

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

The Sixth Form College, Colchester

April 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.

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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 52/97

THE SIXTH FORM COLLEGE, COLCHESTER

EASTERN REGION

Inspected January 1996-January 1997

Summary

The Sixth Form College, Colchester provides a wide range of general education courses for full-time students aged 16 to 19. It has effective links with other educational institutions. There are comprehensive and well-managed arrangements for recruitment, enrolment and induction. Students benefit from good pastoral support. Staff and students are committed to hard work and success. The standard of teaching is consistently high. Students' achievements are outstanding, both in examined courses and on the extensive and imaginative additional studies and enrichment programme. Attendance and retention rates are high. The college is well governed and managed. Senior staff consult widely and maintain effective communications. There is up-to-date specialist equipment for most courses and the main building provides a busy and attractive learning environment. The college has developed a strong quality assurance framework, reflecting a culture of critical self-evaluation. It now needs to produce an overarching quality assurance cycle. The college should also: review governors' training needs; increase the number of computers; and enhance the limited range of teaching equipment available on the north site.

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	1
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	1
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics	2	English and modern languages	1
Sciences	1	Social sciences and physical education	1
Computing and technology	1	Other humanities	1
Economics and business studies	1		
Media, creative and performing arts	1		

INTRODUCTION

1 The Sixth Form College, Colchester was inspected between January 1996 and January 1997. Enrolment and induction were inspected between July and September 1996, most specialist programmes were inspected during two weeks in October and aspects of cross-college provision were inspected from 20 to 24 January 1997. Seventy-eight inspector days were spent in the college. A total of 188 teaching sessions were observed. Inspectors scrutinised students' coursework and held discussions with staff, students, parents, members of the corporation and representatives from local schools, employers, the Essex Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), the community and higher education.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 The Sixth Form College, Colchester opened in 1987 following the reorganisation of post-16 education in the town. Teachers from the former comprehensive school sixth forms were brought together in the new college. The college occupies a town centre site and has mainly purpose-built accommodation. It was originally designed for 850 students but, from its inception, demand for places was greater than anticipated. The college has grown continuously and, at the time of the inspection, there were over 2,000 students on roll.

3 There are 11 secondary schools in the borough of Colchester. Three are for pupils aged 11 to 18 years, of which two are selective single-sex grammar schools. Colchester Institute, a large general further education college, is also located in the town. Other further education colleges in the area are Suffolk College located 24 miles to the east in Ipswich and Braintree College some 17 miles to the west. Essex, with 103 secondary schools, has the largest school population of any county in England and Wales. The proportion of 16 year olds continuing in full-time education has increased from 54 per cent in 1990 to 70 per cent in 1995. There are wide variations within the county. The borough of Colchester had the second highest participation rate of 74 per cent in 1995.

4 In the 1991 census, the population of the district of Colchester was 140,000 and the population of Essex was 1.5 million. By the year 2015, it is predicted that the population of the county will grow by 125,000, with an increase of almost 40 per cent in those under the age of 20. In the census, the resident minority ethnic population in Colchester was about 2 per cent. The proportion of college students from minority ethnic backgrounds is 4.3 per cent.

5 Colchester has a long tradition as a manufacturing centre but the service industries now employ over three-quarters of the workforce. A substantial proportion of local residents commute to work in Greater London. The unemployment rate in Colchester was 5.7 per cent in August 1996. This was lower than the average rate of unemployment in the county, which was 6.5 per cent.

6 In November 1996, the college had 2,010 students. Of these, 1,966 were full-time students and 44 were studying part time. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. The curriculum of the college covers five of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas. There were 133 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 49 full-time equivalent support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

7 The college's prime aim is 'the provision, in a supportive environment, of high quality, full-time academic and general education courses to meet the needs of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 who live in the Colchester area'. It also aims 'to equip them with the qualifications, skills and personal attributes required to move successfully and happily into higher or further education, employment and future life'.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

8 In formulating its strategic plans, the college has taken account of the provision of other post-16 providers in the locality. As a result, it has developed a distinctive role in the community as a provider of a wide range of general education courses for full-time students aged 16 to 19. Students can choose from 42 general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects, 16 GCE advanced supplementary (AS) subjects and 31 general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects. Student choices are further widened by the alternative syllabuses offered in a number of GCE A level subjects. For example, there are four options in history, five options in mathematics and in English language students can choose between a linguistically biased option or one offering a focus on creative writing. There are seven different GCE A level subjects offered in the technology area. These different syllabuses provide choices in content, style of learning and assessment methods. Eleven GCSE subjects, including minority subjects such as archaeology and astronomy, are offered to enhance advanced level programmes. Another 20 GCSE subjects provide opportunities for improved performance on intermediate level programmes. The college has chosen to offer one general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) course at advanced level in business.

9 Students have the opportunity to gain a wide range of supplementary qualifications. All students acquire an information technology qualification before leaving the college. GCE A level general studies examinations are taken by the majority of second-year students who are offered a choice of two syllabuses. Students generally value these opportunities to acquire additional qualifications.

10 The additional, recreational and complementary studies programme provides students with a wide range of opportunities to enhance their experience, both within and outside the college. There are over 80 courses, many of which are accredited through the Essex Open College Federation,

in addition to clubs, societies and lunchtime activities. These include college teams for most sports and opportunities to engage in individual activities such as sailing, skiing and climbing. Around 40 students each year enter for the Duke of Edinburgh gold and silver awards. Students participate in a range of drama, musical and artistic events. There are frequent concerts and dance productions. As well as its own choir and orchestra, the college is home to the Colne Valley Youth Orchestra. Student activity beyond the college site includes community service in special schools, children's homes and day centres. Students raise funds for a range of local and national charities. A group of over 20 students were sponsored through fund-raising activities in the college to travel to India, where they worked on a community farming project. Recently, the college provided a venue for the Mercury Theatre whose premises had been damaged by fire. These and other activities contribute to the college's prominent position in the community.

11 Sound relationships with the local general further education college have led to effective collaboration. There is a joint consultative committee whose terms of reference include the discussion of links with partner schools, strategies for avoiding duplication of courses, and collaboration on in-service training and curriculum development. The two colleges are joint sponsors of the Colchester Adult Community College which provides a range of evening classes using the sixth form college premises. The principal sits on the adult community college board, which also employs one of the college staff as manager of the site during the evenings when the community college is open.

