



Why colleges fail

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Executive summary

The two parallel reports, *Why colleges succeed* and *Why colleges fail*, are based on evidence drawn from the inspections of 307 further education sector colleges carried out between April 2001 and June 2004 and 42 independent specialist colleges (for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) inspected from January 2002 onwards.

The 45 colleges which have been judged to provide an inadequate experience of education and training for their learners demonstrate an inability to focus primarily on outcomes for learners as opposed to processes and procedures. Their leaders and managers are constantly distracted by peripheral activities which draw them away from close attention to their core business. Thirty-seven of this total are general further education, tertiary or specialist colleges, representing 12% of the colleges of that type inspected during that period. A further 8 are independent specialist colleges which constitute 19% of the colleges in this category inspected to date. For reasons that can only be surmised, but which might relate to different perceptions of the value of vocational education and training, to problems with recruitment of staff and to a more competitive post-16 climate, 18% of colleges in the south of England are inadequate whereas only 5% in the north of the country fall into this category.

These colleges are characterised by:

- poor retention and low pass rates
- unsatisfactory teaching, particularly for 16–18 year olds
- inappropriate support and guidance for students
- weak strategic leadership
- inconsistent curriculum management
- inadequate management information systems, with data not used to inform strategy and practice
- ineffective quality assurance processes, with superficial and over-optimistic self-assessment, insufficient focus on classroom practice and poor performance management of staff.

There is some positive news about these colleges, however. Of the 12 which have now been reinspected two years after the original judgement, only one has failed its inspection for a second time. The others have recognised the challenges of the context in which they are working and have either adjusted what they do accordingly or confronted their difficulties with practical and decisive action which is already having a positive impact on the experience of their learners.

This report should be read in conjunction with *Why colleges succeed* (HMI 2409).

Introduction and methodology

1. The purpose of this report is to explore the reasons why some colleges are judged at inspection to provide an inadequate experience of education and training for their learners and, in those cases where improvement has been recorded, to ascertain what is now contributing to this improvement. Throughout the report, illustrations in italics are taken from published reports of the colleges included in the sample.

2. The colleges which form the basis of this scrutiny are those which were unsuccessful in inspection from the summer term of 2001 to the summer term of 2004. This comprises a total of 37 general further education (GFE), tertiary and specialist colleges (excluding independent specialist colleges), which represents 12% of the 307 colleges inspected up to June 2004. The figure of 307 includes sixth form colleges, but there are no sixth form colleges in the inadequate category. In addition, eight independent specialist colleges (exclusively for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) have also been judged to be inadequate. This figure represents 19% of the 42 such colleges inspected to date. In the following commentary, this group of colleges is considered separately from those of the mainstream, since, although there are points of similarity between all inadequate colleges, there appear to be some very specific reasons when independent specialist colleges perform poorly.

3. Twelve of the colleges judged to be inadequate have now had a full reinspection two years after the original judgement. Over this two-year period, they have had termly monitoring inspections by Ofsted which have focused primarily on the unsatisfactory areas identified at the original inspection. Of these 12 colleges, all but 1 have now been found to be providing adequate education and training for their learners. Two mainstream colleges were closed following their original inspections and their work has been taken on by neighbouring institutions. One independent specialist college has also been closed recently.

4. The colleges under scrutiny have in common the following inspectorate judgements:

- poor retention and low pass rates
- unsatisfactory teaching, particularly for 16–18 year olds
- inappropriate support and guidance for students
- weak strategic leadership
- inconsistent curriculum management

- inadequate management information systems, with data not used to inform strategy and practice
- ineffective quality assurance processes, with superficial and over-optimistic self-assessment, insufficient focus on classroom practice and poor performance management of staff.

5. In addition, a majority of these colleges have experienced some level of financial difficulty, at worst as a result of poor stewardship, at best through a miscalculation of recruitment targets. Where financial problems have been serious, managers' attention has frequently been diverted from the institution's central purpose, to its detriment:

Managers focused on improving the financial position, but did so at the expense of the curriculum.

