

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

The Ridge

March 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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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 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.

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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 35/95

THE RIDGE, MARPLE NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected October – November 1994

Summary

The Ridge is a dynamic and responsive college. It demonstrates sensitivity to the needs of the local community and to national developments and targets for further education. Since incorporation, it has grown rapidly both in terms of student numbers and the range of courses offered. The college gives high priority to the support of students at all stages of their learning. Teaching is of a high standard. In 1994 just over half the GCE A level subjects had pass rates in line with or above the national averages; eight subjects were significantly above the national average. A high proportion of students who complete their vocational courses do so successfully. The college is well led and well managed. There are clear systems of accountability and responsibility. The strategic planning process and quality assurance systems are well integrated and the college is committed to continuous improvement. Many systems are new, and their implementation has yet to be fully monitored, using explicit, cross-college performance indicators. The management information system does not always respond quickly enough to support staff in their work. The college should continue to improve its examination results at GCE A level and in some GCSE subjects; raise completion rates on some vocational courses; improve access for students with impaired mobility; and improve social facilities for students.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science	2	Art and design including	
Mathematics and computing	3	performing arts	2
Business studies	2	English	2
		Languages	1
		Geography and history	1
		Psychology and sociology	1
Care	2	Students with learning	
		difficulties and/or disabilities	2

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INTRODUCTION

1 Inspection of The Ridge took place during 1994. A pre-enrolment induction day was observed in July and student enrolment in September. Curriculum area inspections took place in October, and aspects of cross-college provision were inspected in November. Four inspector days were devoted to enrolment and induction, 27 days to specialist inspections and 19 to cross-college assessment.

2 Inspectors observed 107 sessions, examined representative samples of students' work, and held discussions with students, staff and members of the college corporation. They attended meetings of the college's business network, the students' union executive, the senior management team and the college corporation. They examined documentation including the college's strategic plan, its self-assessment report, policy statements, operational papers, and a variety of minutes. Meetings were held with a local employer, two headteachers, a representative of the local education authority (LEA), two parents, and a representative of Stockport and High Peak Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 The Ridge is located in the village of Marple in the borough of Stockport, on the borders of the Derbyshire Peak District and approximately five miles east of Stockport itself. Marple is a mixed residential area with significant retail activity. Stockport has a population of some 284,000 and an unemployment level of 9.6 per cent, slightly below the regional average of 10.9 per cent. By the year 2000, the local workforce is expected to have grown by 21 per cent. Some 2.4 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic groups. Strong links exist between The Ridge and the metropolitan area of Manchester (Tameside, Trafford, Manchester and Salford local authorities). Students come to The Ridge from all four of these areas, and from south and east Cheshire and parts of Derbyshire. Good transport links mean that the college has a potential catchment area of nearly two million people.

4 The college is a significant employer in Marple. It employs 167 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 60 per cent are teachers and 40 per cent technical and administrative staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 1.

5 The Ridge opened in September 1989, inheriting former school buildings on two main sites at Hibbert and Buxton Lanes, within five minutes walking distance of each other. At that time, there were four years of pre-16 students and 383 post-16 students. To allow the pre-16 students to complete their studies, the college was not incorporated into the new further education sector until September 1993.

6 The college operates in a highly-competitive educational environment. There are four other further education colleges in Stockport within six miles of The Ridge, and one Derbyshire further education college 12 miles

to the south-east. Stockport schools do not have sixth forms. Two Derbyshire schools, seven and four miles from The Ridge, have sixth forms.

7 The college is organised in three divisions. The curriculum and development division houses the college's four faculties of arts, business, science and social science. These provide courses in eight of the 10 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) programme areas: science, agriculture, business, hotel and catering (including travel and tourism), health and care, art and design (including performing arts), humanities, and basic education. The other two divisions are student services comprising information services, support and progression, and operational services, comprising personnel, finance and estates.

8 At the time of the inspection, the overall growth in full-time equivalent student numbers from the previous academic year was 18 per cent, some 10 per cent ahead of target. There were 1,678 full-time students, 1,053 part-time students on accredited programmes, and an increasing number of mature students enrolling for general interest and leisure courses. The full-time equivalent students now number 1,857. Details of students' enrolments by age, level of study, and mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 2, 3 and 4.

9 The college offers a wide range of full-time and part-time courses. Accredited courses include General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level), General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) courses at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or vocational qualifications at levels one to four, and a nursery nursing diploma. There is also an access to higher education programme. Seventy-three per cent of full-time students and 28 per cent of part-time students are following non-vocational courses.

10 The college mission is 'to improve the quality of learning and the quality of life'. In order to achieve this aim the college seeks to put its students first by:

- working to achieve excellence in teaching and learning
- holding a reputation for quality and expertise
- offering appropriate support, choices, care and facilities
- supporting students and staff and valuing them equally
- sustaining an ethos of purpose and fulfilment.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

11 The Ridge is a dynamic, responsive college. It is sensitive to the needs of the local community and responds positively to developments in further education and to the National Targets for Education and Training. The college has undergone rapid expansion since its incorporation, and staff have coped well with entry to the new further education sector. The college has been successful in extending its range of provision in terms of type

and level of courses offered, and is attracting an increasingly broad spectrum of students.

12 The college has carefully expanded its portfolio of vocational courses. It has responded to local demand; for example, by introducing courses in travel and tourism, and equine studies, as well as access courses to prepare students for entry to higher education in the social sciences. There are a number of vocational courses which enable students to progress to higher level courses within the college, particularly in information technology and care. Students are given the opportunity to mix vocational and non-vocational courses.

13 Within many subjects students have a choice of syllabuses, assessment methodologies and modes of attendance. For example, provision in history has been expanded, and now includes: GCE A level courses in early, early modern, and modern periods, as well as in social and economic history; access to higher education courses; GCSE courses in history and classical civilisation; and a non-accredited course in local history.

