

Dunstable College
Reinspection of Management: December 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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Dunstable College Eastern Region

Reinspection of management: December 2000

Background

Dunstable College in Bedfordshire was inspected in September 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 02/00. Management was awarded a grade 4 and the FEFC audit opinion on financial management was adequate.

The key strengths of management were: actions taken to improve communications; liaison with other institutions to successfully widen participation; and effective financial reporting and monitoring. The main weaknesses identified at inspection were: lack of management information; insufficient attention to monitoring operational plans; lack of clear links between operating plans and strategic objectives; insufficient monitoring, implementation and review of college policies; and underdeveloped control arrangements for distance learning provision.

The provision was reinspected in December 2000, by an inspector for four days and an auditor for one day. They examined a range of documents including the self-assessment report and held meetings with senior managers, staff and students.

Assessment

The college has made much progress in addressing the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. Many of the recent initiatives are supported by money from the FEFC standards fund. The college has improved the quality of its management information by installing new software and developing new systems of control. Managers and staff are now more confident about the quality of the data which are available to them. The college has conducted a detailed analysis of the management information needs of staff. All managers and most teaching staff have access to management information on the Internet. Staff development activities are planned to enable staff to use the information with greater confidence. Accurate reports on enrolment, retention and students' achievements are now produced at appropriate times for managers. A software writer composes customised reports for managers. The college has purchased software to record and monitor attendance. There are plans to develop a college intranet. Financial reports are produced for managers each month. They do not include details of funding units achieved.

Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of operational plans have improved significantly since the last inspection. Detailed discussions take place at senior management meetings. Unit boards have been established for each of the six teaching and non-teaching areas. The boards meet regularly to review progress with operational plans. The academic board reviews plans and advises senior managers on issues of concern. Governors receive detailed information on the performance of curriculum areas. The course review programme has been extended to include more detailed consideration of students' retention and achievements. Comments of senior staff at review meetings have enabled course teams to improve the quality of their plans. Curriculum managers effectively monitor progress at course team level. The college is developing its system for setting targets for retention and achievement. Targets are not produced by course tutors and do not take into account the previous achievements of students.

Operational objectives for the year are clearly stated and reflect the strategic aims. The operational objectives are covered in the plans of each of the teaching and non-teaching units. The plans are not to a standard format but do address key strategic issues, for example the need to improve the quality of marketing. Course management files are produced to a standard format, but many are incomplete. Action plans at course level do not make sufficient references to improving the quality of teaching and learning or students' retention and achievements. College performance indicators are not included in all of the plans. Service standards have been developed in some areas of the college's work such as student services. The staff development plan is detailed and addresses the main staff training issues identified in the strategic plan.

The college has produced a calendar for the review of its major policies. Key policies are monitored through the senior management team and academic board. Independent subgroups have been established to review the equal opportunities policy and develop a college retention policy. Operational plans at unit level address policy implementation.

The college has rationalised its distance learning provision. It no longer provides distance learning for students through an intermediary.

The strengths reported at the previous inspection have been maintained.

Revised grade: management 3.