

**REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE**

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**An Evaluation  
of the Work  
of the  
Inspectorate  
1998-99**

**May 2000**

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**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
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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## Summary

In the college year 1998-99, the inspectorate completed its work programme by inspecting: 104 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 14 external institutions and one higher education institution. Inspectors also conducted three curriculum surveys, and worked with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to evaluate developments in key skills and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programmes and collaboration between further education colleges and schools. There was a reinspection of 14 curriculum areas in 13 colleges where provision had previously been judged unsatisfactory and 10 cross-college areas in five colleges. Inspectors provided briefing events for college staff, and full-time and part-time registered inspectors. They also contributed to the development of FEFC policy and initiatives in areas such as the standards fund, college accreditation, benchmarking and improving the quality of basic skills provision.

Colleges continued to comment favourably on their experience of inspection. Their evaluations confirmed that they generally found inspectors' judgements fair. In evaluations of inspection, 95% of responses from colleges indicated that they found inspection satisfactory or better. This compares favourably with 87% in 1997-98. Colleges appealed against 43 (4.1%) out of 1,046 grades awarded for curriculum and cross-college provision in 1998-99. One grade was changed after a review of inspection evidence. The inspectorate improved its procedures for preparing and editing inspection reports and exceeded its publication target for 1998-99. An internal audit of the inspectorate's system for obtaining, analysing and taking into account colleges' evaluations of inspections found that there were adequate controls. The inspectorate is responding positively to the auditor's six recommendations for further improvements.

During 1999-2000, the inspectorate will: complete the work programme agreed by the quality assessment committee; continue to provide training programmes for inspectors and college nominees; provide support for colleges through the work of college inspectors; administer and monitor the use of the standards fund; contribute to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives which will help colleges raise the standard of their work.

In addition, the inspectorate will make thorough preparations for the changes heralded in the government's white paper *Learning to Succeed* for a new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), for close collaboration with Ofsted and the development of a common post-16 inspection framework. The inspectorate will also contribute to preparations for the establishment of a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and 47 local LSCs, each with a remit for quality improvement.

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## 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 work during the college year 1998-99. The report focuses primarily on the inspection of colleges in the further education sector. It covers:

- the inspection programme
- joint working with other inspectorates
- the quality assessment committee's (QAC's) views on the inspectorate's annual evaluation for 1998-99
- colleges' responses to inspection
- appeals against inspection grades
- publication of inspection reports
- follow-up to inspections
- the FEFC's internal audit of the inspectorate's system for colleges' evaluations of inspection
- policy and other developments
- conclusions.

2 The report was considered by the QAC at its meeting on 7 February 2000. The QAC endorsed the report and recommended its publication.

## Background

3 *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'.

4 In order to meet its responsibilities for quality assessment, the FEFC established the inspectorate. The terms of reference of the inspectorate and the QAC are at annex A and further information about the inspectorate is included in annex B.

5 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 improvement in further education, raising standards and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors focus on the quality of students' learning, their standards of achievement and the efficacy of colleges' arrangements to support the delivery of these. 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.

6 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**

7 The inspectorate's programme of work for 1998-99 included inspections of:

- 104 colleges in the further education sector
- 15 independent establishments making provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- 14 external institutions
- further education provision in one higher education institution
- 14 curriculum areas in 13 colleges and 10 cross-college areas in five colleges where provision was previously judged to be unsatisfactory.

8 College inspections were carried out using the inspection framework set out in Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. Prior to its inspection, each college was asked to assess and grade its provision, using *Validating Self-assessment* as a guide, and to prepare a self-assessment report. The scope of subsequent curriculum area inspections was determined on the basis of the college's 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 inspection, each college was visited to check the validity of its data on student retention and achievement.

9 On average, inspectors spent 43 working days, and auditors 4.8 days, inspecting each of the further education colleges included in the 1998-99 programme. 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 college nominee, a representative of the senior staff of the college being inspected. The nominee was able to observe all aspects of the inspection and to bring factual information to the attention of the inspectors.

10 Inspectors observed and graded 7,873 lessons, involving 88,216 students, and scrutinised almost 18,200 examples of students' work. They awarded 526 grades to curriculum areas. They also awarded 520 grades to the five aspects of cross-college provision covered by the inspection framework: support for students, general resources, quality assurance, governance, and management.

11 The inspection programme included regular visits to each college by a designated college inspector. College inspector visits are designed to build up an in-depth knowledge of each college's work and its local context. They 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. They also monitor the achievement of targets set by the college for retention and achievement and offer guidance to colleges preparing for accreditation or making plans for using the recently introduced standards fund.

12 During 1998-99, the inspectorate carried out national surveys of art and design, engineering, and humanities. It prepared a good practice guide on self-assessment and carried out essential surveys of: national awards for students with learning difficulties; entry level and level 1 qualifications in numeracy, literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL); widening participation; and working with employers. It also published a study of post-16 education in Ireland.

## Joint Working with other Inspectorates

13 The inspectorate continued its collaboration with Ofsted. There was joint work on evaluating pilot developments in key skills and the revised general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programmes. There was also a joint survey and report on collaboration between further education colleges and school sixth forms. The inspectorate carried out a joint assessment with the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) of careers education and guidance in 30 colleges. One full-time inspector and four part-time inspectors joined teams set up by the chief inspector of prisons to inspect the provision of education and training in 10 prisons. The inspectorate also carried out joint inspections of some colleges with the Training Standards Council (TSC).

## 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.

Colleges' views are sought in two stages:

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

15 Sixty-seven colleges, representing 64% of those inspected, completed evaluation forms following their inspection in 1998-99. This was a lower response rate than in 1997-98, when 72% of the colleges inspected made returns.

### ***Action for 1999-2000***

*The inspectorate aims to ensure that at least 75% of inspected colleges return their evaluation forms.*

16 Colleges 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 852 grades for their inspections, of which 95% indicated that they found the graded aspect of inspection satisfactory or better. This compares favourably with 87% in 1997-98. Analysis of college evaluations confirmed that there was no significant relationship between grades awarded by inspectors during an inspection and subsequent grades awarded by the college when evaluating 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.

