

Cricklade College
Reinspection of Governance: April 1999
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. 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.

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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Cricklade College South East Region

Reinspection of Governance: April 1999

Background

Cricklade College was inspected during November 1997 and the findings were published in inspection report 21/98. Provision in governance was graded 4 and the audit service opinion was that governance was weak.

The strengths of the provision were: the range of governors' links with the community and local business and the high level of commitment demonstrated by board members. The main weaknesses identified at inspection were: poor fulfilment of responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC; poor compliance with the instrument and articles of government; limited involvement in strategic planning; ineffective clerking arrangements; an unrecognised lack of financial expertise among members; inadequate attention to curriculum and student matters; inadequate appraisal arrangements for senior staff.

The college's commentary of progress against the post-inspection action plan and the governance self-assessment report address all of the previously identified weaknesses. The self-assessment report describes strengths as: compliance with instrument and articles of government and effective administration of all aspects of the board's work; commitment on the part of governors to implement improvements and best practice recommendations; effective oversight of college's financial position; the good range of skills and experience of board members. The areas of weakness identified are: insufficient involvement of the board in the strategic planning process; some areas of governance still requiring improvement and refinement; employment policies which comprise the framework for pay and conditions of service of staff ; appropriate programme of training needs to be implemented.

The provision was reinspected in April 1999, by an inspector and an auditor working for six days. They held meetings with senior managers, staff and governors and examined a wide range of college documentation.

Assessment

Governors have understood and debated all the weaknesses in governance described in the previous inspection report. Governors have made significant progress in securing improvement in some of the areas of concern, but important aspects of their work continue to be unsatisfactory.

The strengths identified in the previous inspection continue to characterise governance. The governors have amply demonstrated their loyalty and commitment to the college. Since the last inspection, they have had to address a number of crucial issues for the college. For much of this time the principal was suspended and an acting principal was in post. Governors have worked more closely with senior managers during this period and provided valuable support to them. Governors continue to offer a wide range of links with the local community. The range of governors' skills and experience has improved since the last inspection. The corporation has partly addressed its lack of financial expertise through

the appointment of a governor who is an accountant. Furthermore, to enhance the ability of the board to handle a much increased workload, eight new governors were appointed in February 1999. These are drawn from further afield than Andover and all have recent working experience of education.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC. Since the last inspection, governors have demonstrated a greater awareness of the immediate financial issues facing the college and of the requirements of the financial memorandum between the FEFC and the college. The quality of the financial information and analysis presented to governors has been improved through constructive dialogue between governors and managers. Governors have been more questioning of management on financial matters. Planning for the long-term financial stability of the college remains an issue to be effectively addressed.

The corporation appointed an independent clerk in April 1998. The clerk conducted a full review of governance arrangements in August 1998 and governors completed a comprehensive self-evaluation exercise followed by a seminar in November 1998. These exercises led to the formation of a governance working group which has the task of making recommendations to the corporation on a restructuring of all governance arrangements. The working group has yet to report its findings at the time of the reinspection. The majority of the procedural issues raised in the last inspection report have been addressed and the remaining issues are being considered by the governance working group.

The corporation now meets its responsibilities with regard to appraising senior staff. The acting principal was appraised in August 1998 by the chairman and vice-chairman of governors and performance objectives for the year ahead agreed. The corporation does not monitor or receive reports on the implementation of its equal opportunities and health and safety policies.

Governors' involvement in strategic planning is still limited. They pay little attention to reviewing the mission and strategic priorities of the college. They annually consider the updated commentaries to the 1997 plan, but there is no substantial debate recorded in governors' minutes. For 1998-99, the recovery plan has set the raising of standards and achieving financial stability as short-term objectives in place of longer-term strategic planning. Similarly, other than financial targets, governors have done little to set targets to help them monitor progress with strategic objectives. Governors have recently introduced two annual governor training days. One of these is intended to be devoted to discussion of strategic plans.

Governors' consideration of curriculum matters has improved since the last inspection. Since April 1998, there has been a standing agenda item of curriculum matters for all board meetings and governors regularly receive the very detailed minutes of the academic board. They also consider increasingly detailed reports on courses and students' achievements and retention as part of the college's quality cycle. There is some robust debate around these. Governors established their quality audit group in May 1998. It has met three times and has made a useful start in informing governors about the key elements of any informed debate on standards. The previous inspection report indicated that governors have not established formal links between themselves and programme areas to aid their

understanding of the curriculum. This was still the case at the time of the reinspection.

Revised grade: governance 3.