

Arden College

**Inspection of FEFC-funded provision in
non-sector establishments for students with
learning difficulties and/or disabilities**

February 2000

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-2000**

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to secure provision for individual students in England with learning difficulties and/or disabilities where sector provision is inadequate. When it exercises this duty, the Council makes a contract with the establishment making the provision. The contract includes the right of inspection.

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are described in Council Circulars 97/12 and 97/22. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and other aspects of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses*
- *grade 2 - good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses*
- *grade 4 - less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- *grade 5 - poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses*

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Summary

Independent Establishment 14/2000

Inspection of FEFC-Funded provision in the non-sector establishment for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

**Arden College
Southport, Merseyside**

Inspected February 2000

Arden College makes provision for students with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Many of the students have additional emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. Shortly after the previous inspection in September 1997 the college was sold to a company which subsequently went into receivership. The college is now part of Craegmoor Healthcare, a privately owned company, which bought the college in December 1999. The college is situated in Southport, Merseyside and can accommodate 54 residential students and 16 day students. At the time of the inspection, the college had a total of 60 students, 33 of whom were funded wholly or partly by the FEFC. Twenty of the FEFC-funded students are aged 19 or over.

The pre-vocational and vocational work in catering and horticulture is good. Staff throughout the college are committed to helping students and encouraging them to learn to overcome their behavioural difficulties. Students are able to participate in a wide range of practical activities such as sports,

drama, photography and art. Staff make good use of community facilities such as shops, leisure centres, cinemas and restaurants to help students learn appropriate behaviour and to develop their social and communication skills. Senior managers have worked hard and successfully to support staff and students through the difficulties and uncertainties brought about by the sale of the college and the subsequent period of receivership. However, the curriculum for students with more severe learning difficulties is not meeting their needs. Students are spending too much time on paper-based activities which are not helping them to learn. Staff have not given sufficient thought to identifying and prioritising the skills and competences which will help students to lead more meaningful and enjoyable lives. Students' individual learning programmes are not fully effective and procedures for monitoring and recording their progress are inadequate.

Staff have found the self-assessment process helpful and have used it to identify areas for development. Senior managers took the lead in the self-assessment process but were careful to ensure that all staff had an opportunity to comment on the draft report and the final report was amended to reflect their comments. Staff value the opportunity they have had to participate in the self-assessment process. Many sections of the report are descriptive rather than evaluative; they include statements which describe action which has been taken but do not evaluate the effectiveness of the action. Inspectors

Summary

judged that the college had over-estimated the quality of its provision.

The provision funded by the FEFC was judged to be satisfactory with strengths but also some weaknesses and was awarded a grade 3.

Context

The Establishment and its Mission

1 Arden College is situated in Southport, and makes specialist provision for students with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. At the time of the previous inspection in September 1997, the college was known as Paduan College and run as a private limited company. In July 1998 Paduan College was sold to a company which subsequently went into receivership in October 1999. The college is now part of Craegmoor Healthcare, which took ownership of it in December 1999.

2 The college's prospectus outlines its philosophy and values and states, 'At Arden College we believe in:

- offering students quality provision and access to an educational programme based on a 24-hour curriculum that prepares them for independent living and supports their social and emotional development.
- every student's right to take part in activities that will increase their independence.
- the promotion of the human and civil rights of students so that they can take up valued roles and gain status and respect.
- methods of planning which see students as individuals and identify, and act upon, their likes, dislikes and needs.
- helping students to maintain continuity with the past, progress to the future and use current strengths and interests to pursue their aspirations and ambitions.'

3 The main college building is a converted Methodist Church but learning takes place in a number of locations, including the residential accommodation, community facilities and Café Arden which is located in the main shopping centre of Southport.

4 The college admits students with a wide range of learning difficulties. Many students have additional emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. Since the previous inspection the college has opened a new residential unit for students whose behaviour is particularly difficult to manage and may be injurious to themselves and others. The college does not provide for students who have profound visual or hearing impairments or students whose behaviour prevents them or others benefiting from the programmes offered. At the time of the inspection, 60 students were attending the college, 33 of whom were funded by the FEFC. Twenty of the FEFC-funded students were aged 19 or over.

