

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

An Evaluation of the Work of the Inspectorate 1997-98

October 1999

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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

	<i>Grade</i>				
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Curriculum areas</i>	9	60	29	2	–
<i>Cross-college provision</i>	18	54	24	4	–

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

Summary

In the college year 1997-98, the inspectorate achieved its targets by inspecting: 108 sector colleges; Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funded provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in 15 independent colleges; and further education provision in 12 external institutions and two higher education institutions. Inspectors also conducted two national surveys, and worked with the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) to evaluate developments in key skills and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programmes. There was a reinspection of 25 curriculum areas in 21 colleges where provision had previously been judged unsatisfactory. The inspectorate implemented a revised inspection framework in September 1997. It reviewed and reduced the register of part-time inspectors. Inspectors provided briefing events for college staff, and full-time and part-time inspectors. They also contributed to the development of policies and initiatives in areas such as college accreditation, benchmarking and inclusive learning.

Colleges continued to comment favourably on their experience of inspection. Their evaluations confirmed that they generally found inspectors' judgements fair. A number of the issues raised by colleges were associated with the newness of the revised inspection procedures. Some were addressed through the development and publication of the *Inspection Handbook*. Matters of consistency will be dealt with during training events for full-time and part-time inspectors. The percentage of inspection grades subject to appeal rose slightly in 1997-98, to 3.5%. Less than 1% of grades were modified as a result of appeals. Largely as a result of the introduction of the revised framework for inspection, the inspectorate did not achieve its publication target for 1997-98. A fundamental review of publication procedures was initiated during the summer of 1998.

During 1998-99, the inspectorate will: complete the work programme agreed by the quality assessment committee (QAC); meet its college inspection report publication target; continue to provide training programmes for full-time inspectors and part-time registered inspectors; train principals and vice-principals as part-time registered inspectors and continue to provide training for college nominees; provide support for colleges through the work of college inspectors; and contribute to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives that will help colleges to improve the quality of their work.

CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Introduction	1
Background	2
The Inspection Programme	6
College Responses to Inspection	14
Appeals Against Inspection Grades	22
Publication of Inspection Reports	30
Follow-up to Inspections	35
Other Developments During the Year	37
Conclusions	39
Annexes	
A: Terms of reference	
B: The inspectorate	
C: Report on colleges' evaluations of inspection	

Introduction

1 The inspection arrangements of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) have been in operation since September 1993. The main purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the inspectorate's performance during the college year 1997-98. The report primarily focuses on the inspection of colleges in the further education sector and covers:

- the inspection programme
- college responses to inspection
- appeals against inspection grades
- publication of inspection reports
- follow-up to inspections
- other developments during the year
- conclusions, including the inspectorate's aims for 1998-99.

Background

2 The *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* requires that the FEFC shall:

- a. 'secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions within the further education sector; and
- b. establish a committee, to be known as the 'quality assessment committee', with the function of giving advice on the discharge of their duty under paragraph (a) above and such other functions as may be conferred on the committee by the Council'.

3 In order to meet its responsibilities for quality assessment, the FEFC established the inspectorate. The terms of reference of the inspectorate and the quality assessment committee (QAC) are at annex A and further details about the inspectorate are included in annex B.

4 The purpose of inspection is to provide information and judgements that will enable the FEFC to fulfil its duties. Inspection also aims to promote continuous improvements in standards and in the quality of learning provided in further education. Inspectors focus on the quality of students' learning experience and the efficacy of the systems which support the delivery of that experience. All the work inspected is assessed in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. Judgements about quality are summarised using grades which are awarded to each curriculum area inspected and to each cross-college area. Grades are awarded on a five-point scale, with grade 1 signifying provision which is outstanding and grade 5 signifying provision that is poor.

5 The QAC agrees the inspectorate's work programme and receives all inspection reports, including the chief inspector's annual report. Each year, the FEFC submits a report to the secretary of state on quality and standards in further education. This is based on an annual report from the QAC.

The Inspection Programme

6 The inspectorate's programme of work for 1997-98 included inspections of:

- 108 colleges in the further education sector
- 15 independent establishments making provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- 12 external institutions
- further education provision in two higher education institutions
- 25 curriculum areas in 21 colleges where provision was previously judged to be unsatisfactory.

7 From September 1997, college inspections were carried out according to a revised inspection framework set out in Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. This builds on those features of the framework used between 1993 and 1997 which were considered by colleges to be the most helpful in accounting for and improving quality. The revised framework:

- places more emphasis on college self-assessment
- has a clearer focus on the curriculum, teaching and learning, and students' achievements
- provides for separate assessments of college governance and management
- promotes closer links between inspection and the work of auditors
- provides revised grade descriptors.

8 To help prepare colleges for the introduction of the revised inspection framework, the FEFC published Circular 97/13, *Self-assessment and Inspection*. Prior to its inspection, each college was asked to prepare a self-assessment report. Colleges were asked to assess and grade their provision using *Validating Self-assessment* as guidance. The scope of subsequent curriculum area inspections was determined on the basis of college self-assessments and the need to inspect a representative sample of work. When planning their inspections, inspectors took into account other indicators of college performance held by the FEFC. Prior to its inspection, each college was visited to check the validity of its data on student retention and achievement.

9 On average, inspectors spent 40 working days, and auditors 4.5 days, inspecting each of the further education colleges included in the 1997-98 programme. This fulfilled a commitment on the part of the inspectorate to reduce the average number of days spent inspecting each college. Each inspection team comprised full-time and registered part-time inspectors, and a member of the FEFC's internal audit service. Each team also included a representative from the senior staff from the college being inspected. This college nominee was able to observe all aspects of the inspection and bring factual information to the attention of the inspectors.

