

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Northampton College

May 1996

**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 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 53/96

NORTHAMPTON COLLEGE

EAST MIDLANDS REGION

Inspected February 1995-January 1996

Summary

Northampton College offers a wide range of courses. It maintains a productive relationship with Northamptonshire LEA. The governors are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the college. Teaching and support staff are well qualified. Results achieved by students are generally good. The college's policy on staff development is clear and it has focused on new vocational provision. The college is committed to the effective working of the Northampton Compact as a means of providing education and training for the local population. The quality of accommodation and equipment is high. The effectiveness of the college's organisational structure is under review. Strategic planning has had limited influence on decisions by management. Market analysis is insufficient. There is scope for more varied methods of course structure and delivery to meet the needs of a wider diversity of students. The attendance and retention rates of students on some courses give cause for concern. The college's quality assurance systems need to be improved. Realistic targets should be set and performance indicators identified. The college's framework for the support of students' learning should be reviewed.

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		3
Quality assurance		4
Resources:	staffing	2
	equipment/learning resources	2
	accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science, mathematics and computing	2	Health and social care	2
Engineering	3	Hair and beauty	2
Business and management	3	Arts and media	2
Hotel and catering	2	Modern languages	2
Leisure and tourism	2	English and other humanities	2
		Basic education and ESOL	3
		Provision for SLDD	3

INTRODUCTION

1 Twenty-seven registered inspectors visited the college for 95 inspector days between February 1995 and January 1996. They observed 311 learning sessions attended by approximately 4,150 students. Students' work and a wide range of college documents were examined. Discussions were held with governors, staff, students, representatives from industry, the local community, and the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Northampton College is a general further education college serving much of Northamptonshire and parts of the surrounding counties. The population of the main area served by the college exceeds half a million people. As a former 'expanded town' Northampton has experienced considerable growth since the 1970s and its population is expected to grow to over 200,000 by the turn of the century. The county is experiencing the third fastest rate of growth amongst all counties and the population is close to 600,000. The number of school-age children is now increasing.

3 The college was opened in 1972. It took on the Northamptonshire County Youth Training scheme in 1991, and the Northampton Link College (adult education) in 1993. Also in 1993, some further education provision was transferred to Northampton College from Nene College. Northampton College provides: adult education for Northampton under contract to the local education authority (LEA); youth and adult training for the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise; and education at Her Majesty's Prison, Wellingborough and Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution, Onley. A small amount of work is franchised from two higher education institutions. Since incorporation, full-time enrolments have increased by over 12 per cent and part-time enrolments by over 22 per cent. The colleges in the immediate vicinity are Moulton College (three miles away), which mainly provides education and training for land-based industries, and Nene College (also three miles away), a higher education institution which provides a small amount of further education. There are six other further education sector colleges within a 20 mile radius of the college.

4 The college's main site is purpose built and houses the majority of the college's work. The site has undergone considerable development since 1987 and has seven new buildings, three of which were built in the last two years. Other sites include a former school in the town centre, a town centre shop, and a former school to the north-west of the town. In addition, the college provides community education programmes in 45 centres including schools, community venues and a variety of statutory, voluntary and private organisations.

5 There are 10 schools with sixth forms in Northampton, mainly providing General Certificate of Education advanced levels (GCE A levels). In some cases, the schools are developing provision for General National

Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). There are local arrangements which encourage co-operation between groups of schools and further education colleges. The college is included in these arrangements and also has contact with a number of schools in outlying districts. The percentage of young people continuing in full-time education post-16 has been around 70 per cent for the last three years. Over 23 per cent of local school leavers have continued their education in further education colleges in the last two years.

6 The county has a diverse economy which is forecast to create an additional 30,000 jobs by the end of the decade. Manufacturing accounts for 30 per cent of all employment and is expected to continue to play a vital role in the local economy. Employment in the service sectors and managerial and administrative professions is expected to grow, whilst craft and skilled manual employment is predicted to decrease substantially. Local unemployment is 6.9 per cent, having fallen by 30 per cent in the last two years.

7 In 1994-95, 3,132 students were enrolled on full-time programmes at the college and there were 18,353 part-time enrolments. Of these, 8,725 were enrolments for non-schedule 2 classes. Eighty-three per cent of the college's student population was 19 years of age and over. Female students (63 per cent) outnumbered males (37 per cent). Students from minority ethnic groups comprise approximately 5.9 per cent of the population of Northampton and 7.13 per cent of the college's enrolments. Enrolments by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. There are 351.5 full-time equivalent teachers and 169.1 full-time equivalent support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

8 The college's mission is to meet the needs of its students. It aims to fulfil the present and future education and training needs of its communities. It aims to be supportive to all, accessible, responsive and open, and to achieve excellence in all that it does.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

9 Northampton College has seen significant growth in student numbers recently. Much of this growth is the result of a merger with the adult education college and the transfer of further education courses from Nene College in 1993. The college offers provision ranging from basic to higher education, spanning vocational and academic courses. Provision is made for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Recent developments have included the extension of courses leading to GNVQs.

10 The college's market analysis of local needs lacks clarity and there has been insufficient market research to support it. A revised marketing strategy is now in draft form. The release of students from employment to attend the college part time has declined and the college is aware of the need to adapt its provision as a result of this. However, there has been only limited development of more flexible timetabling and delivery of

courses. The college has identified a market for vocational and non-vocational courses to be held at weekends. A programme of one-day courses has been introduced through the Open Campus, enabling education to be offered to students in outreach centres. The college has a strong central marketing unit which handles the promotion and advertising of its services.

11 Schools in the town have sixth forms and there is a degree of tension between local schools and the college. Whilst schools work together with the college in local 'clusters' there is increasing competition between all institutions and signs that the cluster arrangements may be under strain. Schools do not allow college staff to come in and publicise the college as frequently as they did in the past. Some grant-maintained schools refuse the college the use of their data on pupils. Work is currently underway to co-ordinate GCE A level timetables across nine schools and the college, to identify common needs and to maximise the range of subjects which can be offered. The college has helped schools establish their GNVQ courses. The college's engineering and catering sections provide courses leading to national qualifications for pupils in three schools.

12 The chief executive of the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise is a member of the college corporation. The Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise acts as a training broker. The college is included in a database of training providers and provides courses for a range of occupations. A slowness to respond to the immediate needs of the Chamber and managing agents for training and a lack of flexibility in timetabling have lost the college some contracts for training which have subsequently been awarded to others, including private sector providers. The college has met its targets for the provision of modern apprenticeship training.

13 In some departments advisory committees, including employers, have been set up whilst in other areas there are very few links with business. In engineering, Carlsberg-Tetley have maintained strong links and, at any one time, fund six traditional apprenticeships. This is an arrangement which has continued for 16 years. A Carlsberg-Tetley representative chairs the engineering advisory committee. Equipment has been donated to the college by industrial benefactors. There are strong links with employers through work experience. The social services department of the local authority has worked collaboratively with Northampton College and other colleges in the area for many years to support training in the caring professions. There is now a strong commitment to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in social care and childcare.

