wide range of useful information. A pack containing guidance and suggestions is issued to induction tutors to encourage them to cover all the required elements of the induction programme. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation across divisions in what is delivered during the induction programme, and the quality of delivery. Part-time students, in particular, are sometimes not well served by the induction programme. The college acknowledges, in its self-assessment report, the need to improve the induction process.

45 Students on full-time courses are tested on entry to the college in order to assess their basic skills in mathematics and communications. In 1997-98, approximately 50 per cent of the full-time students who were tested were found to need extra help. Part-time students are not tested but may request learning support or be referred for it by a tutor. Learning support assistants are employed to work with individual students in the classroom or with groups of students, an approach which is well received by students and teachers. The college provides 'academic support', which is often integrated with the main programme, or 'specific support' for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that for those students who receive it, the range and provision of learning support is good.

46 All full-time students have a personal tutor who reviews their progress three times a year and provides personal support as required. On many courses, tutorial time is identified on student and staff timetables; on others, tutorial support is integrated within the teaching programme. However, there is considerable variation in the quality of tutorial work. While most students praised the support they received from their tutors, some considered that the time spent in tutorials was not always well used and others reported that they were not receiving the

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number of tutorial sessions to which they were entitled. The number and quality of tutorials for part-time students is also patchy. Staff who teach part-time students are expected to offer some form of tutorial support, but this varies substantially from course to course. The current position is being monitored by the college. In its self-assessment report the college recognises the need to improve the consistency and quality of its tutorial provision.

47 Student advisers provide advice on a wide range of practical matters, such as benefits and accommodation, and on personal and domestic issues. A personal counselling service is also available and, if necessary, students are referred to external agencies which can offer more specialised support. The students' union represents students' interests and organises recreational events. The college has a comprehensive careers education programme. There are widely-advertised general careers education sessions and regular presentations on specific careers. The college's students' services provision and procedures conform to the college's equal opportunities policy. All heads of divisions are committed to equal opportunities practice in their dealings with students. Inspection confirmed the college's assessment that it is working to address weaknesses in some aspects of support for students.

General Resources

Grade 3

48 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements on cross-college resources included in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- high-quality restaurant and cafeteria at Regent Circus
- extensive wheelchair access
- the town centre computing provision

- successful pilot of new accommodation management system

Weaknesses

- some buildings in need of extensive maintenance work
- low room utilisation rates
- unattractive and unwelcoming North Star site
- some congested circulation spaces and poor signposting
- no sporting and leisure facilities on site

49 The self-assessment report provides a realistic assessment of the college's accommodation. The college estate presents considerable management and maintenance problems. Regent Circus requires extensive maintenance work. The North Star site is unattractive in appearance. The college has no on-site sporting or recreational facilities. There are a few poor-quality teaching rooms, most of which are in huts scheduled for replacement. Nevertheless, most areas of the college are kept clean and in good decorative order.

50 At the time of the inspection, the first phase of the considerable changes proposed in the accommodation strategy was nearing completion. Low room utilisation, which was identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report, is being addressed through the consolidation of provision at North Star and Regent Circus. A new timetabling and accommodation management system has been piloted to good effect at the Ferndale site.

51 The Regent Circus site is being improved: part of the drab frontage is being landscaped; one of the main entrances has been remodelled; the cafeteria has been refurbished and now provides an attractive environment and a high-quality service offering good value for money. The North Star cafeteria provides a more basic level of service. Ferndale Road and

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Euclid Road have only automatic food dispensing services. Most of the college's sites do not have common rooms; students use the refectories and the coffee bar.

52 Some circulation areas on both main sites present difficulties. The entrance to North Star lacks accurate signage. The customer services desk is not conveniently located. The main thoroughfare in front of the lifts at Regent Circus is congested. Nevertheless, wheelchair users can gain access to most of the college's teaching and resource areas. There is a crèche at Ferndale Road and a nursery at Ferndale Road and at North Star.

53 There are libraries on each of the two main sites. At Regent Circus, the entry and enquiry desk area is often congested and noise levels are sometimes high. The North Star library has few study spaces but is rarely crowded. Both libraries are open in the evenings and on Saturdays during term times. Links between teachers and library staff vary in effectiveness between the divisions. Some curriculum areas have their own collections of books and other learning resources, which are not recorded in the library catalogue. Inspectors concluded that in its self-assessment report, the college overestimates the quality of its library provision.