Context

6. Certain contextual features of these 37 colleges raise some interesting questions. The vast majority – 29 of the 37 – are GFE colleges. Of these colleges, 29 are located in the area south of, but not including, Birmingham. To date, 148 colleges have been inspected in the area to the north of, and including, Birmingham, 159 in the area south of Birmingham. Thus 18% of colleges in the south of the country are inadequate whereas only 5% in the north of the country fall into this category. These figures are too contrasting to be a mere coincidence.

7. Why this vast discrepancy should be the case is not obvious, but there are a number of hypotheses. First, almost all the colleges in the southern half of the country are in local authority areas where there is intense competition among post-16 providers and where the GFE college is often very much an institution of last resort, particularly for 16-year-old school leavers. A GFE college's intake is non-selective. Increasingly, such colleges are dealing with young people whose educational successes to date have been minimal since their educational history has either been fragmented or, from secondary age onwards, largely non-existent. Where they are successful, GFE colleges have staff in post who are able to deal with the particular challenges that such a clientele may bring. Almost without exception, inadequate colleges have few teaching staff able to respond effectively to the particular needs of the kinds of young people who, 10 years earlier, would never have remained in education after the statutory school-leaving age. While good support and guidance for learners – and this includes effective in-class learning support – are features of most further education sector colleges up and down the country, many of the inadequate colleges have unfocused and inappropriate support for students whose specific needs they fail to identify accurately.

8. Second, a common feature of many of these colleges is that they have a very vague idea about their particular educational mission. Most have responded with alacrity to the exhortation to widen participation without understanding that under-represented groups deserve better than to be enticed back into education to fail

again. The general inability of such colleges to focus primarily on outcomes for learners as opposed to processes and procedures has poorly served many young people and, occasionally, a large number of adults returning to education. Given in many cases the competitive post-16 educational climate in which most of these colleges find themselves, surprisingly few have understood and developed a primarily vocational portfolio which fills a distinct market niche. It takes a failure at inspection for these colleges to review and revise their 'free for all' approach to recruitment and to consider abandoning, for example, those academic level 3 courses such as AS and A2 at which their competitors, with their selective entry, are inevitably more successful.

9. Why colleges in the north of the country are more skilled at understanding the nature of a vocational mission is open to speculation. It is certainly here that the most successful examples of GFE/tertiary colleges can be found. Does the country's historical industrial heartland have a clearer understanding of how to educate and train the artisans of the twenty-first century? Have the roots of many of these institutions in the mechanics institutes of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century contributed to an understanding of the need to provide this century's learners with similarly realisable and practical goals? Do such colleges have better links with, and respond more effectively to, the needs of local employers? Is it too difficult to market a robust vocational alternative to A levels to the parents and young people of Middle England?

10. Third, it would be disingenuous not to mention the difficulties in recruiting college staff in the southern half of the country, especially in London and the home counties. Here house prices ensure that many vacancies remain unfilled. Recently qualified teachers, the vital new blood for any educational institution, cannot afford to take up posts offered. Nor can experienced teachers from successful colleges elsewhere in the country be persuaded to join the staff. The workforce is therefore an ageing and static one, often unable to cope with the requirements of new and demanding groups of learners and unenthusiastic about taking up in-service training that might be on offer. The demands of much of the work have altered beyond recognition, but college staff have little incentive to change. In relation to the differential between their pay and that of school teachers, they feel undervalued. Morale in such institutions is often low.

11. Such observations do not excuse the fact that these colleges have singularly failed a majority of their learners, but they do provide some of the reasons why inadequate colleges might find themselves in that predicament. Another common feature of many of these colleges is that, until the rude awakening of a failed inspection, they appear never to have explored the significance of any of these contextual features for themselves.

Commentary

GFE, tertiary and specialist colleges

Poor retention and low pass rates

12. Almost all the colleges in this group have low pass rates on many courses and, where they offer work-based learning, low completion of modern apprenticeship frameworks. Overall success rates are further exacerbated by the numbers of students who drop out early:

The college's performance declined significantly between 1998 and 2001, with pass rates in the majority of areas in the lowest quartile.

Sometimes previously satisfactory pass rates have dropped unexpectedly:

In 2001, however, pass rates appear to have fallen sharply, particularly at levels 1 and 2.

