

The Solihull College
Reinspection of Art and Design: November 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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The Solihull College West Midlands Region

Reinspection of art and design: November 2000

Background

The Solihull College was inspected in November 1999 and the inspection findings were recorded in college inspection report 35/00. The art and design provision was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: the wide range of courses; the good pass rates at GCE A level; students' good levels of craft skills; and the range and quality of specialist equipment. The weaknesses were: some poor teaching; students' poor research and drawing skills on vocational courses; the low pass rates on most vocational courses; the poor retention rates on some courses; the ineffective arrangements for quality assurance; and shortcomings in accommodation.

The provision was reinspected over four days in November 2000. Inspectors observed 10 lessons and held meetings with teachers, technicians and students. They examined a range of students' work in studios, portfolios and sketchbooks. They scrutinised course documentation and reviewed resources available. Particular attention was paid to assessing the progress made in addressing weaknesses identified in the college's action plan.

Assessment

The college has clearly taken action to improve the quality of provision since the last inspection. Inspectors noted a substantial improvement in the grades for teaching and learning observed, with 70% of the lessons judged to be good or better compared with 53% at the last inspection. As part of its strategy to improve the quality of teaching and learning the college has made good use of standards funding and drawn from the experience of a Beacon college. The best lessons were conducted at a lively pace and students were nurtured through a variety of stimulating activities. Assignments are constructed to challenge students to make good use of a range of skills. A high priority has been given to the development of students' drawing skills and the exploration of form using different media and there is a stronger focus on experimentation. Students on advanced level courses now have better developed research skills and make good use of primary sources.

In several lessons attendance rates were low and in a few punctuality was poor. This was in spite of greater rigour by the college in monitoring attendance and punctuality. Student attendance in lessons observed was 68% compared with the national average for art and design of 77%.

There is a good standard of work in students' portfolios and sketchbooks. Students display good levels of craft and technical skills. There has been significant improvement in retention rates on most courses although, overall, retention rates remain below national averages. There are improved retention rates, in excess of 10%, for the GCSE, GNVQ advanced and the pre-degree diploma in foundation studies courses. There has, however, been a significant improvement in pass rates on the GNVQ advanced and national diploma courses. On the other hand, pass rates have declined on most full-time courses between 1999 and 2000 particularly on intermediate level courses.

The college continues to provide a wide range of courses in the programme area that widen participation and attract a diversity of students. Entry level requirements have been more rigorously applied. Recruitment to full-time courses has been largely stable although there has been a large increase in numbers enrolled for the GCE AS in art and design. Some progress has been made in developing a database of work placement opportunities but not many students have benefited from this yet. Quality assurance systems are more rigorously applied and staff are starting to make use of benchmarking data on students' achievements and retention.

The college has a broad range of specialist facilities in photography, graphic design, fashion and textiles and three-dimensional design. There is a specialist suite of computers with advanced image manipulation software. The library houses a good range of books and on-line journals.

There have been some improvements to the art and design block at the Blossomfield Road site. A senior technician has been appointed recently to improve the co-ordination of technician resources and the purchase of materials. There remains a shortage of technician resources in a few curriculum areas such as photography. There are new refurbished spaces for contextual studies and life drawing although the latter is too cramped for some group sizes. There remain problems of overcrowding on occasions in the open plan studios. Racks have been made available to store students' portfolios but these are not yet lockable.

The college should address: the low pass rates on intermediate level courses; declining pass rates on a few courses; retention rates that are still below national averages; some poor attendance rates.

Revised grade: art and design 3.