54 At the time of the inspection a strategy for developing the college's information systems was in draft form but the self-assessment acknowledged the weaknesses in the current arrangements. At North Star, consolidating and networking of computers to improve access for students is progressing well. Times when computers are not allocated to classes are publicised so that students can use them for their own work. At Regent Circus, a substantial number of computers are not networked, which limits their effectiveness. A learning resource centre with 17 computers providing open access for all students has been unavailable since September because of delays in building works. The college is working towards its policy objective of having a multimedia, networked

computer in every staff room providing access to the college's electronic mail system and the internet.

55 In Swindon's main shopping centre the college runs Learning City which is open six days a week. It provides general advice and guidance services and basic computing courses. Attendance can be booked to suit the customer and there is no charge except the awarding body's fee. There is a long waiting list for access to this popular resource.

Quality Assurance

Grade 1

56 The college has a comprehensive and effective system of quality assurance which applies to all college functions. Staff willingly implement it and are committed to its further improvement. There is a well-developed culture of openness to self-criticism and external assessment. The self-assessment report provides a thorough appraisal of quality assurance in the college.

Key strengths

- well-established culture of quality assurance
- strategic quality objectives focusing on teaching and learning
- thorough systems of team review and self-assessment
- comprehensive procedures manual
- effective procedures for internal verification and the approval of new courses
- efficient arrangements to assure the quality of off-site collaborative provision
- staff development successfully linked to strategic objectives
- involvement of all staff in the self-assessment process

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Weaknesses

- lack of self-assessment evidence based on direct observation of teaching
- some erratic application of new team review procedures
- inconsistent handling of complaints

57 There are clear policies and rigorous procedures relating to the quality of teaching and support services. Staff consistently follow college quality assurance procedures. Objectives in the strategic plan have an appropriate focus on the quality of teaching, learning and support for students. Service standards are set, although compliance with some is not monitored.

58 Performance indicators, including a 'quality audit score' which measures compliance with key quality assurance procedures, are used to judge the performance of teaching divisions. These include retention and achievement targets for individual courses. The use of GCSE grades to predict the results of GCE A level students and monitor their performance has recently been introduced. The self-assessment report acknowledges that staff have had difficulties in analysing the achievement data produced by the college's management information system.

59 A thorough annual review and self-assessment by each teaching or support team is the basis of the college's quality assurance system. The college has recently taken steps to improve this process. Teams are now required to review different aspects of their performance at specified times throughout the year. There is a focus on measurement of students' performance against targets and on the direct observation of teaching. The annual review system is well understood and effective. The change to continuous review strengthens the system, but in some areas the rigour previously applied to end-of-year review has not been applied to the first stages of the new system.

60 The college has a comprehensive policies and procedures manual which helps to ensure the consistent application of quality assurance procedures. It includes well-established and effective procedures relating, for example, to internal verification of assignments given to students on vocational courses, the consistency of teachers' assessment of the work and the action required following receipt of external verifiers' reports. In each case responsibilities are clear and the procedures are followed across the college.

61 There are thorough arrangements to assure the quality of off-site collaborative provision. A code of practice for collaborative partners sets out standards for the production of learning materials, the delivery of training and course management. Each year a detailed audit is carried out against stated quality criteria. The audit takes note of the actions proposed by partners to address weaknesses. Audit findings are reported to the vice-principal who ensures appropriate action is taken. The judgements in the self-assessment report relating to collaborative provision are consistent with those arrived at as a result of the inspection.

62 The college charter clearly sets out the college's commitments to students, employers and the local community. Staff are aware of the charter and support it. Students are provided with information on the charter as part of their induction. Most complaints are investigated promptly and result in appropriate action. However, procedures to monitor commitments in the charter are weak. For example, there are inadequate records to assess the overall level of complaints and judge the responsiveness of the college.

63 The staff appraisal scheme applies to all teaching and support staff. The system is effectively monitored by the director of curriculum and staff development. Requests for staff development are identified and assessed in relation to strategic objectives. Staff have confidence in the appraisal system and feel that

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the college effectively meets their development needs. Induction procedures for new staff are also effective. The college achieved the Investor in People standard in 1994 and was reaccredited in 1997.

64 Self-assessment has been part of the quality assurance system for three years, although the report produced for the inspection was the first to draw together all the findings into one report. Team reviews were used to compile the curriculum and cross-college sections of the report. All of the college's staff were involved in the self-assessment process. Judgements on the quality of teaching relied primarily on information from student surveys carried out as part of the team review process.

