

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education

May 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

**THE FURTHER EDUCATION
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.

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

CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	2
Responsiveness and range of provision	7
Governance and management	18
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	26
Teaching and the promotion of learning	35
Students' achievements	47
Quality assurance	56
Resources	65
Conclusions and issues	76
Figures	

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-95

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 57/96

MID-CHESHIRE COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected May 1995-February 1996

Summary

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education in Northwich is a friendly and supportive institution, with a long history of providing vocational further education in the Vale Royal area of Cheshire. In September 1994 the college failed to achieve its initial expected growth in student enrolments. The anticipated loss of funding threatened the institution. With the support of governors and the FEFC, the college management team have taken vigorous action to redeem the situation. A new organisation and management team are in place and the college has moved a long way in a very short time. It has improved its strategic planning, strengthened its marketing activities and developed more effective links with employers. It now provides more opportunities for its students and its local community. Staff are responding well to the changes. Students value the support they receive and take pride in their college. Standards of achievement vary. Students generally perform better in vocational areas than at GCSE and GCE A level. The examination results of 16 to 18 year olds are below average for the sector. Some areas of the college have recently been refurbished to a high standard. More needs to be done if the college is to sustain its new-found drive and success. To ensure improvements are sustained, the college should continue to strengthen its links with employers and to attract adults who would not traditionally return to study. It should also remove some inconsistencies in the tutorial system and develop further its quality assurance procedures.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	3	Health and community care	2
Construction	3	Art and design	2
Engineering	2	Humanities	3
Business	3	Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and adult basic education	3
Leisure, tourism and catering	1		

INTRODUCTION

1 Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education was inspected in three stages between May 1995 and February 1996. A team of 22 inspectors was involved for 66 days in assessing the enrolment and induction of students, specialist programme areas and aspects of cross-college provision. Inspectors visited 181 teaching sessions, examined students' work, and studied a wide range of college policies and documents, including the college's self-assessment report. They attended meetings of the governing body as observers and met with governors, students, their parents, employers, college managers and staff, and other people who have a close interest in the college. They also sought the views of Cheshire County Council, North and Mid-Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), and South and East Cheshire TEC.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education in Northwich, heart of Britain's salt and soda industry, intends to celebrate its centenary in 1997. Founded as The Verdin Technical School, the college now occupies three main sites, two of which are in Northwich, and the other seven miles away at Winsford. The largest site, in a residential part of Hartford, is shared with two primary schools, two secondary schools and two special schools. A range of 1950s' flat-roofed buildings houses most of the specialist teaching and administration functions of the college, together with student services and the learning resources unit. The second site in Northwich is that of the original technical college built in 1896. It accommodates the general art and design courses. The Verdin centre at Winsford, located in a school building dating from 1894, provides mainly part-time courses for adult students. Vocational and recreational provision is delivered from four other adult and community centres.

3 The college is situated in the semi-rural Vale Royal part of Cheshire which has a population of 114,600. Of these, 47,100 are employed. In October 1995, the unemployment rate was 6.5 per cent compared with an average of 7.1 per cent for Cheshire and 9.3 per cent for the North West region. Several Vale Royal electoral wards have significantly higher rates, particularly for long-term unemployment. Around 66 per cent of employees work within the growing service sector. Employment in manufacturing and production is declining. Approximately 92 per cent of local companies employ fewer than 25 employees and 60 per cent have less than six employees. Minority ethnic groups account for less than 1 per cent of the local population.

4 The college's mission, set out in its strategic plan 1994-97 and revised in July 1995, states that the college will: 'provide the best education and training available for all sections of the community'.

It intends to achieve this by:

- correctly identifying and meeting individual and corporate needs
- assuring equality of access and opportunity
- developing and providing education and training which is distinctive, superior and exciting
- recognising that success is dependent upon customer satisfaction.

5 In Vale Royal there are five secondary schools catering for 11 to 16 year olds, seven 11 to 18 schools, one sixth form college and seven special schools. Seventy-two per cent of last year's year 11 pupils either remained in school or progressed to further education. The college recruits full-time students from some 55 schools throughout Cheshire. It competes with a nearby sixth form college, and with another two sixth form colleges and five further education colleges within a 20 mile radius. Its higher level art and design courses recruit nationally.

6 The college offers all the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas except agriculture. Courses range from foundation level to higher level and include higher national diplomas. Around 84 per cent of students are enrolled on programmes leading to nationally-recognised academic or vocational qualifications. Seventy-four per cent are enrolled on vocational courses and 10 per cent on General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) courses. Sixteen per cent of students follow recreation and leisure courses, some of which are supported by Cheshire County Council. The provision includes courses which lead to recognised awards. The college has a high proportion of full-time art and design students. At the time of inspection, the college had 10,325 enrolments. Of these, 1,629 were full time and 8,696 part time. Sixty-nine per cent of students were over the age of 19. Enrolments by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. The college employs 281 full-time equivalent staff, 160 of whom are teaching staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The lower than expected full-time enrolments in 1994-95 prompted the college to strengthen its links with local businesses and groups within the community. Governors, managers and staff have worked hard to identify accurately the local needs for education and training and have responded quickly to those needs. Courses and support facilities for adult students are now provided in more convenient ways, particularly for those students who would not previously have considered studying at the college. As a consequence, there has been a significant increase in enrolments for 1995-96. Students can now take short five-week courses to sample provision before they decide whether to make a greater commitment to study. There are also new year-long courses for those who wish to undertake specialist study. The recently-introduced 'Saturday college'

offers a variety of courses for people of all ages and these are recruiting well. Practical measures to attract students include subsidised transport; a hardship fund for part-time students; creche facilities on all main sites; and a concessionary fees policy.

8 The college offers a broad range of vocational courses for full-time and part-time students. In most areas of work, students can progress from one level to the next within the college, although there are still some gaps in provision. The college has decided to maintain its academic provision. It offers 18 GCE A level and 10 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. To encourage wider participation, the college allows adults returning to study to follow a pattern of attendance which suits their specific needs and commitments. The college's 'access to further education' programme is provided free. Newly-established learning and educational technology centres are open between 08.30 and 21.00 hours each day, providing good opportunities for students, including adult students, to make use of the facilities on offer.

9 The four community-based outreach centres provide a good range of vocational and recreational courses. However, the college has no strategy for extending the number of centres and is still considering how more adults can be recruited and supported. In many respects, the college's procedures and its methods of curriculum delivery are not sufficiently flexible to attract adult students. Students can enrol at three points during the college year but, in most curriculum areas, there is not the opportunity to join courses other than at the start of the year. There are few opportunities for students to follow courses away from the college, studying on their own. Business studies is operating and developing procedures for accrediting students' prior learning; in the majority of areas, such accreditation is not available. Access to higher education courses have low enrolments and, overall, the number of adult returners remains low.

