

**REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE**

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# **Rycotewood College**

**March 1995**

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**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

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## **THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL**

*The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to 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 22/95

**RYCOTEWOOD COLLEGE**

**SOUTH EAST REGION**

**Inspected October - November 1994**

## Summary

Rycotewood College, at Thame in Oxfordshire, is a small specialist college offering courses in agricultural and construction engineering, fine craftsmanship and design and information technology. The college recruits its students nationally and locally. Further and higher education courses enable students to go on to courses at higher levels. Good links are maintained between the college and the industries it serves. Effective industrial advisory committees contribute to curriculum planning. Students are highly committed to their courses and many already possess considerable craft skills when they enter the college. Retention rates are high and most students achieve the qualifications for which they are aiming. Teachers are dedicated. However, the organisation of some teaching in the department of fine craftsmanship and design is poor: insufficient attention is given to the basic principles, concepts and skills of design in students' learning. The criteria against which student work is judged are not always explicit and assessment standards are inconsistent. The college should ensure that more attention is paid to health and safety. Information technology is underused and computing equipment inadequate. Some teaching accommodation and workshops are of poor quality. The college has found transition to incorporated status difficult. Its average level of funding is amongst the highest in the sector, yet it has difficulty in coping on the resources provided. Senior managers have difficulty in meeting their workload and the consequent delegation has caused teaching to suffer. Communications are poor and, in particular, there is little sense of shared collegiality between the two departments. The college should improve its management information data; develop its embryonic quality assurance system; rationalise the use of its buildings; improve the quality of its strategic planning; develop staff appraisal; and strengthen curriculum planning, teaching and assessment.

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

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

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Engineering	3	Fine craftsmanship and design	4

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1 Rycotewood College, Oxfordshire, was inspected during the autumn term of the academic year 1994-95. A visit was paid to the annual exhibition of students' work held in July 1994. Enrolment was inspected at the beginning of the autumn term. During the week beginning 17 October 1994, four inspectors spent a total of 12 days on specialist subject inspections, visiting 44 classes and other unsupervised practical sessions. An additional visit was made by three inspectors on 10 November 1994 to review student coursework which had not been available during the specialist inspection. Aspects of cross-college provision were inspected for a total of 18 days by a team of six inspectors during the week beginning 14 November 1994. Inspectors had access to college documentation for all phases of the inspection. Discussions took place with governors, staff, students, parents, employers, past students, representatives of the Heart of England Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), careers counsellors and guidance services.

## **THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS**

2 Rycotewood College was founded in the 1930s as a school for the sons of deprived families from the north-east by Cecil Michaelis, a local land owner and philanthropist. It occupied Thame workhouse, which was opened in 1850 and which is now a grade II listed building. The school provided a broad education which included training in rural skills such as those of the wheelwright, the blacksmith, the gate maker and the farm mechanic. In the late 1950s, the school was given to Oxfordshire County Council to run as a residential technical college specialising in agricultural engineering. The curriculum emphasised woodworking and metalworking. The proximity of High Wycombe, the traditional centre of the British furniture industry, led the college to develop from woodwork into design and construction of fine furniture, which is now concentrated into one department. From metalwork grew a second department of agricultural and construction engineering.

3 The college has a two-hectare site close to the centre of Thame. There is access to the motorway network via the M40, five miles away. Bus and train services give convenient access to Oxford and London. Thame has a population of 11,000. Nearly half the employment in Oxfordshire is in businesses with less than 50 employees. Unemployment in the county is relatively low at 5.5 per cent and has fallen sharply over the last year.

4 Furniture students from the college often intend to become self-employed designer-makers. This is particularly true of the increasing number of mature students who are seeking a new direction for the skills and experience they possess. Others seek to enter higher education at Rycotewood or elsewhere. Opportunities for students in agricultural engineering are affected by the general decline in employment on the land, and lack of growth in the number of machinery dealerships. The college offers training for other industries, including construction, transport and

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horticultural machinery. There is a wide spread of course levels, from the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) level 2 to higher national diploma. Approximately 60 per cent of the college's work is in further education and 40 per cent in higher education. Some higher education courses are supported by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). At the time of the inspection, there were 421 students on roll. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2, respectively.

5 The college aims to expand its provision in the specialised sectors of design and engineering. Its mission is 'to provide people with a means to achieve personal and professional fulfilment in a globally competitive economy. We will achieve this by creating a learning community committed to enabling the development of adaptable and confident people. We will strive to improve our position as experts in providing people, throughout their lives, with the ability to apply their intellectual, specialist technology and hand and eye skills in a creative and intelligent manner'.

### **RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION**

6 The college offers a carefully-selected range of programmes in each of two distinct areas: engineering and fine craftsmanship and design. It recruits nationally and locally. A number of new courses have been introduced in recent years, such as furniture restoration, and design for the small business. Provision now includes National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) levels 2 and 3, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national and higher national certificate and diploma courses. There are also continuing education courses, including a new programme to improve the business skills of craftspeople. There is a limited short-course programme, designed to meet employer or external-agency demand. The engineering department is participating with the Construction Industry Training Board in a plant-maintenance scheme and the joint five agricultural colleges in an advanced GNVQ pilot scheme for agricultural engineering. The strategic plan identifies more new courses to be launched, including a continuing education certificate in musical instrument making. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3.

7 The college promotes its courses at specialist national exhibitions such as the Smithfield Show, New Designers, Art in Action and the Royal Agricultural Show. Student exchanges take place with colleges in Stuttgart, and Uzes in France. Other overseas links have led to two full-cost courses being run this year, involving in each case 15 mature students from the vocational adult education institute at Teuva in Finland.

8 Part-time courses are offered in engineering to students who are released for study by their employers. One higher national diploma programme has a link which enables students to progress to Cranfield University, and there is also a higher national diploma franchised from Oxford Brookes University. In fine craftsmanship and design, almost all

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courses are full time, although a small number of students attend on a part-time basis.

