

Women's Technology and Education Centre

**Inspection of FEFC-funded provision
in external institutions**

June 2000

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE**

1999-00

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 024 76863000
Fax 024 76863100
Website www.fefc.ac.uk*

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circulars 97/12 and 97/22. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and other aspects 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*

In the first two years of the current four-year cycle of inspections, 26 external institutions were inspected. A single grade was awarded for the overall quality of FEFC-funded provision in each institution. The grade profile is shown below.

Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
8%	31%	46%	11%	4%

Source: *Chief inspector's annual reports for 1997-98 and 1998-99. Grades were awarded using guidelines in Council Circular 97/12.*

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Summary

External Institution 16/00 Inspection of FEFC-Funded Provision in External Institutions

Womens's Technology and Education Centre, Liverpool

Inspected June 2000

The Women's Technology and Education Centre is an external institution located near the centre of Liverpool. It aims to encourage and enable women to develop their full potential through the provision of high-quality learning opportunities and facilities. Many of the adult women students are recruited from areas of social and economic deprivation. Programmes are offered in information technology (IT), computing, electronics, personal development, key skills and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).

The centre produced its second self-assessment report in preparation for this inspection. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses. Many of the actions taken to address the weaknesses have been recent and it is too early to assess their impact.

FEFC-funded provision was inspected across full-time and part-time programmes in IT, key skills and ESOL. The range of courses offered provides clear progression routes and there are flexible arrangements to enable students to study at times and in ways convenient to themselves. Courses are well matched to students' needs. Teaching is

purposeful and extends students' skills. There are high pass rates for students who complete courses. Students demonstrate professional standards on work placements. Teachers use good-quality resources and there is good technician support. In a few lessons, teaching methods did not take account of the individual needs of learners. Schemes of work are underdeveloped. Students receive strong personal support and effective advice and guidance at all stages. The centre is successful in attracting women who would not normally enter further education. It uses high-quality accommodation that provides a safe learning environment. The staff are highly committed and have a shared understanding of the centre's values and aims. There is a clear organisation structure that promotes effective teamwork. Strong partnerships with other organisations help to raise the educational aspirations of the local community. The centre makes effective use of course reviews and data from surveys of students' views.

Considerable improvements have been made since the last inspection. However, there are still some areas to be addressed. The centre should improve arrangements for the diagnosis of individual learning needs and for provision of additional learning support, further develop the use of targets and benchmarks, and improve the collection and use of data relating to students.

The FEFC-funded provision was awarded a grade 1. It is outstanding provision with many strengths and few weaknesses.

Context

The Establishment and its Mission

1 Women's Technology and Education Centre was established in 1983 as a positive action project in Liverpool to provide training for women in new technologies. It moved into Blackburne House, its present location near the city centre, in 1994. It is a voluntary organisation and a charity limited by guarantee. The centre rents accommodation from Blackburne House, which provides a range of other services such as a health and fitness centre, a café, a nursery and conference facilities. There is a common board of directors and members who oversee the work of the centre as well as Blackburne House. The chief executive, the director of finance and administration, the director of learning and the learning development manager make up the senior management team. There is also a commercial manager for Blackburne House. The centre employs 9 teachers, 2 technicians, 10 part-time teachers and 7 other support staff. The centre's aim is "to encourage and enable women to develop their full potential through the provision of high-quality learning opportunities and facilities." It is committed to providing vocational education and training, mainly in the areas of information and communication technologies, to enable those women most at risk of social exclusion to acquire the skills necessary to take them into the labour market. Its courses are aimed at women returners, women with few or no formal qualifications, women from ethnic minority groups and women

who lack self-confidence, lone parents and women with disabilities.

2 The centre's 1998-99 funding allocation from the FEFC was £315,777 for 17,069 units of activity. Its average level of funding was £18.50. This compares to a median level for external institutions of £10.72. The FEFC funding amounts to approximately 40% of the centre's total income. The other main sources of income are Liverpool City Council and the European Social Fund. In 1998-99 there were 741 students, all women. Of these, 88 were full-time and 653 part-time. Many part-time students study several courses, either concurrently or consecutively. Of the 2,169 individual enrolments during 1998-99, 89% were students aged between 20 and 49, 23% were from ethnic minority groups and 2% identified themselves as having a disability.