14 Marketing is comprehensive and effective. There are explicit strategies to enable the college to identify and respond to local need, to ensure a positive corporate image, to publicise the college, to monitor the effectiveness of that publicity, and either to develop or to discontinue courses for sound, well-researched reasons. Marketing issues are integral to management and staff-development activities have included promoting an understanding of the college's marketing strategy and training in customer care. The college has a well-defined and systematic process for handling enquiries, which is monitored regularly. The college records enquiries and outcomes, and analyses the records. This whole college approach is well managed and successful.

15 There are effective links with local schools. Staff from the college visit schools regularly and participate in careers events and parents' evenings. Each member of the college's schools liaison team has been allocated responsibility for specific schools, in order to maintain continuity of contact between the staff at both establishments. This means that many new students find at least one member of college staff they recognise when they begin their course. Curriculum links with schools are particularly strong in English, mathematics and computing, the performing arts and art and design. College staff try to keep up to date with curriculum developments within local schools in order to ensure ease of transfer and a suitable choice of courses when students move to the college. Schools value the two-way link they have with the college.

16 There is a good working relationship with Stockport and High Peak TEC. Joint endeavours include youth and adult training, the education business partnership, work-related further education, the national record of achievement, careers education and guidance, and training credits or careerships. The college is developing links with two other neighbouring TECs.

17 The main link the college has with employers is through Summit, which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the college. It provides courses on the college campus or employers' premises, a business network, training advice, recruitment, consultancy, support for mentors, a 'positive management' programme and language learning. Employers speak highly of the support they receive from Summit and the network seminars are well attended. Information available to employers at Summit seminars is up to date and speakers are often of national standing.

18 There are growing links with industry through work experience and work placement programmes. All students on vocational courses were involved in some form of work experience last year. Employers who offer work placements receive well-prepared students who are supervised by college staff. Employers' comments are taken into account in the assessment of students on placements. Students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to enhance their learning and to put theory into practice. Other examples of student experience enhanced through links with employers are the use of industrial case studies, the development of a college travel shop, and close working with a local riding establishment. Thirteen teachers have had placements in industry through the education business partnership. There is scope for greater involvement of employers in the planning, development and evaluation of vocational provision.

19 Since its incorporation, the college has maintained positive links with other further education establishments and the LEA. The college principal attends the local principals' group. Good links with the LEA have ensured that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported in their transition to college. There are effective links with the nearby Bridge College, which serves students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These links enable students from the Bridge College to join courses at The Ridge on a part-time basis, and some later become full-time students.

20 The college welcomes other students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, although there are problems of physical access to some of the buildings for wheelchair users. A specialist teacher gives support to those students with a hearing impairment. Dyslexic students are given effective support which allows them to achieve their goals.

21 The college has made a commitment to bring a European dimension to students' experiences. Students benefit from a number of interesting contacts with other parts of Europe. They have access to exchanges, work placements and curriculum projects as part of their courses. The college is twinned with a lycée in Beziers which has led to work experience exchanges, a joint art visit to Paris, an amateur radio link, and a developing database for history and geography. Exchanges also take place with Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, and Hungary. The college is setting up an information technology training programme, using multi-media computer-based hardware and software for a college in Corsica.

22 The college has an equal opportunities policy which covers all aspects of student life. Students are aware of, and welcome the policy. An equal opportunities unit monitors the implementation of the policy through a number of college groups, and through questionnaires to students.

23 The ethnic backgrounds of students reflect those in the local community. Art and design courses include elements of racial and cultural awareness, designed to expand the experiences of students. As is the case in many colleges, there are many more men than women on information technology courses.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

24 The college's governors fulfil their duties effectively and are committed to supporting the college. They have a wide range of expertise, and the college has made good use of their skills in finance and personnel management. There is a representative from the local TEC and two staff representatives on the board. Two members from the students' union are invited to attend. Subcommittees covering audit, finance, and employment and remuneration meet regularly, and the governing body is kept informed of their activities.

25 Board meetings are well attended and efficiently run. There are good supporting papers, agenda and minutes. Governors show understanding of the college and its working, without getting involved in its day-to-day operation. They use their knowledge of educational developments and the local community to increase the effectiveness of debate. An annual residential meeting gives members the opportunity to undertake development activities to improve their effectiveness. The governing body is initiating processes to monitor its own performance.

26 The strategic planning process is detailed and rigorous and involves all college staff. The senior management team, comprising the principal and the three vice-principals, ensure that strategic priorities are in accord with the college's mission. The targets set are ambitious, but realistic. Operating statements include a clear allocation of responsibilities, resources and timescales. The needs analysis in the strategic plan is used effectively to underpin and inform planning.

27 The college management structure has effective lines of communication and accountability that are understood by all staff. The senior management team has been a driving force in the rapid development of the college; it leads the college in a strong and supportive manner. Senior managers have a clear view of the direction of developments in the college and a strategic overview of how long-term aims might be achieved. The principal chairs a weekly meeting of the senior management team: he ensures that it deals effectively with strategic rather than operational matters, which are delegated to the divisions. There is a good two-way exchange of information among managers in the college. Consultation with, and involvement of, other staff is a feature of senior managers style of working.

28 Faculty directors give a supportive lead to section teams. Meetings have agendas and are minuted, and outcomes are well documented. Targets are set and action planned. Despite this, teaching staff still feel, on occasions, that decisions are imposed upon them.

29 Most section and course teams are well managed. There are effective links between the planning processes at this level and those at faculty and college level. Roles and responsibilities are well defined, and staff fulfil their duties effectively and conscientiously. Section and course teams hold regular minuted meetings, although the meetings of a few teams are poorly attended.

30 The effective implementation of policy is supported by detailed operational arrangements, but the documentation is sometimes over complex, reducing understanding and making monitoring more difficult.

31 The college's average level of funding for 1994-95 is £17.49 per unit. The median for the sector is £19.02. Details of the estimated income and expenditure of the college are shown in figures 5 and 6. The college has an effective and efficient system for delegating budgets. Resource needs are identified, prioritised and related to strategic planning. Funds are made available to support new developments, including the training and development of staff, and to make new appointments to bring in the expertise which is required.

