

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Pershore College of Horticulture

July 1994

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector. It discharges the duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the sector every four years. The Council's inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

College inspections involve both full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have specialist knowledge and experience in the areas they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member from outside the world of education and a nominated member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are described in the Council Circular 93/28. In the course of inspecting colleges, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale. 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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 54/94

PERSHORE COLLEGE OF HORTICULTURE WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Inspected September 1993 – April 1994

Summary

Pershore College of Horticulture, in the county of Hereford and Worcester, is the main specialist college in England providing a uniquely diverse range of courses in horticulture. The college recruits students from all over the country. It has strong and effective links with the industry and with many leisure organisations connected with horticulture. Managers have successfully tackled the reorganisation of the college's commercial units and are beginning to move ahead to diversify the range of courses and to recruit more students locally. This would be assisted by improved links with local schools. The governing body makes an effective contribution to the college and the strategic plan indicates clear awareness of the challenges facing the college. The teaching is of high quality. It is informed by teachers' knowledge of relevant good practice in the industry and draws on the rich resources offered by the college estate. Students are highly motivated and most achieve the qualification for which they aim. The college has shown initiative in restructuring course provision to preserve specialist options within a modular structure. However, there should be more coherent management of the overall curriculum. Quality assurance is well developed and good systems of staff development and appraisal are in place. The accommodation and specialist equipment are of good quality. The college has made some progress in reducing its high unit of funding but will need to continue to address this issue. Other matters to be addressed include the development of an overall policy for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, greater consistency in tutorial arrangements, more effective integration of study skills and information technology into programmes of study, dissemination of information on unit costs as an element in resource management, staff development for wardens of residential accommodation and improved access for students with restricted mobility.

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	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	1
accommodation	1

Curriculum area	Grade
Horticulture	1

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INTRODUCTION

1 Pershore College of Horticulture, in the county of Hereford and Worcester, was inspected in three stages between September 1993 and April 1994. Enrolment and induction were inspected in September, the college's specialist programme area was inspected from February 22 to 24 and cross-college aspects were inspected from April 26 to 28. Nineteen inspector days were used for the inspection. In all, 30 sessions were observed. Inspectors scrutinised samples of students' coursework and held discussions with staff, students, college governors, including the local training and enterprise council (TEC) governor, members of the local community, present and former parents, employers and representatives of many voluntary horticultural organisations.

2 The inspection was carried out according to the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. The framework describes a four-year inspection cycle. When this cycle becomes fully established, colleges will have the opportunity to respond to the findings of earlier inspection visits before their quadrennial inspection and the subsequent published report. As the inspection of Pershore College of Horticulture occurred early in the cycle, the opportunity for such a response was not available.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Pershore College of Horticulture was founded as a specialist centre for horticultural education and training following the recommendations of the Loveday Committee in 1954. The main campus is situated half a mile east of Pershore town centre on a 56 hectare greenbelt site. There is a 20 hectare vegetable unit two miles away at Pensham. At the time of the inspection, the college employed 134 full-time equivalent staff (figure 1). There were approximately 600 further and higher education students enrolled at the college amounting to 373 full-time equivalents. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 2 and 3.

4 The college offers a full range of specialist horticultural options and full-time vocational further and higher education courses in horticulture and related subjects. It is the only specialist horticultural college in England and one of only two in the United Kingdom. The college recruits its students from a wide catchment area. There are two neighbouring colleges of agriculture and horticulture; a local college of further education in Evesham and a general further education college and sixth form college in Worcester. Pershore itself has an 11-18 school and there are other local 11-18 schools.

5 The area surrounding the college is horticulturally important: over 80 per cent of the land area is devoted to the production of agricultural and horticultural crops. The local land-based industries, though usually employing less than five people, employ 8 per cent of the local working population.

6 The college aims to be the national centre of excellence for those employed or seeking careers in horticulture and related land-based

industries. It is committed to developing quality education and training programmes that are responsive, financially efficient and environmentally aware.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The college provides a uniquely diverse range of specialist full-time courses and many part-time courses associated with horticulture. For some programmes the college is the only provider in the country. A lack of resources means that the college is not able to offer a specialist option in sports turf, the only gap identified in the provision. On full-time programmes of study there are good opportunities for students to progress to higher education courses. The recently-introduced first diploma has recruited students with a general interest in horticulture. The national certificate courses provide more specialist programmes of study for students wishing to work in a particular sector of the industry, as well as offering, for the more able, an opportunity to transfer to one of the college's national diploma programmes.

8 As a matter of policy, the college positively encourages students who do not possess the standard entry qualifications for further education to enrol on full-time courses. Just over 20 per cent of full-time students are over 23 years of age. A number of alternative routes are available for students not traditionally represented in further education: programmes of study include accreditation of prior learning, opportunities to transfer from national certificate to diploma programmes, and foundation studies to prepare for higher education courses.

9 The college is heavily dependent on national recruitment to full-time provision. This year, 72 per cent of the further education students had home residence outside the county of Hereford and Worcester. The considerable expansion of horticultural courses nationally has intensified the competition for students. There are 34 colleges in England, other than Pershore, which offer horticulture. Recruitment difficulties have been exacerbated by the failure of some students, who wish to study at the college, to obtain discretionary awards. The college estimates that this year at least 20 students were unable to take up the offer of a place for financial reasons. In November 1993, the college fell short of its target enrolment by 17 per cent. By March 1994, the shortfall had been reduced to only 2 per cent and the college fully expects to meet its target numbers for the year. Although numbers on specialist options are small they are sustained by effective modularisation of the curriculum, which includes a common core of studies. The college proposes to add to the range of specialist options next year. It predicts a further decline in full-time enrolments though a major expansion in part-time further education and higher education is expected.

