West Cumbria College
Reinspection of Management: 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.

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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. Management received a grade 4. The audit service assessed financial management as good.

In the inspection in 1998, key strengths of management were: close attention to financial performance; progress in implementing the accommodation strategy. The major weaknesses were: absence of a strong corporate culture; anomalies in the management structure; inconsistencies in management control; ineffective management information systems; tenuous links between strategic objectives and business plans; limited effectiveness in stimulating participation in education and training; slow implementation of initiatives.

The former principal retired in January 1999 and a new principal took up post in September 1999. Reinspection took place in November 1999. Inspectors and an auditor examined a range of documents; scrutinised details of the planning processes, the uses of management information and college targets; held meetings with managers and staff and had telephone discussions with representative stakeholders.

Assessment

Progress has been made in many of the areas of weakness identified in May 1998 while at the same time the identified strengths have been sustained through a period of uncertainty. Financial management remains strong. The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. Progress with the capital programme has given staff a considerable boost; the beginning of building work on the new campus has contributed to a markedly more positive outlook from staff and a sense of optimism about the future. Staff report a significant improvement in internal communications and their awareness of developments in the college, leading to a willingness to be more involved in the management agenda. Business plans for 1999-2000 take account of the major college objectives. Planning and line management arrangements developed in the last year have led to a framework for effective work programming and monitoring and provide a firm base from which the new principal can build.

The internal college paper bringing together the post-inspection action plan, the self-assessment report and the standards funds proposals recognises the progress that has been made but also correctly identifies that all the weaknesses reported in May 1998 are still in need of varying degrees of attention. Issues causing concern about the management structure in May 1998 have received attention in the form of transitional arrangements. A transitional management structure was introduced by the acting principal in October 1998, modified in September 1999 by the new principal and is to be further reviewed in June 2000. Although the college has identified clearly the issues that will underpin their strategic plan some uncertainty remains amongst staff about the future direction of the college. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that some staff are unclear about their contribution to the college's overall objectives. The relationship between different aspects of the planning process is not always understood and there is duplication in the information demands for appraisal, self-assessment and business planning. External links are extensive but the image of the college has suffered from adverse publicity. Market research is being developed but is not yet making a significant impact on the college's strategic or operational planning, for example to improve low participation rates. The implementation of some internal policy initiatives remains slow or has not yet taken place. A senior manager has only recently been given responsibility for the development of an equal opportunities strategy. Management information reports are improving, but apart from financial matters, managers do not use basic information in a consistent way.

Revised grade: management 4.