12 The college has strong links with the University of Essex. The vice-chancellor is a college governor and the principal sits on the university council. The university provides curriculum support through visiting lecturers and gives up-to-date guidance to prospective university students on applications and choice of course. The college runs degree foundation year courses for the university in mathematical and biological sciences. Plans are well advanced to introduce a humanities degree course involving two years part-time study at the college followed by two years full-time study at the university. The college is a member of the Essex and Havering Sixth Form Colleges compact with 11 universities in the region. The compact provides an agreement for the colleges' students to progress to university; around 40 students from The Sixth Form College, Colchester benefited in 1996.

13 Well-developed and productive links with employers have been established through the college's business and industry liaison committee, which brings together representatives of local employers and members of the college staff. The committee promotes industry-based activities in the classroom. It has sponsored visits to the college by speakers with industrial or professional expertise and has provided work experience or work-shadowing placements. Other contacts for work placements have come from the parents' register, a list of voluntary contacts maintained by

the careers department. The college's relationship with Essex TEC is well established and constructive. The TEC financed a project on 'benchmarking' in 1996. In 1995 and 1996, the college successfully bid for funds to support the development of information technology provision in the college.

14 The college publishes a range of effective promotional documents that clearly describe its courses and accurately convey the college's culture and ethos. There are strong and productive links with partner schools; for example, on market research, liaison systems to effect transfer between institutions, and curriculum links between college and school departments. Staff in partner schools consider the college as the major and most successful provider of GCE A level courses in the locality. Recently, the college has promoted an Internet link, based in the college, which brings the partner schools and two primary schools into a consortium whose aim is to develop the educational and administrative use of the Internet.

15 The college is committed to equality of opportunity and has a long-established and well-publicised equal opportunities policy. An equal opportunities co-ordinator oversees the work of a committee which implements the policy and reviews progress. All subject areas are represented on this committee and a clear culture of equality is evident in the college. Recently the committee has reviewed the process by which students can apply for financial help if it is needed.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

16 The college is well governed and managed. The corporation has 11 independent members, one TEC nominee, three co-opted members, two elected staff members, one elected student member, and two parent members. Seven of the members are women. Governors bring to the corporation a wide range of educational, professional and business expertise. Most independent members have senior positions in local organisations. The corporation manages its business efficiently. Meetings are well attended; average attendance is over 80 per cent. There are appropriate committees: finance, premises, personnel, admissions and appeals, audit, remuneration, and search. Briefing papers are well prepared and meetings are properly minuted. The clerk to the corporation is the chief administration officer of the college. A code of conduct and a register of members' interests are in place.

17 Governors keep abreast of college activities by a variety of means. Each governor takes responsibility for monitoring the annual report of one department. Some spend time observing lessons, meeting teachers and students and discussing resources, and their findings are subsequently reported at corporation meetings. Other governors have helped students campaigning to preserve subsidised public transport.

18 Governors hold annual public meetings with parents. In their business meetings they show a strong sense of common purpose, focus on strategic issues, and are clear about the distinction between their roles

and those of managers. At a recent residential conference the board identified a comprehensive list of performance indicators by which it would monitor college achievements and progress on the strategic plan. At the same time it started to review its own performance. New ways of prioritising agenda items and setting attendance targets have been established. Members monitor how successfully the college is meeting its strategic aims through regular reports and financial statements from the principal. Governors are knowledgeable about community and student issues. New members receive a detailed introduction to the college, supported by an informative briefing pack. Nevertheless, some governors would benefit from additional training.

19 Communication systems are diverse and effective. A communications policy recognises the need to keep staff, students, parents and governors informed. Innovative communication methods include: a daily 10 minute 'shout' at which staff exchange information; daily broadcasts through the college's local radio station; and the use of electronic mail and the Internet by some staff and students. Minutes of meetings are posted and widely distributed, and there is an informative termly newsletter.

20 Senior managers have an open, consultative style and a commitment to personal contact with parents, students and staff. This is appreciated, especially by staff, who feel that their contributions are valued. Teachers and support staff are regularly encouraged to contribute to policy-making decisions. There is a sense of common values and purpose and a pride in the work of the college. Meetings of the senior management and staff teams are held weekly. Strategic, operational, resource and curriculum issues are managed effectively through the senior management team. The curriculum management group involves 33 staff including heads of departments as well as senior managers. Senior tutors meet separately with senior managers to consider pastoral issues. The presence of senior managers in these meetings ensures that decisions can be taken and implemented swiftly. There is a range of other meetings to which staff can contribute, covering all aspects of the college's work. Outcomes of meetings are passed speedily between staff and the senior management team. Lines of reporting and accountability are effective.

21 Most departmental teams are well managed and work effectively. A few departments fail to draw on the models of good practice promoted across the college. The college management structure is designed to ensure that staff feel a part of the total college rather than a section or division within it. Most teachers have multiple roles and often have two or more line managers for different aspects of their work. Staff welcome this opportunity to diversify and develop new skills and experience. The system works effectively and staff are well informed as a result of it.

22 The development of the college's strategic plan involved wide consultation with staff and the TEC and the active involvement of the corporation. The plan is used as a continuous reference point when considering developments and priorities in areas such as staff

development, new courses and additional expenditure. Detailed operational plans and strategies support the implementation of the strategic plan. Managers and the corporation use a wide range of performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the extent to which the college is meeting its targets. The principal's most recent annual report to the governors highlighted the success of the college in meeting its targets for enrolment, students' achievements and resources.

23 The college's budget is formulated by the senior management team, taking account of staff views, prior to consideration by the corporation. The resulting budget clearly reflects the priorities in the strategic plan. The staffing budget is carefully managed and monitored. Budgets for capital and consumable items are delegated to heads of department. Budget holders are provided with monthly statements of income and expenditure. The college's average level of funding was £18.83 in 1995-96 compared with the median for sixth form colleges of £19.73. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6. The college has started to develop unit costing as a means of assessing its cost effectiveness.

24 There is an effective computerised management information system that provides data on students, personnel and finance. Staff have confidence in the reliability of the data. All departmental staff rooms have computer terminals. Managers make considerable use of computer systems and can respond effectively to demands for information from external bodies. Good links with partner schools make it possible to electronically transfer information on year 11 students who join the college. However, teachers cannot easily get access to information on students. The college is investing in additional software and training for staff to improve access and promote greater use of the developing systems.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

25 The guidance and support provided for students is comprehensive and of high quality. The arrangements are overseen by the assistant principal who works closely with six senior tutors to ensure that students receive appropriate academic and personal guidance. Relationships between staff and students are excellent. Students are encouraged to seek help from their tutor, senior tutor or any other member of staff, including members of the senior management team or specialists such as careers staff. There are agreements to provide regular professional inputs from external services including the local careers service, chaplains, a counsellor, a nurse and an educational psychologist.

