

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Reaseheath College

May 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

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

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

College grade profiles 1993-96

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

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 54/97

REASEHEATH COLLEGE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected July 1996-January 1997

Summary

Reaseheath College has responded well to the diverse demands of the land-based industries and the national education and training priorities. It has productive links with a wide range of organisations. The governing body brings wide experience to its work and effectively carries out its responsibilities. Senior managers work well as a team in changing and challenging circumstances. The college copes with a lower average level of funding than most similar colleges and has generated considerable income. It operates efficiently. Prospective students are well supported through the processes of admission. Teaching on engineering courses is of a high quality and much of the teaching on other courses is good. Teaching in weaker sessions does not take enough account of the needs of individual students and, in a few cases, the pace of work is too slow. All students work well together, show commitment and interest in their studies and pay due attention to health and safety issues. Most courses have high levels of attendance, retention and achievement. The system devised to assure quality is easy to understand and comprehensively documented. There is enough equipment and learning resources in all teaching areas, and the quality is good. Both the quality and quantity of accommodation is of a high standard. The college successfully manages its estate. To make further progress the college should: ensure that cross-college policies and initiatives are implemented consistently and effectively by all staff; improve sector management; maximise use of the management information system; manage the learning support for students more effectively; ensure greater consistency in the quality of schemes of work across areas; improve the recording of students' achievements in key skills; ensure consistent application of quality assurance procedures; more closely link staff-development activities to key college priorities; and review staff deployment and workloads.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	3
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	1
accommodation	1

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Agriculture	2	Engineering	1
Animal care and equine	2	Business and management	2
Countryside, horticulture and arboriculture	3		

INTRODUCTION

1 Reaseheath College, near Nantwich in Cheshire, was inspected between July 1996 and January 1997. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in July and September 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in the week beginning 27 January 1997. Ten inspectors spent 52 days in college. They visited 68 classes, examined students' written work and observed students in their practical work. Inspectors looked at documentation, including the college's strategic plan and self-assessment report. They held meetings with the college's governors, managers, teachers, staff responsible for support services, past and present students, parents, employers, members of the community, a range of partners of the college, and representatives from South and East Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). They attended interviews of prospective students and an awards presentation event. They observed meetings of the senior management team and the governing body.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Reaseheath College was originally established as the Cheshire School of Agriculture in 1921 to serve the needs of the farming and cheese-making industries. Its range of activities has grown considerably and now includes most land-based and associated industries. The majority of courses are at further education level, but there are also some higher education and short courses. The college has a small amount of off-site collaborative provision in horticulture at centres in the county.

3 The college estate is approximately 200 hectares, most of which is farmed. It includes sports fields, ornamental gardens, woodlands, water features and a nine-hole golf course. The estate is used as a 'green laboratory' and as a base for conducting commercial businesses as part of courses. Commercial organisations with links to courses rent accommodation on the college estate. These include TetraPak, Air Products, Milk Marque, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Cheshire Ranger Service, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Crewe Alexandra Football Club and an equine clinic of a local partnership of veterinary surgeons.

4 The college attracts students locally, nationally and internationally. In 1995-96 a total of 2,162 students were enrolled. Student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. The college also enrolled over 1,000 students on short courses not funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in the same period.

5 The mission of the college is 'to secure the provision of a range of high-quality learning and development opportunities to meet the aspirations of individuals and businesses and promote economic prosperity, especially within the rural environment'. The college strategic plan identifies five main goals. They aim to make the college well known locally, regionally and nationally for the provision of:

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- good teaching and the promotion of lifetime learning by well-qualified, experienced staff
 - an appropriate range of activities and courses which are responsive to the changing needs of potential and existing clients and consistent with government aims
 - impartial guidance and support for students before, during and after their attendance on Reaseheath courses
 - opportunities for all Reaseheath students to develop academically, practically and socially to achieve their personal learning targets
 - well-managed resources, used efficiently and effectively, and governed by the purpose of maximising the benefits for all who come to learn, work and enjoy Reaseheath.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 Staff are well informed about national initiatives and policies in further education, and issues relating to agricultural education. This knowledge is well used in planning a response to the changing needs of employers and students. Some course managers are not fully aware of the implications of the FEFC's funding methodology for their work.

7 The college is effectively responding to national education and training priorities by extending and diversifying its range of provision. Courses in agriculture, horticulture, agricultural engineering and food technology are long established. Over the last few years courses in equine studies, animal care, countryside management, construction and, most recently, business studies have been introduced. Students have a good choice of entry points to courses and clear progression routes. The choice of countryside courses is somewhat limited, especially for part-time students. Growth is a major priority for the college and over the last few years there has been a rapid expansion in enrolments. Full-time enrolments rose by over 40 per cent between 1993-94 and 1996-97.

8 Students are offered a wide range of activities to enrich the curriculum and broaden their experiences. These enable them to develop personal qualities directly relevant to their future employment and raise their general awareness of the rural environment. Students visit local enterprises, undertake study tours in the United Kingdom and abroad, and most participate in work experience. The college's commercial operations and specialist facilities are used effectively to provide students with realistic experiences. Many full-time students are involved in carrying out the routine tasks on these units and this helps them to develop appropriate skills. In most areas, full-time students have the opportunity to gain qualifications in addition to those of their main course. These are often practically-based qualifications that enhance the students' employment opportunities. There are good opportunities, effectively supported by the college, for the students to take part in sporting, social and special interest activities. Some students take responsibility for

arranging these. Timetable constraints mean that not all students are free to participate in the competitive sports.

9 The college has undertaken a number of successful initiatives to remove barriers to studying. It provides:

- subsidised transport
- programmes of study with flexible patterns of attendance
- block-release courses for employed students
- modularisation of courses to enable them to be studied on a full-time or part-time basis
- a later start to the timetable for older students with parental or other caring responsibilities
- courses aimed at students with learning difficulties.

10 The college promotes its courses well. Publicity material is attractively presented and widely distributed to local schools, careers officers and industry. The college maintains a high public profile through regular press articles, attendance at agricultural shows and by opening the college to the public. Every year the college attends about 80 careers conventions and visits all local secondary schools. Prospective students are given many opportunities to visit the college. Information days are held for careers officers and teachers. There is scope to manage these activities more coherently and thus improve further their effectiveness.

