

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Birkenhead Sixth Form College

September 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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The Further Education Funding Council 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 every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100*

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-96

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 97/97

BIRKENHEAD SIXTH FORM COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected August 1996-April 1997

Summary

Birkenhead Sixth Form College responds effectively to the needs of the local community. It has expanded its curriculum and recruited from groups which are not well represented in further education. There are good links with many organisations, especially its partner schools. Governance is effective and efficient. The strategic planning process is well managed. Students appreciate the adult atmosphere and the mutual respect which characterises relations between staff and students. Learning support for students is well developed and delivered. Some teaching is good. The college has improved its position in national performance tables year on year. Its achievements on vocational courses are consistently good, as are pass rates on many GCE A level courses. The college is committed to quality assurance and undertakes regular reviews of courses and examination results. Staff development is well managed and reflects both the college's and individuals' needs. Staff are dedicated, hard working and well qualified. Much equipment, particularly information technology equipment, is of good quality. Accommodation is of a good standard. The college should: set quantitative targets and performance indicators; ensure that curriculum objectives are more explicitly linked to college strategic objectives, implement and monitor college policies and quality assurance procedures more rigorously; widen the range of teaching and learning methods; continue to address poor levels of achievement and retention rates on some courses; and improve attendance in some areas.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science	2	Sociology and psychology	3
Mathematics, information technology and computing	2	History, geography, law and government and politics	2
Business	3	English and modern languages	2
Art and design and performing arts	2		

INTRODUCTION

1 Birkenhead Sixth Form College was inspected between August 1996 and April 1997. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in August and September 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in the week beginning 21 April 1997. Seventeen inspectors spent a total of 64 days in college. They visited 132 classes, examined students' written work and observed students doing practical work. Inspectors looked at a range of documentation, including the college's strategic plan and self-assessment report. They held meetings with governors, managers, teachers, staff responsible for support services, students, parents, employers, members of the community, a range of partners of the college, and a representative from Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). They attended a conference for new students and an open evening. They observed meetings of some faculties and the governing body.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Birkenhead Sixth Form College was established in 1988. It is located on the Wirral about one mile from the centre of Birkenhead in a residential suburb. Accommodation comprises one main building, erected in 1962 and modified in 1988, a new teaching block constructed in 1995 and three blocks of mobile classrooms. The college has a gymnasium and a multi-gym, but has no playing fields. Students use sports fields at locations throughout the Wirral.

3 The Wirral has a stable population of approximately 335,000. The borough as a whole is in line with national averages on indices of disadvantage, but there are large variations between the inner-city parts of Birkenhead and the wealthier western parts of the borough overlooking the Dee. Unemployment in the Wirral is 12 per cent, which is above both national and regional averages. Unemployment rates for young people in Wirral vary from 11 per cent in Deeside to nearly 40 per cent in parts of inner-city Birkenhead. In three Birkenhead wards, over 30 per cent of children are from one-parent families. Less than 1 per cent of the Wirral population is from minority ethnic groups.

4 The college competes for students aged 16 to 19 in a lively and diverse market which includes secondary modern and comprehensive schools for pupils aged 11 to 18, single-sex local education authority (LEA) grammar schools, grant-maintained grammar schools, a strong independent sector and a large general further education college. The college recruits over 50 per cent of its full-time students from its five partner schools. Just below 70 per cent of young people in the Wirral stay on in full-time education or training after the age of 16, a rate which has remained fairly stable in recent years. The staying-on rate in the schools in Birkenhead is at or below 50 per cent. Seventy per cent of these students go to Birkenhead Sixth Form College.

5 Full-time enrolments in the college have increased by 30 per cent since 1992. In November 1996, there were 1,685 students on roll; 1,010 on full-time courses, 355 on part-time evening courses, 250 on evening leisure courses, 60 on daytime outreach provision and 10 students on part-time day courses. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

6 The college's mission is to 'provide high quality education for all our students' by:

- teaching, guiding and supporting all students
- offering a broad and balanced curriculum
- promoting partnerships
- supporting the development of staff
- ensuring equality of opportunity
- providing an appropriate working environment.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The college is responsive to the needs of the local community. It has met or exceeded all its growth targets, expanded its curriculum for 16 to 19 year olds, both in terms of levels and types of courses, and recruited successfully from groups which are poorly represented in further education. Its provision includes:

- general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) in 35 subjects; 16 of these are also available for study as GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects
- general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) in 14 subjects
- general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs): five advanced, four intermediate and three at foundation level
- evening provision for adults: five GCE A level and 11 GCSE subjects, information technology courses, 16 leisure courses and a part-time day access to higher education programme in social sciences
- programmes of basic literacy, numeracy and information technology in four outreach centres.

8 The college undertakes a regular review of its curriculum. Modular GCE A level courses have been successfully introduced in a number of subjects including business, mathematics, performing arts and four science subjects. There are a few gaps in provision. Despite an increase in the numbers of science students there are no vocational science courses. Insufficient take-up of foundation level numeracy and communication skills courses in the evening has led to their cancellation. Recruitment to the part-time day access to higher education course has been low.

9 The college works well in partnership with groups and institutions in its community. It has productive links with Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral TEC, employers, parents, schools, and further and higher education establishments. Employers are involved in enhancing students' experiences in some curriculum areas, for example by providing work experience and work shadowing placements or by supporting them in projects for national competitions. The art and design curricula are enriched by the involvement of local artists and employers. A high street bank is involved in helping business students to produce a business plan. This type of external involvement needs to be spread to other curriculum areas. Students are encouraged to expand their horizons beyond Birkenhead. 'Euroawareness' is promoted through a college bulletin. Productive student exchanges have taken place with France, Germany, Norway and Spain.

10 Excellent links are maintained with the five partner high schools. There is consultation with them on several issues. Successful bids for funding from the single regeneration budget have enabled projects relating to the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information technology to be mounted in three of the partner schools, in collaboration with the college. Schools and college staff participate in joint staff-development activities. The college principal and the five school heads meet regularly. College managers also meet with LEA officers. There are some useful links with other further education providers including a successful bid to the competitiveness fund to establish Internet links. The college has compact arrangements with three higher education establishments and is in a consortium with another.

11 Liaison with parents is effective. Parents of new students are invited to an introductory evening and are given comprehensive information about the college. They receive reports on students, regular newsletters and are invited to parents' evenings. The group known as Friends of Birkenhead Sixth Form College includes parents and members of the community who support the college and its students through fund-raising activities.