10 Inspectors observed and graded 8,810 lessons, involving 91,910 students, and scrutinised over 20,800 examples of students' work. They awarded 567 grades to curriculum areas. In addition, 540 grades were awarded for the five aspects of cross-college provision covered by the inspection framework: support for students; general resources; quality assurance; governance; and management.

11 In 1997-98, college inspection reports were written to a new format, with an increased emphasis on the curriculum and teaching and learning. Within the new format inspectors:

- list the key strengths and weaknesses of each curriculum area and cross-college area
- include tables showing the figures for student retention and achievement for each curriculum area
- assess the match between the college's judgements, arrived at through self-assessment, and those of the inspection team.

12 The inspection programme also included regular visits to each college by a designated college inspector in order to build up an in-depth knowledge of each college's work and its local context. College inspector visits are also used to monitor the college's self-assessment process. After inspection, the college inspector monitors the college's implementation of its post-inspection action plan.

13 During 1997-98, the inspectorate carried out national surveys of mathematics and numeracy, and professional development for teachers. It worked with the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) to evaluate developments in key skills and revised general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programmes currently in their pilot phase. Individual inspectors made contributions to conferences and a wide range of other external events.

College Responses to Inspection

14 All colleges are asked, but not obliged, to evaluate their inspection and to return their assessment to the FEFC. Evaluations provide an opportunity for colleges to grade and comment on aspects of their inspection. Colleges' evaluations are considered by regional inspection teams and copied to the chief inspector's office for analysis. They help the inspectorate assess what may need to be done to improve the quality and consistency of its work.

15 Revised evaluation forms were issued in 1997-98 enabling colleges to undertake a two-stage evaluation:

- on completion of their inspection
- after receiving the inspection report and considering subsequent actions.

16 Each year, an analysis of colleges' evaluations is presented to the QAC for their comment. For 1997-98, the inspectorate engaged an independent consultant to prepare an evaluation report. The consultant's report is at annex C.

17 Seventy-eight colleges, representing 72% of those inspected, completed evaluation forms following their inspection in 1997-98. They were invited to assess 13 aspects of inspection by assigning grades to each of them on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being outstanding and 5 being poor). Colleges awarded a total of 1,007 grades for their inspections, of which 87% indicated that colleges found the graded aspect of inspection satisfactory or better. Analysis of college evaluations confirmed that there was no significant relationship between grades awarded by inspectors during an inspection and subsequent grades awarded when the college evaluated the inspection. There were no significant regional variations in grades awarded by colleges, and no significant differences in grades awarded by different types of college.

18 Colleges approved most strongly:

- the quality of links with the inspectorate
- the management of inspections
- the value of meetings between members of the inspection team and college staff and other representatives
- the effectiveness of communication between the inspectorate and the college during the inspection week
- the value of having a college nominee
- the professionalism of the inspectorate team
- the quality of feedback on inspection findings.

19 Colleges had the most concerns about:

- the extent of inspectorate involvement in preparation for producing the self-assessment report (SAR)
- the length of notice for receipt of the SAR at the FEFC
- the length of notice for receipt of student achievement data at the FEFC
- the clarity of guidance given about inspections
- the appropriateness of the scope and scale of inspections.

20 The QAC noted that the majority of evaluations supplied by colleges in 1997-98 were positive. The committee was satisfied that issues raised by colleges had been, or were being, addressed by the inspectorate. It was noted that some issues, such as those concerning the length of notice for receipt of the SAR and student achievement data, related to the newness of the revised inspection framework.

Action Record

To address issues raised by colleges, the FEFC has:

- ***Published an Inspection Handbook covering:***
 - *preparation for the inspection*
 - *the role of the college nominee*
 - *information about the organisation of the inspection week*
 - *roles and responsibilities of members of the inspection team*
 - *activities during the inspection week*
 - *feedback after the inspection*
 - *the timescale and arrangements for appeals and other related matters*
- ***initiated a review of guidance for college inspectors***
- ***increased the allocation of days to curriculum inspections to:***
 - *remove any risk of 'rushed' inspections*
 - *improve feed forward of issues arising out of curriculum inspections to those inspecting aspects of cross-college provision*
- ***provided colleges with FEFC data on their students' achievements other than for the year of inspection***
- ***published national benchmarking data for over 7,000 qualifications***
- ***worked with commercial software providers to ensure the development of kite- marked applications which will enable colleges to extract information about student retention and achievement from their individualised student record database***
- ***standardised and strengthened the system for providing feedback to part-time inspectors on the way in which they conducted and reported their inspection.***

The inspectorate will also address issues raised by colleges through regional and programme area team meetings and through training events designed to improve the effectiveness and fairness of the inspection process.

21 Thirty-two colleges, 30% of those inspected in 1997-98, completed an evaluation of inspection following publication of the inspection report. This is a disappointingly small percentage. Colleges were invited to assess five aspects of their inspection. A summary of their responses is set out in table 1. This indicates that all aspects assessed were judged to be satisfactory or better by at least 90% of respondents. All respondents indicated that their inspection report had been used to support staff development within their college.