13. Unreliability of data, a further common feature of these colleges (see paragraphs 35 to 37) means that, in many instances, college managers are unclear about overall retention and completion rates and thus are not developing strategies to tackle shortcomings in performance:

No reliable data are available for retention and pass rates in 1998/99 and 1999/2000. The lack of reliable data for previous years meant that no college performance report could be produced to assist inspectors, who had to rely on information held by course tutors where it was available.

14. In general, however, pass rates at level 3 and on part-time courses for adults are at least satisfactory. It is younger students on level 1 and 2 courses whom these colleges are regularly failing. This is particularly ironic given that, in many areas, GFE colleges are effectively the sole providers of courses for this segment of the post-16 cohort:

Students aged 16 to 18 studying for qualifications at foundation and intermediate level perform poorly. These students make up 46% of the 16–18-year-old cohort and, in terms of their pass rates, the college has been in the bottom quartile of the sector for the last three years.

For students taking NVQs, pass rates have increased at the three levels over the period, but, at levels 1 and 2, the rates remained below the national average in 1999/2000...Retention rates declined at all levels over the period and, while at level 3 the rate remained slightly above the national average in 1999/2000, at levels 1 and 2 the rates were more than 10 percentage points below.

The progress of students aged 16 to 18 with low levels of prior attainment is poor. Students' progression from foundation to intermediate and intermediate to advanced courses is low.

Unsatisfactory teaching, particularly for 16–18 year olds

15. In all but 5 of these 37 colleges, the teaching of adults was judged to be better than that of 16 to 18 year olds. In most cases, the difference between good or better grades is substantial – 49% compared with 70% in the case of one college or 51% as opposed to 73% in the case of another. At the other end of the scale, there are high percentages of unsatisfactory teaching for the younger age group particularly – 34% at a college in the north, 30%, 21%, 18% and 17% at colleges in the south. Adults who return to learning after a break are always easier to teach; they are committed, hardworking and sufficiently mature to understand their own strengths and weaknesses and what they need to do to improve. Many young people arrive in GFE colleges with little enthusiasm for what they are doing, with poor basic skills and negative memories of 11 years of compulsory schooling which have equipped them poorly for independent learning.

16. Where colleges have not understood the need to enthuse and reinvigorate these young people and where staff have few strategies for dealing with the range of learning and behavioural shortcomings presented by at least some of this cohort, they struggle to teach them successfully. They have scant understanding of the need to set parameters for acceptable behaviour and do not inculcate the order and discipline necessary for successful learning. Thus:

Some lessons do not start and end on time. Lessons are frequently disrupted by poor attendance and lack of punctuality. On occasions, students left the classroom without the teacher noticing.

17. Lessons are poorly planned with little clarity about what is to be achieved:

Many lessons are insufficiently planned. Students are not given clear aims and objectives. Teachers talk too much and pay too little attention to matching teaching to the learning needs of students.

Lack of detailed knowledge of the differing needs of the group they are teaching, reflecting possibly poor initial assessment, induction and subsequent record-keeping, means that teachers fail to respond to the particular requirements of individuals:

In some lessons the activities, tasks and time limits set were not demanding enough for the students, and the pace of work was too slow to maintain their interest. In other lessons, tasks did not take account of the concentration span of students and again their interest was lost.

Or, having planned their lessons, poor teachers are insufficiently flexible to adjust what they do in the light of how their learners are responding:

A common feature of a number of unsatisfactory lessons was the failure of teachers to make regular checks on students' learning and

their determination to continue with the planned work even when the students clearly did not understand it.

Checking on learning is an essential part of teaching which poor teachers fail to recognise, concentrating solely on their own performance rather than the understanding of their students.

18. There is clearly a connection between poor teaching and untrained or inexperienced staff. A proportion of these colleges, particularly when compared with sixth form colleges or school sixth forms, have insufficient numbers of fully qualified teachers:

Only 37% of full-time teachers have a full teaching qualification and a further 38% have a stage 1 or 2 City and Guilds teaching certificate. The remaining 25% do not possess a teaching qualification. Only 47% of part-time teachers have any form of teaching qualification.

Only 52% of staff have a teaching qualification, which is a relatively low proportion... The proportion of part-time and sessional staff qualified to teach is very low, at 11%.