9 The college has a marketing strategy, but different approaches are used by each of the departments. The college has strengthened its marketing through the appointment of a marketing manager, but his time for this role is limited because of a substantial teaching commitment. The college participates in schools careers events locally and more widely. There is a central customer enquiry service, but data from this source is not used to improve market research. The college recently participated in a market research initiative to determine the needs and perceptions of school pupils and their parents; this revealed some confused perceptions of Rycotewood. A good prospectus and exhibition stand have been produced, but course leaflets are not of the same quality. The college should draw together its marketing events and marketing materials in order to present a more coherent image of itself.

10 The college has good relationships with employers, and close links with the local TEC. Active advisory panels exist, which identify the needs of industry and inform curriculum developments. The college is sensitive to employers' needs and responds well to criticism and suggestions. There is an effective work experience programme which students value. Many employers who participate in this scheme are themselves former students of the college.

11 The summer exhibition of students' work is a celebration of the best work in the departments. In 1994, 226 items of furniture, models, restored pieces and craftwork were displayed. The work of first-year students was on show in the workshops as part of an 'alternative exhibition'. This also included final-year work which was either unfinished or not of a sufficiently high standard to be shown in the main exhibition. Some 90 per cent of students leaving the college can expect to have at least one piece on show.

12 Ten per cent of students are women. This represents a proportional increase over the last few years, which stems predominately from the introduction of mature student provision. The college had access to a creche at a local school, but it is no longer available. This loss may be a curb on further increases in female enrolments. An equal opportunities policy has been devised but there is no equal opportunities committee to formulate action or to monitor results. The college has stated its intention to establish such a committee in its strategic plan and should do so without further delay. There is little evidence of awareness of equal opportunities issues, but no poor practice was seen.

#### **GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

13 The governors are active in support of the college. The 14 members of the corporation board are well informed. There are four subcommittees, for finance and personnel, audit, remuneration, and estates. Meetings are well attended and managers provide the necessary information to assist governors' decisions. The principal, the heads of the two departments

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and the director of finance and administration, together form the college executive committee.

14 The college ethos, aims, objectives and mission are clearly defined in both the college and departmental operating plans. College staff at all levels have access to the information, but not all understand it. Although communications within departments are adequate, communications in the college, both through the line management structure, and between departments, are poor. The corporation board has recognised the problem, and a member is working to develop effective co-ordination of the college's communications, both internally and externally. Poor communications are a significant weakness in a college of this size.

15 The strategic plan focuses on operational matters rather than strategic issues and little reference is made to it in decision making. Corporate objectives do not relate to the mission statement or to needs analysis. For example, provision for women returners is highlighted in the needs analysis but not mentioned elsewhere. The strategic plan does not give details of the timescale and resources required for action. It concentrates on the implications of the FEFC's funding methodology and accommodation policy, rather than planning to benefit students within existing constraints.

16 The management structure is clearly defined. All members of the college executive provide information to the corporation, as well as carrying out their management functions. They have found the demands placed on them by incorporation taxing. The executive takes a strong lead from the principal but it is not a cohesive group. The two heads of the academic departments have a dual role as assistant principals, with cross-college responsibilities. The head of engineering is away from the college on long-term sick leave. The executive is under pressure from the corporation board for faster action. In meeting these demands, assistant principals have had difficulty in adequately discharging their duties as heads of department. In turn, this has reduced the effectiveness of senior staff in the departments in developing the curriculum. Some staff are not coping well with the dual roles of carrying out the work needed to develop the college, and of teaching existing courses competently. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents is given in figure 4.

17 The academic board is strongly led by the chief executive. It is useful as a channel of communication between students, teachers and college managers, but discussions lead only to recommendations which have to be authorised by others. The board is not seen by staff as having any influence on the planning of teaching programmes or the maintenance of quality, nor does it provide a forum for academic debate.

18 There is a students' association which has regular meetings with the principal, and with subcommittees of the corporation when necessary. Students complain of a lack of less-formal contact with the executive of the college.



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19 Resource allocations are made by the executive, and then devolved to the departments. However, financial information for budget holders is inadequate. Some have had difficulty in establishing how much expenditure has been incurred, and lack training in financial management. It is acknowledged by all budget managers, that more effective control, coupled to improved accountability, would be of real benefit. There are long-established departmental expectations about the level of resources they should receive, which have led to sectional interests being put before those of the college. About 55 per cent of the college's income comes from the FEFC and another 28 per cent from tuition fees. The college's estimated income and expenditure are shown in figures 5 and 6, respectively, which reveal a projected deficit. The college's average level of funding for 1994-95 is £30.43, which is high for the sector overall and substantially above the median of £24.58 for this type of institution.

20 The existence of different operational practices within departments makes it difficult to obtain management information in a common format which enables comparisons to be made. There is now some progress towards the development of an integrated system. Enrolment targets are set. However, departments and the central administration are unable to produce agreed student statistics. The ready availability of fully-integrated information about the work of the college is essential to effective management.

#### **STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT**

21 Pre-entry information, and information included in the induction pack, is comprehensive. However, many students are not aware of the information in the college charter and student handbook. Course leaflets actively encourage applications from students without standard entry qualifications. Local recruitment relies mainly on presentations made at careers conventions, but the college is finding that schools are now seeking to retain their more able students in their own sixth forms.

22 Initial enquiries are handled by the departmental secretaries, who continue to be a point of contact for students and their families throughout their courses. Advisory and admissions interviews are undertaken by course tutors. Following interviews, applicants are given the opportunity to tour the college and to speak to current students. Taster sessions were provided for local schools during the summer of 1994. Accreditation of prior learning is carried out informally. It is not an approved procedure of the college, nor is it controlled by managers. Two members of staff are undergoing training in the accreditation of prior learning. Most students interviewed during the inspection felt that they had made well-informed choices. Some engineering students, however, reported that more information on course content was needed, and that they were finding their courses more difficult than they had expected.