3 The centre provides one-year courses in computer technology, information systems, the Internet, maintaining IT systems and network management ranging from level 1 to level 3. All courses are accredited and offer a mix of Open College Network (OCN) units, Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) key skills units and City & Guilds qualifications. A foundation programme incorporates English for speakers of other languages with IT skills. In addition, the centre offered 26 different short, part-time courses this year. These include courses in IT and computer skills, in personal development and English for speakers of other languages.

Context

4 Women's Technology and Education was inspected over three days in June 2000 by a team of two inspectors. Meetings were held with board members, managers, teachers and representatives from other local organisations. Inspectors held discussions with students and examined a sample of their work. Relevant documentation was reviewed and the centre's self-assessment report and update were evaluated.

5 The inspection covered courses across the full range of provision including full-time and part-time programmes in IT and computing, key skills and ESOL. Inspectors observed 16 lessons. Of these, 75% were judged to be outstanding or good. This is significantly higher than the national average of 59% for external institutions, reported in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in lessons inspected was 81% and the average class size was 8.8.

The Curriculum

Grade profile of sessions observed

Grade	1	2	3	4	5
Number of lessons	5	7	4	0	0

6 Inspectors agreed with many of the centre's judgements in the self-assessment report but identified additional strengths and weaknesses. The self-assessment report did not comment on the quality of teaching and learning.

Key strengths

- flexible arrangements for a wide range of courses offering clear progression routes
- effective teaching of appropriate skills to students
- high levels of achievement for students completing courses
- students' professional performance on work placements
- good-quality learning resources
- good technician support

Weaknesses

- failure to match teaching methods to the needs of learners in some lessons
- underdeveloped schemes of work

7 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the centre provides a wide range of courses designed to suit the needs of women in the locality. This year the centre ran seven year-long courses over two and a half, four or five days a week and 26 different short courses lasting 5 or 10

weeks. Courses are offered during the day and in the evening, and start every half-term. They are reviewed each year to ensure that they keep up to date with changes in technology and meet current employment needs. For example, several courses were introduced in 1999-2000 focusing on web page design. Appropriate forms of accreditation are chosen. The use of evidence-based assessment methods gives students every opportunity to succeed. All full-time courses include elements of key skills. One introductory level full-time course combines an introduction to IT with ESOL. The coherent range of courses in IT, computing and network and personal computer maintenance provides clear pathways from short introductory courses to full-time courses at the equivalent of national vocational qualification level 3. Short courses in other subject areas and courses which are held in the health and fitness centre provide effective first steps back into education for many women, who then go on to study further courses in IT and computing. Many students take several courses at the centre and it is quite common for most of the places on higher level courses to be taken by women who have already studied other courses. For example, all twelve students starting a level 3 short course on personal computer management had

The Curriculum

previously studied the comparable level 2 programme at the centre. A compact agreement with a local university guarantees places to women who successfully complete full-time courses at level 3.

8 Schemes of work are underdeveloped. Although most individual lessons are well-planned, many schemes of work are simply a list of topics to be tackled week by week or are taken directly from a syllabus. There is insufficient recording of different teaching methods, of the planned use of resources and of how the differing needs of individual students are to be met. In both ESOL and communications there is insufficient linking of the work with students' other studies. This is an issue that the centre has partly recognised and, in the case of communications, has plans to address. On full-time IT courses there is insufficient evidence in schemes of work to show how component parts of the programme link together. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

9 Teaching is purposeful and effective in extending students' skills and knowledge and sustaining their interest. Teachers prepare realistic activities and exercises for practical lessons, which relate well to employment situations. They create a friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere, while maintaining high expectations. For example, in a practical lesson the students were challenged to rectify machine faults before they could proceed with the task

of installing a network card into a computer. They coped well with this extra level of difficulty. Teachers used questioning skilfully to guide learners, to challenge their assumptions and to check their understanding. Learners were often helped to identify and solve their own problems. Their learning was consolidated through activities which involved them, for example, in describing techniques to other students in the group. Teachers make good links between theory and practice. They make learning relevant by careful use of examples and analogies. In an introductory database lesson, students had collected information about supermarket prices of 20 individually chosen branded goods. They discussed the design features for the database in small groups and all information was displayed on flipchart paper so that everyone in the class could refer to it easily. The students went on with confidence to the next task of turning the design into a working database that could be searched and queried. In some lessons, teaching methods were not well matched to the needs of learners. For example, in ESOL courses not enough consideration was given to addressing the different levels of ability and language skills of individual students and particularly the needs of the less confident. In an IT lesson on the use of formulae in spreadsheets, some of the language used was unnecessarily complex. Part of the teacher's explanation mixed up the different uses of brackets, leaving a few students perplexed. Those who finished the activity quickly were left with nothing to do.