26 Recruitment procedures are carefully planned and executed. A team of college liaison tutors provides the first point of contact with partner schools. Before applying, students have opportunities to visit the college and to meet college staff. Parents and students find the open evenings at the college welcoming and informative. The detailed and impartial advice offered to prospective students at these events and at individual interviews

enables students to learn about the opportunities open to them, to be aware of the college's pre-course requirements and to make informed choices.

27 The enrolment and induction systems are responsive to students' individual needs and interests. The arrangements are effective and are well integrated with the recruitment process. There is a 'taster' day in July and an enrolment week in September when students formally confirm their programmes of study, after further individual guidance. Students can create a programme of study, including academic subjects and enrichment studies, to suit their individual needs and the college creates a timetable around the selections made. Induction provides a helpful introduction to individual courses as well as to the wider college environment. There are opportunities for students to change to an alternative programme, following advice and guidance from relevant staff.

28 Documentation about the support available to students is clear, consistent and comprehensive. The policies and procedures are understood by staff and communicated to students. There are several useful handbooks for students including one for those applying to higher education which parents and students find clear and helpful.

29 The well-developed tutorial system forms the basis of effective support for students. There are rigorous, regular written reviews of students' progress that incorporate students own action plans for learning. Reviews cover performance on academic courses as well as other aspects of college life. Personal tutors monitor any action required following reviews. Punctuality and attendance are closely scrutinised by subject teachers and tutors. Any poor attendance is quickly acted upon following weekly attendance checks by senior tutors; parents are contacted by telephone or letter when necessary. Attendance is generally maintained at a high level. It is left to students to decide if they wish to maintain their national records of achievement. However, there are plans to investigate whether such records could be incorporated into the existing systems for reviewing and recording progress.

30 The weekly tutorial programme is based on a series of themes and topics. It provides a basis for efficient dissemination of essential information related to academic progression, such as how to apply to universities and colleges. Tutorials are also used to discuss a broad range of topics, such as equal opportunities, health studies, responsible driving and political and European awareness. The college is considering how to accredit this programme.

31 There is an elected college council. The council has subsidised students who need financial support to go on organised trips and it arranges a variety of social events. An induction event for council officers includes assertion training and sessions on management and organisational skills. Through the college council, students have opportunities to take on posts of responsibility and to participate in decision

making. There are three college chaplains and an active Christian union. The college complies with sections 44 and 45 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* in providing opportunities for collective worship.

32 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive effective support. Provision is outlined in the disability statement and the college charter but there is a lack of detail in some college documents describing the support available. The amount of support provided has increased significantly in response to identified need. Where necessary, outside expertise is bought in; for example, an educational psychologist provides initial assessment of needs, where appropriate. There is close liaison with local schools to ensure that students with the most obvious needs are identified in advance, although about half of those who eventually receive support are not identified until courses have started. The system for referring and assessing students who require support once courses have started is efficient and students find it helpful.

33 Students receive comprehensive, informative careers guidance. This includes information and discussion within the tutorial programme and one-to-one guidance from college careers teachers and/or the local careers service staff. Some students undertake work experience. For example, GNVQ business students and those who are thinking of a teaching or medical career are provided with opportunities to experience relevant work at first hand. Other students need to make a specific request for a work experience placement and a minority do so. Students receive extensive information to help them make informed choices about further and higher education, training, and employment after college. Staff are available to provide counselling and advice following the publication of GCSE and GCE A level results.

34 Parents are kept well informed of students' progress through regular written reports and at parents' evenings, which are well attended. Parents are appreciative of the information and advice they receive from the college. An association of parents raises money for the college, runs a series of social events bringing staff, students and parents together, and invites guests into the college to speak on educational topics.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

35 The standard of teaching is very high. One hundred and eighty-eight teaching sessions were inspected. Of these, 82 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed any weaknesses. There were no classes in which weaknesses clearly outweighed strengths. The proportion awarded grade 1 (44 per cent) was more than twice the average for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme, according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. The average attendance in the classes inspected was 89 per cent and the average number of students in each teaching group was 13. The following table summarises the grades given for the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programmes of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	60	52	26	0	0	138
GCSE	13	11	4	0	0	28
GNVQ	2	1	0	0	0	3
Other*	7	9	3	0	0	19
Total	82	73	33	0	0	188

** includes tutorials and additional recreational and complementary studies programme.*

36 Most lessons in art, media and performing arts were well managed, thoroughly prepared and supported by lesson plans which included clear objectives. Work was set regularly and marked with constructive, critical comments. Stimulating and relevant tasks were set that challenged students' preconceived ideas. A communication studies group discussed values in the tabloid newspapers using contemporary materials. They discussed their own reactions to the materials and explored their own bias and prejudice. First-year students were effectively brought into the lively discussion. An exciting multi-media display was produced by art and design students in collaboration with the media and performing arts department and an excellent video of the exhibition was made. Clapping exercises and group instrumental activities were used to liven up a GCE A level music theory lesson. A programme of plays and concerts provided regular opportunities for students to perform in public. Students had opportunities to write, produce and broadcast on a regular basis through Storm Radio, the local college radio station. Staff and students worked hard to produce polished broadcasts. These collaborations enhanced learning and encouraged a maturity of approach. There was rigorous attention to techniques in dance classes as well as opportunities for students to engage in creative work. More attention to acting techniques would benefit students studying GCE A level theatre studies. The use of information technology as a creative design tool in art and design programmes is currently underdeveloped.

37 Students taking business studies and economics courses benefited from a high standard of specialist teaching which extended the most able and provided support for those experiencing difficulties. For example there were lunchtime extension periods in GCE A level business studies and economics where highly-motivated students had an opportunity to study complex concepts and theories. There were also two compulsory lunchtime sessions for second-year students who were known to be experiencing difficulties. Teachers encouraged a range of learning methods across the general and vocational courses. Information technology skills were well integrated with other aspects of work on the GNVQ advanced course. Students worked in a baseroom where they each

had access to a workstation. This enabled them to experience a mixture of whole class teaching, group work and individual study based on current business software. Opportunities for GCE A level and GCSE students to use information technology were more limited. The development of research skills was built into the teaching at advanced level. For example, at the start of each major topic, second-year GCE A level economics students were divided into groups and each group had to produce a seminar paper on a selected subject. This encouraged students to read the relevant sections of textbooks and to make use of library and on-line sources.