14 The college aims to serve the local community through Open Campus and other outreach activities. More than 45 venues are used including schools, community centres and day centres. The Open Campus allows the college to reach individuals who might not otherwise have access to

education. An 'education shop' which provides a central marketing site and a venue for guidance on education and training, has been opened in Derngate in the town centre. Teachers of English for speakers of other languages visit homes in an attempt to reach Asian women who may not otherwise have access to college facilities. The needs of the various ethnic groups in the town have also been addressed through the multicultural centre. Representatives of community organisations find the college generally responsive, if not entirely flexible, in the way it timetables and organises courses. The college does not have formal methods for gauging demand from community organisations and ethnic groups.

15 The Business Training Partnership has been established to provide training in office and information technology skills for local companies. Adults returning to study also take advantage of this facility. It is funded by a mixture of grants, including some European funding and income from short course work. The facility gives adult students access to learning materials which they can use on their own. Assisted by this opportunity, 75 per cent of those returning to study have subsequently found employment, including some who now lecture in the college. Additional ways of funding the facility, such as computer training subscriptions for business, are being developed. The unit also provides training for college staff.

16 Northampton College, with Moulton and Nene Colleges, has entered into the Northampton Compact. This ensures collaboration in the provision of opportunities for training and education for the local population. Some courses in art and design, engineering and GCE A levels were transferred to Northampton College from Nene College in 1993 as part of a process of rationalisation. Courses offering access to higher education are developed in partnership between the institutions. Northampton College has played an active part in establishing the current arrangements for the compact. Good relations exist at all levels. Nene College funded part of the new building programme at Northampton College.

17 Since incorporation the college has maintained effective working relationships with the Northamptonshire LEA. As part of its duty to fund an adequate adult education programme the LEA has supported the college in family literacy projects, adult basic skills and work with minority ethnic groups. Quality control is exercised by the authority which requires a detailed statement of provision across all sites. The contract for adult education is renewable annually and the college has successfully retained the contract for a number of years. Co-operation is taking place in the implementation of an anti-poverty strategy in certain wards in the town.

18 Productive links are maintained with local special schools which offer a range of provision for students with differing degrees of learning difficulty. Opportunities for these students range from attending bridging courses which provide a transition from special schools to a more conventional learning environment to learning life skills, such as cooking and hygiene. Access to college facilities for wheelchair users is good and

they can use all the learning resource areas. It is college practice to integrate students with impaired hearing and vision with mainstream courses. Close contact is maintained with community groups and a mentor system has been introduced to help build self-esteem amongst current and prospective students. The Open Campus works in collaboration with the Council for Racial Equality and LEA staff. The college's equal opportunities policy and its implementation are currently under review. Both student and community representatives are part of this review process.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

19 The corporation board has 20 members including the principal, 11 business members, the chief executive of the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, five co-opted members and two staff representatives. There is one business vacancy which has existed for nearly a year. The members bring to the board a wide range of expertise from industry and commerce, the public sector and higher and community education. Governors have adopted a code of conduct and have agreed to establish a register of business interests; to date, two governors have made declarations of business interests. Membership and the balance of skills amongst governors have been actively considered by the board. At present there is no formal procedure for the replacement of governors nor for establishing the criteria to be used in identifying and selecting potential new governors.

20 The policy and resources committee meets monthly during the college year. There is an audit committee and there are subcommittees for the environment, personnel matters and strategic planning which normally meet once a term. Meetings of the policy and resources committee bring together the chairs of all subcommittees. The chair of the corporation and the principal are ex-officio members of all committees except those for audit and remuneration. The board is committed to reviewing the structure and effectiveness of the corporation and its committees by March 1996. Attendance at corporation and committee meetings has averaged over 80 per cent since incorporation. The governors are committed to and knowledgeable about the work of the college. Some governors are members of college advisory committees. Training is offered to new governors. Some governors have attended external training events.

21 There is a clear understanding of the separate role of the corporation board and the executive management of the college. The review of the terms of reference of all committees provides an opportunity for clarifying the relationship between the full corporation and the policy and resources committee. This committee is aware of its responsibility to advise the full board on financial matters and to investigate the financial implications of recommendations put forward by the subcommittees. For instance, it deferred a scheme to build a new resources centre on the grounds that the cost of £1.6 million might put the solvency of the institution at risk.

22 The new principal, appointed in September 1995, and the corporation are currently considering how to improve strategic planning to ensure it has focus and influences decision making in the college. College staff, managers and the governor's strategic planning subcommittee invested considerable time in formulating strategic objectives for the July 1994 plan, each of which was reviewed in the summer of 1995. The objectives were discussed in each department and translated into departmental plans and programme objectives. There is, however, little evidence that the outcome of these deliberations influenced such key issues as enrolment targets, growth targets, allocation of resources or the accommodation strategy. The college has no human resources strategy. There are a number of strategic objectives for 1995-96 which refer to resources including staffing. Action required to meet these objectives has been delayed until after the strategic plan has been reviewed. A succinct review of progress towards strategic objectives has not yet been provided for governors.

23 The college is managed by the principal, seven assistant principals, the director of external relations, the college secretary and registrar and the finance manager. These staff form the college's management team which meets weekly. This has clear agendas and minutes are produced by each member of the team on a rotating basis. The team does not have terms of reference. There are no up-to-date job descriptions for senior managers. Some key aspects of the academic work of the college are not assigned as a responsibility for a named member of the college management team. The roles and lines of accountability of other managers within the institution also lack clarity. The review of the effectiveness of the organisational structure, recently instigated by the principal, is timely.

24 Responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum rests with the assistant principals and assistant heads of five departments on the main site and the Open Campus, the department for community education and outreach provision. The college has had a departmental structure for several years. Staff recognise that one of the strengths of the departmental system lies in the sense of clear identity and belonging which membership of a department gives them. On the other hand, they also realise that the departmental structure has led to considerable duplication of effort and activity across the college. There is also wide variation in the working practices of different departments. For instance, the role of the 35 professional support tutors lacks clarity and there is inconsistency in the way different departments use their services.

25 Three policy groups were established in 1992 to provide a wider forum for staff involvement in policy development and implementation. The groups cover the curriculum, resources and student services. A liaison group was added in 1994 to improve communications. Terms of reference for the policy groups range from consideration of strategic issues to monitoring the implementation of initiatives. The groups have been more

successful in dealing with operational matters. The college invests considerable time in these groups, some of which have weekly meetings. Their roles and remits have recently been revised to improve their effectiveness.

26 Communication between senior management and departments is generally effective. There are regular news sheets issued by the principal; the assistant principals report to departmental management teams who, in turn, inform staff at regular departmental meetings. The policy groups and the large number of staff working parties ensure that staff views are passed on to senior management. The new principal has visited course teams and met with groups and individuals, in addition to using the formal consultative committees. Staff appreciate the opportunity to have their views on current issues heard.