10 The successful introduction of higher national diplomas has expanded higher level work in the faculties of engineering and art and design, and there are business courses leading to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels 4 and 5 in management. The college has also introduced franchising arrangements with five external organisations including a TEC. There are awards in first aid, sports coaching, customer service, catering and care. Construction, engineering and science have been slow to develop General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and there is a lack of GNVQs at foundation level to enable younger full-time students to progress to other levels.

11 The college markets its courses effectively. Faculties are considering new markets to support the college's mission and there are arrangements to ensure that course teams are actively involved in this process. The college's market intelligence is comprehensive. It informs strategic planning at institution and faculty level. Labour market information is obtained from a range of agencies including the TECs and the chamber of

commerce. College staff hold meetings with community groups or attend community events to determine how such groups can be helped. Most staff are aware of current issues affecting further education and of the government's national targets for education and training.

12 The college works closely with the two TECs and is highly regarded by both. They report that the college performs well in meeting the needs of the clients they fund. The college relates mainly to the North and Mid-Cheshire TEC because it is located in that TEC's travel-to-work area. However, it also works closely with the South and East Cheshire TEC because of the college's geographical position and young people with training credits from this TEC, including some on modern apprenticeships, choose the college rather than other providers. The college has not been as successful as it might have been in developing and submitting new project proposals to the TECs, although it is improving this aspect of its performance. In developing other employment links, the college plays a prominent and valued role in the local education and business partnership. It is also a major partner in the recently-established Business Link.

13 In recent years, links with employers have improved substantially, as have links with the chamber of commerce, which leases accommodation from the college. Employers say the college's work experience programme is well managed and that employers and students are well briefed about placement arrangements and the evaluation of the college's and students' performance. Catering, and health and community care are leading the way in delivering learning, assessment and accreditation services on employers' premises. However, there is little consultancy to industry and the college's research activities in relation to industry are weak. Employers contribute little to curriculum development and evaluation. A newly-appointed NVQ/GNVQ co-ordinator is charged with improving links with industry. The college's services to business unit, Mid-Cheshire Training Services, has a modest programme of individually-tailored courses and seminars. It generates a small income. The college is at an early stage of identifying the training needs of small to medium-size enterprises. The short course programmes of the college faculties are underdeveloped.

14 Local high schools and special schools value their strong links with the college. There are some long-standing curriculum links. At present, for example, these include a local 11 to 18 high school on the GNVQ in manufacturing, and the provision of GCE A level tuition in an outreach centre for sixth form students. The principal or his representative attends the area secondary heads' meeting and each faculty has someone with responsibility for school links. The college also has a schools liaison officer.

15 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are encouraged to attend college. A bridging programme organised with special schools helps to smooth pupils' transition to the college. Students' needs are diagnosed before their studies begin. Some teachers of mainstream classes have not been fully briefed in individual students' needs.

16 The college's entitlement programme of extra-curricular activities suffers from several weaknesses. It is made up from elements of existing college GNVQ courses and does not work for full-time students not attending GNVQ courses. There are too many clashes between topics which make it impossible for some students to attend the programmes they request. It is college policy that all students develop an awareness of European issues, but the European dimension is not systematically incorporated into study programmes. It is possible for students to join language classes through the entitlement programme, but they rarely do so. European links include exchanges with the Burgundy region of France for business studies and catering students and arrangements under which engineering students visit German partners to learn about international technical standards as part of a study module on health and safety. In the higher national diploma in art there is a compulsory European study unit.

17 The college has sound arrangements for ensuring equal opportunities. A comprehensive policy is outlined in handbooks for students and staff. Equal opportunities issues are included in the students' induction programme. A subcommittee of the academic board, which includes two student members, monitors and manages college-wide developments. The committee's action plan highlights areas for improvement; for example, the imbalance between male and female students on particular courses. The faculties of business, leisure and tourism, and social and community care check materials for gender bias. However, this is not a college requirement and other faculties do not do so.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

18 Governors are enthusiastic about their role. They have worked hard to overcome the college's recent difficulties. There are 20 members of the board including 11 from industry and commerce, a member nominated by North and Mid-Cheshire TEC, two community members, a co-opted member with curriculum expertise, one student member, two staff members and the principal. A local authority representative recently resigned and the board is seeking a replacement. Six governors are women. The business governors' expertise in finance, law, personnel and property development has benefited the college. The search committee of the board tries to ensure that the board has an appropriate range of skills at its disposal and that the membership of the board represents the interests of the college and the community. Members keep up to date with the demands of the sector and agree responses to Council Circulars. They have replied to the Nolan committee, have agreed a code of conduct and have registered their business interests. Members participate regularly in college activities.

19 The board has committees for audit, finance and general purposes, marketing, personnel, premises, remuneration and search. All committees have agreed terms of reference and board members belong to at least one

of these committees. Meetings are regular and well attended. There is keen analysis of the executive recommendations and reports which keep governors informed about the college's performance. The board makes some use of the FEFC's performance indicators. The duties of the clerk to the corporation are undertaken by the college's director of support services who has previous local authority experience of such work.

20 The college has an effective strategic planning cycle. The strategic plan contains clear targets and measures to assess progress. It was revised in July 1995 and a review of progress took place in December 1995. The current plan is fully costed. Its operating objectives are well documented and lines of accountability are clear. All faculties and support functions of the college have produced detailed development plans to support the college's strategic goals. They vary in the quality of their content and presentation. Some have over-ambitious timescales for achieving objectives and some are too bulky to be useful working documents.

21 The college is well led; a new management structure was introduced in August 1995 after extensive consultation between the principal, governors and the staff. Day-to-day executive functions are carried out efficiently by a much-reduced management team. The management team is led by the principal and his two directors. The director of studies is the line manager for the six heads of faculty, heads of student services and learning resources and two project development managers. The director of support services has responsibility for the managers for human resources, operational services, marketing and external relations and business development. The finance and information services manager reports directly to the principal. The college management board, which develops college strategy and policy, comprises the principal, his two directors, and the managers of curriculum and support services. It ensures progress on operational matters. The academic board advises the principal on standards, planning, co-ordination, development and oversight of the college's academic work. To improve individual and collective performance, the college is introducing management training for all managers through a programme of competence-based assessment. Management roles are not yet sufficiently developed. There is heavy reliance on the principal and key managers.

22 Meetings at the various levels of college organisation are generally well organised and have clear agendas. Minutes vary in their detail and the quality of presentation. Faculties increasingly share good practice and disseminate information. Training faculty heads and deputies to use management information effectively has been identified as a need within the management development plan but it has not yet started. The new faculty administrators and secretaries require further training and development.

