

Dunstable College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: 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 quality assurance: December 2000

Background

Dunstable College in Bedfordshire was inspected in September 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 02/00. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: effective course review in some areas; and the well-organised staff development. Major weaknesses were: ineffective self-assessment; insufficient use of targets and performance indicators; ineffective arrangements to evaluate the quality of the franchised provision; failure to link staff development to strategic planning; and the lack of impact of quality assurance procedures on overall improvements in performance.

The provision was reinspected in December 2000 by an inspector working for four days. The inspector examined the college's self-assessment report and a range of review documents, and scrutinised students' retention and achievement data. Meetings were held with staff, students and governors.

Assessment

The college is addressing the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection and continues to maintain the strengths. Quality assurance arrangements are raising the standards of teaching. More robust procedures for assessing the quality of teaching and learning have been developed and over 100 lessons were observed in 1999-2000. Staff development is closely related to the strategic objectives of the college and training needs are also identified through the rigorous system of lesson observation. Training days are held on teaching and learning styles and there has been a strong emphasis on improving the IT skills and industrial experience of teaching staff.

The college has established a working party to develop strategies for improving retention. It is reviewing good practice from other colleges and is focusing on improving students' attendance and punctuality on full-time courses. On many courses, student induction has been improved so that students have a stronger sense of group identity. Student retention rates have improved on courses, at levels 1, 2 and 3 since 1998-99. Student achievement rates remain below the national average particularly at level 3. The self-assessment process and the report produced for the reinspection are much improved. In the one curriculum area reinspected, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, there was evidence of some improvement. For example, teaching standards and curriculum organisation and management were better than at the previous inspection. Some progress has been made in the use of targets and performance indicators to monitor standards. Senior managers and the governors' standards committee receive regular reports on retention and achievement, the outcomes of lesson observation and the assessment of college performance against national benchmarks. More robust data are available from the management information system. The FEFC standards fund has been used to support investment in improving the management information system. The college recognises however, that there is still insufficient analysis of students' achievement data at course level. It also recognises the need for greater rigour in monitoring and following up poor levels of student attendance. Targets are set for retention and achievement but not for attendance.

Systems for monitoring the quality of franchised provision have improved significantly since the previous inspection. The college has reduced the number of franchise partners to four organisations with which it has well-established links. During monitoring visits the quality of teaching, learning, students' retention and achievements are evaluated. Attention is given to checking progress against agreed priorities for action. There are comprehensive records of meetings with franchise partners and regular reports are made to the corporation.

Revised grade: quality assurance 3.