

Stoke-on-Trent College
Reinspection of English, History and Geography: January 2001
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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Stoke-on-Trent College
West Midlands Region

Reinspection of English, history and geography: January 2001

Background

Stoke-on-Trent College was inspected in October 1999 and the findings published in inspection report 19/00. Provision in English, history and geography was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: lively teaching in lessons for adults and some GCE A level lessons; and well-prepared lessons. The major weaknesses were: the lack of students' involvement in learning in a number of lessons; poor examination results on GCE A level courses; very low retention across a range of courses; and low attendance on GCSE courses.

Reinspection took place in January 2001. Inspectors observed 13 lessons, had meetings with students and staff, examined a range of documents, examined students' work and scrutinised student retention and achievement data.

Assessment

The college has made significant progress since the last inspection. It has changed its curriculum offer in order to ensure that it matches students' needs and previous achievements to an appropriate level of course. The implementation of a long-standing plan to establish a new sixth form centre resulted in the transfer of the GCE A level provision for full-time 16 to 18 year olds to the new sixth form centre at Burslem. This is jointly managed by the college and the City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College. The reduced offer comprises GCE A/AS level English for part-time evening students and GCE AS English as an additional subject for full-time students on vocational programmes. GCE A level history and geography and GCSE geography are no longer offered. The GCSE English programme has been reorganised enabling students to enrol on pre-GCSE courses using NOCN-accredited units devised by college staff. This allows students to enrol for both pre-GCSE and GCSE at additional points in the year. These changes allow students to acquire more basic skills and to develop their self-confidence, and are part of the college's plan to improve retention and achievement at GCSE level. In addition an introductory 'return to study' course has been established which provides progression to the access to higher education course.

New teachers, appointed since the last inspection, have been supported by a comprehensive development programme which emphasises effective approaches to teaching and learning. Good use has been made of the standards fund and the inclusive learning quality initiative to support extensive staff development for all teachers, with a specific emphasis on practical classroom management.

The college has made significant progress in improving the quality of teaching since the last inspection. There is now much good teaching. Lessons are carefully planned and well organised. There is effective group work and a good variety of interesting activities. Students are involved and work purposefully. Their oral contributions are good. In a small number of cases lessons are less well managed. At times there are missed opportunities to broaden students' experience and knowledge. Teachers do not always take the opportunity to organise students' contributions in a way that helps to further their understanding of theoretical concepts.

Teachers provide sound advice and guidance to students. With the support of money from the standards fund, 'drop-in' workshops and a personal tutor system have been established for adult evening students. New entry procedures have been established so that all part-time students wishing to take English at any level receive a personal guidance interview. Students' progress is reviewed regularly and action-planning takes place. The enthusiastic course team is committed to improvement. It meets weekly to review students' progress and share ideas and resources for effective teaching. It has produced some stimulating course materials. Staff and students are extending their use of the Internet and the intranet to good effect. The teaching rooms are good and teachers are able to use them for different types of teaching activity. There are lively visual displays that include students' contributions.

Students' written work is effectively assessed and is of a standard appropriate to the course level. Generally teachers mark and assess students' work carefully. Most comment on students' work is detailed and gives specific guidance on how to improve. In some cases additional support needs are identified and guidance given on how to obtain support. There are some inconsistencies in approaches to marking and the use of feedback sheets. In a few instances feedback is more general and provides less indication of specific measures for improvement. Internal moderation of marking takes place regularly. Courses are well-planned and effectively organised. A number of good lesson plans are part of a pilot scheme contributing to the inclusive learning project. Less effective lesson plans pay insufficient attention to students' learning outcomes.

The college no longer offers GCE A level history and geography where students' achievements were very poor in 2000. Achievements at GCSE qualifications are now good. In GCSE English, which was 59% of the provision in 2000, achievement was 13% above the national average. In GCSE history, achievements are well above the national average and improving. Achievements in the access course are good in the history and literature modules. Retention remains a very serious issue for the college. Retention rates have remained below the national average in most courses. In GCE A level geography, retention declined from 33% to 29% between 1999 and 2000. In GCSE geography and GCE A level English retention has declined. There have been improvements in retention on GCSE history to exceed the national average in 2000. As part of its strategy to improve retention, the college has trained staff in selecting students for appropriate courses, provided additional interviews, improved absence monitoring and enhanced tutorial support. It is too early to assess their effectiveness but there are signs of improvement in on-course retention in the current academic year. Attendance rates at GCSE lessons have improved since the last inspection and were 77% during the reinspection.

The college should address the following issues: poor retention on most courses; some inconsistent practice in course documentation; and some inconsistent and unhelpful marking of students' work.

Revised grade: English, history and geography 3.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in English, history and geography, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1998	1999	2000
GCSE English	2	Number of starters	297	345	269
		Retention (%)	61	61	61
		Achievement (%)	50	65	64
GCSE history	2	Number of starters	18	17	17
		Retention (%)	39	59	82
		Achievement (%)	29	60	71
GCSE geography	2	Number of starters	29	18	11
		Retention (%)	48	72	64
		Achievement (%)	36	46	43
GCE A level English	3	Number of starters	81	84	86
		Retention (%)	69	63	58
		Achievement (%)	59	70	68
GCE A level history	3	Number of starters	19	28	24
		Retention (%)	74	59	58
		Achievement (%)	50	13	36
GCE A level geography	3	Number of starters	15	19	15
		Retention (%)	73	47	47
		Achievement (%)	0	33	29

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)