27 The college has an average level of funding for 1995-96 of £16.34 per unit. The median for general further education colleges is £17.84 and for all sector colleges it is £18.56 per unit. The finance manager presents regular budgetary control reports and cash-flow statements to the policy and resources committee and the full board. The system of budgetary allocation is well understood. The college has yet to move away from historic allocations so that changes in student numbers and the development of new programmes can be taken into account. The process for allocating capital expenditure budgets has also been largely historic and is under review. The college has not yet developed a model for comparing the unit costs of individual courses to inform strategic and course planning. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6. The college originally had a tariff unit target of 534,000 for 1994-95; this was increased to 605,454 to take account of Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) work which was expected to transfer from Nene College. The college is expecting to underachieve significantly against its tariff target for 1994-95. The shortfall in units and the consequent estimated clawback in funding by the FEFC has budgetary implications for the current year. This, together with some downturn in student numbers, has required managers to consider strategies which will bring the income and expenditure budgets for 1995-96 back into balance.

28 The college's management information system is not yet providing sufficient support for management decisions. Separate databases to monitor student enrolments, attendance and retention have been developed in the college's departments. The centralised entry of student data does not provide staff with up-to-date and reliable information. Staff find it difficult to reconcile the data generated by the central system with their own data. The college is having difficulty making its returns to the FEFC on time. The college management team has considered a consultant's report which was commissioned in the summer of 1995. An information systems strategy has now been adopted and it is planned to

appoint a manager for the management information system as soon as possible.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

29 A comprehensive system for pre-entry advice and guidance was introduced in 1995 together with a detailed staff-development programme. The pre-entry advice and guidance team is led by a member of the college staff who is a trained careers adviser. The team has offices within the central admissions unit on the college campus and at the education shop in the town centre. The team visits all the community centres used by the college to provide information about progression for students attending evening classes and to give students the opportunity to arrange an advice and guidance interview. The town centre shop is used for marketing and guidance. The shop is part of the Northamptonshire Guidance and Information Network. This collaborative venture aims to provide impartial advice and guidance on education and training, particularly for unemployed adults. The shop provides a pleasant environment and has rooms suitable for seminars and individual meetings. There is a plentiful supply of information relating to the college and its courses. There are two computers which have careers information software. There is no facility at the shop for students to enrol on a college course; instead they are referred to the college for interview or enrolment as the Network regulations require.

30 School pupils are contacted by a direct mailshot to promote the college prospectus. The college holds a series of open days and evenings to provide information about the college and its courses. A clear, well-documented set of procedures, both paper-based and computerised, has been developed to track the recruitment procedures. This is not yet linked to the college's student record system. Regular reports are produced by the central admissions unit for departments and college management. Prospective students are also kept informed of the progress of their application by the central admissions unit. Guidelines for admissions are provided for college staff. However, interpretation of these guidelines is not consistent across the college.

31 Formal induction is provided for all full-time students and those part-time students who will attend the college for several hours a week. A checklist is provided for tutors contributing to induction and new students receive a file of information about the college. Staff from the student support teams are present to meet groups of new students during induction and tutors administer and mark a test which screens students for difficulties with literacy and numeracy. The results of this test are passed to the learning support team. Staff receive guidelines on induction but the consistency with which they are followed is not checked sufficiently rigorously.

32 A college policy on tutorials was approved by the college management team in May 1995. Each full-time and substantial part-time course is required to timetable at least one hour of tutorial work every week. A file for tutors has been developed which offers them advice and guidance on their function and on planning a tutorial programme. Tutors use the tutorial hour in widely differing ways. It is used for monitoring attendance, checking progress or for a continuation of teaching. Course teams are required to produce schemes of work for tutorials. These have been developed on a course by course basis. The resulting variation in these schemes of work is being addressed by the college. Students have an entitlement to a 15-minute individual interview each term although not all students are aware of this. Helpful material relating to application for higher education is widely used. Similar material has recently been prepared by the careers service for those applying for employment, but the existence of this material is not yet widely known.

33 There is no consistent system for monitoring the attendance of students and no centralised information on attendance is available. There are no realistic targets set for improving attendance. The student file lays down clear guidelines for students on attendance and punctuality at classes. The interpretation and implementation of these guidelines are managed through the departments and there is no consistency of approach across the college. Statistics on retention are collected five times a year through the course evaluation system as an administrative exercise and to provide information for the FEFC. Retention data are not used to inform management decisions or set realistic targets for improvement.

34 Support services available for students are wide ranging and include counselling, childcare, the provision of advice on welfare, finance and accommodation, and the services of a team of four student support workers and a learning support team. The fully-qualified counsellor has an external supervisor funded by the college. The rooms used by the counsellor are in a central location with the necessary degree of privacy. The college offers childcare facilities on each of its three main sites. All are registered with social services, have adequately trained staff and provide a friendly, safe and welcoming environment. The three facilities are separately managed and offer a variety of services.

35 Information and support for students on issues relating to finance and accommodation are available. The college maintains a register of accommodation which is appropriate to the needs of students. The college employs four full-time youth workers whose role is intended to support students' personal and social development. Their role is not understood by some staff and students. In practice, they offer a wide range of activities including confidential counselling on drugs, support to stop smoking, short courses for students in self-defence, workshops for students on personal health and assistance to find employment in the vacations. They contribute to the tutorial programme at the request of tutors and have attempted to

develop a sports programme at a neighbouring sports centre. Another major part of their role is to support and oversee the student association.

36 The team of learning support staff commands a variety of expertise. The support service is well documented and comprehensive. Staff encourage students to identify their problems and needs prior to enrolment. Where appropriate, the support staff interview students to discuss their needs and determine how these can be addressed most effectively. Referral to the learning support services is possible at any stage in a student's course of study. There are criteria in the tutor file identifying the basis for provision of support. In practice, however, it is not always clear how students are selected. There is no system to check that referrals are followed through. For instance, two students who referred themselves for help at enrolment in September had not been seen by the learning support team one term later. Generally, the facilities for learning support are significantly underused. The English and mathematics workshops are not generally available to students because they are only open at certain times and the learning support workshop is poorly sited.