11 The college has strong links with industry which help to ensure the continuing vocational relevance of the curriculum. New course development is firmly based on the views of industry. Employers contribute generously to the students' learning experiences. Local employers provide work experience placements for students, allow their specialist facilities to be used for practical work, encourage study visits to their premises and participate in the design and assessment of students' assignments. There is a wide range of full-cost courses which meet the needs of industry and commerce both in the United Kingdom and abroad. Employers comment favourably on the adaptability of the college in meeting their training needs. Good links exist with the local TEC which has found the college responsive and receptive to new initiatives.

12 College partnerships extend training and educational opportunities. For example:

- employers and local rural interest groups based on the estate assist the sharing of resources, the transfer of technical knowledge and regular contacts between practitioners and students
- links with two higher education institutions have extended the range of provision to higher level courses
- there are joint general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) business courses run with a local school

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- a range of leisure interest courses was introduced two years ago based on the college's specialist facilities and supported in its first year by the TEC.

There is scope for improved co-ordination and development of this work and for more use to be made of it in recruitment.

13 There is an equal opportunities policy and the college shows a clear commitment to equality of opportunity. There are weaknesses in implementing the policy. Procedures and responsibilities are not clearly defined and monitoring is inadequate. There has been little related staff development and some staff need to have their awareness raised to the issues involved. There are strong gender imbalances among students recruited to some courses. Although most of these generally reflect patterns in the industries served, few initiatives have been taken to change them on college courses. The disability statement was not widely debated in the college. Plans for its dissemination are inadequate.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

14 Governors have a wide range of experience, are highly supportive of the college and effectively carry out their responsibilities. The governors contribute experience in farming, agricultural engineering, banking, surveying, accountancy, and management in education, industry and commerce. The chief executive of South and East Cheshire TEC is a member and there is a student representative and two staff representatives. Many of the 17 members, including the principal, serve on regional and national committees. The clerk is well informed and has undertaken relevant training. He was a member of the FEFC committee which produced the guidance for clerks. There are six subcommittees of the board: finance and general purposes; audit; remuneration; staff disciplinary; student disciplinary; and farm management. Meetings of the board and its subcommittees are well attended. Clear and well-presented papers for meetings arrive in good time. Full board meetings can be attended by up to six members of the public, on request.

15 Governors strive to improve their own performance and that of the college. They have been involved in several training events and have used external consultants to extend their understanding of financial and auditing issues. They have decided that expertise in legal matters and property management would strengthen the board's effectiveness and they intend to use any vacancies to recruit appropriately-qualified members. Governors participate in strategic planning and review within a clear annual calendar of activities. They have made a significant contribution to a revision of the college's mission statement and strategic objectives. The revised mission statement reflects the diversification of provision and the widening range of students' achievements.

16 The college has policies for health and safety, equal opportunities, tutorials, quality assurance and information technology. It has an

environmental policy statement. The health and safety policy is systematically implemented and carefully monitored. There is a lack of clarity about the responsibility for monitoring the implementation of other cross-college policies. Agreed procedures are not always followed at sector and course team levels. As a result, there are inconsistencies in the implementation of policies across the college.

17 The senior management team, comprising the principal and four directors responsible for finance, administration, resources and the curriculum, respectively, work well together as a team. They have a clear view of the challenging and changing context in which the college is operating and have developed strategies to manage these changes. Senior management meetings are timetabled, frequent and productive. The principal also meets weekly with each director. Senior managers' job descriptions are clear and differentiated, though they do not include specific responsibilities for the implementation of cross-college policies.

18 The college is organised in seven sectors:

- agriculture
- horticulture
- turf and arboriculture
- dairy food and science
- countryside, animal care and equine studies
- business and management
- engineering and construction.

Sector management is not well co-ordinated across the college. This has led to variable standards of practice within and between sectors. Development plans are good in the engineering and equine sectors. Some other sector plans are not so well informed by available information, the outcomes of course reviews or good practice elsewhere in the college. Recruitment targets have not been met by all sectors, but the college as a whole has met its recruitment targets in the past two years. Sector managers' meetings are sometimes dominated by operational issues, such as course timetabling, rather than curriculum issues, such as how courses could be better taught. Sector managers create their own priorities for development as a result of these meetings. Cross-college initiatives, therefore, are not being consistently implemented.

19 Some course management is weak. Course management is a key task of some teachers, but their job descriptions do not make clear their management responsibilities and consist, instead, of a checklist of tasks which encompasses a wide range of unprioritised responsibilities. Course managers often focus on the day-to-day administrative aspects of their role, many of which could be carried out by support staff. Course managers are not always effective in analysing and using the information which they collect. They could be better trained for the managerial aspects of their roles.

20 The college estate is effectively managed to balance the changing needs of the curriculum with the successful demonstration of the practical and commercial aspects of land-based industries. The management of the college farm offers examples of good practice for students.

21 Communication between staff at all levels is generally good. There are frequent opportunities for informal communication and liaison which staff value. They feel that their managers are easily accessible and willing to discuss issues as they arise. Formal communication occurs through a range of committee meetings, including the academic board, its subcommittee on academic standards, and a curriculum group. Minutes of all meetings are available in the library. The principal holds regular meetings with groups of staff. A whole staff meeting is held annually. Many staff would like this event to occur more often.

22 The computerised management information system is capable of providing a wide range of up-to-date, accurate information on students and courses quickly. Although this information is easily accessible to staff through computers, they do not make good use of what is a potentially powerful system. By using their own records rather than the centralised system course managers are not always aware of trends which are important as a basis for review and planning. The information technology manager is well aware of developments in this area as he is a member of one of the FEFC consultative groups on statistical matters.

23 The college is one of the most efficient agricultural colleges in the sector. Its average level of funding has decreased from £21.80 per unit in 1994-95 to £18.85 in 1996-97. The median for all agriculture colleges in 1996-97 is £22.86 per unit. The clear and well-understood system of budget allocation and monitoring is regularly reviewed. Steps have been taken to generate income from full-cost courses and other external sources. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6. These indicate that 48 per cent of the college's income was derived from FEFC-recurrent funding. In a few instances, the college has not claimed as many funding units as it might from the FEFC.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

24 Admission processes are effective. Students are able to have either general or course-specific interviews. There are guidelines for staff conducting interviews to ensure that students receive all the information they need. Staff keep to these guidelines assiduously. Prospective students for equine courses who have had limited previous experience are offered the opportunity to improve their practical skills in the summer before their course starts. Adult students who have not studied for a while are offered a course in the summer to prepare them for returning to study. Those who took part in this found it useful in easing the transition back into education. Enrolment is conducted in a welcoming and efficient way. At this early stage, students are made well aware of both their own and the college's responsibilities in the learning process.