38 In computing and technology there were comprehensive course files containing detailed lesson plans, schemes of work, assessment schedules and project notes. Schemes of work were reviewed and amended each year, resulting in improvements to the management and delivery of the subject. Teachers organised a programme of trips, visits and outside speakers to broaden students' experience. They provided software manuals to encourage students to work on their own, monitored and recorded students' progress and provided useful feedback on their performance. Students were regularly reminded of their responsibilities for submitting coursework on time by notices hung from the ceiling, a novel but effective means of communication.

39 Most English lessons included opportunities for students to make written or oral contributions. Students were set suitable tasks which took account of their different abilities. In one class students were given the opportunity to combine language and literature work by writing in tabloid newspaper style on the Duke's disappearance in *Measure for Measure* and Angelo's strict laws against vice. Group work was successful in many classes because the groups were well prepared and briefed. The clear tasks and effective group work proved a great help to students in a lesson looking at the language used in a public information campaign. In a lesson introducing the topic of phonetics, students were fully absorbed in an enjoyable game used to reinforce theory. Teachers used well-prepared, high-quality handouts to aid students' learning.

40 In the majority of humanities lessons, the aims and objectives of the lesson were explained to students and the subject was set in context. Schemes of work were of a particularly high standard in history. They included topic packs, documents, statistics, contemporary cartoons, maps, diagrams and commentary. In contrast, the schemes of work for geography lacked detail. In most lessons, teachers organised a range of appropriate activities, including work in groups and pairs, student presentations, discussions, debates and question and answer sessions. In a GCE A level government and politics lesson role-play was used effectively. Half the group played the role of junior whips, with the task of persuading back benchers to support the government on a health bill. The exercise demonstrated how fierce such pressure might be. In a geography lesson on migration, students worked in pairs to classify case studies of different

people migrating, into a scheme which they themselves had devised. In a religious studies lesson, the clarity of questions and answers made the discussion of the existence of God a challenging and enjoyable experience for students.

41 Mathematics courses were well planned and organised. GCSE students were given a detailed study guide which included the topics to be studied, the exercises and assessment sheets for the year, and the target completion dates. The guide enabled each student's progress to be recorded and monitored. Students commented favourably on the organisation of the programme. Students were set homework on a regular weekly basis and this was marked and returned promptly by teachers. Many of the lessons consisted largely of individual work and there was scope for a wider variety of activities. Practical investigations and the use of information technology were a feature of the modular GCE A level course, but less common elsewhere. There was an over-reliance on the use of calculators by students. Insufficient opportunities were provided for students to develop confidence in communication skills.

42 In modern language lessons, teachers made efficient use of resources and employed effective teaching techniques. There was a commitment to help students of all abilities achieve their potential. Carefully-chosen material encouraged students to think for themselves. In a first-year GCE A level lesson the vocabulary and grammatical structures necessary to bridge the gap between GCSE and GCE A level were rapidly developed. There was a good balance between teacher-led activity and students working individually and in pairs. The whole lesson was conducted at a brisk pace and students made good progress.

43 Teachers prepared well for science courses, producing programmes of study with clear aims and objectives. They responded to the needs of their students, using a variety of teaching methods to maintain interest and pacing their delivery to suit students' abilities. High standards were expected and achieved in practical work. There were effective procedures for tracking students' achievements and appropriate schedules for the setting and marking of students' work. Homework was returned to students with extensive, helpful comments on every aspect of the work.

44 On social science courses the teaching was well planned and designed to engage the students in a variety of activities. In a psychology lesson on phobias, students joined in a lively discussion about their own phobias before progressing to possible explanations which might account for such behaviour. In a sociology lesson on religious sects, students were allocated case study materials on different religions. They analysed these and presented their conclusions to the class. In a physical education lesson, the use of theoretical models of aerobics was effectively linked to practical activities. In some social studies lessons the tasks set were insufficiently challenging for the more able. Information technology skills were insufficiently developed.

45 The additional studies programme, including GCE A level general studies, was well planned. Teaching in all areas showed sensitive handling of controversial issues, respect for student views and encouragement to think critically. Lecture notes for a health unit made good use of recent research to raise students' awareness of social, geographic and age factors affecting health.

46 The students' experience on most courses was enriched through visits, trips and the use of external speakers. Geography and geology students undertook residential fieldwork in West Yorkshire, the Isle of Arran and Bournemouth. Study trips further afield to Snowdonia, the Netherlands and Morocco were led by members of the geography department. Law students had opportunities for contact with the legal profession, the courts and the police. Media students visited the London photographers gallery and participated in a film workshop. Alexi Sayle opened the college's Storm Radio and talked about careers in the media and acting. Language students extended their learning through a range of foreign exchange trips.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

47 Students were well motivated, worked hard and showed enthusiasm for their work. The performance of students in GCE A level examinations has been consistently high over the last three years. In 1996, there were 2,796 entries in 41 subjects, including 606 entries for general studies. The average pass rate at grades A to E was 87 per cent compared with the national average of 84 per cent in 1995 for students aged 16 to 18 in sixth form colleges. The 826 students aged 16 to 18 entered for at least one GCE AS/A level examinations in 1996 scored an average of 5.1 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2). The comparable figures for 1995 and 1994 were 5.1 and 5.2, respectively. This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, according to tables published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). The 790 students entered for two or more GCE AS/A level examinations in 1996 scored, on average, 18.6 points per student.

48 The college subscribes to an independent, external service which provides an analysis of the value added to students' achievements by comparing their actual performance at GCE A level with predictions based on GCSE grades. The analysis shows that during the period 1994 to 1996, students consistently achieved higher grades than those predicted in biology, computing, design technology, English language, French, German, graphical communication, music, politics, psychology and sociology. They performed below their expected grades only in further mathematics and in one of the two general studies courses.