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23 The initial stage of enrolment created long queues, with some students waiting up to one-and-a-half hours for a personal interview with the registrar. After this, the process was quickly and efficiently handled; accommodation, locker keys, and car park permits were allocated promptly and there was an introduction to the local health centre and other local services. Induction is organised on a departmental basis. There is no opportunity for senior managers to make themselves known. There is an induction checklist, but delivery is not monitored against it. The college should address these matters in order to ensure that every student receives an effective introduction to the college.

24 On enrolment, students become members of the student association, which is affiliated to the National Union of Students. Membership enables them to use the limited college sports and social facilities, and the Thame Sports and Arts Centre. Membership of the association, however, fails to ameliorate students' lack of a sense of college identity. This is seen as a problem by students, for example, in the composition of student committees, where representation between the two departments is seldom equally balanced. Students of the two departments were rarely seen to mix, even in the refectory and common room, although social events, rag week and sports teams draw them together.

25 Each course is represented on a student consultative committee. Meetings are held once a term and course management meetings are advised of action points arising. There is no record in committee minutes of actions taken. Students are critical of the effectiveness of the process.

26 All students are assessed for communication and numeracy skills within the first few weeks of term. A high proportion need remedial support in these areas. In one course, nine out of 10 students require learning support. The college has recently appointed a basic skills teacher on a half-time appointment to address this problem. It has a small number of students with severe learning difficulties who are integrated into mainstream courses with specialised support. There are few facilities for those with physical disabilities.

27 A comprehensive set of prospectuses for higher education institutions, and careers guidance literature, are available in the learning resource centre. Guidance is provided by course tutors and the county careers service. Provision has been made for 20 hours a week of careers guidance.

28 Counselling services are not monitored or co-ordinated across the college. People without specialist training are supporting students on an informal basis. Nine members of staff have requested training in student counselling, but no courses have been offered and the senior warden remains the only qualified person. Staff recognise their need to develop counselling skills to enable them to deal with the increasing demand from students. When serious problems arise, the warden is not always consulted and individual carers seek professional help from various sources outside

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the college. Information about these sources is not shared. A room is available for counselling, but it is formal and uninviting, and also used for committee meetings.

29 Because of the small size of the college, open access to tutors has developed naturally, and most students feel able to bring their problems to a member of staff who will deal sympathetically with them. However, the formal tutorial structure is poorly developed. There is no college tutorial policy to regulate tutorial practices, and to ensure that all students receive adequate pastoral care. Students' views of the tutorial system are varied. The size of tutor groups is not limited and though it is exceptional, some students are placed in groups of over 40. They complain about their access to personal tutors. Most groups are small enough to meet regularly. Staff can use a 'cause for concern' form to bring problems to the attention of the student services manager.

30 Attendance is monitored in each session, using interim registers while a new computerised system is introduced. Persistent absence is notified to the student services manager. The delays between first absence, notification and follow-up vary widely and are not regulated by a college policy.

31 An increasing number of students suffer financial hardship, and many have part-time jobs. The extent of the problem is not monitored by the college and its impact on their learning cannot be assessed reliably.

## **TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING**

32 Teaching and the promotion of learning is considered separately for each of the two departments.

### **Department of engineering**

33 In 59 per cent of the teaching sessions inspected, the strengths clearly outweighed weaknesses and in the remainder there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There were no sessions where weaknesses outweighed strengths. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

### **Department of engineering**

#### **Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study**

<b>Programmes</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Totals</b>
GNVQ		0	1	0	0	0	1
NVQ		0	0	3	0	0	3
Other further education		0	6	4	0	0	10
Higher education		0	3	0	0	0	3
Total		0	10	7	0	0	17

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34 The teaching strategies employed were appropriate to the course content, aims and objectives. Throughout the curriculum, good use was made of teaching and learning aids. The pace of activity was brisk, and students were particularly purposeful in the practical sessions. For example, in an engineering workshop an exercise in assessing engine wear was well resourced and students, working in pairs, were all able to have access to an engine and measuring equipment. Students were acquiring appropriate skills in the practical elements of courses.

35 All programmes have clearly-identified aims and objectives, but these were not always effectively communicated to students. Course content was appropriate and well structured. The sandwich national diploma programme in agricultural engineering provided students with a particularly good learning experience. They spend the second year of a three-year course on work experience, often some distance from the college. They receive visits from the work experience co-ordinator, and both employers and students report to the college.

36 With some exceptions, the college has yet to deal effectively with deficiencies in core skills. Students carrying out a tractor trial as part of a national diploma programme had difficulty dealing with simple ratios and proportions. Students generally found course content challenging, and those who gained a place by exceptional entry often experienced particular difficulty in meeting requirements.

37 There was some inappropriate project work. For example, one whole-year project involved the manufacture of a hydraulic puller, but included only a very small element of design and did not draw on the knowledge which students were developing in the rest of their course.

38 Staff provide subject support beyond that required by their timetables. Good working relationships exist with students. Records of achievement are kept, but inconsistencies in approach and a lack of target setting resulted in students being unsure about their progress. Students are very supportive of each other and help one another with their work.

39 The application of health and safety standards was uneven. Not all students were wearing goggles when cutting metal, wearing protective footwear in workshops or using hand barrier cream during practical activities. The college should ensure that good practice is unfailingly used not only for the sake of safety in the college, but also to ensure that students acquire safe working habits for their own protection after they have left the college.