10 Prior to this year, the college had been slow to respond to changes in demand for further education provision. Part-time and full-cost provision for industry is underdeveloped. The strategic plan acknowledges the current weaknesses: a narrow portfolio of courses with a concentration on

full-time provision, an over-reliance on national recruitment and a failure to develop full-cost provision. In the last 12 months, progress has been made in correcting these weaknesses. Courses being developed for next academic year, represent a significant change in the balance of provision, including a substantial increase in part-time released provision.

11 The college has a national reputation for horticulture. For many years it has successfully competed in national competitions and exhibitions. Through its active commitment to working with industry the college has established effective links for many aspects of its work. During their courses, students are given frequent and appropriate opportunities to broaden their understanding and experience of industry. Activities include visits to industry and study tours, and speakers from industry contribute to the teaching and work placement arrangements. Representatives from industry are consulted about new courses. Recently, the college reviewed its arrangements for formal consultation with specialist sectors of the industry. Technical and advisory groups with clearly-focused aims are being established and some already provide an effective forum for consultation with industry. Minutes of meetings show that for some sectors industrialist are providing the college with valuable information on the needs of industry. With the support of nearly 20 employers the college has recently established a unit to promote its consultancy and professional development work with industry. A number of activities have been launched, including up-dating courses specifically designed for companies. Employer representatives feel that the unit has the potential to meet their needs for work of this kind.

12 The college has good links with a number of organisations which have a leisure interest in horticulture. A range of courses are offered to meet their requirements. Many of these are offered in conjunction with the Royal Horticultural Society, for which the college is a regional centre. The local community appreciate the openness of the college and the courses offered, and there may be opportunities for the certification of locally designed courses. The college has established a productive relationship with a local special school involving the delivery of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 1 programme. However, links with local schools are generally weak. The college has close working relations with Worcester College of Higher Education and the University of Central England in Birmingham and provides for them a number of franchised programmes and a foundation course. The college is exploring with several further education colleges in the region the possibilities for co-operative delivery of introductory programmes of study. Such programmes would increase access opportunities for students who live some distance from the college. The college has good links with the local TEC: it is well represented on working groups and the TEC has provided development funding for the college.

13 Marketing activity has lacked co-ordination and has not always been directed to support strategic objectives. It is now being given a high priority

in the college's development plans. A marketing unit has been established and a full-time appointment to the unit was made just before the inspection. Appropriately, the short-term objectives of the unit are to promote developments within the existing provision. Tasks are clearly specified. The need for improved, systematic gathering of market intelligence to support the college's proposed diversification is acknowledged in the policy statement. Some of the college's promotional material should be updated and made more relevant and attractive to the full range of its potential clients.

14 A small number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are effectively integrated into the college's further education programmes. The development of provision for these students, in line with the strategic plan, has yet to be explored fully. Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is only briefly referred to in the college's general literature and there is insufficient information on support and guidance arrangements. Through its membership of a voluntary group in the county, the college has established contact with other colleges in the area, the careers service and a sensory support unit to discuss provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 At the time of the inspection, the governing body of the corporation had 13 members, including governors from industry, a representative of the local TEC, a staff and a student governor and the principal. One member of the governing body is female. There are four subcommittees: finance and general purposes, remuneration, staff consultative, and audit. The governing body and its subcommittees meet regularly and are operating well. Good use is made of the specialist expertise of governors on the various subcommittees. The governing body receives regular reports from senior managers on budgets, property and personnel issues, and from the student governor on matters of concern to students. It has recently identified the need to move from an operational to a more strategic role as the first period of incorporation ends. The governors commented upon the first strategic plan and have been actively involved in the development of the second. Governors play an active part in the life of the college and meet regularly with staff and students.

16 The college has a clear mission which focuses primarily on the continuing development of the college as a national centre of excellence for education and training in horticulture and related areas. The mission also emphasises equality of access and individual development.

17 The academic board includes senior managers, heads of department, teaching staff, the academic quality co-ordinator, a student representative, the librarian and the registrar. It has broad responsibility for the overall co-ordination of the curriculum, review of course provision and the monitoring of quality. It considers issues raised by staff, student and

library committees which report directly to it. The role of the academic board is under discussion in the college.

18 The first strategic plan and curriculum area plans were developed by senior managers. The second strategic plan is being developed on the basis of a broad outline provided by senior management with individual groups of staff working on its more detailed applications. The plan is based on a clear evaluation of structural and employment trends within the horticultural and land-based industries. It is realistic about the problems the college faces: increased competition, greater difficulties in recruiting further education students and the need to strengthen local recruitment and to develop full-cost courses. The college has established a separate training agency, Mercia Training and Assessment Consultancy, and successfully negotiated an agreement with an outside organisation to deliver modular block release courses for the provision of off-the-job National Examining Board For Supervisory Management education. This both widens the college's curriculum provision and enables a more efficient use of the college's resources

19 There are clearly-established policies for equal opportunities, and for health and safety. The health and safety committee reports regularly to the academic board and frequent and thorough safety audits are carried out on all parts of the college. There is, however, no policy for ensuring that students are alerted to environmental issues relevant to the curriculum.

20 The senior management structure is clear. The principal takes responsibility for external relations and financial and strategic management while the vice-principal has responsibility for overall management of the curriculum and its support services, in particular academic resources and library/learning resources support. The director of finance oversees finance, property and domestic services. Sectional and specialist area management is also clearly structured. The management of the curriculum does not provide an effective means of checking individual students' programmes for coherence and relevance. This issue should be addressed.