Table 1. Summary of colleges' evaluations of inspections in 1997-98

Aspect of inspection	Assessed to be satisfactory or better (%)	Assessed to be less than satisfactory (%)
The usefulness of the inspection to the college	94	6
The consistency between the interim feedback to the college and the published report	94	6
The clarity of the published report	90	9
The consistency between the inspection report and the FEFC's audit report	94	6
The clarity of issues to be addressed by the college	100	0

Appeals Against Inspection Grades

22 The willingness of inspectors to discuss their inspection findings openly with college staff continues to ensure that most inspections run smoothly. Nevertheless, a few colleges are unhappy with their inspection or its outcomes. All colleges are entitled to appeal against judgements made by inspectors according to procedures agreed by the FEFC and published in the *Inspection Handbook* and Council Circulars 96/24, *Conduct of the Council's Business* and 96/25, *Complaints about the Council's Administration*. Colleges may appeal successively to the:

- regional senior inspector (about judgements or the process of inspection)
- chief inspector (about judgements or the process of inspection)
- chief executive of the FEFC (about the process of inspection)
- FEFC's ombudsman (about the process of inspection).

23 Colleges wishing to appeal against inspection judgements are required to provide additional evidence to support their appeal. This is reviewed together with existing evidence and, if appropriate, additional inspection is arranged.

24 The inspectorate monitors appeals as part of its quality assurance arrangements. In 1997-98, of the colleges inspected, 29 (27%) appealed against one or more of the grades awarded. The majority appealed against only one grade. In total, appeals were received against 39 grades (3.5% of those awarded), comprising:

- eight curriculum grades
- 31 grades for aspects of cross-college provision.

25 Two of the 29 colleges did not appeal against inspection grades but appealed only against audit opinions which contribute to grades awarded for governance and management.

26 Tables 2 and 3 give a more detailed breakdown of the appeals. These data indicate that 67% of the grade judgements appealed against were for governance or management, and that 44% of the appeals related to provision judged by inspectors to be good (grade 2).

Table 2. Graded aspects of provision subject to appeal, 1997-98

	Number of appeals
Curriculum areas	8
Support for students	3
General resources	0
Quality assurance	2
Governance	16
Management	10
Total	39

Table 3. Distribution of grades subject to appeal, 1997-98

	Number subject to appeal
Grade 2 awarded	17
Grade 3 awarded	12
Grade 4 awarded	8
Grade 5 awarded	2
Total	39

27 Consistent procedures were followed in dealing with all appeals. Of the appeals received from the 29 colleges:

- 21 were resolved by senior regional inspectors
- seven were referred to the chief inspector
- one was referred to the ombudsman.

28 Table 4 summarises the outcome of appeals against grades, indicating that in 10 cases (26%), grades were amended as a result of appeal. The majority of decisions to amend grades were made at the first stage of appeal.

Table 4. Graded aspects of provision subject to appeal and appeal outcomes, 1997-98

	Number of appeals	Number of amended grades
Curriculum areas	8	0
Support for students	3	1
General resources	0	0
Quality assurance	2	1
Governance	16	4
Management	10	4
Total	39	10

29 On the basis of this evidence, the QAC noted that appeals were made against only 3.5% of the 1,107 grades awarded by inspectors. The committee was satisfied that appeals had been appropriately handled by the inspectorate in accordance with procedures set out in the *Inspection Handbook*. However, it was concerned about the amount of time taken to deal with appeals. It noted that, in a few cases, protracted appeals had unduly delayed the publication of inspection reports and the implementation of actions to remedy weaknesses.

Action Record

In recognition of the need for clearer guidance, the inspectorate specified in the Inspection Handbook that colleges should commence any appeal against inspection outcomes within one week of receiving feedback and inspection grades. In the same document, requirements were placed on the inspectorate to ensure that appeals were responded to within set times.

Publication of Inspection Reports

30 In 1993-94, the QAC set the inspectorate a target of publishing 70% of college inspection reports within 10 working weeks of the end of the relevant inspections. The end of an inspection is considered to be the feedback to the principal and the chair of governors. By 1997-98 the target had increased to 85%. Prior to 1997-98, the inspectorate's record of meeting publication targets had been good.

31 With the introduction of the new inspection framework, reporting procedures were modified in order to:

- give regional inspection teams greater responsibility for the quality of reports
- incorporate appropriate editorial stages to ensure the accuracy of audit opinions.

32 The revised editorial process involves more stages of editing and checking before publication. As a result, the previous record of successfully meeting publication targets was not sustained in 1997-98. Although the majority of inspection reports were published within 13 working weeks of the end of the inspection, only 21% were published within the 10-week target. Table 5 summarises the main reasons for delays in publication.

Table 5. Reasons for delays in the publication of college inspection reports, 1997-98

Primary reason	Number of reports
College appeals against inspection findings	21
Delays in drafting/amending reports	30
Revised editorial process	29
Publication delayed at request of college	1
Difficulties with college agreeing the report text	2

33 In 1997-98, most appeals against inspection judgements or audit opinions delayed publication by between five and eight weeks. Longer delays were caused by:

- colleges waiting for several weeks after the end of their inspection before starting appeals
- colleges delaying responses to appeal decisions and/or deciding whether to take the appeal further.

34 In five cases, protracted appeals caused the publication of inspection reports to be delayed to more than 20 weeks after the end of the inspection. In two cases publication was delayed to over 40 weeks.

Action Record

During 1997-98, several modifications to the process for producing reports were made in an attempt to speed up report production. In the absence of significant improvement, the chief inspector directed that a fundamental review of procedures should take place during the summer of 1998, in time for the 1998-99 college inspection programme.

Follow-up to Inspections

35 All colleges are requested to draw up an action plan following the publication of their inspection report. Colleges have up to four months to respond to this request. Each action plan is evaluated by the inspectorate to see whether it realistically addresses the issues identified in the inspection report. A designated college inspector monitors and records the progress a college makes towards achieving the objectives set out in its action plan.

