

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

West Cheshire College

July 1996

**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 1995, some 208 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 208 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-95

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	60%	28%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	13%	51%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	11%	56%	29%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 94/96

WEST CHESHIRE COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected November 1994-March 1996

Summary

West Cheshire College is a general further education college and serves three distinct areas: Chester, Ellesmere Port and North Wales. It offers a wide range of courses through an increasing variety of modes of learning and attendance. The college has developed an effective marketing plan. Staff are well qualified. There is some good teaching. Examination results are above average on some courses but are not consistently good across the college. The college has some excellent resources. The college has a clear commitment to the establishment of effective quality assurance systems but has not yet addressed the issues of poor retention and attendance rates and poor examination results in several areas of its work. In a significant number of lessons, staff had low expectations of their students. In addition, the college needs to: ensure that there is consistency in tutorial systems across the college; improve management information systems in order that they may help the college to monitor its performance effectively; deploy all its resources effectively and address some poor use of accommodation.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	2
Governance and management	3
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	3
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	3	Art and design (including performing arts)	3
Construction	4	English and humanities	3
Engineering	3	Languages, English as a foreign language and teacher training	2
Business	3	Basic education	2
Hotel and catering, tourism and leisure	2	Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	4
Health and care, hairdressing and beauty therapy	2		

INTRODUCTION

1 West Cheshire College was inspected in four stages. Engineering was inspected in November 1994. Enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in September 1995. The rest of the specialist subject areas were inspected in January and February 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in March 1996. A total of 22 inspectors spent 103 days in the college. They visited 274 classes and scrutinised students' written and practical work. Meetings were held with members of the corporation, senior managers, staff and students. Discussions also took place with local employers, parents and representatives from Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), schools, Cheshire County Council, the careers service, higher education and voluntary community groups.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 West Cheshire College is a general further education college. It operates in four main centres, three in Chester and one in Ellesmere Port. In addition, there are 11 centres, mainly school premises, where adult education is delivered. The college has its origins in Chester over a century ago and acquired premises in Ellesmere Port in 1985.

3 The college is geographically placed to serve distinctly different communities in Chester, the Wirral and North Wales. The college has to plan its provision and services to meet the differing needs of each of the three areas. In Chester, employment is mainly in leisure and tourism and the service industries. The head offices of several financial services companies are based in the city of Chester. Ellesmere Port is a centre for the chemical industry and manufacturing and has a few multinational employers. The western part of the college's catchment area in North Wales is predominantly rural; the eastern part has well-established manufacturing and processing employers, as well as recent commercial and industrial development.

4 Latest estimates suggest that the population of the Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral TEC area will rise by 1.6 per cent to reach 538,000 by the year 2000. Most of this growth is likely to be in the Chester and Ellesmere Port areas. The number of people available for work will rise by 6.4 per cent by the year 2006, whilst unemployment in the Wirral and Chester 'travel-to-work area' will remain at its current level of 10.3 per cent before falling to 8.8 per cent by 2005. The economy of the local area is forecast to outperform the region in terms of growth in employment. This will increase by 10 per cent between 1995 and 2005, mainly in service industries in Chester.

5 The college is in competition with other post-16 providers in the area. These include: 11 to 18 comprehensive schools and independent schools with large sixth forms; three further education colleges within 10 miles of the college; and established training providers who compete with the college in certain programme areas. Currently, 70 per cent of 16 year olds

in the area remain in full-time education. The college attracts approximately 20 per cent of those who stay on within the West Cheshire district.

6 The college currently has approximately 11,980 students, including 2,178 full-time students. There are 2,100 enrolments on leisure and recreation courses delivered under contract with Cheshire County Council. In 1995-96, full-time students formed 18 per cent of the total number of students. The college has set itself a 36 per cent growth target over five years from 1994-99. Targets for 1994-95 to date have been met or exceeded. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. The college has 296 full-time staff and 118 full-time equivalent part-time staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

7 In 1995-96 the college's average level of funding is £14.49 per unit. This compares with the median for further education and tertiary colleges of £17.84. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

8 The college's purpose is 'to work with people to realise their potential through the provision of high quality learning opportunities'. The college is committed to providing opportunities for individuals to learn throughout their lives and to developing partnerships to support and expand the local economy and communities within the area.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

9 The college offers a wide range of courses. These include programmes leading to General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) at intermediate and advanced levels, an increasing range of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), 31 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects and 21 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. The college also runs a limited number of higher education courses in conjunction with several universities in the region and runs an adult education programme on behalf of the local authority. There are courses in all the Council's ten programme areas though there is limited provision in agriculture. Because of low enrolments, the college has decided to discontinue the provision for construction. There is little provision at foundation level in a number of vocational areas. The college is planning to increase the number of foundation programmes from September 1996.

10 Courses are being made more accessible in a number of ways. Many courses are offered on a full-time and part-time basis during both the day and the evening. Over 300 students attend college on Saturdays. The college is breaking down its courses into units which students may take when it suits them through various methods of learning and attendance. There are, for instance, modular syllabuses for some GCE A level subjects. The college has some impressive learning centres where students may

study, at times of their choosing, materials tailored to their individual needs. Through the college's increasing range of courses leading to NVQs, significant numbers of students have their competence assessed in the workplace. A number of programmes were offered which did not run due to lack of demand; others are running with low enrolments.

11 Although the general range of vocational courses is wide, the college's provision of vocational courses in art and design is narrow in its scope. There are few opportunities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to progress to further study. There is not a consistent approach across the college to the provision of activities designed to enrich or broaden the curriculum for full-time students. A limited programme of such activities is available to full-time GCE A level students. This programme includes optional classes in information technology. The college estimates that 50 per cent of GCE A level students take these classes which lead to the RSA Examinations Board (RSA) certificate of computer literacy and information technology.