12 The college has a very positive image in the area. Marketing activities are concentrated on publicity in line with the college's policy. The quality of the college prospectus is high. The college profile has been raised by the inclusion of a substantial number of articles and some advertisements in the local press. The adult and community programmes are also promoted through letters to local residents, notices and handbills. Although strategies to expand the curriculum have made use of local market intelligence, there has been little systematic analysis of such intelligence.

13 All daytime students participate in the college's 'core programme' which is designed to enrich and broaden their experience. The 150 options are organised in five or 10 week blocks in two sessions each week. They include academic support, additional lectures, awareness of higher education, careers education, community service, competitive and

individual sporting opportunities, first aid and involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. Students are involved in community projects such as environmental improvement work, reading and information technology support for schools, and working for senior citizens. Recently, one group of students lent support to a group of people with multiple sclerosis on a week's holiday. Many of these activities have been successful in helping students achieve awards, prizes and accreditation. The college's young engineers' club won the Engineering Council's competition in 1996 and college teams have regularly won Merseyside industry and commerce awards. Two college students represented Britain in an 'advancement of science' project in Copenhagen

14 Equality of opportunity has a high priority in the college. It is emphasised in the college's mission. There is a clear equal opportunities policy. An equal opportunities working group meets regularly. Promotional literature is checked for unintentional bias and recent staff appointments have been analysed by age and gender. Currently, the equal opportunities working group is focusing on the balance of male and female students in various subjects. An all-female GCE A level chemistry group has been established. There is some preliminary evidence that achievements among female chemistry students have improved as a result. Staff in other curriculum areas have been less active in addressing such issues. Three of the four outreach centres have creche facilities that are funded by the college. Although the local population has only small numbers of people from minority ethnic groups, they are well represented in the college.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 Governance of the college is effective and efficient. The governors are highly supportive of the college and carry out their duties well. They have experience in marketing, community service, business, law, finance, audit and education. A representative of Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral TEC is a member, as are two members of the college staff. The president and vice-president of the students' council represent the views of students. All of the 19 members serve on one of the five subcommittees of the board: finance and general purposes; employment policy; remuneration; premises and services; and audit. There is also a governors' committee which meets as required and acts as the search committee for new members. A skills audit of members helps in identifying the needs of the board when vacancies arise. Governors give much of their time to the college and work hard to secure its future. Meetings are well attended, businesslike and good humoured. The clerk and the secretary to the corporation carry out their duties efficiently.

16 Governors strive to improve their own performance and that of the college. They undertake regular training, are kept well informed about developments within the further education sector, and have access to a governors' library containing much useful documentation. They receive

regular reports from senior managers, review the performance of the college and ask probing and perceptive questions. They review their own performance regularly. They have responded swiftly to suggestions for improvement made by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) auditors. Governors make sure students have opportunities to express their views to the board at formal meetings and through regular governors' lunches where a few governors meet with a group of students.

17 Strategic planning is well managed. Governors and staff are active participants in shaping the college's mission statement and determining strategic objectives. Planning follows a sensible timetable which enables the final version of the strategic plan to take account of issues emerging from the quality assurance system and budget planning. The actions and resources needed to achieve key objectives in the strategic plan and operating statement are specified, as well as the names of those responsible for the various actions and the timescales for completion. The development plans produced by staff in subject areas follow a similar pattern, but subject area objectives are not specifically linked to the college's strategic objectives. The quality of these development plans varies from one subject to another. At all levels of the institution, not enough attention is paid to setting quantitative targets and to establishing clearly-defined achievement criteria. This makes it difficult for the college to judge how well it is meeting its strategic objectives.

18 The college has a wide range of policy statements. The status of these documents varies. For example, the health and safety policy, the equal opportunities policy and those relating to personnel have been formally approved by governors. Others such as those relating to admissions, careers education and information technology have not. Governors receive annual reports from the health and safety officer and the equal opportunities co-ordinator. The extent to which other policies are implemented consistently and effectively across the college is not monitored with sufficient rigour. The college is at the beginning of a three-year period during which it intends to review and revise its policies.

19 The management structure is straightforward and well established. In most respects it works effectively. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and staff understand to whom they are responsible for different aspects of their work. Senior managers have a shared sense of purpose and work well together as a team. They have a close involvement in the day-to-day management of the college but do not lose sight of their strategic and leadership roles. Tasks and responsibilities are allocated sensibly. Senior managers place a high priority on maintaining regular contact with staff and students. For example, there is a principal's newsletter, regular meetings and training days as well as short staff briefings twice a week. Staff and students appreciate the informal contacts they have with senior managers. The principal, in particular, maintains a high profile among both staff and students.

20 Heads of division are the main channel of communication between senior managers and teachers. They meet one of the vice-principals weekly to discuss divisional issues. They also attend monthly meetings of the policy group which brings together senior and middle managers to consider college-wide issues. A carefully-planned programme of divisional, subject and course team meetings enables heads of division to pass information to other staff promptly. Staff consider that these arrangements work well in terms of the information they receive, but some are less confident that their own views are passed upwards to senior managers.

21 Most courses and subject areas are effectively organised and well managed. For example, there is a clear and concise assessment handbook and related documentation which is used by all staff who teach GNVQ courses. The science staff have collaborated to develop a range of policies covering topics such as assessment, homework and the purpose of practical work. Most heads of subject areas pay close attention to their administrative responsibilities but some need to strengthen their curricular management role to ensure that staff work effectively as a team. For example, some part-time teachers whose classes take place in the evenings are insufficiently integrated with other members of their subject teams.