19. It has always been a strength of further education that vocational teachers are drawn from those occupations whose disciplines they are teaching. These colleges are no exception – several have teachers who are well versed in their trades and who bring up-to-date knowledge of those skills and concepts of their craft which students need to develop. Such specialists still need to be trained in how to teach their subjects, however, and this has yet to be tackled consistently in many of these institutions:

Many part-time teachers use their valuable current industrial and professional experience well, but some have little teaching experience.

Although the college has recruited new staff with occupational expertise, managers have been slow to provide support to help them develop effective teaching skills.

Teachers have extensive professional experience which is generally up to date. However, 55% of teachers do not have a recognised teaching qualification.

Conversely, the professional experience and familiarity with current industrial and commercial practice of long-serving teachers have become out of date, but they rarely take up opportunities for professional updating:

Teachers in some curriculum areas lack recent industrial experience.

20. This emphasis on teacher training does, of course, beg the question as to whether the current generic model of teacher training is the most suitable means of turning vocational specialists into teachers. This point has already been raised in last year's Ofsted report on FE teacher training (*The initial training of further education*

teachers: a survey, HMI 1762, November 2003) which recommends a far greater focus on the pedagogy of specific subject teaching. What is also significant about many of these colleges is that there is very little activity centring on the effectiveness of teacher training, with scant monitoring of the impact of either programmes of initial training or continuous professional development:

There has been insufficient monitoring of the impact of professional development on teaching and learning.

There has been insufficient concentration on improving teaching and learning across the whole college and evaluation of the staff development that takes place is not sufficiently rigorous.

21. As students often say when asked to give their views, there is little doubt that constant staff turnover, coupled with an over-reliance on agency staff, has a very negative impact on the quality of the learners' experience. As mentioned already, a large number of these colleges have difficulty in recruiting suitable staff and sometimes in keeping those who do take up post:

The college has experienced significant difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff in many areas of the curriculum.

There has been high staff turnover in recent years, largely the result of the high cost of housing in the area...some posts have been vacant for some time, with no effective strategies for cover.

Managers have endeavoured to recruit additional full-time teachers in areas such as construction, science, mathematics, English, information and communication technology (ICT), basic skills and childcare, but this has proved to be difficult.

Recruitment of appropriately qualified staff has been difficult in some curriculum areas. This, along with a high proportion of agency staff, has led to a lack of continuity for some students.

22. Full-time students are most likely to suffer acutely when there is an absence of consistency and continuity in the teaching they receive. Coupled with the very fragile nature of the commitment of many of the lower-attaining young people who form the bulk of the 16–18-year-old full-time cohort in these institutions, the use of underqualified and unreliable staff is contributing to both the poor retention rates and the poor pass rates. Again it is ironic that those learners who need the very best teaching are frequently being subjected to the most inadequate.

Ineffective support and guidance for students

23. In a sector which is characterised by good support and guidance for students many of these colleges are the exception:

Overall guidance and support are unsatisfactory.

The effectiveness of arrangements for guidance and support vary considerably.

Guidance and support for students are unsatisfactory. Although many teachers and tutors provide good personal and academic support for students, students' poor retention rates and low attendance at lessons demonstrate that the support is insufficiently effective.

There are ineffective arrangements for guidance and support.

24. These negative judgements centre principally on initial guidance, on in-class learning support and on the quality of tutorials. Initial guidance is singularly unsuccessful in that a significant number of students in these colleges would appear to be on the wrong courses. Interviewing and induction are flawed:

There are examples of poor initial guidance resulting in students following inappropriate programmes.

Sometimes interviewing staff totally ignore college systems:

Enrolment procedures are generally clear, but entry requirements for courses are not always adhered to and some students struggle on courses at inappropriate levels.

In particular, assessments of students' standards of literacy and numeracy are carried out by untrained staff, if at all.

25. When the college operates from several sites, there can be inconsistency in the quality of available advice at enrolment. Part-time students tend to get the worst deal in this respect:

At the main site, which offers mainly provision for full-time students, guidance and support services are generally satisfactory, but they are less effective for part-time students, especially at community venues.

26. Once students are in college, whatever additional support may have been identified at induction is not followed up quickly enough. In-class support can be minimal or else provided by unqualified staff:

At the time of inspection in late November, around one third of students who were identified as needing specialist support were still waiting for help from specialist tutors.

There are insufficient teachers to provide the support that is identified.

