

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Merrist Wood College

February 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-96

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 23/97

MERRIST WOOD COLLEGE
SOUTH EAST REGION
Inspected May-November 1996

Summary

Merrist Wood College has diversified its provision away from agriculture to introduce a wider range of courses which are mainly based on leisure activities. It has exceeded its recruitment targets for each of the last three years. Governors have a range of relevant industrial and commercial experience and have contributed significantly to the many enterprises developed by the college. The extensive college estate is well used to support the curriculum, particularly the woodland which is used for the high-quality arboriculture studies. The college has a caring and supportive approach to its students, who are well served by the student services teams. Students are highly motivated and show considerable commitment to their courses. The learning resources centre is well stocked and has capable and active staff. The college exhibits successfully at major shows. The development of students' technical skills benefits from the contribution of newly-appointed practical instructors. The clear strategic direction of the college is not yet reflected in a coherent range of programmes which offer appropriate points for students' entry and progression. The quality of teaching is variable and the number of sessions awarded higher grades was below average for the sector. Teaching in small animal care is poor. Pass rates and retention rates vary between courses and some students gain employment before completing their studies. The college should: address the uneven distribution of responsibilities among managers; develop further the quality assurance systems; continue to improve internal communications; establish staff appraisal; address the poor co-ordination between teachers and instructors; and improve aspects of the provision in small animal care.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision		Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision		3
Governance and management		3
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		2
Quality assurance		4
Resources:	staffing	2
	equipment/learning resources	2
	accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Small animal care	4	Horticulture and floristry	3
Landscaping	3	Countryside and golf studies	3
Equine studies	3	Arboriculture	2

INTRODUCTION

1 Merrist Wood College, Guildford was inspected in several stages between May and November 1996. Inspection of landscape construction was arranged to coincide with the Chelsea Flower Show at which two gardens built by students were on display. Inspectors visited the college's open day in May 1996 and induction procedures were inspected in September 1996. In October 1996, five inspectors spent 15 days assessing the remaining curriculum areas. They observed 69 classes, examined students' work and scrutinised documentation about the college and its courses. In November 1996, six inspectors spent 18 days evaluating aspects of cross-college provision. They held meetings with governors, college managers, teaching and support staff, students, and representatives from industry, the local training and enterprise council (TEC) and the community.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Merrist Wood College was opened in 1945 by Surrey County Council as the Surrey Farm Institute. It provided courses for local farmers and horticultural businesses. The college closed its farming courses in 1992, concentrating instead on courses in arboriculture, horticulture, landscaping and countryside management. More recently, it has introduced equine studies and courses in small animal care, greenkeeping, floristry, garden design and golf studies. During the 1970s and 1980s, the college attracted students from the whole of Britain and overseas. The college has now decided to concentrate on the recruitment of younger students from Surrey, the home counties and the western fringe of London. The local area has easy access to the M3, M4 and M25 motorways and one-third of residents commute regularly to London and other towns outside Surrey. The area is suburban rather than rural.

3 Unemployment rates in 1995 for the Guildford area were the lowest in south-east England. Most employment in the county is in small businesses, 90 per cent of which employ fewer than 20 people. Services and manufacturing industries are growing but urban encroachment has caused a decline in agriculture. Information technology, technical and management skills are the major requirements for jobs around Guildford. In 1995, nearly 80 per cent of 16 year old school-leavers in Surrey stayed in education and 68 per cent of students who completed general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) studies at 18 or 19 went on to additional further education or higher education. There are two local general further education colleges, the nearer of which is three miles away. There are three colleges specialising in land-based courses within 40 miles, all of which compete directly with Merrist Wood College. The college had total enrolments of 2,053 in 1995-96, of whom 726 were full-time students. In the same year, the average age of full-time students was 20.6 years and of part-time students 23.1 years. Half the full-time students and 42 per cent of part-time students lived outside Surrey. Only

a small number of students at the college come from minority ethnic groups, reflecting the general population in southern Surrey. 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.

4 The college's academic structure is based on three programme areas: horticulture; agriculture and countryside studies; and arboriculture. There are 118 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 39 full-time equivalent are teachers. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. The college's mission statement is 'to provide high-quality education and training for the land-based and related leisure industries which is responsive to the needs of individuals, relevant and cost effective'.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

5 Five years ago the college faced general decline as the demand for its courses in agriculture and horticulture fell. Since then, it has been active in diversifying its curriculum and the educational and commercial use of its estate. The college's land is of poor farming quality and agricultural use has been brought to an end with the recent sale of the dairy herd. The college has extended its equestrian activities, including construction of a cross-country course, and it intends to develop an indoor riding school. The college has built on its expertise in greenkeeping and golf by investing in the construction of an 18-hole golf course. Membership of the private golf club is almost fully subscribed 10 months before the course is available for play. Comparable initiatives are being planned for other leisure areas. The outcome will be a curriculum in which the college's traditional strengths in arboriculture and horticulture are complemented by a range of leisure facilities and related educational courses. Students will be able to learn about facility design, construction and management.

6 The rationale for course development is not yet reflected in a coherent range of programmes which offer appropriate points for students' entry and progression. The core of the college's provision comprises courses leading to national certificates and national diplomas. National vocational qualifications (NVQs) are used as entry programmes in several subjects. These work-based qualifications are often unsuitable for young students seeking to go on to national diplomas and higher education.

7 The college used to offer higher national diploma courses in golf and landscape design which were franchised from Kingston University. The university reviewed its franchising policy and withdrew funding. The golf studies course is now offered as a national diploma which is unique in this subject. It continues to be oversubscribed and some of the applicants are formally overqualified for it. The shortage of paid employment in countryside management has left the college's national diploma students competing for work with applicants who hold degrees from other institutions.

8 Job opportunities for some students are restricted by their lack of subsidiary qualifications. For example, tractor driving is taught to equine students but not certificated. National diploma and national certificate students are sometimes taught together in order to improve cost effectiveness. One outcome of this is that national diploma students are given the opportunity to achieve a national certificate at the end of their first year of study.

9 The college intends to lessen its dependency on Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funding through developing more full-cost courses and other income-generating activities. Programme managers across the college have been given the task of bringing this about. Course teams follow up any opportunities which may come their way to achieve this. As yet, however, they have had little success. Pick-up funding was used to research the market for full-cost courses three years ago, but there have been few courses developed as a result of this research. Part-time NVQ students under 19 years of age are supported through the TEC 'Skillscard' scheme. Whilst TEC representatives say that they see the college as responsive to the needs of industry, few proposals made by the college have been supported by the TEC.

