

Rycotewood College
Reinspection of Governance: April 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.

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Rycotewood College South East Region

Reinspection of governance: April 2000

Background

Rycotewood College was inspected in March 1999 and the findings published in inspection report 73/99. Governance was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: dedicated governors with relevant expertise; successful process to recruit and induct new governors; and comprehensive standing orders for the conduct of corporation business. The major weaknesses were: insufficient oversight to ensure financial viability; failure to define appropriate strategic direction; poor compliance with the instrument and articles of government; insufficiently rigorous monitoring of college performance; delay in authorising some key appointments; little training for governors; and some key information withheld from the full board. The FEFC's audit service concluded that governance was weak. The corporation did not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government; it did not fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

Reinspection took place in April 2000. Inspectors and auditors examined a range of documents and had meetings with governors and managers.

Assessment

Inspectors and auditors judged that significant progress had been made in addressing the weaknesses identified in March 1999. Following the resignation of some governors, four new governors have been appointed, in addition to the new student governor for 1999-2000. The corporation has redetermined its membership to 16 in accordance with the modifications to the instrument of government introduced in August 1999. A clear recovery plan has been put in place to address the college's financial position. Governors are currently working on the development of a new strategic plan, and have been proactive in developing a relationship with a potential merger partner. The corporation has restructured its committees to include audit, remuneration and search committees only, and now meets monthly to monitor progress against the recovery plan. Governors have a much firmer grasp of the college's financial performance through the provision of clear and comprehensive monthly management accounts. Under the leadership of a new chair, governors are working as a cohesive and highly committed team. They have all participated in a helpful training programme. Attendance at meetings is good. Governors now have a clear appreciation of the distinction between governance and management, and a more open approach to governance is now evident, with the college's senior management team in attendance at all corporation meetings. There is now an appropriate and productive partnership between the board and the executive.

The corporation has appointed a new clerk, who has been instrumental in providing training for governors to help them better understand their role. Governors have been very appreciative of this. The clerk is fully independent of the college and the corporation and provides a consistently high standard of service to the corporation. The corporation has yet to establish procedures for appraisal of the clerk.

Governors have given little attention to monitoring the academic performance of the college. They have begun to address this through training, and have received some helpful reports.

However, they do not yet have a sufficiently firm grasp of the areas of strength and weakness in the college, nor of the college's overall performance in relation to national comparisons. They are beginning to question and demand information from managers and intend to address this shortcoming in the near future.

Governors conducted a self-assessment in preparation for the reinspection. It provided a helpful update of progress since the last inspection. There is scope for the further development of the self-assessment process and for the outcomes to be used more effectively in informing plans for the future development of the governing body.

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.

Revised grade: governance 3.