49 In 1996, there were 100 per cent pass rates in 11 GCE A level subjects; art, classical civilisation, dance, design, French, German, graphical communication, history of art, media studies, music and Spanish. Students

in a further 10 subjects gained pass rates of more than 90 per cent. Results in 26 subjects were higher than the national average for sixth form colleges at grades A to E and 24 subjects had higher than national average pass rates for grades A to C.

50 In 1996, there were 134 entries for GCE AS examinations in 16 subjects. The average pass rate at grades A to E was 78 per cent. In 1995, there were 154 entries and an average pass rate of 79 per cent. These results are above the national average for students aged 16 to 18 in sixth form colleges, which was 73 per cent in 1995.

51 There were 954 entries in 26 GCSE subjects in 1996. An average of 66 per cent achieved grade C or above; 14 per cent higher than the 1995 national average for sixth form colleges of 52 per cent. The college introduced a GNVQ advanced business programme in 1994. Of the 11 students who started the course, eight completed it in 1996 and five achieved the full award with a merit or distinction. These results are comparable with the 1996 national average for all colleges and schools according to data provided by the DfEE.

52 Students worked purposefully in most lessons, mastering appropriate skills and specialist vocabulary. Students' oral work was of a high standard, especially in humanities, modern languages, technology and English. Students in modern language lessons demonstrated good levels of fluency and self-expression. Technology students gave individual presentations based on a design brief which were analytical and self-critical.

53 Students in humanities, social sciences and technology had good research skills. In assignments and project work students applied their knowledge and understanding in practical situations. Students' written work in English was technically correct and thoughtful; much of it showed flair and originality. Students in science, media and performing arts handled specialist equipment skilfully; this enabled them to carry out practical work safely and competently. Students' art work was generally bold and exciting; the standard of observational drawing was high. Students worked effectively as a team in the production of broadcasts for Storm Radio, the student-run radio station. Music students displayed good instrumental skills in individual and group performances.

54 Students' achievements were enhanced by a wide range of additional qualifications and activities. For example, second-year economics students are encouraged to take an additional GCE A level in business studies and in 1996 there was a 100 per cent pass rate, with eight out of 17 students achieving a grade A or B. GNVQ students ran companies under the young enterprise scheme and received specialist advice from local business entrepreneurs. A group of four science and technology students won the Young Engineer for Britain competition in 1996. This is the third time in nine years that students from the college have won this competition. There is a strong tradition of excellence in team and individual sport. The college hockey team won a national competition and the football team won the

British colleges' national competition in 1996. Each year several students represent their country in a range of sports. The college celebrates the achievements of its students at an annual reunion where awards are presented for academic excellence, general and personal progress and service to the college or to the local community.

55 The college systematically records data on students' attendance, retention and destinations. Of 790 full-time students aged 16 to 19 who completed advanced level courses in 1996, 80 per cent progressed to higher education, 9 per cent to additional further education, 10 per cent gained employment and the destinations of only 1 per cent were unknown. Of the 143 students completing one-year GCSE courses, 66 per cent went on to additional further education, 24 per cent gained employment and the destinations of 10 per cent were unknown. Very few students leave the college before completing their programme of study. In 1995-96, the figure for the college as a whole was 4 per cent. Retention rates are consistently high. For example, the average retention rate on 11 one-year GCE AS/A level courses during 1995-96 was 93 per cent, on the 47 two-year GCE AS/A level courses it was 86 per cent and for the 27 one-year GCSE courses the completion rate was 81 per cent. Attendance rates are very high at all levels; the average student attendance on GCE A level courses during 1995-96 was 93 per cent and the comparable rate for GCSE courses was 90 per cent.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

56 The quality assurance policy reflects the college's objective to develop and maintain a quality assurance system that builds on established practices and encourages a climate of critical reflection and evaluation. Developments to date have successfully met this objective. There is a quality management group, comprising the senior management team, the quality manager and a senior tutor, whose remit is to monitor and review the operation of the quality assurance procedures. This group produces an annual quality report for the corporation. In addition, there are three other groups which monitor the quality of the curriculum, pastoral care and resources. Taken together, the terms of reference of the four quality groups provide a comprehensive framework for monitoring the quality of provision.

57 Mechanisms to ensure that the quality management group is aware of the issues raised in subject reports are not yet formalised. The working methods of the quality groups, particularly the resources group which has only recently been formed, need to be further developed to ensure that they fulfil their terms of reference. The college has not yet firmly established an overarching quality assurance cycle. Although most quality assurance activities are now well established, there is scope for further co-ordination.

58 There is an effective system of annual departmental reviews. Most departmental reports contain a detailed self-assessment of the strengths

and weaknesses of teaching and learning and of students' achievements and include clear targets for future improvement. Formal, college-wide procedures to monitor progress towards targets set by departments are being implemented for the first time this academic year. There are many instances of items in departmental reports leading to improvements in teaching and learning. For example, in response to the 1995 GCSE results in physical education, the departmental report recommended a modified teaching scheme involving a closer integration of the theoretical and practical aspects of the syllabus. This recommendation was adopted and examination results improved significantly in 1996. Value-added measures are employed extensively to analyse trends in results in each GCE A level and AS subject and to compare the attainments of different student groups, broken down by such factors as gender and the school which was attended before college. The college recognises the need to develop similar systems for comparing the performance of students on GCSE programmes with their predicted performance based on previous achievements.

59 There is a cycle of annual reporting on the quality of cross-college provision in six areas: the library, equal opportunities, staff development, health and safety, careers, and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These reports vary in quality. The best are detailed and rigorous. For example, the library report is analytical, contains clear performance indicators and a specific action plan. Some aspects of college activity are not fully included in existing quality processes; for example, the catering services.

60 The college makes extensive and effective use of information from questionnaires and attitude surveys. Students are encouraged to express their views and air their concerns in a variety of ways. For instance, there is an annual survey of students' views on enrolment and induction, and on the operation of the college charter. Students are also able to raise issues through their representatives on the student council. The college is responsive to students' views; for example, a change was made to the timing of morning registration, for a trial period, in response to a suggestion from students. Questionnaires are also used to find out why students change courses or leave before the end of their course. Students' views about individual subjects are also canvassed through questionnaires. However, practice in departments varies leaving some students unable to express their views in every subject. Generally, the process is thorough; students' views are analysed and evaluated and subsequent actions are reported back to them. The views of parents are also sought and these are published in the principal's newsletter.