36 Since 1994-95, arrangements have been in place to restrict growth in the number of students studying in curriculum areas judged to be unsatisfactory during college inspections. These restrictions are lifted if reinspection indicates that quality has improved. These arrangements have proved to be a powerful incentive for colleges to address weaknesses in provision. In 1997-98, there were 25 curriculum areas reinspected in 21 colleges. In one of these reinspections, previously unsatisfactory provision was judged to be good. In a further 23 inspections, provision was judged to be satisfactory. In the remaining case, improvement was judged to be insufficient to warrant changing the original inspection grade.

Other Developments During the Year

37 The inspectorate makes a significant contribution to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives related to quality. During 1997-98, inspectors played a key role in, for example:

- **College accreditation:** in July 1997, the FEFC consulted the sector (Council Circular 97/25, *College Accreditation*), on the introduction of accredited status for those colleges which are able to demonstrate that they are effectively managed, and have comprehensive and rigorous quality assurance. Responses to the FEFC's proposals were overwhelmingly positive. More than 90% of the 240 respondents indicated support. A framework for accrediting colleges was finalised in Council Circular 98/22, *Accrediting Colleges* (June 1998) in preparation for the launch of accreditation in 1998-99.
- **Quality improvement:** the FEFC agreed to seek advice from the QAC on quality improvement as part of its response to the government white paper, *Excellence in Schools*, published in July 1997. The QAC's advice was based on recommendations from the inspectorate. The resulting quality improvement strategy was published by the FEFC in June 1998 as Council Circular 98/21.
- **Benchmarking:** throughout 1997-98, inspectors worked closely with members of the FEFC research and statistics team to derive benchmarking data for student retention and the achievement qualifications from individualised student records completed by all colleges. National benchmarking data were published in August 1998 in preparation for

the introduction of annual target-setting by colleges in 1998-99.

- **Inclusive learning:** inspectors supported the Inclusive Learning Steering Group which was set up to implement recommendations in the report of the Tomlinson Committee. This involved contributing to the development of learning materials and associated training as part of the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative.
- **Widening Participation:** inspectors advised the Kennedy committee on widening participation which published its report in June 1997 and subsequently compiled a good practice guide *How to Widen Participation* published in September 1997 under the auspices of the committee.
- **Joint working:** inspectors commenced work on a project with OFSTED to evaluate key skills and the implementations of revised GNVQs. The inspectorate also agreed the basis for joint working with the Training Standards Council (TSC) inspectorate.

38 The inspectorate has links with a wide range of external organisations, including those which are concerned with particular areas of the curriculum and with educational policy-making. There is regular liaison with the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) which includes briefing on the outcomes of the work of the inspectorate. The inspectorate also contributes to training events organised by FEDA and other providers, where appropriate.

Conclusions

39 The primary task of the inspectorate is to fulfil its terms of reference. It achieved this in 1997-98 by:

- inspecting and reporting on the quality of provision in 108 further education colleges
- conducting national surveys on mathematics and numeracy, and professional development for teachers
- inspecting 15 independent colleges making provision, funded by the FEFC, for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- inspecting 12 external institutions funded by the FEFC
- inspecting further education provision in two higher education institutions
- reinspecting 25 curriculum areas in 21 colleges to meet the requirements of the FEFC
- publishing the chief inspector's fourth annual report.

40 In addition, the inspectorate achieved its objectives and those set by the QAC by:

- reviewing the register of part-time inspectors
- implementing a revised inspection framework
- training full-time and part-time inspectors for the new inspection framework
- reviewing operational procedures in the light of the new framework
- publishing a handbook for inspection
- contributing to a range of FEFC policy and guidance documents and initiatives associated with quality
- continuing its programme of training sector staff to become part-time inspectors
- contributing to staff training events organised by FEDA and other organisations

- maintaining links with external bodies associated with curriculum development and quality assessment
- maintaining a programme of college inspector visits, including visits to assess and monitor college action plans resulting from inspection
- inviting colleges to evaluate inspections
- dealing with challenges to its judgements through agreed procedures.

41 The inspectorate failed to meet its target of publishing 85% of inspection reports within 10 working weeks of the end of inspection. As a result, a fundamental review of report production procedures was undertaken.

42 During 1998-99, the inspectorate aims to:

- complete the work programme agreed by the QAC
- meet the college inspection report publication target set by the QAC
- continue to provide training programmes for full-time inspectors and part-time registered inspectors
- train principals and vice-principals as part-time registered inspectors and continue to provide training for college nominees
- provide support for colleges through the work of college inspectors
- contribute to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives which will help colleges raise the standard of their work.

Terms of Reference

The Inspectorate's Terms of Reference

The inspectorate's terms of reference, as agreed by the Council, are:

- a. to assess standards and trends across the further education sector and advise the Council, its committees and working groups on the performance of the sector overall;
- b. to prepare and publish reports on individual institutions;
- c. to identify and make more widely known good practice and promising developments in further education and draw attention to weaknesses that require attention;
- d. to provide advice and assistance to those with responsibility for, or in, institutions in the sector, through day-to-day contacts, its contribution to training, and its publications;
- e. to keep abreast of international developments in post-school education and training.