25 Most induction to courses and the college is of a good standard. New students are able to get to know each other and their teachers. Activities are well matched to students' abilities and experiences. A joint group of first-year and second-year horticulture students were divided into groups, and given an assignment and a deadline for its completion. The second-year students then had to manage their 'unskilled' workforce to mark out two flower beds and undertake a grass and shrub identification exercise and some library research. New students gained a good idea of what the course would involve and second-year students were able to practise their management skills. Most full-time students are well informed about the facilities which the college offers and the specialist support which is available. Part-time students are less well informed.

26 The systems for managing the provision of support for students are weak. Staff who are responsible for providing this support for students do not meet formally. There are no clear delineations of responsibility among staff. The many staff who are involved in giving support to students do not have specific guidelines on their role. Records of all action taken with a student are not kept together and, in some cases, do not exist.

27 The services offered by the careers and learning support units are of a good standard. Some course managers and personal tutors do not make best use of them for the benefit of their students. Students who have individual careers guidance interviews value the support they receive. There is a careers room in the library which has good general careers information and a careers noticeboard. However, information relating to land-based and other associated careers is not kept in this room, which can be confusing for students. All full-time and some part-time students undertake a diagnostic test in basic skills at the beginning of their course. The test and an early course assignment are analysed by both course teachers and specialist learning support staff. Course managers of those who are identified in this way as in need of learning support are informed, and it is their responsibility to ensure that the student is contacted and encouraged to attend sessions. Some course managers are slow in implementing their part of this process. Thus, some students did not know that they had been identified as in need of extra support until well into their first term. When informed, students do take up the offer of extra support and are conscientious about attending sessions. Sometimes timetabling, especially for non-resident students, limits the opportunities for students to use the learning support facilities. In some courses, learning support staff work alongside teachers in the classroom. This requires more careful preparation and planning if it is to be effective.

28 The college offers a wide range of other services to students. Residential students are well supported by wardens. There is a good ratio of wardens to students and a clear duty rota for wardens. The college employs two qualified counsellors who come into college when required. Few students use this service. There is a college chaplain who regularly visits the college, supports staff and students and leads acts of worship.

Financial advice is available from the admissions section of the college. A small fund is maintained to help students who have short-term financial difficulties. There is an active students' union which organises social activities and the annual rag week.

29 Tutorial support is of variable quality. All full-time students have a personal tutor whom they are entitled to meet individually for a minimum of twice each term. Some students had not received their first interview by the mid-point of the first term. There can be long gaps between interviews which means that students' difficulties may not be quickly identified. The standards of tutorial meetings vary. A few have a clear agenda and tutors keep to the guidelines set by the college. Many do not. Personal tutorials sometimes cover areas which should be dealt with by the careers officer, the learning support section or the college counsellors. Records of most tutorials are scant, some do not use the college record form and students rarely receive copies of the action plans despite the fact that they are expected to respond to them. The progress of younger students is reported to their parents and there is opportunity for parents to visit the college to discuss this with teachers. Not enough emphasis is put on recording students' achievements. Some students record their achievements through the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) core skills system, but others have no records of the many skills they acquire during their time at the college. Few students leave the college with an up-to-date record of achievement.

30 There is a college-wide system of monitoring attendance and a timescale for following up non-attendance. The formal system is largely a disciplinary procedure and has some long timescales before action is taken. Informally, some course tutors offer a quicker and more supportive response to non-attendance. This is not always well recorded. Some students' absence appears to go unnoticed for a considerable time.

31 Students with disabilities are well supported on their courses. The college has purchased specialist equipment to help them in their studies and offers additional on-course support as necessary. The college runs joint courses with schools and other colleges for students with learning difficulties. These students gain both vocational and general life skills. The recording, review and reporting of the former is better than the latter. A few students on these courses progress to the college or enter land-based employment. Foundation level courses have been successful in helping students to improve their skills and to progress to employment or higher level courses.

32 There is an efficient system to help students to achieve all or part of their qualifications through accreditation of their prior learning. Students are given a clear and comprehensive guide to the system. In the past 12 months, 84 students have gained full qualifications and 42 partial qualification through accreditation of prior learning. These qualifications have been in management, engineering, food technology, horticulture and agriculture.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

33 Inspectors observed 68 sessions. Sixty-nine per cent of sessions had more strengths than weaknesses. This is above the average of 63 per cent for all lessons observed during the 1995-96 inspection programme according to the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96* and considerably higher than the average of 57 per cent for sessions in agricultural colleges recorded in the same report. The weaknesses outweighed the strengths in only 6 per cent of the sessions. The vast majority of courses have high levels of attendance. The main exception to this is part-time national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses in animal care. The average attendance rate at classes observed by inspectors was 91 per cent, and the average class size in these sessions was 13. The following table summarises the grades awarded to the sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GNVQ	3	5	4	0	0	12
NVQ	6	6	3	2	0	17
Other vocational	4	21	9	1	0	35
Other	2	0	1	1	0	4
Total	15	32	17	4	0	68

34 The quality of documentation to support the teaching of courses is variable. Some course handbooks, for example that for the national diploma in horticulture, are of a good standard. Others, such as that for the first diploma in horticulture, lack detail. Schemes of work and lesson plans vary from the detailed, linked and well-developed system used in engineering to some sketchy ones in agriculture. Planning for learning is not always shared with students. This is a particular handicap for students on business courses.

35 Standards of assignments and their assessment also vary from course to course. Engineering students receive clear briefs for assignments with explicit criteria for assessment. They are given a good level of feedback on their work. Interesting assignments are set in equine studies, but in a few cases students have not had their work returned promptly. In many cases in horticulture, arboriculture and countryside, briefing materials give insufficient detail about what is expected of students. The criteria for, and weighting of, assessments are unclear. In business and management courses there is an effective framework for assessment and recording which is well documented in students' portfolios.