22 Budgets are fairly allocated and carefully monitored. Heads of subject areas understand the principles which determine their budget allocations. Some are not aware of the weightings that are used to determine their allocations, but most consider the system to be equitable. In addition to their budget allocations, subject heads can bid for specific funds which are allocated by senior managers using agreed criteria. Senior managers and governors who are members of the finance and general purposes committee monitor the college's financial transactions carefully. They receive clearly-presented, monthly reports. All budget holders receive regular reports of their spending. The college's average level of funding for 1996-97 is £18.26 per unit compared with £18.48 in 1995-96. In 1996-97, the median for sixth form colleges is £19.36 per unit. For all sector colleges it is £18.66 per unit. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

23 The college sets enrolment targets as well as targets for its funded units of activity. The interim review of the college's operating statement for 1996-97 indicates that the college has already exceeded both these targets. There are no targets for students' retention although retention rates are carefully monitored. In 1995, concerns about retention rates led to the development of a retention strategy, most of which has been implemented. Senior managers and staff have a wealth of accurate information available to them through the computerised management information system. Some data are used effectively, but more needs to be done to make staff aware of the capabilities of the system and to enable them to make greater use of data to inform decision making.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

24 Birkenhead Sixth Form College is a friendly college. Students appreciate the adult atmosphere and the mutual respect and good humour which characterises relations between staff and students at all levels. Teachers, tutors and managers, including the principal and vice-principals, are approachable, accessible and generous with their time, and students value the support and encouragement they receive from them. The recently-established, independent, confidential counselling system is valued by students. An energetic and influential students' council flourishes in an atmosphere where students' views are genuinely listened to, respected and acted upon. Students value their freedom to visit the staff room.

25 The college's well-established relationships with its five partner high schools provide a good basis for the recruitment and guidance of prospective students. Senior college staff attend school parents' evenings, careers conventions, option choice events and industry conferences. The college holds two open evenings in January followed by an information evening in March. Prospective students and their parents value these opportunities to see the college, speak to staff and students and investigate their options. Evening events are well advertised and increasingly attract students from schools other than the partner schools.

26 The admissions process is well managed and well organised. Staff involved in admissions are trained and work to clear guidelines. Prospective students have two interviews with college staff. The college is committed, as a matter of policy, to offering impartial guidance. Staff from the local careers service, Career Connections, are present at enrolment. Vocational courses are sometimes undervalued in the admissions process and tend to be mentioned as a second choice. Some language in recruitment literature undermines the college's commitment to a parity of esteem for all courses. The majority of students valued the guidance they had received during the admissions process. There are separate enrolments for courses in adult and community education. Subject tutors and Career Connections staff are present at these events. There is an annual review of all admissions procedures, but poor retention during the initial weeks of several courses is not examined as an indicator of effectiveness.

27 Induction is efficient. Although students feel bombarded with detail and paperwork they value highly the caring ethos established during the induction process. Induction includes a conference for new students in July. New students receive a good range of information to prepare them for college life, the tutorial system, support services and the core curriculum. At the start of the term, they also get a useful and informative diary and handbook. During the first two weeks of term, students undertake an induction programme during which they choose their core options and are introduced to action planning, the college charter, records of achievement and learning agreements. The learning agreement is not

used subsequently, and is forgotten by many students. In addition to this college programme, there are separate subject inductions. On the first day of their subject induction, some students found themselves repeating activities in which they had been involved during the college induction. While many of the subject inductions observed by inspectors were very good, several were unimaginative. Students who wish to transfer courses or change subjects are encouraged to do so before November. Students are well supported through this process.

28 There is an effective system of workshops to support students' learning. These cover literacy, numeracy and study skills. Students who need extra help are identified through diagnostic testing if they are on foundation or intermediate level courses. Advanced level students who experience difficulties are identified less formally by course tutors. Students themselves may also volunteer to attend the workshops. Although the number of students using the learning support workshops is small, the quality of the work is well regarded. Agreed actions and targets are recorded and used to inform students' monthly reviews and to assist in the evaluation of the workshops. There are no procedures for accrediting students' prior learning, except in the case of information technology within the core programme.

29 The tutorial system is well developed and generally effective. Tutor groups contain students from different courses. They meet for a 10 minute registration session daily and a 30 minute session once a week. During this weekly session, students discuss and update their records of achievement, receive guidance on careers and higher education, and have some sessions devoted to personal and social education. The effectiveness of the longer weekly tutorial session is very uneven. Some tutors in a session designed to raise awareness of the general election failed to challenge fairly superficial views or to correct factual inaccuracies; in some cases the tutor's half-hearted engagement with the exercise proved contagious. The best sessions stimulated students to examine the issues and encouraged them to exercise their democratic rights.

30 Systems for monitoring and reporting attendance, punctuality and progress are thorough. The referral system for students causing concern is too labour intensive and not always well used. The opportunity to officially commend students is used sparingly, but some students spoke appreciatively of its use by senior managers as a means of thanking them for their contributions to the life of the college. There is a cycle of regular assessment and reporting on students' progress. Action planning is integral to this process, involving students in assessing their own performance. Most students, however, find action planning tedious, repetitive and unhelpful. There is no follow up to see if targets set during action planning are met. There have been some imaginative attempts to improve the image of records of achievement in the eyes of students. Forty per cent of students who left college in 1996 had continued to update the record of achievement which they brought with them from school.

31 Careers education and guidance are of a good standard. The responsibilities of the guidance team members are clearly identified. Career interviews are available to students on demand. Students are aware of this entitlement and 340 took up the opportunity in 1995-96. The college has a detailed service-level agreement with Career Connections which clearly identifies the separate responsibilities of college staff and careers service staff. Career Connections provides careers education for groups of GNVQ students, second-year GCE A level students applying for jobs and GCSE students. Support for applications to higher education is provided through core courses and individual interviews. Some emphasis is given to vocational and professional career pathways after higher education. A variety of presentations on careers and higher education is provided within tutor group sessions by college and careers service staff.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

32 Inspectors observed 132 sessions. Sixty per cent of sessions had more strengths than weaknesses. This is 3 per cent lower than the average for all classes observed during 1995-96, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. The weaknesses outweighed the strengths in 10 per cent of the sessions. This is 2 per cent more than is recorded in the same report. The average attendance rate in the classes observed was 84 per cent and the average class size seen was 10. These are in line with figures presented in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Attendance rates varied from subject to subject. Science had the best attendance, at 90 per cent, and social science the worst at 78 per cent. The following table summarises the grades awarded to the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	20	37	20	4	0	81
GCSE	0	8	6	3	0	17
GNVQ	0	7	8	2	0	17
Other	2	5	6	4	0	17
Total	22	57	40	13	0	132

33 Science teachers are knowledgeable and skilled in teaching their subjects. They give careful and clear explanations of complex concepts, review calculations and check students' understanding. They use well-organised practical activities to support theory and give students many opportunities for extra help and support. Relationships between students and teachers are good and students express satisfaction with their courses. Homework is set and marked on a regular basis. However, teaching does not always challenge more able students, and opportunities to set more demanding assessment tasks are sometimes missed. The pace

of teaching is too slow in a few lessons and teachers' checks on learning and understanding are not always careful enough.