### ***Action record in 1997-98***

*To address issues raised by colleges, the Council published guidance on inspection procedures in the form of a comprehensive inspection handbook.*

### ***Action taken in 1998-99***

*Inspectors and colleges used the inspection handbook to guide inspections. A review of the content was carried out at the end of the year.*

### ***Impact of action taken in 1998-99***

*Feedback from colleges has indicated the usefulness of the handbook. The inspectorate considers it has been effective and efficient in informing colleges about inspection and that the handbook has helped to make practice more consistent across regions.*

### ***Action for 1999-2000***

*To publish updates to the inspection handbook arising from a review of its content.*

Colleges approved most strongly of:

- the value of having a college nominee
- the professionalism of the inspectorate team
- the management of inspections
- the clarity of guidance given about inspections
- the quality of links with the inspectorate
- the length of notice for receipt of the self-assessment report at the FEFC
- the effectiveness of communication between the inspectorate and the college during the inspection week
- the value of meetings between members of the inspection team and college staff and other representatives
- the quality of feedback on inspection findings.

Colleges had the most concerns about:

- the extent of the college inspectors' involvement in preparing for the production of the self-assessment report (colleges wanting college inspectors to take a greater role)
- the length of notice given for receipt of student achievement data at the FEFC
- the appropriateness of the scope and scale of inspections
- the selection of curriculum areas to be graded.

17 These concerns were of minor significance overall; each attracted a less than satisfactory grade in between 5% and 10% of responses, apart from the inspectorate's involvement in self-assessment. Here colleges' responses indicated that 16%, compared with 33% in 1997-98, were less than satisfied. Colleges' levels of concern decreased significantly compared with 1997-98 when five aspects of inspection attracted less than satisfactory grades in between 15% and 33% of responses. No additional action, beyond the usual monitoring and quality assurance arrangements is proposed, in the case of most of these concerns.



However, the extent of the inspectorate's involvement in colleges' self-assessment process, and the relevant guidance to college inspectors, will be reviewed.

***Action record in 1997-98***

*Guidance was issued to college inspectors about their role, including their role in relation to college's self-assessment.*

***Action taken in 1998-99***

*College inspectors referred to the guidance issued.*

***Impact of action taken in 1998-99***

*There remains some concern in a minority of colleges about the extent of the inspectorate's involvement in self-assessment.*

***Action for 1999-2000***

*A review to be undertaken of how well college inspectors use the guidance issued and of whether the guidance needs updating.*

18 Twenty-three colleges, 22% of those inspected in 1998-99, completed an evaluation of inspection following publication of the inspection report. This is a disappointingly small percentage and is lower than the 30% of those who were inspected in 1997-98.

***Action for 1999-2000***

*The inspectorate will reconsider the need to evaluate the inspection after publication of the inspection report and, if the evaluation is retained, review the questions asked of colleges and the administrative procedures involved.*

19 In the second stage of evaluation, after receiving the inspection report, colleges were invited to assess five aspects of their inspection. A summary of their responses is set out in table 1. It indicates that all aspects assessed were judged to be satisfactory or better by at least 91% 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 1998-99**

<b>Aspect of inspection</b>	<b>% assessed to be satisfactory or better</b>	<b>% assessed to be less than satisfactory</b>
The usefulness of the inspection to the college	98 (94)	2 (6)
The consistency between the interim feedback to the college and the published report	95 (94)	5 (6)
The clarity of the published report	98 (90)	2 (10)
The consistency between the inspection report and the FEFC's audit report	88 (94)	12 (6)
The clarity of issues to be addressed by the college	100 (100)	0 (0)

*Note: figures in brackets are for 1997-98*

20 Each year, an analysis of colleges' evaluations is presented to the QAC for their comment. As in 1997-98, the inspectorate engaged an independent consultant to prepare a report evaluating colleges' responses to inspection. The consultant's report is at annex C.

### ***Action for 1999-2000***

*The report on colleges' views, prepared by the external consultant, will be considered by the inspectorate's inspection and reporting group. The group will be asked to identify any additional action needed beyond:*

- *the inspectorate's normal review arrangements*
- *the actions already outlined in this report for making improvements.*

21 In addition to responding to the issues raised by colleges in their evaluations, the inspectorate reviews each of the inspections it conducts. As a consequence, several changes were introduced in 1998-99, aimed at improving the quality and consistency of inspection. These included:

- the development of closer collaboration between inspectors and auditors during inspection of governance and management
- a joint training event for inspectors and auditors on inspecting governance and management
- additional moderation by senior inspectors of grading for cross-college aspects of provision
- the introduction of a review of evidence relating to the quality of governance with the chair of governors, to take place before the conclusion of the inspection
- more structured and detailed feedback to part-time registered inspectors on their performance, including grades for performance.

## **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 each year are unhappy with the inspection or its outcomes. 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*. They may appeal successively to the:

- the regional senior inspector (about judgements or the process of inspection)
- the chief inspector (about judgements or the process of inspection)
- the 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. Of the colleges inspected in 1998-99, 24 (23%) appealed against one or more of the grades

awarded. The majority appealed against only one grade. In total, appeals were received against 43 grades (4.1% of those awarded). They comprised:

- 14 curriculum grades
- 29 grades for aspects of cross-college provision.

25 Tables 2 and 3 give a more detailed breakdown of the appeals. Overall, 25% of the appeals related to provision judged by inspectors to be good (grade 2). The data indicate that judgements about governance and management remain the most frequent cause of appeals; 51% of grades appealed against were for governance or management, a decline from 67% in 1997-98.