10 Many students undertake work experience as part of their studies; employers speak favourably of this work. There has been high student drop out from national diploma courses during the year when students have industrial experience. This has impacted on both student retention and achievement results. The college has reacted to this by redesigning all three-year programmes to reduce them to two-year programmes, though periods of industrial experience are still included.

11 Every course has an industrial liaison panel in order to ensure that employers' views influence the curriculum. However, companies play little part in developing courses beyond providing opportunities for work experience. The loss of the year when students undertook industrial experience from the college's national diplomas is lamented by some employers. There are no facilities for students to study on their own away from the college. The college makes limited use of its facility to accredit prior learning towards its qualifications. The college does not offer consultancy services. Nevertheless, the college is well thought of in its professional sphere and a number of national bodies, such as the British Institute of Golf Course Architects, hold their meetings at Merrist Wood College.

12 The college prospectus is particularly well designed. Exhibition gardens constructed by students have been well received at the Chelsea Flower Show in recent years. A 'security garden' was designed and built by part-time NVQ students, some of whom are police officers. It used walls and fencing capable of keeping out intruders but in a visually attractive way, and included plants which discouraged tampering. The garden was originally built for a college open day but, with the help of sponsorship, it was also exhibited at Hampton Court Flower Show where it attracted a

good deal of media coverage. There is a marketing manager and a marketing assistant, but so far market research has been focused on meeting the modest requirements of submissions for national diplomas. The college analyses its recruitment pattern for both full-time and part-time students and has produced maps indicating enrolment numbers according to postcode area to help staff to target marketing activities.

13 The college works hard to promote productive links with schools and the local community. Many school parties visit Merrist Wood College, often with the help of transport which the college provides free. There is a schools liaison officer.

14 The college senior management team considers issues related to equal opportunities once a month and the college analyses the extent to which applications from men and women result in enrolments. However, there are few students in the college from minority ethnic groups and student groups on many courses are predominantly of one sex. There is no separate specialist provision for students with learning difficulties.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 Governors have taken an active part in determining the direction of the college. Membership of the corporation board has increased recently to 15, with one vacancy remaining unfilled. The principal is a governor. Ten members of the board are from business, two are elected staff, and one member is nominated by Surrey TEC. Two of the business members are new and have yet to attend a corporation meeting. The business members have experience and expertise which are relevant to land-based industries. Two members, one of whom is the chairman, are past students of the college. The corporation board meets 10 times each year and during the period 1994-96, the average attendance was 81 per cent. There is one woman member and the corporation is taking steps to increase female representation. The board decided not to include student members. There are no formal means for governors to inform themselves about students' views although they believe they have sufficient informal avenues of communication. Governors are involved in college activities. They attend industrial liaison panels, students' functions and college events. The staff members issue a newsletter to keep their colleagues informed about the business of the corporation.

16 The board has established an appropriate range of committees: audit; finance and employment policy; remuneration; and a search committee to recruit new members. All have clear terms of reference and there is a well-planned calendar of meetings. Background information is provided for members and minutes are accurate, but they are insufficiently detailed to be helpful to a reader who did not attend the meetings. Working parties are set up as required. For example, there is a group looking at the future viability of the plant nursery. The governors have adopted a code of conduct and a voluntary register of members' interests. In June 1996, the corporation reviewed its own performance. The chairman of the board

has been in post since September 1996 and intends to review the work of the corporation further.

17 Members of the corporation have a clear view of their role and leave the day-to-day management of the college to the principal and his senior staff. New corporation members receive an induction pack of information. Members attend training and development events. Since incorporation, the board has spent much of its time dealing with finance, the estate and personnel matters. It has kept tight control of the college's income, expenditure and enrolments, and has monitored the activities of subsidiary companies established to manage the golf course development and the leasing of the milk quota. There has been less scrutiny of students' achievements. Governors now need to do more to satisfy themselves about the quality of the college's academic performance.

18 Since incorporation, the college has had to adjust to declining financial returns from courses and a need to raise funds from other sources. Competition for students from other providers has increased. In response to these pressures, the college has introduced a range of new courses and subjects, and has developed its entrepreneurial activities. To increase efficiency and cut staffing costs, the college reviewed its teaching staff during 1994-95. The full-time teaching staff was reduced by a quarter. The college has made slow progress in introducing new contracts for the remaining full-time teachers and, at the time of inspection, just over half had accepted them. The college's objectives have been translated into operating plans with timescales for achievement and responsibilities allocated to managers. Although some performance indicators for achievement have been set, many are too general.

19 The principal is assisted by three senior managers. They are the vice-principal, the director of academic affairs, and the commercial director. It is not clear whether the director of academic affairs reports to the principal or the vice-principal. The breadth of responsibility of the three senior managers varies widely. The director of academic affairs has particularly extensive responsibilities which include the curriculum, quality assurance, learning resources, student services, industrial liaison and grounds. Courses and subjects are grouped under programme managers. There are three programme manager posts. In addition to other duties, the director of academic affairs has been an acting programme manager for over a year. The responsibilities and workloads of programme managers are unequal. The college is reviewing the academic management structure.

20 The strategic plan is formulated under agreed procedures which are managed by the principal. All staff are formally invited to make suggestions and comments. The objectives and operating statement are made known to staff across the institution. The principal, the directors and programme managers form the strategic management team which meets fortnightly. Meetings are carefully minuted and the actions to be taken are clearly

noted. Day-to-day matters are dealt with by the academic operations group. Although their meetings are minuted, the outcomes of the actions they agree are not always followed up. Clear terms of reference exist for the strategic management team and the academic operations group. The arrangements for managing courses vary widely. Some courses are well managed, but many team leaders rely too heavily on informal arrangements which do not ensure that staff are fully aware of what is expected of them. Although enrolments and retention are monitored regularly, less attention is given to other vital indicators of performance such as students' examination results.

21 Budget allocations are clear. They are adjusted in the light of changes in recruitment. Budgets for materials and small items of equipment are devolved to course leaders and programme managers who receive timely summaries of their expenditure. A standard system for the costing of courses is being developed. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6, respectively. The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 was £24.77 per unit compared with the median for agricultural colleges of £23.57 per unit and the median for all further education sector colleges of £18.99 per unit. The college has almost doubled in size in the past four years and, in 1994-95, exceeded its enrolment target by 37 per cent. In 1995-96, it exceeded its enrolment target by 21 per cent. These are substantial achievements.

