

REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE

**Good Practice
Report**

July 1997

Quality Assurance


THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

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FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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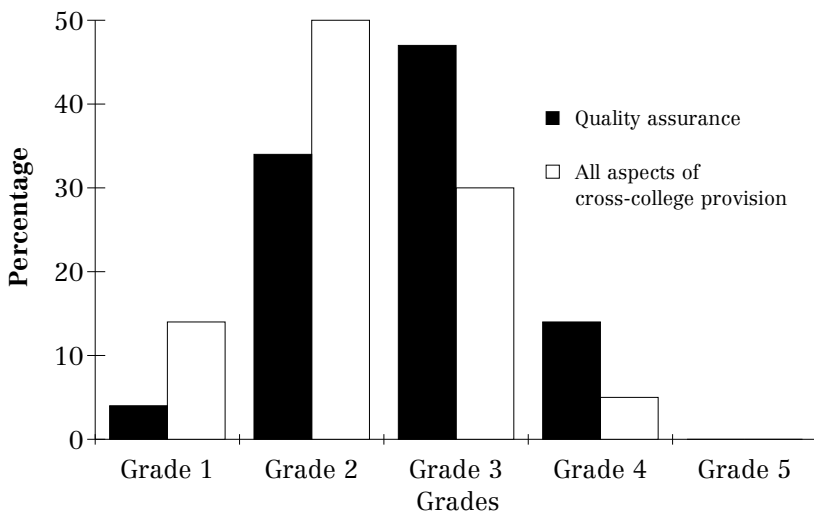
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INTRODUCTION

1 Since incorporation, in April 1993, further education colleges have devoted considerable thought and effort to developing policies, systems and procedures to assure and control quality. Colleges know that the quality of their provision is central to their operation and directly affects their reputation, recruitment and funding. The importance of effective quality assurance has been recognised in Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspection arrangements. Self-assessment by colleges of the quality of their provision is a key element of the revised framework for inspection which will be introduced from September 1997. The main purpose of inspection after September will be to validate a college's self-assessment. To help this process, colleges will be expected to assess their own strengths and weaknesses in the light of guidance provided by the FEFC, and to produce self-assessment reports. The rigour, comprehensiveness and accuracy of a college's self-assessment process and report will be important components of inspectors' assessment and grading of quality assurance. In addition, effective self-assessment is likely to be a key factor in the achievement of accredited status for colleges, which is currently under consideration by the FEFC.

2 Despite the progress colleges have made in developing quality assurance arrangements, evidence based on inspection grades indicates that this is the weakest aspect of colleges' provision (figure 1). The purpose of this report is to highlight and disseminate examples of good practice in devising and securing effective quality assurance in colleges.

Figure 1. Quality assurance grades compared with average grades for all aspects of cross-college provision, 1993 to 1996



Source: *inspectorate database, November 1996*

Note: based on a sample of 329 college inspections

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

3 A distinguishing feature of the further education sector is its diversity. Not surprisingly, therefore, quality assurance systems are also diverse. A discussion paper *Making Quality Your Own* (FEU, 1995) recommended that colleges develop systems that suit their own circumstances. Subsequently, a Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) report, *Quality Assurance in Colleges* (FEDA, 1995) outlined the characteristics shared by and the considerable differences between the five colleges which had by that date received an inspection grade 1 for quality assurance. This report identifies aspects of quality assurance which are working well for individual colleges. It does not seek to recommend a particular model. Colleges frequently combine elements of different approaches.

4 Governors in many colleges have only recently begun to turn their attention to quality assurance policies and procedures. Many corporation boards have been receiving reports on the achievements of students, some of which include retention rates and destinations as well as pass rates. It has been much less common for governors to be actively involved in monitoring the quality of the college's provision by establishing targets and indicators for measuring improvements. Where governors are carrying out their responsibilities for monitoring the quality of provision, colleges benefit.

5 A statement that a total quality management system is being implemented features in many colleges' policies. It is sometimes unclear what this means in practice. Staff may lack the common understanding of such a system which is generally accepted to be a first priority of total quality management. Nevertheless, some elements of total quality management have been successfully adopted. For example, some colleges have quality teams involved in setting specific performance standards. Some have worked effectively at improving communications and developing a sense of shared institutional priorities, features not only of total quality management but important in gaining the Investors in People award.