**Table 2. Graded aspects of provision subject to appeal, 1998-99**

	<b>Number of appeals</b>
Curriculum areas	14 (8)
Support for students	4 (3)
General resources	1 (0)
Quality assurance	2 (2)
Governance	12 (16)
Management	10 (10)
<b>Total</b>	<b>43 (39)</b>

*Note: figures in brackets are for 1997-98*

**Table 3. Distribution of grades subject to appeal, 1998-99**

	<b>Number subject to appeal</b>
Grade 2 awarded	11
Grade 3 awarded	17
Grade 4 awarded	12
Grade 5 awarded	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

26 Consistent procedures were followed in dealing with all appeals. Of the appeals received from the 24 colleges:

- 29 were resolved by regional senior inspectors
- 13 were referred to the chief inspector
- one was referred to the chief executive or ombudsman.

In one case, a grade was amended after a review of the underlying inspection evidence.

### ***Action record in 1997-98***

*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.*

### ***Action taken in 1998-99***

*The inspectorate used the handbook procedures for appeals.*

### ***Impact of the action taken in 1998-99***

*Appeals were dealt with promptly following inspections. The appeals process did not delay significantly the publication of inspection reports.*

## **Publication of Inspection Reports**

27 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. In 1997-98, new reporting and editorial procedures, and procedures for appeals led to delays and 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.

28 After a fundamental review of procedures instigated by the chief inspector, the inspectorate exceeded its target in 1998-99 by publishing 92% of college inspection reports within 10 working weeks of the end of the inspection. Only six reports were delayed by appeals, compared with 21 in 1997-98.

### ***Action Record in 1997-98***

*During 1997-98, several modifications to the process for producing reports were made in an attempt to speed up the production of reports. Procedures were fundamentally reviewed in 1998-99.*

### ***Action taken in 1998-99***

*New editorial procedures were implemented in 1998-99.*

### ***Impact of action taken in 1998-99***

*The inspectorate published 92% of college inspection reports within 10 working weeks of the end of the inspection, an increase from 21% in 1997-98.*

### ***Action for 1999-2000***

*No new action is needed, as problems have been addressed successfully.*

## **Follow-up to Inspections**

29 Colleges are requested to draw up an action plan following the publication of their inspection report. They 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. The college inspector monitors and records the progress the college is making in achieving the objectives set out in its action plan.

30 Since 1994-95, arrangements have been in place to restrict the growth in number of students studying in curriculum areas judged to be unsatisfactory during college inspections. These restrictions are lifted if reinspection indicates that the quality of provision has improved sufficiently. The arrangements have proved to be a powerful incentive for colleges to address weaknesses in provision. During 1998-99, 14 curriculum areas in 13 colleges were reinspected. In all, but one of these reinspections, previously unsatisfactory provision was judged to be satisfactory. In the remaining case, improvement was considered insufficient to warrant changing the original inspection grade.

## **The Council's Internal Audit of Procedures for Evaluating Inspections**

31 A review of the arrangements for obtaining, analysing and taking account of college's evaluations of inspections was carried out in May 1999 by BKL Weeks Green, the Council's provider of internal audit services.

The audit covered the inspectorate's policies and procedures for ensuring that:

- evaluations of the effectiveness of the inspection and reporting process are appropriately obtained in all circumstances
- evaluations are suitably analysed and the findings reported promptly to the Council's QAC
- the inspectorate takes action to ensure that colleges' evaluations are taken into account when reviewing and developing inspection methods

- resources are used economically and effectively in dealing with colleges' evaluations
- computer applications in respect of colleges' evaluations are appropriately operated, safeguarded and maintained.

32 The purpose of the audit was to inform the Council of the adequacy of the inspectorate's procedures in relation to the objectives the Council has set for colleges' evaluations of inspections, and to show how effectively these procedures are operating.

33 The internal auditors concluded that there were adequate controls to achieve the objectives the Council has set for the system for obtaining, analysing and taking into account colleges' evaluations of inspections. Opinions on different aspects of the system are set out in table 4.

**Table 4. Internal auditors' opinions of the Council's controls for colleges' evaluations of inspections.**

<b>Management objectives</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Weak</b>
Evaluations of the effectiveness of the inspection and reporting process are appropriately obtained for all inspected situations	✓		
Evaluations are suitably analysed and findings reported promptly to the Council's quality assessment committee	✓		
The inspectorate takes appropriate action to ensure that colleges' evaluations are taken into account when reviewing and developing inspection methods	✓		
<b>General objectives</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Weak</b>
Achieve economical and efficient use of resources		✓	
Ensure the integrity and efficient use of resources		✓	
Ensure the integrity and reliability of information and data		✓	
Reduce the impact of contingencies		✓	

34 The inspectorate has responded to internal auditors' recommendations with an action plan to effect improvements to the system. During 1999-2000, the inspectorate will:

- set a target for the proportion of college evaluation forms returned
- set a timescale for the return of evaluation forms across the regions
- produce an interim national report on colleges' evaluations, to be considered by the inspection and reporting group before the inspection programme for 2000-01 begins
- include in the annual report to the QAC, an analysis of the previous year's responses, a report on the actions taken as a result, an analysis of the current year's responses and a report on any further action required
- standardise the regions' approaches to colleges, for example using standard letters to request the return of evaluation forms

- establish a system for entering data efficiently between the regions and the central inspectorate office.

35 Some actions have already been implemented, or are under way. Others will be completed by the target dates set for 1999-2000.

## Policy and other Developments During the Year

36 The inspectorate makes a significant contribution to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives on quality. During 1998-99, for example, inspectors played a key role in:

- **Quality improvement.** During 1998-99, the government introduced a standards fund of £35 million for further education. The Council's quality improvement unit co-ordinates arrangements for administering the standards fund. Details were published by the Council in June 1999. By the end of August 1999, 89 action plans had been received by the Council.
- **Benchmarking and target-setting.** National benchmarking data were published by the Council in August 1998 in order to help colleges compare their students' achievements against national standards. In October 1998, the Council consulted colleges and in February 1999 it established arrangements for colleges to set and record targets for student retention and achievement. Colleges submitted targets to the Council in May 1999. Over 80% of colleges expressed an intention to improve retention or achievement rates. The median college target was for an improvement of around 2% in retention levels and about 3% in achievement levels. College inspectors offer guidance on the appropriateness of targets and monitor the progress colleges are making towards reaching their targets.
- **College accreditation.** At the start of 1998-99, arrangements were launched for the accreditation of colleges which are able to demonstrate that they are effectively managed, have rigorous quality assurance and good-quality provision. In 1998-99, the first five colleges were awarded accredited status by the Council. College inspectors offer guidance to colleges seeking accredited status.
- **Inclusive learning.** Inspectors continued to support the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative. They contributed to the development of learning materials and associated training for inclusive learning facilitators to work with colleges and other providers of further education. In 1998-99, over 40% of inspection reports listed strengths relating to inclusive learning.
- **Widening participation.** Since the publication of *Learning Works* in 1997, inspectors have been investigating the progress made by colleges in widening participation. Colleges have established more systematic approaches to widening participation and raising levels of achievement. Over three-quarters of colleges have mission statements which signal a clear commitment to widen participation, together with relevant strategic objectives and operational plans. However, few colleges monitor trends in retention and achievement among groups most under-represented in further education.