Learning support staff lack basic skills training.

In these colleges, it is as if there is an understanding of what should be done, and correct procedures are largely followed, but there is then a lack of resolve about carrying things through. There is little doubt that many of the students require sustained and specialist support to redress shortcomings remaining after years of failed schooling. Good learning support is certainly resource-intensive, but does reap benefits.

27. A further criticism of support for students centres on the quality of tutorials. Again, systems are largely in place, for full-time students at least, if not for those who attend part time. While pastoral support can be exemplary, effective target-setting for individual performance is rare:

Students all receive at least one formally recorded tutorial each term. The recording of tutorials is varied; few set challenging and measurable targets.

There is some inconsistency in the rigour in which tutorial targets are set.

Tutorials do not identify sufficiently the learning needs of students, and individual target-setting and progress monitoring are unsatisfactory.

In institutions such as these, where there is no shared understanding of the primacy of students' achievements, it is not surprising that target-setting is neither precise nor evaluated regularly. Nor is it surprising, therefore, that an unacceptably high proportion of students fail.

Weak strategic leadership

28. In almost all these colleges, senior managers and governors spend a large part of their energies developing strategic plans and putting into place structures and systems for realising their vision. They invariably fail to turn these plans into effective action:

There is no clearly established link between the college's operational plan and the strategic plan.

Usually the problem is perceived to lie with middle managers who are unclear about how to implement the college's strategic aims within their areas of responsibility:

Development plans do not adhere sufficiently to the college's strategic aims.

Yet this shortcoming is essentially the result of weak leadership at a senior level, a feature of almost all these institutions.

29. What is striking about inadequate colleges is their singular failure to understand, and focus on, their primary purpose – the education and training of young people and adults. Obvious as this might seem, attention to the core business of teaching, learning and success for their students would appear to come second to vague if well-intentioned pseudo-sociological missions:

They [governors] feel that the college has a particular mission to be inclusive and to support students.

What is missed here is that inclusion and support are not ends in themselves, but means to a particular end – the provision of high-quality teaching leading to success in gaining relevant qualifications.

Or senior managers are diverted from this core business by financial problems, crucial when they are as extreme as in some of these institutions, but not so important as to exclude entirely a firm focus on the curriculum.

30. As alluded to earlier, many of these GFE colleges face particular challenges from the diverse nature of a changing student body. Failure to acknowledge what has changed and to develop new curricula and approaches in response to such changes has led to declining retention and pass rates and to poor results at inspection:

The college has been successful in widening participation in education and training, but has been slow to develop strategies to support the diverse and demanding needs of individual learners.

Good GFE colleges maintain the right balance between inclusion and quality. Inadequate colleges have yet to learn how to do this:

Strategic planning and monitoring have not successfully addressed the challenge of balancing growth in the provision with maintaining quality in teaching and learning.

Inconsistent curriculum management

31. A common characteristic of inadequate colleges is the weakness of management in several areas of the curriculum. This does not mean that there are not some areas of the curriculum where management is satisfactory and very occasionally even good, although, given the weak strategic leadership of the senior management team, it is likely that, when this occurs, it is in spite of, not because of, effective central direction. Generally in these colleges there is a very high proportion of unsatisfactory or even poor areas of learning – as many as eight at one college and seven at three more – affecting more than half of all learners on roll.

32. Weaknesses in curriculum management are inextricably linked to the failure of senior managers to ensure that what vision they may have is implemented through clear communication of what is required and regular monitoring to see that things are done:

Curriculum management has a range of weaknesses.

Unsatisfactory management in many curriculum areas...has either not been recognised or has not been effectively addressed.

The effectiveness of curriculum management varies widely across the college.

As these last two references suggest, senior managers are unaware of what is happening at curriculum level and thus are not even able to disseminate what is working well for the benefit of areas where there are problems.

33. At curriculum level, managers are often unclear about their levels of accountability and of those who work for them:

There is a lack of clear responsibilities for staff.

At a very basic level there is a:

...lack of subject leadership, poor course organisation...failure to resolve staffing problems, inappropriate timetabling and frequent room changes.

Both senior and middle managers seem to be unaware of the practicalities of their jobs, of the need for attention to detail in the planning and organisation of courses and the constant anticipation of possible problems so that difficulties can be ironed out swiftly.

