

West Cumbria College
Reinspection of Science, Mathematics and Computing: 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>*

© FEFC 1999

You may photocopy this report and use extracts in promotional or other material provided quotes are accurate, and the findings are not misrepresented.

**West Cumbria College
North West Region**

Reinspection of science, mathematics and computing: November 1999

Background

West Cumbria College was inspected in May 1998 and the inspection findings were recorded in college inspection report 103/98. The science, mathematics and computing provision was awarded a grade 4.

The strengths of the provision were: the individual tuition for students in practical sessions and workshops; high levels of achievement in two-year vocational courses; courses responsive to local employers' and students' needs. The weaknesses were: poor teaching; very poor rates of attendance and retention; low levels of achievement; insufficient written feedback to students on some assignments; poor management of split-site working; science resources which were outdated.

The provision was reinspected over four days in November 1999. Inspectors observed 11 classes and held meetings with teaching staff, support staff and students. They examined a range of students' work, reviewed resources available and scrutinised college documentation, including the college's plan to address weaknesses previously identified.

Assessment

The college has taken action to improve the quality of provision since the last inspection. Inspectors noted an improvement in the grades for teaching and learning observed, with 81% of the provision being satisfactory compared with 72% at the last inspection. In the best lessons, effective use was made of learning materials to complement teacher-led presentations. Teachers set work to ensure that students understood what they were expected to learn at each stage of the lesson. In the poorer lessons, the approach adopted by teachers was inappropriate for the level of attainment of students and the open questioning adopted elicited little response. In some classes students' punctuality was poor and homework had not been completed. There has been some improvement in students' achievements. Results in GCSE mathematics have risen and are well above the national average although retention rates are below the national averages. On national certificate and diploma programmes, retention and achievement rates approximate to national averages. On the C&G plant processing course, retention and achievement rates have been above the national average for the past three years. Achievement rates in computer literacy and information technology have risen and are now near the national averages. Pass rates remain poor for the relatively small number of students who take GCE A level courses. Student attendance in classes observed was 74% compared with the national average for science of 79%. The college continues to provide a good range of courses in the programme area, although there has been a decline in recruitment to some courses which have been designed to meet the needs of local industry. There is good support for students in the mathematics learning centre where students' needs are assessed and the appropriate programme selected.

The college has upgraded its computing resources, including the installation of a college network. Access to IT and the Internet is good and hardware and software is industry standard. There has been investment in science equipment, which is now adequate. Since the last inspection report, science provision has been consolidated onto one site. Laboratory accommodation remains poorly furnished. In some large classes students undertake practical

work in groups of four, thereby affecting adversely the development of their practical skills. On one occasion, practical work was not linked to underpinning theory.

Progress has been made to standardise lesson plans and schemes of work. However, their quality varies significantly. Teachers make good use of standard frontsheets for assignments to provide detailed feedback to students. Internal verification systems are in place and assessment is appropriate and accurate. There is an excellent example of students' records and registers with assignments and assignment plans being available on the network.

The reinspection revealed some weaknesses not recorded previously. As recognised in the self-assessment report, a staff development need which remains unmet is to provide staff with industrial updating. The growth in IT resources has not been accompanied by an appropriate level of technical support. Strategies to extend the use of resource-based learning in the curriculum remain underdeveloped.

Revised grade: science, mathematics and computing 3.