- **Basic skills.** Between June and September 1998, there were inspections of basic skills provision in a sample of the 237 colleges funded by the Council to run summer schools in basic skills. A report on these inspections was published January 1999. The inspectorate contributed evidence to the national advisory group on basic skills, chaired by Sir Claus Moser. In partnership with the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), the inspectorate also organised a national conference on basic skills, entitled 'An Agenda for Improvement' followed by six regional conferences arranged in partnership with the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA). The outcomes from the national and regional conferences were summarised in a report published in September 1999.

37 The inspectorate has links with a wide range of external organisations, including those concerned with particular areas of the curriculum and with educational policy-making. There is regular liaison with 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

38 In 1998-99, the inspectorate fulfilled its terms of reference by:

- inspecting and reporting on the quality of provision in 104 further education colleges
- conducting national surveys on art and design, engineering and humanities
- inspecting 15 independent colleges making provision, funded by the Council, for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- inspecting 14 external institutions funded by the Council
- inspecting further education provision in one higher education institution
- reinspecting 14 curriculum areas in 13 colleges and 10 cross-college aspects in five colleges
- publishing the chief inspector's fifth annual report.

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

- maintaining a programme of college inspector visits
- training full-time and part-time registered inspectors in each of the programme areas
- contributing to a range of Council policy and guidance documents, and initiatives associated with quality
- continuing its programme of training sector staff to become part-time registered inspectors
- contributing to staff training events organised by FEDA and other organisations
- maintaining links with external bodies associated with curriculum development and quality assessment
- inviting colleges to evaluate inspections
- dealing with challenges to its judgements through agreed procedures
- meeting its target for publishing inspection reports of 85% within 10 weeks of the end of the inspection.



40 During 1999-2000, the inspectorate aims to:

- complete the work programme agreed by the QAC
- continue to provide training programmes for full-time inspectors and part-time registered inspectors
- continue to provide training for college nominees
- keep the quality of its work under review
- provide support for colleges through the work of college inspectors
- advise on and monitor the use of the standards fund
- contribute to the development of FEFC policies and initiatives which will help colleges raise the standard of their work
- conduct area inspections of provision for 16 to 19 year old students, in conjunction with Ofsted
- make thorough preparations for the changes heralded in the government's white paper, *Learning to Succeed*, including those for:
  - a new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)
  - close collaboration with Ofsted
  - the development of a common post-16 inspection framework
  - the establishment of a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and 47 local LSCs, particularly in relation to their remit for quality improvement.

## **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 1998-99, the organisation of the inspectorate was, in the main, unchanged. There were 74 full-time inspectors, two inspectors with fractional posts, nine senior inspectors and the chief inspector. During 1998-99, a new quality improvement unit was established by the Council. The unit's remit includes the standards fund, accreditation, target-setting and benchmarking. Staffing includes the head of the unit, seconded from the inspectorate, three other staff and additional support provided by both full-time and part-time inspectors.

Although the majority of inspectors are home based, an increasing proportion are located in the Council's regional offices; almost one-third in 1998-99. Inspectors work in regional teams and contribute 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 Council divisions. The inspectorate has continued to make a significant contribution to the work of the Council's advisory committees; for example, the External Institutions' Review Group, chaired by Professor Bob Fryer.

Full-time inspectors were supported in their work by part-time registered inspectors. On 1 September 1998, there were 351 part-time inspectors on register. On 1 September 1999, there were 318. Eighteen part-time inspectors achieved registration during 1998-99. Five withdrew from the register, and a further 33 were removed after a review of the register.

The cost of the inspectorate in the financial year 1998-99 was £6.8 million, representing approximately 29% of the FEFC's running costs and 0.2% of the overall programme budget of about £3.1 billion.

### **Training**

The inspectorate continued to provide training programmes for full-time and part-time registered inspectors. Two separate one-day training events were held for full-time inspectors. In September 1998, there was a workshop on governance and management for inspectors and auditors. In January 1999, there was a training event on accreditation. Each national curriculum team ran a training event for part-time registered inspectors in their programme area. After reviewing the situation, it was decided to move the inspectorate's annual conference, scheduled for the summer term 1999, to the beginning of the new teaching year, September 1999. For two days in October 1998 and for one day in January 1999, there was training for a total of six new full-time inspectors. During spring and summer terms 1999 there were workshops on writing and editing reports for full-time inspectors in each of the regions.

During 1998-99, 83 part-time inspectors were awaiting completion of training. Of the 83, 18 successfully achieved registration before 31 August 1999, six withdrew or did not meet the requirements. Forty part-time inspectors went on to achieve registration early in the following academic year, 1999-2000. In June 1999, a three-day briefing, training and assessment event was run for 64 prospective part-time registered inspectors.

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 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:

- briefings and information from the chief inspector and senior inspectors' committee
- updates on issues, including the standards fund, accreditation, the Councils' individualised students record (ISR), contributing to the Council's plans to gain recognition as an Investor in People
- the programme for, and management of, college inspections
- the deployment and use of part-time registered inspectors
- the profile of grades awarded during inspections
- evaluation of college inspections
- the development and management of national surveys.

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.