The Curriculum

10 Students are highly motivated and work well together, whether as a whole class or in small groups. They are enthusiastic about what they are learning. They contribute keenly to discussions. Their written work is of an appropriate standard. In key skills communications, especially at level 2, students value the skills they have acquired. Some of them demonstrate impressive levels of oral and written fluency. There are examples of professionally produced work in students' portfolios where they had designed web pages to a client's specification. All practical work is carried out with due regard for health and safety. Teachers mark and return work promptly and provide constructive feedback to enable students to improve. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that students' performance on work placements is of a professional standard. Employers praise students' work performance highly, and the skills learned at work make an effective contribution to their learning. Level 3 provision in communication skills was started this year as a component of full-time courses. It has suffered from lack of a clear structure, as the centre now recognises, and some students are finding it difficult to complete their evidence portfolios.

11 There are high levels of achievement for those students who complete courses, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. Achievement rates on full-time courses are good. In 1998-99, all the students passed the Internet and

computer technology course and the foundation course, while the telematics course had a pass rate of 82%.

Overall, the average pass rate for full-time courses was 88% in 1998 and 92% in 1999. Achievement rates for those completing short courses is also very high. The average for all short courses was 98% in 1999. However, fewer students pass on ESOL courses. Of 45 students who completed ESOL courses during 1998-99, only 25 achieved the qualification. The centre could not easily provide data for the achievement of key skills. Data provided for the key skills element of a telematics course in 1998-99 show an achievement rate of approximately 75%.

12 Retention rates have improved significantly for part-time courses since the last inspection. From a low average of 65% in 1995-96 they rose to 80% in 1997-98 and to 85% in 1998-99. This includes a few poor rates in individual courses. For example, retention was 55% in assertiveness skills and 53% in personal computer maintenance during 1998-99.

Retention rates for full-time courses have fallen since the last inspection, when the average was 85%. In 1997-98, the average retention rate was 61% and rose to 73% in 1998-99. The centre estimates that 62 students will complete full-time courses out of 84 who started in 1999-2000, giving a retention rate of 74%. Last year there was poor retention on the computer studies course where only 7 students completed out of 15 who started. The centre recognised this weakness and replaced the course this year.

The Curriculum

13 There are good progression rates from full-time programmes into further training, employment or higher education. Last year all 11 students who completed the advanced electronics course went on to university and 18 out of 22 students completing the foundation programme went on to further training. Over the last four years an average of 51% of students from full-time courses have gone on to higher education and 14% have progressed to employment. The centre does not collate and analyse destination data for part-time courses, although some teachers record such data in registers. Data provided from a sample of four part-time courses run during 1998-99, showed that 30 out of 41 students went on to further training or education. Several former students are now employed by the centre as tutors or technicians.

14 There is good technician support, a strength not mentioned in the self-assessment report. The two technicians work staggered hours to provide cover for all daytime and evening lessons. They run an efficient fault-finding service and set up audio-visual aids for teachers as well as contributing to training for staff in how to use new equipment. There is good technical support in practical laboratory lessons, sometimes with two technicians assisting the teacher to provide rapid response to student's individual needs. The technicians, together with the lead tutor for technical liaison, research solutions to problems and contribute to future planning of IT equipment needs. These actions have rectified a

weakness identified in the previous inspection.

15 Teachers prepare and use good-quality learning materials, which often include content which relates to equal opportunities issues. Teaching rooms are well equipped with whiteboards and flipcharts. There is a good supply of audio-visual aids. In IT lessons, teachers make effective use of large screen display facilities and the Smartboard (an interactive whiteboard connected to a computer). Resources for ESOL and communications include video players and overhead projectors but there was little evidence of their use in the lessons observed. There is little use of IT and too much reliance on photocopied handouts. The IT equipment is good and can use up-to-date software. Students on IT courses each have their own workstation in lessons. Students can use computers outside timetabled lessons by finding spare workstations in other classrooms. Students value the availability of IT facilities during half-terms. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that there is insufficient access to the Internet for learners on IT courses. Students have to share workstations to access the Internet. The centre has identified this deficiency and has researched and costed a plan to rectify the problem for September 2000.

