

Merton College
Reinspection of English, History, Psychology and Social Science: February 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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**Merton College
Greater London Region**

Reinspection of English, history, psychology and social science: February 2001

Background

English, history, psychology and social science at Merton College were inspected in April 2000 and awarded a grade 4. The inspection findings were published in inspection report 91/00.

The inspection took place shortly after a merger with a local sixth form college. Inspectors found that the humanities provision aimed to meet the current needs of the community and that most courses were offered in a variety of modes. Strengths identified were the strong student endeavour in many lessons and that some areas were developing a team approach to course development through the sharing of good practice. Key weaknesses were: ineffective teaching; poor rates of retention and achievement on many courses; insufficient attention to promoting learning; and unsatisfactory practice in the provision of feedback on students' work.

The provision was reinspected by an inspector over four days in February 2001. Before the inspection, inspectors studied the self-assessment report and the action plan in response to the last inspection. The inspector held meetings with senior and middle managers, full-time and part-time staff and students. Samples of students' work were scrutinised and many documents were reviewed.

Assessment

Inspectors found that managers and teachers have worked hard to address the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. Much effort has been devoted to measures to improve the quality of teaching. Inspectors observed 12 lessons. The teaching and learning in half of these lessons was judged to be good or better by inspectors; this is below average for the programme area. The strengths in teaching and learning include well-devised schemes of work and lesson plans and the effective use of well chosen handouts to help students' understanding. In contrast with the previous inspection there was variety in the teaching within lessons and determined efforts by teachers to check students' learning. The variety of teaching techniques used included small group work, audiovisual aids and effective use of question and answer. Less effective teaching was characterised by weaknesses in time management, the slow pace of learning and failure to meet the needs of students of differing ability within the same lesson. Some students have poor note-taking skills, a weakness identified in the previous inspection. Students' lateness in attending lessons was always challenged, as part of a strategy to improve attendance and punctuality.

Many of the changes aimed to secure improvements in retention and achievements are too recent to judge their effectiveness. Inspectors found that there had been some improvements in the retention of students during the current academic year compared with the same period for previous years. The retention rate of students taking GCSE English in 2000 declined and was well below average. The proportion of students who completed the course and achieved grade C or above was close to the national average, a significant improvement on the previous year. Students' retention and pass rates on two-year GCE A level courses deteriorated in 2000 and were poor in comparison with the national average for similar colleges. There were some improvements in 2000 in pass rates on one-year GCE A level courses, bringing them

close to national averages. Value-added information is not yet available to determine whether students are performing better than might have been predicted from their GCSE point scores on entry to the college. Students' work varies in quality. The best includes clear answers to questions, demonstrating a good command of specialist subject expertise, and well-written essays. Weaker work has many spelling errors and is often poorly expressed. Teaching staff carefully check such errors. Students are offered additional learning support to improve their performance.

The merger with the local sixth form college has led to significant reorganisation and staffing changes since the inspection. These have been well managed and much care has been taken in selecting the new GCE AS syllabi. All students now receive prompt and helpful feedback on their written work, supported by well-devised cover sheets which indicate how their work meets assessment criteria. Much effort has gone into the development of key skills, although not all students are wholly clear about what is required of them. There has been useful staff development aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning, supported by the standards fund. There is a stronger team sense amongst staff, particularly in English, the largest subject.

Staff are well qualified, and teaching takes place in attractive accommodation which is improved by the widespread display of posters and students' work. Learning resources are adequate to support the subjects. The learning resource centre, which combines traditional and modern learning resources, has been much improved in the last year. Liaison between the subject staff and the learning resources are good.

Revised grade: English, history, psychology and social sciences 4.