37 Careers advice and guidance for students are seen as separate from the pre-entry guidance and are managed through a different department. Since September 1995, the college has used the services of two qualified full-time careers advisers for 85 per cent of their time. A further 160 part-time hours a year are allocated to the provision of careers advice. Career Path (Northamptonshire) Ltd provides the careers advisers. Sixty per cent of the advisers' time is spent in individual guidance interviews. The remainder is used in tutorial sessions and open workshops for students although the take-up of these has been limited. Career Path has a published policy on careers advice and the college produced a careers education and guidance policy in April 1994. This policy is not implemented in a consistent manner throughout the departmental structure, across curriculum areas or between all sites. The college established a 'careers network' in September 1993. This is a college-wide group with representatives from each teaching department, the student support team and the two careers advisers. Its function is to promote careers education and the implementation of an annual calendar of careers activities. This is seen as a framework on which the individual departments can build. The college set up its own employment agency, Next Step, in June 1995. This initiative aims to approach employers directly to identify vacancies and match these to appropriate students.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

38 Strengths outweighed weaknesses in 66 per cent of the sessions inspected. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in only 5 per cent of the sessions. The following table summarises the inspection grades awarded for the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		9	26	11	2	0	48
GCSE		2	16	5	2	0	25
GNVQ		8	18	11	2	1	40
NVQ		6	11	7	0	0	24
Access to higher education		7	6	2	0	0	15
Basic education		5	9	15	3	0	32
Other vocational		16	44	33	6	0	99
Other		11	12	4	1	0	28
Total		64	142	88	16	1	311

39 Attendance averaged 71 per cent in lessons inspected. In some areas, attendance is good. For example in health and social care, catering and parts of business studies there were attendance rates above 80 per cent. In some other areas attendance is an issue. GCE A level and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) programmes in particular had poor attendance rates in some subjects.

40 Science, computing and mathematics lessons were generally well planned. Science teachers use a variety of teaching methods and materials including video tapes, computer-based learning and practical work. Students generally respond competently and with enthusiasm. In some classes, staff fail to take into account the varying abilities of students and tend to teach to the pace of the slowest student. In some lessons, the questioning technique of the teacher could be improved by involving more students in the question and answer process. More attention should be paid to promoting best practice in health and safety in some laboratory sessions. Computing sessions are delivered with enthusiasm and verve. The teaching method most used is that of practical work supported by individual tuition and, at times, by general class discussion. Questioning is used well to involve all students in the lesson and check their understanding of the work. Whilst students value the individual help they receive in mathematics, many lessons are not sufficiently challenging. Work is set regularly and marked conscientiously, often with informative feedback to students. The purpose and aims of the mathematics workshop have not been clearly identified. Presentation of mathematical work by teachers on the board, on the overhead projector or in worksheets varies from excellent to poor.

41 In engineering, teachers cover a wide range of topics which extend the skills and knowledge of the students. Practical work is appropriately balanced by the teaching and learning of underpinning knowledge. Theoretical work in the classroom, however, often fails to challenge the

students sufficiently and they spend too much time copying notes from the board. In automotive engineering there is a suitable balance between practical work and theoretical study.

42 Professional and business administration courses are generally well taught. Exposition by the teachers is balanced by practical work. Good use is made of activities requiring the application of computing skills to reinforce learning. Some units in GNVQ programmes do not have a sufficiently realistic business context. Consequently, some students become disenchanted with work which they see as irrelevant and lacking a clear vocational purpose. Some poor lessons are characterised by a failure by the teacher to question and test the students to make sure that learning has taken place. In some instances, lessons could be enlivened by the use of appropriate teaching and audio-visual aids.

43 Catering students benefit from sound teaching. Students are provided with well-prepared handouts and learning packages which they can work on by themselves. Teachers provide careful guidance and assistance to students. Teachers have high expectations of their students who respond with work and products of good quality.

44 The majority of lessons seen in leisure were well planned to ensure a variety of learning experiences for students. Lessons are purposeful and productive. Effective use is made of group work activities. In a minority of lessons staff fail to introduce new content and concepts with sufficient care and do not question the students to reinforce learning.

45 There are good schemes of work and lesson plans in hair and beauty. Teachers demonstrate proficient technical skills and knowledge. Classes are well managed and a proper emphasis is placed upon the importance of high standards of professional practice. In beauty classes, in particular, the interest and enthusiasm of the students are well maintained by challenging activities. In some hairdressing classes there is insufficient variety of activity and the students spend long periods of time working on practice blocks. There is scope for greater emphasis on the application of students' information technology skills in the hair and beauty programme as a whole.

46 Health and social care programmes are well planned and documented. All full-time students benefit from a residential experience and some visit care establishments in France. Displays of students' work enhance the learning environment. Teachers enliven lessons by drawing on their own experiences of the world of work to illustrate particular points. Students receive full and detailed feedback on their performance in written assignments and the teachers' assessments are accurate and fair. There is scope for making use of other teaching and learning aids in addition to text books. In some of the less effective lessons there was insufficient planning of group work. On GNVQ programmes, the teaching and learning of core skills is successfully integrated with the vocational units.

47 Teaching in art and design is generally good and, in some instances, represents excellent practice. The integration of information technology, communication and numeracy skills and art and design studies is successful and well managed. Students are encouraged to develop their own ideas and be inventive. In a few instances, however, teachers were too prescriptive in suggesting ways in which these ideas might be realised and the students' initiative was stifled. Advice and criticism from teachers is mostly positive, detailed and encouraging. Teachers have high expectations of their students although more attention needs to be paid to attendance and punctuality in some classes. Work in performing arts is well planned and teaching is challenging. Students are encouraged to master techniques in dance and music technology by regular practice. In media courses teachers ensure that students first prepare practical work thoroughly; teachers only intervene when it is timely and appropriate to do so. Students' learning is regularly checked, information is given on progress and targets set for improvement. Criticism, written on students' work, is sometimes not substantial enough.

48 In English and communications students benefit from well-planned courses. The schemes of work are explained to the students. Aims of teaching sessions are clearly stated. Effective group work is a feature of many sessions. At GCE A level, the work is challenging and students respond well. Learning is enhanced by the use of high-quality handouts. In lessons there is a good relationship between staff and students and open discussion and debate are encouraged. The better classes in the social sciences fostered effective individual and group work. Marking is of high quality and helpful feedback is given by teachers. The department has some excellent learning packages. Weak sessions included those where preparation of materials and illustrative examples was inadequate. Some staff do not always manage to sustain students' interest, especially in GCSE classes; this results in low levels of achievement by students who are inattentive.

49 Teaching and learning in languages are of high quality. Lessons are consistently effective in their planning, management and delivery. The target language is well used, where possible, as a medium of instruction. In some instances, good use is made of the language laboratory. The students are helped to achieve by conscientious and sensitive assessment by their teachers.

50 All basic education students are assessed in order to identify their individual needs. A set of learning objectives is established for each student and a timescale is worked out for their achievement. Students are encouraged by this planned approach and they respond enthusiastically. Teachers provide students with careful and sensitive guidance and this is complemented by the work of the learning support assistants. Some worksheets, however, are poor both in terms of presentation and content. Most of the lessons in English for speakers of other languages are

satisfactory. In the best lessons, students were enjoyably challenged by the need to use English in group work and discussion. In some of the more elementary classes, however, teaching was unimaginative and there was too much repetitive language work which taxed the students' memory rather than understanding.