61 The college's staff-development policy and programme are effective in meeting staff and college needs. There is a supportive and flexible induction programme for new staff that provides professional and general advice. New staff are asked to review the programme and to suggest

improvements. Their responses to the programme have been favourable. There is also an induction process for members of staff assuming new responsibilities. Induction programmes and briefing sessions have been introduced for non-teaching staff, although the college recognises the need for further development in this area. In 1996-97, funds allocated to externally-run staff-development courses amount to £33,000, equivalent to 0.8 per cent of the staffing budget. The college also provides extensive in-house training. A staff-development committee, representing all sections of staff, meets to consider staff-development issues. All full-time staff, and part-time staff with more than a 50 per cent commitment, have an annual staff-development interview with their line manager. Training is closely matched to college priorities as identified in departmental reports and the strategic plan. The head of personnel monitors the evaluation of training, and heads of department monitor training outcomes.

62 Staff-development procedures are linked to the college's appraisal scheme. Appraisal for all full-time staff was introduced in 1993, following consultation with staff and appropriate training. The scheme underwent a review in 1995. As a result, an annual system of staff-development interviews linked to a biannual appraisal system was introduced in June 1996. At the staff-development interview, discussion takes place on the focus for the forthcoming appraisal and the selection of the most appropriate appraiser. The line manager monitors the appraisal to ensure it is in line with strategic priorities. Over the last three years, appraisal has proved to be effective in improving performance and identifying staff-development needs. Staff speak positively about their experience of appraisal. There is scope for including more part-time staff in the scheme. The college is seeking Investors in People recognition with an agreed target date of January 1998. As part of this process, the appraisal procedures have been streamlined.

63 The college charter is clear and accessible, and it is available in 10 languages other than English. It is included in the student handbook and is introduced to new students in a tutorial session early in their first term. It has been reviewed after consultation with staff, students and local employers which has led to improvements in its clarity and format. During the review, college staff suggested the addition of a staff charter and this is being considered. The review led to the inclusion of measurable quality standards but some charter commitments still lack precision. The charter does not make any explicit commitments on access to buildings for students with restricted mobility.

64 The college's self-assessment report was written by the senior management team and follows the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The report is evaluative and clearly identifies strengths and areas for improvement. It did not cross-reference its judgements to supportive evidence. The judgements in the report closely match the findings of the inspection team.

RESOURCES

Staffing

65 There are 120 full-time teachers and the equivalent of a further 12.5 teachers employed part time. Staff are particularly well qualified. Ninety-four per cent have a first degree or its equivalent, 30 hold higher degrees and 86 per cent have a recognised teaching qualification. A few teachers have not had recent industrial or commercial experience although many have current experience as external examiners. The staff are dedicated and contribute their personal skills and interests to the enrichment programme. There is a system for covering staff absences which works well. Teachers are deployed effectively and have steadily increased their efficiency since incorporation; the staff to student ratio has increased from 1:12.8 to 1:14.3 over four years.

66 There are 77 support staff who make a valuable contribution to the work of the college. Technicians are well qualified. The adequacy of technician support across the curriculum is varied. For example, there are two technicians to support the work of three academic staff in technology but there is insufficient technical support in media and performing arts; this particular need will be met through an additional appointment. Staff responsible for the management of key support services, such as premises, personnel and finance are all professionally qualified.

Equipment/learning resources

67 The work of students and staff in most areas is well supported by a wide range of up-to-date equipment and materials. Most specialist equipment is of industrial standard and is readily accessible. The equipment in the sciences meets students' needs fully. There is a substantial number of relevant videos to support work in film, advertising and the media. However, stocks of some items of equipment are insufficient for the numbers of students wishing to use them; for example, there are insufficient cameras and video recorders to support the work in media studies. The college radio station is accessible in all tutor group baserooms and provides an imaginative additional resource to the curriculum.

68 The teaching rooms are well furnished and most are equipped with an overhead projector and other audio-visual equipment that is effectively maintained and managed by a central audio-visual aids service. Classrooms on the north site do not have the full range of teaching equipment. The reprographics service is appreciated by staff and students for its contribution to the production of high-quality learning materials and its support to students needing to provide visual presentations of their work. The service has been the recipient of two awards from an industrial print magazine.

69 The library is well stocked with 16,500 items including books, cassettes, magazines, periodicals and 54 compact disk read-only memory

(CD-ROM) databases. Library staff attend meetings of the curriculum management group. There is student representation on the library committee and students were responsible for setting the levels of library fines. This attractive learning environment is very popular with students and becomes congested at peak times. Other study spaces are available but attract lower levels of use. Pressure on space has made it difficult to access some of the bookstock. An additional bookstock of 12,700 volumes is maintained outside the library by departments and is included in the library catalogue.

70 Over the last three years, the college has spent around £250,000 on updating and enhancing its information technology provision. There are 115 workstations available to students and 61 available for use by academic and administrative staff. Nearly all these machines are networked and files can be transferred with relative ease. The current ratio of computers to students is low at 1:17. The college recognises the need to increase the number of workstations. The recent purchase of a leased line to the Internet provides access to a wide range of learning materials in most parts of the college. Many students are not yet fully aware of the potential of this service.

Accommodation

71 The college is located on a town centre site of 10 hectares, with limited vehicular and passenger access from a busy thoroughfare. There are two attractive brick buildings, sympathetically linked to allow full access, including wheelchair access, to all floors. The larger block was constructed in 1987 when the college first opened. There are additional temporary classrooms at the north end of the site. This accommodation is visually unattractive from the outside. It can be noisy and is poorly serviced in terms of information technology and audio-visual resources. The college has purchased an additional building, the Cock and Pye, located at the main entrance to the site, and has leased a floor of a 1960s building approximately 100 yards away from the main site. The north site classrooms and the Cock and Pye are not fully accessible to wheelchair users. The college has started on the first phase of an accommodation development strategy that will, by 1998, have provided an additional 1,100 square metres of space. This programme is designed to allow the college to withdraw from its accommodation at the north site.

72 There is a high standard of decoration and the accommodation is well maintained. The environment benefits from stimulating displays of student work. Staff workrooms are being systematically refurbished to a high standard. The refectory seats 120 in what is a congested area at peak times. An additional facility with a different range of provision is planned as part of the building extension.