12 There are well-established links with a variety of industrial organisations. Through its successful partnership with Technical Training Enterprises, the college works with a number of large chemical engineering companies. Currently, there are 150 students participating in this project which enables them to achieve NVQs and other nationally-recognised qualifications. The project has been operating for five years and now forms part of the modern apprenticeship arrangements for engineering. Training for modern apprenticeships is also offered in conjunction with the Chester Hoteliers Association Scheme. Staff have links with industry and commerce through their arrangement of work experience for students and the assessment they carry out in the workplace for NVQs. Such links are, however, restricted in computing, business, hairdressing and construction.

13 The college has made good progress in providing a service to medium-sized and large firms in accrediting the prior learning of their employees. Through this process, the college tests the skills and understanding employees already have in order that they may acquire NVQ units or the award of a full NVQ. Of 2,700 students registered with the college for the accreditation of their prior learning, 600 have attained a qualification and many of these seek a further award. Qualifications offered to employers through the college's accreditation service include those in food preparation and customer service, business administration, management and information technology. Within the college itself, accreditation of prior learning has developed more slowly. In some areas, such as sports therapy, hotel and catering, computing and business administration, staff make good use of the process of accrediting prior learning in order to accelerate the progress of some students, and particularly adults taking NVQs, through their course. In other areas, such as art and design and care, there is little accreditation of the prior learning of students.

14 The college has been successful in developing and supporting a number of initiatives which are to the mutual benefit of the college and local schools. A project aiming to increase achievement involves pupils from seven local schools. The pupils attend college and follow individual programmes which enable them to join a range of vocational courses. Besides providing the pupils with opportunities to sample provision so that they may make an informed choice of course at 16, successful completion of their programme can lead to an NVQ unit or to a college certificate of achievement. The college also operates a GCE A level revision programme for students from local schools.

15 The college runs a substantial adult education programme which is funded by the county council. The college works with local primary schools on a family education project. It also has links with the voluntary sector and helps, for example, to provide access to education for people who have experienced mental health illness. The college puts on frequent productions at its New Grange Theatre and the public response to these is good. A training restaurant at the Greenbank Centre is available to the general public. Links with groups in the community, whose native language is not English, are less good, mainly because of changes in staff at the college. Many residents travel to work in Manchester and Liverpool and the college has introduced provision on Saturday mornings to meet their needs.

16 International links have been limited. The recent appointment of a co-ordinator for international affairs has, however, provided an impetus to a number of initiatives. The college has approximately 150 international students. These include 14 Malaysian teachers taking a course in engineering and short visits by Italian school children to learn English. Further links are being developed with other countries. The college plans to make greater use of the significance of Chester as a historical and cultural centre in marketing courses to overseas students.

17 The college runs some courses jointly with establishments of higher education, including a degree in psychology and a diploma in management studies, and particular links have been established with Chester College and with universities in Liverpool and Manchester. There are further links with higher education as a result of providing access courses as part of the Merseyside Open College Federation.

18 There is good awareness by staff of national issues relating to their work. Staff have responded well to recent initiatives such as the development of GNVQs and NVQs and there is considerable support for the aim of enhancing access for students.

19 Marketing is generally effective. There is a realistic budget of £140,000 to cover marketing activities and the quality of marketing and publicity materials is generally good. The marketing plan has been developed by making good use of externally available labour market information. However, the college's marketing processes are not

underpinned with reliable information relating to the backgrounds, progression, achievements and destinations of students.

20 Some aspects of the college's provision have clearly been designed for groups who are under represented in further education, disadvantaged or require special arrangements to be made for them. These include, for example, specific provision for the unemployed and for women who wish to return to education. A programme in 'tele-working' for students with disabilities has also recently been introduced which enables them to work from home.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

21 The college is undergoing a period of substantial change. A new principal was appointed in September 1993 and at that time, a number of key problems in the college were identified. At the time of inspection, some of these problems had still to be addressed. A new management restructure was introduced in July 1995, following a lengthy consultation process in the college.

22 The college's main priority was to revise its strategic objectives in order to give paramount importance to the learning needs of students. The senior management team now comprises the principal and eight heads of division, of whom four are female. Three divisions are responsible for the management of programme areas and five for learning development, student support, resources, human resources and external relations, respectively. Heads of division deputise in the principal's absence and take it in turns to do so at four monthly intervals. The new structure is still at a formative stage and it is too early to judge its effectiveness.

23 The college's strategic plan clearly reflects the college's purpose. The plan uses information obtained from outside bodies and forms the basis for the divisional plans. The operating statement provides an appropriate level of detail on actions to be taken to implement the plan. A key objective of the plan is the enhancement of the range of opportunities and resources for learning which students may undertake at times of their choice, either at home or in learning centres at the college, using materials which suit their individual needs. A member of the senior management team effectively co-ordinates the planning process across the college. At an early stage staff were given the opportunity to offer ideas and make contributions before the plan was considered and approved by the corporation.

24 Management of the curriculum is variable in quality across the college. There are some examples of effective planning of the curriculum, for example, in relation to the successful learning centres. The new management structure has introduced the role of learning development leaders who work with course managers to introduce new ideas and disseminate good practice.

25 The college's new management structure is designed to give middle managers greater powers, together with clear responsibilities for meeting targets. Middle managers now relate their planning of the curriculum more closely to funding mechanisms. In some instances, budgets have been redistributed because middle managers have not met their targets for enrolments.

26 The college has poor management information systems. Data collected to produce performance indicators are unreliable. Staff lack confidence in information produced by the systems. Inspectors found conflicting sets of information being produced at different levels within the college. Poor information makes it difficult for managers and governors to monitor the performance of the college.

27 The governing board is aware of its responsibilities. Board members are reviewing their own performance, including a review by an external consultant, and undertaking training. The 14 members have a good range of business expertise but they have identified weaknesses in terms of their familiarity with the curriculum and are exploring ways to overcome these.

28 The full corporation meets monthly. Its structure of committees is limited to committees for finance, audit, remuneration and search, which meet less frequently than the board. The finance committee was established in 1995 and had met twice at the time of the inspection. Scrutiny of the college's financial performance is undertaken by the corporation every two months.