23 The college has clear policies for health and safety and for equal opportunities, and these are implemented effectively. Other policies,

including the policy on tutorial support, are in draft form. Some of the college's policies lack a clear rationale and terms of reference. Staff responsibilities for renewing and updating policies are uncertain.

24 The college's computerised management information system is networked to all faculties and across all college sites. Responsibility for student information now rests with faculties. Staff in the faculties sometimes regard entering data and analysing it as chores rather than important tasks which help to inform management decisions. Faculties have only recently acquired the necessary computer equipment to access the management information system. The college recognises the need to refine and improve the system, particularly the collection, analysis and effective use of management information. Records of destinations for full-time students are maintained and stored separately by course leaders and faculty heads.

25 Following an action plan agreed with the FEFC, the college is recovering from its 1994-95 anticipated financial shortfall. Its average level of funding in 1994-95 was £16.54 per unit. For 1995-96 it is £16.60. The median for general further education colleges is £17.84. College restructuring has improved efficiency and further improvements are planned. There is still a heavy reliance on FEFC recurrent funding. Budget allocation to cost centres is generally well organised. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

26 The head of student services is a member of the management board which is a measure of the importance the college attaches to students' welfare. A core of central staff work closely with faculty staff to ensure that students are provided with effective support. Students' views are sought and valued. All courses nominate representatives to the student council whose members, in turn, attend other college committees and working groups. This level of representation enables students to have a real say in decisions on matters which affect them. Actions taken by the college as a result of consulting students include improved information technology facilities and better catering arrangements. The siting of student services at the back of the main reception area at the Hartford campus occasionally causes problems of access and limits the confidentiality which can be accorded to discussions between staff and students. Students complain that the students' entrance to the main building takes them away from the visitors' entrance where student services are to be found.

27 A well-developed schools liaison programme helps young people and parents to find out about the college. A successful 'taster' programme allows pupils in their last year at school to sample the courses on offer. The central admissions system ensures that the majority of applications

for full-time courses are efficiently processed. Standards built into the system include a quick response to enquiries and the guarantee of an interview within a set time. Occasionally application forms are lost, and some of the procedures operated during the main enrolment period in September are cumbersome.

28 The college publicises its provision effectively using both local radio and the press. A fortnightly column in the local newspaper keeps the college in the public eye. Successful initiatives aimed at recruiting adult returners include the mounting of information stalls in the local shopping centre. Information leaflets on specific subjects vary in quality and in their usefulness to potential customers. Some 'fliers' delivered to households are uninspiring. Staff dealing with initial enquiries do not always have sufficient information or training to deal with queries. However, a professional careers officer is available to provide guidance to students before they enrol. The college is still developing its guidance services for part-time and adult applicants, and has secured funding for this from Europe. All full-time course applications are screened to try to identify applicants who are unsure about their choice of course. Where students are interviewed within faculties, the quality of guidance varies. Staff require further training to assist them in moving from an information giving role to a guidance role.

29 A comprehensive induction programme is organised for all full-time students. It involves well-structured activities to help students familiarise themselves with the college and their course. Students said that the induction helped them to get to know each other and their teachers in an interesting and enjoyable manner. It also helped them to decide if they were on the right course and, if not, how to set about arranging a transfer. Central student services staff co-operate effectively with faculty staff to deliver the induction programme. Training is arranged to ensure that staff are familiar with the programme. Students' views on induction have been taken into account in planning next year's programme. Some students found the general college induction too long, particularly those involved in practical subjects who wanted teaching to begin earlier. A modified induction programme is delivered for part-time students but it is not operated consistently across the college.

30 The majority of students speak highly of the support they receive during their time at college. All full-time students have a personal tutor. An hour each week is allocated to tutorials. The tutorial framework is the result of a development project. The framework includes sample tutorial programmes for one and two-year courses, examples of good practice and materials to assist tutors. It is sufficiently flexible to allow tutors to meet the needs of differing student groups. In many areas of the college the system is working well. For example, construction tutorials include topics on Europe, work experience and sponsorship, and there is good tutorial support for the newer courses targeted at adults. In other areas, tutorials

lack clear objectives. For example, some art and design sessions are poorly structured and business studies tutorials are of inconsistent quality. The draft policy on tutorial support fails to identify standards and monitoring procedures. Ways of extending formal tutorial support to part-time students are being considered. Some training events aimed at developing staff tutorial skills have not been well attended.

31 The monitoring of students' progress is a feature of most tutorials. In engineering, students, together with their tutor, set their own learning objectives, and their progress is formally recorded. The work of catering and leisure students is monitored weekly; students have diaries and action plans to record progress on units of work. Many students have individual as well as group tutorials; some complete national records of achievement. Staff training in tutorial skills is focused on spreading the good practice which exists in the college.

32 The college employs appropriately-trained and experienced staff to give careers guidance, personal counselling and advice on welfare issues. Effective links with the local careers service, at faculty as well as college level, enable young people and adults to attend individual careers interviews and group sessions. A careers pack is included in resources used for tutorials. Staff training, for example in basic counselling skills, is designed to help tutors become more effective in their work with students. Help with higher education applications is available from teachers, course tutors and central student services; higher education fairs are organised to provide students with information on particular institutions. Careers support is extensive, nevertheless many students fail to receive enough help in planning for their future when they leave college.

33 During the period of the inspection, the college made significant progress in developing an effective learning support service, which offers students additional help in developing their literacy, numeracy and study skills. Methods of identifying students who could benefit from this service are being reviewed following an evaluation of last September's screening process.

34 Students with children are provided with good creche facilities on three sites. However, the closure of the creches at lunchtimes creates difficulty for some parents.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

35 The standard of teaching is generally high though practice varies across the college. Of the 181 sessions inspected, 54 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in 10 per cent of sessions. The following table shows the grades awarded during the inspection.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		5	8	6	1	1	21
GCSE		5	6	4	1	0	16
GNVQ		6	14	15	5	1	41
NVQ		5	6	14	0	0	25
Other vocational		10	24	20	8	1	63
Other		6	3	6	0	0	15
Total		37	61	65	15	3	181

36 In most areas of the college, the procedures for monitoring and following up students' absences operate effectively. The average number of students in the sessions inspected was 11.5, which is 82 per cent of the number registered. This is better than the national average for general further education colleges. The best rate of attendance (91 per cent) was on engineering courses; the lowest (76 per cent) was on tourism, leisure and catering courses.