34 Mathematics, computing and information technology courses are well organised and preparation for lessons is thorough. Teachers cover all the requirements of the courses and devise appropriate exercises for students. However, schemes of work lack detail. In many lessons, not enough account is taken of individuals' needs. Most teachers use a narrow range of teaching strategies to develop theoretical work. Students' work is set and marked regularly. In the better mathematics lessons, teachers make connections between the topics being studied and students' own experiences; they use careful questioning to elicit students' ideas; and they help students to develop solutions to problems. Mathematics students are not sufficiently encouraged to use information technology as a mathematical tool. In computing and information technology, practical lessons are well taught and students are effectively supported as they work on their own. In a few instances, teaching was pitched at too high a level for the class.

35 Schemes of work for business courses are well thought out and carefully structured. All business lessons start well; students are punctual, and teachers set out the aims of the session and link it with previous work. Some also have an effective conclusion. For example, in one lesson, the teacher drew together all the components of the session, recapping and reinforcing the main points, checking all the learning outcomes, showing how that lesson would fit with the next lesson and setting a practical task which would consolidate the theory and give it a practical application. The best lessons encouraged productive work, effective learning and high levels of interest. Other lessons consisted of relatively long periods during which the teacher spoke to the class, developing ideas slowly. The result was that students' concentration lapsed. Question and answer sessions are often dominated by a few of the more confident students and teachers fail to make best use of questions directed at individual students, to check their understanding and to draw them into discussion. Work experience is generally well integrated with other aspects of learning. The timing of students' assignments is poorly managed. In order to make groups of a viable size, foundation business students are combined with foundation leisure and tourism students. More thought needs to be given to the management of such groups that ensure all the students' needs are being met.

36 In performing arts, and art and design, the programmes of study are well planned and designed to encourage a systematic development of students' skills. There is a friendly, relaxed, but purposeful atmosphere in lessons. In the performing arts, teaching and the promotion of learning are of the highest standard. Topics are delivered with humour, imagination and appropriate rigour. Teachers lead by example. The performing arts curriculum is enriched by students' own performances, the peripatetic

music service and visits to concerts, the theatre and art galleries. In art and design, team teaching provides students with a variety of experiences and makes clear the links between the various components of the curriculum. In some art and design lessons, students are not given sufficient encouragement to exceed their own expectations.

37 Relationships between teachers and students in English and foreign languages are positive and friendly. There is good use of praise and encouragement. Teachers are sensitive to their students' responses to literature and to their use of the language they are studying. In English, students undertake a variety of stimulating activities. In the best sessions, there is pertinent questioning by teachers to tease out and elaborate upon students' initial ideas. In weaker sessions a lack of planning and imprecise instruction to students sometimes impede learning. The conclusions of some lessons are too perfunctory, failing to emphasise the learning which has taken place. In foreign language lessons, teachers and students make good use of the language being learned. In a lesson on the generation gap, students, encouraged to express their opinions, showed a good range of idiomatic expression and appropriate vocabulary. In the better language lessons, class time is fully utilised and the classroom is a busy, active place. Points are clearly explained and illustrated by the teacher. In weaker sessions, the teachers tend to talk for too long themselves, fail to encourage contributions from students, and allow the more reticent students to make no comments at all.

38 In sociology and psychology, teachers encourage the appropriate and accurate use of social science terms and concepts. The best lessons start with the teacher discussing the aims and objectives of the session with students. Sometimes these are recorded on the board so that they can be referred to as the work progresses. The conclusions of lessons are not always as well thought through. Teaching and learning methods lack variety. This is true both of classroom activities and work set for students to undertake on their own. Students are not stretched enough. There is not always sufficient emphasis on developing the skills of evaluation, interpretation and criticism. Teachers' work with individual students, especially in workshop sessions, is of a good standard. Marking of students' work is sometimes too generous and sometimes gives insufficient pointers for improvement.

39 In history, law, geography and government and politics, teachers start sessions with a review of the work previously covered before introducing new topics. This helps students to develop an overview of their subjects. Question and answer sessions involving the whole class are well conducted. Teachers often ask probing questions to check students' understanding. There is effective use of video to develop students' imagination and to foster an appreciation of different points of view. Students need more encouragement to note all the important points being made during lessons. In some lessons, the pace of the work is too slow, especially for more able students. On occasions, the poor standard of

writing on boards and in handouts adversely effects learning. The quality of teachers' marking is often good. Well-designed assessment cover sheets are used to help students to focus on aspects of their work which can be improved.

40 The college provides academic support workshops to help students who have missed work or are finding certain topics difficult. These workshops are invariably of a high standard and are a great help to students. Students speak highly of the support they receive in such sessions. Students with disabilities are effectively supported in the college. Although they are few in number they are well integrated. Much thought is given to ensuring they are able to fulfil their potential. Help from external agencies is recruited when necessary.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

41 Students carry out the tasks set for them diligently. Many of them work well together in groups and are mutually supportive. When undertaking practical activities they observe health and safety regulations. Although some students use wordprocessors, not many use information technology for more complex tasks. There are a few examples of good practice, such as the use of the Internet by biology students. A few students have problems with numeracy which hinders their progress.

42 The vast majority of students are developing appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding in relation to the courses they are following. Students' course files are usually well organised and their work is well presented. Science students are able to make deductions from observations and are adept at problem solving. Computing students are able to analyse a given situation, design a solution, and write appropriate computer programs. Performing arts students act, make music, and dance with skill and sophistication. Art students' work displays imagination and appropriate levels of skill. During the inspection there was an impressive display of work which included large-scale relief work developed from painting and critical studies, and some jewel-like artefacts made from thin copper sheet and wire. In some instances, students are satisfied with repeating information given to them by the teacher rather than finding out for themselves and developing their own ideas. This was particularly so in the social sciences. Many students exhibit a lack of confidence in oral work and experience difficulty in speaking in a detailed way about topics they are studying.