21 About 53 per cent of the college's income comes from the Further Education Funding Council. The unit of funding is £4,763 which is high for the sector overall and substantially above the median of £3,585 for this type of institution. Staffing costs are about 56 per cent of total expenditure, which is lower than that commonly found in colleges. However, about 20 per cent of total college expenditure is accounted for by its commercial departments such as the garden centre. It also has high premises expenditure, about 15 per cent of the total. Summaries of the college's income and expenditure are shown in figures 4 and 5.

22 The strategic deployment of resources is generally effective. There is careful management of staff which is particularly crucial in a college which has a substantial estate requiring considerable maintenance. The student:staff ratio has improved significantly in recent years. Budget

holders are required to bid for resources. These are allocated on the basis of needs and on performance criteria. There is a separate system for capital bids and, in accordance with quality standards, these cannot be fragmented into smaller recurrent bids. Budget holders receive regular updates on expenditure and commitments and there is dialogue between them and the director of finance on reasons for variance. Staff are well informed on the allocation and monitoring of the use of resources. Although the college has a comprehensive resourcing model, there has been no attempt to calculate costs of provision at course level. The model should be used to investigate the overall impact upon resources of new course developments.

23 There have been determined and effective efforts to manage resources strategically. Consultants have been retained to advise on accommodation strategy and to conduct an audit of energy use. Management took as its key priority the need to eliminate a loss of £150,000 per year on the commercial units and to ensure that the units develop as an effective model for the industry. There has been rationalisation of support and teaching staff. The college has clear information on the notional and actual capacity of teaching, and workshop accommodation.

24 The college has a mixed computerised and manual management information system which it is able to sustain, mainly because of the small number of student enrolments. Staff loading, resource utilisation, staff and course timetables, as well as individualised student timetables, are produced rapidly. Although the system provides information which can be made available to staff and the senior management through a network, most information is conveyed to the staff in paper form. For example, students' personal information, including a digitised photograph, is held on a database, but staff have a hard copy of this database and do not have to access the network. Student applications and enrolments are processed during the academic year and numbers are regularly conveyed to the course teams.

25 A senior member of the academic staff has responsibility for the management information system and for information technology across the college as well as having a teaching commitment. This workload restricts the amount of time that can be given to the development and production of information for the senior management. The two support staff who look after the management information system are also responsible for monitoring information technology provision. They maintain and develop the software effectively and produce reports on demand. Other administrative staff undertake the input and processing of data for student enrolment and the financial system. There has been little recent staff development on the facilities that the management information system can offer to staff.

26 Enrolment targets have been set and the college expects to achieve its 7 per cent growth target for 1993-94. Retention rates are carefully monitored and reasons for students' withdrawals are analysed. The most

recent information for 1992–93 indicates generally high completion rates, all in excess of 95 per cent. An analysis of the destinations of last year's leavers had a high response rate of 93 per cent.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

27 Members of college staff attend schools and careers conventions, and there are plans to offer taster courses for pupils from local schools. Prospective students attend for interview on college open days and may be accompanied by their parents. Some staff lack the training in interviewing skills to ensure that students' support needs are identified. It would assist applicants if the students who guide them round the college came from the same or similar course areas. The paperwork for interviews is well prepared. Some students reported that they had not been made fully aware of the balance and relevance of optional choices to meet their career needs and that their expectations of courses had not been fully met. Students' perception surveys yielded similar evidence. The college should address this. It should also give particular attention to the learning and support needs of adult returners.

28 The college has a developed policy on the accreditation of prior learning and arrangements are in place to support assessment. Some 10 students have taken advantage of this in the current academic year. There are opportunities for students to transfer from the end of the first year of the national certificate to the second year of the national diploma. This bridging arrangement is welcomed by students but its full implications were not always made clear to students before enrolment.

29 The college has a clear induction policy which, following a major reshaping in 1992, is modified annually in the light of experience. Students are advised in July of general enrolment details and the materials, clothes and equipment required for their courses. All new students are met by existing students on arrival and receive an introductory pack which includes course timetables, health and safety requirements and advice on access funds. Course tutors advise students about the structure of the course, and assessment and attendance requirements. Induction sessions were carried out effectively. Staff conveyed information clearly, provided opportunities for question and answer by students and gave a realistic introduction to general work requirements. Students were introduced early to aspects of goal setting and alerted again to the possibility of the accreditation of prior learning. However, some students complained that they were not made fully aware of this and had been obliged to repeat work with which they were already familiar. The college has decided to move the initial meeting with tutors to earlier in the induction period so that these and other issues are explored at the earliest possible moment.

30 Induction includes a brief initial introduction to the library and learning resources, followed by a more extended induction during the second and third weeks of term. Students receive an early five-week introductory information technology course. Some college courses provide

clear introductory guidance on study skills and this practice could usefully be extended to all courses.

31 There is a developing system for the initial identification of students' needs for learning support. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are identified from interview, the application form and self referral. All applications are monitored and a sample of all students' written work is passed for analysis to the learning support co-ordinator. Testing of students' numeracy to identify those requiring additional support takes place on all further education courses by the middle of the first term.

32 As yet, however, the college lacks a co-ordinated strategy for offering learning support to all students. There is no clear understanding about what constitutes 'special needs'; both staff and students are confused about this. Students are actively encouraged to declare their learning needs. A small number of students with specific learning difficulties are given individual support and students reported sensitive and effective help from the learning support co-ordinator. Helpful information on particular students is passed from the learning support co-ordinator to teachers, indicating how teaching might accommodate the particular students' needs. However, not all staff have the required skills to assist students with particular learning difficulties.