37 Teachers have productive working relationships with their students. They organise activities using schemes of work and lesson plans and regularly check students' progress and understanding as lessons develop. Teachers often share lesson plans with their students. In the most successful lessons teachers give clear introductions, establish links with the work which students have already done and conclude by summarising what has been achieved. Methods of teaching and learning are suitably varied and most teachers provide students with regular feedback on their performance. Opportunities for teachers to share best practice across subjects and courses are not fully exploited.

38 In art and design, lesson plans are derived from comprehensive schemes of work. The study of drawing and painting skills through life studies is available to all students. The best plans for GNVQ lessons have clear performance criteria. Teachers promote problem-solving skills and ensure that students undertake mandatory units. Assignment briefs, particularly in life studies, set high standards for students, but the assessment criteria and their relevance to the course are often unclear. Too many students do not know what they have to achieve and they have limited understanding of the purpose of core skills.

39 Teachers in business studies are well organised. They use well-structured schemes of work which contain schedules of the tasks to be undertaken and the resources to be used. Assignment briefs are clear and help students to manage their own learning in 'real work' situations. Students undertaking an assignment at a local brewery effectively shared planning activities, visited the company, researched the development of a new product and subsequently delivered presentations of their findings to

the rest of the group. The office for the administration NVQ course fails to simulate a real working environment. On some courses, particularly GNVQ courses, students create action plans which enable them to establish their own learning objectives and monitor their own performance. In the less effective sessions, students could not see how the work related to course objectives. Teachers often failed to question students' understanding of the work which had been covered.

40 Health and community care lessons are well planned and teaching is sound. Teachers set suitable assignments. Students' interest is maintained by skilful questioning, the use of visual aids and regular checks on their understanding. In the best sessions, tutors draw on their own professional experience to help students to link theory and practice and to solve practical problems. In some of the weaker sessions teachers failed to take account of the needs and abilities of all the students. In one session the tutor coped well with a group of adults who had varied abilities by drawing on their experiences and providing them with encouragement and support, whereas adults in another group were simply expected to sit and listen like school pupils. In one class, students who raised legitimate concerns about assignment deadlines were ignored.

41 In construction, the best practical projects which students undertake are full scale and provide realistic site conditions. This helps to compensate for the lack of work experience available from construction employers. Students also gain from the wide industrial knowledge and experience which teachers possess. Detailed records are kept of students' achievements, particularly in NVQ sessions where assessment is comprehensive and thorough. Classes contain students with a wide range of ability. Adult students join many of the classes. The quality of teaching varies substantially. In too many NVQ sessions, teachers dominated proceedings setting an inappropriate pace for effective learning and preventing students from thinking for themselves. In some of the weakest sessions there was far too much dictation or copying of notes; students became bored and lost interest. In one laborious session, when students had completed their notes, the teacher commented that they did not need to know what they had written. Teachers often overburdened technician students by giving out several assignments at a time. When marking assignments, teachers made too little comment on students' performance.

42 In engineering, many lessons are well organised, especially those involving workshop practical activities, where students are industrious and enthusiastic. Teachers regularly assess students' performance, including their progress in developing core skills, and provide them with feedback. Assignment and project briefs provide good guidance on the tasks to be achieved. In one session, good use was made of colour slides to emphasise key learning points and students remained attentive and interested. In another session, involving two different groups of students, the teacher's presentation to one group disturbed the work of the other. Attempts by teachers to offer explanations during workshop classes are

often made difficult by the noise of machinery. The generally poor presentational skills of electrical engineering staff cause students to spend too much time on unnecessary note taking. Because of this, they often lose interest in their work.

43 Teaching is effective in humanities subjects, with the exception of English. Teachers work in teams, varying their teaching methods to make lessons more interesting. In one session, students moved about the room, questioning different partners to explore issues they had identified. Many geography and history lessons were lively affairs and the students were interested and conscientious. In English, there was too much reliance on note taking. In many lessons, teachers failed to draw together the ideas which had been introduced. The range of teaching methods was narrow and there was little attempt to cater for students' widely differing needs and abilities. Assessment in the humanities is generally well organised. Teachers give clear guidance and provide students with thorough feedback on their performance.

44 Courses in leisure, tourism and catering are well documented. Teaching methods are suitably varied. Learning is relevant and rigorous, and supported by good resources. In an effective lesson on leisure travel services, the teacher reviewed the previous lesson and thoroughly prepared the students for the work they were to undertake. Operating in small groups, students used text and video to amass information on their topics. They worked well without direct supervision. At the end of the session each group reported to the class and the teacher provided an overview of the conclusions which had been reached. Students learn in realistic work environments. Catering students are able to work in the college's catering service.

45 Lessons in science, computing and mathematics vary markedly in their effectiveness. In the better lessons, teachers involve students in appropriate and carefully-planned activities. Students work well together, and are encouraged to participate in question and answer sessions. Too many lessons are tired and poorly organised. During one lesson, students were unable to read the extensive notes written on a whiteboard because of the poor lighting. In one unsatisfactory computing lesson, the software would not run on the network and students were unable to complete their work. Some science students were disadvantaged because low enrolments had resulted in the creation of mixed classes and teachers were finding it difficult to cope simultaneously with students studying subjects at different levels. For example, first and second-year GCE A level students were being taught alongside national diploma and certificate students. The quality of some of the lessons was poor and students' learning suffered.

46 Teachers and helpers work hard to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, though the effectiveness of work in outreach centres is hampered by the lack of support staff. Students generally feel valued and they have the opportunity to progress to mainstream courses.

All full-time students have some vocational studies in their timetables, for example, they join various NVQ foundation courses, and their studies are linked with experience of real work to improve their ability to mix with others inside and outside the college. Students have individual timetables tailored to suit their needs. In basic education, lessons and assessments are insufficiently structured and there is little focus on the development of core skills. Students in separate classes for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive little information on their progress and achievement.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

47 Generally, more students achieve their primary learning goals on vocational courses than in academic subjects. Most students are enthusiastic, work hard and value their college experience, though late arrivals at classes and erratic attendance sometimes adversely affect individual achievement. School leavers quickly develop study skills and take greater responsibility for organising their own learning, especially those taking GNVQ and NVQ courses. Adult students are eager to progress to higher levels and many gain their intended qualifications. Most vocational students gain appropriate knowledge and understanding of the theory needed to complete practical tasks successfully. They develop relevant practical skills within their course and some have the opportunity to practise these skills while at work or through organised work experience. The standard of assignments is generally appropriate to the level of study.

48 The core skills of communications, numeracy and information technology are not developed consistently though some students have good opportunities to develop their information technology skills. On some courses group work is used effectively to develop communication and interpersonal skills. The college has effective policies and procedures for health and safety. Students pay heed to these when working in laboratories, workshops and studios.