43 The GCE A level results for 16 to 18 year olds have shown consistent improvement. In 1994, the college was in the middle third of the performance tables for all colleges published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) with an average points score per entry of 4.2 (where grade A=10 points, E=2). This score improved to 4.3 the following year which put the college in the top third of all colleges in the sector, a position it maintained with an improved score of 4.6 points per entry in 1996. The college's performance in vocational courses has also

shown improvement according to the DfEE tables. In 1996, it was in the top 10 per cent of the performance tables for advanced level vocational qualifications with an achievement rate of 90 per cent and in the top third for intermediate level vocational qualifications, with an achievement rate of 73 per cent.

44 The college has used value-added statistics since 1993 to compare students' performance in GCE A level examinations with that predicted on the basis of their GCSE grades. Records show that, overall, students achieved in line with expectations in 1996. In 15 subjects, students achieved above expectations, significantly so in computing, psychology, physics and Spanish. Achievements were below expectations in business studies, English literature, history and German.

45 Pass rates at GCE A level vary between subjects. Compared with other sixth form colleges nationally there are some consistent patterns of success and a few consistently poor results:

- music, computing and textiles have had 100 per cent pass rates for each of the past three years
- design technology, economics, geography, geology, government and politics, mathematics, and psychology have had pass rates above the national average for the past three years
- art and design, law, sports studies, theatre studies, physics, English language, communication studies, and English literature have had pass rates above the national average in two out of the past three years
- biology, business studies, chemistry, French and Spanish have had pass rates below the national average for two out of the past three years
- in German, history and sociology, results have been below the national average for the past three years
- results for English literature/language have been below the national average in both the years it has been offered.

46 The proportions of students obtaining grade C or above at GCE A level compare less favourably with the average for sixth form colleges. Only computing, government and politics and psychology have had a higher than average proportion of students achieving these higher grades in each of the past three years. Textiles, biology, business studies, chemistry, French, and sociology have had low proportions of higher grades for the past three years. The proportion of students achieving higher grades in Spanish has improved over the last three years, 75 per cent gaining grade C or above in 1996. German, on the other hand, has seen a declining proportion of higher grades; only 8 per cent of students achieved grade C or above in 1996.

47 Over recent years, the college has seen a decline in the number of students taking GCSE courses: 72 students did so last year. There have been examination entries in 18 GCSE subjects in at least some of the last three years. Good results are to be found in a number of areas: in sociology the results have been more than 10 per cent above the national average for the last three years; in mathematics and science the results have been above the national average for the last three years; and there are consistently good results for the small numbers entered for music, all of whom attained grade C or above in both 1994 and 1995. There is a pattern of improving results in Spanish. There are also some poor results: business studies results have been well below national averages for the past three years; and physical education results are declining and have been below the national average for the past two years. The proportions of students who follow a programme of four GCSE subjects and achieve three or four GCSEs at grade C or above has declined. In 1996, only 21 per cent did so. The college is in the process of reviewing the reasons for poor GCSE performance.

48 Results on vocational courses have been consistently good. All students who completed Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national and first diploma courses in information technology have gained the qualification in each of the years the courses have been offered at the college. All those who completed the intermediate level GNVQ course in business in 1996 and the foundation level GNVQ course in leisure and tourism in 1995 gained the qualification. Apart from the first year of running, the GNVQ intermediate courses in business and leisure and tourism have had achievement rates well above the national average. Students on foundation level courses have done exceptionally well.

49 Retention rates are poor on some courses. Only 45 per cent of GCE A level courses retained more than 80 per cent of their students to the completion of the course in 1996. The picture is more positive for GCSE courses; only three out of 14 subjects had retention rates below 80 per cent in 1996. GCSE mathematics has had consistently good retention rates; 98 per cent of those starting the course completed it last year. Retention rates on advanced level vocational courses are low for all subjects. Only one-third of those enrolling on advanced GNVQ leisure and tourism in 1994 completed the course in 1996. Foundation and intermediate level vocational courses have better retention rates; four out of the seven courses offered retained over 80 per cent of their students in 1996.

50 The college collects students' destinations data very efficiently. In 1996 it had information on the destinations of 96 per cent of the students who had completed their courses. Of those whose destinations were known, 72 per cent of advanced level students progressed to higher education, including 77 per cent of GCE A level students and 50 per cent of GNVQ advanced students. Fourteen per cent of advanced level students

entered employment; 9 per cent of GCE A level students and 50 per cent of GNVQ advanced level students. Sixty per cent of intermediate and foundation level students continued in further education, over three-quarters of them choosing to remain at the college. Twelve per cent of intermediate and foundation level students entered employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

51 The college's mission commits it to providing high-quality education for all of its students. Senior managers and heads of division have been closely involved in developing quality assurance procedures and have a strong commitment to them. Other staff are made aware of the quality assurance procedures through consultation and training. There are well-established quality standards and procedures relating to services to students. The documentation describing the annual quality cycle provides a clear understanding of how all the procedures fit together and relate to the strategic planning process. The college does not have a formal quality assurance policy. The quality committee has not met for almost a year. The role of governors in quality assurance is not well defined.

52 There are comprehensive reports on examination results for all courses. They are written to a clearly-defined standard format. An analysis of the value added to students' achievements on GCE A level courses, as a result of their time at the college, plays a central role in the reports. The principal and a vice-principal scrutinise each report carefully. Where serious weaknesses are identified, they take a leading role in drawing up an action plan with the team involved and supervising its implementation. Improvements in students' performance have been achieved as a result of these procedures.

53 Systems to review and evaluate courses are well established. They include all the newly-established adult courses as well as the long-standing provision for 16 to 19 year olds. The course reviews draw on the views of external moderators and verifiers. Subject teachers devise their own questionnaires to find out what students think about courses. In the best instances, the questionnaires yield much useful information, but some questionnaires are poorly designed. Students' comments are taken more seriously by some teams than others. Quantitative performance indicators have not been developed and this makes improvement more difficult to monitor. Measurable targets are also missing from some subject reports. Some monitoring of standards is not rigorous enough.

54 The college charter is an integral part of the quality system. Students receive a copy at enrolment and its importance is explained during early tutorials. It is easy to understand. The extent to which the commitments in the charter have been met are monitored annually by the quality committee. The complaints procedure is concisely described in the charter. The procedure works well and the few complainants have all been satisfied with the responses they have received.