During 1998-99, inspectors continued to use the management plans introduced in 1997-98, allowing managers to monitor and plan the way in which inspectors' use their time.

## 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 2000.*

### Introduction

1 All further education sector colleges inspected in 1998-99 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 2000, 67 colleges had supplied completed evaluation forms. This represents 64% 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 1998-99 colleges awarded 852 grades for their inspections. Of these, 95% 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**

{PRIV ATE }	Grade 1 (%)	Grade 2 (%)	Grade 3 (%)	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 5 (%)
<b>Q4</b>	15 (16)*	64 (63)	19 (16)	2 (5)	0 (0)
<b>Q5</b>	11 (6)	42 (29)	31 (31)	10 (27)	6 (6)
<b>Q6</b>	28 (12)	48 (22)	21 (33)	3 (23)	0 (10)
<b>Q7</b>	11 (4)	51 (26)	30 (41)	6 (19)	2 (10)
<b>Q8</b>	15 (8)	48 (51)	32 (31)	5 (9)	0 (1)
<b>Q9</b>	27 (32)	54 (44)	15 (19)	3 (3)	1 (1)
<b>Q10</b>	20 (8)	59 (40)	21 (32)	0 (18)	0 (3)
<b>Q11</b>	14 (14)	61 (68)	20 (16)	5 (3)	0 (0)
<b>Q12</b>	29 (33)	48 (46)	22 (13)	1 (8)	0 (0)
<b>Q13</b>	71 (79)	23 (18)	6 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)
<b>Q14</b>	12 (4)	53 (50)	30 (31)	5 (14)	0 (1)
<b>Q15</b>	33 (27)	52 (52)	12 (19)	3 (1)	0 (0)
<b>Q16</b>	17 (26)	52 (53)	28 (19)	3 (1)	0 (0)

*Note: figures in brackets are for 1997-98*

**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 indicate improvements compared with 1997-98, in colleges' views about the quality and value of inspection.

7 Colleges approve most strongly of:

- the value of having a college nominee
- the professionalism of the inspectorate team
- the management of inspections
- the clarity of guidance given about inspections
- the quality of links with the inspectorate
- the length of notice for receipt of the self-assessment report at the FEFC
- the effectiveness of communication between the inspectorate and the college during the inspection week

- the value of meetings between members of the inspection team and college staff and other representatives
- the quality of feedback on inspection findings.

8 Colleges had the most concerns about:

- the extent of inspectorate involvement in preparation for producing the self-assessment report
- the length of notice for receipt of student achievement data at the FEFC
- the appropriateness of the scope and scale of inspections
- the selection of curriculum areas to be graded.

Further analysis of the grades awarded by colleges confirms that:

- there is no significant relationship between the grades awarded by inspectors and subsequent grades awarded when colleges 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).

9 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**

10 The following paragraphs summarise comments made by colleges on their inspection, and this year for the first time, their views on the value of the final published inspection report. Where it is significant, comparisons are made with the comments in the evaluation of the inspectorate's work in 1997-98, published in October 1999.

11 The comments set out below do not comprise an evaluation of the inspections themselves, or an evaluation of the evaluations. Evaluations provided by the colleges have to be taken at face value. Generally, no information is provided about how the evaluation was developed within each college, so it is not possible to know whether the evaluation represents the views of one person or a collation of the views of many.

12 As in the evaluation report for 1997-98, this section of the report is prepared by an education adviser, who is neither a member of FEFC staff nor of any college. The quotes selected from evaluation forms included in the text below are typical of the points made by colleges.

### **Introductory Remarks**

13 The commentary and the quotations which follow should be read in the light of the statistics given above which show that across the range of questions on the evaluation forms 95% of all responses awarded grade 1 (outstanding), grade 2 (good) or grade 3 (satisfactory). Only 5% were grade 4 (less than satisfactory) and grade 5 (poor).

14 The grades 4 and 5 given by colleges were concentrated in a small number of colleges. That this small minority of inspections appears to be less than satisfactory is clearly a matter for concern, and it might be advantageous for the inspectorate to consider these cases in detail to see if there are any common factors involved.

15 It is also worth noting that the proportion of colleges completing the evaluation form by grading only has increased. The volume of comments has diminished, along with the number of supplementary letters raising the particular concerns of individual colleges. Fewer comments and reliance on the use of grades may reflect a growing acceptance of an increasingly professional and consistent FEFC system of inspection.

## **Particular Strengths of the Inspection Programme**

### **Personal qualities and professionalism**

16 Both the statistics of the responses to questions 4, 9 and 15 and the comments related to those questions make it clear that, as in 1997-98, the strengths of the inspection programme derive greatly from the personal qualities and professionalism demonstrated by the inspectors.

- *‘the reporting inspector ensured that the inspection was well organised and most certainly very rigorous. Communication with the college was good, issues were dealt with openly and thoroughly yet with due respect for the individuals concerned.’*

Many colleges welcomed inspectors’ responsiveness to their particular needs and local circumstances:

- *‘we were pleased that the inspectors took the context of the college into account’*
- *‘the majority of the team acknowledged the strain of the process upon individual members of staff’*
- *‘particularly impressive given the short notice’.*

Such capacity and openness was in most cases established early in the process:

- *‘the college inspector briefed all staff on the inspection process. This was clear and effective’*
- *‘pre-inspection meetings and those during inspection were valued by college staff’.*

This year there appeared to be even less debate about judgements made by inspectors:

- *‘the inspection team interacted with the staff and managers in a rigorous but constructive way which ensured that all the staff trusted their professional judgements and found the inspection a positive experience’*
- *‘inspectors were rigorous and fair’.*

It is clear that, as in 1997-98, that the attitude or professionalism of one or two inspectors could damage this general acceptance of inspectors:

- *‘one member of the team did not arrive on the Monday morning as expected, which led to changes. With this exception, the inspection was tightly managed by the lead inspector who was concerned at all times about the college’s needs’*