Other Aspects of Provision

16 Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses recognised in the self-assessment report but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- success in attracting women who would not normally enter further education
- effective advice and guidance for learners at all stages
- strong personal support for students
- high-quality accommodation and a safe learning environment
- effective use of course reviews and surveys of students' views
- highly committed staff with a shared understanding of the centre's values and aims
- a clear organisation structure promoting effective teamwork
- strong partnerships with other organisations to raise aspirations in the local community

Weaknesses

- no systematic arrangements for diagnosis of learning needs and provision of additional learning support
- underdeveloped systems for measuring performance against targets and benchmarks

17 The centre is successful in attracting women onto courses in areas of new technology, such as personal computer maintenance and web design, where women are usually under-

represented. Many of the students are from groups who would not usually enrol in further education. In 1998-99, a third of students on foundation and introductory full-time courses had no prior qualifications.

18 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that women at the centre benefit from effective guidance at all stages in their learning. All full-time students have an individual guidance session to discuss course choice prior to applying. Detailed guidelines for tutors help to ensure the consistency and impartiality of that advice. Part-time students value the advice and guidance available for them during enrolment days. Careers and employment information is available in the library and links with the local careers service enable students to gain more detailed careers guidance. Individual guidance sessions with mature student advisers from the local university are arranged for women seeking to apply to higher education.

19 Students receive a high level of personal and practical support that often enables them to consider enrolling on a course or to stay on a course at the centre. All women on full-time courses receive free tuition, free child-care and a training allowance. The on-site nursery has 30 places, about a third of which are used by staff and students at the centre. Other students receive help to arrange child-care in local nurseries or after-school clubs. A free counselling service is available to students and staff. All full-time students have a

Other Aspects of Provision

support tutor. Regular individual sessions provide opportunities for them to discuss personal issues as well as the progress they are making on their course. Students praised highly the extent and quality of support they received from their tutors.

20 There are no systematic arrangements for diagnosing individual student's learning needs and for providing additional learning support, a weakness that was also identified in the previous inspection. Students applying for full-time courses take a short skills test to help to decide the appropriate level of course for them, but there is no diagnosis of individual basic skills or key skills starting points. There is no system for identifying and providing support for students with learning difficulties. For example, there are no arrangements to provide dyslexia support. There are no individual learning plans for students requiring ESOL support. Some basic skills support is provided through key skills sessions in communications and numeracy but it is not systematically matched to individual needs. Individual students with disabilities have been well supported. For example, specialised software was bought to help a student with visual impairment.

21 Inspectors agreed that the centre uses high-quality accommodation, providing a safe learning environment. Blackburne House is a grade two listed building which has been renovated to a very high standard and provides accommodation well suited for the

courses offered. Health and safety issues are closely monitored and effectively co-ordinated. This contributes to the safe environment which the women learners value. All rooms are accessible to wheelchair users or those with restricted mobility. The self-assessment report recognises that the two laboratories with fixed benching are not large enough to allow easy movement for wheelchairs. The centre uses five IT rooms, two electronics laboratories and two general classrooms as well as two student common rooms and staff areas. All the teaching areas are clean, well decorated and well furnished. Women appreciate the facilities in the two student common rooms. There are good facilities for staff. Teachers all have storage space and access to computers, and a dedicated desk is available in one of the staff rooms for part-time staff to use when working in the centre. Students make good use of other services in Blackburne House such as the café and the Health Place. However, the library and study area were underused during the time of the inspection.

22 There is a strong commitment to providing courses of good quality, accompanied by effective procedures for quality assurance. Course reviews are undertaken each year and an overall summary report is produced for the board. The course reviews include statistical data on recruitment, retention and achievement. They do not contain an analysis of three-year trends in performance, although comparisons are sometimes made with the previous year's performance.

Other Aspects of Provision

There are regular questionnaires to obtain students' views on enrolment and induction and on the quality of their courses. Employers provide useful reports on students' performance on work placements. Good use is made of information from the surveys and reports to bring about improvements and assist in planning future courses.

