

West Cumbria College
Reinspection of Quality Assurance: 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**

Reinspection of quality assurance: November 1999

Background

The college was inspected in May 1998 and the findings published in inspection report 103/98. Provision in quality assurance was graded 4.

The key strengths were: staff ownership of the relatively accurate self-assessment report; effective quality assurance procedures in administrative services; well-developed policies and procedures for staff development. Major weaknesses were: slow progress in improving the college's approach to quality assurance; little use of statistical information in the self-assessment process; lack of comprehensive course review and evaluation procedures; the use of few performance measures or performance targets; no arrangements for providing a reliable overview of the college's performance; no staff appraisal system; the lack of a self-critical approach to quality assurance arrangements.

Reinspection took place in November 1999. Inspectors examined a range of documentation, scrutinised students' retention and achievement data, had meetings with students and a variety of staff.

Assessment

The college has made progress in developing a much improved quality assurance framework and in rationalising the remit of the various committees and subgroups concerned with quality assurance. Revised systems for course review and self-assessment were introduced in the latter part of the academic year 1998-99. Guidance has been produced to support staff through the self-assessment process. A panel which includes the principal, senior managers and governors validates internal grades awarded. Staff development procedures are clear. Most course reviews are informed by analysis of student data, views of students, and monitoring of performance against targets and performance indicators. Only recently have non-numerical statements of quality standards, which course teams can use to drive forward improvements, been introduced. Course review managers monitor action taken to address weaknesses. The internal audit team audits course and support service reviews. Action to address weaknesses identified is monitored through the quality assurance committee. A staff review system is in place. The outcomes of lesson observations are used to inform judgements on teaching and learning, to identify staff training needs and to inform the staff review process.

There remains considerable variation in the rigour with which the course review process is implemented. The quality of action-planning to address issues identified by course teams is largely poor and often reactive. For example, where an issue related to student continuation from first to second year was identified, the action taken was to contact students who had left. Action to review the way first-year students on the course are being supported is not included in the action plan. At the time of reinspection there was limited evidence that the implementation of the revised quality procedures had improved significantly the experience of students. There has been some partial improvement in student retention and achievement with level 3 courses for those over 19 now being above the national benchmarks, but student retention on courses at levels 2 and 3 and student achievements on courses at levels 1 and 3 remain below sector benchmarks. Some of the assessment questions within the guidance

designed to prompt self-assessment judgements are unclear. The needs identified by staff for training do not always receive the response they require within appropriate timescales. For example, there is a significant unmet need for staff teaching vocational courses to receive industrial updating. Inspectors judged the quality of teaching and learning was overstated in the curriculum area reinspected. Some staff remain unclear in their understanding of the quality system. There is a lack of staff commitment to self-assessment, demonstrated by the number of programme area self-assessment reports that were not submitted on time. Inspectors found that judgements in the self-assessment report were accurate in some areas but failed to identify the key strengths and weaknesses in other areas. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment grades awarded in three out of five of the areas reinspected.

Revised grade: quality assurance 4.