

Northbrook College, Sussex
Reinspection of Governance: June 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.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 02476 863000
Fax 02476 862100
website: <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>*

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**Northbrook College, Sussex
South East Region**

Reinspection of governance: June 2000

Background

Northbrook College, Sussex was inspected during November 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 38/00. Provision in governance was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: the commitment of governors to making the college successful; effective monitoring of the college's finances; governors' focus on addressing the college's accommodation needs; and clear monitoring of personnel systems and procedures. The main weaknesses were: a failure to appoint governors correctly; insufficiently prompt action to fill governor vacancies; a lack of openness in the conduct of business; some unsatisfactory aspects of procedures for meetings; inadequate monitoring of student retention and achievement rates; and failure to identify performance indicators for the corporation. The FEFC's audit service concluded that governance was weak. The corporation did not conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government.

Reinspection took place in June 2000. Inspectors and auditors held meetings with senior managers and governors, including the chair of governors, and examined a range of college documents.

Assessment

Inspectors and auditors judged that governors have made good progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. Where appropriate, immediate action was taken to remedy weaknesses. Governors have secured improvement in all of the areas of concern. They have led the task of producing a specific action plan for governance, as part of the overall college post-inspection action plan. With assistance from outside the college, they have reviewed all of their activities and the way they work. In particular, they have recently held a valuable training and development day for governors, also attended by senior college managers. Inspectors attended a corporation meeting, at which the outcomes of the day were thoroughly debated, and actions for the future decided.

The corporation has appointed governors in accordance with the instrument of government, at a series of meetings in the last six months. The search committee has advised on the recruitment of new governors and the re-appointment of existing governors. Five new governors have been appointed. There are now five business members, two co-opted, two local authority, two local community, one student and two staff governors, and the principal. A skills audit has been completed, and the results were used by the search committee during the recent governor appointments.

The corporation has adopted a comprehensive set of standing orders to guide the conduct of its business. The corporation has adopted a more open approach to governance. It has determined that this will include an open corporation meeting each year. Corporation minutes are now available on the college's intranet site and steps are being taken to record the outcomes of meetings on the college's Internet site. The governors' code of conduct has been updated to take account of the Nolan committee's recommendations. The annual calendar of meetings now identifies key items of business for each meeting.

The corporation continues to have an appropriate committee structure. The audit committee has started to play a more active role on audit-related matters in order to fulfil all of its terms of reference effectively.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

The standards committee of the corporation had only just been established at the time of the last inspection. It has now had several meetings. Through its work, governors have started to monitor and review students' retention and achievements more rigorously. Most notably, the committee considered the college's targets for the current year, engaged in challenging debate with senior college managers and changed some targets. The committee has identified as an urgent priority the receipt of more manageable and accurate achievement data to improve the quality of their work.

As part of the review of their work, governors have determined performance indicators against which to monitor their performance. The post-inspection action plan requires that progress in this regard is debated by governors. The corporation is now receiving a termly report on progress in achieving each of the objectives in the college's annual operating statement, as part of their oversight of the college's activities.

In order to make further improvements to its governance, the college should: continue to implement the governance post-inspection action plan; monitor the effectiveness of the revised arrangements for conduct of corporation business; further develop the work of the audit and standards committees; and continue to engage fully with the process of self-assessment.

Revised grade: governance 3.