Nor are there good levels of communication within curriculum areas. Team meetings are *'poorly conducted and recorded'* or *'infrequent'*. There is scant curriculum development and innovation and a lack of order in how the area is run:

...badly kept course files, ineffective internal verification of assessments, poor management of key skills programmes.

34. Since senior managers do not acknowledge the primacy of what happens in the classroom, it is small wonder that curriculum managers demonstrate:

...ineffective course review and evaluation, poor action-planning, inadequate monitoring of students' performance...

and

...lack of action to improve teaching and raise students' achievements.

In the absence of a self-reflective and self-critical culture, with no lead from the top:

Course teams' use and awareness of targets for retention and pass rates are low.

Inadequate management information systems

35. A feature of a large number of these colleges is that, at the time of inspection, their management information systems were so inadequate that inspectors were unable to rely on the data produced. In two reports, the reporting inspector felt obliged to draw attention to the fact that:

Due to unreliability of data, no retention rates or pass rates for either 2001 or 2002 are quoted in this report.

Aggregate information for the college shows that, for 1999 and 2000, the last two years for which there is ISR data, the college was unaware of the results of 3,750 students.

This failure to have a system which maintains accurate records of what the college is achieving underlines the scant attention which poor colleges are paying to their core business.

36. In such circumstances, curriculum managers and teaching staff take little account of central data which are not trusted nor effectively used. Evaluation of performance is thus impressionistic and often over-optimistic; in the absence of firm figures to back up assessment of performance, curriculum managers work in a vacuum which impedes planning and masks serious weaknesses. Thus senior managers gain a false picture of what is happening at course and classroom level:

The quality and use of management information are unsatisfactory. Unreliable students' pass rate data and inadequate financial information have adversely affected managers' and governors' ability to recognise the unsatisfactory overall achievements of students...

37. With imprecise details of past performance, curriculum managers and their teams are unable to set targets for improvement:

The use of student data on retention, pass and attendance rates is inadequately developed. There are wide variations in the use of such data to support judgements in self-assessment reports and development plans. While the college has set itself the target of providing managers and staff with consistently reliable student data, it has not yet been able to do so.

Ineffective quality assurance processes

38. Inevitably, with an imprecise vision and poor management information, quality assurance in these colleges is a major weakness. There may well be a plethora of procedural documents, but there is inconsistent implementation of what they propose:

There are long-established quality assurance procedures, but they are not being complied with accurately or fully.

Or the quality strategies themselves are ill-judged:

Managers have put considerable effort into the development and implementation of new quality procedures. However, the procedures pay insufficient attention to the improvement of teaching and learning.

39. Indeed poor quality assurance is invariably characterised by this lack of focus on classroom practice, by superficial and over-optimistic self-assessment and by poor performance management of staff. To take these one by one: first, classroom observation schemes are in place in all these institutions, but lack rigour and practical follow-up:

Managers have paid insufficient attention to the need to improve teaching and learning and the standards achieved by students.

Weak teaching has not been systematically confronted by many managers.

40. In some colleges there is a reluctance to grade observations which are viewed as developmental rather than quality control activities:

The college lesson observation scheme is...insufficiently robust, partly because the observations are not graded.

Nor, in some colleges, do observations contribute to an assessment of teachers' performance:

Lesson observation does not contribute to staff appraisal, although individual teaching performance is discussed with faculty managers during workload reviews...A new system for staff appraisal, incorporating results from observations, is to be introduced in September 2002, but it is not intended that it will measure staff performance or make judgements about competence.

Staff appraisal is not linked to lesson observation, and judgements about competence are not required.

The college does not have a policy for linking the outcomes of lesson observation to the appraisal of teachers.

It is difficult to envisage how teaching staff can be appraised without some value judgement of their competence in the task which they have been employed to carry out. What this example also illustrates is managers' total misunderstanding of the nature of their work, since their primary concern would appear to be the needs of staff rather than those of students. No commercial organisation would survive for long if it concentrated on the sensibilities of its staff as opposed to the satisfaction of its customers and the quality of its product.