73 Accommodation usage is well monitored and space is used creatively to support the needs of a changing curriculum. Student study spaces have been created close to teaching rooms. Occasionally these study spaces are

required for teaching. The number of students in a few, smaller classrooms makes it difficult for the full range of teaching and learning methods to be used. The concentration of students in the most popular social areas provides a lively and busy forum but also leads to congestion at break times. The college makes full use of a number of excellent off-site sporting facilities. This is a logical and cost-effective solution to the restrictions imposed by the location of the college site.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

74 The main strengths of the college are:

- the high standard of teaching
- the outstanding level of students' achievement across the curriculum
- the commitment to hard work and success by staff and students
- the high attendance and retention rates
- the outstanding additional studies and enrichment programme
- the up-to-date specialist equipment for most courses
- the attractive learning environment provided by the main building
- the well-developed links with local schools and other education providers
- the effective governance and management
- the comprehensive and effective recruitment, enrolment, induction, support and guidance processes
- the valuable contribution of staff to the wider curriculum
- the effective quality assurance framework
- the extensive programme of staff development.

75 To improve further the college should:

- review the governors' training needs
- continue to develop the quality assurance arrangements
- increase the number of computers
- enhance the range of teaching equipment on the north site
- make improvements to those classrooms which currently restrict the range of teaching methods.

FIGURES

-
- 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)

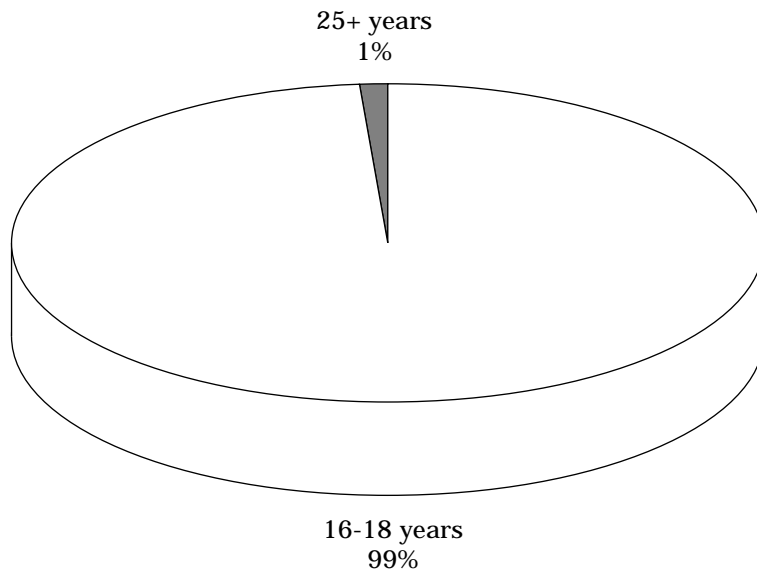
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 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

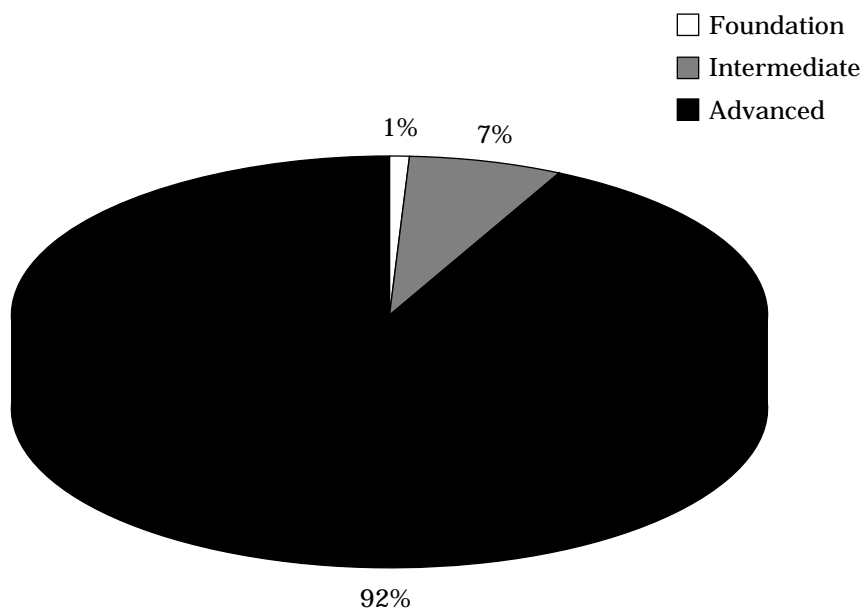
The Sixth Form College, Colchester: percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 2,010

Figure 2

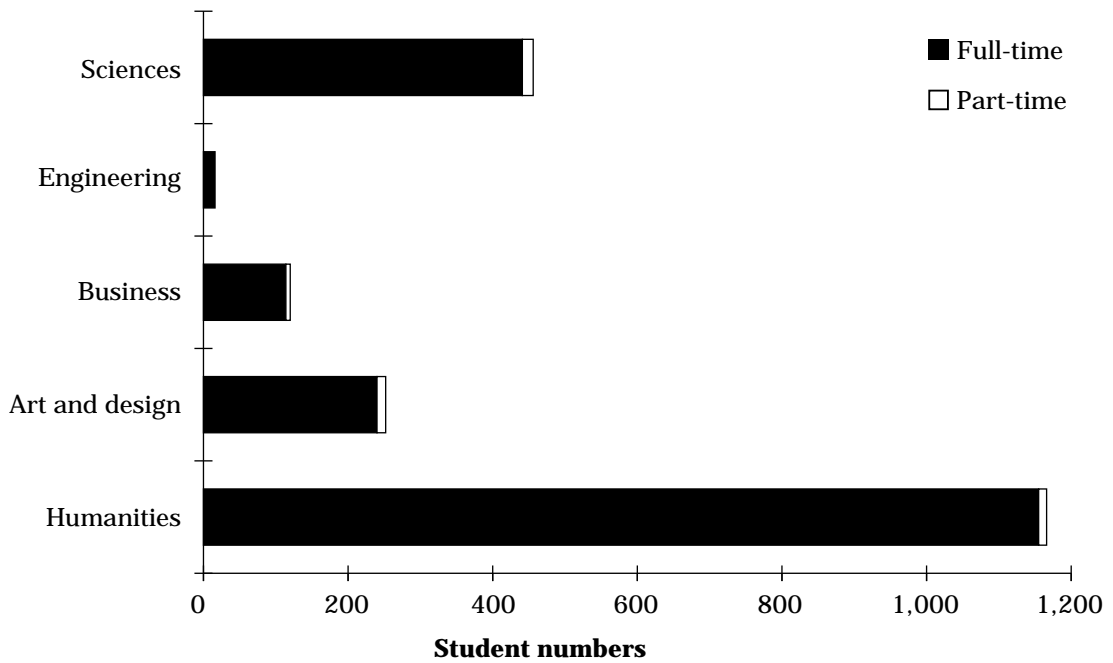
The Sixth Form College, Colchester: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 2,010