36 Engineering sessions are invariably well planned and taught. The better lessons start with a brief recapitulation of previous work and a description of the lesson and its objectives. Teachers introduce topics clearly, often relating them to agricultural issues, and they ensure that the

work is paced to suit the abilities of students. Lessons usually conclude with a brief summary of what has been covered and the tasks to be completed by students in their own time. There is a strong emphasis on health and safety issues in workshops to the credit of both staff and students. Practical assignments are challenging and require a significant element of self-direction and time management by students. Teachers provide sound and knowledgeable support in practical sessions, but also allow students to take responsibility for their own work. In one workshop session, students were given the potentially difficult and dangerous task of splitting a tractor into two parts to examine the clutch. This task was carried out successfully under the careful supervision, but with little intervention, of staff. The session provided students with excellent experience of working in a safe way and using proper lifting and support techniques. Students thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

37 Most agriculture sessions are well planned and engage students actively in the learning process. In all cases, teachers exhibited a sound grasp of the topic being studied and possessed up-to-date knowledge and skills. Approximately a third of the sessions observed were challenging and motivating and enabled students to develop key skills to a good standard. In one session, third-year national diploma agriculture students undertook work on gross margin analysis which included an exercise on farm stocktaking and valuation. Students worked through a set of well-prepared notes on the theory and practice of farm stocktaking and valuation. They then completed a stocktake and valuation on the college farm using guidelines produced by the teacher. The teacher reviewed their work at the end of the session. Weaker agriculture sessions were less imaginative and did not address the needs of individual students sufficiently. In a few cases, an inappropriate method was used to explain a topic.

38 Animal care and equine studies sessions are generally enthusiastically presented by teachers who provide a range of learning activities linked to clear objectives. The use of some teaching methods, especially question and answer sessions, is exemplary and practical teaching on equine courses is of a high standard. Most learning activities are appropriately matched to students' experience. Tutors use a range of exemplars to help students learn. Oral feedback to students encourages them to apply their knowledge appropriately and to practise self-evaluation. There were some lively sessions. For example, in a session on animals' aggression displays the topic was illustrated with live snakes, scorpions and cockroaches as well as a video. Seeing and, in some cases, handling the animals captured the students' attention and imagination. Students made contributions from previous knowledge, asked questions and were generally involved in the session. NVQ animal care sessions were of a more variable quality. In some, the work was set at a pace suited to the least able member of the group and not sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of all students. Students do not make their own records of important information. They

are also often unclear about how they are being assessed; this is a particular problem for those students who are taking NVQs as a secondary qualification.

39 A variety of teaching and learning methods are well used in many business and management sessions. Teachers establish a good rapport and working relationship with students. Students work hard and enjoy the well-designed assignments. Key skills are effectively integrated with courses and students understand the progress they are making. In a few sessions, the abilities of students were underestimated, expectations were inappropriately low and there was a lack of pace to the work. There were instances of an overemphasis on dictated notes and a lack of encouragement for students to study and research on their own. The quality of teaching on the animal care option was below that on other parts of business courses.

40 A wide range of teaching methods is used in horticulture, arboriculture and countryside courses. In some sessions, not enough thought is given to the learning process. Although theory sessions are logically developed and illustrated with examples, only in a few cases is there variety of activity and appropriate attention paid to the individual needs of students. An example of a more successful session was in landscape drawing for horticulture students where a balanced mix of teacher demonstration, student practice with support from the teacher and group discussion enabled students to identify weaknesses in their own performance and to make progress through a graduated series of tasks. In many lessons, attempts to involve students through questions were not fully successful and often responses were monopolised by a few students. Teachers were not always clear about what notes they expected students to take. In some cases, the slower students were still concentrating on their notes when other activities were taking place. In practical classes, teachers give students clear demonstrations of the tasks that need to be done and helpful advice when students carry out the work. However, ineffective organisation and management of such sessions mean that students are not always productively engaged and weaknesses in their performance are not always identified.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

41 Students work well together, show commitment and interest in their studies and pay appropriate attention to safety issues. Many students are well informed about areas related to their courses. For example, some countryside students are particularly knowledgeable about environmental issues. Students work hard in producing written work and in their practical activities. On equine courses, students carry out yard duties effectively and achieve a high level of work. National diploma students supervise the first diploma students and report back to the yard manager. Students are successful in gaining awards from outside the college. Students from the college won the BTEC student of the year award in 1995 and the Royal Horticultural Society general student of the year award in 1996.

42 The standards students achieve in key skills such as literacy, numeracy and information technology are more variable. There are some good examples of students developing such skills. For example, on an assignment on housing a dairy herd students showed that they could use numerical data efficiently. Some students are hampered by inadequate literacy and numeracy skills. This is a particular problem on level 1 and 2 courses. Not all students are developing their information technology skills. Students on countryside, horticulture, arboriculture and business courses display appropriate levels of information technology skills but students on other courses do not. Some students on agriculture, horticulture, countryside and engineering courses do not maintain their files of materials in an efficient enough fashion for them to be helpful in revision. The common feature of weaker written assignments in horticulture, arboriculture and countryside courses is the lack of structure and conclusions.

43 Retention rates on the majority of courses are good. Engineering courses usually retain over 90 per cent of their students. In agriculture in the past two years, no full-time course lost more than 15 per cent of students, and many had 100 per cent retention rates. On part-time courses only two had retention rates less than 80 per cent. In business and management courses, the retention rates in 1996 ranged from 76 per cent to 100 per cent. No animal care course had a retention rate below 82 per cent in 1996. Of the 10 courses offered in equine studies in 1996 half had 100 per cent retention rates. Countryside courses have had consistently high retention rates over the past two years, as have most arboriculture, turf and horticulture courses. There was a large drop-out rate in the national diploma (horticulture) courses last year and a loss of part-time students on horticulture courses due to their withdrawal by their employers.

