

Isle of Wight College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: March 2001
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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Isle of Wight College South East Region

Reinspection of quality assurance: March 2001

Background

The college was inspected in February 1999 and the findings published in inspection report 52/99. Quality assurance was graded 4.

Quality assurance was reinspected in March 2000 and the report published on the FEFC's website. While some improvements had been made, major weaknesses remained: uneven progress partly due to major changes in management and governance; few measurable outcomes; quality assurance procedures unevenly implemented; some insufficiently effective course reviews and self-assessments; little emphasis on the use of targets for improvement; inadequate preparation for the effective use of resource-based learning. A grade 4 was awarded.

A second reinspection took place in March 2001. Inspectors examined a range of documentation, including the recently completed self-assessment report, scrutinised student retention and pass rates, and met with staff, students and governors individually and in groups.

Assessment

Since the previous reinspection, the college has continued to improve its quality assurance framework with the intention of simplifying procedures and ensuring greater consistency in their application. The quality review and self-assessment process is aligned appropriately with the strategic planning cycle. Responsibility for quality assurance now rests with a newly appointed manager, who reports directly to the principal. Student data are now more reliable and accessible for most staff. There is clear evidence that staff, managers and governors are committed to improving standards. Teachers are aware of the importance of refining and implementing consistently a robust set of procedures.

The board and its committees are working hard to keep attention on quality improvement. Governors ask more penetrating questions as their understanding of underlying issues develops. There is now some duplication of business between the subcommittee for strategic planning and quality, and that for curriculum, students, and marketing. There is a quality assurance committee of the academic board to standardise quality assurance procedures, and monitor the college's performance and the quality of its provision. A quality management team reviews and monitors underperforming courses, and has initiated measures for improvement. Since the review of the first 40 or more courses, some have been discontinued. The quality management team is proving effective in challenging poor performance and initiating improvements.

Line managers are responsible for appraisal, but they do not systematically observe lessons. A professional tutor in each curriculum area is responsible for observing lessons and helping teachers to improve. All teachers have undertaken training for lesson observations and staff generally have had extensive opportunities for other training and development. Since the last reinspection, 75% of teachers have had their lessons observed and the findings inform the college's staff development plans.

Governors have indicated their concerns about the timeliness and form of presentation management data presented to them. Targets were set for all courses in 1999-2000, but no performance data have been presented to governors, which offers a comparison with college targets or national benchmarks. Governors have now requested this. Students' attendance is monitored carefully. So far, the full-time student retention rate in March 2001 has improved by 4 percentage points compared with March 2000. The college charter contains standards, which are measured through student surveys and by monitoring performance against support area service level agreements. Staff surveys indicate support services have improved and are considered good.

During the two financial years since the full inspection in 1999, the college has received well over £500,000 from the standards fund. A substantial proportion of the money allocated was to improve the reliability of management information, and this improvement is apparent. The remainder has been spent on initiatives designed to improve the college's performance. These include: nine projects to improve student retention and achievement; work to develop resource-based learning; and training and consultancy for observing lessons and improving teaching and learning. The resource-based learning strategy has now been absorbed into the college's new information and learning technology strategy and the new strategy document has been commended by BECTA. Attendance in the information and learning technology centre is monitored more carefully than at the last reinspection. The quality of tasks students are required to complete during the information and learning technology sessions vary. It is too soon to gauge the impact of the new strategy on student retention and pass rates.

Some of the recent developments are not yet properly embedded. Their impact remains unclear and few tangible improvements are evident. Student retention rates for courses at most levels have remained well below the national benchmarks for the last four years. While pass rates have generally improved by approximately 6 percentage points between 1999 and 2000, this figure has to be qualified by the fact that results are not known for 15% of the students who completed courses at the college in 2000. This proportion of unknown results is unacceptably high.

Students whom the inspectors met were generally complimentary about the college and the support they receive. Some students made adverse comments about poor course organisation at the start of the year, and observed that this may have had an impact on retention. The college has conducted surveys annually of student satisfaction with the college and their courses, but has not investigated further why many students would be hesitant about recommending the college to friends.

The lesson observation scheme is insufficiently robust and grades awarded by the college are unrealistically high. Inspectors awarded grades for lessons in mathematics and science that were approximately 40 percentage points below the college's own grades for the area. The practice of allowing staff to select the lessons to be observed has not produced the necessary improvements. The planned number of lesson observations and appraisals has not been achieved. Course reviews are not always completed properly. Course files rarely contain notes of review meetings or indicate evidence to support the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Many curriculum self-assessment reports do not focus sufficiently on issues related to teaching and learning. There is little evidence that planned actions from previous years are reviewed and analysed for effectiveness or that performance has been measured against targets from the previous year. The setting of targets, although improving rapidly, is still insufficiently developed and some proposed improvement targets are unrealistic. In 2000, the corporation set targets that were unchallenging and based on limited evidence. The latest proposed targets are being reviewed. The student destination

survey for 2000 is still incomplete. The college acknowledges that the role of curriculum quality verifiers in departments, to share good practice and to monitor compliance with quality procedures, has not been successful. The college has continued to face significant difficulties, but still has further progress to make before its quality and performance can be regarded as satisfactory, especially given the standards fund money allocated to it.

In order to demonstrate that its quality arrangements are satisfactory or better, the college should: consolidate the use of the various aspects of its quality assurance framework, to maintain staff confidence in the system; improve the link between setting targets, monitoring performance against them and taking appropriate remedial action; re-focus lesson observations on student learning, and the coaching of teachers to improve this; investigate carefully the reasons for high student drop-out rates and the destinations of all leavers; establish the leadership of quality improvement with the principal.

Revised grade: quality assurance 4.