The Quality Assessment Committee's Terms of Reference

The quality assessment committee's terms of reference are:

- a. to advise the Council on the quality of education provided:
 - i. in institutions within the sector
 - ii. in institutions for whose activities the FEFC provides, or is considering providing, financial support (in which respect, it will be necessary to have regard to the advice from local education authorities, the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools and the Higher Education Funding Council for England);
- b. to recommend to the Council and keep under review methods for assessing quality;
- c. to receive assessment reports on the quality of education and advise on any necessary action;
- d. to report annually to the Council, including an evaluation of the overall quality of education in the sector;
- e. to advise on other matters as requested from time to time by the Council.

The Inspectorate

In 1997-98, the organisation of the inspectorate was unchanged. There were 71 full-time inspectors including nine senior inspectors and the chief inspector. The majority of inspectors are home-based, working in regional teams and contributing to national curriculum teams aligned to the FEFC's 10 programme areas. Each regional team is managed by a senior inspector. Regional teams within the inspectorate continued to work with other FEFC divisions. The inspectorate has continued to make a significant contribution to the work of the FEFC's advisory committees, for example, the committee on widening participation.

Full-time inspectors were supported in their work by part-time registered inspectors. On 1 September 1997, there were 388 part-time inspectors on the register. On 1 September 1998 there were 351. Fifteen part-time inspectors achieved registration during 1997-98. Ten withdrew from the register, and a further 42 were removed after a review of the register.

The cost of the inspectorate in the financial year 1997-98 was £7.1 million, representing approximately 30% of the FEFC's running cost budget and 0.2% of the overall budget of about £3.1 billion.

Training

In January and February 1997, all full-time inspectors attended one of two initial training events on the revised inspection framework. They received further training at their national conference in July 1998. At the conference, training was also provided for colleagues from audit and for inspectorate support staff.

A two-day training event for principals and vice-principals was held in October 1997. Of the 25 participants, 13 achieved registration during 1997-98 and one failed to achieve registration. Three previously registered inspectors used the training event to gain experience of the new framework. The remainder did not complete their training during 1997-98. A three-day briefing, training and assessment event for new part-time inspectors was held in March 1998. There were 34 participants, of whom 26 were from minority ethnic backgrounds. One participant was an observer. Fourteen of the participants have since achieved registration. Ten were awaiting the completion of their training during 1998-99. Eight failed to achieve registration, and one withdrew.

Two briefings on the new framework were held for registered inspectors, in September 1997 and February 1998. Programme area leaders held training events for their teams in September 1997.

The inspectorate continued to offer training to college nominees, to prepare them for their role in inspection teams. Nominees, who are usually senior members of the college, may participate in various aspects of inspection, including observing lessons with an inspector and joining discussions with college staff, students, employers and others with an interest in the work of the college. They may also attend all meetings held by inspectors before, during and after the inspection.

Monitoring the Inspectorate's Work

There were regular meetings of regional, programme area and consortium (cross-regional) groups. These groups meet at least once a term. Regional inspection teams are expected to meet every six weeks. Their agendas include fixed items such as:

- the programme for, and management of, college inspections
- the deployment and use of part-time inspectors
- the profile of grades awarded during inspections
- college evaluations of inspection
- the development and management of national exercises.

The chief inspector and senior inspectors meet about once every six weeks. Their meetings include items on all aspects of the inspectorate's operations. Senior inspectors also regularly review expenditure and progress against the objectives in the inspectorate's operational plan, and report on these to the FEFC.

In April 1998, management plans for inspectors were introduced, which allow managers to monitor and plan more precisely than before the way in which inspectors' time is used.

Report on Colleges' Evaluations of Inspection

This annex comprises a report drawn up by an independent consultant on colleges' evaluations of inspection. The report was presented to the quality assessment committee in February 1999.

Introduction

1 All further education sector colleges inspected in 1997-98 were invited to complete an evaluation of their inspection and forward this to the FEFC as soon as their inspection was completed.

2 By January 1999, 78 colleges had supplied completed evaluation forms. This represents 72% of the colleges inspected during the year.

3 This report is in two sections:

- **Section 1** provides a summary of grades awarded by colleges when completing evaluations of inspections.
- **Section 2** provides a summary of comments made by colleges on evaluation forms, with concluding observations.

Grades Awarded by Colleges

4 Colleges are invited to assess 13 aspects of inspection by assigning grades to each of them on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being 'outstanding' and 5 being 'poor').

5 In 1997-98 colleges awarded 1,007 grades for their inspections. Of these, 87% indicated that aspects of inspection were considered satisfactory or better. Table 1 summarises the grades awarded for each of the 13 questions graded by colleges.

Table 1. Summary of grades awarded by colleges in evaluations

	Grade 1 (%)	Grade 2 (%)	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)
Q4	16	63	16	5	0
Q5	6	29	31	27	6
Q6	12	22	33	23	10
Q7	4	26	41	19	10
Q8	8	51	31	9	1
Q9	32	44	19	3	1
Q10	8	40	32	18	3
Q11	14	68	16	3	0
Q12	33	46	13	8	0
Q13	79	18	3	0	0
Q14	4	50	31	14	1
Q15	27	52	19	1	0
Q16	26	53	19	1	0

Key:

- Q4 The quality of links with the inspectorate.
Q5 The extent of inspectorate involvement in preparation for producing self-assessment report.
Q6 The length of notice for receipt of the self-assessment report at FEFC.
Q7 The length of notice for receipt of student achievement data at FEFC.
Q8 The appropriateness of the selection of curriculum areas to be graded.
Q9 The management of the inspection.
Q10 The clarity of guidance given about the inspection.
Q11 The value of meetings between members of the inspection team, staff and other representatives.
Q12 The effectiveness of communication between inspectorate and college during the inspection week.
Q13 The value of having a college nominee.
Q14 The appropriateness of the scope and scale of the inspection.
Q15 The professionalism of the inspectorate team.
Q16 The quality of the feedback.