- *'data issues were dealt with calmly with well managed and clear communications. The cross-college inspectors were very well managed. One area of weakness was overseeing the work of curriculum inspectors and there was some variation in protocols and feedback'*
- *'generally, inspectors were very good, including inexperienced inspectors. However, there were problems with the inspector for management'*
- *'the majority conducted themselves with absolute professionalism. There were, however, two notable exceptions'.*

### **Staff contacts**

17 Working relationships between members of staff and inspectors were mostly positive and many responses indicated that considerable respect was established, with each acknowledging the professional concerns of the other:

- *'a real strength! All staff commented on the professional manner adopted by the inspectors. They were thorough but willing to listen, sensitive but clear'*
- *'points of disagreement were well argued and a satisfactory outcome achieved'*
- *'even difficult messages were skilfully delivered in the vast majority of cases'*
- *'the messengers were very professional even when the message was not the one we wanted to hear'.*

Meetings of groups with inspectors, too, were generally well received:

- *'the majority of the meetings were valuable, and allowed the college to present its position effectively'*
- *'all staff have been extremely positive about the meetings and the contributions they were able to make'*
- *'in general, the value of the meetings was good, and indeed many were outstanding'.*

However, there is some evidence that some larger meetings were less productive, for reasons which are not clear but which might benefit from further investigation:

- *'during the inspection of governance and management considerable concern was expressed about the quality, appropriateness and value of the meetings aspect of the inspection. These are views upheld by the governors, staff and external representatives'*
- *'unfortunately, the style of the meetings with governors was very badly received and governors have expressed strong criticism about the value of the meetings. Highly experienced senior executives were left with a strong feeling that the style adopted had denied them any opportunity to express their views or explain their actions'.*

### **The importance of the college nominee**

18 The response to question 13, about the importance of the college nominee was overwhelmingly positive, with 71% awarding it as outstanding, grade 1. The college nominee is seen as by many colleges as crucial to the whole process, and especially appropriate in the context of self-assessment. It also enabled the college to scrutinise

procedures and to be assured that they were fair. Typical comments about the value of the college nominee were:

- *'absolutely key to the success and integrity of the inspection process'*
- *'essential to facilitate effective communication and ensure that evidence is made available and understood'*
- *'a smoother of ruffled feathers'.*

In 1997-98, although most colleges valued having a college nominee, a few expressed doubts, which seem slightly more widespread in 1998-99:

- *'...to state that the nominee is a 'member of the inspection team' is misleading. The nominee's participation in formal meetings was not on the same basis as the rest of the team, and there were clearly other meetings which the nominee did not attend'*
- *'my opinion on the merits of having a college nominee is becoming neutral. Almost certainly of more value to the inspection team than to the college'.*

19 Despite a few concerns, the college nominee remains a much-valued and distinctive feature of the FEFC inspection process.

### **Issues Raised by Colleges**

20 The following comments need to be considered in the light of the predominantly positive responses from colleges about inspection, as shown by the statistics and the bulk of their comments. Even where inspection was considered by the colleges to have worked well, many had some concerns which they wished to air. Issues raised by the majority of colleges and reported here should be seen as suggestions for improvement, not a strong critique of inspections.

### **Inspectors and inspection teams**

21 The illness of key inspectors, such as the college inspector or the reporting inspector, although understood as unavoidable nevertheless disconcerted college staff. Even apparently minor changes in inspection teams could spark anxiety, especially if colleges felt they had not been informed properly of changes:

- *'an unfortunate change of college inspector three months prior to inspection, but good links despite this'*
- *'we were unaware that the science inspector had changed and discovered this after sending documentation to inspectors. The regional office did not inform the college nominee directly. The college inspector and reporting inspector expressed surprise when they discovered this'.*

22 Although such difficulties were usually overcome through the exercise of goodwill by both colleges and the inspectors, confidence in both the process and the team could be at risk.

23 Confidence was also eroded in a few cases by the inspectors' knowledge of or ability to handle information made available to them prior to the inspection:

- *'some inspectors had major problems with the statistical data, particularly the use of benchmarking data from a variety of sources'*

- *'the response to the written information was poor. Some inspectors did not seem to have read information provided prior to inspection and they requested information that had already been supplied'.*

The effectiveness of the inspection team was raised, both positively and negatively:

- *'I was impressed by the way they acted as a team collecting evidence and their willingness to challenge one another'*
- *'the team apparently first came together on the Monday morning. By no means all of the inspectors knew each other and the need to pull a team together in such a short time, in my view, made the inspection process more difficult for the college'.*

Whilst knowing one another was not crucial, colleges felt that consistent behaviour and standards were:

- *'that one inspector should work in a different manner, portray a totally different attitude and manner to staff and students, and create an 'atmosphere' and negativity is a major concern'*
- *'some inspectors observed for the full duration of classes, others for 30-minute "snapshots" which is far from ideal'.*

A few colleges commented on inspectors holding preconceptions or not being up to date:

- *'the management did feel that one curriculum area inspector had fixed ideas on accreditation and progression issues. In the end this led to fruitful discussion'.*
- *'a staff survey identified concerns with regard to some inspectors' knowledge of current working practices'.*

24 In 1997-98, considerable disquiet was expressed by a number of colleges about the inexperience of some of the part-time inspectors. No such concerns were expressed in 1998-99:

- *'our previous concerns about the inadequacies of part-time inspectors were not borne out in this cycle'.*

25 However, there were concerns expressed about how the involvement of 'other inspectors', such as those from the DfEE assessing careers education and guidance, were managed by the inspectorate and where liaison between them and the college was less good.