51 Schemes of work for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are carefully thought out. Students on the work skills programme benefit from carefully-managed work experiences. Most teaching sessions are well prepared. In some lessons there is particularly effective group management involving pair work, and students are encouraged to help one another. Some effective management of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties was observed. Students' work is, however, sometimes left unfinished, unmarked or is lacking in constructive comment. Some students are not challenged sufficiently by the work they are set.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

52 There has been continued improvement in GCE A level results. In 1994-95 the college had 455 entries from students aged 16 to 18 and 312 entries from students aged 19 and over at GCE AS/A levels. In 1995, the pass rate was 81 per cent. The average point score per entry (where A=10, E=2) for 16 to 18 year olds was 4.3. This compared with 3.8 in 1993-94. Based on the performance tables produced by the Department for Education and Employment the college has moved from the middle third to the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this measure of performance. The college has conducted a pilot exercise comparing GCSE entry grades with GCE A level grades. Early indications are that students with lower entry qualifications are making progress above the national average, but students with higher qualifications on entry are not performing as well as expected.

53 The overall GCSE pass rate at grades A to C was 51 per cent in 1994-95; the national average for England for the further education sector is 47.7 per cent. Students aged 16 to 18 achieved results which exceed national averages for sector colleges by at least 10 per cent at grades A to C in art and design and photography. Students aged 19 and over attained a comparable level of success in business studies, French, German, history and sociology although, in some cases, numbers of entries are small. Results were less successful in chemistry, environmental studies, media studies and physics.

54 The results achieved by students on vocational courses are generally good. In 1994-95, 86 per cent of the 214 students, aged 16 to 18, in their final year of study were successful in achieving specified advanced level qualifications compared with an average for England of 77.5 per cent. In 1993-94, 94 per cent of 179 students were successful by the same performance measure, compared with the national average of 81.2 per

cent. The college considers that this fall is, at least in part, the result of the more comprehensive collection of data rather than a fall off in achievement. In 1994-95, 85 per cent of all students entering for Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national qualifications achieved their awards. The results on City and Guilds of London Institute programmes are a cause for some concern with a fall in the pass rate from 56 per cent in 1993-94 to 43 per cent in 1994-95. For NVQ assessment, differing interpretations of the number of students who complete the award in the standard time mean that college figures give no reliable guide to comparative performance. Further attention is needed to the collection and presentation of data on achievements.

55 Retention on full-time courses in 1994-95 was 76 per cent. This figure masks considerable variation within the same curriculum area and between the same level courses in different areas. The retention rate for full-time students on the BTEC national in information technology is 91 per cent, but the retention rate on the BTEC national computer studies course dropped from 78 per cent in 1993-94 to 46 per cent in 1994-95. In business administration courses, retention rates ranged from 63 per cent to 100 per cent. Lowest rates were on GNVQ business courses. In catering there was a 50 per cent drop-out rate in advanced GNVQ and 40 per cent for the intermediate GNVQ in 1994-95.

56 In 1994-95, 450 full-time students applied for places in higher education and 72 per cent were successful. This was an improvement on 1993-94 when 66 per cent of 339 students who applied were successful. In 1993-94, all students on the science access course had secured training or education in areas of, or allied to, health professions. All but a small minority of catering students were recorded as obtaining jobs or continuing in further education. In 1994-95, 857 students progressed onto a course at a higher level within Northampton College. The college monitors intended destinations but a significant proportion, even of intended destinations, is unknown. The collection and analysis of destination data are poor.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

57 The college self-assessment report is clearly presented. It was submitted to the academic board and then to governors. The report is acknowledged by the college to be mainly descriptive and lacks quantitative data although some analysis is undertaken. There is no clear indication whether strengths outweigh weaknesses, or the converse. Some issues are not given sufficient weight and some elements of staffing and accommodation are not dealt with at all. The production of future reports will be integrated with formal quality assurance procedures.

58 The college has recognised the need to develop and implement a comprehensive and coherent quality assurance system. Current initiatives lack the support of a clear college-wide framework. Individual elements intended to assure quality have been piloted and introduced or rejected;

others are being developed. During 1994-95, a pilot project was started in which the academic board undertook in-depth reviews of six courses. Five courses were reported on. The results were judged to lack rigour and in-depth analysis. The pilot was abandoned prior to the report back of the sixth course review. A policy on quality and a framework have been devised recently. Both have been accepted by the college management team. Although the policy involves governors it has not yet been presented to the corporation. Governors have not received sufficient information on retention rates, satisfaction surveys and examination results to fulfil their policy role. The new framework will build on elements of existing practice and adapt and strengthen these to support the new quality assurance system.

59 Currently, the major focus for monitoring quality is the system of course review and evaluation. Course teams complete comprehensive course review and evaluation records. Teams have designated meeting times. Agendas are set and minutes are taken. There are student representatives on these course teams. Many of the copious course files represent a substantial compendium of information. This is not used in a systematic way to inform action planning and decision-making processes within departments. In some fundamental areas, such as students' achievements, there are serious discrepancies between departmental and college data. Review is not carried out with reference to clearly-defined standards and performance indicators. Only some functions within student services have identified performance indicators. Course reviews take account of the needs of examining, validating and accrediting bodies.

60 All courses are reviewed annually and an action plan is produced. This does not include targets against which actual improvement can be measured. There is a lack of clarity about how course action plans are implemented, monitored and followed up. In many areas, there is little discernable follow-up from action planning. There is a general lack of critical analysis of the teaching and learning process and the effectiveness of programmes. A pilot project involving classroom observation has taken place in two departments. Course reviews and action plans form the basis for departmental reviews and plans. These too lack specific and measurable targets against which progress can be measured. Issues and action points which cannot be resolved at course team or departmental level go to the college management team. Not all staff are clear how these corporate issues are handled since feedback is informal. There is no internal approval process for the development of new programmes on a corporate basis.

61 Another initiative undertaken in 1994-95 was the introduction of posts of professional support tutors. Professional support tutors have no management responsibility; they are not part of departmental management teams nor do they have clearly-defined roles in quality assurance. The professional support tutors observe classroom practice

for the appraisal system. It was envisaged by senior managers that the professional support tutors would have a role in internal inspection and quality audit but departmental managers were left to define roles for their individual professional support tutors. This has resulted in completely different roles and functions for professional support tutors both between departments and within departments. The picture is confused and the contribution of these tutors to quality assurance is variable and unclear. The professional support tutors are not set clear targets so their effectiveness cannot be assessed. The college has recognised that the role of professional support tutor needs to be defined more clearly within the overall framework which has just been developed for quality assurance.

62 The college seeks feedback from students through a 'first impressions of college' survey and a questionnaire about the students' perceptions of courses. Currently these are collated manually. This is a time-consuming process. Departments have analysed the data that are relevant to them with varying degrees of thoroughness. The college registrar produces a college overview of the data. There is no formal process, as yet, for responding to feedback from students. The college is aware of the need to devise mechanisms for eliciting the views of employers and parents but has not yet done so. The college charter was revised for 1995-96 and another revision has been produced in readiness for 1996-97. The college recognises that in the current charter, the commitments made are not sufficiently challenging and could be more specific. The charter is supported by a more comprehensive charter file containing additional documentation such as college policies.

