

**Skelmersdale College**  
**Reinspection of Quality Assurance: 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 quality assurance: December 2000**

#### **Background**

Skelmersdale College was inspected in November 1999 and the findings were published in inspection report 27/00. Quality assurance was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: a clearly articulated commitment to quality of provision; the effective linkage of well-planned staff development to operational planning; and an effective complaints procedure. The weaknesses of the provision were: slow progress in improving poor retention and achievement rates; the uneven quality of course reviews; the underdeveloped use of quality standards to drive improvements; the focus of lesson observation on teaching rather than learning; and underdeveloped systems for internal verification and moderation.

The provision was reinspected over four days in December 2000. Inspectors examined a wide range of documents and met with college managers, teachers, support staff and students from both the Ormskirk and the Skelmersdale sites. Inspectors generally agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but felt that some weaknesses had been understated.

#### **Assessment**

Since the last inspection, the college has made extensive efforts to drive up retention and achievement rates to give students a better chance of success. It has made good use of its standards fund allocation to bring about a wide range of improvements. College staff have developed a new mission statement on retention and achievement and this was published to all staff and students in May 2000. It commits the college to promote high expectations of success by students within a clear framework of discipline. Strategies introduced to support this mission are beginning to raise standards. A new centralised absence tracking system that allows staff to follow up student absences promptly has reduced absence by 32% up to the end of November compared with the same period last year. Retention is 13% higher to date than the same period last year. In 1999-2000, retention and pass rates rose on long courses at all levels and for all ages, some significantly. Though inspectors agreed that there is a strong and successful focus on driving up standards, there is still much work to be done. The much improved pass rates for 1999-2000 are still largely below the appropriate national average. Retention rates for 1999-2000 had not reached the national average on long courses for 16 to 18 year olds at levels 2 and 3. Retention rates for adult students are better but some are still below national averages.

The college has made substantial improvements to its quality assurance arrangements. Staff understand and support these. The quality framework is clear. A new quality assurance guide provides a clear description of the main elements of the system and clarifies what staff are expected to do. The college has introduced more rigour into course reviews, self-assessment and development planning by requiring course teams to use appropriate performance indicators and to set challenging targets based on them. Course reviews are audited centrally against the quality assurance guidelines before they go to the academic board for approval. Curriculum teams use a good range of quality performance indicators to measure their performance, including student perception surveys, lesson observations,

external verifiers' reports and achievement against national benchmarks. Analysis of this evidence could be improved. For example in judging their performance in lesson observations, course teams use lesson observation grades rather than analysing the strengths and weaknesses underpinning the grades to assist them in further improving the students' learning. Quality performance indicators are now being used in business support services though here they are less well developed. The audits of curriculum quality reports are effective in picking up examples of unhelpful action-planning and other non-compliance with the guidelines. A number of reports have been sent back to team leaders for amendment. However, some teams have made slow progress in putting right weaknesses. In response to the weakness noted in the last inspection, the college has further developed and improved its college-wide internal verification system.

The strengths in staff development noted in the last inspection have been maintained and extended. Well-targeted training and development is helping staff put the new retention and achievement mission statement into practice. There has been training, for example, in motivational interviewing of disaffected young people, in dealing with latecomers and in setting 'smart' targets with students. The college has addressed successfully the weakness in the arrangements for lesson observations noted in the last inspection. The staff development manager publishes strengths and weaknesses in practice. Teachers of all lessons graded as less than good undertake staff development. The outcomes of observed lessons now feed into individual staff reviews. Every member of staff has an annual interview in which progress against team targets and personal targets are reviewed. In the current year the college is on target for reviews with academic staff but behind target for business support staff.

**Revised grade:** quality assurance 3.