

Cricklade College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: 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 quality assurance: April 1999

Background

Cricklade College was inspected in November 1997 and the findings published in inspection report 21/98. Quality assurance was graded 4.

The key strengths were: quality assurance processes in student support and learning centres; the work of the academic board; the impact of increased self-criticism in the most recent curriculum quality development plans; careful monitoring of collaborative provision.

The key weaknesses were; slow response to previous criticism by inspectorate; known weaknesses persisting; few specific targets for improvement; ineffective quality assurance in some curriculum areas; lack of central analysis and aggregation of results of questionnaires to students; ineffective staff appraisal and professional development plans not always linked to strategic priorities. Other weaknesses were: inconsistent implementation of procedures and a lack of central control; no mechanism to compare standards in curriculum areas; persistently low or falling students' achievements in some areas; formal complaints by students about teaching standards; evidence on students' achievements not presented in sufficient detail to the academic board or governors; low standard of critical reflection in many annual quality development plans; lack of a formal quality assurance mechanism based on secure information and resulting in measurable schemes for improvement; no formal moderation of the self-assessment process, which was not sufficiently rigorous.

The provision was reinspected in April 1999, by an inspector working for four days. She held meetings with senior managers, teaching staff and support staff, and examined a wide range of college documentation. Student achievement data supplied by the college was analysed by FEFC to ascertain the levels of improvement.

Assessment

The college has improved quality assurance since the last inspection, in difficult circumstances. In some areas good progress has been made, while in others, the pace has been slower. Some measures are still at an early stage of development. Known weaknesses have not been allowed to persist. Staff and governors have an improved appreciation of quality matters, as a result of measures which include: the creation of a senior management post responsible for quality; a quality standards subcommittee of the academic board; a quality audit committee of the corporation. A new quality development cycle for curriculum areas sets four key review periods throughout the year. It replaces the previous annual quality development plan. It provides a formal system for quality assurance and encourages consistent application of procedures. In most curriculum areas critical reflection has improved, although there are some inconsistencies in approach as staff adapt to the new procedures. The reviews contain detailed monitoring of student retention and achievement against recently-set course targets. To help inform the process, course teams receive an analysis of the most recent achievements, which is done centrally. Data on the college's overall performance was not provided by the college, but was calculated by FEFC staff.

The academic board continues to be a strength. It monitors carefully the progress of courses and in two instances has recommended that recruitment be suspended pending redevelopment work. Course reviews for each programme area are discussed with the quality manager. To complete the cycle, course reviews will inform the annual self-assessment report. One of the two key objectives for the college's recovery plan is to raise standards.

Since the last inspection the college has added a second student evaluation questionnaire. The outcomes are analysed centrally. Results are communicated to teams to inform their course reviews and comparisons made with a group of five similar tertiary colleges. There is little evidence of immediate action resulting from this evaluation. Students commented on the lack of feedback from evaluations. Student representatives attend most course meetings at least once a term and two attend academic board meetings. They consider their contributions are valued and useful.

Lesson observations have been strengthened since the last inspection with the addition of grading. They form vital information for course reviews and are central to quality assurance in teaching and learning. The college has yet to implement the new appraisal system and is still consulting with staff. Observations of teaching are followed by discussions about the teaching quality. Line managers ensure that requests for professional development match curriculum development plans for these areas, but there is no mechanism in place to link these directly with strategic planning. Staff development opportunities are limited by budget restrictions. Days have been set aside for specific activities. Most realistic requests for training are approved. A revised staff development policy has been drawn up for consultation. Support staff are satisfied that they have equal access to staff development opportunities.

The quality assurance system does not yet include all the support areas in the college. As identified in the last inspection, learner services and learning resources continue to provide examples of good practice but little has been done to spread this to other areas. The previous outward collaborative arrangements have ceased. The newly established Cricklade Training, which provides training off-site, has yet to establish the quality assurance measures used elsewhere. Attendance is closely monitored. An internal moderator has been appointed but has not yet undertaken any review of assessment. The quality manager has observed and reported on induction.

In the period from 1996 to 1998, overall students' achievements have significantly improved. There are inevitable variations between courses. GCE A level results improved, although in French, they declined significantly. The level 3 vocational courses in nursery nursing, the diploma in computer studies, and the GNVQ in health and social care showed particularly high achievement. The continuing decline in achievement on GNVQ business resulted in a decision to suspend recruitment. Some GCSE results are good. Those in English, physics, biology, and chemistry are above the national average. Art and design and communications show a significant decline and the college is taking steps to address this through closer monitoring and reviews of progress.

Revised grade: quality assurance 3.