6 Vocational awarding bodies such as the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), now the Edexcel Foundation, have long required that courses leading to their awards are submitted to regular review and evaluation by teaching teams and students. Many colleges have, in recent years, adapted and refined their course review procedures. Statistical information may have been added to facilitate the monitoring of student enrolments and achievements. Procedures may have been extended to cover general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and general certificate of education (GCE) programmes and subjects. To be effective, reviews need to be consistently thorough. Colleges have acknowledged the

difficulty of raising all course reviews to the standard of the best, and of ensuring that action plans arising from reviews are acted upon.

7 Many colleges have introduced procedures for measuring students' progress while at college by comparing end-of-course achievements with their GCSE scores on entry. Where such value-added calculations are in use, they are almost always applied to performance at GCE A level. Value-added systems may incorporate the national comparisons available to subscribers to the Advanced Level Information System and the guidance issued by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Some colleges have designed their own method of scoring. The reliability of value-added data is dependent on complex factors but many colleges have found them useful in providing guidance for individual students as well as for monitoring and managing the performance of groups of students and teachers.

8 Industrially devised models of quality assurance, such as those accredited by the International Standards Organisation (ISO), emphasise document control, audits and uniform procedures. Many colleges have restricted this approach to those areas of the college which deal with direct training for business and industry, where it may be felt to be most appropriate. Some colleges have not followed the ISO approach but have nevertheless used its emphasis on uniformity of documentation to help in standardising quality assurance procedures.

9 Colleges often combine elements from several quality assurance models. The management services centre may be ISO-accredited, course review may have been developed and extended, quality improvement targets and service standards may have been agreed after consultation with staff and students, value-added calculations may be used on GCE A level programmes and the college may have gained, or be attempting to gain, recognition as an Investor in

People. The distinguishing features of mature and productive quality assurance systems include:

- a growing rigour and objectivity in the college's self-assessment of the quality of its provision
- the college's ability to act on an informed awareness of its shortcomings
- the involvement of governors in monitoring the quality of the college's provision
- the commitment of staff at all levels
- the increasing integration of quality assurance with strategic and operational planning
- clear evidence that the system is improving the quality of students' experiences.

10 What follows are brief statements summarising good practice with examples drawn from FEFC inspection reports. It is intended that they will be useful to colleges in carrying out self-assessments according to the guidelines for quality assurance in the revised inspection framework, described in Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*. A list of the inspection reports which provided source material is to be found in the annex. There are valuable elements in many colleges' quality assurance procedures even where the whole system lacks maturity and consistency. The reports chosen are a representative sample.

QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

There is a clearly defined policy and system which is supported by all staff.

11 At a general further education college in the East Midlands, the quality assurance system is clearly outlined in manuals containing standard forms and procedures for all stages of the process. The documentation is of a high standard, is readily accessible to all staff and is used throughout the college. Staff accept their responsibility to monitor and control quality.

12 At another East Midlands college, the introduction of systems and procedures to support the quality assurance policy has been accompanied by appropriate organisational and structural change. For example, there is a quality committee comprising senior managers. Faculty quality manuals set out local roles and responsibilities. Within faculties, course teams and support teams play a major part in agreeing the characteristics of good quality, and in setting the standards. Staff show commitment to these procedures.

Governors are consulted on quality assurance procedures and contribute to their development.

13 At a sixth form college in Essex, the governors' quality assurance focus group receives quality assurance reviews and provides advice and approval for quality assurance measures proposed by the college.

14 The governors of a Roman Catholic sixth form college in the North West region have formed a quality committee to support the

corporation board in its responsibilities for assuring quality and standards.

Quality assurance procedures are linked to management procedures and planning cycles.

15 At a college in Essex, the strategic planning cycle is linked to explicit quality standards for the curriculum and for cross-college support services such as the library and learning resources. As part of the annual planning process, each unit prepares an operating statement which contains a list of objectives, related quality standards, and target dates for their achievement. Success in achieving quality standards is reviewed termly.

16 At a London college, the strategic plan is reviewed annually and, with governors' approval, is used to set a framework within which each curriculum and cross-college area establishes its operational plans. Subsequently, an operational plan for the whole college is produced and its implementation is monitored on a termly basis. Subsumed within the operational plan is an internal quality report, produced annually, which sets performance targets for all sections of the college.

17 Academic and support managers at another London college are responsible for agreeing quality targets and action plans with individuals and teams. Progress is regularly reviewed at all levels. Important issues are addressed at meetings of the college management team, departmental heads and course team leaders.