22 The corporation and senior managers have acknowledged that communication with staff has been poor. They have made some improvements which include the circulation of minutes of management meetings, a weekly staff bulletin, briefings for staff, and a consultative forum which has met on two occasions. Communication is still poor between senior managers and course teams and between different course teams. Some teaching staff say that there is too much emphasis on written communication, especially committee minutes, and too little face-to-face contact. The college has policies for the environment, health and safety, student under performance and equal opportunities for students. Other policies, for example, on equal opportunities for staff, training and staff development, and the code of conduct for staff are being reviewed.

23 Computer systems are used to record data on students, finance, personnel and timetabling. Managers receive regular information on students' recruitment and withdrawals from courses. The management information service is effective and provides staff with useful data about their students. The presentation of data in graphic form is particularly useful. Arrangements for monitoring students' attendance vary across the college. The monitoring of students' withdrawal from some courses and their destinations is superficial; little use is made of the information by course teams.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

24 Initial enquiries about college courses are dealt with by the student services unit, a team of administrative staff who use effective and carefully-recorded procedures. A series of careers evenings and open days enable prospective students and their parents to visit the college and discuss the programmes of study which are available. Members of the academic staff contribute to careers conventions. Work experience at the college is arranged for pupils from local schools. This introduces prospective students to the college and builds up contacts with schools. Interviews are conducted by subject teachers who record the outcomes carefully. Some students reported that they were not given sufficient detail about their courses, or provided with a realistic picture of careers opportunities.

25 A week is devoted to the general induction of new and returning students. Although the content of induction week is designed to be comprehensive, the quality of its delivery is dependent on individual course teams and is uneven. Some students were bored by the process, believing that it kept them from the work they had chosen to do, and others found the volume of information too great to absorb. There are comprehensive course handbooks for all the college's programmes. They are issued to every student and additional copies are held in the library and the student services unit for reference. Some students are offered introductory courses in particular skills. For example, arboriculture students have a course in tree climbing before the beginning of the academic year. Students who have enrolled on a course which proves inappropriate to their needs can change by agreement with programme managers. Students are given copies of the college charter and are introduced to it during induction.

26 Student support services have recently been reviewed and expanded. Students in their second or third years commented on the improvements they had seen. Staff are enthusiastic and work as a team. Their successes are convincing colleagues of the importance of student services. Free transport to the college is provided from Guildford. The college has recently established a fund to help students experiencing financial hardship. The learning support group brings together teachers and learning support staff to discuss students' progress and development. Students' attendance and retention are a cause for concern in some curriculum areas. Early leavers are questioned by the examinations officer to discover the reasons for their withdrawal. Students sometimes give reasons for their actions which are different from those they give to their teachers. The college needs to bring the two sets of information together if it is to analyse the reason for students' withdrawal with any clarity.

27 Staff have a growing awareness of the need for additional learning support for students. All students take basic skills tests on entry, and those who have problems with literacy or numeracy are recommended to attend student support sessions. Teachers and learning support staff work together to encourage students to take advantage of the help that is offered.

Students report favourably on the assistance they receive. Learning support tutors communicate effectively with course teams but their activities are restricted to helping students cope with the work they have been given in their lessons. They have not been asked to advise on the appropriateness of the curriculum being taught, although, in some cases, it is the mismatch between the level of work and students' previous experience which results in the need for help.

28 Tutorial support contributes substantially to students' learning. All full-time and many part-time students receive individual tutorials in which their progress is reviewed and future targets set. Parents are invited to discuss their children's progress; reports are not normally sent home. The effectiveness of group tutorials varies and there is little central guidance about their content. An opportunity is being missed to disseminate good practice about tutorial management and to bring general issues such as health education into the curriculum. The college is supportive to students with disabilities. Several with hearing impairments are being helped through the Surrey advisory service. A statement explaining how the college will comply with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* has already been added to the strategic plan.

29 The appointment of an enthusiastic senior warden with a full-time responsibility for students' welfare has alleviated problems encountered last year when young students took up residential places for the first time. A small welfare committee, which includes the college counsellor, has developed a supportive and secure environment. An increasing programme of social activities is widely publicised and it draws together both resident and day students. There is a group which plans activities and seeks suggestions for broadening their scope. Two mature students are paid as part-time recreation assistants. In addition to organising events, they also drive minibuses which enable non-resident students to take part in evening activities and give resident students more access to the town.

30 The college counsellor makes a strong contribution to college life, not only by providing individual counselling but by helping staff and students to come to terms with rapid change. The counsellor is a member of the college welfare committee which reports to the academic operations group. Helpful careers advice is provided by Surrey Careers Service and by specialist course tutors. The library holds a growing stock of careers information. Careers advisory interviews are generally effective but some students report that advice had been too little and too late. Records of the destinations of former students are not used systematically to influence careers advice.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

31 Inspectors observed an equal number of practical and theoretical teaching sessions. Forty-nine per cent of the 69 classes inspected had strengths which outweighed weaknesses. This compares with a national

figure of 63 per cent for colleges inspected in the academic year 1995-96, according to figures published in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Nineteen per cent of classes had weaknesses which clearly outweighed strengths. This compares with a national figure of 8 per cent for colleges inspected in the academic year 1995-96, according to figures published in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Student attendance in the classes inspected was 85 per cent. The average class size was 13. The following table summarises the grades given to the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
NVQ		3	4	3	2	0	12
Other advanced		13	14	19	9	2	57
Total		16	18	22	11	2	69

32 A high standard was set in practical classes in landscape construction, and students gained experience in a wide variety of tasks. Installation of exhibits at the Chelsea Flower Show provides valuable work experience in circumstances which demand the highest international standards. Site work at the college is organised so that groups of about six students have at least two opportunities to undertake each aspect of landscape work. Each group keeps a logbook and their work is monitored by the course tutor. Classroom sessions were taught by academic staff and practical sessions by instructors. Their separate contributions were often poorly co-ordinated. Although private study time is part of each student's timetable it was not well used. A disproportionate amount of time was spent on building up leaf and pest collections, which relate only to a very small part of the curriculum. Many students perform badly on tests during the course. Students often lack the motivation to learn to identify plants and, by agreement with the external moderator, national diploma and national certificate students are now tested on 10 plants each week, instead of 40 plants once a month as is required by the syllabus. The average pass rate was 52 per cent and, after this change of approach, it increased to 71 per cent. However, NVQ amenity horticulture students are still required to identify the full 40 plants during monthly tests. The section is slow to share good practice between courses.

