

**North Area College  
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: January 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. 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.*

*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: January 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.

Key strengths during the inspection of quality assurance were: clearly defined policies and procedures of which staff were aware; regular and systematic audits of college procedures which had led to some improvements in effectiveness and efficiency; detailed analysis and full consideration of students' views on college courses and services to help identify areas for improvement. The major weaknesses were: a quality assurance framework which lacked coherence and failed to cover every aspect of the college's work; few clearly defined standards and measures to enable the college to judge its performance, including the extent to which it fulfils its charter commitments; subject and course reviews which were not rigorous enough because of the failure to collect and analyse relevant data; separate systems for internal inspection and appraisal which did not provide managers with sufficient information to effect improvements; staff development and training which was not fully in step with strategic and curricular objectives and which was not rigorously evaluated.

Reinspection took place in January 1999. Inspectors examined a range of documents, scrutinised students' achievement and retention data, had meetings with managers and staff and spoke with students from a range of courses.

#### **Assessment**

In attempting to address the weaknesses in quality assurance procedures, the college examined the systems of three other colleges before recently adopting one of them as its chosen model. It has not been tailored to the needs of the college. There has been considerable progress in achieving a consensus among staff about the importance of quality assurance. There is now a developing system, which focuses on students' achievements. Staff at all levels are involved in the monitoring of retention and achievement. As part of a newly introduced course review process, each team sets and regularly monitors targets. There is a well-established lesson observation scheme. Outcomes are followed up systematically and staff who are performing unsatisfactorily are reviewed and supported. Staff respond positively to results of regular surveys of students and to the outcomes of student forum meetings. However, significant weaknesses remain. The quality assurance system is not yet fully developed, particularly in administrative areas, and still lacks cohesion. Although a staff appraisal system has been devised, to date no members of the teaching staff have been appraised. The college is responsive to individual training needs but there is no training plan and no specific links to strategic priorities. Evaluation of training activities is limited. A strength of the system is that the self-assessment report is built up from contributions from all teaching and business support teams. However, in the curriculum sections there is insufficient reference to teaching and learning issues. In a number of areas, significant weaknesses identified by inspectors had not been included. Action planning at course team level is rudimentary and there is no formal action planning for all administration teams.

**Revised grade:** quality assurance 4.