6 Analysis of the results data in table 1 suggest that colleges approve most strongly of the:

- quality of links with the inspectorate
- management of the inspection
- value of meetings between members of the inspection team, staff and other representatives
- effectiveness of communication between inspectorate and college during the inspection week
- value of having a college nominee
- professionalism of the inspectorate team
- quality of the feedback

and have most concerns about the:

- extent of inspectorate involvement in preparation for producing the self-assessment report
- length of notice for receipt of the self-assessment report at FEFC
- length of notice for receipt of student achievement data at FEFC
- clarity of guidance given about the inspection
- appropriateness of the scope and scale of the inspection.

7 Further analysis on the grades awarded by colleges confirms that:

- there is no significant relationship between the grades awarded by inspectors and subsequent grades awarded when college evaluate their inspection
- there is no discernible regional bias in grades awarded by colleges
- there is no discernible trend in college grades related to the time of year the inspection took place
- there is no significant difference in grades awarded by colleges in relation to college type (sixth form college, general further education/tertiary college, specialist college).

8 These outcomes are taken to be encouraging evidence that evaluations provide a valuable form of unbiased advice to the inspectorate.

Comments on Inspection from Colleges

9 The following paragraphs summarise comments made by colleges on their inspection. They do not comprise an evaluation of the inspections themselves, or an evaluation of the evaluations. It should be noted that evaluations provided by colleges have to be taken at face value. Generally, no information is provided about how the evaluation was developed within the college. It is therefore not possible to know whether an individual evaluation represents the views of one person or a collation of the views of many.

10 Quotes from evaluation forms included in the text of this report have generally been selected as being typical of the points made by colleges.

Strengths of the Inspection Programme

Personal qualities and professionalism

11 It would appear that many of the strengths of the inspection programme stem from the personal qualities demonstrated by the inspectors, the respect earned by them for their approach, and the integrity and validity of their judgements.

12 Equally, the quality of the relationships formed between the inspectors and the various groups of staff within the colleges is crucial. The number of colleges in which there appears to have been a serious and significant breakdown in relationships was very small. For many:

- *'the interest shown by the inspectors in the college and its staff was exemplary. Discussion was fair, and 1/4 we were fortunate to have such a good team'.*

13 Particularly in the earliest stages of preparing for the inspection, the manner, style and helpfulness of the college inspector was commented on favourably by the majority of respondents. A limited number of colleges rather regretted that they had not had more contact with their college inspector since the previous inspection. Reporting inspectors, too, soon established good relationships, in coping with a system new to both colleges and the inspectorate:

- *'we had really practical helpful guidance from both the college inspector and the reporting inspector'.*

14 In many cases *'the respect of college management and staff for the inspectorate'* grew with further acquaintance, for a variety of reasons. Most of the comments were very positive:

- *'the inspectorate were efficient, expert and professional'*
- *'they were good ambassadors for the service'*
- *'they were not very disruptive of the curriculum'*
- *'friendly, courteous, supportive, ¼with good links forged'*
- *'approachable and professional, [we established] good communications'.*

15 Clearly, it is the judgements made that might have caused most controversy, but there were again many comments about:

- *'the outstanding integrity and fairness of judgement'*

and

- *'staff found the inspectorate to be very courteous and professional ¼and had considerable respect for their judgements'.*

16 There were some exceptions in relation to judgements. One college commented that:

- *'one ... inspector seemed particularly quirky'.*

17 Another college would need some persuading that:

- *'a grade 2 is the same in programme area 7 as in area 4'.*

Staff contacts

18 For the majority of staff contact with the inspectors came through the observation and later feedback on classes, and during the various meetings. The comment from one college is not untypical:

- *'informal feedback was particularly useful, avoiding surprises at the formal stages'.*

19 Mainly, it was the attitudes displayed throughout the inspection that mattered. At best, comments indicated that meetings were:

- *‘on the whole excellent, particularly in cross-college areas’*

and they

- *‘allowed staff and students to feel part of the process, and that it wasn’t all about paperwork and systems’.*

20 One college commented that meeting with the inspectorate was:

- *‘very important for [staff] development in understanding how the college works. Staff felt valued, and that they had made a contribution to the overall grade’.*

21 Events inevitably occurred in some colleges before or during inspections which ensured that they could not be all about ‘paperwork and systems’. The responsiveness of the inspectors to unforeseen events was generally appreciated:

- *‘there were difficulties and challenges for the inspectorate, and they were handled very proficiently’.*

Only rarely were there comments that emerging difficulties were not handled promptly and effectively.

The importance of the college nominee

22 Creating and sustaining such a positive relationship between college and inspectorate appears to have been eased by the presence and approach of the college nominees. A number of the colleges made the point that the success of the inspectorate in managing the inspection depended in part on both the attitude and the preparation of college staff at every level, with the nominee being a vital intermediary. The following was echoed by many colleges:

- *‘our confidence in the process would have been very different without a nominee’.*

23 A few were concerned that the position of the college nominee is undermined in the revised inspection process with the college nominee apparently *‘excluded from certain activities and information’*.

Issues Raised by Colleges

24 The following paragraphs summarise issues raised by colleges. As the statistics indicate, the general reaction to the inspections was positive, and the issues raised by the colleges and reported here should be seen as suggestions for improvement, not a sustained and consistent critique of the system by the majority of colleges.