44 Students' achievements in engineering are generally very good. There are high pass rates for welding courses and for NVQ courses. In 1995, 94 per cent of students achieved engineering NVQs and 82 per cent did so in 1996. There were lower pass rates on the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) agricultural mechanics course mainly because students' achievements on the written part of the assessment were poor. As a result, only 64 per cent of students gained this qualification in 1996. The college has replaced the qualification with the competence-based C&G agricultural service engineering course and expects this will improve pass rates. Although the pass rate for the GNVQ foundation course in engineering appears low at 43 per cent in 1996, it is well in excess of the national average which was 27 per cent.

45 Business and management courses have good levels of success. All students on the introductory award in supervisory studies who enrolled achieved their award in 1996. GNVQ advanced and intermediate courses achieved pass rates much higher than national averages. The two students on the GNVQ intermediate course each achieved the award in 1995 and

14 out of 23 achieved the full award in 1996 with a further student achieving a partial award. Students taking NVQ animal care options in addition to business courses are less successful often because there has been a lack of assessment rather than their lack of ability.

46 In equine studies and animal care courses most students achieve good levels in their main programmes of study and they do particularly well on BTEC courses. In 1995, 90 per cent of animal care and 95 per cent of equine studies students gained the BTEC first diploma; in 1996, both of these courses improved their results to 93 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively. Achievement of secondary qualifications is weak. Few students enter British Horse Society examinations because they are too expensive, though the awards are highly valued in the industry. Moreover, many students do not achieve relevant NVQ qualifications alongside their main course. However, there are good pass rates on riding and road safety courses with all students, full time and part time, gaining the qualification in 1996.

47 Students achieve good results on some agriculture courses. There was a 100 per cent pass rate for the national certificate in dairy herd management in 1995 and in 1996 it was 96 per cent. Ninety-four per cent of students taking the national diploma in agriculture gained the award in 1996. However, students on a few courses, such as the national certificate in agriculture and the first diploma in agriculture, are less successful though students who failed to gain the full award often did so because of only one incomplete unit. Results for the farm book-keeping, records and accounts course are low, but improving; in 1995, 32 per cent gained the qualification and in 1996, 53 per cent.

48 For all students completing their studies last year in arboriculture, horticulture and countryside courses the proportion gaining their main award was 5 per cent below college targets. Some courses have good pass rates. For example, all students passed the advanced national certificate in countryside related studies and over 80 per cent gained first diplomas or national certificates in horticulture. Pass rates on other courses were lower. Particular causes for concern are the national certificate in countryside related studies where 70 per cent of students who completed the course gained the qualification and the part-time certificate in arboriculture where only 40 per cent of students who completed the course qualified. A high proportion of students on horticulture courses gain qualifications which are in addition to their main programme of study. This includes some who do not obtain the main qualification. For example, 93 per cent of students on first diploma courses gained relevant NVQ level 1 qualifications.

49 The destinations of almost half of the students who completed their courses in 1996 are known to the college. Of these 61 per cent had entered employment and 30 per cent continued studying at a higher level. Almost without exception, engineering students either enter employment or continue their studies at a higher level. Many countryside and business

studies students go on to higher education. About half of the students on equine studies and animal care courses continue their studies at a higher level at the end of their course.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

50 The improvement and maintenance of quality are important features of the college's strategic objectives. Reaseheath College enjoys a high reputation in the industries it serves, and aims to keep it. It has put in place a range of systems which are intended to improve the quality of students' experiences at the college. However, not all staff fully understand the need to review their practice and improve it.

51 The system of quality assurance is well thought through and easy to understand. Common documentation is of a good standard and efficiently collated in a quality assurance manual. Responsibilities for quality assurance are clearly allocated.

52 Arrangements for quality assurance in the college include: an academic standards committee, which is a subcommittee of the academic board; course teams which take responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning and review their progress regularly; surveys of student opinion conducted three times a year; three quality and curriculum co-ordinators who work across the college to support and advise staff; thorough internal audits of specific aspects of the college's work; and an internal verification system, which checks the standards applied in the assessment. This last feature is a real strength; it provides support to inexperienced staff and encourages the sharing of good practice. There are still some inconsistencies in the care with which student assignments are designed and planned. External verifiers express general satisfaction with the standards applied by the college. Verifiers from BTEC have awarded their highest ratings to the college.

53 The impact of service standards and performance indicators on the quality of college provision has been limited. Service standards have been produced for the main areas of the college's operation. Such matters as the speed with which applications are processed are monitored. Performance indicators for key aspects of course performance are published in an annual academic review. Threshold standards have been agreed, so that aspects of poor performance can be investigated. Performance indicators would be more useful if there were some benchmark standards for each course; the threshold standards are too low and too uniform to provide more than an indication of major problems. There are instances where staff have responded to missed targets by lowering the target for the following year.

54 Course managers produce course reviews to a standard format. The review teams include students, and most involve employers. The timing of some reviews is not always appropriate. When the review system is applied as intended, such as in engineering, it contributes to high standards. There are still some areas of the college which take the review process less

seriously and are insufficiently self-critical. The system depends on sector managers taking responsibility for monitoring performance, and taking action to ensure that course teams make improvements. Not all sector managers and course teams take equal care to do this.

55 There has been a series of internal audits of specific activities, such as the operation of the tutorial system and an internal inspection of teaching and learning. The audits have been thorough and carried out with integrity. The profile of lesson grades awarded by internal inspectors matches those awarded by the FEFC's inspectors. Lapses in procedures revealed by the internal audits and reviews have not all been remedied, although there is continuous follow-up to encourage such remedial action. It is clear that some staff need further support in helping them to change their practice or cope with new responsibilities.

56 Appraisal and staff development are intended to support the quality assurance process. Adequate funds are allocated to staff development, at around 1 per cent of payroll costs. There are good arrangements for the dissemination of staff-development activity, and numerous examples of staff holding meetings or short courses and demonstrations for their colleagues following their own training. A 'leisure learning' scheme allows all staff up to £40 a year to spend on learning activities. The college has the Investor in People award.

57 Staff-development activity is not always closely matched to the college's strategic objectives. Some initiatives have been well supported by staff training. A large proportion of the staff-development budget has been devoted to assessor training for NVQ work. By contrast, the organisational changes made recently would have benefited from more direct support for those taking on new roles. Management training for sector heads was needed, and to fulfil this a programme of development leading to accreditation under the management charter initiative was introduced. However, most of those who started this programme have failed to continue because of pressure of work. There is no co-ordinated approach to technical updating, and some of the opportunities negotiated for placements in industry have not been taken up. The appraisal programme has not been completed to schedule, so that some staff have not had their development needs properly identified.