33 The close and productive working relationships between teachers and students and the opportunities for work in smaller groups were appreciated by students. Most students felt that staff were accessible and willing to respond to their concerns. The opportunities for social activities are good for a college of this size.

34 Each full-time student has a course tutor. The college has a written policy on tutorials and a sound method of recording individual interviews with students. However, the frequency and content of tutorial varies between tutors. Some tutorials were merged with teaching sessions and students were unclear about their purpose or the level of tutorial support they might expect. A more systematic tutorial programme with a minimum entitlement should be developed.

35 Residential students were positive about their experience and spoke warmly of the amount of personal responsibility encouraged by the wardens. There are five wardens, one for each hostel; three are mature students, two are members of staff. All wardens have the same responsibilities and authority. A head warden lives on site. All wardens receive first-aid training and the head warden liaises closely with the college counsellor on matters of student welfare. In practice, wardens are a further resource for student counselling. Of concern to some staff and students was the lack of a female warden: there are 34 residential women students. Wardens require staff development specifically addressed to their needs as wardens.

36 There is no college policy on creating or developing records of achievement. Records of students' progress on the assessed elements of

their programme are kept by course managers. The college has a clear commitment on business technology and education courses to a core skills policy. Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national students receive continual feedback on their performance but some students on the BTEC first diploma were unclear about how well they were doing. The systems for recording attendance have not operated effectively, which is in breach of the college's quality standards. There is no effective policy for alerting tutors to students' absence. The college has a written agreement with students and this is included in course handbooks. It is developing a student charter which will include a clear statement on students' rights and responsibilities.

37 Careers support is given to the students in several ways. All staff have close contacts with the horticultural industry and through tutorials and informal discussion are able to offer a lot of informed advice. All courses help students to develop some of the necessary skills involved in securing employment. Students are advised how to write curricula vitae. Each has to produce a word processed curriculum vitae during the first year of the course and these are subsequently updated. In the final year, students undertake practice interviews which are then evaluated. Despite these examples of good practice, the college has no formal policy on careers support. Changes in course provision, for example the introduction of the BTEC first course, may require more precisely focused development of careers' skills and the creation of records of achievement.

38 There is a helpful careers section in the library which contains prospectuses for further and higher education, and useful software packages. Funding from the local TEC helped to establish this provision, and further financial support from the TEC has been obtained for the production of a leaflet giving advice on how to use the careers library. The college maintains an up-to-date careers notice board, well located at the top of the stairs just outside the library entrance. Increased difficulties in obtaining employment during the recession have led to initiatives, such as the college's first careers' exhibition in May 1994, to which employers were invited

TEACHING AND PROMOTION OF LEARNING

39 The following table, which includes induction classes, summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected:

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Totals		7	15	5	3	0	30

40 Much of the work was of a high standard. The strengths outweighed the weaknesses in 73 per cent of the sessions inspected. Students experienced a variety of learning activities, including practicals, tutorials, assignments and class work exercises, which enabled them to experience working together as a whole class, in small groups and individually.

41 During a number of classroom-based sessions students visited adjacent specialist facilities to observe demonstrations or to carry out exercises. This provided variety for the students and effectively reinforced the link between theory and practice. In individual study units there was careful planning to relate theory and practice, and frequent and effective reinforcement of the commercial relevance of the work. However, teachers could do more to ensure that students appreciate the ways in which the units inter-relate.

42 Teaching sessions were generally well planned. Schemes of work derived from course documentation, ensured that the syllabus coverage was comprehensive. In most classes, the teachers introductions ensured that the content of lessons is effectively linked to previous work. On a few occasions the initial briefing was too rushed, the expected outcomes were not clearly identified for students and opportunities were missed to check on levels of understanding. Normally topics were developed logically and coherently. Teachers made effective use of relevant classwork exercises to allow time for consolidation and were able to provide time for identifying individual learning difficulties and giving support and guidance.

43 Tutors' skilful handling of discussion and well-directed, challenging questions gave students good opportunities to express their views and to raise issues. In a minority of classes, the more knowledgeable students were sometimes allowed to dominate proceedings at the expense of others. On a few occasions, students spent an excessive amount of time copying notes. Teachers often make effective use of a variety of visual aids including slides and handouts. For specialist aspects of the curriculum which are common to many programmes of study, teachers have developed some useful learning packages which allow students to work at their own pace.

44 Teachers enjoy good working relationships with students and these are used effectively to promote learning. With few exception, teachers display sound knowledge of their subject and have a clear understanding of current issues affecting the industry. They were able to draw attention to the commercial relevance of topics through well chosen examples which stimulated students' interest.

45 Most assignments provided good opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in commercially relevant exercises. The brief provided by the teacher established a clear context for the work and made known to the students the expected outcomes. In a few national diploma assignments, there were insufficient opportunities for the students to analyse and evaluate information.

46 The work placement for the national diploma programme was generally well integrated with the college-based work. Normally this period provided students with direct experience of their chosen sector of the industry as well as good opportunities for work-related development of personal skills. The written work requirement and assessment arrangements provided an effective structure for exploiting the potential

benefits. Although the arrangements for supervising the students during the period were clearly documented, many students were critical of the support they received. The college needs to ensure that it does not raise unrealistic expectations of the frequency of tutorial visits, particularly for those students working some distance from the college, and that systems are in place to ensure that regular feedback is obtained from the work placement. Some first diploma students saw little value in the simulated work experience carried out on the college units and argued that there were few attempts to relate it directly to the rest of the curriculum.