32 The college has made progress in the development of its computer-based, management information systems. The systems form part of a wider information service available at college level. Although aspects of the software used are restricting, the college is developing ways of overcoming these limitations. Databases are in place for student records and for finance. Outputs are used for managerial decision-making and for planning of provision. However, the system does not respond quickly enough to the monitoring needs of managers and tutors, and some information is still of questionable validity. Details of attendance are unreliable and can take six weeks to reach personal tutors. This causes delay in taking whatever action might be appropriate. The level of direct access to the systems provided for teaching staff and personal tutors is low. Teaching and non-teaching staff still require further training on the systems.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

33 The college gives high priority to the support of students as they enter the college, whilst they are following courses, and as they progress to the next stage of their careers. Arrangements for support are explicit, well documented and understood by staff. There are strengths in much of this work, but the tutorial system is relatively new and has not had time to be fully implemented.

34 Materials to inform prospective students and other clients about the services the college offers are of a high standard. They are well presented

and use simple language. Documentation follows a house style. Information is made available at a variety of external outlets such as local schools, the careers service and local libraries. The college advertises regularly through various media, including the local cinema. It makes sure that the local media, especially the press, are well informed of its activities and achievements.

35 The procedures for handling admissions are well defined. Staff are prepared to spend time with prospective students at all stages of the admissions process. All prospective students are interviewed. Students describe these interviews as helpful, friendly and informative. They have frequent opportunities to visit the college before enrolling. The pre-enrolment induction event held in July allows prospective students to sample courses and to meet staff and students from the college. The event relies heavily on the initiative of individual students. Some are too wary to take full advantage of the opportunities available and a few find the subject-specific terminology confusing.

36 Enrolment days are friendly, welcoming and efficient. Most paperwork is processed without lengthy queuing and a check-out desk helps to ensure that all successfully complete the processes. Students with learning difficulties, who have been previously identified during interviewing procedures, are well supported by staff during enrolment. Staff are knowledgeable about the courses on offer, but some give insufficient attention to vocational options. Not all staff follow the procedures set out in the documentation. Insufficient attention is given to encouraging students to enhance their programmes of study by opting for some of the additional activities which are provided, and some students enrol on courses without discussion or appropriate guidance. The demand on the services of the careers advisers during the main enrolment day is too great. Careers guidance received by students, in some cases after a long wait, is helpful and informative, although it addresses short-term needs only.

37 Arrangements for the induction of students through the tutorial system are effective, and students comment that this helps them settle quickly into college life. In a college survey, 73 per cent of students believed they were provided with everything they needed during their induction. All students follow a user-friendly process early in their first term to identify specific learning support needs; it relies heavily, however, on self identification of needs, and does not always provide the college with accurate information. Only students on vocational courses at and below intermediate level undertake additional initial screening tests for literacy and numeracy. There is scope for this to be extended to other students.

38 There is a well-documented, effective system to assess the prior achievement of students on vocational courses. Three fully-qualified advisers provide them with help in collecting evidence to support accreditation. The advisers work both with internal candidates and with

external candidates in their work-place. The college is well placed to extend this system to other areas of its provision.

39 Effective tutorial support for students is given a high priority by the college. New arrangements have been introduced this academic year for tutorial support throughout the college. These involve both subject and pastoral tutors in recording achievement and in action-planning, through which students, in consultation with their tutors, set their own learning objectives. Staff have been well briefed on the introduction of the new procedures. They are potentially effective for monitoring performance, identifying needs and setting targets that are based on completion of a series of action-planning forms. Subject tutors provide students with good feedback on their performance, but some early action-planning is superficial. Personal tutors do not have ready access to full, up-to-date information on their students. The number of students allocated to each personal tutor is high. Monitoring of the system is rudimentary.

40 Personal tutorials are largely one-to-one interviews. Although friendly and supportive, administrative work overshadowed other activities in the first term. Some students felt this was a major disadvantage of the system. Occasionally opportunities for whole group tutorial work are missed; for example, there is no provision for study skills development to complement the increased amount of independent learning time given to business studies students.

41 Teachers are highly responsive to requests for help from students. Students, particularly performing arts, languages and business studies students, speak positively about the support they receive. One student reflected well the aims of the tutorial system in stating that 'self-discipline with sensitive support was the key to success at college'.

42 The college fulfils the requirements of sections 44 and 45 of the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 by providing a weekly opportunity for students to participate in an act of worship. The chaplain attends the college for 10 hours per week and there is an active Christian union.

43 There is an accessible and effectively-staffed counselling service, which is well used. Last year it helped 102 clients, some over substantial periods of time. There are three female, qualified counsellors, each of whom has a teaching commitment. The college has addressed the lack of a male counsellor by arranging for the chaplain to devote some time to counselling. The British Association of Counsellors' guidelines are assiduously followed and all counsellors have external supervision. Confidential records are kept, enabling preventative and developmental counselling to be introduced. Students are aware of, and understand, the service. They trust its confidentiality.

44 The careers guidance available to students is of a high standard. There are two full-time, qualified and experienced careers officers in the college, and students also have access to a careers officer from Stockport

careers service for two half days per week. Although there are no regularly-timetabled careers education classes, the careers staff organise seminars, visits and other careers activities on an individual, group or college basis. Students have easy access to a well-stocked careers library and to specialist careers software. Students speak highly about the quality and availability of the careers advice and guidance they receive.

45 There are many opportunities for students to enhance their programmes of studies by undertaking additional activities. Some of these lead to accredited qualifications and some to achievements recorded through a student-enhancement record. At present, 30 activities are offered; only one, a self-teach course in information technology skills, for first-year, full-time students is compulsory. The range of options is wide and various and includes electronics, a jazz band and women's soccer. Students who participate in these activities enjoy and benefit from them

46 All students have records of achievement. Ultimately, it is the students' responsibility to update their records of achievement, and they are encouraged to do so through a college-produced computerised system. This allows them to wordprocess their records and have them printed directly onto national record of achievement sheets.

47 The college offers considerable support to students when examination results are published. Students who have gone on to other courses at the college speak highly of the support they received at this important time. Destinations are carefully tracked to help in planning future needs for support.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

48 Teaching and the promotion of learning is of an impressively-high standard. In 33 per cent of classes observed there were many strengths and few weaknesses and a further 48 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed the weaknesses. The GCE A level teaching was consistently strong.