Figure 3

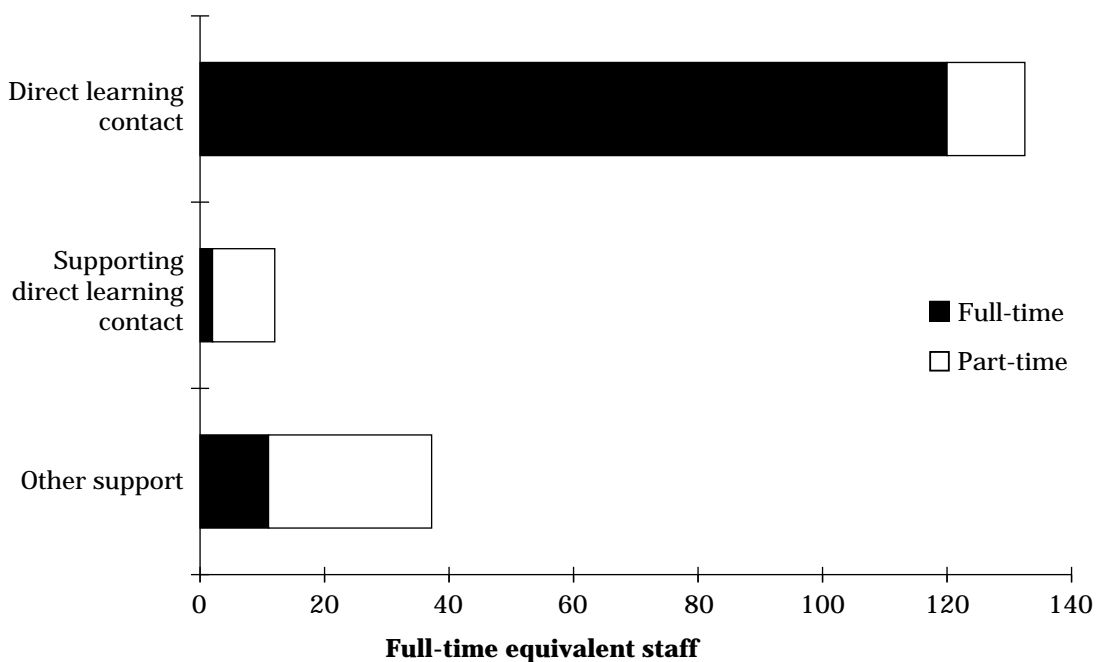
The Sixth Form College, Colchester: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 2,010

Figure 4

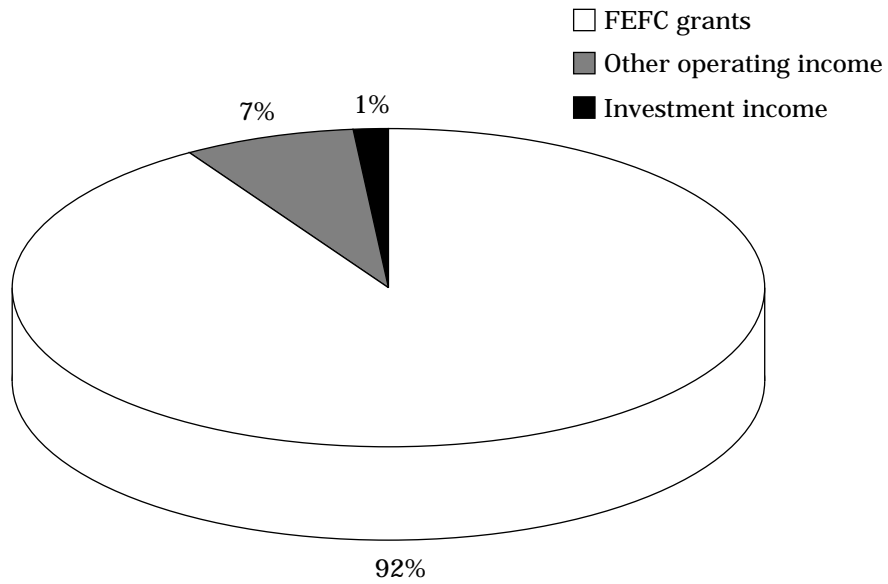
The Sixth Form College, Colchester: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at November 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 182

Figure 5

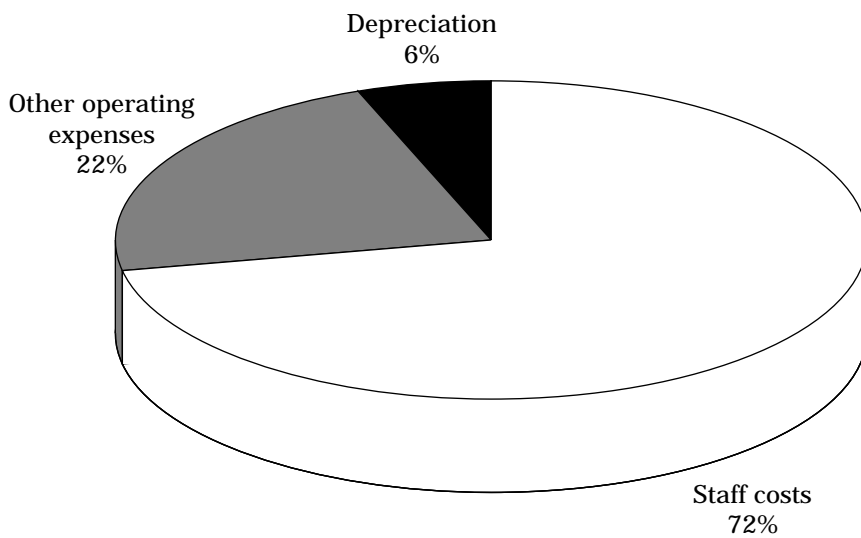
The Sixth Form College, Colchester: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £5,841,000

Figure 6

The Sixth Form College, Colchester: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £5,882,000

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