55 Staff development takes into account the priorities in the strategic plan and individual needs. It is well managed. Almost all staff undertook some form of training or development last academic year. Staff appreciate the opportunities available to them. The investment in training amounted to 4 per cent of college staffing costs for 1995-96. Staff are required to share the benefits of their training with colleagues, when it is useful to do so. There are a few instances in which teachers have had insufficient opportunity for development activities outside the college. Induction for new staff is effective and supportive. The college achieved Investor in People status in November 1996.

56 The college's appraisal scheme is now in its second year of operation and the institution is on schedule to complete its first cycle successfully by the end of the present academic year. The scheme operates to a well-planned programme. It includes classroom observation and is also intended to identify teachers' professional development needs. The appraisal scheme is encouraging the spread of good practice. All senior managers were appraised in the first year. It is planned that appraisal of non-teaching staff will begin during the present academic year.

57 The college has produced an annual self-assessment report since 1994. The reports are written to the headings of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. They are informed by the judgements arrived at through the college's quality assurance procedures. Whilst a large number of specific strengths are identified in the current report, there is no specific identification of weaknesses, only 'areas for development'. Some, such as 'providing resources for new courses', are examples of good planning, rather than of actions to be taken to address weaknesses. There is no clear indication of the evidence which the college is relying upon to support the judgements in the report.

RESOURCES

Staffing

58 Teachers are dedicated, hard working and committed to furthering the success of their students. They often give of their non-teaching time to assist students. Teachers are well qualified and generally well experienced; 90 per cent have first degrees, 17 per cent have postgraduate qualifications and 84 per cent are qualified teachers. In response to the introduction of a broader curriculum, 13 teachers have gained assessor qualifications and 16 are in the process of working towards them. Some teachers on vocational courses have limited or out-of-date industrial experience. However, some have taken advantage of the teacher placement scheme to have a one-day placement in industry and a few have undertaken a five-day placement. Fourteen per cent of teachers have had more than 10 days' industrial experience in the last five years. There is a good spread of experience and expertise among staff. For example, in biology teachers

are qualified in botany, zoology, biology and applied biology. Teachers are well matched to the courses which they teach.

59 Support staff are well qualified; 23 per cent have degrees or equivalent qualifications. They work hard to support teachers and managers and also to enhance the experience of students. They work well as part of the appropriate college teams. The college has recognised that, in a few instances, support staff carry heavy workloads; occasionally teachers are spending time on non-teaching duties which would be more efficiently undertaken by support staff. It is reviewing the requirements for, and roles of, support staff.

Equipment/learning resources

60 Equipment and learning resources are generally sufficient. Some are of a high quality. Most classrooms have good-quality furnishings, blinds or curtains and a whiteboard. In science, a few of the whiteboards are of a poor quality. One science laboratory needs refurbishment. There is good reprographic equipment available to staff. Handouts and other documents produced by teachers are generally of a high standard. Most specialist equipment is appropriate to the needs of courses. Science laboratories and art and design and performing arts areas are well equipped. For example, in art and design the textiles print facilities include eight sewing machines, two over-lockers, two screen-print tables and a variety of screens, a vacuum screen bed, a light exposure box, batik equipment, a washing machine, a spin dryer and a lino printing press. There is a limited stock of audio-visual equipment: 27 overhead projectors and 14 televisions with video players. Apart from in modern languages, there are few audio players for use in classrooms. Equipment can be reserved through a sensible booking system but it is not heavily used. On a few courses there are not enough text books; for example, students on two-year courses only have access to them on one year of their course.

61 The provision of information technology facilities is generally good, in terms of quantity and quality. The ratio of students to workstations is 9:1. The vast majority of workstations are networked and the majority of the network can use multimedia software. Ten workstations have Internet connections. Workstations are situated throughout the college, and provide good access for both teachers and students. There are computer workstations in some teaching rooms, an open access resources centre and the library, as well as in the information technology teaching rooms. When there are free workstations in the information technology teaching rooms they are available to other students on a 'drop-in' basis. Each computer area has a laser printer and the college has a scanner and a plotter. Outreach centres are supplied with good-quality laptop computers. These are used in the college when there are no classes in outreach centres. There is up-to-date software available for the general user and appropriate specialist software for information technology and computing students. In some areas, there is insufficient specialist software, for example graphics

packages are few in number for art and design students, and there is no specialist software for social science students. The library bookstock is good for some courses, but not for others. In a few instances, dated books are left on the shelves which can be misleading for students. There are few learning resources apart from books in most curriculum areas. The college has recently allocated funds to try to bring the library stock up to recommended minimum standards.

Accommodation

62 The college stands in approximately 1.5 hectares of well-maintained grounds. There are adequate car parking spaces. Accommodation is generally of a good standard. Most of it is clean and tidy, apart from some students' social areas. Buildings are in good decorative order. There is a clear system for reporting necessary repairs and a reasonable response time by the premises team. Some good displays of students' work and other stimulus materials are evident throughout the college. Particularly notable are those in business studies, mathematics, English and art and design. The new building provides a pleasant place for staff and students to work. The college has a no smoking policy within the buildings, which is respected by college members. There is a smokers' area in the grounds with benches and litter bins. In addition to the refectory, there are five social areas for students. They are attractive and students value them. The library is small and rather cramped. The environment does not encourage students to work there. There are some good-quality study rooms in an annexe to the library. The college will be extending the library during the summer holiday this year. Almost all the college is accessible to wheelchair users.

63 Some laboratories and classrooms are too small for the classes using them. Occasionally, support activities take place in inappropriate rooms. The grouping of rooms by subject gives them a sharp subject focus. An attractive base room with appropriate displays and facilities has been created for students on access courses. The college theatre is an excellent, flexible performance venue. There is a good-quality lecture theatre. External noise is sometimes distracting in some areas; music practice rooms are insufficiently soundproofed, and the noise disturbs adjacent classes. The ventilation and heating system in the theatre is noisy and interferes with activities. Noise echoes through the uncarpeted mobile classrooms. A few classrooms are sometimes too warm and stuffy.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

64 The strengths of the college are:

- its effective response to the needs of the local community
- the strong links it has with other organisations, in particular its partner schools

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- the experience, support and effective work of the governing body
 - a generally effective management structure
 - good communication between senior managers and staff
 - excellent relationships between staff and students, built on mutual respect
 - effective workshops for learning support
 - good careers education and guidance
 - some good teaching and effective promotion of learning
 - good examination results in most areas and an improving position in performance tables
 - comprehensive reports on examination performance and a well-established system of course reviews
 - a staff-development programme which is well planned and well managed
 - dedicated, hard-working and well-qualified staff
 - sufficient information technology equipment of good quality
 - accommodation which is well cared for.