49 The following table summarises the grades for the classes inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE A level		21	26	7	0	0	54
GCSE		2	9	3	1	0	15
GNVQ foundation		4	2	0	0	1	7
GNVQ intermediate		0	3	1	0	0	4
GNVQ advanced		0	6	3	1	0	10
NVQ		1	0	0	0	0	1
Access		3	1	0	0	0	4
Other		4	4	3	1	0	12
Total		35	51	17	3	1	107

50 High-quality teaching and promotion of learning are achieved in all subjects in the humanities programme area. There were many strengths and few weaknesses in two-thirds of the classes inspected. Course documentation is of a high standard, aims and objectives are clearly stated and assessment schedules specified. Students are well informed about programme requirements through the use of course guides; they have clear goals for every stage of their learning. Teachers are knowledgeable about their subjects. They are enthusiastic in their teaching and they develop good working relationships with their students.

51 In humanities lessons, students are given appropriate responsibility for their own learning through a variety of activities. Modern language students are immersed in the culture of the language they are studying through displays, memorabilia and appropriate background music. Lively interactive sessions encourage students to use the target language. In English, assignments are used effectively to develop the skills required for the final assessment. In one literature class students were accomplished in their reading aloud, and confident in fulfilling tasks as co-ordinators in group work. Students of sociology and psychology are given careful encouragement and support to develop skills which enable them to work effectively alone or in groups. In history and geography, students' self-confidence and understanding of the subject is developed through group work.

52 Teaching and the promotion of learning are also of a high standard in art subjects. The strengths outweighed the weaknesses in over 90 per cent of the classes inspected. Aims and objectives are clearly stated and shared with students; students' achievements are efficiently recorded and they are kept well informed of their progress. GNVQ courses in art and design are at an early stage of development. Although the course documentation is comprehensive, students are not always clear about assessment requirements or GNVQ terminology.

53 There are excellent working relationships between art teachers and their students. A feature of much of the work is the generous support and individual guidance provided by the teachers. A significant strength of the teaching in performing arts, including music, is the careful balance between criticism and encouragement. Students experience a wide variety of activities which are well matched to the aims of the course. Performing arts classes use different activities effectively to cope with the range of students' abilities. Good use is made of assignments to extend the students' knowledge and understanding. Music assignments give students valuable experience of critical analysis. Some of the skill development in ceramics, art and craft, and painting is of a high quality. There is a need to strengthen the teaching of some drawing skills and allow students more opportunities to specialise in graphic design. In art and design generally, there is insufficient use of information technology.

54 Students experience high standards of teaching in business studies. There are detailed schemes of work and lesson plans, and a good mix of

teaching and learning styles. In a GNVQ intermediate session, students examining the operation of administrative systems used information technology workstations purposefully to prepare action plans for their assignments. Assignments are set regularly and students are informed of the assessment criteria. Teachers provide helpful written comments on the students' work, identifying strengths and weaknesses. In most classes, the work is challenging and stimulates interest; occasionally there is insufficient time to consolidate previous work. While students on the GCE A level business studies with computing course have good opportunities to develop skills in information technology, these are not so readily available to students on the GNVQ advanced programme.

55 In health care classes, teaching and the promotion of learning is good. Schemes of work, and supporting lesson plans are clear. Students are helped to develop their communication and other core skills. Theory and practical aspects blend together well; for example, students' work placements are used effectively to complement classroom sessions. Students learn through a range of activities, which they find stimulating and motivating. They respond positively to teachers' presentations. On a few occasions, when there are wide ability differences in classes, the management of the work is less effective.

56 In the majority of the classes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities the work is well planned. Some schemes of work effectively link, through performance criteria, the skills to be achieved and their assessment. Core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, are integrated with the vocational aspects of the course. Students record the skills they acquire. The marking of work builds on positive achievement and targets are set to meet individual learning needs. Students work effectively in small groups. Teachers have established good working relationships with the students and are supportive when checking their understanding. Occasionally, students are taught in a style and at a pace which is too complex and too quick for them. Some sessions are disturbed by people using a classroom as a short cut to another part of the college.

57 The teaching of science is of a high standard; the strengths outweighed the weaknesses in over 90 per cent of the classes inspected. Course documentation is comprehensive and informative. Students' interest is maintained by a range of activities. Teachers take pains to link practice with theory and to ensure that appropriate information and equipment is provided for safe practical work. Good use is made of visual aids in classes. Teachers provide effective support in their one-to-one discussions with students, where progress is tracked and achievements recorded. However, science students have insufficient opportunity to participate in small-group work. Occasionally teachers fail to summarise fully the main elements of the lessons. Information technology is not sufficiently integrated into science learning.

58 In mathematics and computing, the teaching and promotion of learning shows a balance of strengths and weaknesses. GCE A level classes

are of a higher standard than others. In the best sessions, students participate in a range of activities, involving whole group, small group and individual work and the teacher provides clear explanations and uses questions effectively to maintain students' involvement. The record-keeping system for mathematics courses charts students' progress so that they can recognise their achievements at various points in the course. In GCSE mathematics, teachers rely on a narrow range of teaching and learning methods. In computing, some of the classwork was conducted at too slow a pace and this demotivated students. Students on the diploma courses in information technology do not always appreciate how the different aspects of their courses link together.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

59 With few exceptions, students appeared to enjoy their studies and work well together. They are responsive in class and show commitment to their studies. Most show a good deal of confidence and talk about their work enthusiastically. Although college registers show high rates of absence for some course groups, the data is unreliable and checks indicate that absence is not as high as it appears.

60 Students' work is generally of a high standard, well structured and clearly presented. Most students demonstrate appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding. In all of the humanities subject areas, students consistently produce written work of a high standard. Care students are able to work independently and demonstrate well-developed research skills. Art and design students plan their work well and produce high-quality painting, ceramics and design. Students on foundation level courses are able to apply their numeracy and literacy skills to the vocational aspects of the course. In business studies, the performance of the GNVQ advanced level and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national students does not always match those on GCE A level programmes. They are not always able to show that they understand the concepts behind the practical knowledge they have acquired. The information technology skills of students vary widely.