33 Teaching in arboriculture is based in the extensive and varied woodland on the campus. Staff maintain close links with industry and students are able to work frequently on private land. Schemes of work were often not clearly related to the aims of the courses and did not describe teaching methods, but lesson planning was effective enough to ensure coverage of syllabus topics. Teachers made good use of visual aids and discussion in class, and lessons were often stimulating and vocationally relevant. A lecture on remedial tree surgery was illustrated with a variety of appropriate slides and students were prompted to debate aesthetic and

social issues as well as techniques. Practical classes were well planned to build students' confidence and to develop their skills gradually, but there was variation in the standards demanded. Practical instructors were not always in a position to make links between classroom theory and its application because of shortcomings in communication within the teaching team. Course documents gave a clear picture of the demands of the course, and students were given regular feedback on their work at tutorials. Assessments were linked clearly to the aims of the programme and, in most cases, were suited to the level of study. In a minority of cases, assignments were too easy. Learning support is available to students who experience difficulties not only with literacy and numeracy, but also in practical skills such as climbing and machine operation.

34 The quality of teaching in horticulture and floristry lessons was uneven. Clear presentations were given by some teachers who then involved students in the work with carefully-structured questioning. In the weaker lessons teaching was unimaginative and the work set for students was monotonous. In classes which combined students from different courses the pace and level of work were sometimes inappropriate, particularly in the work shared by national certificate and national diploma groups where the level was below the standard normally expected of diploma students. On the other hand, a group which mixed both years of study and two subject areas worked together well. Staff from both courses contributed to a week-long exercise which involved students in observing and analysing the preparation of plants for sale at the college and in commercial outlets. The project finished with a visit to a local nursery where students gave a presentation to the owner. The demands of the work set for students, and the quality of marking, differed across the courses. In some cases, feedback to students was limited and marking criteria were minimal; in others, the marking indicated to students how the work might be improved and the marking schemes were clear. Class organisation also varied; in some sessions inadequate lesson planning and casual direction by teachers reduced students' opportunities to learn.

35 There was a significant difference between the quality of teaching on the well-established countryside courses and on the newer golf studies course. Classroom teaching by countryside staff was stimulating and challenged the students. Practical sessions were well managed. However, course and assessment planning in golf studies were superficial and the teaching often failed to hold students' interest. Question and answer sessions tested students' capacity to remember what they had been told rather than to show that they had fully understood it. Teachers did not stimulate discussion between students or use their experience to enrich the work of the group as a whole. Speakers from outside the college were well used to enrich the content of the course. On occasions, unsatisfactory substitutions of staff meant that students were left to practise on the golf range alone. Countryside students gain from visits to environmentally-sensitive sites, and from their study tour to the Brecon Beacons. Students on the golf studies course visit various courses and tournaments.

36 Animal care studies were often unsatisfactory. Tutors set standards well beyond those of the qualifications being studied and, in doing so, often lost sight of the needs of their students. Teachers used too small a range of teaching methods and relied excessively on the overhead projector from which students were instructed to copy their notes. Teaching was insufficiently differentiated to take account of the range of students' abilities in each group. Staff often failed to check that students were learning or to make links between theory and practice. Much laboratory practice was poor and students neglected to wear protective clothing. During one practical session, cats were asleep on the top of reptile cages near where students were handling a variety of creatures, including tarantula spiders. Cats and kittens played in the animal care classroom during lessons and wandered freely among students' work and belongings. Students did not follow elementary procedures for animal hygiene, such as washing their hands between handling each specimen. These examples of poor practice marred sensible procedures such as issuing differently coloured sweatshirts to students as they moved between the rehabilitation unit and the animal unit, to prevent cross-infection. Students worked effectively in groups during animal unit duties. On NVQ courses, assessments were poorly conducted; handouts provided students with the answers to questions asked in written tests.

37 Theory teaching in equine studies was of a consistently high standard, and topics were developed logically. Courses were well planned and documented. Teachers used their wide experience to illustrate their teaching and to make it relevant. Information technology teaching was appropriate and well integrated with other lessons. Practical teaching was more varied and, in half the lessons inspected, students were not sufficiently challenged or involved. In the weaker lessons there was little reference to the theory teaching that had gone before. In two practical lessons the normal procedures for hygiene were ignored. For example, in a stable management lesson, small groups of students were learning to take the temperature of horses. Students' file notes showed that they had been taught to wash and disinfect thermometers after every use. However, this practice was not adhered to by the teacher during a demonstration involving several horses. Students are aware of the range and weighting of each piece of assessed work throughout their courses. The marking and grading of coursework was sometimes inconsistent and the grading criteria were not always made clear to students.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

38 Most students are enthusiastic about their studies and appreciate the considerable resources of the college estate. Staff and students get on well together. Students act responsibly during practical classes and most staff set a good example for them to follow. Students help at the college open days and on college displays at the county show and other events.

39 The high standard of practical work which landscape construction students achieve is reflected in regular successes at the Chelsea and

Hampton Court Flower Shows. All national diploma students in 1994-95 finished the course and, among the 17 who passed, 12 gained distinctions and three went on to higher education. Other examination results and retention rates were poor, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Success rates* for students enrolled on landscape and amenity horticulture courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in landscape construction	77	100	33
Full-time NVQ level 2 in amenity horticulture	-	40	36
Part-time NVQ level 2 in amenity landscape	-	-	83

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

40 Students in arboriculture achieve standards which meet the expectations of the industry. The majority show strong commitment to their work, encouraged by teachers who have a thorough knowledge of current practice. Examinations results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Success rates* for students enrolled on arboriculture courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in arboriculture	79	70	48
National certificate in arboriculture	84	73	69
Part-time NVQ level 2 in amenity arboriculture	-	-	43

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

41 Several students gained employment during work experience and did not return for that reason. Dropout from other courses is less than 10 per cent. Progression to employment in the industry is high and 74 per cent of national diploma students and 53 per cent of national certificate students gained relevant work last year. In addition to their main award, most students take advantage of the opportunity to achieve National Proficiency Training Council certificates of competence in chain-saw operation and in pesticide application. These additional qualifications significantly improve their employability. In assignment work, students demonstrate appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding and, in some cases, they go beyond this to undertake original research.