65 The college should:

- set quantitative targets and performance indicators in order to judge its progress towards achieving its strategic objectives
- implement its policies and quality assurance procedures more consistently and monitor that implementation more rigorously
- disseminate good practice in personal tutorials
- encourage some teachers to use a wider range of teaching methods
- ensure that teaching takes into account the needs of individual students
- take steps to improve attendance, retention and achievement rates in some areas
- continue to upgrade library facilities and stock.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1996)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1996)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area
(as at November 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents
(as at November 1996)

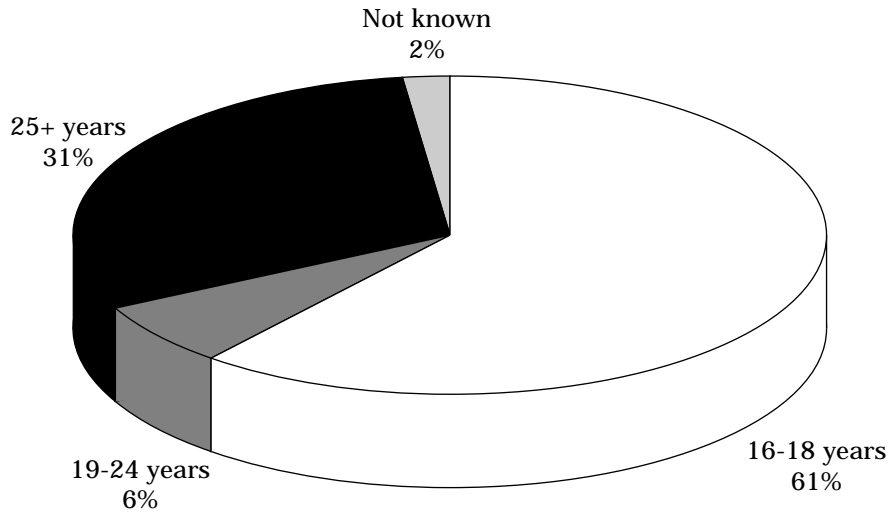
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

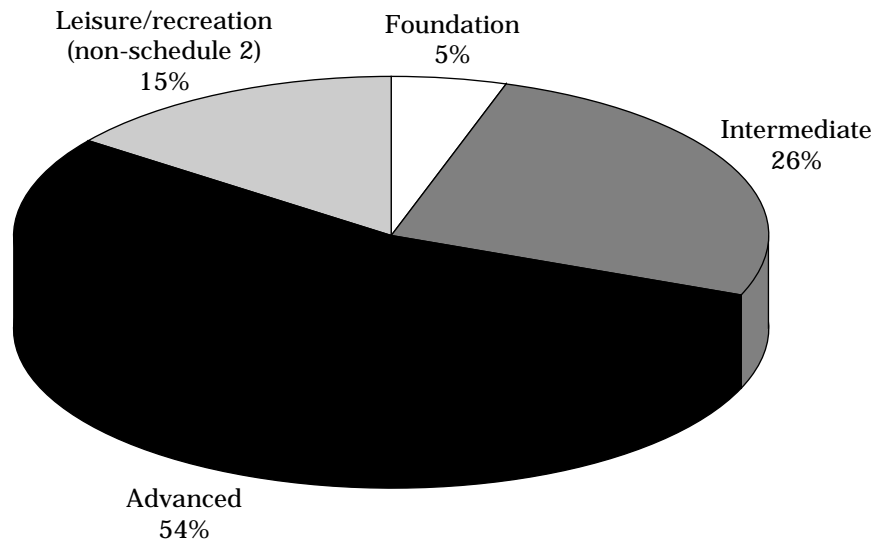
**Birkenhead Sixth Form College: percentage student numbers by age
(as at November 1996)**



Student numbers: 1,685

Figure 2

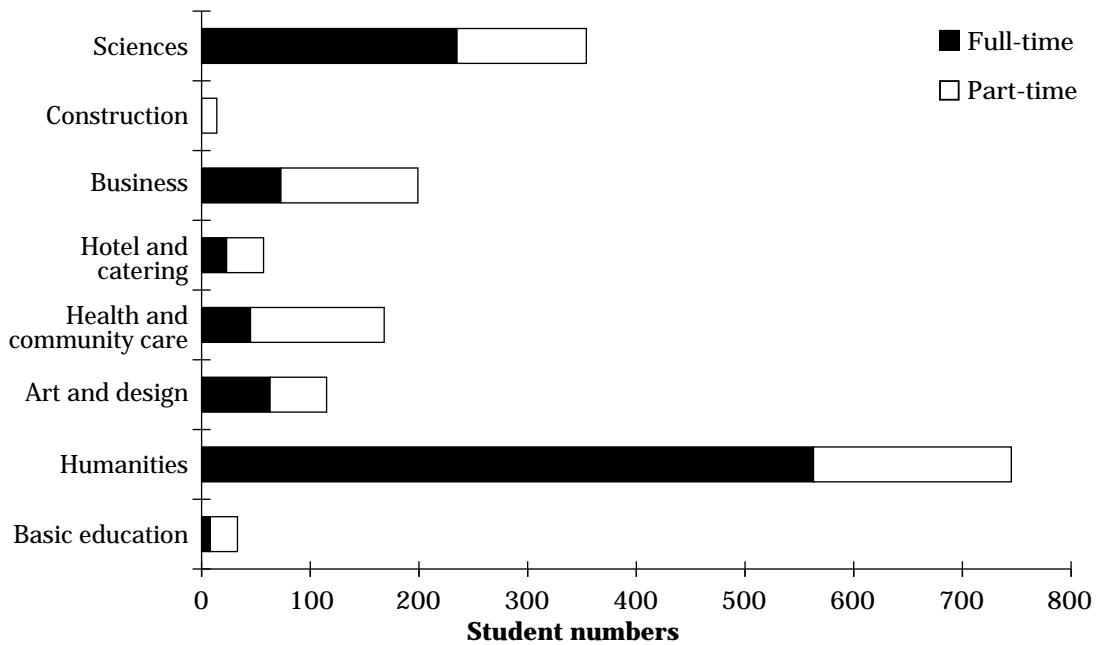
**Birkenhead Sixth Form College: percentage student numbers by level of study
(as at November 1996)**