61 Students achieve high standards in external assessments in most programme areas. Humanities students produce particularly good results. The overall performance in external examinations in 1994 showed a significant improvement over the previous year.

62 The best results are in the GCE A level programmes. In 1994, 81 per cent of students entering GCE A level gained grades A-E. This compares with a national average of 83 per cent for sixth form colleges and, is a marked improvement on 1993, when the pass rate was 71 per cent. The average points score of individual students improved by about 10 per cent to 14.7 (where A=10 points and E=2). The average point score per entry was 4.5, which puts the college within the top third of colleges in the further education sector. In 1994, just over half the GCE A level subjects

had a pass rate above the national average; and those in communications studies, design technology, art, computing, economics, law and sociology were significantly above the national average. Below average pass rates were recorded for business studies, English literature, English language, modern languages, geography, and physics. In the case of English literature and German, the pass rate in 1993 had been significantly higher but fewer students entered the examination than in 1994.

63 The college pass rate for GCSE subjects in 1994 was 58 per cent, again representing an improvement over the previous year. However, performances varied greatly from subject to subject. Pass rates were good for English language, travel and tourism, sociology and modern languages, but poor for art and design, business studies, English literature, geography and physics.

64 The college has recently introduced vocational courses and the scale of provision is relatively small. Although completion rates for BTEC programmes in 1994 varied widely, most were above 90 per cent. A high proportion of students who completed their programmes of study gained the full award in the normal minimal time. All students working towards the first diplomas in information technology, care and business and finance, and the national diploma in art and design gained their awards. There were high non-completion rates in two courses: the first diploma in information technology and national diploma in performing arts. Only two-thirds of students on the national diploma in performing arts course gained the full award, the remainder obtaining interim awards.

65 In all areas where performance in external examinations was weak, the results have been analysed and in most cases, remedial action has been taken.

66 A high proportion of students complete the full academic year at the college: 94 per cent of students who enrolled in October 1993 completed the year. A substantial proportion of students on two-year programmes continued to the second year; of the 615 students on advanced programmes in November 1993, 83 per cent progressed to the second year of study. This is a significant improvement on the previous year, when only 70 per cent of students on two-year programmes went on to the second year. This is a successful outcome of the college's analysis of the reasons for student drop-out and the consequent strengthening of guidance procedures.

67 Annually, on the first Friday in October, the college records destinations for all students. The information is comprehensive and the returns show that a high proportion of students have gone on to further or higher education or to employment. Last year, 90 per cent of students who applied to higher education received at least one offer; 87 per cent of access course students moved into higher education; and over 50 per cent of students completing a one-year intermediate level programme moved to further studies, almost two-thirds returning to The Ridge. More than

three-quarters of full-time students on vocational courses last year went on to further training or related employment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

68 The college is committed to continuous improvement. Over the last two years it has put considerable effort into the development of a comprehensive quality assurance policy, together with a framework for its implementation. This development has involved consultation with all staff and as a result commitment to, and a feeling of involvement in, the scheme are strong features. The policy covers all the college's key activities. Implementation of quality procedures is at varying stages; for example, procedures for staff development are well advanced, but procedures for course review and the tutorial system have not been fully implemented.

69 Detailed and extensive documentation is provided for the quality assurance framework; there is a common format for recording accountabilities, standards, measures, and timescales for each team in the college. Not all staff interpret these specifications in the same way. Teams have responded to the process in different ways; some see it as purely about information, while others have moved beyond this and recognise that it is a mechanism for monitoring and review. Staff understand the quality assurance arrangements relevant to their own area of work, but they are less clear about how this fits into the overall college process and how they can contribute to it. The lack of explicit cross-college performance indicators is a weakness in the college's monitoring and review procedures.

70 The college's self-assessment report was drawn up with help from an external consultant. It was linked to the headings in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement* and, through appendices, identified evidence available to inspectors. Unlike the college quality assurance processes, the report only concerned itself with strengths.

71 All teams have a cycle of meetings linked to the quality assurance process. Most meetings are well attended and follow a common format. Staff find this process helpful. As yet, not all teams are producing clear and full records of actions and responsibilities.

72 A newly-introduced system of course review has ensured a consistent approach in all curriculum areas. Documentation for this review is of a high standard: when fully implemented it will allow staff to have an overview not only of subjects but also of individual elements within them. The system includes cross-checking of information from a variety of sources; for example, the satisfaction questionnaire which students complete during their course is cross-checked with the section in the course review dealing with teaching and learning styles. The quality of course reviews varies widely. Some early drafts are not written clearly and suggest that staff are unaware of the need for accuracy. The target date for completed reviews is not clear; many are not produced sufficiently early in the autumn term to allow corrective action to be taken.

73 Subject teams have paid careful attention to examination performance in end-of-year-reviews. In many areas, this analysis has resulted in positive actions to address identified weaknesses. The Advanced Level Information System, introduced in 1993, supports this work.

74 The college has an effective staff-development policy which responds quickly to identified need. The staff-development co-ordinator determines staff requirements and the director of personnel controls the budget. Staff undergoing career changes and those involved in the increase in vocational courses have been well supported through this system.

75 There is a comprehensive staff-induction programme for new staff. It has a core element delivered within the first week of employment. The extent and duration of the rest of the induction process depends upon the requirements of the post.

76 Staff-development activities link into the staff-appraisal and mentoring systems. Both appraisers and appraisees have undertaken appraisal training. The documentation to support appraisal is thorough. All staff are appraised every two years. Appraisees can choose an appraiser other than their line manager if they wish, and they are also able to negotiate those areas of their work on which they wish to be appraised. The appraisal system focuses on the needs of the individual; the needs of the college are not given sufficient prominence.

77 The college is working towards Investors in People status and this is seen as integral to the college's approach to quality assurance. After a very positive pre-assessment report, the college is ready for assessment ahead of its original schedule.