47 The curricula for national diploma and certificate courses have been effectively modularised. A common core of technical modules applies to each specialist horticultural programme. This facilitates student transfers, and offers the potential for more flexible modes of delivery. Each programme of study is divided into comprehensive, well documented units covering rationale, objectives, content and assessment scheme. Some are covered by appropriate schemes of work.

48 Good course documentation provides potentially valuable support for programme management. However, it is not always fully exploited and many programmes lack coherence. Personal development, communication and problem-solving skills are often identified in the documentation, particularly for the BTEC courses where the college has a clear policy. However, there are weaknesses in monitoring and recording the achievement of these skills and they are not effectively integrated into the teaching and learning. Similarly, information technology does not form a sufficiently integral part of much of the work.

49 A wide and appropriate range of assessment methods are used, and these are generally well matched to course aims. Students are provided with informative course handbooks that give an overview of content and assessment for each study unit. For most assignments, teachers provide sufficiently detailed written comment on the work to help the students improve their performance. There are, however, inconsistencies in the marking of assignments, particularly in the emphasis teachers place on students' ability to apply their knowledge. Arrangements are in hand to ensure a more consistent approach to the setting and marking of assignments. A course group reviews assignments and this is improving the quality of the written brief provided for students. The group's role in monitoring marking is only partially developed but the recent standardisation of marking sheets should help to develop consistency.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

50 A high proportion of full-time students complete their studies and achieve the qualification for which they are aiming. Last year 98 per cent of national diploma and certificate students completed their studies and just over 90 per cent of them obtained their qualification. Many of these students achieved higher than the minimum pass level. Over three quarters gained distinction or credit grades and all students on the diploma

programmes passed. An unusually high failure rate of about 40 per cent was recorded for the national certificate in amenity horticulture. This depressed the overall rate for the 1992–93 cohort compared with previous years. Such isolated examples require more detailed analysis to identify the reasons for the poor results. The relatively higher overall failure rate in national certificate courses last year is partly a reflection of the entry qualification profile of the students, which ranged from degree level to students with no GCSE science at grades A to C.

51 Most part-time students complete their studies, and, in 1993, all were successful in achieving their qualifications. Normally all floristry students gain their target award. Last year only one of the 31 students completing the programme failed. In 1992–93, over 90 per cent of all horticulture students obtained their qualification.

52 A high proportion of full-time students progress to relevant employment or to more advanced courses. Almost 60 per cent of leavers entered full-time permanent employment, mostly in horticulture. About 30 per cent progressed to other courses; half of these were national certificate students transferring to the second year of the national diploma. Others either entered short-term or part-time employment or their destinations were unknown. Less than five per cent were unemployed.

53 The great majority of students carry out practical work carefully and conscientiously with due regard to safe practice. The standard achieved is normally at least satisfactory, and much of the horticultural work is of high quality. Students work well together and are mutually supportive. The group work, particularly the specific project work for exhibitions, is often of a high standard. Over the last three years, students, individually and in groups, have achieved a dozen awards for their work in national competitions. Much of the work consisted of practical projects for shows and exhibitions but some also included written assignments.

54 Most students are knowledgeable about their area of study, and have a sufficient understanding of key issues. A significant minority have an extremely high level of understanding of certain specialist sectors. With very few exceptions, students show considerable vocational commitment and this is reflected in their positive response in class and in the considerable effort they often put into coursework exercises. A small minority of first diploma students have a casual approach to their studies.

55 Students' written work and performance in internal assessments reaches at least a satisfactory level. Some of the assignment work is of a high standard, in terms of technical coverage and presentation, particularly the national certificate work. Most national diploma assignments are well researched and include valid evaluative comment. In a few cases, although the factual content is comprehensive, the students' application of knowledge and analysis are weak. The quality of first diploma assignments varies widely. A few are weak in terms of presentation and literacy. Most students' notes are clearly presented and well organised. Some, however, do not provide an accurate record of the work.

56 Generally, students are confident and competent in discussion. Most are willing and able to talk about their programmes of study. The numeracy skills of a minority of national certificate and first diploma students are weak and this impedes their progress in some technical aspects of the curriculum

QUALITY ASSURANCE

57 The college is well advanced in quality assurance. There is a strategic commitment to quality in the college which embraces course delivery and administrative and financial support. The college has already been accredited for British Standard 5750 and is working towards the achievement of Investors in People status. There are well developed quality manuals, which are regularly updated and clear descriptions of jobs and functions. A quality management review committee meets regularly. A key feature in the development of quality assurance has been the introduction of action plans.

58 The college has developed a draft student charter. This has statements on students' entitlement, covering induction, course and assessment requirements, tutorials and careers support. Students' responsibilities are also clearly identified.

59 Two surveys of students' perceptions are carried out annually. They cover all courses and have high rates of return. Responses include students' views on marketing, induction, aspirations at the beginning of the course, the college's success or failure in meeting expectations and the volume of work. The second survey asks questions about the quality of the course, including assessment, the nature of teaching and course content, the quality of guidance, library/learning resources and social facilities. Briefer evaluation surveys are also carried out for the short courses. Survey questions are being revised to give them a sharper focus which will increase their value in contributing to future policy.

60 Course review is less well developed. All courses have an annual review, which is considered by the academic board. In 1992, the review was confined to examination results but in 1993 it was extended to include students' perceptions and other course information. Employers are not involved in course review other than for the Youth Training programmes. Course reviews are not yet sufficiently rigorous to ensure that identified shortcomings are addressed and that plans for action are instigated and implemented.

61 The college places a high priority on staff development. Policy is effective. It covers all staff, is matched to the mission, and concentrates upon the updating of teaching staff and the development of support staff through training in customer care, health and safety, and financial operations. There are thorough records and effective procedures for submitting, moderating and prioritising bids. Staff-development activities are recorded and there are good procedures for the evaluation and dissemination of staff experience following in-house and external activities.

