

West Thames College
Reinspection of Science and Mathematics: 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.

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**West Thames College
Greater London Region**

Reinspection of science and mathematics: October 2000

West Thames College was inspected in October 1998 and the findings of the inspection were recorded in the inspection report 14/99. The science and mathematics provision was graded 4. The provision was reinspected in January 2000 and again awarded a grade 4.

The main strengths of the reinspection were: well-organised practical lessons; homework set regularly and returned promptly, often with helpful comments from teachers; well-documented courses team meetings; and a significant number of students progressing to higher education. The main weaknesses of the provision were: low students' achievements in GCE A level chemistry, mathematics and physics; low pass rates at grade C or higher on GCSE science and mathematics courses; low retention rates on many courses; little use of IT within lessons; and some lessons delivered in inappropriate accommodation.

The provision was reinspected in October 2000. Twelve lessons were observed. Inspectors held meetings with managers, staff and students, and scrutinised a range of documentation and students' work.

Assessment

Since the last reinspection, there has been an overall improvement in students' achievements on science and mathematics courses. For courses completing in July 2000, the pass rates at grade C and above for GCSE subjects in biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics have improved since the previous year. Similarly, the pass rates for all one-year and some two-year GCE A level science and mathematics subjects have improved. However, the pass rates for the two-year GCE A level physics and biology courses remain poor. Retention on some courses has improved. The retention rates on most one-year GCE A level subjects have improved to above national figures, and there has been a small overall improvement in retention on GCSE courses. As recognised by the college in its self-assessment report, retention on most two-year GCE A level subjects is low.

Most teaching is satisfactory or better. However, some unsatisfactory aspects of teaching and learning remain. Schemes of work are often no more than lists of topics, and make little reference to methods of teaching and learning. In the better lessons, students worked effectively in small groups to solve problems. In one outstanding lesson, students worked enthusiastically in small groups, developing communication skills through role-play which involved consideration of alternative energy sources. Most of the students had made productive use of the Internet and other IT resources to research their arguments, and some used presentation software effectively. In a few practical lessons, teachers did not ensure that students were aware of the purpose of the experiments, and many students were unable to relate the work to the theory learned previously. Often, teachers did not address the needs of the less able students, and in some lessons, teachers assumed too much prior knowledge of their students. Teachers set homework regularly, and provide helpful written comments for students on how to improve their work. The standard of many students' written work is good.

The accommodation for mathematics and science teaching is good. There is a wide range of equipment for students to carry out science practical work. Since the inspection, the college has established a mathematics workshop and a science workshop. These enable students to access support outside of timetabled lessons. Students have good access to IT facilities, and

are also able to use a computer network located in the science and mathematics accommodation.

Revised grade: science and mathematics 3.