29 Key policies are in place or being developed. The health and safety policy has been updated and responsibility for its implementation is clear. There has been delay in producing and implementing an accommodation strategy which is attributed to lack of agreement regarding transfer of some of the estates from the local education authority (LEA) to the college. An equal opportunities policy is currently being revised.

30 The board and the principal have identified communications as an area for improvement. The new structure gives a clear priority to improving internal communication. A staff newsletter is published fortnightly. Electronic mail is improving some internal communication. However, split-site operations still cause problems with communications across the college.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

31 A division for the support of students was established following organisational changes in the college in the summer of 1995. A clear document states the commitment of the college to supporting students effectively on entry, throughout their programme and to their point of exit. There are statements of intent for careers guidance, counselling, students' services and admissions. The college carried out an audit of the extent and quality of support for students and this identified inconsistencies, as well as good practice, in providing support.

32 Students who have not made a clear choice of programme receive an impartial interview with guidance tutors from student services. Students who appear committed to their chosen area of study are passed directly to staff in the appropriate curriculum area. The college has identified that the present system fails to explore sufficiently a broad range of possible programmes with students, to enable them to make well informed choices. Some students experience difficulty in transferring from one course to another.

33 Most full-time and part-time students who attend the college for a substantial number of hours each week, receive an effective induction to the college. During induction all full-time 16 year old students are given their own personal record of achievement disk in order that they may add to their national record of achievement from school. Staff from students' services help them to do this. Other, older students may also receive a record of achievement disk if they wish. Last year, 950 full-time students left college with fully-completed national records of achievement. Students complete these records on their own initiative with tutor support and no specific time is designated for their maintenance within timetabled tutorial periods.

34 The college intended that the numeracy and literacy skills of all new full-time students would be tested during their induction last year. The testing process was hastily planned. Staff in some programme areas failed to carry out the testing. Some of the 186 students who were identified as being in need of additional help with numeracy and literacy waited a considerable time before receiving the support they required. The provision of additional support with literacy and numeracy improved during the period of the inspection. The college plans to offer additional support more systematically next year.

35 All full-time students and a substantial number of part-time students have a tutor who is responsible for their pastoral care and for giving them guidance with their studies. Each student is entitled to a minimum of three individual formal reviews with their tutor in any one year. Practice varies considerably in the way these reviews are carried out, the plans for future action which ensue and the maintenance of written records. Some courses have programmed time for tutorials, others integrate tutorial support with teaching and learning across the course. The effectiveness of tutoring varies accordingly. Excellent tutorial support exists in some curriculum areas, for example, in catering and teacher training. There is no agreed content across the college for tutorial periods nor is there any programme of careers education and guidance. Some tutors feel they are inadequately trained or prepared for their role.

36 The college has an effective careers team of 1.5 full-time equivalent staff who previously worked with the LEA careers service. They work well with external careers officers in providing advice and guidance to students on employment and higher education. They have seen 500 students over the last 12 months.

37 Staff, in general, give advice and support to students informally, in breaks between lessons, at lunchtime and when they are not teaching. The college also provides help on practical issues; for example, the college's support services help students from overseas to find accommodation and they assist in the process of obtaining financial assistance for students through the college's access and hardship funds. The college has a creche at each main centre.

38 There is a high rate of absenteeism of students from classes in many programme areas. Practice varies in the ways in which absenteeism is followed up. Class registers do not enable tutors to track absenteeism readily. It is only recently that the college's management information system has been able to provide clear information, in easily readable format, on the attendance record of individual students.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

39 The average attendance rate in classes inspected was 73 per cent. Attendance rates varied from 89 per cent in catering to 59 per cent in construction. Many lessons were disrupted at the beginning because students arrived late.

40 Fifty-four per cent of lessons were judged to have strengths outweighing weaknesses and 12 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed the strengths. In a significant number of lessons, staff had low expectations of their students. The table below shows the breakdown of the 274 lessons observed by type of course.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		4	12	15	4	0	35
GCSE		1	10	4	3	0	18
GNVQ		16	33	33	6	0	88
Basic education		5	9	7	8	2	31
Other vocational		3	23	20	6	2	54
Other		11	21	15	1	0	48
Total		40	108	94	28	4	274

41 The teaching of mathematics is competent. Most teachers prepare their lessons conscientiously. In the best lessons, teachers made good use of well-prepared materials and aids to illustrate key points. Schemes of work are detailed but in some instances, these are not in the form which can be easily shared with students. Coursework is carefully planned and is carried out well by the students. In a few instances, however, the students received insufficient guidance on their coursework from their teacher. Some teachers failed to check that all students had understood the lesson. The standard of record keeping varies from adequate to poor; in one case, there was no evidence that students' work had been assessed during a whole term.

42 The standard of teaching is generally good in languages, including English as a foreign language and in teacher training. Some lessons were excellent. Most teachers made considerable efforts to make their lessons exciting and rewarding for their students; they provided activities which encouraged students to work well together. The standard of teaching is generally high in English literature and GCSE English classes for adults. In some of the weaker lessons, the teaching was insufficiently lively and failed to excite and sustain the students' interest. Some teachers failed to take account of the differing abilities of students in the class. Some adolescent students have a weak commitment to their studies and do not behave well in class. In some evening classes, teachers provided insufficient opportunity for students to explore ideas through discussion.

43 In science, most teachers use well-directed questions to test the students' knowledge, memory and ability to reason. In some instances, however, teachers failed to check that everyone understood the lesson. Some students found their tasks too difficult; they did not receive sufficient help from the teacher and were unable to keep up. In a few lessons, students were inattentive or boisterous. Some staff do not offer sufficient guidance to their students on their progress and do not mark their work in enough detail. Students do not always hand in their work to be marked and their records of attainment are incomplete.

44 In social science, teachers use an appropriate variety of teaching and learning methods. Their lessons are well prepared. They set and mark homework regularly. In some classes there was a high level of student absence.