62 The college has an effective system of staff appraisal. All teaching staff including the principal, are appraised and the system has now been extended to all support staff. The college has not universally followed the principle that all appraisers should first have been appraised. The annual cycle of appraisal involves the identification of development needs and the support required. The appraisal form is signed by both appraiser and appraisee as an agreed record and, in case of dispute, there is an opportunity for the principal to review the appraisal form. The college is planning to include observation of teaching as part of staff appraisal.

RESOURCES

Staffing

63 Teachers are well qualified and most have relevant commercial experience. Their awareness of current industrial performance is maintained through productive relationship with relevant sectors of the horticultural industry. Staff show considerable commitment to their work and often work outside their normal hours to support the students' extra-curricular activity, including work for shows and exhibitions. The amount of technical support is generally adequate and support staff are also well qualified for the work they undertake.

64 Recent reductions in the overall complement of staff have been well managed. The range of expertise is generally in line with the needs of the programmes of study, although there are some imbalances between subject areas, resulting from changes in the balance of provision following new course developments. Teachers have been flexible in their responses to deployment. In a small minority of cases, the teachers' lack of experience in the specialism means that opportunities to reinforce the commercial relevance of work are sometimes missed.

Accommodation

65 The college campus is attractive. The extensive grounds surrounding the main building include a wealth of hard and soft landscape features. The buildings are clean and well furnished. The public areas are well decorated and welcoming. However, many of the rooms are inaccessible to students with restricted mobility and the location of the library on the first floor prevents its use by students in wheelchairs. The college is implementing a programme of building adaptations to improve access. The standard of residential accommodation varies between hostels but overall it is at least of satisfactory quality. The students' communal areas are generally of good quality and of adequate size although they become crowded at peak times. There are reasonable outdoor sports facilities but no covered sports area.

66 There are sufficient teaching rooms, providing a range of generally good quality accommodation. These are well furnished and well equipped with teaching aids. Most of the specialist facilities provide high-quality support for teaching and learning. They include excellent hard landscape

workshops, nursery propagation units that incorporate the latest technological developments and extensive, good-quality, covered growing areas, including environmentally-controlled glasshouses. The specialist floristry facilities, however, are barely adequate. The college's sports turf facilities are supplemented by the use of an off-site golf course. These can support the current range of provision but would not be adequate for a specialist option in sports turf. The college is working in a joint arrangement with a commercial company to make more sports facilities available on the college campus.

Equipment / learning resources

67 The large, well-stocked college estate provides a rich learning resource which is used extensively by students. There is an abundance of plant material for practicals, demonstrations and student investigation. The specialist commercial units are substantial enough to provide students with realistic working environments and offer examples of good commercial practice. Industrialist are complimentary about the standards of performance of these units. Informative monthly reports which record the work carried out include comments on performance. However, the physical and financial performance data from the units is not always readily available to staff and students to use as an additional learning resource.

68 The college is well resourced with equipment and consumable materials for most of its main specialist areas. There is a wide range of analytical equipment in the science laboratories, an excellent plant micro-propagation unit and good provision of general equipment. There is also a comprehensive range of horticultural machines and equipment.

69 The space in the library is adequate for students to work individually and in groups. Extended opening hours, including Saturday mornings, have increased the opportunities to use these facilities. Generally the library is effectively integrated into the management and committee structure. Library staff are represented on the academic board and the board has a library committee.

70 There is a wide range of specialist learning resources in the library. New course developments are normally well supported. There is a good range of up-to-date text books and journals for horticulture, countryside management and science. The library offers an excellent company product data base. Despite this, many students are critical of the availability of text and other materials to support some assignments. This is the consequence of poor co-ordination by staff so that work is set which requires the use of the same books by too many students. The range of general reading material is restricted to a small fiction area.

71 The number of computers available in the computer room is sufficient. The ratio of full-time equivalent students to computers is 12:1. The computers are accessible for a large part of the college week. Standard packages for general use are available on all machines, and specific hardware and software is available in the specialised areas. After their

basic introduction to information technology in their first few weeks at college students receive no further support unless it is made available as part of their course. This disadvantages some students, particularly those returning to education. Although guides are made available, the lack of basic information and technician assistance prevents some students from making better use of computer facilities. The computer room is often booked for teaching and this places a heavy load upon the small number of machines available in the library.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

72 The college is successful in its mission to provide high quality specialist education and training in horticulture. Particular strengths of the provision are:

- the strong support of the governing body
- the achievements of management in improving the efficiency and quality of the commercial departments
- the realistic awareness by governors and managers of the issues facing the college
- the distinctive range of full-time courses in horticulture
- effective links with employers
- the high standards of most teaching, which includes teachers' knowledge of up-to-date commercial practice
- the high proportion of students achieving their target qualifications and progressing to higher education or employment
- the high quality of accommodation and equipment
- the implementation of college-wide quality assurance
- well-advanced systems of staff development and appraisal.

73 The college should address the following matters if it is to sustain and enhance the quality of its provision and the standards of achievement of its students:

- more vigorous market research and the recruitment of more local students to further education courses
- the development of an overall policy for students with learning difficulties and disabilities
- improved links with local schools
- greater consistency in tutorial arrangements
- more coherent overall management of the curriculum
- the development of study skills and information technology as integral parts of the curriculum
- the dissemination of information on unit costs per course as an element in resource management

-
- specific staff development for wardens of residential accommodation
 - improved access to teaching accommodation for students with restricted mobility.

