

**West Cumbria College**  
**Reinspection of Quality Assurance: October 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.*

*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**

**Reinspection of quality assurance: October 2000**

**Background**

The college was inspected in May 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 103/98. Quality assurance was graded 4 and subsequently reinspected in November 1999 when provision was again graded 4.

The inspection identified strengths in procedures for the assurance of the quality of college administrative services and staff development. The self-assessment report was judged to be relatively accurate and evaluative. Major weaknesses were: the slow progress in improving the college's arrangements for quality assurance; the inability of the college to produce a reliable overview of its performance; the absence of comprehensive course review and evaluation mechanisms, informed by performance measures; no staff appraisal; the failure to develop a sufficiently critical approach to quality assurance; and little statistical data in the self-assessment process. The reinspection recognised an improving quality assurance framework and more accountable systems for course review and self-assessment. It judged however, that there was still insufficient rigour in the course review process, that the revised quality procedures had not improved significantly the experience of students and, that in key areas, retention and achievement were still below sector benchmarks. Further, it concluded that the strengths in the internal observation of teaching and learning had been overstated and that there was a lack of staff commitment to self-assessment.

The second reinspection took place in October 2000. Inspectors examined a range of documentation including the latest self-assessment report. They evaluated students' achievements data and conducted meetings with a range of staff and students.

**Assessment**

The college has made progress in addressing a number of the weaknesses identified during the previous inspection and reinspection. Following the appointment of a new principal in August 1999, a revised quality framework has been introduced which includes the use of 14 quality standards covering all aspects of the college's operations. Staff understand the framework and how the standards link directly to their own areas of work. A quality audit team has been trained to monitor compliance with the standards; it has so far produced three reports and its findings and recommendations have been reported directly to the senior management team. Individual senior managers have been tasked with implementing recommendations; specific concerns are recorded on a 'corrective action request' form. Minutes of senior management meetings confirm that progress is being made with the actions taken in line with deadline dates set for completion. Departments now undertake three formal quality reviews during a year, the outcomes of which are reported to an academic standards committee. In the latest reviews, issues of student retention were analysed in some detail but there was much less evidence of a thorough analysis of students' pass rates, compared with national averages. College data show that at most levels, pass rates improved in 1999, compared with 1998, and were above national averages. Retention, although declining at a number of levels for students aged 19 and over, remained largely above national figures. Nearly all staff have now undergone an annual performance review compared with only 40% in 1998-99. A report on staff development for 1999-2000 illustrates increasing participation and improved funding, amounting to 1.2% of the overall college budget. The internal lesson

observation system has been externally moderated and now closely matches the national profile for good and outstanding grades as reported in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*.

Some weaknesses still remain. A recent internal quality audit report identified that not all staff had been involved in the compilation of the drafting of the self-assessment report. The latest curriculum self-assessment reports give insufficient attention to the analysis of students' achievements; the academic standards committee did not effectively evaluate students' pass rates in 1999. Staff remain unclear about the distinctive roles of the three different quality committees. Although standardised student and employer perception questionnaires have been introduced for the whole college, responses are not properly analysed and actioned within the departmental quality reviews. College reports show that there have been delays in the process of target-setting within departments and that many targets set for 1999-2000 proved to be unrealistic. A college fund against which bids were invited from staff teams to support an internal quality improvement strategy, has been significantly under subscribed. The self-assessment report recognises the lack of performance indicators at cross-college level to measure relevant quality standards established in the revised framework.

**Revised grade:** quality assurance 3.