45 In business studies, some programmes of study, for example in wordprocessing, are well planned and are designed for individual students; teachers provide students with effective guidance and support. In some of the weaker lessons, teaching was insufficiently lively and lacked a sense of purpose. Some staff geared their teaching to the needs of the slowest learner in the class and failed to plan and provide activities which would sustain the interest of every student in the group. In general, teachers do not work together to identify, develop and disseminate good practice.

46 The teaching of catering courses is generally sound. Schemes of work are clear and comprehensive. Teachers shared their aims with their students at the start of each lesson. Teachers gave clear explanations in class and encouraged students to draw upon their previous experience in discussion; the response of students was lively. There was, however, a lack of continuity on the GNVQ courses in hospitality and catering with insufficient relationship between course units. The standard of teaching in leisure and tourism is good. Courses are well organised. Students are given challenging tasks. Teachers mark students' work thoroughly, return it promptly and give clear assessments. Students on the NVQ sport and recreation programme do not always have sufficient experience of practical work and are not assessed under realistic working conditions.

47 The teaching of health, social and childcare courses is highly effective. Teachers successfully make links between the different GNVQ units. Students are well motivated, except on the GNVQ intermediate course. In a few instances, the teachers' knowledge and experience are not well matched to the subject they are teaching. There is insufficient sharing of schemes of work and good course documentation among staff. Hairdressing and beauty therapy staff adopt a team approach to their teaching which their students find helpful and supportive. Teachers make good use of their own industrial experience to exemplify and illustrate points under discussion. Specialist staff, such as teachers of science, make a valuable contribution to courses by teaching the theory which underpins practical skills. Teachers of health, social and childcare courses and hairdressing/beauty therapy courses keep detailed records of their students' progress. In hairdressing and beauty therapy, students have insufficient opportunities to work together in groups. The teachers' written assessment of students' work lacks standardisation, in terms of level, content and the criteria used for awarding marks. There is a shortage of clients in hairdressing and beauty therapy upon whom students can practise their skills.

48 In art and design, teachers use an appropriate variety of teaching styles. Some of these encourage students to work successfully on their own. In some instances, however, students were given too much freedom to study by themselves; they received insufficient guidance from the teacher and their work lacked direction. In two particular lessons in media studies and dance, respectively, the teaching was exemplary and of a high standard. There is an imbalance between technical, performance and design elements in the teaching and learning on performing arts courses. Assignments are generally well planned and students find them challenging. Teachers, particularly in performing arts, do not always complete the marking of assignments or help their students sufficiently to plan their further improvement and progress. In GNVQ advanced art and design, students are introduced to specialist work too early in the course and only have limited opportunities for the study of design.

49 There is some good teaching in engineering and particularly in motor vehicle engineering. In many lessons, however, the prime activity was exposition by the teacher. Students spent much of the lesson copying notes from the board or taking down dictation. They were given insufficient opportunity to discover information for themselves through specific tasks. The teaching in some construction lessons lacked sparkle and excitement. In some lessons, the low number of students present restricted the range of learning activities they could carry out. Assignment work on GNVQ construction and the built environment courses is not well managed by the students. They do not have structured work experience as part of their course or opportunities to become familiar with current industrial practice.

50 The basic education programme is successfully enabling adults to make progress with spelling, punctuation and grammar. In contrast, the

curriculum for students with learning difficulties is often not meeting their needs; the purpose of many lessons is not clear. Teachers show high levels of commitment to helping and guiding their students but often have low expectations of them. Students were usually taught as a group throughout lessons and some failed to participate or make progress. Students were given little opportunity to work on their own or in small groups on specific tasks which would sustain their interest and meet their particular needs.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

51 There are low completion rates on a number of courses. The overall completion rate on two-year full-time vocational courses is 68 per cent. The standards achieved by students vary significantly within and across programme areas. Students achieve high standards of work in teacher education, and some science, humanities and art and design classes. Standards of work are also generally high on catering, advanced health and social care, modern languages and media courses. Students on courses leading to NVQ levels 2 and 3 in administration are making good progress in their work. In contrast, the work of some students on health and care intermediate courses is not up to the standards required. Similarly, many students on business courses are not producing work which is of a sufficiently high standard. In both engineering and construction, some students are insufficiently motivated to produce good work in the more theoretical aspects of their studies. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are underachieving and only a small number progress to mainstream vocational courses.

52 Most students achieve required standards of competence in practical work. Health and safety requirements are generally well observed in laboratories and workshop areas. In catering, the standards of practical work in food and beverage services are high. Media students show confidence when using complex equipment. On some courses, students develop relevant vocational experience through work placements. In science, a number of students show poorly-developed practical skills in laboratory work. Some students do not attend science classes regularly and they fail to complete tasks.

53 In some programme areas, students are helped to develop the basic skills of number, communication and information technology. Engineering students use information technology in their project work. Students on leisure, health and care and business studies courses acquire skills in information technology and number; some of the assignment work in business studies, however, fails to ensure that students can demonstrate and practise these skills. Art and design students do not have sufficient opportunities to develop information technology skills. In mathematics, information technology is not systematically included within students' programmes of learning. Most courses provide students with opportunities to develop skills of communication through group work. In humanities, students demonstrated that they could express themselves well.

54 The performance tables for 1994-95 published by the Department for Education and Employment record that 50 per cent of the 109 students, aged 16 to 18, in the college, were successful in gaining a vocational qualification. This showing places the college in the bottom 10 per cent of colleges in the further education sector, on this performance measure. Checks made during the inspection indicate that inaccurate information was sent to the Department; a revised figure shows that 68 per cent of 313 examination entries were successful. This figure would give the college a slightly better position in the performance tables. The college's management information systems were unable to produce accurate information on students' performance in examinations across all subjects. Inspectors were unable to verify some of the following information on examinations, provided by the college.

55 Examination results on full-time vocational courses are variable. In 1995, there were good results on Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national diploma courses in health and childcare, hospitality and catering, media and performing arts. Some GNVQ pass rates were above the national average, for example in advanced leisure and tourism and intermediate information technology and science. There were poor results in GNVQ advanced management and intermediate health and social care.