### **Nature and style of the process**

26 As in 1997-98, the issue of the role of the audit service and the inspectorate was a recurring theme. However, more positive comments were made about the role of auditors in 1988-99 than in the previous year:

- *'there is a need to clarify the audit and governance inspector roles and to clarify audit criteria for judgements on governance and management'*
- *'although the college had some concerns about the difference between audit methodology and the inspection process, we are happy to report that we were particularly impressed with the role of the FEFC auditor, his attention to detail and the quality of his verbal feedback'*

- *'the presence of the FEFC auditor was a very positive feature of the inspection'.*

27 But concerns remained for some colleges about the roles of the inspectors and the audit service:

- *'...staff involved in interviews with the audit service found that questions were prejudiced, biased, not open-ended and often based on a false premise'*
- *'...the audit process merely seems to involve 'ticking' their list of compliance requirements. The college deserves to know the list it will be judged against'.*

Some colleges felt that the inspection system is too concentrated, and had become too bureaucratic:

- *'the inspection process was very intense and therefore did not facilitate immediate feedback to staff. This was a source of anxiety'*
- *'a very pressured week and did not feel like a 'lighter touch'. Evidence collation and tagging paperwork is bureaucratic and it is impossible for inspectors to read it all...better to concentrate on providing limited evidence around a few important performance indicators than evidence for all judgements'.*

However, for most:

- *'the overall process went very smoothly compared with the last round of inspection and has provided the college with a clear grasp of the issues, and the college's strengths and weaknesses'.*

Very few felt that:

- *'some staff, including senior staff have found the inspection itself to be both demoralising and demotivating'.*

### **Production of the self-assessment report and links prior to inspections**

28 As in 1997-98, a number of colleges felt that the production of their self-assessment report was the most useful part of the process. Much more positive responses were made by colleges to the question about the length of notice required for receipt of the self-assessment report: 97% grades 1 to 3 compared with 67% in 1997-98. Similarly, responses to the question about the length of notice for student achievement data was assessed much more positively in 1998-99: 92% grades 1 to 3 compared with 71% in 1997-98.

29 Some concerns remain, particularly about student achievement data. These are in part linked to the time in the year when the inspection was due to take place. A few colleges commented that inspections in the autumn term made the use of up-to-date student achievement data more problematic. Comments included:

- *'a lot of data was FEFC sourced, the college was then expected to adapt it and return it. This seems extra unnecessary work for the college'*
- *'the verification of the student achievement data was undertaken in the week before the inspection. This was far too late in the process and did not allow the focus for the inspection week to be on the other key aspects of curriculum delivery and management'.*

A concern about how inspectors viewed the self-assessment report was that:

- *‘progress in the six-month period between report submission and the actual inspection was not as relevant as the college had been led to expect’.*

30 The variation in the extent of help from the inspectorate prior to the inspection, and particularly in relation to the self-assessment was of concern for some colleges. At its best:

- *‘good sound advice was offered. Early drafts were discussed and action taken to be mutually beneficial in terms of inspectorate and college needs’.*

And at the other end of the scale, one college felt very strongly:

- *‘we were informed that it was acceptable to provide an updated version of our most recent self-assessment report. Being a working internal document, this naturally concentrated on problems and issues which the college was addressing, rather than giving a full account of all our strengths, which we did take account of in awarding ourselves grades. We feel that we were penalised for our frankness’.*

Whilst another raised a vital, if at first sight rather semantic, question:

- *‘inspectors criticised the fact that not all the strengths were noted in the self-assessment report. For example, the careful marking of students’ work was not included as a key strength in the self-assessment report. But, on advice, the college had endeavoured to moderate out normal good practice from the self-assessment report’.*

### **Scope and scale**

31 This was an area in which the responses were more guardedly favourable, with almost the least grade 1 responses. This is perhaps related to what one college described as:

- *‘the new style is very compressed and some areas are not fully viewed by the inspectorate. Some staff were disappointed’.*

There was particular concern that:

- *‘some curriculum areas were not inspected in either 1994 or 1999’*

and that some small specialist areas of the curriculum were not inspected.

The balance of inspection was also queried:

- *‘an imbalance against the vocational work that the college provides. Around 40% of the work is vocational – the inspection looked at less than 10%’*
- *‘the areas chosen represented an appropriate profile of our own self-assessed grades. However, the particular courses selected ...were heavily weighted towards full-time 16 to 19 provision’.*

Particularly in larger further education colleges, there was a concern that:

- *'the accuracy of the whole self-assessment report is in question on the basis of an inspection covering only one part of that programme area'.*

Whilst in smaller colleges, there were problems where staff have multiple functions:

- *'one member of staff was observed five times'.*

32 The self-assessment report grading as the basis for the 'selection' of programme areas to be inspected was seen by some colleges as contentious:

- *'extensive grade 1 self-assessed provision was not selected. Our self-assessment report was validated but the public report will not reflect the grade 1 curriculum provision'.*

33 However, a number of colleges sought to balance the need for a 'lighter touch' with the inherent problems of selectivity, and came to the conclusion that:

- *'anything less would have been unhelpful. The scale and scope created an improved agenda for the next few years'.*

## **Feedback**

34 As noted in 1997-98, feedback is a critical point in the process. The level of dissatisfaction among colleges remained low in 1998-99. Fewer comments were made about disputed programme area grades and 'late surprises' in judgements reached. Feedback was seen by many as:

- *'concise, thorough and constructive'*
- *'excellent and supportive. Inspectors were prepared to listen and discuss but hold to the evidence of the inspection'.*

35 A few colleges expressed concerns but there was no discernible trend. Negative comments included:

- *'some feedback sessions were very brief'*
- *'feedback ranged from four minutes to 30 minutes per curriculum area. It was difficult to disentangle key strengths and weaknesses from some feedback'*
- *'feedback for programme areas was better than feedback from cross-college areas'*
- *'generally good in cross-college aspects but very variable from curriculum'*
- *'if inspection of a failing college is deemed to be the first step on the road to recovery, it is vital that negative aspects are fed back in such a way as to enable the college to move forward... not all inspectors were skilled at doing this'.*

36 One more widely reported feeling, repeated from 1997-98, was that:

- *'the cross-college areas would have appreciated feedback in a similar manner to the curriculum areas'.*

## Comparisons

37 There were fewer negative comments this year about the basis of comparisons with other colleges. However, some colleges that felt they were changing rapidly, were concerned that the benchmarking data lagged behind. One college sought greater clarity:

- *'we took great care to make a comprehensive list of all the reasons cited in inspection reports when colleges were awarded a grade 1 in cross-college areas. We noted that some grade 1s were awarded even though there appeared to be quite serious weaknesses. Inspectors made it quite clear to us that we should not regard the information which we had compiled as valid benchmarking data. This is both regrettable and unfair since there should clearly be some measure of congruence in the written reasons given when colleges are awarded similar grades'.*

And a continuing plea from several colleges was:

- *'procedures have to be developed to clarify the inspectorate's position on performance in relation to value added'.*

## New issues

38 If some of the issues raised in the previous report appear to have been resolved or of diminishing importance, others appeared for the first time or with greater weight. One mentioned by an increasing number of larger colleges was the inspectorate's co-ordination with the Training Standards Council (TSC). Others aired included:

- the moderation of grade 1s
- the lack of multicultural mix of the inspection team
- the inappropriateness of the external inspector for management and governance in a general further education college to come from a sixth form college
- the need for help and support for new principals, particularly those taking up post in colleges left in less than satisfactory state by their predecessors
- in basic education, the college should be notified of some classes to be observed so that the college can supply confidential information on the identified needs of each student before the inspector undertakes any observations.

## Non-sector college providers of further education

39 In general the gradings compared very favourably with the more general colleges, and the comments, whilst few, were mainly very positive. Surprise, and perhaps disappointment, was expressed that:

- *'the inspectorate appeared to rely on circulars to maintain links in the years between inspections'.*

and that

- *'there seemed to be a focus on the paperwork and documentation. We would have anticipated more time being spent with the students'.*

## Evaluation of the Inspection after the Publication of the Report

40 By January 2000, slightly less than one quarter of the colleges who had completed the initial evaluation report had returned the second stage evaluation form after their inspection report was published.

41 In general, these evaluations were congruent with the earlier ones, those completed immediately after the inspection.

42 Most colleges rated the usefulness of the inspection process and the report as good:

- *'the report verified in the main the outcomes of the self-assessment process'*
- *'a helpful consultancy exercise; a positive change of internal mindset in relation to self-assessment developed'*
- *'whilst the inspection has been very useful in informing our agenda to take the college forward, the impact of the grades, in terms of both staff morale and the ability of the college to capitalise on our areas of real expertise, has been damaging'.*

43 In general, colleges reported that the published report reflected the interim feedback:

- *'very consistent with clear themes and issues running throughout the inspection to the published report'*
- *'the editing process flattened in some respects qualitative highlights fed back by inspectors'.*

A few were less happy:

- *'the published report was not as balanced as the interim feedback we received. The summary in particular was extremely harsh, although it was subsequently modified'.*

44 The messages in inspection reports were nearly always seen as very clear, even if not what was hoped for. Very few colleges made even mildly negative comments. One example of a more negative response is:

- *'the inspectors' views are clear in the report. However, they do not always match our priorities and the main differences are that we prioritise the student experience over paperwork deficiencies'.*

45 One of the responding colleges raised the issue of the future of FEFC and its inspection process:

- *'because of the value of FEFC inspection, we are very disappointed indeed that the White Paper Learning to Succeed may abolish the excellent format, the openness, the links with self-assessment and all the support for colleges. We have a mechanism for inspection second to none. Colleges will not be as well served by another inspectorate'.*

46 A few colleges commented on the costs associated with the inspection process:

- *'there is a high opportunity cost in producing some supporting data which does not flow naturally out of college's own self-assessment process'*



- *'if there is some way of reducing the administrative burden of the inspection process without diminishing the outcome I am sure that all colleges would be most appreciative'.*

47 The consistency between the inspection report and the Council's audit report is an area of discontent for some:

- *'there was a number of inconsistencies between the Council's audit report and the inspection report, resulting in a down-grading of the college'*
- *'the audit report is extremely positive. The corporation feels that there is an inconsistency between its report and the final grades achieved for governance and management'*
- *'the audit report and inspection report have very different styles and the emphasis of audit on process and inspection on outcome make them unhappy bedfellows'.*

48 All colleges reported that they used the inspection report for staff development purposes, including:

- staff training day on tutorials
- training relating to colleges' strategies for raising retention and achievement
- regular meetings held with staff about the report, culminating in a dedicated staff development week concentrating on the key issues
- a programme of 'pedagogic skills improvement workshops' has been established
- classroom observation has been intensified
- the college can provide extensive evidence of how the report has influenced developments in mathematics
- training to support the production of a tutors' handbook, and the reorganisation of interview and admission procedures
- there has been a greater sharing of strengths identified by inspectors across curriculum areas.

## **Concluding Comments and Conclusions**

49 The range of comments made and the selection quoted here is wide, and may imply less enthusiasm for the value of inspection than the numerical gradings indicate. It may be that the grades reflect the overall judgement, whilst the comments deal with the caveats and exceptions. Colleges have nothing to lose by being sharply critical, and yet, in the main, their criticisms are few, constructive and detailed.

50 Certain issues raised in 1997-98 by colleges have become less important:

- student achievement data now present less of a problem
- any inexperience of part-time inspectors was hardly mentioned
- the emergence of adverse judgements as 'late surprises' has diminished.

51 The success of the inspections does not rely solely on the expertise and professionalism of the inspectors, nor the process that they are implementing. The attitude of the college staff at every level matters too. The relationship between these elements influences the way in which a particular inspection progresses. The productive working relationships achieved in almost all cases, that assist the inspection whilst maintaining its rigour, are a credit both to the inspectorate and college staff.

52 Key issues for the inspectorate to address are:

- the consistency of support and guidance given to colleges in the preparation of their self-assessment report
- ways of minimising any disruption caused by changes in personnel allocated to inspection teams
- the best mechanisms for the interaction of the audit service and the inspectorate in the inspection of governance and management
- the ethnic and gender mix of inspection teams, and their awareness of cultural diversity issues
- the basis of selection of curriculum areas to be inspected and the clarity of the rationale of choices given to colleges
- the apparent negative impact of a small number of inspectors' approaches
- the importance of the reporting inspector dealing rapidly with the limited number of problems as soon as they arise
- reporting arrangements for cross-college aspects
- consistency in inspectorate practice and effective team-working.