STANDARDS AND TARGETS

Quality standards are defined in measurable terms and are monitored.

18 A sixth form college in the FEFC's North West region has developed quality characteristics, targets for improvements and standards for most activities. They cover the work of all teaching departments, student guidance, marketing, support services, property services and the performance of senior managers. The work of departments and service areas is reviewed regularly so that performance can be evaluated against measures of quality.

Governors are involved in monitoring the quality of the college's provision and in establishing indicators by which to assess improvements to it.

19 At a general further education college in Yorkshire, annual reports on different aspects of quality are considered by the corporation and improvements are initiated. For example, following a report to the board summarising the views of external verifiers, the teaching of key skills is being reviewed in order to make it more consistent.

20 Written reports on the quality of the college's academic provision are presented each December to the corporation of a sixth form college in Yorkshire. A wide variety of data is reported, including the aggregated results of questionnaires for students, examination pass rates for recent years, comparisons between students' actual and predicted examination performance, and student retention rates. A good feature is the requirement that issues arising out of these reports are the subject of further analysis

by the vice-principal and are discussed at the next meeting of the finances and general purposes committee of the corporation board.

Quality standards enable staff to develop a comparative view of achievements.

21 Performance at a sixth form college in the West Midlands is reviewed every autumn against targets for enrolments, retention, examination results and student destinations. Wherever possible, performance is compared with other institutions nationally. Teaching groups evaluate their own performance against quality statements which they have previously devised and published. A measure of the value added by the college is calculated for each group of students within a subject area, and reasons are sought for differences between these groups.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There is an emphasis on standards of teaching and learning and the quality of students' experience in college.

22 At a large general further education college in the North East region, the planning document for each course has to incorporate approved statements on the methods of teaching and learning which will be used to cover the course. Course descriptions, issued to students, form a guarantee of what students can expect to receive.

23 In a London college, staff awareness of the impact of quality issues on teaching and learning has been raised by feedback from students, by self-assessment reports and by a termly forum on teaching and learning. Some members of the forum have observed

each other's lessons. On the GCE A level and GCSE programmes, lessons are evaluated by the students and this activity has led to changes in classroom practice.

Lessons are observed and judgements on them shared with those teaching them.

24 A large general further education college in the Eastern Region is one of many which have developed a system of internal inspection modelled on FEFC inspections. The inspections have provided in-service training for 35 staff, improved communication across faculties, and encouraged staff to reflect analytically on their teaching. Outcomes of the process are included in course review reports.

25 A recently introduced approach to improving teaching and learning at a sixth form college involves the observation of classroom practice by senior managers, curriculum area leaders and teachers. They use criteria relating to planning, preparation, student relationships, teaching, classroom management, equal opportunities and assessment procedures. A sample group of students also completes an evaluation of the teaching.

COURSE REVIEWS

Reviews are thorough, valued by those taking part, and result in action plans.

26 Programme teams at a college in the Eastern Region are required to produce a master file which serves as an operational manual and as evidence for quality assurance. Each team is required to produce a summary report containing key statistical indicators, the strengths and weaknesses of the programme area, matters requiring attention and an action plan.

27 Detailed guidance is given on the issues to be addressed in the annual reviews of every full-time and part-time course at an agricultural college. To improve consistency, a common structure for the reports is required, together with a supporting sheet for course statistics. Most reports give a clear picture of the operation and achievements of the course. A separate report details action to be taken to improve provision, including the timescales for implementation and the staff responsible. Comments from moderators and employers also contribute to the evaluation process.

Review and evaluation involves collecting students' views.

28 Much effort at a London college goes into responding to students' views. Some areas have responded effectively to concerns raised in regular student consultation meetings. There are regular liaison meetings between the student union executive and the senior management. Consequent improvements include a no-smoking policy and better access for students with restricted mobility. There are three cross-college surveys of student opinion each year. A well-presented summary goes to the senior management team, and issues for action are sent to heads of services and course managers. The summary is published in the college newsletter.

COLLEGE CHARTERS

The college charter is in active use and complaints procedures are well established.

29 At another London college, clear information is provided for the students on how to make a complaint. Good records are kept of each stage in processing the complaint and progress is monitored to

ensure a satisfactory resolution. Letters to complainants are courteous, helpful and clear, reflecting the college's view of students as valued customers.

30 At a sixth form college in the Northern Region, links between the framework for quality assurance and the college charter commitments are clear. Each section of the charter contains realistic statements of what users can expect from the college, and in many cases, these statements are matched to specific, quantitative targets.