56 Results on the part-time vocational courses are also variable. In 1995, there were good results in NVQ level 2 and NVQ level 3 administration, motor vehicle and catering courses. There was a 100 per cent pass rate in the Cambridge proficiency examination in English as a foreign language and all the 100 students taking the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) wordpower or numberpower examinations were successful. Teacher education courses were successful with over 90 per cent of students gaining their qualification. Some BTEC national certificate programmes, for example in business studies, had modest to poor success rates. On the BTEC national certificate in civil engineering, one student from seven initially enrolled completed the course. On the foundation Association of Accounting Technicians accountancy course, 24 per cent of those originally enrolled achieved an award.

57 In 1994-95, the 248 students aged 16 to 18 taking GCE A level and GCE advanced supplementary (AS) examinations scored an average 2.7 points per entry (where grade A=10 points, E=2) according to the 1995 tables published by the Department for Education and Employment. This places the college among the bottom third of all colleges. General features of GCE A level results in 1995 include:

- an overall pass rate of 55 per cent (grades A to E) which is 14 per cent below the average for further education colleges
- a high number of students who complete the course enter for the examination but do not take it

-
- none of the 18 subjects with more than 10 entries of 16 to 18 year olds achieved pass rates above the national averages
 - proportions of higher grades (A to C) are low.

58 The college provided incomplete statistics for GCSE results. Evidence given is based on students from one site of the college. Of the 732 entries in 1995 from that site, the overall rate of those achieving grades A to C was 47 per cent for all ages, which is equivalent to the national average for further education colleges. Twenty-seven per cent of students aged 16 to 18 achieved grades A to C. General features of the GCSE results include:

- above average results in English literature and psychology for all ages and English language, sociology and human biology for students of 19 or above
- a high number of x grades, given when candidates entered for examinations do not sit them
- poor results in mathematics, sciences and physical education.

59 Comprehensive information on the destinations of students is not available at either divisional level or from central college statistics. Of 440 students who applied to higher education 272 gained places. Students within the art and design programme area are particularly successful in progressing to higher education. Catering, health and caring and hairdressing students are generally successful in finding relevant employment. However, destinations are unrecorded for the majority of students in the college. Of 733 students aged 16 to 18, who achieved a qualification in 1994-95, the destinations of 447 are recorded as unknown. Of 2,479 students aged 19 or over, the destinations of 1,569 are unknown.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

60 The college has issued a statement on its commitment to assuring quality, and has gained a number of external awards, including BS EN ISO 9002 and Investor in People. The college is currently integrating procedures entailed by these awards with its own system of quality assurance. The effectiveness of key procedures in the college's quality assurance system has not yet been fully established.

61 The college's charter was developed after consultation with Chester, Ellesmere Port and Wirral TEC, employers, the careers service and the governing body. It provides a clear statement of commitment to the levels of service clients can expect from the college. The importance of the college's charter is emphasised to new students during their induction and they are made familiar with its content. There is a taped version of the charter for visually impaired students.

62 The college's self-assessment report is a realistic, honest and accurate appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses organised under the headings of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It is accompanied by a set of detailed papers for cross-college and programme areas. Staff have

been closely involved in the college's self-assessment process. The actions to be taken as a result of this internal analysis are specified in most of the accompanying papers and provide the basis for development in the immediate future.

63 As a result of achieving BS EN ISO 9002, there is a sound and comprehensive system of documentation covering most aspects of the college's operations. Staff value this documentation which sets out procedures clearly and it provides a valuable source of information and guidance to part-time staff in particular. Service standards have been established and are agreed by the quality assurance management committee. Standards for teaching and learning have only recently been agreed. These will now form the basis for an internal system of monitoring teaching and learning and observing classes.

64 The oversight of quality assurance is moving away from a single manager and will be shared by all staff throughout the college. The college intends that the outcome of its quality assurance activities will be the improvement of students' attainment and satisfaction. To this end, overall responsibility for quality assurance now rests with the division of learning development.

65 Staff recognise the importance of performance indicators and take some action to monitor them at course level. There is, however, no agreement across the college, on how particular issues, such as the poor retention rates of students on courses, should be addressed. Information on issues such as retention and attendance is inaccurate; divisions have different ways of monitoring them. The college has initiated some work on the feasibility of calculating the 'value-added' factor in the students' achievement at college. This factor is a measurement of the extent of students' achievements, based on a comparison of their grades in their final examination with the grades they obtained in GCSE or other examinations before coming to college.

66 Reports from external verifiers are systematically reviewed and form a useful basis upon which staff can base plans for future action. Students contribute their views on provision through course reviews and surveys of students' opinions. Some students were able to identify changes which resulted from their responses such as rearrangements in the learning centres and the transfer of a French class to a more suitable site. The effectiveness of these surveys and reviews is infrequently monitored, however, and they do not always lead to clear plans for future action.

67 There are well-established systems for staff development. Staff are able to link their own objectives for their professional development to the college's objectives. Through the staff-appraisal process, staff agree action on their professional development with their managers and have their achievements recorded on the college's staff-development database. Staff generally regard the staff-appraisal system as positive and constructive. It is currently being revised to include the observation of teaching and the appraisal of managers by other staff.

68 Staff attend courses outside the college. These are matched by a wide range of low cost, staff-development activities provided within the college, sometimes on an informal basis. Staff are enthusiastic about improving their professional development and the level of their participation in training activities is high. Many staff achieve qualifications to become assessors on NVQ programmes. In some areas of the college's work, staff have insufficient opportunities to bring their industrial and commercial skills and experience up to date. There is also insufficient staff development for teachers of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

69 There are effective induction arrangements for new staff. Upon appointment, new teachers receive guidance and help from a more experienced member of staff who acts as their mentor. This mentoring system works well and often continues informally after the initial mentoring period is completed.