Inspectors and inspection teams

25 Whilst most colleges commented warmly on the professionalism and competence of the inspectorate, inevitably there were some negative comments about a limited number of the

inspectors. Colleges indicated that the negative effect of even one unsatisfactory inspector in a team of perhaps 14 inspectors was disproportionate.

26 Criticisms of inspectors were often individual, direct, and specific: usually such concerns were reported and dealt with on the spot by the reporting inspector. More difficult to describe and to handle were perceptions that an inspector [or a team] came to a college with a range of assumptions about that college which did not tally with their own.

27 Although comparatively few made comments about groups within inspection teams, where such comparisons were made:

- the full-time inspectors were generally more highly rated than the part-time registered inspectors, not least because they appeared to be *'better briefed than the part-timers'*, whilst others *'were worried by the consistency of grading amongst the part-timers'*
- there were more reservations expressed about auditors than inspectors.

28 But the comments were not entirely without wry humour: *'a very clear 5 for one inspector'*. This from a college which rated the inspectors in general very highly indeed.

The nature and style of the process

29 Positive relationships appear to have eased difficulties about the processes, but colleges under any one of a variety of pressures, sometimes felt themselves to be under threat from a potentially hostile process. Some of the colleges inspected in this first round of the new cycle of inspections were unclear in their own minds about whether the 'new system' was really about the 'validation of the self-assessment report (SAR) or a 'traditional inspection model'. A few colleges suggested that the inspectors themselves were uncertain, citing for example:

- *'some differences within the team about whether it was an inspection or the verification of self-assessment'*.

30 There was an air of almost indulgent resignation amongst a few colleges:

- *'we have been in the first round of inspections twice, [and] in both cases there has been an absence of guidance in many respects'*.

However, most reported that as they prepared:

- *'things got better with time'*.

31 It was acknowledged that the FEFC had taken steps to explain the changed needs of the system, but the training events for college nominees were criticised by a small number of colleges and the issue of circulars received a similarly mixed press: *'circulars did not give sufficient clarity'*.

32 Linking inspection with audit was a new feature of arrangements from September 1997. While there was clear approval from some colleges, others had mixed feelings:

- *'bringing [them] together is to be applauded, the difference in audit and inspection approaches all too apparent'.*

33 There were some expressions of concern about what was covered by auditors, such as:

- *'some issues are not appropriate in a four-year cycle'.*

34 A number of colleges highlighted the need for clarification on the link between audit opinions and inspection grades:

- *'does "adequate" mean 2, or between 3 and 4?'*

35 For some, it was the actual cost of preparing for the audit aspect of the inspection which caused most concern.

36 Other organisational issues were occasionally raised:

- changes in the inspection team, announced at short notice
- an apparent lack of liaison resulting in several staff being observed two or three times
- an apparent lack of pre-planning to ensure coherence and consistency in the way inspection is approached.

37 Though clearly a minority view, several smaller colleges have suggested that inspection bore disproportionately heavily on them, not least because several staff have multiple roles.

38 Nevertheless, the 'new system' had many friends:

- *'this inspection was a totally different experience for the staff than the previous one. They felt supported, involved, and though obviously tense, appreciated the process ¼ ¼[even if] ¼ they were disappointed in the areas given grade 3'*
- *'a good process which we found very acceptable'*
- *'senior staff valued the inspection as a first-class form of external consultancy'.*

Production of the self-assessment report

39 A number of colleges felt that, from their point of view:

- *'the SAR was the best aspect of the process'.*

40 The timing of producing the SAR caused some disquiet to some colleges:

- *'summer break reduced [available time] significantly'*
- *'the SAR had to be rushed to meet the needs of the inspectorate rather than being college owned'*
- lack of congruence with established internal college review cycles could cause *'excessive extra pressure which impacted heavily on normal day to day operations'.*

41 In some cases, the time lag between the preparation of the SAR and the inspection taking place was such that colleges felt the SAR used could not take account of more recent developments.

42 It is perhaps a marker of the flexibility of the system that a number of colleges reported that: *'special arrangements were requested as the timing of the inspection did not fit in with normal college processes'*. One reported warmly that *'the inspector supported and accommodated our request for delay in the requirement [to submit SAR], showing sensitivity to internal college affairs. Our SAR was late, but the inspector was patient and uncomplaining'*.

43 There appeared to be significant differences in the degree of inspector involvement in preparing the SAR and for inspection in general, while a few colleges, perhaps understandably, said that it was:

- *'difficult to know what [degree of help] can reasonably be expected'*

many colleges reported:

- *'very good involvement in briefing on the requirements for SAR'*

and

- *'excellent advice from our college inspector'*.

44 Many colleges requested that 'model' SAR be made available, not least so that they and their college inspector could keep on the right lines during the development of the SAR.

45 Student achievement data (SAD) had few friends:

- *'Timing [of completion] is not the issue, it is the detailed workings and complexities of the SAD...a huge amount of work, and now it is to be changed...'*

46 The following comments were not untypical in illustrating colleges' thoughts about preparing student achievement data:

- *'very difficult for non-traditional adult orientated provision, where 89% do not fit in'*
- *'lead time insufficient when collecting 3 years data'*
- *'OK if it fits in with normal cycle'*
- *'Data is one thing they [FEFC] do have'*

47 Nevertheless it would appear that flexibility was possible. One college commented that the timing for submitting SAD was:

- *'tight, but dealt with sensitively by the auditor'*.

48 In another case:

- *'the college inspector was responsive to the complex task of providing information on the spreadsheet'.*

Scope and scale

49 This was one of the very few topics on which there appeared to be significant differences in the responses from the various sectors within the FEFC. The generally larger GFEC with diverse provision found the selection of programme areas more problematical than the generally smaller, apparently more homogenous sixth form colleges.