31 The charter at a London college is introduced to students at their induction, summarised in the student handbook, and displayed as a wall poster. It is available in the three languages most used by students and a simplified version is available for students with learning difficulties. There has been a review of the extent to which charter commitments have been met, an action plan has been developed and targets for review and improvement have been set for the next college year.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The college informs itself of the strengths and weaknesses of its quality assurance procedures.

32 The manager responsible for quality at a general further education college in the Northern Region leads a team of trained auditors drawn from teaching staff across the college. They audit the extent to which course teams comply with quality assurance procedures. The results of individual course audits are provided to the relevant managers.

33 At a college in the South West region, an internal audit team, including the principal and vice-principal, reports on the end-of-

course reviews. The college's annual report includes the results of the audit team's work. This means that the college has a detailed view of where reviews are ineffective. The status given to the audit team's work by the involvement of the principalship adds to its potential for quality improvement.

The college's self-assessment report accurately identifies the institution's strengths and weaknesses.

34 The first self-assessment report of a tertiary college in the South East region was thorough, clearly written and well presented. It was based on a quality audit. Under each heading in the report, strengths and weaknesses were set out as bullet points, with more detailed evaluative comments provided in narrative paragraphs. Most of the judgements recorded in the report coincided with those of inspectors.

35 At a sixth form college in London the self-assessment report was well written. All major weaknesses were identified as well as the strengths. The report included information on the actions being taken to address weaknesses, target dates by which action was to be completed and the staff responsible. The judgements made were generally consistent with those arrived at by the inspection team.

36 A large general further education college in London has produced two annual self-assessment reports so far and uses these as working documents for strategic planning. A comprehensive self-assessment programme includes inspections of curriculum areas. The most recent report provides a self-critical view of the college's provision.

INTERNAL VALIDATION AND VERIFICATION

The college validates its courses and is taking steps to develop and co-ordinate internal verification of assessment standards and procedures.

37 Internal verification at a college in the East Midlands region aims to ensure that systems for fair and accurate assessment are available to students, that they are consistent and that they satisfy the requirements of internal quality standards and those of external bodies. Reports from external verifiers and moderators are included in the procedure.

38 At a Midlands college there are internal peer review processes for all existing courses and validation for all course proposals where courses are over 100 hours in length. Both mechanisms are extremely rigorous, but also supportive. Issues associated with quality raised by students, staff or the wider community are responded to and resolved.

39 A London college has a co-ordinator to manage internal verification of vocational courses and to co-ordinate assessor and verifier training for internal and external clients. Course co-ordinators receive remission of one hour a week from their teaching commitments for internal verification work.

40 An academic standards unit at a Yorkshire college ensures that courses are appropriate to the college's mission and meet national standards. There are rigorous procedures for the development and periodic review of courses to ensure that the college can resource and teach them effectively.

STAFF APPRAISAL AND TRAINING

Staff appraisal is linked to staff development and valued for its outcomes.

41 Staff development needs at a tertiary college in the South West region are identified during appraisal, and appraisal is linked to strategic developments. The annual appraisal process for all full-time teaching and support staff has been evaluated and extended to all but hourly paid employees. Staff are positive about the review process, understand it and feel that their development needs will continue to be met.

Staff development has a high profile and includes induction and support for newly qualified teachers.

42 All staff at a London college are entitled to attend college courses for up to four hours a week, free of charge. This has enabled some to gain qualifications such as national vocational qualifications (NVQs), supervisory management awards, and qualifications in health and safety and first aid. Teachers without teaching qualifications are encouraged to participate in the college's teacher training course at stage one and then to undertake further external training. About five or six people a year are allocated half the costs of undertaking further degrees and other qualifications. A few teachers have taken advantage of placements in industry. There is an induction programme for all new staff which takes place on Saturdays in the autumn and spring terms. An open learning pack is provided for those unable to attend. The college's commitment to quality and the development of its staff has been recognised by the attainment of the Investors in People award.

CONCLUSIONS

43 The maturity of the quality assurance system and consistency in implementing quality assurance procedures are key issues for colleges during inspection. Colleges with significant weaknesses in their quality assurance systems may have areas of high achievement but without effective quality assurance procedures it may be difficult to ensure that this state of affairs continues, or to persuade other interested parties that the institution is doing as much as it can for its students.