41. It is also clear that, in many of these colleges, the observation process itself is poorly conceived and implemented, concentrating too much on teacher performance as opposed to the achievement of learners. This accounts for the generally very large discrepancy between the grades awarded by the internal observation teams and external observers, whether inspectors or consultants. Internal observation requirements tend to concentrate too much – as with quality assurance overall – on procedural issues. Thus high teaching grades are awarded by inexperienced observers to lessons where planning documentation is sound and where teachers are ostensibly meeting all the criteria on the quality checklist. What is overlooked is a detailed focus, during the course of the observation, on what students are understanding and whether they are acquiring the necessary skills for successful completion of their programmes of study. In such circumstances, therefore, lesson observation grades are inflated, based as they are exclusively on processes rather than outcomes:

The annual teaching observation programme is well established, but the profile of grades determined indicates a lack of rigour...It is clear that teaching observation has not effectively identified the many weaknesses that became evident during inspection.

Internal lesson observations have not been sufficiently self-critical.

42. Second, the key factor which contributes to poor quality assurance is the inability to self-assess accurately and comprehensively. In the case of accuracy, it is extremely difficult for curriculum managers who lack precise data and who fail to concentrate on the quality of classroom practice to be able to carry out meaningful self-assessment. What is of more concern, however, is that, in many of these institutions, managers seem unaware of what they lack in terms of sound evidence for forming judgements and evaluate programmes nonetheless. In consequence:

The self-assessment reports lack rigour. There is no external validation of the outcomes of the self-assessment process. The college self-assessment report does not reflect the breadth of activity within the college or include some key areas of significance such as governance and quality assurance.

Managers go through the paces of course reviews and target-setting, but what they produce are of little use in bringing about improvement:

The level of detail (of programme reviews), the precision of the judgements, the strength of the evidence and the usefulness of improvement targets are often insufficient to make them useful tools for quality improvement.

Close monitoring of progress and achievement in key areas has been ineffective, as many objectives are descriptive and lack clear performance indicators and measurable targets.

43. Third, at the time of their inspection, a majority of these colleges had no system in place for the regular performance management of staff:

There is a lack of performance management for staff at all levels.

There is insufficient management of staff performance. Individual target-setting is not well developed.

44. Either appraisal was so irregular as to have little impact:

Until recently staff were appraised only every two years.

or it did not take place at all:

In some departments staff are not appraised.

Since the merger relatively few staff have been appraised.

45. In the absence of a culture of self-evaluation and without a clear consensus across an institution about purpose and strategy, meaningful quality assessment is almost impossible.

Independent specialist colleges

46. While the weaknesses of those independent specialist colleges judged inadequate mirror those of mainstream colleges, there are additional problems which exacerbate already ineffective provision. The current inspection round is the first in which these colleges were, at their request, subjected to the same inspection

framework and regime as the rest of the FE sector. This was a rude awakening for those institutions which, despite their tradition of good care and personal support, were focusing insufficiently on the educational development of their learners:

There is a lack of clarity about the key aspects of learning that form the core of all programmes. Individual members of staff have developed objectives related to their area of work. Many students also have objectives related to specialist interventions, such as speech and language therapy, but these are not always brought together as a coherent basis for planning lessons and teaching individual students. There is insufficient focus overall on learning.

Much emphasis is placed on managing students' social interaction, social communication and imagination, and social understanding, but these aspects are largely disconnected from the curriculum of the unit.

47. Given the residential nature of these colleges, weak provision does not exploit the opportunities for learning which exist around the clock:

There is insufficient coherence and planned progression across the extended curriculum. Limited use and involvement in the life of the local community restrict opportunities for students to learn and transfer skills in realistic contexts.

The links between the extended curriculum in the residences and the formal teaching are not always effective, particularly in relation to daily living skills, where members of staff working in the day are not always aware of the activities undertaken by students during the evening and the weekend.

48. Nor are there systematic assessments of day-to-day progress of learners for whom external examinations do not feature significantly:

Small steps of learning are not recorded systematically or in detail. Progress made by students since arriving at the college cannot be measured.

Achievements in meeting individual targets over time are not recorded effectively. Most staff find it difficult to determine students' small steps of learning.

The dividing line between care and support on the one hand and education and training on the other may be blurred in colleges of this nature, but only when all staff are clear about this distinction will they fulfil their obligations to external funders and, more importantly, their students.