Student numbers: 1,685

Figure 3

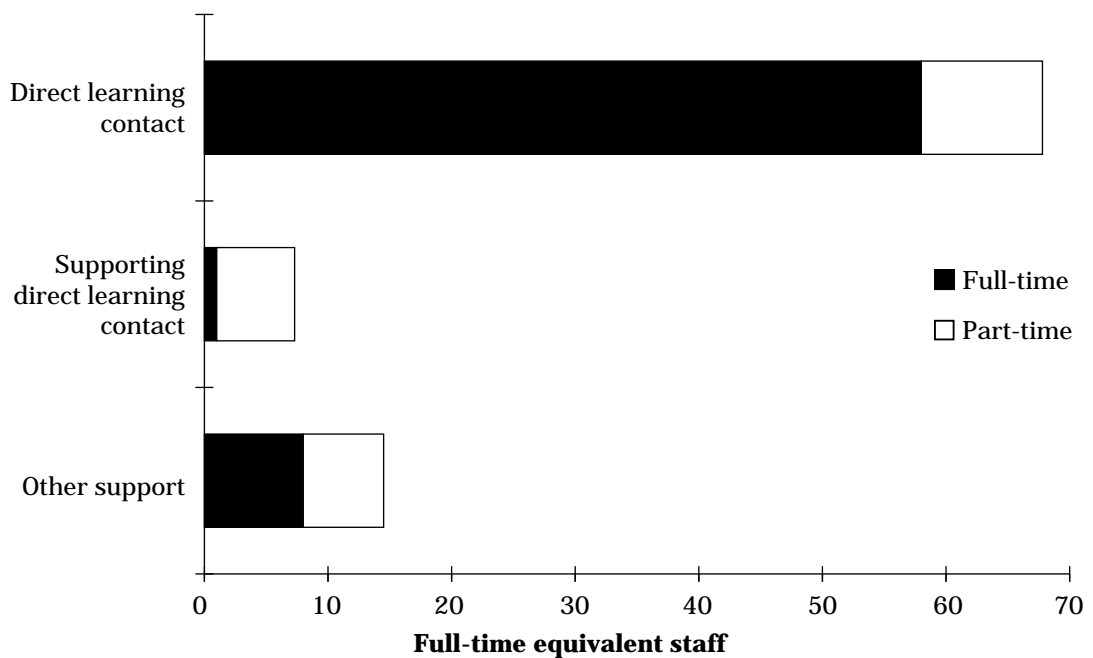
Birkenhead Sixth Form College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 1,685

Figure 4

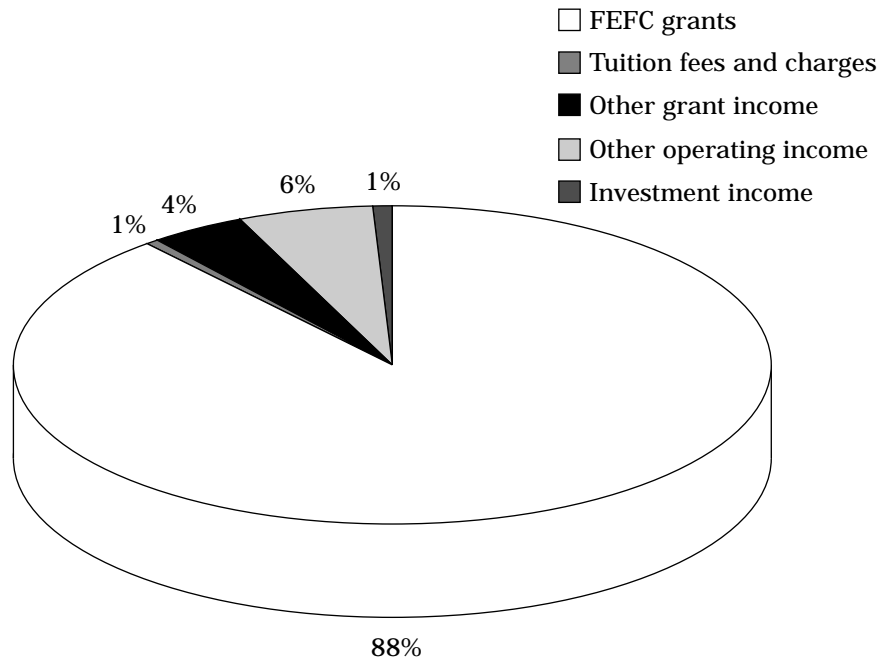
Birkenhead Sixth Form College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at November 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 90

Figure 5

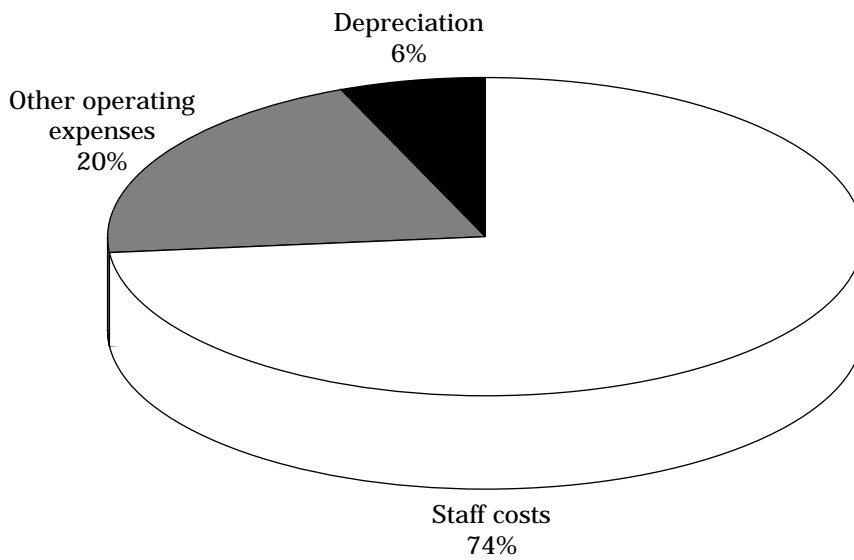
Birkenhead Sixth Form College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £2,900,000

Figure 6

Birkenhead Sixth Form College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £2,884,000

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