44 It would be unrealistic to expect total uniformity of procedures across a large and diverse college. However, colleges with more mature systems know where inconsistencies exist and deal with them effectively.

45 The move to appropriate forms of self-assessment is likely to be difficult if quality assurance is not rigorous and does not include:

- regular collection and analysis of data on student retention and achievement
- careful scrutiny of teaching methods, methods of learning and students' perceptions of their effectiveness
- the sharing of good practice
- the definition of targets for improvement
- the creation of effective action plans to deal with identified weaknesses.

46 Some colleges are training staff to assess their work against objective criteria, to seek out and analyse trends, to assess the work of colleagues, and to write effective internal reports. Such training is aimed at raising awareness of the need to make evaluative judgements rather than to provide descriptive statements. The successful aggregation of judgements from different teams in the

college to form a self-assessment report which is accurate, reliable, and comprehensive, and therefore useful to the college's planning and development, will receive much more attention from colleges and inspectors from September 1997 onwards.

47 All the work that goes into quality assurance should produce improvements in the quality of students' experience and in the standard of their achievements. It can be frustrating for colleges to have developed new and better procedures and then to find that there is a time lag between their implementation and any observable improvements. Conversely, when a college has a suitable quality assurance system delivered through consistent procedures, and where all this has been in place long enough to take effect, colleges and inspectors can be encouraged by the sort of improvements briefly described in the following extracts drawn from published inspection reports.

There have been changes and improvements in teaching styles; additional instruction in note making; an improved student diary; improved publicity about counselling; and the provision of more study space.

Most staff acknowledge the benefits of appraisal in raising the quality of teaching and in making in-service training more relevant.

The common standards that have been developed for the learning resource centres, libraries and central information technology provision on both sites have been effective in raising quality.

Examples of improvements, generated at least in part by course reviews, include the remodelling of a student common room and the provision of two resource rooms. Issues identified in course reviews also helped in restructuring the GCSE course.

48 The following features are characteristic of the more effective quality assurance systems inspected between September 1993 and June 1997:

- there is a clearly defined policy and system which is supported by staff
- governors are consulted on quality assurance procedures and contribute to their development
- the quality assurance procedures are linked to management procedures and planning cycles
- standards related to quality are defined in measurable terms and are monitored
- governors are involved in monitoring the quality of the college's provision and in establishing indicators by which to assess improvements to it
- clear standards enable staff to develop a comparative view of achievements
- standards of teaching and learning and the quality of students' experiences in college are emphasised
- learning sessions are observed and judgements on them shared with the teachers concerned
- reviews are thorough, valued by those taking part and result in action plans
- review and evaluation involves collecting students' views
- the college charter is in active use and the complaints procedures are well established
- the college informs itself of the strengths and weaknesses of its quality assurance procedures

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- the college's self-assessment report accurately identifies strengths and weaknesses
 - the college validates its courses and is taking steps to develop and co-ordinate internal verification of assessment standards and procedures
 - staff appraisal is linked to staff development and valued for its outcomes
 - staff development has a high profile and includes induction and support for newly qualified teachers.

COLLEGE INSPECTION REPORTS USED IN THIS REPORT

Bishop Burton College

Bradford and Ilkley Community College

Brockenhurst College

Chesterfield College

College of North West London (The)

Exeter College

Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology

Hackney Community College

Harlow College

Havering College of Further and Higher Education

Huddersfield Technical College

Hull College

John Ruskin College

Kensington and Chelsea College

New College, Telford

Newcastle College

Newham College of Further Education

North Derbyshire Tertiary College

North Warwickshire College of Technology and Art
(now North Warwickshire and Hinckley College)

North Lincolnshire College

Peter Symonds' College

Reigate College

Seevic College

South Tyneside College

St Mary's College, Blackburn

St Mary Roman Catholic Sixth Form College, Middlesbrough

Swindon College

Teesside Tertiary College

Thurrock College

Tower Hamlets College

Winstanley College

Wyke Sixth Form College


York Sixth Form College

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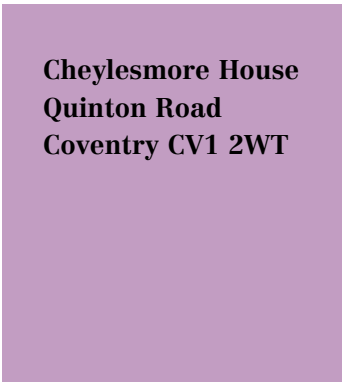
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