23 There are plentiful opportunities for staff development, including training provided in-house, external courses and opportunities for staff to obtain additional qualifications up to, and including, degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Staff can join courses at the centre free of charge, if places are available. Some staff have recently undertaken professional updating through 'shadowing' arrangements and there are plans to extend this. As the centre acknowledged in its self-assessment report, there is a need to draw these arrangements into a more coherent approach to planning and monitoring of staff development. There is no overall staff development plan linked to the centre's strategic aims and objectives. The appraisal of staff, other than newly appointed 'probationers' had not taken place since the last inspection. Appraisal has recently been reinstated and most staff have now been appraised.

24 As the self-assessment report states, governors have a wide range of relevant skills and experience. They are well-informed about educational issues and committed to the ethos and values of the centre. They have

established an appropriate range of committees, with clear terms of reference. A quality assurance committee has been established to take responsibility for the overseeing of the educational performance of the centre, as well as leading governors' work on self-assessment and preparation for inspection. Governors have used their own self-assessment process to identify areas for improvement and have taken appropriate action. The self-assessment report did not identify the poor overall attendance of governors. While there are usually legitimate reasons for absence, this means that a small core of governors carries most of the workload and responsibility.

25 The aims and values of the centre are clear and shared by all staff. The commitment to providing second chances for women, to equality of opportunity and to raising the aspirations and achievements of the local community is central to its activities. There is a concern to introduce new ideas, where appropriate, and to increase achievement. There are measures in place to assess the centre's achievements, but they have not yet been developed into a coherent system. For example, targets for retention and achievement have only been established this year. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the new organisational structure introduced in 1999 has provided greater clarity about roles and responsibilities. It has promoted effective teamwork and improved internal communications.

Other Aspects of Provision

The senior management team is energetic, and provides inspiring leadership. Four 'lead tutors' have responsibility for particular aspects, such as student guidance and links with awarding bodies. This structure works well. Staff are clear about who has responsibility for what and know where to go for help. Regular meetings and briefings help all staff to be well-informed about key matters.

26 The centre has experienced problems with its student record software and has had difficulty in making returns to the FEFC. These problems are being addressed but it was not possible to obtain accurate figures on the number of students on short courses in the current year. There is no system for ensuring that current figures on enrolments and withdrawals are accurate and reconciled on data held on course registers and that held centrally. On part-time courses there are inconsistencies in the way teachers complete registers. Although individual lesson attendance is recorded accurately, a few teachers are unsure how to record students who have not attended for several weeks, have left the course or have only attended once. As a result, it is not always clear how many students are currently on the register. These weaknesses are not identified in the self-assessment report.

27 There have been some significant improvements since the last inspection. Weaknesses in the management of part-time courses have been addressed. Almost all courses are

now well managed. There are regular meetings for part-time teachers and those who cannot attend meetings receive good briefing information. Standardised procedures for course administration are now in place but not yet in a form readily accessible to all staff. Publicity has also improved. Promotional materials and course leaflets are of good quality. Progress in some areas has been slower, as the self-assessment report acknowledges. For example, a systematic cycle for strategic planning and quality assurance has only recently been agreed.

28 There are strong and productive partnerships with a wide range of organisations dedicated to raising aspirations and achievements in the community. They range from successful taster courses for schools to encourage girls into technology, to arrangements with universities to enable students to progress to higher education. There are beneficial links with employers, who provide work placements for students and, in some cases, significant resources for the centre. The centre has close links with the City Council, the TEC, the City of Liverpool Community College and with voluntary organisations, such as a centre that supports people with disabilities. Senior managers serve on numerous committees, at local, regional and national level.

Conclusions

29 Women's Technology and Education Centre prepared a clearly written and evaluative self-assessment report for this inspection. This was the first self-assessment report they had produced since the last inspection. The self-assessment process involved all staff at the centre. Governors contributed to the report and validated its findings. Although a system of formal lesson observations is now in place, it was begun after the compilation of the self-assessment report. An update on the action plan was provided for the inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made in the report. However, they identified additional strengths and weaknesses. Many of the actions taken to address weaknesses have been taken recently and it is too early to measure their impact. The FEFC-funded provision at the centre is outstanding with many strengths and few weaknesses. It was awarded a grade 1.