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### Department of fine craftsmanship and design

40 The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

### Department of fine craftsmanship and design

#### Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Advanced further education		0	2	7	3	0	12
Higher education		0	2	4	4	0	10
Other		0	1	3	1	0	5
Total		0	5	14	8	0	27

41 Strengths outweighed the weaknesses in 18 per cent of the teaching sessions inspected. This is a much lower percentage than is normally the case. Just under 30 per cent of sessions had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. Of the 27 sessions observed, only one concentrated on the development of design concepts or principles. Half of the lessons were dedicated to practical craft work, nine to technical drawing or theory, and three to project briefings or initial research.

42 Student enrolments in the department have expanded by 70 per cent from 137 in 1990-91, to a full-time equivalent of 233 in 1993-94. Between the 1993-94 session and the 1994-95 session, new accommodation for the work of the department was made available. The decision to provide this new accommodation and to make use of it immediately was taken very late in the academic year. Inadequate planning has resulted in some courses continuing to work in unsatisfactory circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning was considerably affected in some areas where there was a poor environment. Some rooms were relatively small, and furnished in a way which inhibited varied approaches to teaching. One design studio, used by national diploma students, was furnished with drawing desks which had their drawing boards removed. An adjacent pinboard for each student was roughly painted and unused. The walls of the room lacked any visual display and were undecorated, and there was evidence of builders' work still unfinished. The height of the pin boards on the workstations was such that the tutor could not see to supervise the room, and when talking to the group as a whole, was invisible to many of the students. The room provided an inappropriate environment for teaching, and no obvious attempt had been made to improve it. Similar shortcomings were found elsewhere.

43 Teachers, generally, had a good working relationship with their students. Students received individual attention. Little variety in the forms of teaching and learning was observed. Teachers' expectations of students' timekeeping, time management and work organisation were too low. Some

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effective use is made of practising designers as part-time lecturers, to bring experience of current professional life and the attitudes of clients into classes.

44 Students often lacked the study skills necessary to make effective use of their time and the resources available. Research in project work relied heavily on trade catalogues or photocopies, and lacked depth and originality. Evidence of students' knowledge of materials and processes was generally very poorly organised, and often their project research and technical tuition notes were mixed up. There was evidence that staff had not checked students' designs before they started to make them. The quality of students' work was generally weak. There was little evidence in students' portfolios of development in their work on basic design concepts and principles. Insufficient emphasis was given to the development of communication through drawing. Drawing standards seen in folios and practical sessions were weak.

45 The outcomes of the practical work observed were mixed. For example, before they joined the college, students had been set the task of making a personal tool chest. The results showed the use of a wide range of technical skills which they had acquired previously. By contrast, they showed low levels of skill in a range of craft techniques undertaken at college, partly because they had received insufficient tuition and their skills were self taught. The standard of practical skill in some work was poor, although good work was seen in some traditional craft items and at the annual exhibition.

46 The management of teaching is excessively informal, and this often adversely affects the quality of students' learning. For example, a group due for a formal lecture was provided instead with a technician to supervise practical work, because the lecturer was required to attend a college meeting. The meeting was on a programme of regular events and there had been ample opportunity for a substitute teacher to be provided. Students complained that such lapses were frequent. In one session inspected, the teacher arrived 40 minutes late. The college should ensure that staff set an example of promptness and reliability to students. Many classes seen were unnecessarily interrupted by people passing through to gain access to rooms beyond, when alternative routes were available.

47 In the department as a whole, the teaching lacks co-ordination, and provides insufficient rigour and challenge for the students. Students are not being provided with a rounded curriculum which includes social and life skills. The main emphasis of the work is on the development of traditional hand skills and there is little appreciation or application of current technology.

#### **STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

48 Most students establish good working relationships with their lecturers, whose willingness to give generously of their time is appreciated.

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Students enjoy their practical work and see this as the main purpose of their programmes. They work hard in this area of activity. Mature students in particular, have high levels of motivation.

49 In the department of fine craftsmanship and design, the programmes observed emphasise the production of finished artefacts. The underpinning design, communications and numeracy skills are underdeveloped and undervalued. Where work is marked, records of grades are maintained, but there are inconsistencies in assessment which interfere with students' understanding of their personal progress, strengths and weaknesses. As a result, few are able to state what they need to do to improve their work. The process by which students upgrade their work from referral to pass standard is obscure. There is also evidence that studio and workshop practice does not always meet minimum health and safety standards.

50 Of 250 students leaving the college, 80 per cent were successful in gaining the qualifications for which they were aiming. Thirteen students aged between 16-19 were unsuccessful. Seventy-two per cent of the 43 students aged 16-18 in the final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education's 1994 performance tables were successful. This places the college among the bottom third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure.

51 In the engineering department, students' work experience programmes, and the learning that is drawn from them, are a particular strength. It is noteworthy that task recording systems are in place for NVQ programmes. Teamwork among students, and peer support, are evident. Students' achievements on information technology programmes across the college are being adversely affected by the low standard expected; by staff working from out-dated learning materials; by the failure to supply guidance on document layout and structure; and by the lack of tutoring packages to help with basic keyboarding. Individual teachers develop assessment plans, but the lack of co-ordination between teachers causes an uneven workload for the students. Consequently, they experience unnecessary difficulty in managing their time. The better assessment schemes were appropriate, and there were many examples of good practice: for example, some schemes included students' self-assessment of common skills, and there was clear identification of grading criteria. However, the differing approaches of staff led to uncertainty about assessment criteria among students, and to variable standards of assessment. There was a lack of cross-curricular integration on the BTEC programmes, which resulted in students regarding their courses as a series of events rather than a whole experience. Opportunities to assess were often overlooked or ignored. Feedback arrangements were not formalised and were variable within a single course. Little or no feedback to students was provided in some cases. Only one teacher conducted a summary assessment every term.

