

West Cumbria College
Reinspection of Governance: November 1999
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.

Cheylesmore House

Quinton Road

Coventry CV1 2WT

Telephone 02476 863000

Fax 02476 862100

website: <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>

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West Cumbria College North West Region

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Background

West Cumbria College was inspected in May 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 103/98. Governance was awarded a grade 4.

The major weaknesses were: insufficient involvement in strategic planning; little monitoring and evaluation of the quality of students' experience; no formal arrangements to appraise senior postholders; unsystematic induction and training for governors.

Reinspection took place in November 1999. Inspectors and auditors examined a range of documents and had meetings with governors and managers.

Assessment

Inspectors judged that the college has made progress in addressing the main weaknesses identified in May 1998. There has been significant change of membership on the governing body, including nine new governors appointed. Governors have demonstrated a commitment to change, in particular to focus more clearly on the student experience. They have held a number of special meetings and development days to consider their role and to discuss issues arising from the inspection report. These formed part of a governors' training programme, which included the use of external expertise to look at self-assessment and performance management. Induction for new governors has improved. Attendance at meetings has increased, averaging 85% over the last 12 months. Governors are now adequately involved in the strategic planning process. They have introduced a formal appraisal for senior postholders. They receive reports on student retention and achievement, and have looked at FEFC benchmarking data. Student feedback on their courses has been discussed at the curriculum and student affairs committee. However, governors recognise in their recent self-assessment report that some governors are not clear about their role in monitoring aspects of the strategic plan. There is a need to question more rigorously the reports presented to them. A link programme has been put in place to help governors develop their understanding of different aspects of the college work. Action is being taken by management to sharpen the key objectives in the strategic plan and to ensure there are clear performance indicators to monitor progress. Governors recognise the need to have more robust mechanisms for evaluating their own performance. The FEFC's audit service concluded that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is still 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. Governors have identified a skills gap in respect of finance and audit expertise, and this is impacting on the effectiveness of the audit committee. The level of resource committed to internal audit is low.

Revised grade: governance 3.