58 A self-assessment report was produced in preparation for the FEFC inspection. In general terms, it is realistic. It follows the framework outlined in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*, with assessments of each college sector, as well as a cross-college review referenced to the objectives of the strategic plan. Not all areas covered by *Assessing Achievement* are covered in the report. It was produced before the annual academic review and some sections do not achieve the penetrative assessment which would have been possible had review material been used. The college suggested grades for cross-college areas; these were accurate for responsiveness and range of provision and the

three areas of resources, but too generous for the areas of governance and management, student recruitment, guidance and support and quality assurance. The college found the process a beneficial one and is planning to build on this experience.

RESOURCES

Staffing

59 There is a full-time equivalent staff of 62.5 teachers and 113.75 instructors, technicians and other support staff. Teaching staff are well qualified and have considerable vocational experience. Eighty-one per cent of teaching staff have professional teaching qualifications and 83 per cent have higher level technical qualifications. They are less well trained for their roles as tutors and managers. Support staff make a significant contribution to the experience of students. Many technical support staff are also instructors. Managers of college enterprises and their staff are actively involved in the assessment of students and their development, especially in the farm, the horticultural unit and the equine yard. Most support and teaching staff involved in assessment have achieved relevant NVQs; 73 per cent have the vocational assessor award and 48 per cent have the internal verifier award. Part-time staff are not always as well informed as their full-time colleagues of developments and initiatives on courses and in the further education sector.

60 Most staff have strong links with their industry. Up-to-date technical expertise is available through the commercial research and development enterprises on the college estates, through college enterprises such as the commercial farm and horticultural unit, and from visiting speakers who contribute to courses.

61 All staff show great commitment to students and give a significant amount of their time to support individual students' learning needs. Staff often carry many responsibilities, including course management, administration, teaching and instruction as well as securing income-producing contracts, such as full-cost recovery programmes. Many staff say they feel under considerable pressure. The college should review staff deployment and workloads.

Equipment/learning resources

62 Specialist equipment and learning resources support courses well. There are sufficient tools, materials and livestock in all areas. The equipment to support the engineering unit is particularly impressive. The college system for issuing tools allows them to be used efficiently across sectors. There is a regular effective review of capital items and an accompanying upgrading and replacement plan. Livestock is plentiful and varied; it ranges from a 150 cow dairy herd on the farm to a collection of exotic animals in the animal care unit. The plants and trees of the college estate are a useful resource for learning. Planting schemes are clearly

labelled. Classroom and laboratory equipment is generally good. In a few sessions, the overhead transparencies used were of a poor quality and handouts were not well matched to activities.

63 The library has 18,500 books, generally appropriate to support the range of programmes offered by the college. There are fewer books to support specialist options and some of the higher level courses. It is of concern that the library does not have an electronic security system. Students complain that many books go missing. Some resources such as periodicals and open learning materials are kept within sectors and are not catalogued on the library's computer database. This hinders access to these resources for all students.

64 There are good information technology facilities. Ninety-five computers of modern specification are available for students' use. The computers are networked and all will provide access to the Internet. About half the computers are available for students' use on an open access basis for seven days a week, including evenings. Computers are protected by video security cameras.

Accommodation

65 Accommodation is of a high standard. It is well decorated, clean and has the appearance of being cared for by both staff and students. The college is a pleasant and welcoming place for staff and students to work. Signs are clear both within buildings and outside on the estate. The college tries wherever possible to make buildings and other areas accessible to people with restricted mobility. The main farm buildings are modern. The other more traditional farm buildings have been well converted for educational use. The farm information room is centrally located and provides access for staff and students to all farm data. Information in this room is well presented; there are farm management statistics on wall charts, specialist support material held in folders and access to computer data.

66 There is a wildlife and landscape management plan for the college estate that demonstrates how modern commercial farming can be integrated with conservation. The college has a continuous hedge and tree planting programme. Wild plants and animals are carefully monitored. There are three marked trails that take students and visitors to the ponds, woods, hedgerows, conservation area, streams and river. Good accommodation for visitors to the estate, such as primary school children from urban areas, is provided at the Greenway Centre.

67 Specialist accommodation is generally of a high standard. Particularly notable are the agricultural engineering workshops, the recently-developed equine unit which includes a veterinary practice with an operating theatre for horses, and the range of specialist accommodation for horticulture and floristry. Parts of the animal care unit have inadequate space for the size of groups and the activities undertaken.

68 Classrooms, laboratories and the animal postmortem room are of a good standard. General classrooms do not belong to a specific sector, but most sectors use rooms nearest to their specialist facilities. Occasionally, these may not be the best rooms available for a particular group. There are few large classrooms. The college library and resources centre is an attractive building centrally located on the college estate. It has an appropriate number of study spaces, but there are no separate silent areas. There are a number of rooms within the centre which provide facilities for learning support, mathematics, careers, video viewing and information technology. There are additional information technology rooms within specialist areas, such as that for computer-aided design in engineering, and farm management terminals in the farm office and food and dairy unit.

69 Residential accommodation is of a good range and standard. Accommodation for about 230 students is available during term time. Rooms are also available for non-residential students when it is their turn to undertake early morning duties. Social facilities include a refectory, snack bar, common room area and a poolroom with televisions. The college has plans to expand these facilities. There are good sports facilities which include a general-purpose sports hall and multi-gym as well as a golf course, football, rugby and cricket pitches and access to local hockey pitches.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

70 The strengths of Reaseheath College are:

- its effective response to national education and training priorities and the needs of the land-based industries
- the many partnerships and links with the world outside the college which enhance students' learning
- the experience, support and effective work of the governing body
- the productive teamworking of the principal and directors and the efficient management of the college and its estate
- effective admission and induction procedures
- the high quality of engineering courses
- much good teaching and promotion of learning
- high levels of attendance, retention and achievement on most courses
- good relationships between students and staff within a safe and friendly environment
- well-qualified staff who are strongly committed to maximising student experiences and achievements
- a learning environment and resources of high quality to support courses.