50 The concept of 'a lighter touch' sometimes provoked dry humour: *'this was not quite the lighter touch we had been expecting'*. More seriously, the selectivity of the lighter touch was seen as a complicating factor in terms of relations with the general public:

- *'Selection [may be] sufficient to validate the SAR, but it makes reports far less valuable from the point of view of the general public and the key stakeholders'.*

51 A few colleges commented that the tight focus of inspections caused inspectors to ignore important indicators of success. Others:

- *'were surprised by the lack of interest in widening participation and community links'.*

52 A sixth form college was disappointed that:

- *'the selection of only academic curriculum areas reinforced traditional perceptions of sixth form colleges, which we have clearly moved away from'.*

53 The comment from one college was that curriculum areas:

- *'were very carefully chosen, but were certainly more than could be effectively inspected in a week'.*

54 Whilst some colleges welcomed the concentration of the inspection into a week, others felt that:

- *'the timescale meant only a narrow focus could be adopted, [which caused] a skewed judgement to be reached'*

and another commented on the

- *'frenetic demands of the week [for both inspectors and colleges] ...55 different meetings in four days... [which] made this an uncomfortable experience'.*

55 Many suggested that the time for classroom observation was limited, commenting that a three-day inspection only really provided two days on which observation can be carried out.

56 A variety of concerns were raised about the level of aggregation involved in the more selective approach, including:

- large areas of work not covered, sometimes for a second time
- the mismatch between FEFC programme areas and college structures.

57 One college commented that aggregation:

- *'did not allow for depth or valuable comment, simply dilution and averaging of judgements'*

while another said:

- *'the high level of aggregation disadvantages GFEC compared with the SFC'*

58 Such comments highlight issues revolving around the complexity of organising the inspection process within the time available for inspection, while taking account of the selectivity inherent in a lighter touch.

Feedback

59 Feedback of inspection findings to college staff is a critical point in the process and, not surprisingly, causes some comment. There is a call by some colleges for greater clarity about the procedure for dealing with disagreements and differences. In particular, though perhaps few in number, changes in curriculum area grades from those previously intimated, caused considerable upset when they occurred.

60 For a few:

- *'too much of the of the feedback to teachers was negative'*

and

- *'statements appeared in the report that were not part of the feedback'*
- *'feedback was inadequate because only our strengths were mentioned, and this contrasted with the grading eventually attributed'.*

61 Whilst feedback on curriculum areas was given universally, feedback arrangements for cross-college areas were less clear to colleges and appears to some to have been more patchy:

- *'we needed organised feedback on all areas inspected'.*

62 The timing of cross-college feedback mattered too:

- *'the principal should hear the cross-college inspectors before the final feedback and grading session.'*

63 It was also suggested that since governance was now a separate area, the chair of the corporation receive feedback separately, rather than solely during the final session with the principal.

Comparisons

64 A small number of colleges made interesting points about the basis of comparisons made as part of the inspection process:

- there are *'fundamental problems in making any inter-college comparisons'*
- *'as value added is underdeveloped, considerable importance [is given to] national averages. This creates a "glass ceiling" for curriculum area grades in areas of socio-economic deprivation.'*
- *'the criteria [for comparison] may shift as evidence about ethnicity and deprivation related to attitudes and achievement becomes available'*
- *'sixth form colleges are compared with one another on achievement and retention, but with GFEC in terms of resources generated'.*

Concluding Comments

65 The inspections carried out during 1997-98 elicited the broad range of comments which might be expected, given the diverse contexts into which varying groups of inspectors operated. The progress of inspection appears to be greatly influenced by the interaction of the various elements in an inspection: the attitude and approach of the inspectorate; the pre-existing confidence and attitude of the college management and staff; the 'political' context of the college; and the actual process of FEFC inspection. The following comment typifies responses to inspection at its best:

- *'astute, shrewd judgements made - clearly based on evidence. Weaknesses identified - when not evident from our SAR - in a constructive manner. Subject area and cross-college feedback had the feel of authenticity: it was our college being described'.*

66 There is clearly a range of generally inter-related and complex issues which deserve to be considered, to make a serviceable and generally well-regarded system even more acceptable and effective. Although many of the points in this report may have already been considered, I offer following observations intended to help refine the inspection process.

- If there is to be a shift towards 'validation', then support for the production of the self-assessment report becomes paramount. This presupposes a continuous dialogue between college inspector and the college, between as well as before 'inspection'. Support events, training days, circulars and models of best practice clearly need continuing review.
- Linked to the issue of purpose are those of the time spent on the process, the selection of areas to be observed, and the level of aggregation when selecting and grading curriculum areas. It is clear that there is potential tension between public accountability, the FEFC's need to assess the curriculum, the value of inspections for internal management of a college and the use of inspection reports for public relations.

- Student achievement data is probably already being reviewed, and rightly: it is unlikely, however, that everyone will be happy with whatever develops, given the diversity of college provision
- The conduct of individual inspectors is clearly crucial to the success and apparent validity of inspections. Behaviour seen as unsatisfactory by a college can have a major impact on perceptions of the inspection as a whole. Are there opportunities for training and guidance, or in the way inspections are organised, which would ensure further improvements in consistency and teamwork? Would a pre-inspection meeting for all team members before the first inspection day be possible and/or helpful?
- Consistency of feedback arrangements and language could be checked with advantage.
- The basis of comparisons between colleges should be under constant review.

College nominee training might usefully be reviewed in the light of the revised inspection arrangements.