Reinspection

49. Twelve colleges, including one independent specialist college, have now had a second inspection two years after the first. All but one have been successful second time around. During the intervening two years, each has been subject to termly

monitoring inspections by Ofsted which have focused on both individual curriculum areas and on the quality of overall leadership and management. Reports of these termly visits, sent to the college in the form of a letter, suggest that, while initial progress in several was slow, improvements were gradually discernible. In general, as the subsequent full inspections confirmed, such improvements were sustainable and were having an impact across the whole college and not simply in those curriculum areas with the most acute problems.

50. The colleges which have made the swiftest recovery are undoubtedly those where the outcomes of inspection were accepted immediately and where changes in structure and purpose were rapidly put in place. In all but two of these colleges there has been a change of principal; several have also had changes in the chair of governors and in members of the senior management team. While improvements in pass rates have, in most cases, been modest, there have generally been better attendance and retention rates. All colleges have reviewed the curriculum they provide and several have refocused their mission.

51. The quality of teaching and learning has been the most significant improvement. In several cases the improvement in observation grades has been substantial, especially with the 16–18-year-old cohort. Managers have finally understood where they must focus their greatest efforts:

Managers are very focused on improving the standards of teaching and raising students' achievements.

The introduction of the new organisational structure has placed teaching and learning at the core of college activity.

There is now a strong focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning...The proportion of teaching which is good or better is now above the national average for further education colleges.

52. In stark contrast, the one college which has been declared inadequate for the second time has seen an overall decline in the quality of its teaching. While there has been some slight improvement in the teaching of 16–18 year olds, that of adult students has deteriorated significantly. In those colleges where teaching and learning have improved, there has been a parallel improvement in quality assurance procedures – in lesson observations, in self-assessment and in performance management of staff:

Quality assurance procedures have improved since the last inspection and they are consistently implemented. Course review and target-setting are well established. The principal chairs termly performance review boards for each faculty. The board monitors all aspects of performance including retention rates, achievement, attendance, staffing and the results of lesson observations.

Appraisal is carried out rigorously throughout the organisation, starting with senior management. Individual objectives and targets are set for staff performance. Training is linked to strategic

priorities, to outcomes resulting from teaching observations and to personal needs.

A very extensive internal lesson observation scheme has ensured that managers know the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers. The internal lesson observation profile for the college matches the findings of the inspection team.

53. This comprehensive approach to the monitoring and evaluation of quality would appear to still be eluding the one college which has failed its inspection for the second time. Despite progress in the setting up of suitable quality systems, the focus remains largely on the systems themselves rather than on concrete evidence of performance:

There are clear procedures and policies in place but course teams do not always comply with these. The monitoring and effectiveness of these systems vary considerably across the curriculum. Much target-setting is weak and is not used effectively to measure improvement. Many course reviews do not identify quantifiable targets for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

In the last 12 months only 29% of teaching staff have been appraised. Informal interim reviews through individual meetings with line managers are held but these are not clearly or systematically linked to objectives within appraisal. Objectives recorded in individual managers' appraisals do not clearly link to the college's strategic aims and there is insufficient reference to setting improvement targets for teaching and learning within teachers' appraisals.

Those curriculum areas which had been judged unsatisfactory at the 2002 inspection were satisfactory in 2004. Unfortunately three different curriculum areas were found wanting on the second occasion. This suggests an inability to relate the lessons to be learnt from the original failure to the wider cross-college perspective. As the other 11 colleges have understood, the weaknesses which have contributed to the original judgement are so intertwined that it is only by tackling them on all fronts simultaneously that sustainable improvement can result.

Conclusion

54. The shock of a failed inspection has proved to be, in all but one case so far, a sufficient jolt to bring about significant change. Most of these colleges are still making progress towards their renewed goals rather than having already transformed themselves in a relatively short space of time. They have nevertheless been judged to be making progress. This judgement has centred primarily on a recognition of a culture change which embraces a shared understanding of accountability by all staff and a clear-sighted focus by the leadership on the essential purpose of an educational establishment – the success of its students.

55. Those contextual difficulties identified in the introduction to this survey have not gone away. The difference now, however, is that these colleges recognise the challenges of the context in which they are working and have either adjusted what they do accordingly or have confronted their difficulties with practical and decisive action.