RESOURCES

Staffing

70 Staff are well qualified, particularly those who work in the learning centres. Seventy per cent of full-time teaching staff hold first degrees, 86 per cent are teacher trained and a high percentage are engaged in the Training and Development Lead Body assessor and verifier training. Staff are enthusiastic about further training and development.

71 Staffing levels are satisfactory, and there is adequate technician support. There is heavy reliance on part-time staff in some programme areas who have to carry out many administrative and management duties. The college is centralising administrative arrangements for the employment of part-time staff. The college is also considering replacing part-time appointments with fractional appointments, in line with European Community legislation. Expenditure on staffing in 1995-96 is 69 per cent, a slight decrease from the previous year.

72 Responsibility for the recruitment and administration of staff, personnel management and staff development has been recently refocussed in the new division of human resources. Fifty-three per cent of staff, including all members of the senior management team, have signed new contracts.

Equipment/learning resources

73 Much equipment and learning resources are of a high standard. Learning centres have a wide range of resources which are well matched to courses, they are well publicised to staff and students through an attractive series of leaflets. The centres provide study support packs, core skills worksheets, periodicals, reference books, audio-visual aids, newspapers, a large number of compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases, and a cuttings service. Bookstock is good and up to date. There

is excellent information technology hardware and software. This includes a new weather station and a satellite weather link, a suite of modern equipment for art and design and good computer-aided design equipment. There are 413 up-to-date workstations giving a workstation to full-time equivalent student ratio of 1:10. Many workstations are readily accessible to students. Most are networked across three sites. Although there is plenty of good-quality reprographic equipment for teachers to use when producing their own materials, some handouts, worksheets and overhead transparencies are of a poor quality. An efficient equipment booking system extends to outreach centres, but staff there do not put it to good use.

74 Most classrooms have overhead projectors, screens and black or white boards. Some of the screens and boards need to be replaced. Much specialist equipment is of an appropriate standard. There is an excellent range of modern industrial power control equipment in engineering. Equipment for fine art, print making, three-dimensional art work, metalwork, surveying and construction is good. The theatre, photographic darkroom, media suite and travel shop are well equipped. There is appropriate gymnastic, fitness, sports and catering equipment.

75 The quality of furniture in many classrooms is poor. The college holds a stock of furniture centrally but this is not used to replace worn and broken desks and chairs. Some rooms are furnished with chairs with attached writing boards. These chairs are rarely suitable for the style of teaching and learning activities in these rooms, or for left-handed students. The tables used on fashion and textile courses are inappropriate; there is also a limited range of equipment for these courses. There are no graphical calculators for mathematics courses. Much science equipment is old. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on mainstream courses do not always have access to specialist equipment which they need. Some basic skills courses are poorly resourced.

Accommodation

76 The quality of accommodation varies from site to site and within sites. Much accommodation is inappropriately deployed and not used to best advantage. There is no centralised system of timetabling. Some classes are allocated to inappropriate rooms; for example, some teaching takes place in a large hall, in a small workroom attached to a learning centre and in an area used as a students' common room. The overall usage of accommodation is low. The findings of an accommodation survey carried out by the college suggest that there is substantial surplus accommodation. The students' refectories are generally pleasant. Their use is not staggered and they can become overcrowded and untidy at certain times. The accommodation for art and design and performing arts is untidy, and in other areas there is scope for improving the standards of housekeeping. The college has a maintenance programme and day-to-day repairs are undertaken efficiently.

77 Learning centres on all sites are good, particularly those at the Handbridge site. Some other areas are also well carpeted and decorated. Classrooms used for teacher education courses and for teaching English as a foreign language, are particularly good. Two classrooms have recently been refurbished. There is a studio theatre and a dance studio that are up to professional standards. The accommodation for hairdressing and beauty courses is commercially realistic. The reception, bar and restaurant for catering courses is well set out to resemble facilities in a country house hotel. Specialist accommodation for sport and leisure courses is appropriate and includes a travel shop. The accommodation for the creche is of good quality. Accommodation for staff is good.

78 Other accommodation is poor; there is little display material and many areas need redecorating. Teachers of some courses such as nursery nursing and sport have, however, arranged attractive displays of students' work and other materials in classrooms. Many classrooms have either no blinds or curtains, or have damaged ones. Rooms at the Grange are often bleak. Some hutted accommodation needs refurbishment. The kitchens used by catering students are cramped. There is no photography studio. Changing and showering facilities for sport, dance, performing arts, catering and construction students are poor. Heating and ventilation in some rooms are inefficient. A few toilet facilities require renovating. Not all signs are clear and some at the Grange can be misleading. Some accommodation is inaccessible to people with impaired mobility.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

79 The main strengths of the college are:

- a wide range of courses
- effective marketing
- the increasing variety of modes of learning and attendance available to students
- a well-developed strategic planning process
- effective teaching in some classes and good examination results on some vocational courses
- some excellent learning resources
- well-qualified staff
- clear commitment to quality assurance.

80 The main weaknesses are:

- insufficient provision at foundation level
- poor management information systems, which adversely affect the monitoring of performance
- poor retention and attendance rates of students on some courses
- poor punctuality by some students

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- some poor examination results
 - the insufficient monitoring of teaching and learning through the college's quality assurance systems
 - the low expectations which some teachers have of students
 - inconsistencies in the guidance and tutorial systems across the college
 - inefficient deployment of resources in some areas
 - some poor accommodation.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1995)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)