42 Most students from floristry, nursery and greenkeeping courses find employment related to their courses. Students' made-up floristry pieces were of a professional standard and a silver medal was awarded at the

Chelsea Flower Show in 1996 to the national diploma nursery practice group for their display. The logbooks which students use to record their practical experiences around the college facilities and in industrial placements are well maintained. Examination results are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Success rates* for students enrolled on floristry, nursery and greenkeeping courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in nursery practices	83	71	36
National certificate in nursery practices	74	65	93
National certificate in greenkeeping	-	-	80
National certificate in professional floristry	-	-	67
Full-time NVQ level 2 in floristry	75	63	92
Part-time NVQ level 2 in floristry	-	85	93
Part-time NVQ level 2 in commercial horticulture	-	-	100
Part-time NVQ level 2 in amenity nursery	-	-	91

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

43 Retention rates on one-year courses are high, but only four of the 11 three-year national diploma in nursery practices students completed the course in 1996. Most students gain related employment although these data are not collated centrally by the college.

44 Students on countryside and golf studies programmes have a wide range of entry qualifications. Many are adult returners and their behaviour was exemplary. They were attentive, courteous and loyal to the college. Most students are committed to their courses, but attendance and punctuality on some courses is poor. The national diploma in countryside recreation has low retention rates and only one student gained appropriate employment. Many students achieved national proficiency tests as additional qualifications. Examination results are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Success rates* for students enrolled on countryside and golf studies courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in countryside studies	63	80	47
National certificate in practical habitat management	88	85	84

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

45 Achievement levels among animal care students are low, as shown in table 5. The first group of national diploma results were poor with 53 per cent of the 15 students enrolled achieving the award. During a period when student numbers have doubled, pass rates on the full-time NVQ level 2 course have dropped significantly from 93 per cent in 1994 to 58 per cent in 1996. Of the 11 part-time NVQ level 2 students, only four completed.

Table 5. Success rates* for students enrolled on animal care courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in animal care	-	-	53
Full-time NVQ level 2 in small animal care	93	50	58
Part-time NVQ level 2 in small animal care	-	-	36

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

46 On British Horse Society and first aid examination courses, students keep their files carefully and make notes that will be useful for reference. Their assignment work is presented neatly and is appropriate for the level of the course. Students work together well in groups and share yard and other duties equally. The college is not an approved NVQ or British Horse Society examination centre and does not have an indoor riding school; these shortcomings limit opportunities for students. Student retention on equine study courses is poor. In 1996, 18 students who completed the national certificate went into work with horses and 10 students progressed to the second year of the national diploma. Retention has been high on the two-year national diploma in equine studies course with only one student leaving in each year. Sixteen of the 19 students completing the national diploma in 1996 secured employment. Examination results are shown in table 6.

Table 6. Success rates* for students enrolled for management of horses and equine studies courses, 1994-96

Programme	Success rates of students (%)		
	1994	1995	1996
National diploma in equine studies	-	91	76
National certificate in management of horses	78	65	72

**success rates equal the percentage of those students enrolled on 1 November on year 1 of the course who achieved the qualification.*

QUALITY ASSURANCE

47 The college has a quality assurance policy whose objectives are linked to its strategic plan. Nevertheless, many of these objectives are vague and unmeasurable. There is a variety of activities designed to secure quality, notably in parts of student services and the learning resources area, but there are many aspects of the college's work not covered by any systematic monitoring. The college does respond to students' complaints and issues raised by staff, but the process is sometimes slow in addressing important issues. A comprehensive quality assurance system that regularly examined all aspects of the college's work would allow staff to predict and rectify problems in a more efficient manner.

48 Two different methods are used to obtain students' opinions about their courses and college life. Firstly, questionnaires are issued shortly after induction and at the end of each college year, and a survey is made of the reasons why students withdraw from courses early. The outcomes of all the questionnaires are not always drawn together so that any common threads can be seen and addressed. Secondly, students and teachers meet twice a year to discuss each course, a procedure which has been used for the last four years. Course leaders incorporate comment from these review meetings into an annual course report.

49 An annual report is produced for each full-time course and for clusters of part-time courses. The reports should include data on recruitment, retention, students' performance, and analysis leading to proposals for improvement. Some areas produce good reports, but others fail to consider evidence with any rigour. Targets for improvement are neither set centrally nor are staff teams required to set their own. Reports are submitted to the academic board through programme managers. Both managers and the board have the power to reject unsatisfactory reports, but this rarely happens. Course team leaders and teaching staff say that the system has been responsible for few identifiable improvements and that those who do produce rigorous reports are losing confidence in the process.

50 The academic board is the main co-ordinating body for the quality assurance system. Until recently, it was generally regarded as ineffective

and the system therefore lacked cohesion. The board now works better and pays much more attention to academic matters. However, its minutes are too terse to record consideration of course reports in sufficient detail to inform staff about the reception given to their submissions. A new subcommittee has been introduced to enable course reports to be analysed more thoroughly and appropriate feedback given to staff.

51 Assessment practices vary widely and there is no effective internal verification system which is used across the college. There is little evidence of staff sharing good assessment practice. The college has recognised these deficiencies by appointing a member of staff to deal with them. However, until work on this is completed, students risk being disadvantaged by inconsistent assessment practice.

52 The college developed a staff-appraisal system for teaching staff and took the first steps towards gaining the Investor in People award in 1993. Staff were trained, and some appraisals were carried out before these initiatives were abandoned in 1994 during staff restructuring. There are plans to introduce a new appraisal scheme to include all staff during the spring of 1997. The staff-development budget has increased from 1 per cent to 1.5 per cent of staff costs this year. The staff-development officer has a half-time commitment to this work. There are few requests for course team development from course leaders and programme managers; most requests come from individuals. The lack of an appraisal scheme prevents these requests from being tempered by a formal process which matches them to the needs of the college. New staff, and those recently appointed as instructors, are provided with an induction course and support which may include observations of teaching.

53 The college charter is clearly worded and well presented. It outlines students' entitlements and obligations. A complaints procedure is included which directs concerns appropriately to student services. The charter is undergoing routine review. The college produced its first self-assessment report for the inspection. It was drawn up by senior managers in consultation with other staff, rather than resulting from the college's planning and review procedures. Its layout follows that of Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*, with sections differing considerably in the extent to which they highlight strengths and, particularly, weaknesses. There is analysis, but much is purely descriptive. The report took a more favourable view than inspectors of some areas of the college's work, especially the quality of teaching and students' achievements. The report contains a useful action plan which nominates staff to carry out the work and, in most areas, indicates a timescale for completion.