The Inspection

5 Two inspectors carried out the inspection over three days. They observed students in different aspects of the college's provision, including the residential units and Café Arden. They held meetings with managers and staff and had discussions with students. Students' work and college documentation, including students' files, were examined.

The Curriculum

Grade profile of lessons observed

Grade	1	2	3	4	5
Number of lessons	1	3	7	4	0

6 Of the lessons observed, 27% were judged to be good or outstanding. This is well below the average of 65% for all colleges inspected in 1998-99 as set out in *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: the chief inspector's annual report*. The figure of 27% for lessons judged to be less than satisfactory or poor is much higher than the national average of 6%. The majority of the lessons observed were judged to be satisfactory.

7 The college's core curriculum comprises literacy, numeracy, information technology/design, music, physical education, drama and art. In addition to the core curriculum, students study 'enhanced curriculum' subjects such as world of work, office skills, catering, horticulture and photography. Many of these subjects are externally validated by examining bodies such as the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), City and Guilds, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications.

8 Students learn most effectively in lessons which comprise practical activities. For example, in catering and horticulture students learn skills by

carrying out real tasks such as preparing lunch in the college's catering kitchen for all the students and staff, and tending the grounds of the local hospice. Where the lessons are least effective, teachers have given insufficient thought to establishing what students need to learn and to identifying the teaching methods which will help them to learn most effectively.

9 Although the college's self-assessment report states the use of nationally accredited courses as a strength, inspectors were not able to agree fully with this judgement. Such courses are effective when they enable students to develop the skills and competences they need to progress to more advanced vocational courses or to employment. However, the content of some of the nationally accredited courses taken by the students does not enable them to develop such skills, and results in the students spending a considerable amount of time on activities that are of little relevance to their lives. For example, in a nationally accredited course which is designed to prepare students for more advanced level retail courses, students are required to develop a plan of a village, a town and an arcade, and to compile a list of retail outlets. The rationale for such tasks is unclear and

The Curriculum

the tasks are often inappropriate for the students.

10 Since the previous inspection, the college has extended the range of subjects available for students to study in the college and the residential units. Inspectors agree with the judgement in the self-assessment report that this is a strength. Students are now able to study subjects such as photography and health and beauty and to participate in a wide range of leisure and recreational activities. Students also benefit from opportunities to participate in day trips and holidays in this country and abroad.

11 In the residential units students learn a good range of domestic and self-care skills. Staff know the students well and help them to undertake household tasks such as cleaning, cooking and shopping. In the smaller residential units students benefit from the individual attention they get from staff and from the order that the routines and discipline bring to their lives. Students learn to live alongside others. This is good preparation for the students, as many of them, particularly those with more severe learning difficulties, will live in small group homes when they leave the college. However, the potential of the residential units to increase students' learning is not fully exploited. Few teachers work in the residential units and opportunities for learning are missed, particularly for students who would learn best by following the routines of daily life within a domestic setting.

12 Currently, students' individual learning programmes are inadequate. The programmes are divided into separate sections for 'priority needs, the overall learning objective and primary learning goals' but in many files these sections contain the same information. Often, the objectives set for students are too general and do not help staff to plan lessons which take into account the needs of each of the students in the class. For example, one student's primary learning goals were listed as 'to develop all communication skills, to develop independent living skills, to gain self confidence and assertiveness skills'. When planning students' individual programmes teachers often give too much emphasis to students' choices and do not pay sufficient attention to assessing their learning needs. The weaknesses relating to students' programmes were not identified in the self-assessment report.

13 Reviews of students' progress are not fully effective. Teachers assess students' progress in relation to the separate subjects on their timetables but their reports give little indication of the progress students have made. For example, one student's report for art stated that she always worked well, presented no problems and had produced some interesting work using a variety of media. The review reports do not give a clear picture of the progress students are making in relation to the objectives in their individual programmes.

The Curriculum

14 Some students are making progress and learning skills which are relevant to their lives. Students who have successfully completed catering courses in the college have the opportunity to extend their learning by working in Café Arden, which is open to the public and situated near the centre of the town. Inspectors observed students preparing food in the café's kitchen whilst others took orders and served customers. The students worked competently and safely and related well to customers. In other subjects such as photography, students are learning subject specific skills and general employability skills such as listening, taking turns and responding to instructions.