Governance

Grade 2

65 Governors completed a self-assessment report for the first time for the inspection. They assessed and graded their work under appropriate headings. Inspectors generally agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- good support for senior management
- governors setting a clear vision for the college
- governors' expertise and experience reflecting the local community
- governors' involvement in strategic and financial planning
- use of a wide range of targets and performance indicators
- an appropriate range of effective subcommittees

Weaknesses

- inconsistent monitoring of students' achievements

- finance and general purposes committee sometimes exceeds its remit
- few mechanisms to review students' experiences and views
- some weak policy monitoring

66 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.

67 There are 10 independent governors, the chief executive of Wiltshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), two staff members and the principal. There is no student member. Governors bring a wide and appropriate range of business expertise to their work for the college and are well informed about strategic issues. The college's self-assessment report identifies the board's lack of legal expertise. New governors receive an induction to the board. Further training is offered to established members, but few take advantage of the opportunity. The board is seeking ways to improve its knowledge of students' views and experiences.

68 The governing body manages its business well. There is a code of conduct and a register of governors' interests. Most minutes and board papers are of good quality. The board is adequately supported in its work by the clerk. There is an appropriate range of effective committees to support the board's work. Good use is made of individual governors' expertise. Attendance is generally good. Committee chairmen give regular verbal reports to the corporation and committee minutes are received by all governors. However, the finance and general purposes committee has determined some matters such as the approval of the budget it should recommend for decision by the corporation.

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69 Governors are kept well informed on the financial position of the college. They receive an annual report on the achievements of each of the college's divisions which includes examination results and retention rates. The format of these sections of the report vary from course to course. This does not help governors to make easy comparisons with national or college benchmarks for students' achievements. The self-assessment report acknowledges that governors need more complete information and better analysis of students' destinations.

70 The strategic plan is discussed by governors during its preparation. Inspection findings confirmed the positive role taken by governors in strategic planning. The plan sets clear targets for the college and is well supported by financial data. Governors receive reports from senior managers which show progress made towards the attainment of targets. They are presented with various budgetary projections which they debate and decide on. The finance and general purposes committee receives regular and timely reports regarding the progress of the actual budget against the projections. The self-assessment report suggests that governors need to increase the time they spend monitoring the strategic plan and inspectors agreed with this judgement. Governors intend to make the strategic plan the subject of their next annual planning day.

71 Links between the board and senior managers are considered open and productive by both parties. Governors receive briefings from senior managers on specific topics. Senior managers attend governors' meetings and answer questions about their areas of responsibility. Senior managers are appraised against performance targets set by the governors.

72 Governors receive insufficient information about health and safety issues to enable them to effectively monitor the implementation of the college's policy. They identified the need to improve their overview of health and safety in

the self-assessment report. Although the personnel and employment committee receives reports about equality of opportunity issues that relate to staffing matters, the board does not monitor other aspects of the college's equal opportunity policy.

Management

Grade 2

73 The college identified in its self-assessment report many strengths and weaknesses with which the inspectors agreed. However, some weaknesses were understated.

Key strengths

- effective, open and responsive management
- generally good communication between senior and middle managers
- the consultative strategic planning process
- sound financial management
- strong links with the wider community

Weaknesses

- some unreliable data on students' achievements
- insufficiently firm management of attendance and retention monitoring
- lack of timely data from the management information system
- role of the academic board not clear to all staff

74 Overall, Swindon College is well managed. The executive of the college comprises the acting principal and the directors of finance and resources; curriculum, staffing and learning resources. There is a senior management team which has responsibility for the day-to-day management of the college. Its members include the executive, other college directors

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and, since September 1997, the heads of division. There is a college management group which includes members of the senior management team and the heads of business support. All teams have terms of reference and hold regular meetings which are minuted. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the management structure and lines of responsibility are clear and understood by most staff.

75 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The finance team has an appropriate number of qualified and experienced staff. The college's management accounts are reported monthly to budget holders and to the college executive who review them regularly. The college's management accounts include all the elements recommended by the audit service as good practice. Prudent financial control has resulted in strong college finances. The work of the college's internal auditors complies with audit standards. Financial regulations and procedures are in place. The slow flow of student management information from collaborative partners has delayed submissions of individualised student record data and funding claims to the FEFC.

76 The college has a well-documented and effective strategic planning process which involves all staff. Each college team produces a strategic plan which contributes to the overall college plan. Senior managers work closely with the individual managers to monitor the achievement of their targets. Responsibility for budget management is delegated to team leaders. Most budgets are well managed. Staff and other resources are generally effectively deployed.