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52 Assessment arrangements should be extensively reviewed. Students are not made aware of assessment schedules when they begin their studies. Schemes of assessment are not shared by teams of staff. Assignment briefs are not produced to a standard format, and essential content such as deadlines, consequences of late submission, and supporting information are often omitted. The college uses no standard marking scheme. Criteria for marking are not always explicit. Procedures for assessment vary widely and there is no college policy to regulate them. Arrangements for retrieval of failure, repeats, and appeals are not defined. In one case, a first-year student was graded with five referrals out of a total of six assessments, yet was allowed to continue to the second year of study on the understanding that resubmission of work was made within the duration of the course-validation period. The student was concerned that it would be difficult to meet the demands of the second year whilst working to resubmit work from the previous year.

53 Data on student retention, progression and examination results are not collated centrally in the college. Results were obtained from individual courses and analysed for each of the two departments. These figures show that retention rates are good. Students make a positive choice to embark upon a specialist course, sometimes at considerable cost to themselves both in personal and monetary terms, and they remain committed to it. The block release mode of the agricultural mechanics course had a lower than average retention rate, at 62 per cent for 1992-93 and 40 per cent for 1993-94; this reflects the uncertainty of current trading conditions.

54 Examination results are good and in many cases, notably above national averages. In 1992-93, a number of courses obtained pass rates of 100 per cent, including the national diploma in agricultural mechanics (block release), the national diploma in construction plant engineering, and the national diploma in three-dimensional design. In 1993-94, every student passed in the construction plant engineering mechanics (full-time) certificate, the national diploma in three-dimensional design and in the higher national diploma in model making. When examination passes are measured against numbers enrolling rather than numbers entering for the examination, average pass rates remain creditable at 75 per cent in the two years for which figures were made available. The college should collect and analyse data over a longer period.

55 The college collects information on student destinations but the categories used to analyse it are too general to allow significant conclusions to be reached. For example, it is not possible to determine whether or not students proceed to jobs which relate directly to their courses.

#### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

56 The college executive produced a draft copy of their self-assessment report, which followed the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. Not all sections were available until the end of the inspection, and it



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therefore played little part in shaping inspectors' conclusions. The draft is not a uniform document and has not been shared within the college. It reflects different authorship and gives very limited evaluation of the college's strengths and weaknesses.

57 The college's quality assurance policy is in draft form and has not yet been formally adopted. Processes of course review and evaluation have been in operation for some years. These derive largely from the demands of the validating bodies. Practice varies considerably between courses and, although they may meet the requirements of each validating body, they do not provide a uniform college system. The college has recognised this shortcoming and has started to respond by formulating a quality assurance policy for general adoption. The academic board was informed at its meeting on 8 September 1994 that such a policy was in preparation, and a third draft, dated 11 November 1994, was provided during the cross-college phase of the inspection.

58 The quality assurance policy has been designed internally and takes account of a consultant's evaluation of the college in March 1994, carried out against the Investors in People national standard. This was an early step towards achievement of the Investors in People award, which the college seeks to gain by May 1995. Given the large amount of progress still to be made, this target is ambitious. Staff are aware of the quality assurance policy and understand the reasons for its introduction. The majority, who have not been involved in its formulation, are unsure both of the demands it will make on them and of how well it will suit their courses.

59 The policy is likely to provide for a system of course monitoring, review and evaluation leading to continuous quality improvement. In its present form, however, it lacks precise targets and consequently it will be difficult to measure improvements. It is also not clear who will pull together the strands of the process and ensure that action results.

60 Although departments collect most of the information necessary to develop statistics for enrolments against targets, retention rates, course completion, examination achievements and destinations, there is no widely agreed view of what constitutes success.

61 Responsibility for quality assurance is vested in the principal. Whilst it is in some respects appropriate that it should be placed in the hands of the most senior member of the college, it is in practice difficult for him to devote the close attention and time needed to establish and develop a quality assurance policy. Staff-development and staff-appraisal policy and procedures are important elements in quality assurance, yet responsibility for them is separated.

62 The draft quality assurance policy sets out to make a connection between the management of staffing and staff development. Staff-development activity has until recently been driven to a significant degree

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by the needs of individual members of staff. There is a staff-development committee, but it did not meet between 20 January 1993 and 25 May 1994, so that the development needs of the college were not formulated. The new staff-development policy, presented to the executive committee on 8 September 1994, and to the staff-development committee on 12 October 1994, recognises that the implementation of the strategic plan should be among the most important criteria for allocating staff-development support. The aims of the new policy are appropriate, and the proposals for its implementation appear sound. The policy is, however, so new that no judgement of its effectiveness can be made.

63 There is at present no staff-development co-ordinator. The responsibilities arising from the establishment of both quality assurance and staff-development policies, and the demands of staff appraisal are considerable. The college should now reconsider how it might best meet these responsibilities.

64 The college subscribes to the Oxfordshire staff-appraisal scheme, which was established in May 1992. Its progress in introducing the scheme has, however, been slow. Plans were laid with a view to completing the first cycle of appraisal by 31 August 1994. In practice, members of the executive committee have been appraised, though not all of them have completed the process. Appraisal of members of staff in the academic departments has begun. No completed forms have so far been received by the administrator of the scheme. Training for those to be involved in appraisal began to take place some two years ago. Some members of staff have had no training. This, and the fact that the scope of the scheme is now to be widened to include support staff, suggests that the college should consider whether all staff are sufficiently aware of the intentions and benefits of the scheme for it to grow healthily from its present, insubstantial, foundation. It is important that the appraisal scheme should contribute directly to the quality assurance process.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Staffing**

65 There are 30 full-time equivalent teaching staff, of whom 20 are full time, and 35 full-time equivalent support and technical staff. Both teaching and support staff are committed to the college. They are highly motivated and make a significant personal contribution to college life. This often takes place outside their normal hours to support the students' extra-curricular activities and to prepare work for shows and exhibitions. Most staff have relevant working experience and maintain close links with industry. Seventy-four per cent of the full-time teaching staff are qualified teachers, and the college actively encourages its staff to become qualified. The programme of accreditation of teaching staff to Training and Development Lead Body standards is not far advanced.