FIGURES

1 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993–94)

2 Percentage enrolments by age (1993–94)

3 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1993–94)

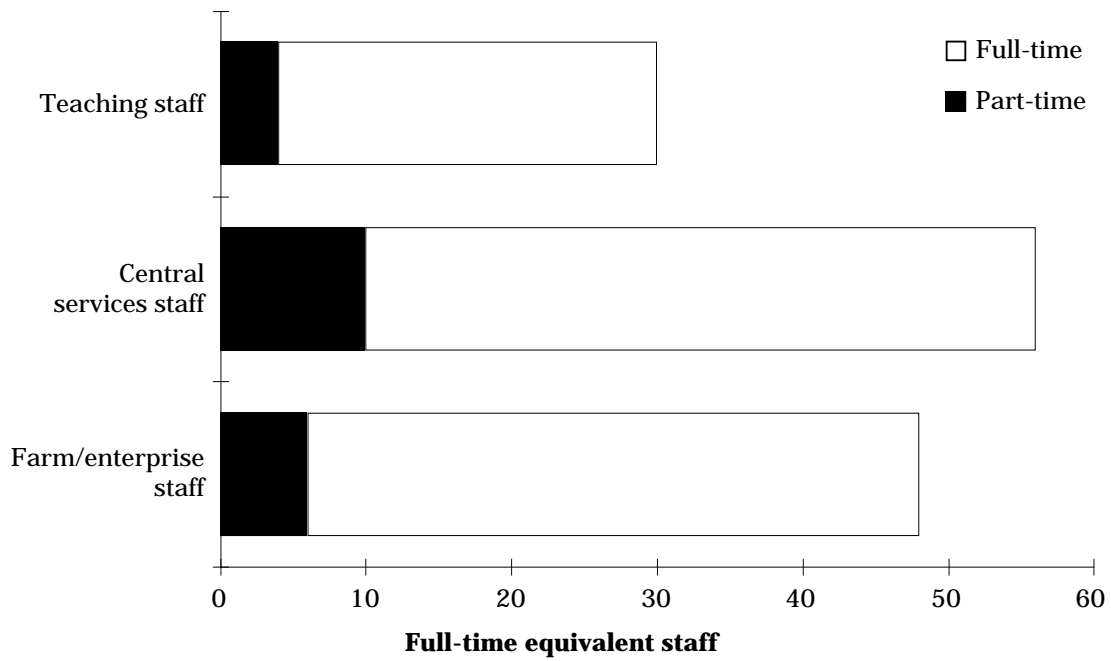
4 Recurrent income (1993–94)

5 Estimated expenditure (1993–94)

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

Figure 1

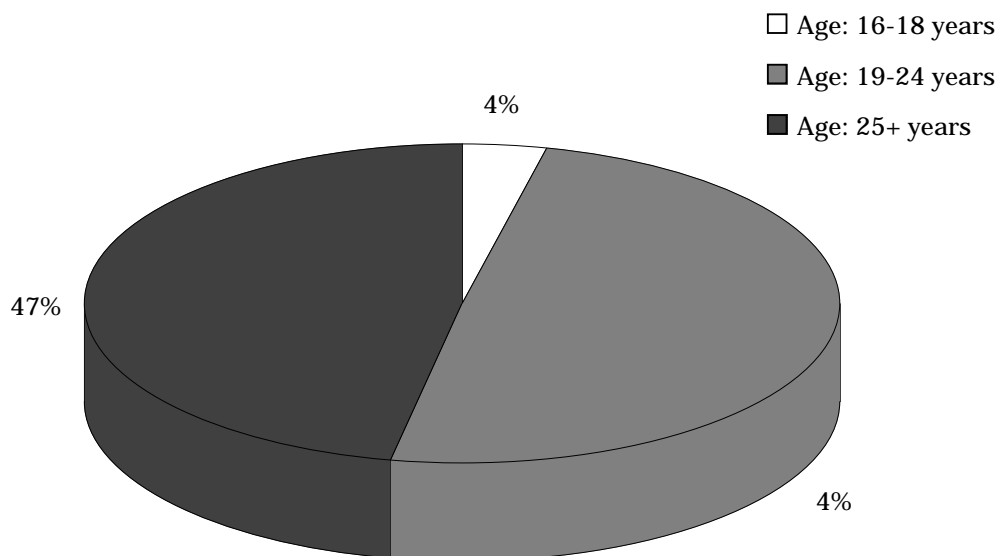
Pershore College of Horticulture: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993–94)



Full-time equivalent staff: 134

Figure 2

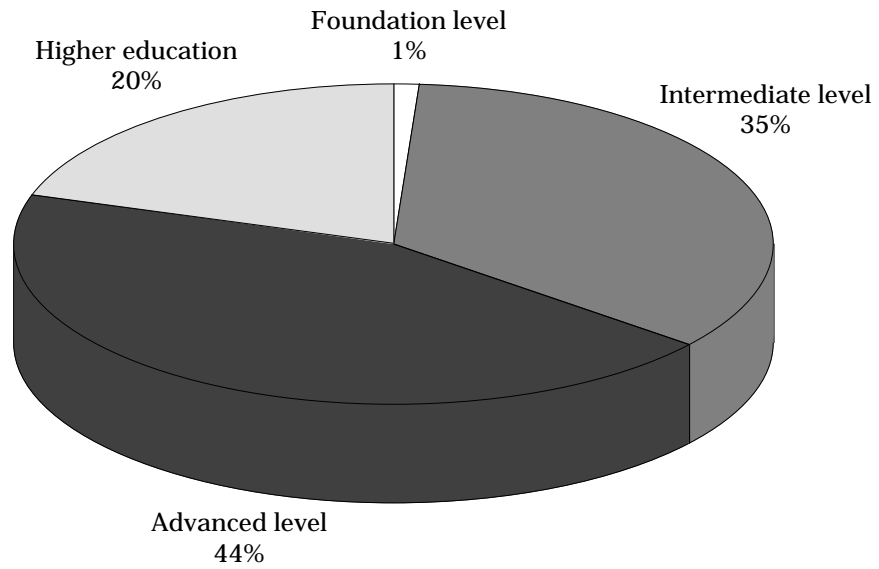
Pershore College of Horticulture: percentage enrolments by age (1993–94)