63 The Open Campus has devised its own quality assurance system. In an attempt to combat the isolation of programmes delivered in centres throughout the town, a quality support programme was initiated both to monitor and evaluate quality, and to support part-time tutors. A programme of visits was instituted in 1993. Classroom observation is an essential part of the process and tutor evaluation sheets are collated. The record of findings is insufficiently evaluative and does not indicate future actions. Part-time tutors in the Open Campus feel well supported. They are provided with four half-day induction sessions and a tutor's handbook. Although they do not have access to the appraisal system, they are given the opportunity to have an interview to discuss their work and any staff-development needs. They have access to the college staff-development programme as well as a specific programme aimed at their particular needs. The college has been awarded the Basic Skills Agency quality mark.

64 The system of internal verification is developing well. The college produced a policy for internal verification in May 1995 and considerable work has been done in this area. An internal verification panel was set up which includes departmental representatives. The panel has responsibility for managing the verification process. It sets up strategies and procedures, and monitors and evaluates their implementation. Individual departmental verification teams have also been established. There are

now standardised documents and practices across the college. A considerable amount of work has been done to train staff in this area. Lead body assessor awards D32 and D33 have been achieved by 107 staff and 69 more are registered and working towards these; 25 have achieved D34 and 13 are registered and working towards it. There are some problems associated with instituting the full system of internal verification because of pressures on time and financial constraints, particularly in practical areas such as hairdressing.

65 There is a clear staff-development policy which is intended to achieve a balance between the needs of the college and the needs of individual staff. New application forms were introduced in 1994-95 in an attempt to target resources more effectively and to support college strategy. These required clearer identification of the benefit to the college or the department, in tandem with the needs of the individual. The staff-development plan does not anticipate future developments and the training these may entail. Staff-development needs for courses or departments are not identified through course reviews or departmental plans. Currently, staff appraisal for teaching staff is based on a two-year cycle and a one-year cycle for support staff. Although the system has been in place for over two years, some teaching staff have still not been appraised. The college achieved the Investors in People Award in July 1995. There is an induction programme for staff new to the college. This comprises a one-day meeting plus four further one-hour meetings on cross-college matters. New members of staff are assigned a mentor.

RESOURCES

Staffing

66 Teaching staff are suitably qualified for the courses they teach. Some have recent industrial experience. Forty per cent of the teaching staff are part time and many are from industry and commerce and are able to bring up-to-date knowledge of the world of work into the classroom. Staff do not, however, have many opportunities to update their experience of industrial and commercial practices. Compared with 45 per cent nationally, 56 per cent of the full-time and fractional contract academic staff are educated to degree level. Eighty-one per cent are teacher trained. The average length of service varies from 4.8 years in care and social studies to 9.7 in science and technology. Men and women form equal numbers of the 260 full-time staff. Thirteen of the 29 managers are women.

67 There are 106.5 full-time equivalent support staff, of whom 81 are full time. Support staff are well integrated with curriculum teams. There are 10 technician instructors. They provide technical support and help the students in their use of equipment. Support staff have been appointed as work placement supervisors in care, beauty, catering, and leisure. Two technicians provide centralised support for information technology. There is one technician, assigned to media studies, who has 40 per cent of his

time nominally allocated to providing support for cross-college audio-visual equipment such as video cameras. Some technicians and technician instructors teach on a paid part-time basis in addition to their main role. Each department has an administrative officer to provide support for the head of department. There are 12 support staff on the main site for security, minor maintenance, and janitorial duties. There is one site supervisor at Kings Heath and two site supervisors at Military Road. Cleaning and major buildings maintenance work are contracted out.

Equipment/learning resources

68 Curriculum areas are well equipped. Of particular note are the wide range of basic laboratory equipment in science, the well-equipped welding shop and vehicle body repair facilities, and the high quality of the computing rooms in business. There is catering equipment of industrial standard and a health suite with commercial fitness equipment. All aspects of art and design, performing arts and media studies have excellent facilities. There are some minor weaknesses in specialist equipment such as a lack of modern analytical equipment in science; some video equipment for media studies is outdated. The information technology equipment for basic education at Military Road is poor.

69 Computing equipment is modern and appropriate; software is comprehensive and has been standardised across the college. The drop-in computer suite on the main site has approximately 120 modern machines able to run modern business software. There is a mix of facilities which must be booked in advance and open access areas. Opening hours are extensive. There are other computer suites around the site to support specialist areas. Most have modern hardware. Art and design has a suite of modern Apple Mac computers which are of industrial standard. The engineering suite also has computer-aided design software of industrial standard. Departments can purchase their own hardware and software but purchases are vetted by the computer manager to ensure compatibility and commonality. Machines are networked within individual suites; cables have been installed to network the whole site. There are two computer suites at Military Road with a mix of modern and dated machines. The computing facilities at Kings Heath are adequate. There is a computing network group which meets regularly to discuss relevant operational and strategic matters. The group has produced a computing and information technology policy which is being implemented as money permits.

70 The library is managed within the student services department. The library network committee meets twice a term with representatives from every department. There is a reasonable number of books (30,000) but the stock has not been reviewed recently in order to remove dated texts. The budget for books is £30,000. A library report has been produced for the head of department. The library on the first floor of the main block is accessible to wheelchair users. It has a dated appearance. There is a

limited amount of study space. There are separate, but small, quiet and group study areas. The quiet study area houses reference materials. Some curriculum areas also have their own small bookstock. The catalogue has been computerised and can be accessed by students from within the library. The Kings Heath catalogue is also available. Most of the library administrative functions have been computerised including records and recording. There are two computers with compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database readers. The library also has a collection of European material, careers material, a photocopier, and a colour printer for CD-ROM material. Opening hours are suitably extensive. The library at the Kings Heath site is mainly for childcare students. It is well stocked, with a catalogue which has been computerised.

Accommodation

71 The quality of accommodation is generally good. The majority of day courses are on the main site in modern buildings. The site is landscaped, provides a pleasant environment and is clean. The first, and main, building was opened in 1972. Seven new buildings have been added since 1987 including three in the last two years. Car parking has been substantially extended and is well laid out but there is still insufficient space to meet demand. There have been major extensions and remodelling of existing buildings including those for catering, beauty therapy, motor vehicle, engineering and performing arts facilities. The main site is well served by public transport.

72 There are a number of catering facilities. The main cafeteria has been extensively refurbished and provides separate smoking and non-smoking facilities. There is also a coffee shop, a restaurant and an ethnic food shop. The students' common room provides a meeting place; it has a kitchen and some games machines. There is no common room specifically for adult students. There are five mobiles which contain offices and classrooms. These have a poor external appearance but have been redecorated internally to provide an adequate learning environment. Two of them are used for support staff, thus freeing better quality accommodation for teaching. Some accommodation issues remain, such as the limited practical facilities in leisure, overheating in the art and design information technology suite and the shortage of rehearsal space and practice rooms in performing arts. Signposting to buildings and to rooms within buildings, especially the various support workshops, is poor.