15 The progress of students who have severe cognitive impairments is often hindered by the teaching methods used. For example, students who have difficulty understanding written words and numbers are expected to spend a considerable amount of time each week on paper-based activities. In many of the lessons observed, students could not concentrate on such activities for the duration of the lesson and their behaviour deteriorated. However, some students are benefiting from opportunities to participate in lessons which are specifically designed to extend their communication skills. For example, in one lesson observed by inspectors, students with severe learning difficulties were taught signs which enable them to make their needs known. Such work is particularly beneficial and often reduces students' disruptive behaviour.

Other Aspects of Provision

16 Teachers and support workers know the students well and are committed to their work with them. There is a high staffing ratio and this enables staff to provide appropriate support for students whose behaviour is difficult to manage. Inspectors agree with the judgement in the self-assessment report that further work is needed to ensure that procedures for undertaking baseline assessments are effective. Currently, students do not undertake a residential assessment before they are offered a place at the college. Staff do not always have sufficient information from other agencies about students' needs and difficulties prior to them starting college. This lack of information has meant that some students have had to leave the college soon after entry because the placement has proved to be inappropriate.

17 Some students have been at the college for several years and, in the view of staff, have reached the point when they should be moving on to new placements. Previously, these students have continued at the college repeating courses with little evidence of them making progress. As the self-assessment report states, carefully planned procedures for managing the transition of these students to new placements have now been introduced. Staff are currently working with the students, their parents or carers and external agencies to prepare the students for their move from the college from July 2000.

18 Much of the accommodation is of high quality. Students benefit from the opportunity to learn and practise their

vocational skills within real work environments such as the catering kitchen and Café Arden. Since the previous inspection, the college has established a multi-sensory room which is a useful resource for staff to use with students who have more severe learning difficulties or students who need this type of environment to help them manage their behaviour. The practice of having many of the students together in the large communal area of the main college building at breaks and lunchtimes is inappropriate. Some students find it difficult to cope with this 'open' environment and, as a consequence, their behaviour deteriorates and disrupts others.

19 The college has a wide range of equipment to help students learn. For example, in the photography room students have the opportunity to use up-to-date specialist equipment. The residential units have a range of appropriate household equipment which students can use to learn domestic and self-care skills.

20 Quality assurance procedures are at an early stage of development. Inspectors could not support the college's judgement that this aspect of provision is of outstanding quality. Senior managers have introduced a programme of lesson observations but have insufficient experience of practice in other colleges to establish appropriate criteria against which to judge the quality of the lessons they observe. An appraisal system has been introduced and all staff benefit from supportive supervision sessions but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of

Other Aspects of Provision

these. Senior managers recognise the importance of training for staff and many staff, with help from the college, are currently undertaking training which is of direct relevance to their work with the students.

the new management style and the opportunities they now have to contribute to the work of the college.

21 The self-assessment process has helped senior managers to formulate a development plan for the college. Staff across the college have been involved in the process and value the opportunity they have had to contribute to it. Currently, few staff have a sound understanding of what constitutes good practice in provision for students with learning difficulties and, as a consequence, the self-assessment report is based mainly on subjective evidence. In many sections, action which has been taken is listed as a strength, but staff have made little attempt to analyse the impact that the action has had on students' learning and achievements.

22 Senior managers have worked hard to support staff and students through the difficulties of the past 18 months. They have succeeded in maintaining the morale of staff and ensuring continuity in the students' education. Staff have had to spend a considerable amount of time reconstructing records and documentation which were removed from the college when it was sold in July 1998. Staff have developed an appropriate range of policies and procedures to protect the safety and well-being of the students. Senior managers have devolved more responsibility to staff and encouraged them to participate in planning and monitoring the quality of the provision. Staff are positive about

Conclusions

23 Key Strengths

- high-quality pre-vocational and vocational training in catering and horticulture
- the wide range of activities available for students
- effective management through a period of considerable change and uncertainty

24 Weaknesses

- inappropriate curriculum and teaching methods for students with more severe learning difficulties
- inadequate individual learning programmes for students
- ineffective monitoring and recording of students' progress.