

Blackburn College
Reinspection of Governance: June 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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Blackburn College North West Region

Reinspection of governance: June 2000

Background

Blackburn College was inspected in March 1999 and the findings were published in the inspection report 77/99. Provision in governance was graded 3 and the audit service opinion was that governance was adequate. The college requested reinspection since this was the only grade that prevented it from applying for accreditation.

The strengths identified by the inspection were the productive working relationship of the corporation and senior managers, the open conduct of corporation business and effective communications with college staff. The major weaknesses identified were the corporation's ineffective monitoring of retention rates, inadequate arrangements for judging the effectiveness of the corporation and an unsystematic approach to the recruitment, induction and training of governors. Following the inspection, the college prepared an action plan to address the weaknesses. It evaluated its progress against the action plan and updated its self-assessment report.

The reinspection was carried out in June 2000 by one inspector and an auditor working for six days. They held meetings with governors, managers and the clerk and examined a wide range of documents, including information provide for governors on students' retention.

Assessment

Inspectors and auditors judged that the college had made good progress in addressing most of the key weaknesses in governance identified at the last inspection. They agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the revised self-assessment report.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

A formal induction programme is now provided for new governors. It includes the provision of essential documents and the allocation of mentors. A training plan for governors has been adopted. Regular briefings and details of training opportunities are provided by the clerk. However, the individual training needs of members are not systematically identified. Vacancies are filled through a careful analysis of the skills needed. Formal appointment procedures have not yet been documented. The remuneration committee now gives thorough consideration to the outcomes of the appraisal process for the principal and senior postholders.

The standing orders and code of conduct have been updated to incorporate changes to the instrument and articles of government. The register of interests is completed annually and is accompanied by comprehensive guidance on completion. The policy and resources committee now routinely monitors franchising, overseas activities and the performance of the college company.

A curriculum and quality committee of the corporation has been established. It has clear terms of reference which include the monitoring of the academic performance of the college and production of an annual report to the full corporation. In its initial meetings it has carefully reviewed the retention and pass rates for a range of courses. A calendar of activities has been approved. These specifically include a review of the performance of the substantial franchised provision. This review has not yet been considered in sufficient detail by governors. The committee has a clear strategy for determining its information requirements.

The corporation has not yet made adequate arrangements for judging its own effectiveness. A set of draft performance indicators has been considered. They have been referred for further consideration by the policy and resources committee. Governors were fully involved in the production of the self-assessment report on governance prepared for the reinspection.

Revised grade: governance 2.