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- 71 In order to make further progress the college should:
- implement and monitor all college policies to the standards set by the health and safety policy
 - improve sector management and support course managers to improve their efficiency
 - maximise use of the college management information system
 - manage the learning support for students more effectively and make better use of the cross-college services which are available
 - ensure greater consistency in the quality of schemes of work
 - improve the recording of students' achievements in key skills
 - ensure the consistent application of quality assurance procedures across the college
 - link staff-development activities to key college priorities
 - review the deployment of staff and staff workloads.

FIGURES

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

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

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

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

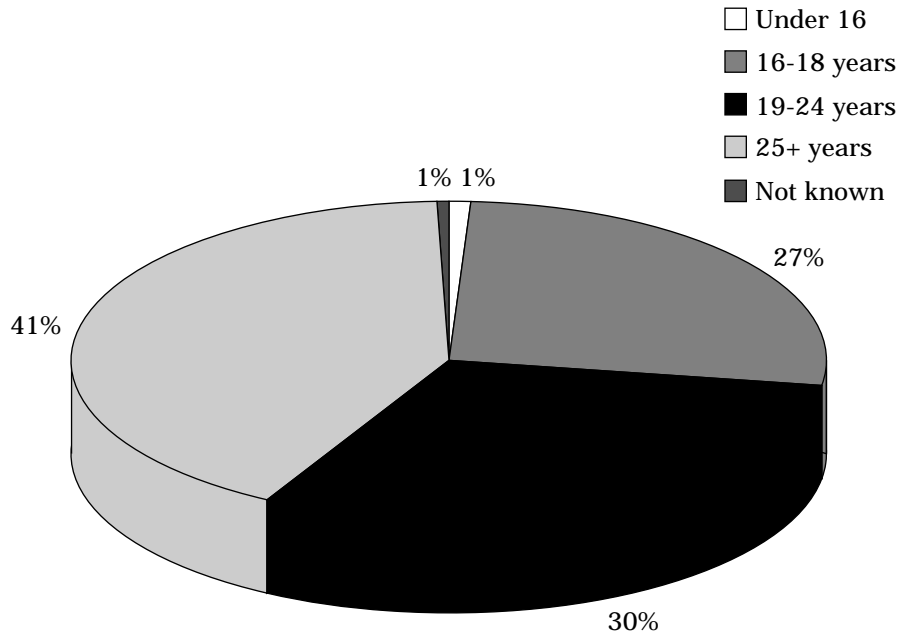
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

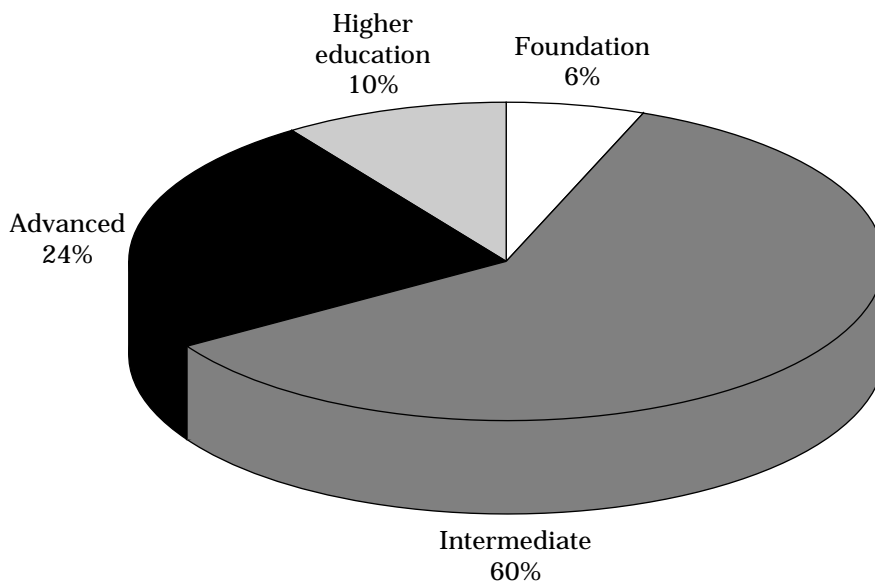
Reaseheath College: percentage student numbers by age (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,162

Figure 2

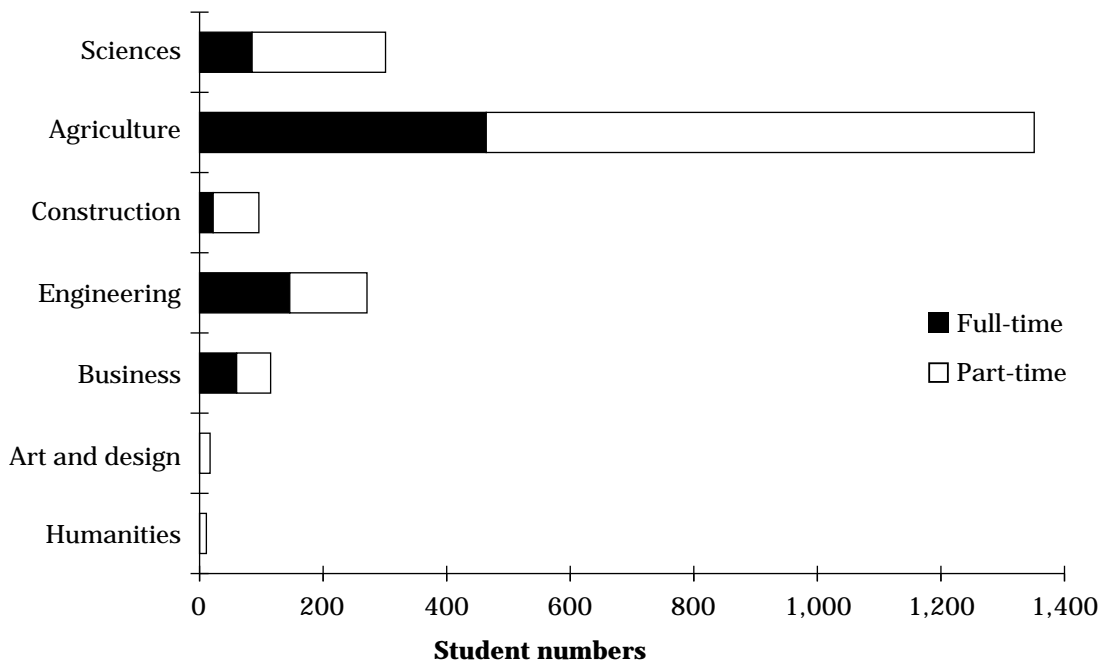
Reaseheath College: percentage student numbers by level of study (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,162