RESOURCES

Staffing

54 The college reorganised its staffing during 1994-95. The number of teaching posts was reduced by 12 and eight full-time practical instructor

posts were established. This changed the emphasis of staffing and allowed specialists to be employed in new growth areas such as equine studies, golf studies and small animal care. There are 36 full-time and 3.3 full-time equivalent part-time academic staff. There are 28 full-time equivalent teaching support staff and 50 full-time equivalent staff responsible for central administration, the estate and hostels. A third of the full-time academic staff have been employed at the college for more than 15 years; 71 per cent are male and 29 per cent female. The remission of time to teaching staff for timetabling, staff development, and course team leadership amounts to approximately five full-time equivalent staff. Payroll costs are 58 per cent of total college income. Staff are only deployed for 90 per cent of their contracted hours. They generally work within specialist subject teams, and there is little cross-programme teaching to absorb surplus hours.

55 Most teaching and senior support staff have appropriate technical qualifications and industrial experience. The majority of full-time teaching staff have teaching qualifications, but about one-third of part-time staff have not. Most staff, for whom it is appropriate, now have training and development lead body qualifications. More staff need to qualify for the award for internal verification work. One person is qualified to accredit prior learning. There are 12 technicians in the 10 specialist areas. Technical support in some respects is inadequate, particularly for the maintenance of commercial machines and support for the curriculum in the larger sections. Instructors carry out practical teaching duties. They speak highly of the support and help received from the course team leaders to whom they report.

Equipment/learning resources

56 The library is a major strength of the college. It is open until 20.00 hours during weekdays, on Saturday mornings in term-time and for 35 hours each week during vacations. It is well managed by enthusiastic staff. The help they provide is much appreciated by students. Stock control and cataloguing are computerised and efficient. The book collection of approximately 19,000 volumes is comprehensive and three-quarters of the books were published since 1980. Class sets of books are available for the more commonly used texts. Over 200 journals are taken regularly; they are attractively displayed. The collection of nearly 650 videos and over 200 slide sets is well used. An analysis of library loans shows a substantial increase in the last two years. The collection of 18 compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases is used regularly by students. An Internet link, which was introduced in 1995, has proved valuable for students' project work, and the college's own entry has already led to the recruitment of one student. There are 84 study places and space for silent study, seminars and learning support. The head of learning resources is professionally qualified and she manages one qualified librarian and two library assistants. Audio-visual resources are well managed through an

external maintenance contract. A learning resource group, with representation from all the main subject areas, has been set up to consider purchases.

57 The college has a network incorporating 34 modern computers which are available for students' use. The machines are situated in two attractive computer training rooms. When not timetabled for class use, these facilities are available for use by students at their convenience. In addition, the learning support room has nine computers available for students to use as and when they choose. Although the ratio of full-time equivalent students to computers is about 17:1, there is no overcrowding and students report that they have ready access to information technology. 'Learning to learn' software for study skills is widely used by foundation students. All staff have access to computers, most of which are linked to the college network.

58 There is a narrow range of modern equipment for greenkeeping work. The animal care unit keeps small domestic animals such as guinea pigs, gerbils and rabbits, as well as reptiles, amphibians and birds. There are too few animals for the number of students in some classes to allow them to be handled by students without causing them undue stress. There are few dog-grooming and kennelling facilities and no cattery. The college has an extensive stock of up-to-date and well-maintained arboricultural equipment. The stables are well equipped and there are 30 horses at livery. An attractive equestrian cross-country course is used for training and public events.

59 Landscape students have access to a wide range of equipment and machinery. Two design studios are equipped with 30 parallel-motion drawing boards. The maintenance and repair of large machines, particularly tractors, is not always fast enough to ensure that there are sufficient available for the frequent off-site work undertaken by students. The two floristry rooms are well equipped and have easy access to cold stores, but there is no display area suitable for the florists' work. The plant centre is available for students to gain practical experience but it is not well maintained and it sets a poor example. Plant and tree labelling in the grounds is incomplete and this hinders students in learning the names of specimens.

Accommodation

60 The college has a 280 hectare site, three miles north-west of the town of Guildford. The estate has a mixture of nineteenth-century buildings, purpose-built teaching accommodation, ornamental grounds, fields and mature woodland. Merrist Wood House, a listed building, is the administrative centre of the college. There are glasshouses and workshops in a commercial horticultural nursery unit; dedicated arboriculture, countryside skills, machinery and construction workshops; and residential accommodation for staff and students. Other facilities include a large lecture theatre, two computer suites, floristry rooms, science laboratories,

a library with study areas, a range of farm buildings and demonstration sites, a stable yard, an equestrian cross-country course and a small animal unit. A wildlife rehabilitation unit was opened in September 1996. Sports facilities include pitches for football, rugby, hockey and cricket, squash courts, a hard court for tennis, netball and basketball, a multi-gym, a clay-pigeon shooting range, and a golf driving range. An 18-hole golf course and a golf club will open in 1997 on land that was once used for farming.

61 The Westnedge Centre was opened in 1993. It is a suite of six purpose-built lecture rooms which are well furnished and equipped and have seating for classes of up to 40 students. The Harris Centre, built in the 1970s, houses the library, the resources centre, student services, a lecture theatre seating 90, and specialist areas such as science laboratories, computer rooms and floristry. The lecture theatre has been improved but it still suffers from extremes of temperature. The other rooms in the centre are well appointed and comfortable. Storage is limited in many areas but stores are not used efficiently. The newly-created courtyard social centre is well used, and is centrally located, close to the major teaching areas. Light refreshments are provided throughout the day until 22.00 hours. A nearby room has snooker and pool tables and there is a separate television room for resident students.

62 Internal and external signs are not designed to a common style and some are unhelpful. A number of room titles are now incorrect. Room timetabling is carried out using a computer program which includes variables such as class size and any specific facilities required. Room usage was low at 66 per cent for the main 25 lecture rooms in 1995-96; a 1 per cent improvement is predicted for 1996-97. Six of the huts used as classrooms are at the end of their useful life. Classrooms are kept clean and tidy but wall displays are little used throughout the college. There has been a regular programme of refurbishment and adaptation of the buildings to improve facilities. Measures are taken to conserve energy.

