

West Cumbria College
Reinspection of Support for Students: 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. Support for students was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: an effective and developing student services section; a variety of opportunities for prospective students to gain information; good support for students with personal problems. The significant weaknesses were: inadequate co-ordination and monitoring of support for students; the variable quality of tutorial support; underdeveloped systems for monitoring students' progress and setting them targets; no overall strategy for careers education and guidance; ineffective systems for identifying and meeting additional learning support needs.

Reinspection took place in November 1999. Inspectors observed four tutorials, had meetings with managers and teachers, spoke with students from a range of courses and examined a variety of college documents.

Assessment

There has been a significant improvement in the organisation and monitoring of support for students. There is now a clear management structure for this area of provision which draws together the different strands of support. Staff who provide support for students operate effectively as a team and ensure that all parts of the support provision are developed together. Links between the curriculum teams and the student services section have been strengthened. One outcome of this is the improved arrangements for induction. Students are now well informed about the range of support services available to them. Key members of the support for students team are the curriculum group tutorial co-ordinators. They have an important monitoring role as well as ensuring the dissemination of good practice. A similar model is being used for the development of key skills. The college has successfully strengthened tutorial support arrangements not only for full-time students but significantly for part-time students. There is a clear articulation of the role of personal tutoring. A strong link between tutoring and learning has been made. A college-wide framework for tutorial work has been established which sets out expectations of what students should experience at each stage. Many students, full and part time, now have a more positive experience of tutorials. Students have more regular contacts with their tutors through the weekly tutorial. In so doing, their progress is much more closely monitored. Improvements have been made in the identification and provision of additional learning support. Initial assessment is more rigorously carried out and the level and range of support provided has widened. Students and teachers have better access to the additional learning support adviser.

There remain areas in need of further development. Although some teams provide advice to students on opportunities for progression, there is no strategy for careers guidance and currently no one to oversee this area of provision. The small careers library is underused. Some students are researching and making applications for jobs or higher education with little or no support. The new tutorial system is not yet fully embedded for students in the second year of their course. In a few course teams following the new programme, group tutorials are not taking place. Further work is required to fully embed one of the key skills into the tutorial programme. The college has identified the need to provide personal tutors with staff development to equip them

with the skills to manage group tutorial activities. Some of the documentation which relates to the monitoring and recording of student progress is underdeveloped. There has been little progress with target-setting and action-planning. Further progress is required to ensure that all students who require it make use of additional learning support and to monitor its impact on student achievement.

Revised grade: support for students 3.