73 An accommodation strategy has been produced. It is mainly descriptive. The key immediate decisions relate to the future of Kings Heath and to the provision of learning support for students. The Kings Heath centre was previously a school and was transferred to the college in 1986. There is a main building plus a number of mobiles. It is not well sited for some of the courses currently being offered at this centre.

74 The Military Road centre is close to the town centre and serves the needs of local residential and commercial communities. This centre was

previously an elementary school and transferred to the college in 1993. It is used for courses providing access to further education provision and adult basic education, and for provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and English for speakers of other languages. The interior has been repainted and is in good condition. Some rooms have been carpeted. The exterior of the building is in poor condition with crumbling stonework.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

75 Particular strengths of the college are:

- committed, knowledgeable and enthusiastic governors
- the high quality of the accommodation and equipment
- the range and diversity of staff who are well qualified
- generally good results
- relevant staff development to support new vocational provision
- productive relationships with the local authority
- commitment to the Northampton Compact as a planning forum
- documentation procedures for initial advice and guidance.

76 Issues to be addressed are:

- the effectiveness of the current organisational structure
- inconsistency in the implementation of the college's guidelines and policies
- the limited influence of strategic planning on decision making
- absence of an integrated system for quality improvement
- the lack of performance indicators and realistic targets
- poor attendance and low retention rates in some areas
- limited development of flexible provision
- insufficient market research
- access to and organisation of learning support.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

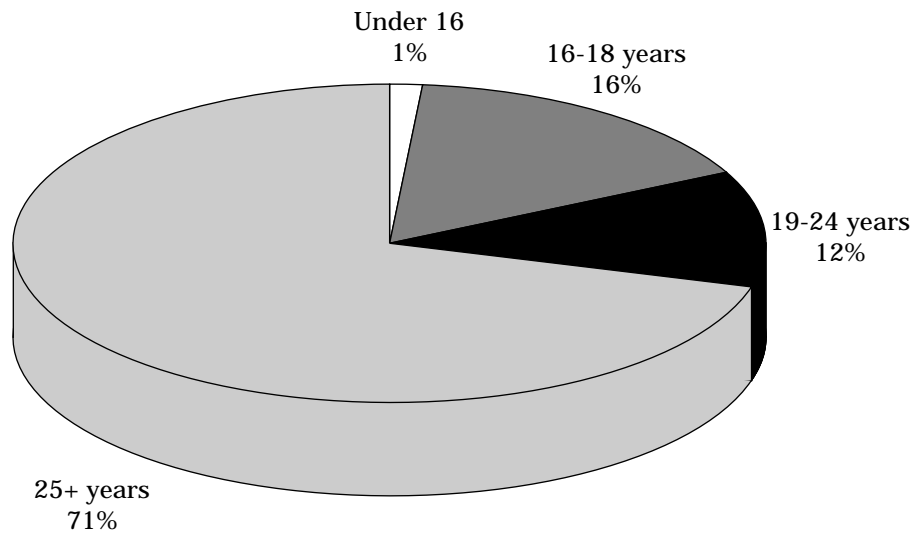
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 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

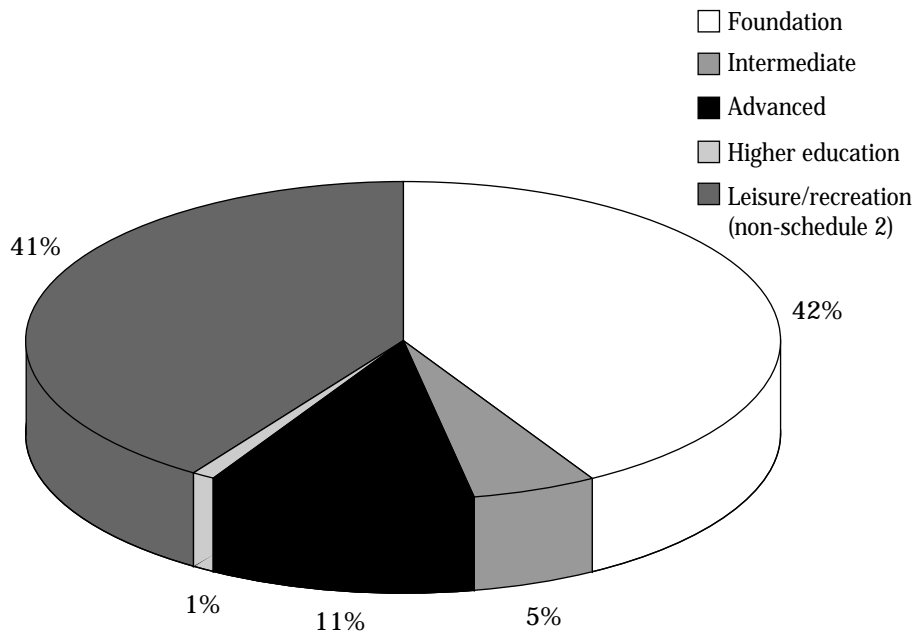
Northampton College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 21,485

Figure 2

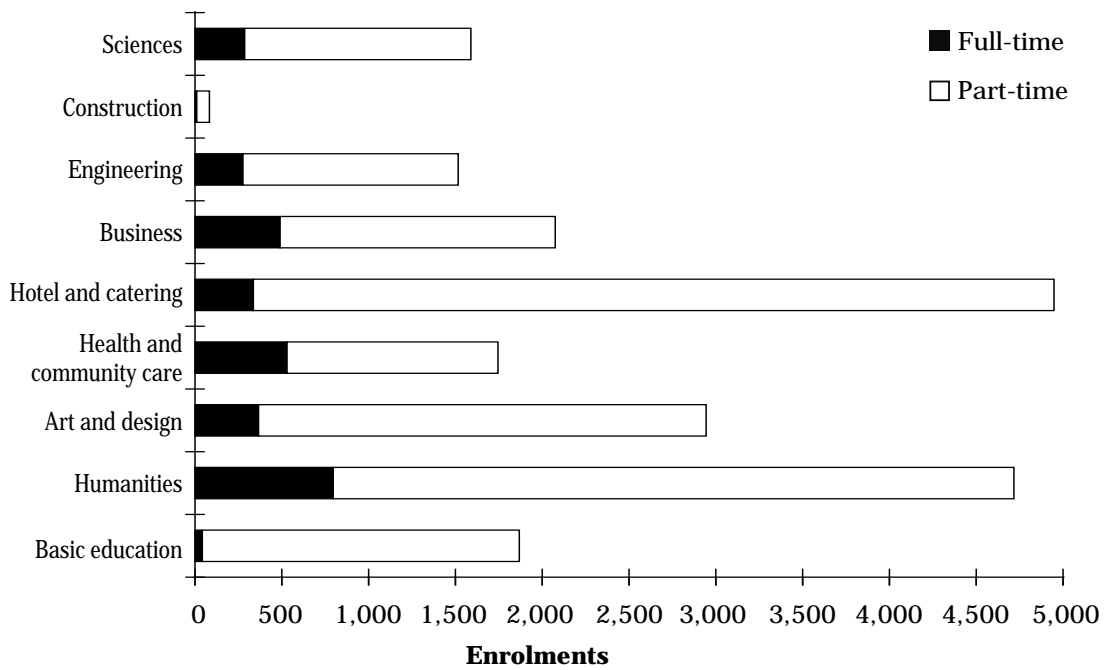
Northampton College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 21,485