63 Student residential accommodation consists of 113 single-occupancy study bedrooms in three separate hostel blocks. They house about 15 per cent of the college's students. Priority is given to the younger students. The hostels offer only basic accommodation, they are regularly redecorated and are fit for their purpose. There are no self-catering facilities for residential students. There is secure entry to the residential facilities and a fire alarm system linked to the warden's accommodation.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

64 The strengths of the college are:

- experienced and supportive governors
- recruitment which has significantly exceeded targets for the last three years
- its contacts with industry and close links with schools and the local community
- the arboriculture courses
- the well-equipped and well-managed library
- the diversification into leisure programmes
- the effective use made of the college estate to support the curriculum
- the student services teams
- the quality of management information data.

65 If it is to improve its provision further, the college should address the following:

- curriculum management
- the lack of coherent progression routes in some subjects
- poor co-ordination between teachers and instructors
- poor teaching in some areas
- poor examination results or retention rates in several areas
- aspects of the provision in small animal care
- the uneven distribution of responsibilities among managers
- underdeveloped quality assurance systems
- the lack of staff appraisal
- internal communications.

FIGURES

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

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

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

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

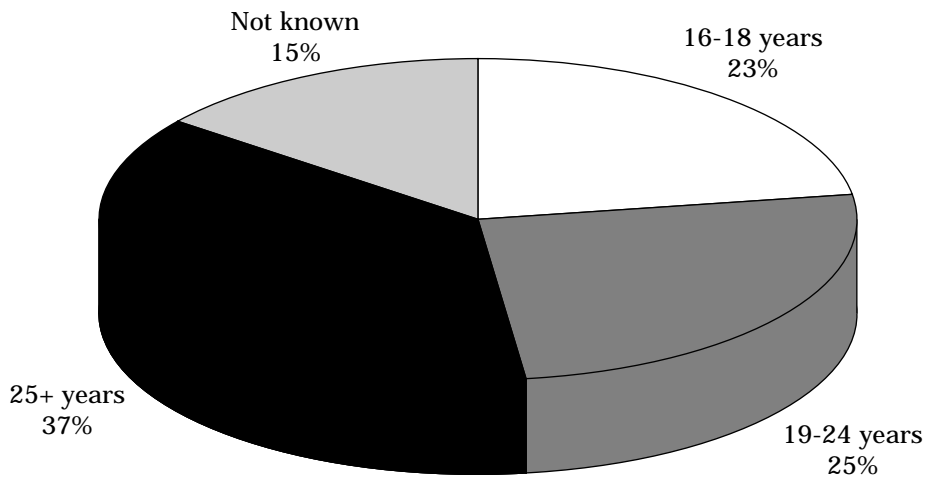
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

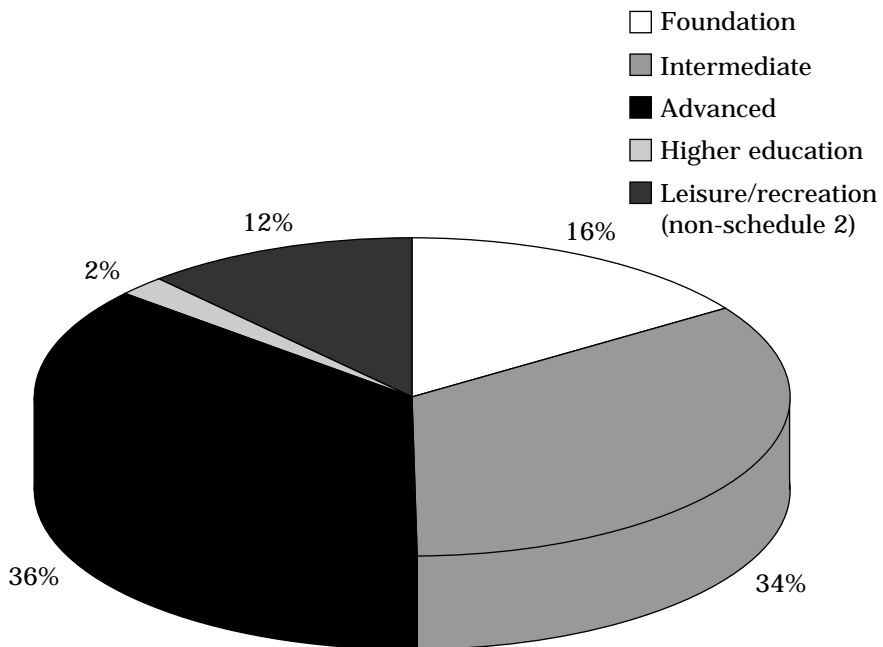
Merrist Wood College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,053

Figure 2

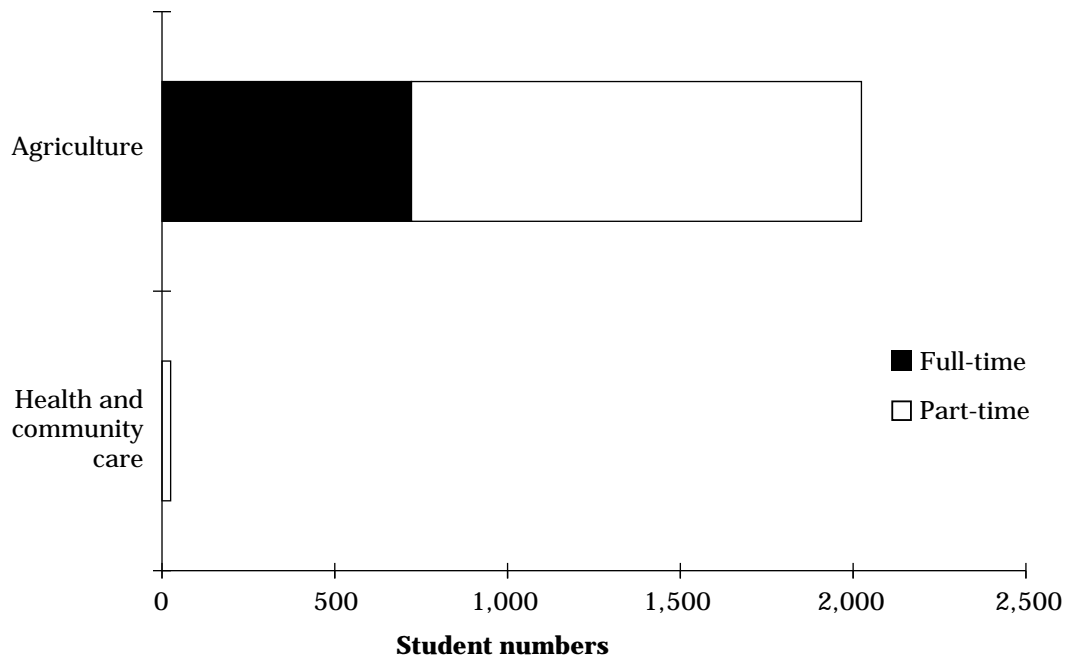
Merrist Wood College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,053