Enrolments: 596

Figure 3

Pershore College of Horticulture: percentage enrolments by level of study (1993-94)



Enrolments: 596

Figure 4

Pershore College of Horticulture: estimated income (1993-94)

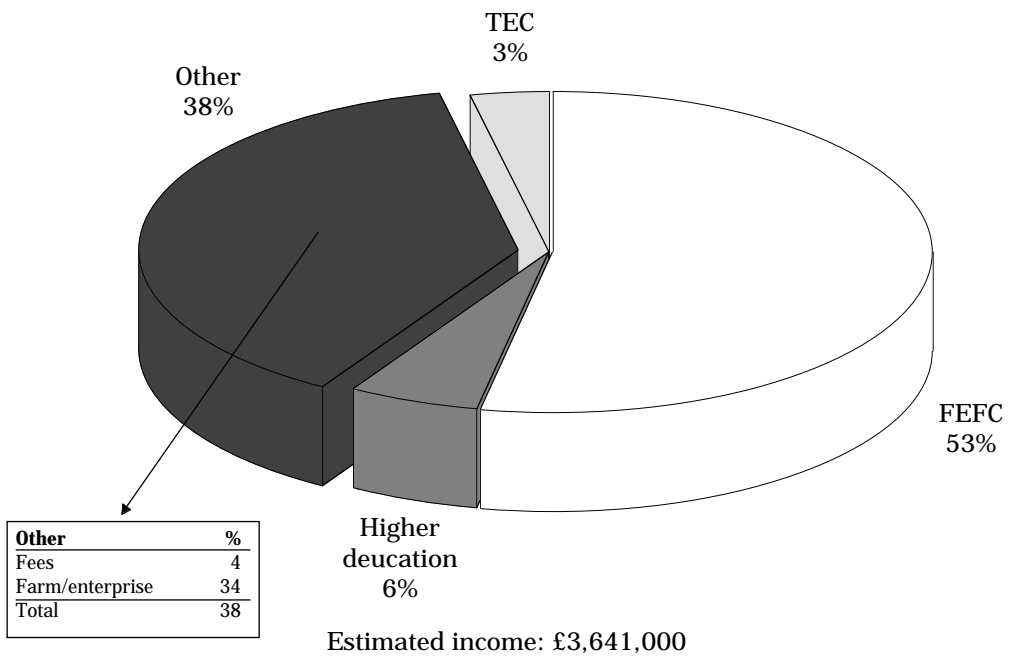
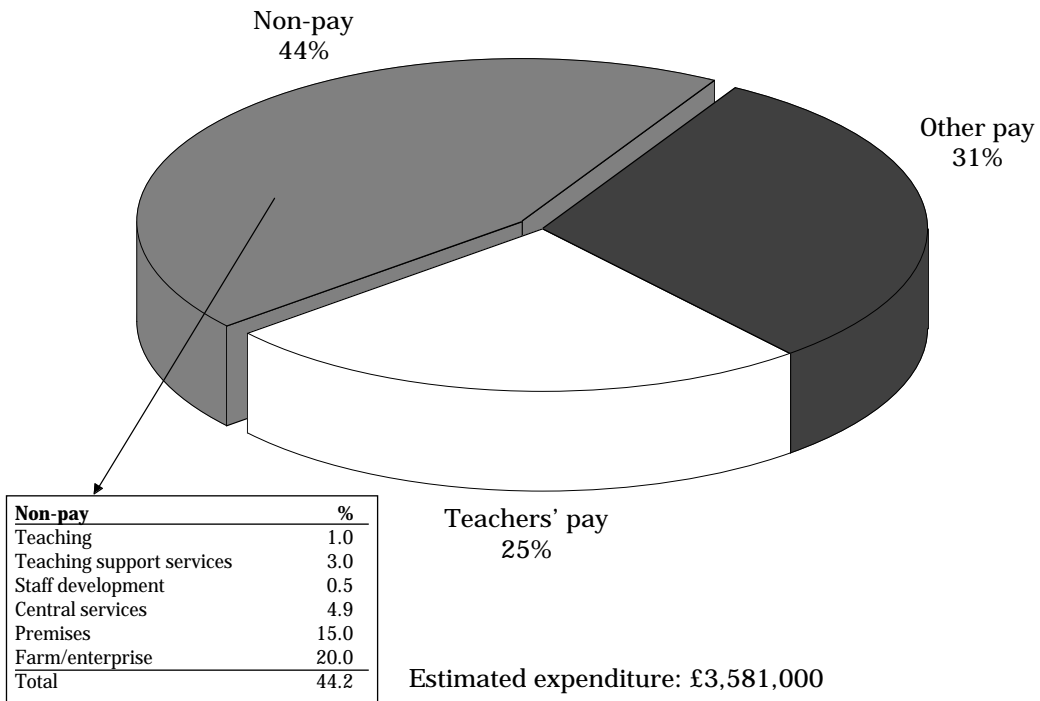


Figure 5

Pershore College of Horticulture: estimated expenditure (1993-94)



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