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66 The board of the corporation sets efficiency targets for the teaching departments, for the deployment of academic staff. This has resulted in a 20 per cent increase in the student:staff ratio over the last three years. It was 12.4:1 in 1993-94 according to the official return and there is scope for further increase. There is evidence of a mismatch between the skills of some full-time teachers and the curriculum taught, particularly in the business studies and design elements of the fine craftsmanship and design courses. At times, staff work at the edge of their competence, particularly in information technology, and they lack the benefits of relevant staff development. Approximately one-third of the teaching hours are delivered by part-time staff, whose skills and knowledge ensure that coverage of the curriculum is maintained.

67 There are sufficient support staff deployed in the teaching areas. However, the use of technicians for teaching leaves technical support work undone, and this affects the learning of students. The illness of a key member of staff in the engineering department has exaggerated this problem. The uneven distribution of tasks and functions among a relatively small number of staff occasionally causes tensions. In the majority of cases, however, staff are able to manage their time so that they fulfil their duties.

#### **Equipment/learning resources**

68 Inventories of equipment are maintained and updated. There are no significant equipment deficiencies in the two curriculum areas. Some shortages in materials and small tools were noted. These were found to be due to the ineffective ordering of priorities for the allocation of funds, and to lack of staff involvement in discussing allocations. In the learning resource centre, replacement of losses accounts for 8 per cent of annual expenditure. The installation of an effective electronic security system and a computerised issue system is included in the draft development plan.

69 There is insufficient information technology equipment to support the curriculum. Much of the existing hardware and software is out of date. A core of 12 networked computers provides a minimum level of availability, but almost half of the stand-alone machines are obsolete. There is an insufficient number of copies and licences of current software, and the limited availability of machines for students to use outside class hours is a cause of frustration, particularly to those who are residents.

70 The college has two minibuses and a pool car, available through a booking system. These provide a useful facility for the college, situated as it is in this rural area.

71 Students in fine craftsmanship and design are required to make a considerable financial investment in hand tools and materials to undertake their programme of study. When students start their courses they are required to bring with them a purpose-made tool chest of prescribed design, to store their own tools and equipment. This standard tool kit is

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reported to cost about £350. Over the duration of their studies many students add to the original kit and many support each other by lending tools. The college is able to lend the necessary equipment in a limited number of hardship cases. A small access fund is available.

72 The bookstock in the learning resource centre is generally adequate. Its use varies widely among students on the various courses. A lack of multiple copies causes delay to some students. Approximately 16,000 items are held, ranging from subject texts, to technical literature, British Standards, and a small reference collection. An electronic catalogue provides access to the stock, and a compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database is available. Two computers for wordprocessing work are provided for library users.

73 The college has extensive contacts with manufacturers and suppliers, and there are many examples of heavy equipment being leased on favourable terms or loaned for the purpose of instruction. The power unit area of the engineering department has benefited considerably from companies which supplied engines for students to work with.

### **Accommodation**

74 The college has made a detailed assessment of its accommodation. There is adequate accommodation but it is of mixed quality. Some is very good, but other areas, for example, the agricultural engineering workshop, the hatted accommodation, and some areas of the listed building used by fine craftsmanship and design students, fail to provide an appropriate working environment. The work of the college means that it requires a good deal of storage space, but this is unplanned and as a result teaching areas are often taken up with equipment which stands idle for much of the year.

75 The learning resource centre is small and often overcrowded. There is a quiet study area, but it is not available for 20 per cent of the week, since it is also used as a conference room.

76 Some rooms need redecoration and refurbishment, particularly the student refectory. This is overcrowded at college break times. Rooms are cleaned once a day, but both communal areas and workshops are untidy and dirty for much of the time. The fine craftsmanship and design workrooms are often cluttered, and the college should instil good practice by requiring students to pay closer attention to cleanliness and tidiness.

77 The college has provided access for wheelchair users in some of its accommodation. Access is impracticable to the computing room and to many other essential facilities.

78 Female toilet facilities are not available in the engineering workshop. Changing rooms are not available for students using the sports hall. Lighting and extraction, respectively, are unsatisfactory in the life-drawing and modelling areas. The student car park has poor lighting and the

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surface is broken and uneven. Although the site is small, the signposting system should be improved to locate the entrances and specialist facilities.

79 The hostel block has capacity for 73 students. It is a pleasant environment in which to live and study. It is proving difficult for the college to accommodate the increasing numbers of students in the town.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES**

80 The particular strengths of the college are:

- effective links with employers who provide support and advice
- committed, dedicated and caring staff
- the rapport between staff and students
- some of the work experience programmes
- students' achievements
- clear identification of its specialist market.

81 The college needs to address the following issues:

- poor teaching in fine craftsmanship and design
- uneven allocation of tasks among staff
- an underdeveloped quality assurance system
- the lack of an accommodation strategy
- the lack of systems for student guidance and support
- insufficient attention to basic principles and skills in students' learning
- insufficient attention to health and safety issues
- weaknesses in communication within the institution
- underdevelopment of the management information system
- inconsistency of assessment
- under-emphasis on information technology in the curriculum.