49 In 1995, 74 per cent of students completing their courses achieve their intended qualification, representing a 6 per cent improvement compared with 1994. The college's average pass rates for GNVQ courses are higher than the average pass rates nationally. At foundation level, 50 per cent of the college's students achieved their qualification within the normal period; at intermediate level it is 55 per cent and at advanced level it is 41 per cent. Outcomes on the intermediate GNVQ information technology course were less good. At advanced level students' achievements were particularly good in GNVQ art and design and GNVQ health and social care. Overall pass rates are depressed by the substantial number of students on two-year programmes who do not complete their assessments within the time allocated. According to the tables published by the Department for Education and Employment in 1995, 65 per cent of the 246 students aged 16 to 18 in their final year of study on vocational courses were successful. This places the college in the bottom third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure.

50 The proportion of students gaining grades A to C at GCSE has risen since 1994. At GCE A level the pass rate has fallen. In 1994-95, students aged 16 to 18 taking GCE AS/A level examinations scored on average 2.4 point per entry (where A=10, E=2). This places the college in the bottom 10 per cent of colleges in the further education sector based on the performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment in 1995.

51 The numbers of students achieving their qualification, as a percentage of those completing their programme, are shown in the table below.

Number of students achieving their qualification as a percentage of those completing their programme

	1994-95 pass rates			1993-94 pass rates		
	Overall	Full-time	Part-time	Overall	Full-time	Part-time
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All students	74	74	74	68	74	66
GCE A level	55	53	58	64	60	66
GCSE grades						
A to C	44	33	47	32	29	34
Vocational	80	83	79	72	81	69

52 The college closely monitors retention rates and low achievement, and seeks to identify the causes and the action required to improve performance. It reports a retention rate of 93 per cent for full-time students. For part-time students it is 90 per cent. On some two-year programmes, however, retention rates are poor; the proportion of students entering the second year of the two-year programme is low. Examples include the national diplomas in engineering, catering and science, the advanced GNVQ in business studies and some GCE A level subjects.

53 The proportion of full-time students entering higher education is highest in art and design (45 per cent), followed by engineering (30 per cent), construction (30 per cent) and science (24 per cent). In 1995, 21 of the 22 students completing the access to higher education course went on to higher education. According to college statistics, courses with the highest proportion of students proceeding directly to employment are health and community care (35 per cent), leisure, tourism and catering (23 per cent), and business and secretarial (21 per cent).

54 Examples of good student performance include:

- art and design students who make good use of their research and practical experience
- technician assignments in construction which were favourably commented upon by external verifiers
- high standards of practical and research work in engineering, including a project undertaken in a local primary school

-
- development of good analytical and oral skills by adult students following humanities subjects.
- 55 Students' achievements are below average in a number of areas:
- intermediate GNVQ business students have poor team-building skills
 - too few GCE A level and GCSE students take up the opportunity to develop information technology skills
 - students achieve poor examination results in general studies, history, and economics
 - examination results are below average for the sector in science, mathematics and computing.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

56 The college has a clear and concise quality assurance policy. It promotes the continuous improvement of teaching and learning and has been extended to embrace the work of the college's support services. Many quality assurance developments are too recent for their impact to be clear. The director of studies and the director of support services take responsibility for their own areas in respect of quality assurance.

57 A code of practice for quality assurance in the curriculum clearly spells out the key roles of staff and relevant committees. A small and enthusiastic subcommittee of the academic board plays an important part in monitoring the quality of academic provision in the college. It does this by twice-yearly sampling of the quality files maintained for each course and by undertaking an annual curriculum review of the faculties. The committee is concerned with the whole student experience, having representatives from college support services. Weaknesses in the course quality files throw doubt on the effectiveness of sampling and of the faculty review process.

58 Franchised courses, which now represent a significant proportion of the college's work, operate within the main college quality assurance framework, but use procedures appropriate to the organisation delivering the franchise. Quality of delivery is rigorously monitored by a franchise manager who maintains detailed files on each contract and who visits centres unannounced to inspect delivery. Contractors speak approvingly of the manager's thoroughness and the challenging standards that are set.

59 Course teams are responsible for maintaining and improving the quality of teaching and learning. Standardised course files, now in their third annual cycle, are considered central to this. They contain an evaluation and review form, completed each year, which forms the basis for action to improve performance. Some files are correctly maintained and show evidence of thorough analysis of performance. Others have significant gaps. Some sections of the evaluation and review document, particularly those relating to self-assessment of teaching quality, are not completed. Action plans do not always deal with elements from the

evaluation which are marked down as requiring action. The minutes of meetings to review progress against action plans are not always included in files. In the best files, evidence of progress is transferred directly onto the evaluation sheets at regular intervals, but this is not standard practice.

60 Course team leaders are responsible for liaising with examining and awarding bodies, usually through contact with a moderator or external verifier. Team leaders usually act as internal verifiers. Records of visits by external moderators and verifiers are stored in course quality files and their recommendations incorporated into action plans. The director of studies and the quality committee take careful note of the feedback provided. A number of verifiers commented favourably on the college's response to their recommendations.

61 Students mentioned the excellent formal and informal opportunities that they had for expressing their views on the quality of provision. There is a recognised timetable for the issue of questionnaires to full-time and some part-time students. College-wide questionnaires are supplemented by those issued by individual faculties and course teams. Not all students receive feedback on the outcomes of the questionnaires, though they do feel that their views are taken seriously. All of those consulted felt that the questionnaires were used too frequently.

62 The college charter is clearly laid out and is concise. It is included in the handbook for full-time students and the handbook for part-time students makes reference to it. Copies are freely available on all college sites. The students interviewed by inspectors were familiar with the content of the charter and confirmed that the college lives up to its policy statements. The charter is being reviewed by a working group of the student council in time for the next academic year. At present, it lacks specific performance indicators against which the college can measure its achievement within a given time span.

63 Staff development is well managed. The programme is funded at 1.5 per cent of payroll costs. Staff have individual development plans which are reviewed annually. In order to tie staff development more closely to the improvement of quality, the college is committed to achieving the Investors in People standard by May 1996. All staff have recently had a half day's training on customer care. Induction for new staff takes place once a term. The programme includes a helpful general introduction to the college and its workings. A staff handbook has been assembled very recently. It is informative, but extremely long and bulky and there is no indication of how and with whom it will be used. Job descriptions have recently been reviewed. Links between staff-development activities, the college's strategic plan, and faculty, division and team plans are not clear. There is no formal appraisal scheme which might encourage the development of such links though the college is moving slowly towards one. In the absence of a formal system of appraisal the criteria for the principal's appraisal are set by the chair of the remuneration committee, though they are not formally recorded.