78 The college charter reflects the college's commitments to students; it covers all aspects of a student's college life and sets easily measurable standards. Staff and students understand the charter and its implications and this is formalised in a compact detailing both parties' responsibilities. A system is in place to monitor college performance against the charter. Although the main part of the charter is clear, some of the details are not; for example, the complaints procedure is not given sufficient attention.

RESOURCES

Staffing

79 Teaching staff are well qualified and experienced. Ninety-four per cent of full-time teachers have a teaching qualification and 87 per cent are graduates. In addition, almost half of the teachers have had some commercial or industrial experience. The use of part-time staff has increased in some curriculum areas; overall, 14.7 per cent of teaching staff are part time. Part-time staff are used effectively, participating fully in subject planning. In general, staff are well deployed but the experience of some staff working on foundation programme courses is not always well matched to the teaching they are required to do. All staff have agreed job

descriptions. The turnover of staff is low and there are exemplary levels of commitment throughout the college. The senior management team has only one female member.

80 Non-teaching staff are generally well qualified and they provide an effective and efficient service to the college. The college's growth has been well supported by the increase in non-teaching staff particularly in science, and for the college library and the reprographics unit.

Equipment/learning resources

81 The college has a good range of high quality, specialist equipment and learning resources. Most art and design workshops and performing arts studios are well resourced with excellent specialist equipment and a well-stocked video and slide library. Graphic and computer design equipment is not of such a high standard. Language courses have appropriate equipment such as cassette recorders, a mobile television/video cassette recorder, satellite television links and a computer with audio facilities. There is an appropriate range and quantity of learning resources for care courses, including toys for childcare.

82 The adoption of a college-wide information technology policy has ensured an extensive range of consistently high-quality equipment. Information technology resources currently include 147 educational workstations, 32 administration workstations and 25 portables. The ratio of computers to students has improved between the academic years 1993-94 and 1994-95 from 1:16 to 1:11. The business faculty has developed an effective self-teach instruction manual for information technology and wordprocessing.

83 A range of equipment to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is being developed. This includes radio links, spell-check machines, dictaphones and lap-top computers.

84 Standards of handouts are high across all courses; they are particularly good in mathematics. In English and communications studies, there are high-quality college-produced resource packs. For most courses, there is a plentiful supply of appropriate textbooks available for student loan. History has introduced a short-term loan policy for topic books so that they are now used by more students.

85 The college library has a current catalogue of 15,500 good-quality, up-to-date books. However, the ratio of books to students of 9.4:1 is low. The bookstock is generally of good quality and up to date; it is supplemented by 15 compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database titles and two computer stations, and 63 journals. The demands on resources are increasing generally and in particular there is a shortfall of materials in the library for students with a learning disability. The college is addressing these issues.

86 The college has a rolling programme for the maintenance and/or replacement of equipment, and funds are earmarked to support it. All

electrical equipment is subject to an annual inspection conducted by the relevant site manager.

Accommodation

87 Accommodation is clean and attractively furnished, and students demonstrate admirable care for it. The college has a feast of stimulating wall displays, which include students' creative work.

88 Specialist accommodation is generally of a high standard. It includes a good-quality drama studio, a stimulating and attractive suite of rooms for art and design, excellent information technology areas on both main sites, extensive sports facilities, a good lecture theatre, a nursery and a creche. A major strength is the grouping together of good-quality teaching areas with adjacent staffbases for history and English and communications studies. The modern languages suite at Buxton Lane is well designed and is linked with a Euro-study room. The language centre at Hibbert Lane is not of such a high quality. Music practice rooms need refurbishment and the college plans this for 1997.

89 The college has gone some way to improving access to accommodation for students with mobility problems by providing ramps, toilets and designated parking places. Access to the Buxton Lane site is restricted; there is no lift to the upper floors where the majority of classrooms are situated. There are plans to install a lift in 1998.

90 The new library complex at the Hibbert Lane site has a pleasant ambience and is centrally located. It can provide over 120 study places, although current provision is for 113. This accommodation is well used and opening hours have been extended. There is easy access for all, including students with mobility disabilities, to the computers, CD-ROM and reprographic services, but not to the mezzanine floor. The library can be noisy at times.

91 Student social facilities are limited. The Hibbert Lane site has small social areas where students can meet and a youth club area, which students can use when it is not being used as a classroom. The two student common rooms on the Buxton Lane site have been reduced to one, and this has brought overcrowding. Some students find these facilities noisy and unattractive. Refectories on both sites are of a very good standard.

92 The college's 10-year accommodation strategy includes planned and costed priorities. It is based on a comprehensive accommodation and use of space survey. Overall, accommodation is efficiently used. There is a high rate of room use between 09.00 and 15.30 but this declines later in the day. There is mounting pressure on space resulting from the growth in curriculum provision and a higher than expected enrolment figure. Some groups, such as those following business studies, psychology and modern languages, have insufficient teaching space.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

93 The Ridge has undergone a period of rapid change since it was incorporated. It has responded positively to this challenge. The strengths of the college include:

- high-quality teaching
- improvements in student achievements
- effective, efficient and dedicated governance and management
- a clear and effective strategic planning process, well-supported by operational objectives
- the development of quality assurance systems which involve all aspects of college activity
- comprehensive and effective marketing
- strong links with the community
- high standards of staffing, equipment and of some of the accommodation.

94 In order to raise levels of achievement the college should:

- adopt a consistent approach to monitoring and review, including the use of explicit performance indicators
- simplify some of the documentation used for planning and quality assurance
- provide accessible, reliable and up-to-date information to tutors
- improve access to all parts of the college for students with mobility disabilities
- continue to improve GCE A level and GCSE pass rates and the completion rates on some vocational courses.