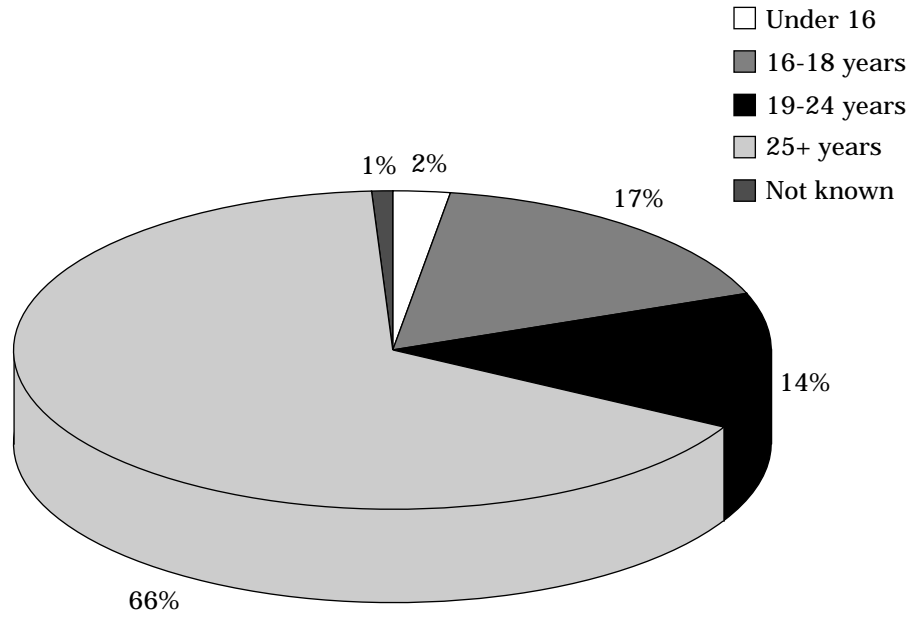
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

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

Figure 1

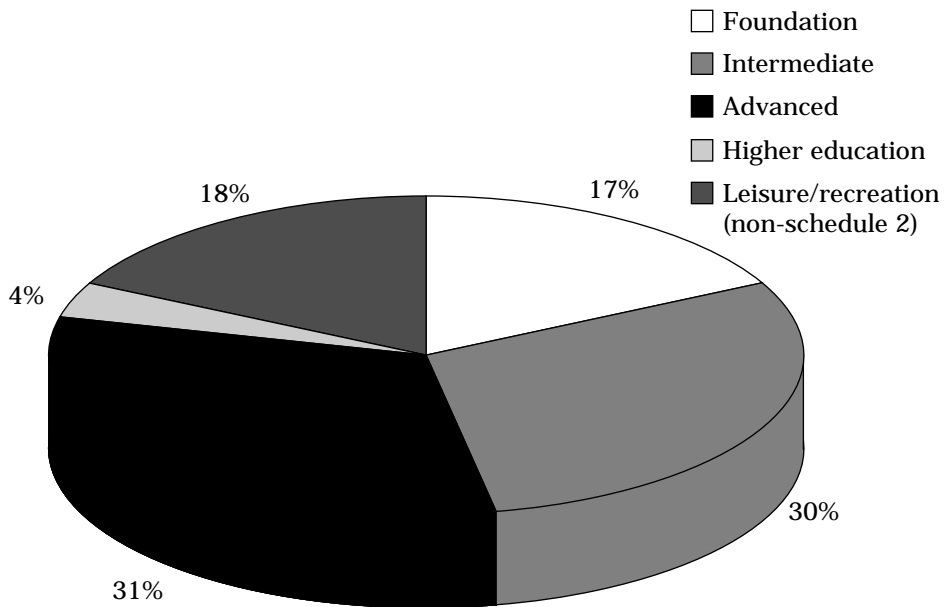
West Cheshire College: percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 11,980

Figure 2

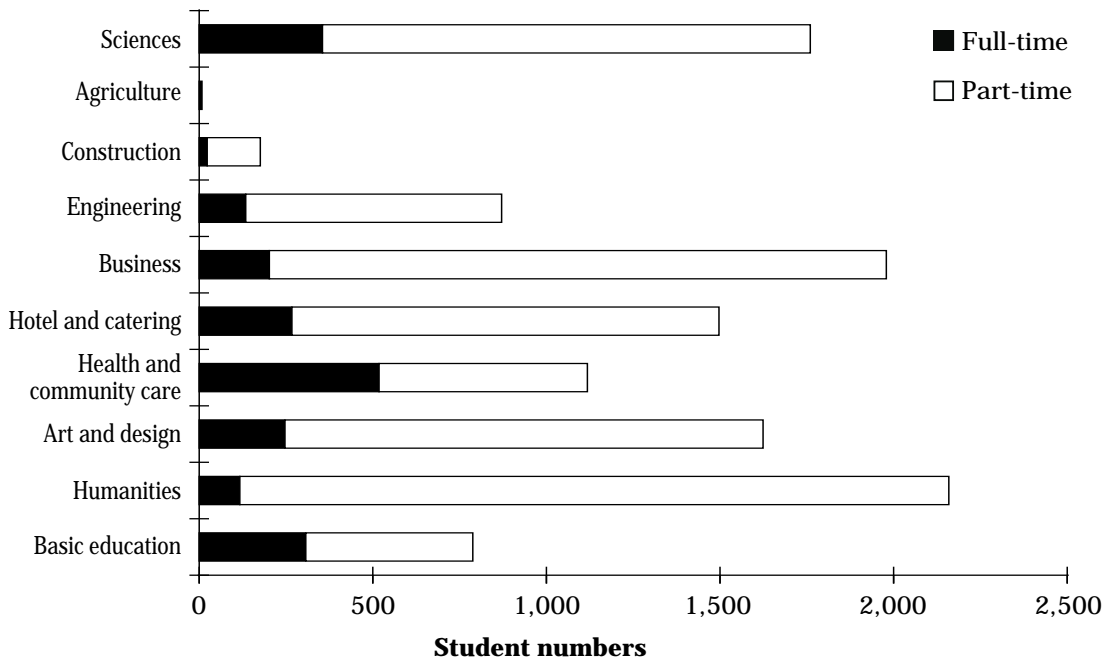
West Cheshire College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 11,980