64 The college's self-assessment report is clearly written. Its development relied heavily on the efforts of one management board member, although consultation with other members of the management board did take place. The report follows most of the headings used in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*, and refers to some general sources of evidence. It clearly identifies college performance against five of the FEFC's six performance indicators and identifies improvements which have taken place over the last 12 months. The report fails to give a clear indication of the college's strengths and weaknesses but it does identify some areas for improvement.

RESOURCES

Staffing

65 Teaching and support staff are equally valued by the college and are encouraged to co-operate in planning and development. Most staff are enthusiastic and work together effectively as a team. Teachers are deployed efficiently. They are well qualified and have sufficient experience for the work they undertake. Nearly 74 per cent have a degree. Most also have vocational qualifications related to the programmes they teach. The college is taking steps to ensure that staff working on vocational courses have opportunities to refresh, or where necessary, acquire relevant industrial experience. Industrial placements are encouraged and take-up is strong. A high proportion of teachers are working towards, and many have achieved, accreditation to assess students' competences in GNVQ and NVQ courses. Women are well represented among the college management team.

66 The college stresses the importance of good teaching skills and is improving its practice in this respect. At present, 83 per cent of full-time teachers have a teaching qualification and a further 9 per cent are undertaking training. People being interviewed for teaching posts are assessed delivering a lesson. New and unqualified teachers must promptly gain a teaching qualification after their appointment and successfully complete a probationary year before they are made permanent. Part-time teachers help to create greater flexibility in delivering programmes; they bring with them valuable up-to-date experience of industry and the professions. In a few programme areas, the large proportion of part-time staff has created difficulties in managing classes and led to a lack of teaching continuity. Fractional full-time appointments are helping to overcome these problems. Some full-time staff bear an unfair share of responsibility for providing quick responses to syllabus changes and demands of examination bodies.

67 Administrative and support staff are suitably qualified and efficiently deployed. They provide high-quality support. The college encourages them to improve their skills. Where they have undertaken new roles they receive the necessary training to do their jobs well. The college's

caretakers, for example, have recently been trained to carry out a number of different, non-specialist maintenance tasks.

Equipment/learning resources

68 Classrooms are well equipped. Whiteboards and overhead projectors are standard items in rooms and there is easy access to television and video through a college-wide booking system. The college's photocopying and duplicating service is good and is well used by teachers. Specialist equipment needs are identified as part of the college's annual planning cycle. Faculties estimate their course requirements and list the equipment required to support the curriculum in order of priority. Additional funding is made available for new courses and money is held in reserve to meet unforeseen problems. The rationale for the priorities observed in allocating funding is not recorded.

69 The quality of specialist equipment varies from adequate to very good. In art and design and in catering, the quality and range of equipment is first class and it is well maintained. Business studies has good resources which include up-to-date information technology. Industry-standard technology has been introduced into parts of the engineering faculty. In electronic engineering most equipment is new, much of it built by staff to a very high standard, but the range of equipment is narrow. In the mechanical engineering shop, machines are old and need replacing. Much equipment for motor vehicle engineering is outdated. In construction, recent purchases have led to the upgrading of equipment. The routine maintenance of hand tools should be improved. In science, there is not enough equipment for students and what there is, is out of date.

70 Central learning resources are of good quality. The Hartford information study centre, recently converted from the old library, is a large and pleasant place in which to work. There are 130 study places as well as a quiet study area. The centre carries a good stock of books and journals and offers a helpful newspaper cuttings service. A professional librarian is available to support students for most of the time. There are four multi-media computers and students can pay to access the Internet. Good arrangements are made for art students at the London Road site who do not have a library on site. Arrangements are less satisfactory at the Winsford site where there is a limited library and learning resource facility. Developments are planned to improve the situation and the college is collaborating with the local public library to provide an adequate service to students.

71 The college's educational technology centre, situated on the Hartford campus, is spacious and well resourced. It is very busy although a booking system helps to spread use. The centre has a network of 75 up-to-date computers, a good range of software applications and some interactive learning packages. Close by is an audio technology centre with 18 interactive workstations. Across the college's three sites the ratio of computers to students is 1:11.

Accommodation

72 Accommodation is clean, well maintained and efficiently used. The Hartford campus comprises a range of low-rise buildings, specialist workshops and more recent purpose-built design studios. The extensive grounds are kept in good condition by an outside contractor and provide good car parking facilities. The main 'visitors' entrance is bright and welcoming, and situated conveniently close to the main reception area. Direction signs are well placed. Some accommodation has been remodelled and upgraded and is now of high quality. The impressive 'Food Court', the computing and educational technology centres, and the extensive redecoration of circulation and teaching areas provide examples. Other areas are in need of improvements and many are already scheduled for upgrading. The college recognises that its accommodation strategy should be strengthened.

73 Students take care of their environment. The interiors of buildings are clean and free from graffiti. Video-surveillance facilities have improved external security and these are to be extended. Numerous inherited temporary teaching units, though generally in good condition, are inadequate for teaching and should be replaced. The college has used some of them for college administration in order to provide more teaching areas in the main building. Action has been taken to improve the college's consumption of energy. The large areas of single glazing in the main teaching block continue to cause a high level of heat loss and occasional discomfort for occupants. Access to buildings and other facilities for wheelchair users are generally good.

74 The London Road studios and Verdin centre are mainly red-brick Victorian buildings of local architectural and historical significance. The former has a faience brick facade and imposing stained-glass windows. Though cramped and difficult to alter, the building is effectively and imaginatively used as a backdrop for art and design activities. Areas for student recreation and car parking are poor and facilities for wheelchair users are restricted. The architectural features of the Verdin centre have been enhanced by good internal redecoration. The students' coffee bar and lounge area is in a poor condition, but the mainly adult users of the building value the environment. The impressive, but underused W E Russell memorial library needs refurbishment and the college has plans to do this.

75 The college's specialist teaching accommodation is generally of good quality. A series of recent improvements includes the provision of 'real work environments' in catering, the motor vehicle reception area and the new laboratories for electronic engineering courses. A shortage of resource-based learning areas for GNVQ students is a weakness. Some specialist rooms are not always allocated sensibly. For example, drawing rooms are sometimes used for mathematics teaching. Engineering students have to use workshops and classrooms which are too far apart and some rooms are used as access routes to other rooms.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

76 The college has made significant progress towards achieving its mission. Its strengths include:

- governors and managers who are committed to the college and have a clear understanding of their strategic role
- the new management structure and the strengthening of strategic planning
- a responsive style of leadership that draws on the energies of staff
- growing awareness of and responsiveness to the needs of the local community
- improved marketing and promotional activities
- the support provided to students and their involvement in college committees
- well-qualified teachers and support staff who work well together
- a college-wide commitment to improve the quality of teaching and learning
- well-maintained accommodation, some of it recently improved and of high quality.