FIGURES

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

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

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

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

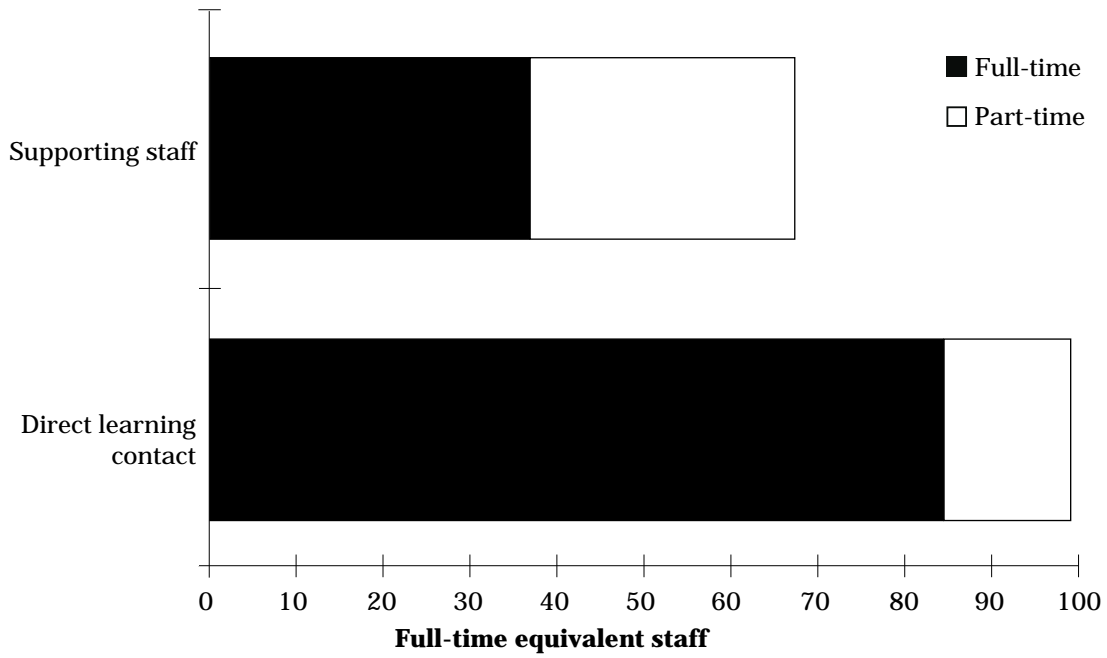
 - 5 Estimated income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Estimated 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

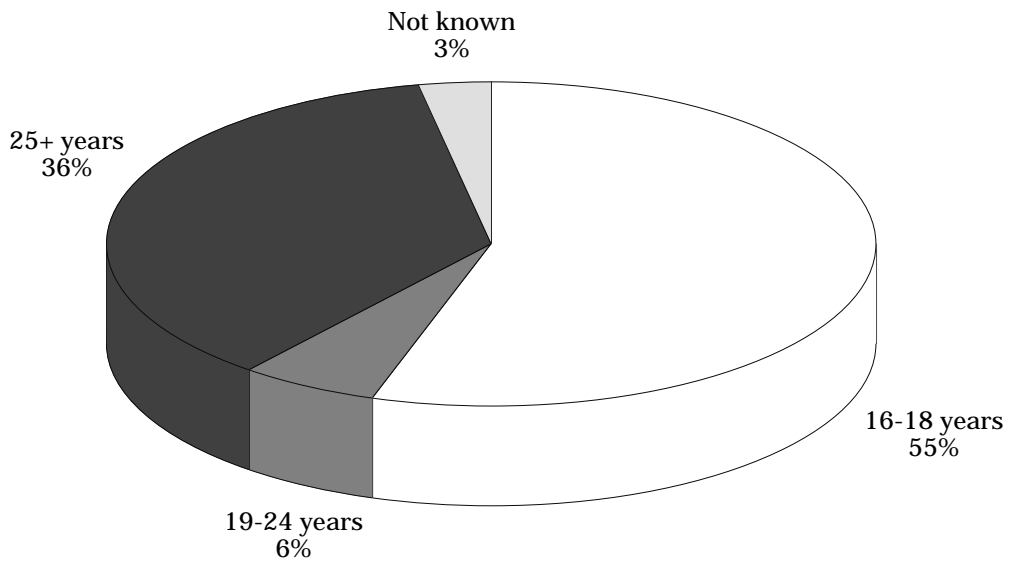
The Ridge: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 167

Figure 2

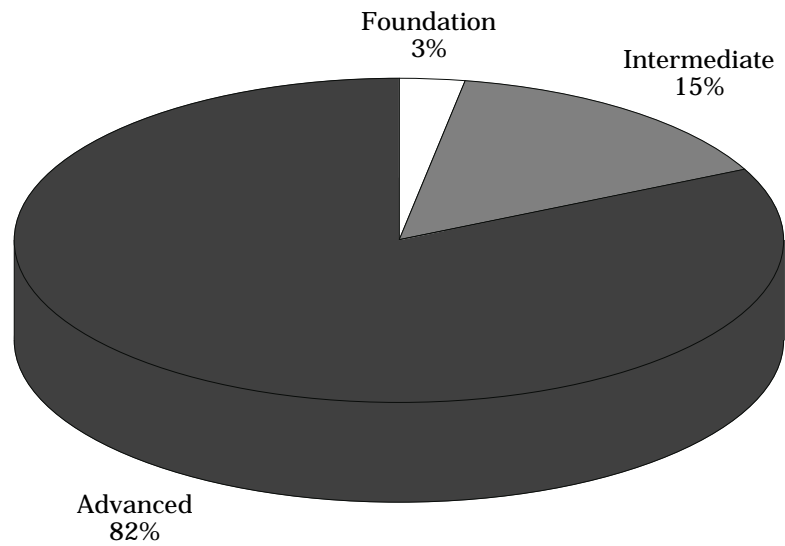
The Ridge: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 2,731