77 Communication between staff at all levels is mostly good. There is a shared sense of commitment at senior management level and across the college. Staff value the open management style. They feel that managers are

easily accessible and willing to discuss issues as they arise. A regular newsletter and briefing notes help to ensure effective communication. The membership of committees is structured to optimise communication and promote a whole-college approach to academic development and the delivery of the curriculum. However, team managers are not always effective in passing on to their staff the information which they receive. They do not always keep staff who are unable to attend meetings well informed. The role of academic board is not clear to all staff. The self-assessment report fails to identify some of the weaknesses in communication identified by inspectors.

78 The college collaborates with a wide range of external organisations. The self-assessment report claims that these collaborative links are effective, and inspectors agreed with this judgement. The college works with the Wiltshire TEC, the chamber of commerce and local businesses in planning provision to meet the needs of the locality and TEC targets. Good use is made of market information. Research into various segments of the market is summarised in a useful document which is readily available to all staff. Marketing materials are of a high quality.

79 The college responds effectively to industry's needs for training and consultancy through a substantial range of off-site collaborative provision. College figures show that in 1995-96, 34 per cent of part-time enrolments and in 1996-97, 15 per cent of part-time enrolments, were students enrolled on programmes provided away from the college's main site. The majority of the provision is made within the Swindon area. The remainder is more widespread ranging from Slough in the east to Bristol in the west. The main element of the provision consists of work-based NVQs in business and IT, and assessor training. Most courses are designed to meet the needs of local and national companies. Some courses are highly specific to particular occupations.

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80 The college has a range of policies which are comprehensive, effectively implemented and systematically updated by named managers. The college has a strong commitment to promoting equality of opportunity. Compliance with the equal opportunity policy is a condition of new course approval.

81 The college has achieved or exceeded its growth targets in each of the past three years. At present the college's management information system does not produce reliable data on students' achievements. As a result, many staff maintain their own records. A directorate of information services has recently been established. Several improvements have resulted. For example, updated software has been installed and a network has been established which enables managers to consult the system more easily. A new registration system has been introduced but many classes are not yet entered on the system. Managers speak well of the improvements but there is still much to do. Although the college identified weaknesses relating to management information in its self-assessment report, it overestimated the rigour with which the new registration system is being applied.

Conclusions

82 The college linked its self-assessment report to its strategic and operating plans and to its existing quality assurance procedures. The production of the college's first self-assessment report built upon quality procedures which had involved self-assessment by curriculum and functional divisions for the past three years. The report was useful to inspectors. It reflected the robust and mature nature of the college's quality assurance system. Open and honest judgements were recorded under appropriate headings. Data were collected from existing quality assurance processes. Inspectors agreed with most of the overall judgements made in the report. However, the college overestimated some strengths, particularly in relation to the

quality of teaching and learning. In some curriculum areas, the report did not pay sufficient attention to students' achievements, in part because some of the information available was inadequate. The college had taken some corrective actions following self-assessment, but it was too early to judge whether these had been effective.

83 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	2
16-18 years	8
19-24 years	13
25+ years	75
Not known	2
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	25
Intermediate	20
Advanced	38
Higher education	1
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	16
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	421	3,596	8
Agriculture	0	37	0
Construction	95	250	0
Engineering	230	816	2
Business	436	25,315	52
Hotel and catering	197	703	2
Health and community care	592	8,194	18
Art and design	455	2,828	7
Humanities	297	4,591	10
Basic education	39	434	1
Total	2,762	46,764	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	174	2	0	176
Supporting direct learning contact	30	3	10	43
Other support	151	54	15	220
Total	355	59	25	439

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£14,764,000	£17,989,000	£18,936,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£15.09	£13.09	£15.98
Payroll as a proportion of income	67%	66%	*
Achievement of funding target	102%	136%	*
Diversity of income	29%	26%	*
Operating surplus	-£472,000	£253,000	*

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)

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)

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

*data not available

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	146	177	168
	Average point score per entry	3.8	3.8	4.2
	Position in tables	middle third	middle third	middle third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	192	197	162
	Percentage achieving qualification	75%	77%	83%
	Position in tables	middle third	middle third	top third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	116	118
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	51%	75%
	Position in tables	*	bottom third	top third

Source: DfEE

Note: the majority of the college's students are 19 years of age or older

The achievements of these students are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

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