77 The college should:

- continue to develop and rationalise management roles
- expand access and provide more flexible methods of delivery for adults returning to study
- continue to strengthen its links with employers and involve employers more in curriculum developments
- ensure that practice within the developing tutorial system is more consistent
- deal with staffing problems that are affecting the continuity of learning on a few courses
- develop further the college's quality assurance and self-assessment procedures
- improve students' achievements at GCSE and GCE A level
- improve library provision at the Winsford site
- develop an effective accommodation strategy.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1995-96)

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

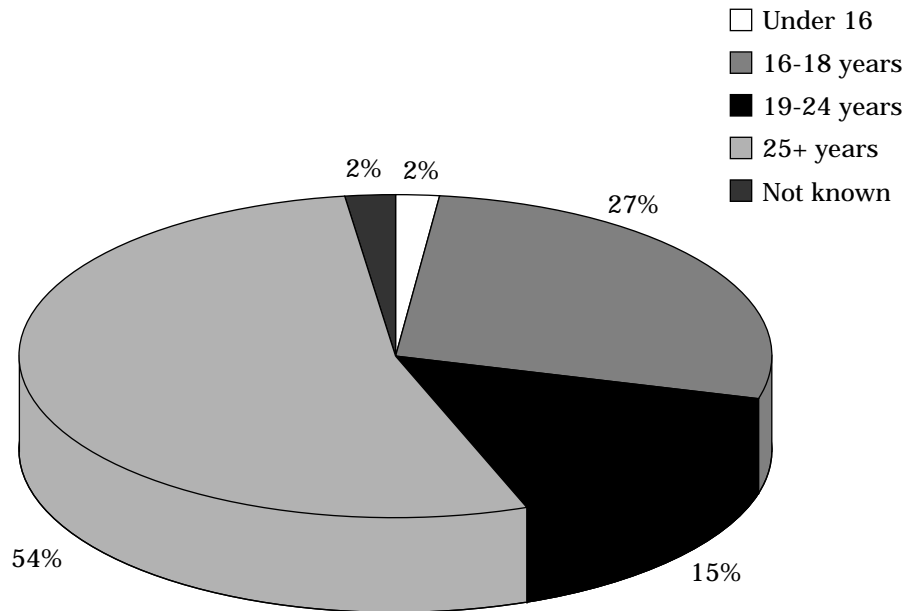
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

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

Figure 1

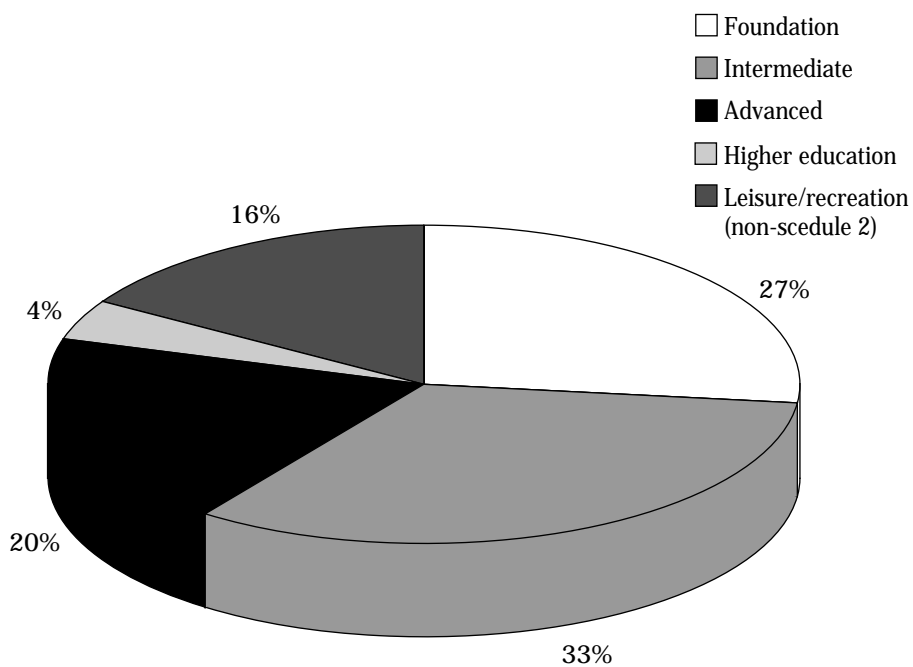
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: percentage enrolments by age (1995-96)



Enrolments: 10,325

Figure 2

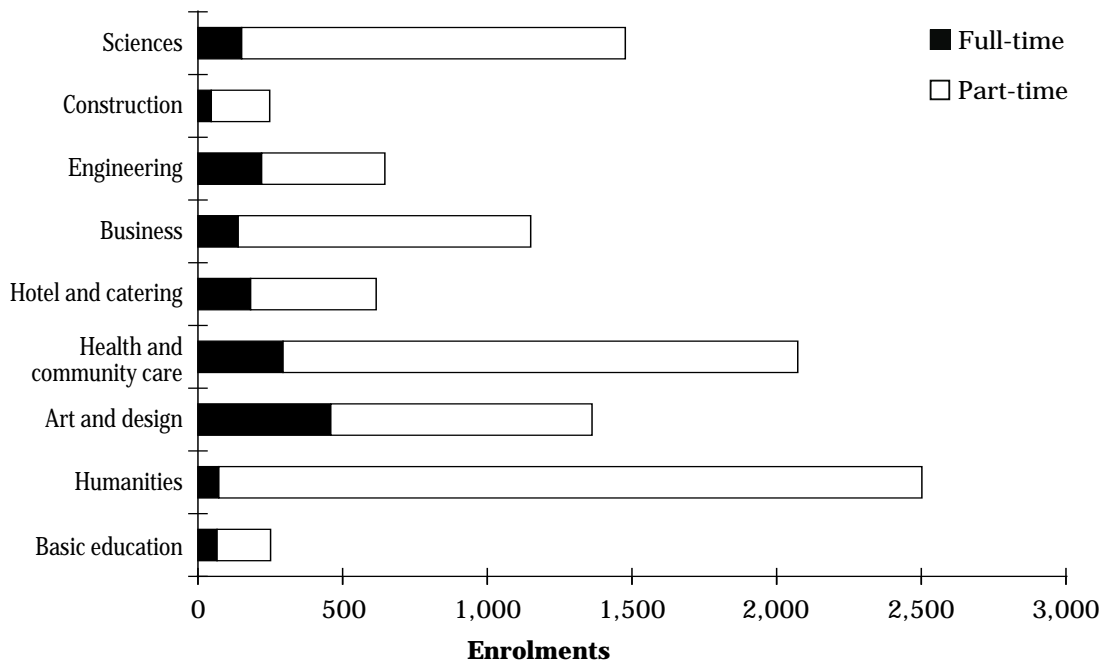
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: percentage enrolments by level of study (1995-96)



