

Skelmersdale College
Reinspection of Governance: December 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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Skelmersdale College North West Region

Reinspection of governance: December 2000

Background

Skelmersdale College was inspected in November 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 27/00. Provision in governance was graded 4 and the audit service opinion was that governance was weak.

The strengths of the provision were: governors' strong commitment to the college and its mission; and the effective involvement of governors in setting strategic objectives. The weaknesses were: lack of attention to the educational character of the college and its companies; inadequate clerking arrangements; ineffective committees; inadequate review by governors of their own performance; the lack of formal training on governance issues; and the lack of openness.

The college was reinspected over four days in December 2000 by an inspector and auditor. Inspectors and auditors held meetings with governors, managers and the clerk and attended a board meeting. They examined a range of documents, including corporation and committee minutes and other documents relating to the self-assessment report. Inspectors and auditors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Assessment

Inspectors and auditors agreed that governors took prompt and appropriate action to address the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. Governors consider that the standards fund allocation has assisted them in implementing their action plan for improvement. They developed successful links with partner colleges and external consultants to identify best practice. They have reviewed and made considerable improvements to their activities and structures. The corporation has established six committees including a standards committee and a self-assessment working party. These have appropriate terms of reference and work effectively. The audit committee has operated largely in accordance with its terms of reference and the requirements of Council Circular 98/15, *Audit Code of Practice*. Average attendance at corporation meetings during 1999-2000 remains good at 83%. The corporation conducts its business openly. Meetings are advertised in the local press and minutes are widely available in the college, including on the college intranet. Following the appointment of a new clerk immediately after the previous inspection, clerking is now efficient and of a good standard. Comprehensive papers for the corporation and its committees form a good basis for decision-making. The standing orders, code of conduct and many policies have been revised and updated to incorporate changes to the instrument and articles of government. The calendar of meetings indicates key agenda items. Governors ask challenging questions and thoroughly interrogate statistics and reports before making decisions.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is good. 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.

Governors continue to play an important role in reviewing the mission and setting the strategic direction of the college. They have taken appropriate action to reduce the dependency on franchised provision. The proportion of income generated from franchised activity has been reduced to less than 10% of total college income. All franchised activity out of the locality has been discontinued. Governors are aware of the need to address the resulting loss of revenue to the college. They now routinely monitor both the financial and non-financial performance of franchised provision and the college company. The standards committee rigorously monitors the academic performance of the college. Its clear terms of reference include the approval of college retention and achievement targets. Governors regularly attend college functions and events. They are taking action to establish more formal links with curriculum and service areas. They attend the college self-assessment committee and the monitoring committee and they monitor reports on good practice from course leaders.

Governors have carried out a skills audit and a training need analysis. A training plan addresses the training needs of the corporation and of individual governors. New governors follow a formal induction programme. The training programme includes attendance at national and regional events, an in-house programme and regular briefings before corporation meetings on issues relating to the college and the further education sector. Governors undertake a rigorous self-assessment and produce an action plan to address the weaknesses identified. They have, as yet, developed few performance indicators, mainly relating to attendance. They plan to develop further performance indicators through their self-assessment committee. Membership of the corporation is stable. Efforts to attract new governors have met with limited success and identified skill gaps in property and law remain. Governors recently co-opted a person with appropriate skills to one of their committees. However, the search committee has yet to develop a strategy for succession planning.

Revised grade: governance 2.