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## FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

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

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

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

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  - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

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  - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

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

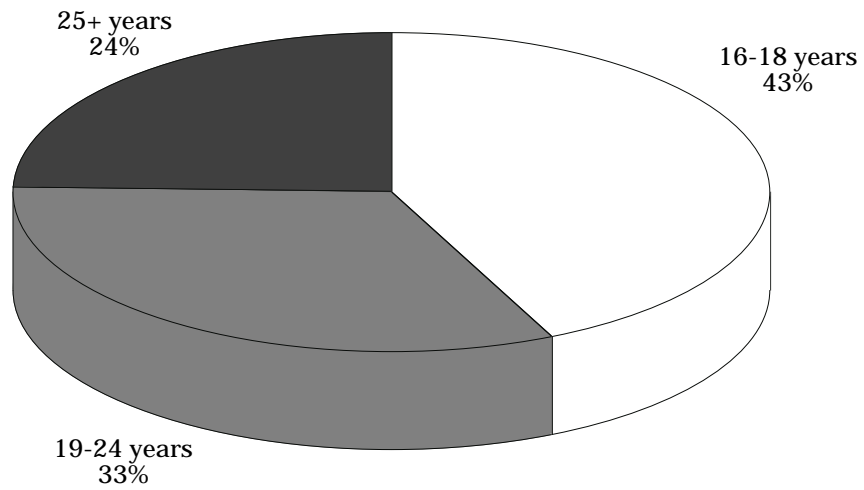
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**Figure 1**

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**Rycotewood College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)**