Enrolments: 10,325

Figure 3

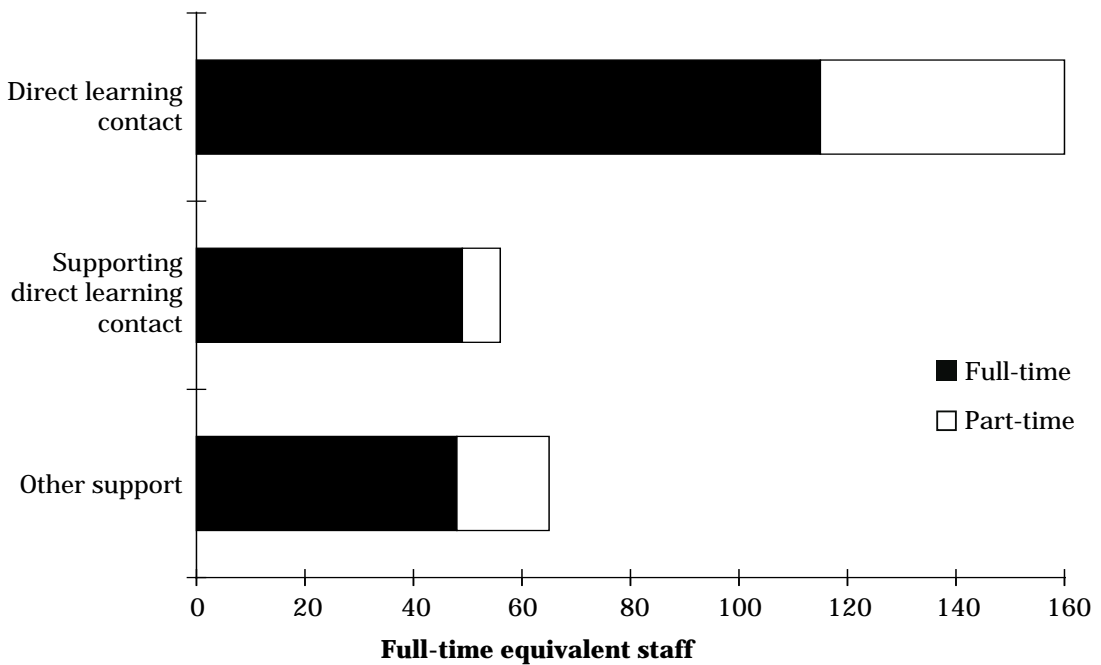
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1995-96)



Enrolments: 10,325

Figure 4

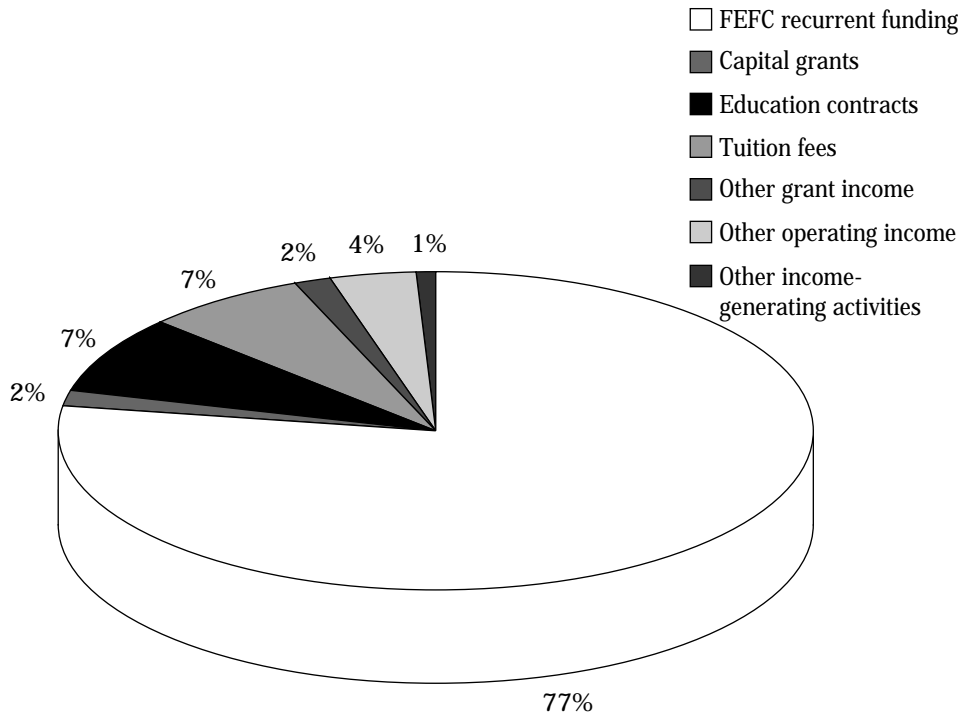
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1995-96)



Full-time equivalent staff: 281

Figure 5

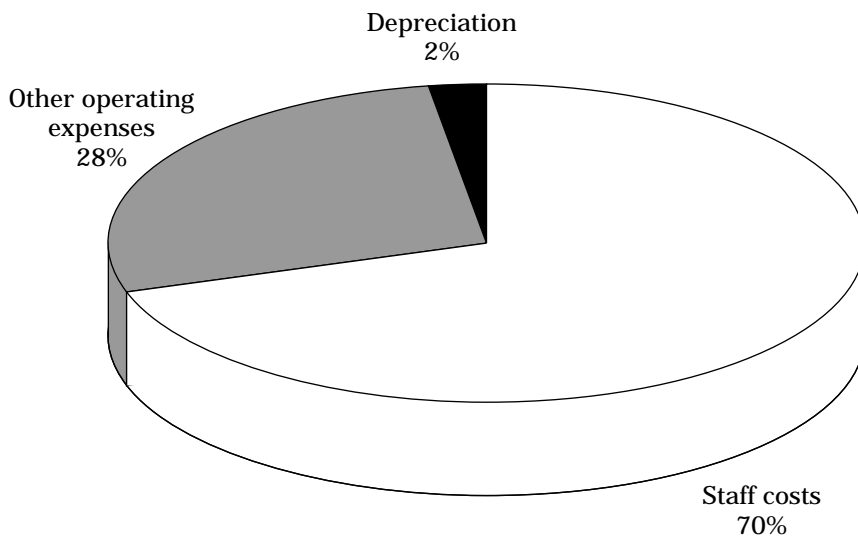
Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £6,970,000

Figure 6

Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £7,371,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
May 1996