

Plymouth College of Art and Design
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: February 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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Plymouth College of Art and Design South West Region

Reinspection of quality assurance: February 2000

Background

Plymouth College of Art and Design was inspected in November 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 34/99. Quality assurance was graded 4.

Key strengths during the inspection of quality assurance were: well-developed procedures for staff appraisal; a clear new structure for course review; close attention by course teams to external verifier reports; and effective internal verification arrangements. The major weaknesses were: no formal quality assurance system embracing all aspects of the college; slow progress in improving quality assurance; the lack of impact of quality assurance procedures on students achievements, particularly retention rates; insufficient evaluation of students' achievements in course reviews; some poor aspects of the system for lesson observation; no formal monitoring of the student charter; lack of complaints procedure and insufficient monitoring of complaints; and an overgenerous assessment of teaching quality.

Reinspection took place over three days in February 2000. Inspectors examined a range of documents, scrutinised students' achievements and retention data, and had meetings with managers and staff.

Assessment

The college has made progress in addressing some of the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection report. The quality assurance arrangements are improving slowly. Inspectors agreed with many of the weaknesses identified in the college's self-assessment report most of which relate to the newness of the quality assurance system. Considerable discussion and review of this system has taken place. A draft quality manual has been written, including a schematic representation of the quality assurance structure. Although some middle managers fail to recognise and understand this structure, all staff are now more aware of issues relating to quality assurance and of the value of the system. A cross-college quality review committee has been given a remit for quality, and is chaired by a recently appointed quality development officer. Although this group is new, it has been effective in raising awareness amongst staff of issues on quality. There are some data which indicate that the retention rate is improving with the current cohort of students, although retention figures for 1999 show the college remains below the average for the sector.

Reviews for courses and cross-college functions are written to a college-wide format. This ensures that each course team considers student achievement data and performance indicators. Many of these reviews are of limited value since they are insufficiently self-critical and have poor action plans. The common format used is not well suited to the review of cross-college functions. Evidence from lesson observations is not used effectively either in the preparation of these reviews or in sharing good practice across the college. The college charter is in the process of being updated. Employers and community groups are being consulted on its appropriateness. The implementation of the charter is now monitored through responses to student questionnaires. Analysis of these questionnaires and subsequent action has resulted in a number of improvements. The college has introduced a complaints procedure. Formal complaints are few and are acted upon quickly.

Revised grade: quality assurance 3.