

**North Area College**  
**Reinspection of Quality Assurance: December 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. 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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**North Area College  
North West Region**

**Reinspection of quality assurance: December 1999**

**Background**

North Area College in Stockport, Greater Manchester, was inspected in September 1997 and the findings published in inspection report 01/98. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4. Quality assurance was reinspected in January 1999 and awarded a grade 4.

Key strengths during the reinspection in January 1999 were: considerable progress in achieving a consensus among staff about the importance of quality assurance; a developing system which focuses on students' achievements; the setting and monitoring of targets by staff at all levels; a well-established lesson observation scheme, the outcomes of which are followed up systematically; a positive response to students' views; a self-assessment report built up from contributions from all teaching and business support teams. The major weaknesses were: the system was not fully developed and still lacked cohesion; no members of the teaching staff had been appraised; there was no training plan, little evaluation of training and no specific linkage to strategic priorities; insufficient reference in self-assessment to teaching and learning issues; rudimentary action-planning at course team level and no formal action-planning for all administration teams.

**Assessment**

Further progress has been made in gaining the commitment of the college staff to the quality assurance arrangements. They understand, support, and have confidence in, the developing system. There is a willingness at every level to put right long-standing weaknesses in provision. Figures provided by the college show that retention and achievement has improved across all qualification levels between 1998 and 1999. The system has not completed a full cycle, however, and the college's overall targets for retention and achievement in 1998-99 were not met.

The framework is coherent and thoroughly documented and covers every aspect of the college's provision. Rigour has been incorporated into the system by the recently established standards committee which is overseen by an executive quality standards committee. Both committees have external members. They have designed and implemented a rigorous system of internal inspection and developed a strong methodology for the validation of self-assessment. A good system of lesson observation which is externally moderated provides secure evidence of the quality of teaching and learning and has led to some sharing of good practice. Teams are now much better at assessing their strengths and weaknesses but the quality of course reviews is variable. Many course teams set low and unchallenging targets and analysis of performance data is often narrow and superficial. Managers do not always have the right data at the right time. Value-added data, for example, is not readily available and its use is underdeveloped. Results are not analysed by gender and ethnicity. Action-planning remains generally weak across the range of quality documents. Operational plans, for example, state objectives but give no indication of how these are to be achieved. Though monitoring of progress on achievement targets is satisfactory, brief and perfunctory action plans make monitoring of other elements more difficult. There is no system in place for monitoring compliance with all college procedures and inspectors met students who had not received all their entitlements.

Appraisal arrangements are linked to quality assurance and all staff have now been appraised in a well-thought out system which supports both college priorities and staff development. A staff training and development plan has now been produced which responds to individual training needs and to needs identified through self-assessment and strategic planning. Staff value the college's commitment to their development. Though they evaluate the quality of their training, there is no requirement on staff to reflect on its impact on the student experience. The college staff development plan has not yet been evaluated.

**Revised grade:** quality assurance 3.