Figure 3

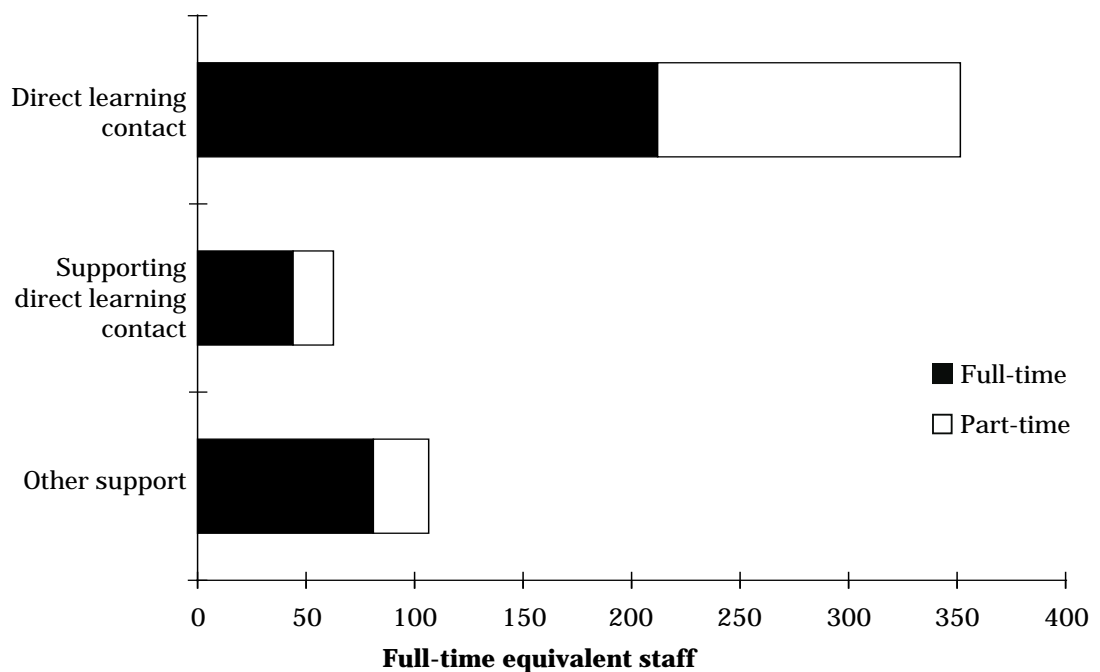
Northampton College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 21,485

Figure 4

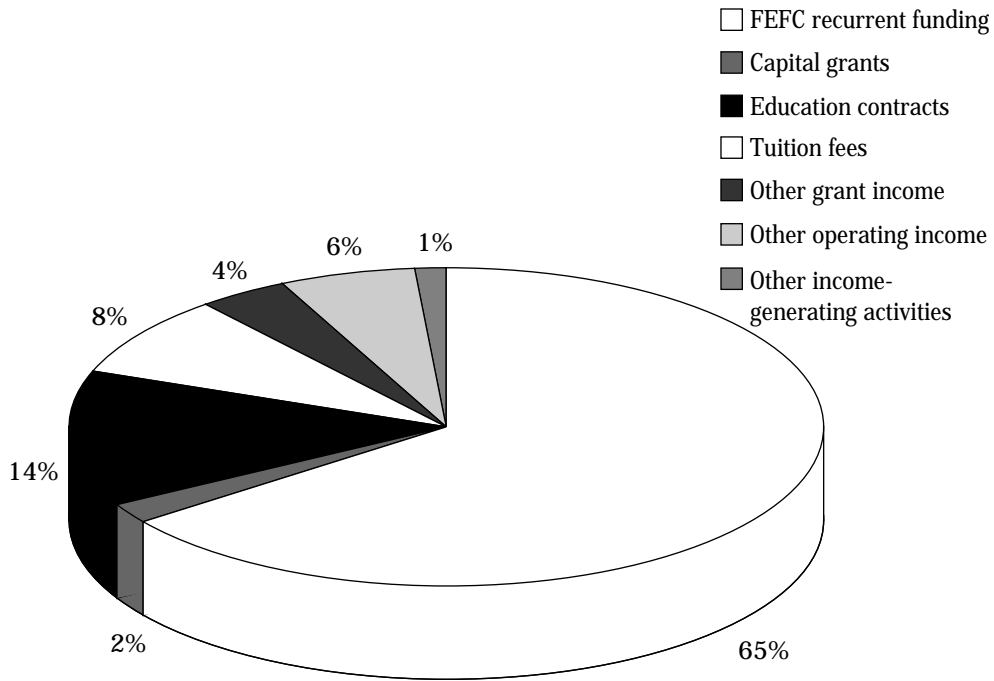
Northampton College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 521

Figure 5

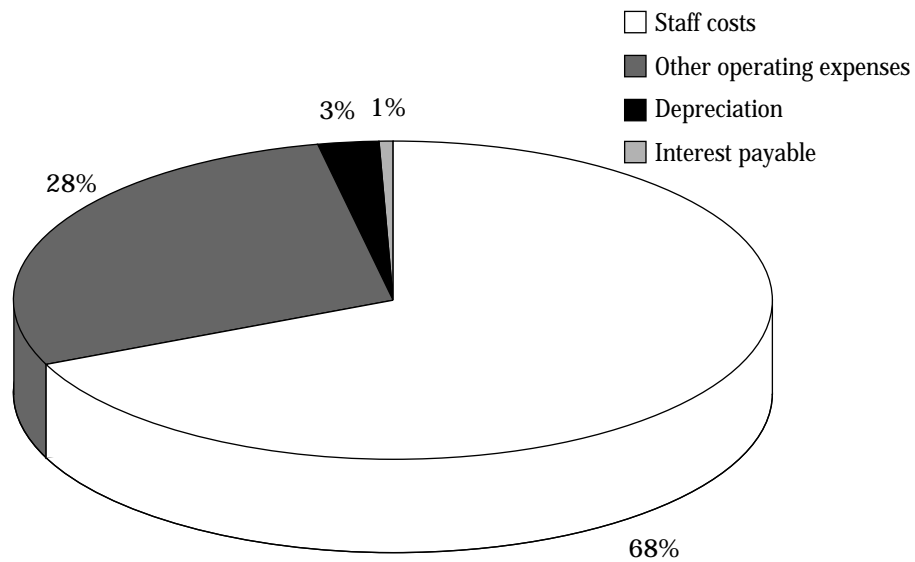
Northampton College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £13,828,000

Figure 6

Northampton College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £13,992,000

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