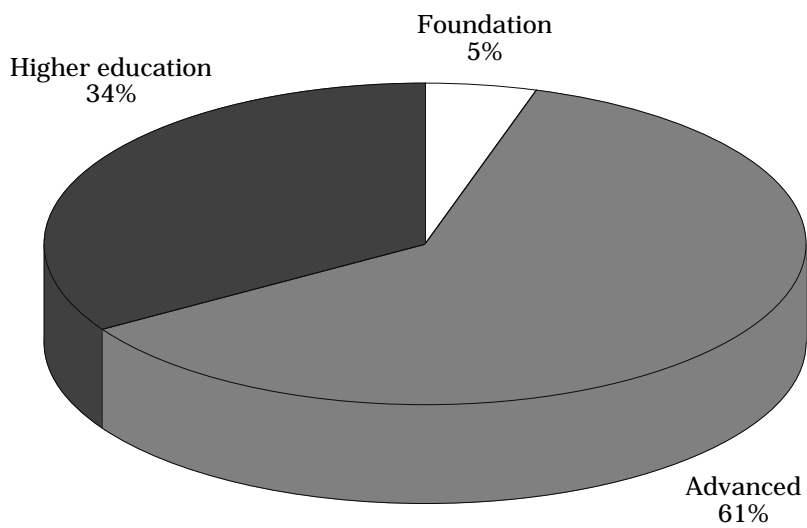


Enrolments: 421

**Figure 2**

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

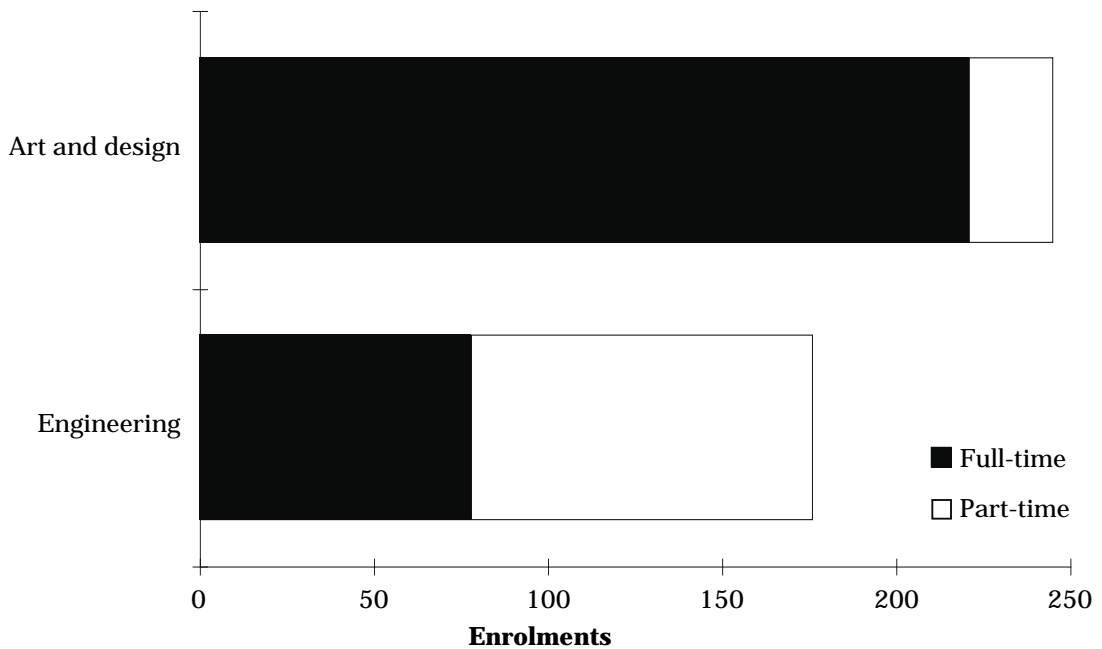


Enrolments: 421

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**Figure 3**

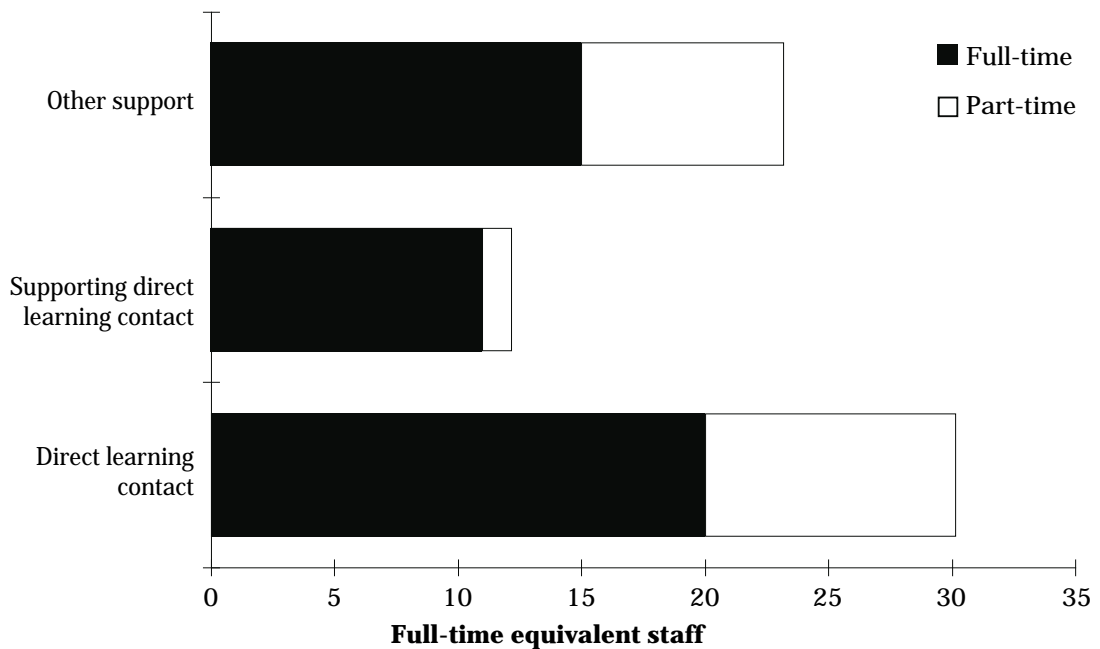
**Rycotewood College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)**



Enrolments: 421

**Figure 4**

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



Full-time equivalent staff: 65

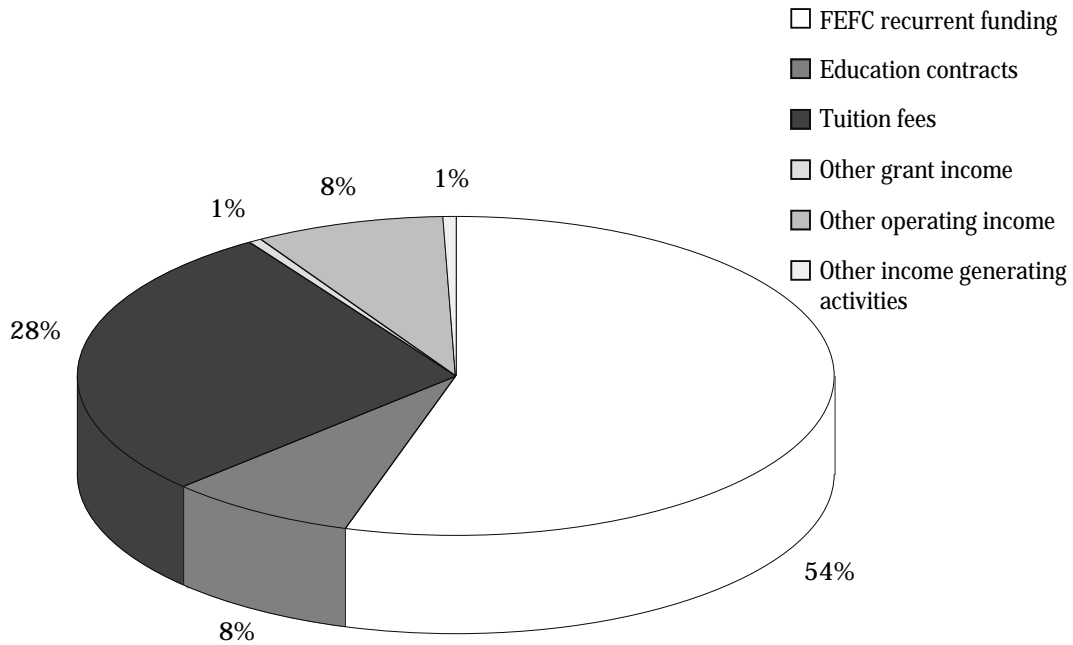


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**Figure 5**

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**Rycotewood College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)**



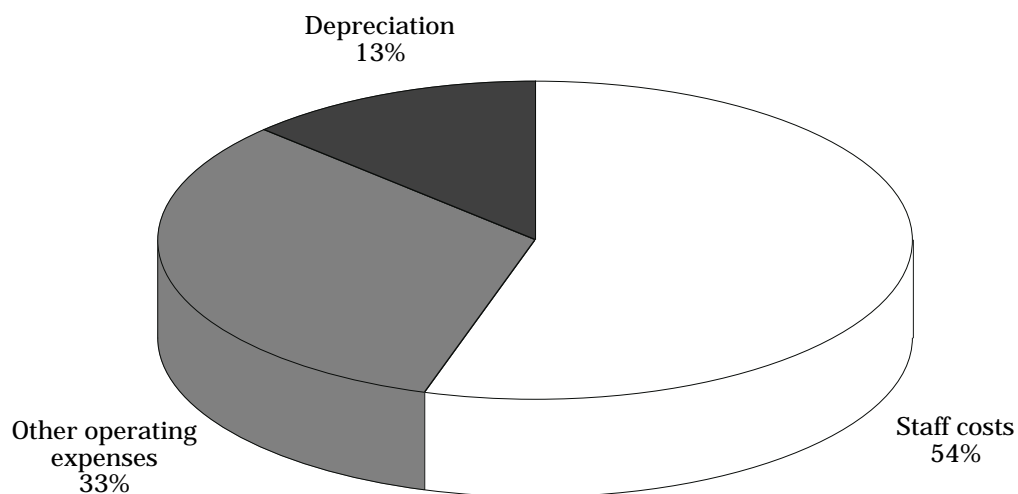
Income: £2,779,000

*Note: does not include £6,000 access, £40,000 transitional and £9,000 capital grants.*

**Figure 6**

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**Rycotewood College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)**



Expenditure: £3,025,000

*Note: excluded from the chart is £5,000 interest payable.*

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