Figure 3

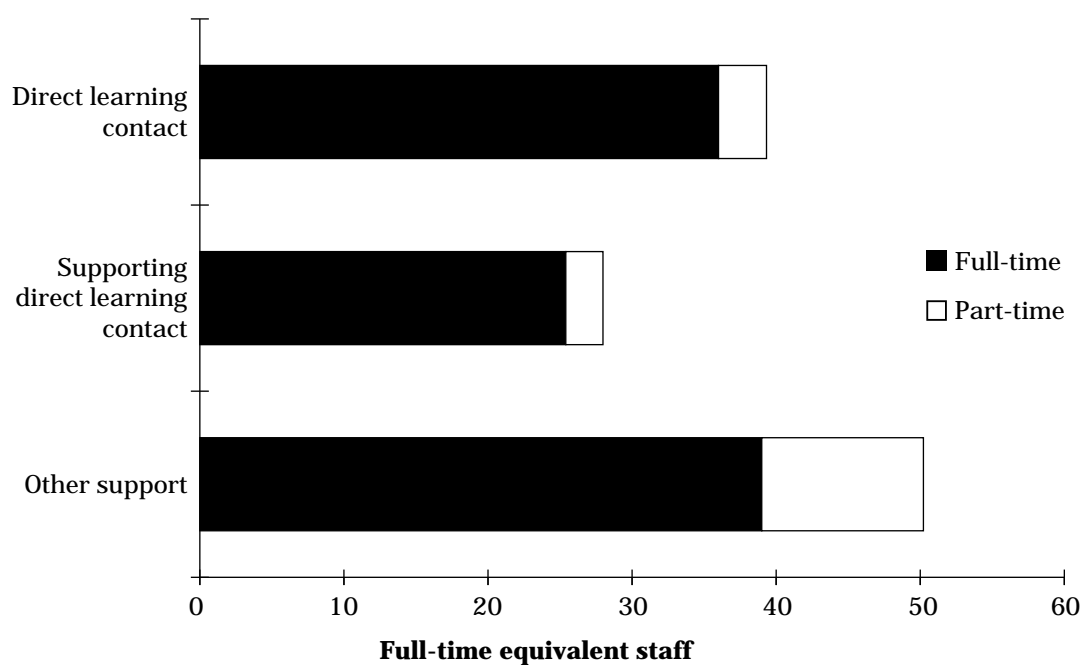
Merrist Wood College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,053

Figure 4

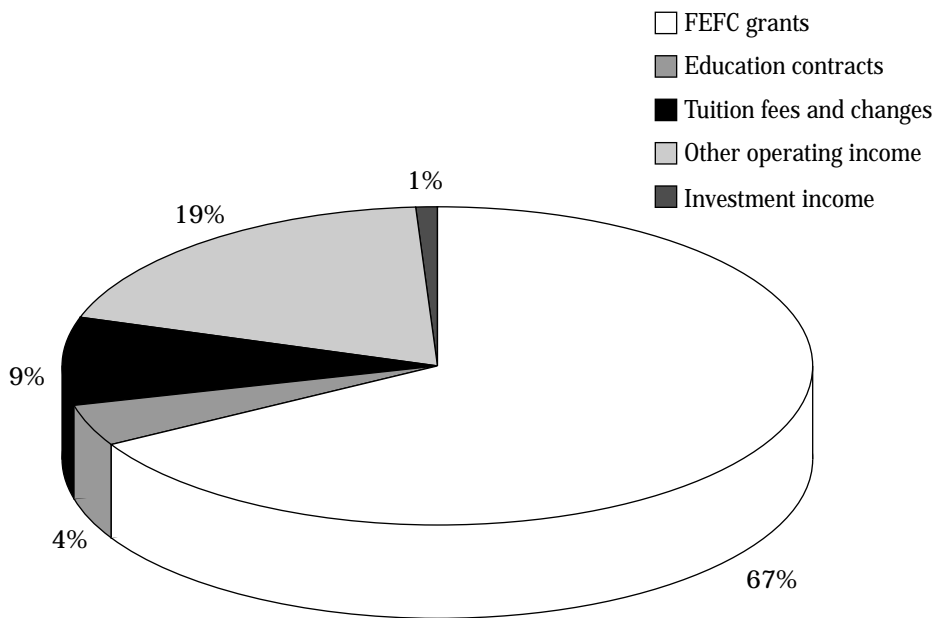
Merrist Wood College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 118

Figure 5

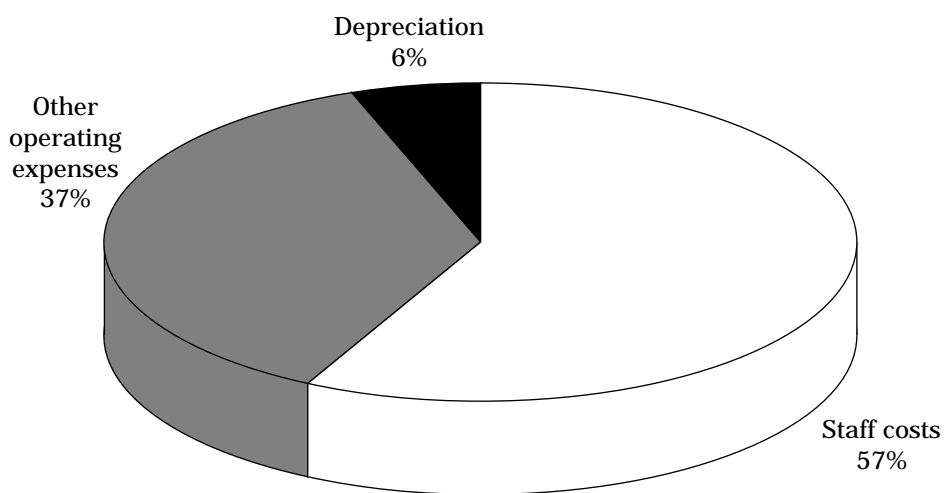
Merrist Wood College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £4,319,000

Figure 6

Merrist Wood College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £4,363,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
February 1997