Figure 3

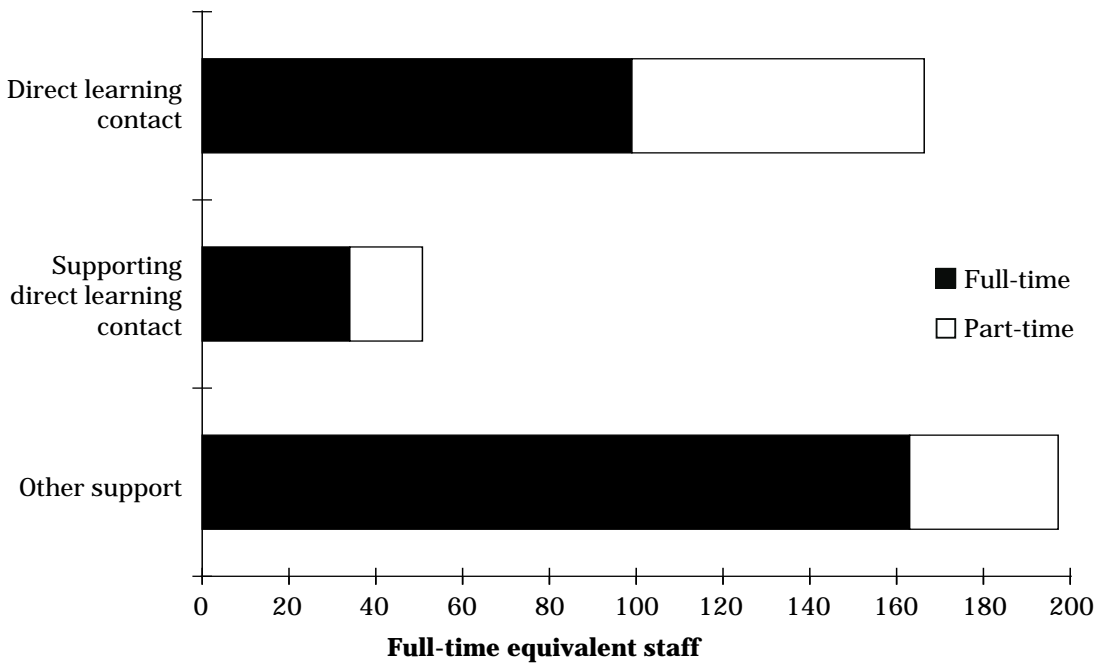
West Cheshire College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 11,980

Figure 4

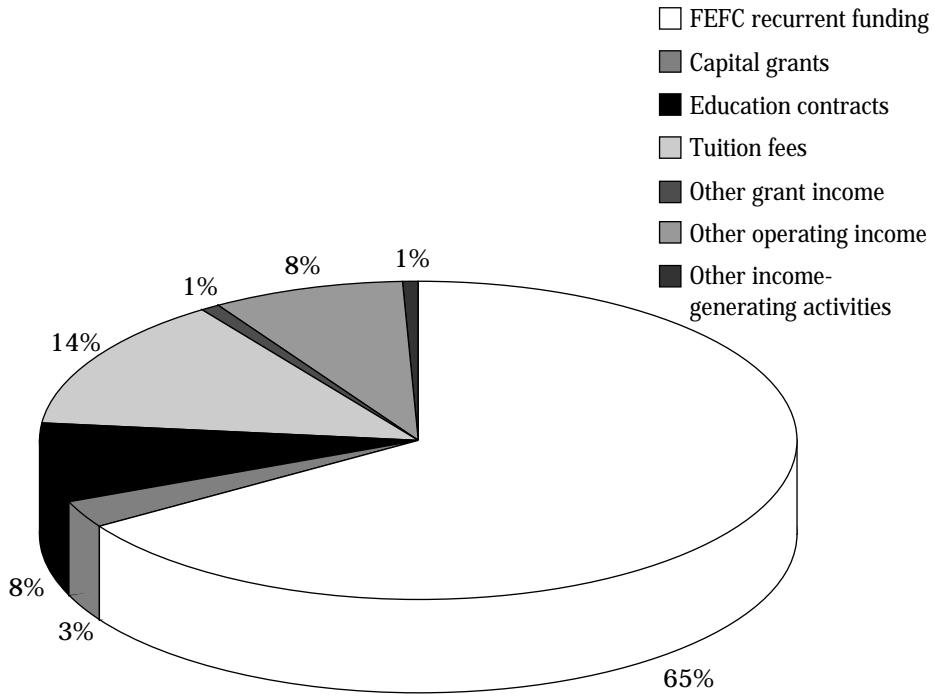
West Cheshire College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)



Full-time equivalent staff: 414

Figure 5

West Cheshire College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)

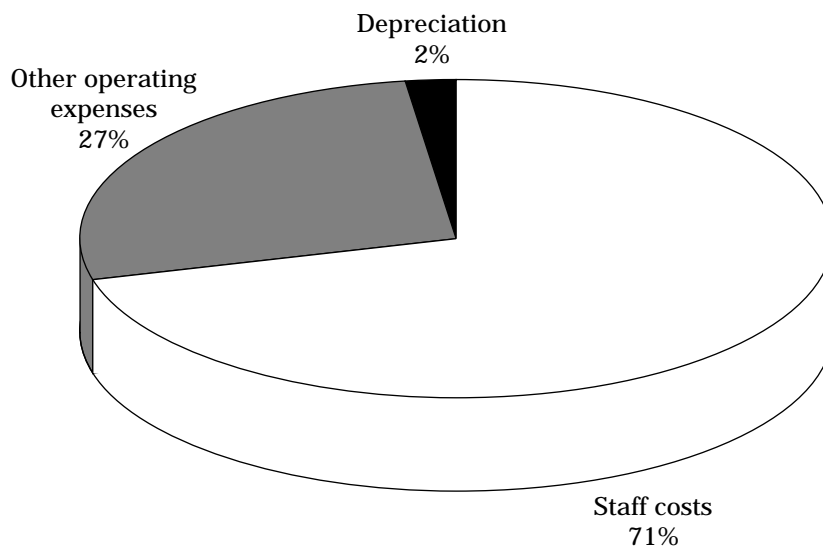


Income: £12,023,000

Note: the historical cost surplus for the period is £34,000.

Figure 6

West Cheshire College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £12,120,000

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