Figure 3

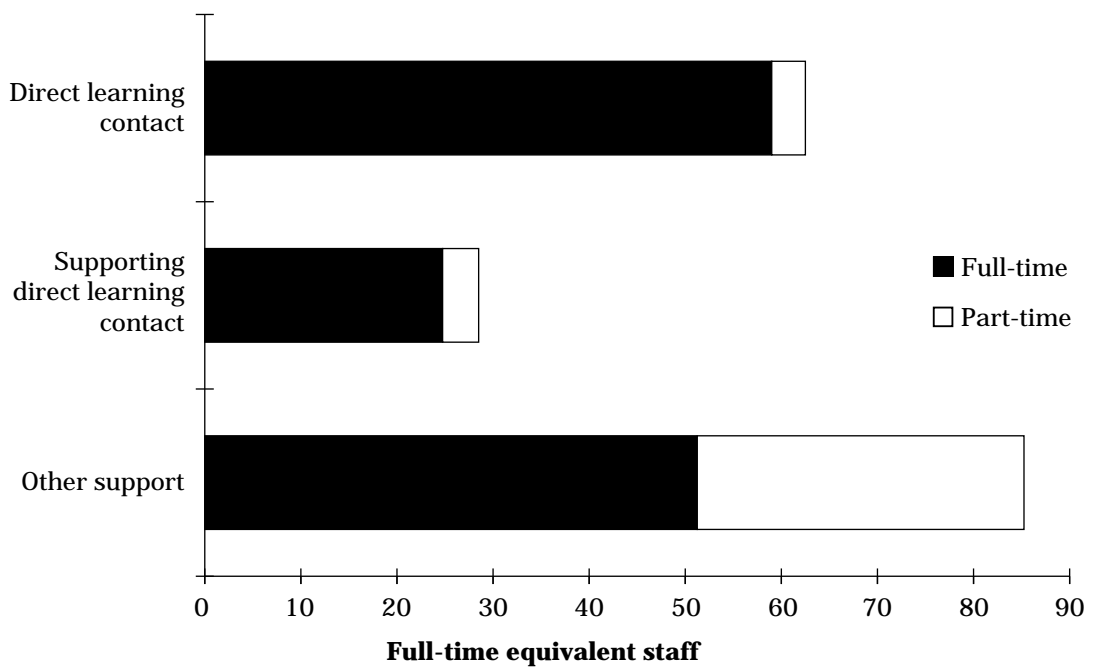
Reaseheath College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at July 1996)



Student numbers: 2,162

Figure 4

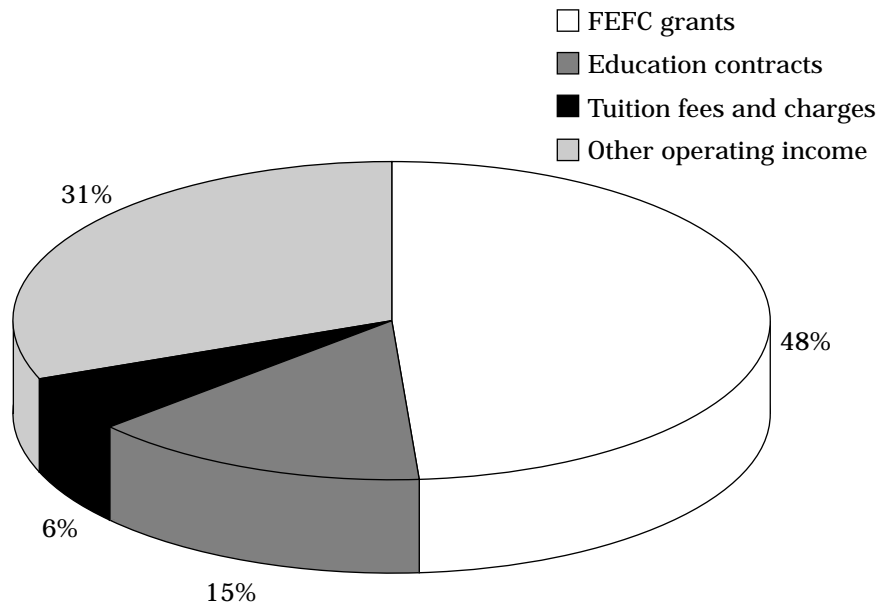
Reaseheath College: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at July 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 176

Figure 5

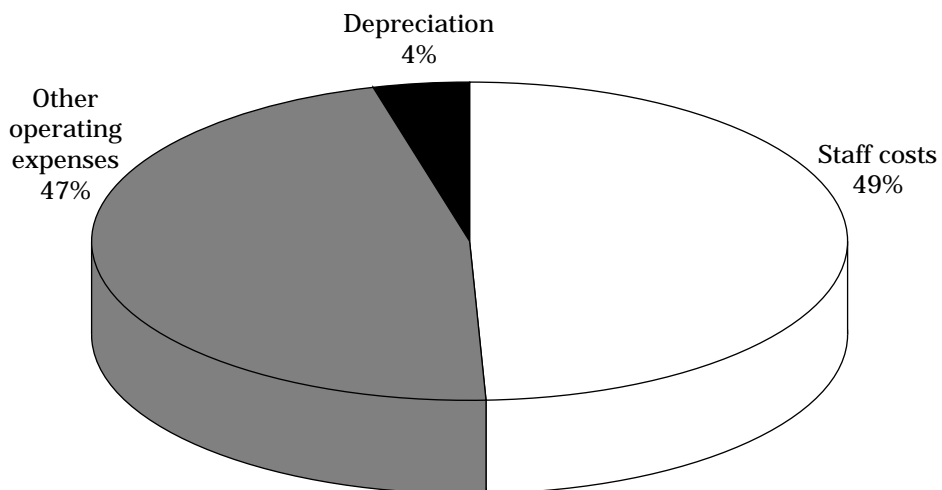
Reaseheath College: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £6,420,000

Figure 6

Reaseheath College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £6,788,000

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