Figure 3

The Ridge: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

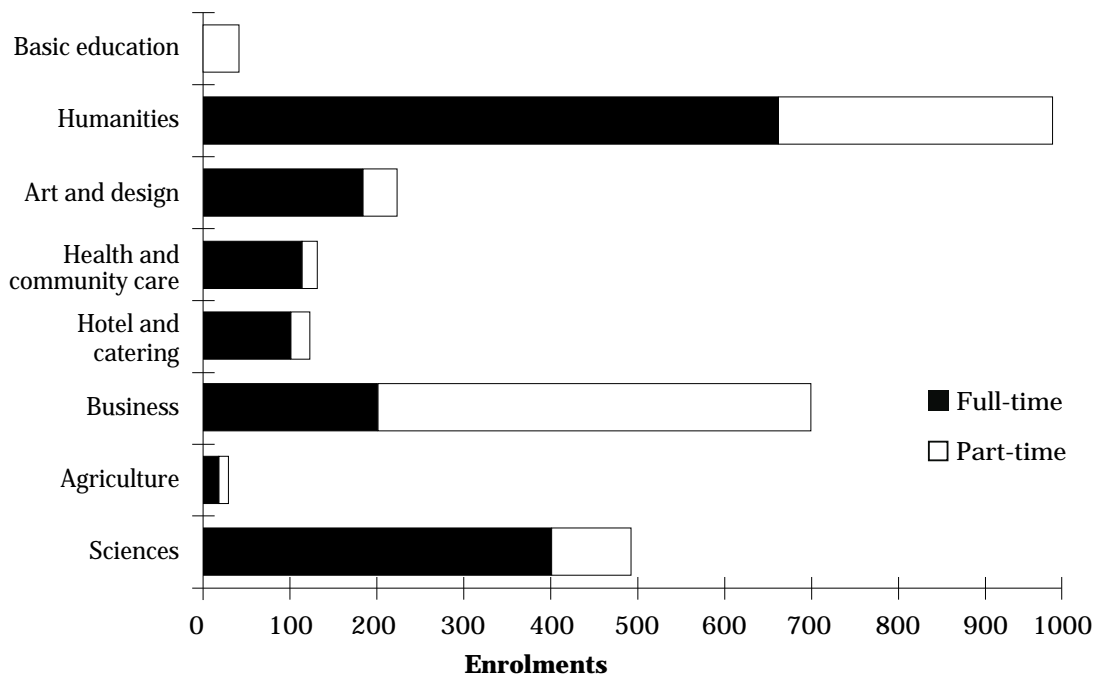


Enrolments: 2,731

Note: excluded from the chart are 11 higher education enrolments.

Figure 4

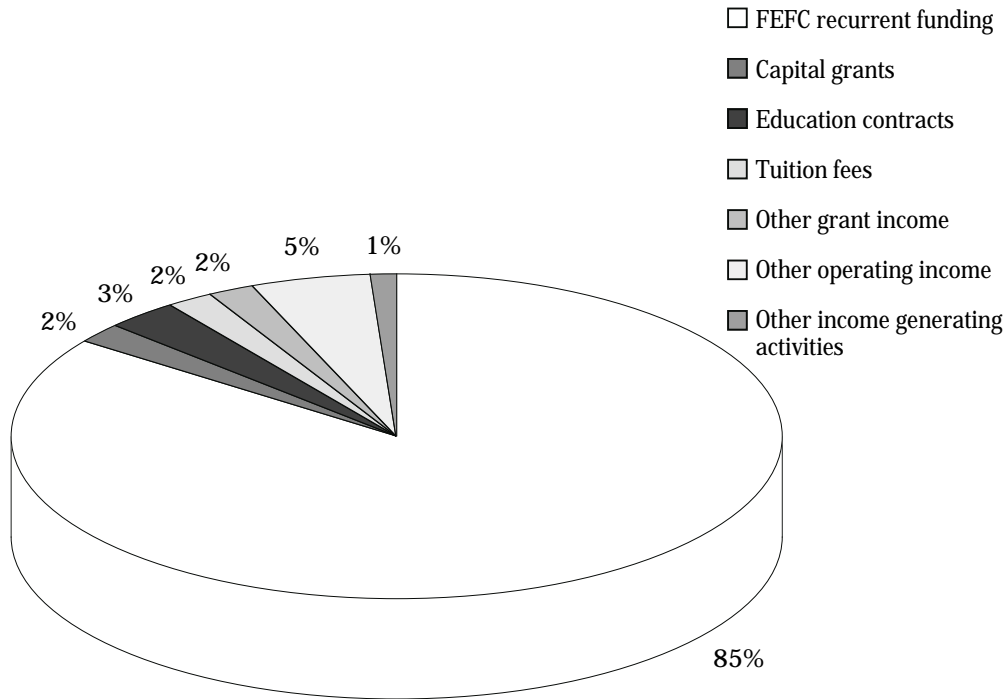
The Ridge: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 2,731

Figure 5

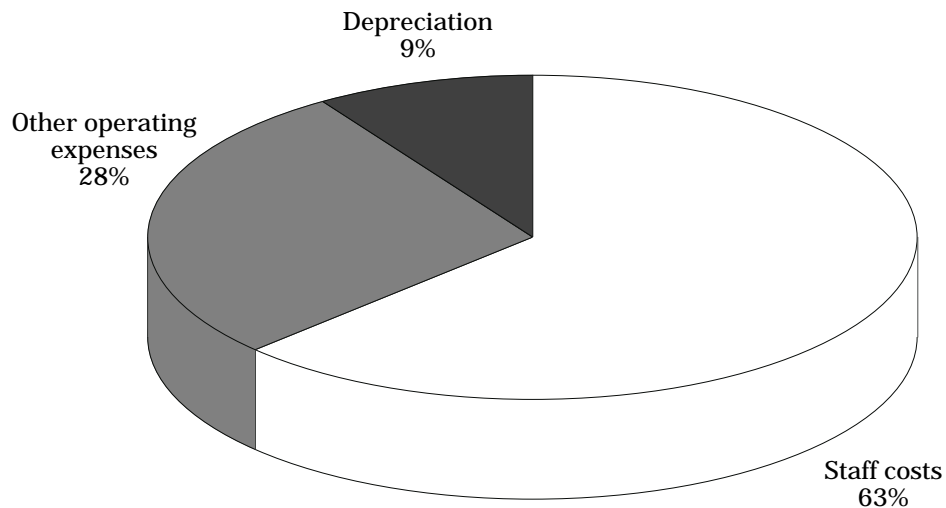
The Ridge: estimated income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Estimated income: £5,040,000

Figure 6

The Ridge: estimated expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Estimated expenditure: £5,309,000

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