

Alton College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: March 2000
Report from the Inspectorate
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 assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

REINSPECTION

The FEFC has agreed that colleges with provision judged by the inspectorate to be less than satisfactory or poor (grade 4 or 5) should be reinspected. In these circumstances, a college may have its funding agreement with the FEFC qualified to prevent it increasing the number of new students in an unsatisfactory curriculum area until the FEFC is satisfied that weaknesses have been addressed.

Satisfactory provision may also be reinspected if actions have been taken to improve quality and the college's existing inspection grade is the only factor which prevents it from meeting the criteria for FEFC accreditation.

Reinspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Reinspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports and confirm that actions taken as a result of previous inspection have improved the quality of provision. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. The opinion of the FEFC's audit service contributes to inspectorate judgements about governance and management.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Assessments use grades on a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses. The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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Alton College South East Region

Reinspection of quality assurance: March 2000

Background

Alton College was inspected in October 1997 and the findings published in inspection report 03/98. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 3.

The key strengths were: a coherent framework for assuring the quality of the curriculum; the adoption of performance indicators for many areas of work; staff commitment to high professional standards; regular review of the college charter; the achievement of the Investors in People award. The major weaknesses were: lack of rigour in ensuring compliance with the quality assurance framework; adoption of some inappropriate targets; overestimation of the quality of teaching and learning; failure to extend the quality assurance framework to all areas; slow implementation of quality assurance procedures.

Reinspection took place in March 2000, at the college's request following the corporation's decision to seek accredited status. All other cross-college aspects were graded 2 at the last inspection. Inspectors examined a range of documents and had meetings with governors, managers, teaching and support staff and students.

Assessment

Inspectors judged that significant progress had been made in addressing the main weaknesses identified in November 1997. The college has developed a more detailed quality assurance system that has clearer procedures. These are now more consistently followed by staff. Course reviews are produced to a common format and include a detailed analysis of retention and achievement. Action plans still require sharper focus and these would benefit from more rigorous internal validation and critical external scrutiny. Quality assurance procedures now embrace all college activity, although there is still need for further development in cross-college areas. The corporation is actively involved in monitoring the college's academic performance and is providing a clear and challenging lead in taking forward the standards agenda.

The student president is *ex officio* a governor of the college. The board involves her in the debate of issues that affect the quality of student life. The college gives high priority to student opinion and its commitments in the college charter. Regular and comprehensive surveys are carried out. Improvements which have resulted from this consultation process include better access to the Internet, better canteen and social facilities, and the college's plan to improve facilities for sport and leisure on the campus. However, while the analyses of surveys are posted on appropriate notice boards, there is no clear route for decisions taken as a result of these surveys to be formally communicated to staff and students.

The college sets itself high standards for student retention and achievement. These have been achieved and sustained over a number of years by students aged 16 to 18. The college has chosen recently to use the more challenging benchmarks for sixth form colleges which are higher than it needs to use as a tertiary college. Retention and achievement for this age group are at or above these national benchmarks for the period 1995-96 to 1997-98. Preliminary analysis of the college's 1998-99 ISR returns indicates that the college continues to maintain high standards.

At the time of the last inspection, the management of adult provision was judged to have significant weaknesses. The college has responded positively to this criticism. The new arrangements, which have been in place for over a year, have brought a greater coherence and direction to this provision. The impact of these changes is now being manifested in some significant improvements in retention and achievement in 1998-99 for most older students.

The college has had a long tradition of target-setting at course level. There is now extensive use of target-setting across the college which is supported by the greatly improved management information system. However, there is a need for greater rigour and challenge in setting targets in areas that are already good. Target-setting for individual students is a particular strength. This process is underpinned by termly one-to-one progress reviews which staff, students and their parents value.

The corporation has recently approved a revised and improved appraisal scheme. An improved lesson observation scheme benefits from a more considered approach. However, not all staff have been observed. Those who have been observed welcome the feedback. The college has started to collaborate with other colleges in the development of external assessment of academic performance. Staff development planning and provision are responsive to needs identified during appraisal. Senior managers ensure that planning is relevant to the college's strategic objectives.

Revised grade: quality assurance 2.