Using Management Information to Raise Standards

**NATIONAL
REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE**

2000-01

Summary

The quality of management information used in further education colleges has been an issue for many years. The challenge facing college staff has always been complex, because of the many thousands of qualifications available to students attending in a wide variety of modes. There has been significant progress recently as measures put in place by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) have focused attention on students, their progress and achievements. Additional momentum has come from the sector's drive to raise standards in response to clearly stated government priorities, and increasing emphasis on the outcomes of learning in inspection. The result is that the majority of colleges now have a range of systems to monitor and account for the work which they do.

There is, however, still some way to go before college information systems are put to the most effective use in raising standards. Good practice seen during inspection underlines the importance of ensuring that data are accurate and that responsibility for their accuracy is shared by all college staff. Better access to management information, and effective training in using information systems, are encouraging staff to play a stronger role in the collection and analysis of data. They are also motivated to accept greater responsibility for ensuring standards and promoting improvement. This, and a high degree of openness and constructive dialogue between teachers and those responsible for centrally held data, lays good foundations for initiatives to raise standards.

The use of targets for managing improvements in the quality of provision has become fundamental to raising standards. A 'whole college' approach to the setting of targets encourages all staff to accept responsibility for their work and achievements. The most effective colleges provide clear guidance on target-setting and refer to a wide range of internal and external sources of information before targets are finalised. Although targets relating to retention and achievement are the central concern, standards will be most effectively raised if colleges set targets for all their services and activities. Increasingly, colleges are involving students in the process of raising standards by setting them targets which help them achieve their maximum potential.

A key task for each college is to define what information is needed to monitor progress against targets. Effective monitoring takes full account of the opinions of students and other clients of the college. In the best practice, monitoring systems are open and transparent, and they enable data to be presented in forms convenient to staff. Attention is increasingly being paid to students' attendance. Procedures for monitoring attendance often feed into tutorial systems so that action can be taken rapidly in cases where attendance is falling.

Governors have a key role in leading a college's drive to raise standards. Most corporations appoint a subgroup to consider quality and standards and the more effective colleges have extensive briefing programmes for governors. Evidence suggests that developing governors' role in

self-assessment also helps them to appreciate the issues associated with standards and quality assurance and improvement. A critical task for governors is to be clear about the performance indicators they consider to be important and how the performance against these should be measured and presented. It helps staff to know what information governors consider when they determine strategies for improvement and associated targets.

The effort devoted to ensuring good-quality data and effective monitoring arrangements will be wasted unless action leads to measurable improvements. Clear thinking is needed about which measures to use when seeking quality improvement, and what the outcomes of initiatives should be. Inspection evidence suggests that small refinements made to college-wide information systems can sometimes have significant benefits for departmental teams because they illuminate local issues. It is also evident that a single quality improvement initiative can have many beneficial outcomes, not all of which may be immediately obvious.

Contents

Introduction

1   The development and use of college information systems has been a recurrent theme of reports on further education. In 1987, the then Department for Education and Science published the findings of a joint efficiency study which recommended that:

> … *all colleges should operate comprehensive, integrated CMIS able to cater for the performance indicators identified in the report…within five years.*

CMIS stands for 'computerised management information systems' and the performance indicators referred to were student completion and success rates, and student destinations and unit costs.

2   In 1991, the summary of a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate on CMIS in further education commented that:

> *The majority of colleges have still to identify their total needs for information and which staff require to access the system.*

It went on to comment that best practice allowed:

> … *better monitoring of the performance of students…*

and

> … *more informed course reviews and evaluation.*

3   In 1993, the Audit Commission in its report, *Unfinished Business*, stated that there were:

> … *shortcomings in the collection and recording of information, particularly on completion rates, qualifications before enrolling, on completion and sometimes on students' final results too.*

4   The pressure to make good use of data increased in April 1993 when colleges were incorporated and became responsible for the management of their own operations. Since incorporation, colleges and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) have worked to improve the quality and accuracy of data on students. The individualised student record (ISR), regular census dates, and the introduction of auditing and credibility tests have all helped in creating more comprehensive and more reliable data.

5   Colleges have been further encouraged to improve their data and to make more effective use of their information systems by the creation of benchmarking data for many national qualifications and the publication of annual performance indicators for each college. Increasing emphasis has also been placed on student retention and achievement during inspection and data checks by inspection teams are now a standard feature of inspection arrangements. Self-assessment, action-planning and inspection have strengthened colleges' efforts to improve the range and quality of the data they consider necessary for good management.

6   Although colleges now make more effective use of data, many have some way to go in ensuring that they have the information they need and that they are using it successfully in managing all aspects of their work. A common feature of colleges that have found themselves in operational difficulties has been their lack of systems for collecting, auditing and using their data effectively. In this context, some colleges believe that the FEFC's policy of not commissioning software on behalf of the sector has slowed the establishing of effective management information systems. The alternative view is that by providing specifications of all data requirements to software suppliers and holding regular liaison meetings, the FEFC has stimulated change without undue interference in the commercial market.

7   Whichever view is taken, many colleges still have considerable development work to undertake in their information systems. The variable accuracy of data on student retention and achievement continues to be a particular problem in many colleges. The chief inspector's report for 1998-99 stated:

Colleges continue to have difficulty in maintaining accurate data relating to retention and students' performance in examinations. When checking samples of data against primary sources, inspectors frequently find differences between the retention and achievement data kept by teachers, those kept by the college and those submitted to the Council.

8   The chief inspector's report for 1999-2000 expressed the view that productive use of management information by colleges would be a key factor in the sector's future development. It suggested that colleges need:

… to see beyond the task of fulfilling data requirements for funding and other external purposes. The use of accurate and trusted management information must become routine for all staff concerned with students' learning.

The report warned the few remaining colleges experiencing significant difficulties:

Those colleges still struggling to count students and their achievements will rapidly be left behind unless they make substantial progress.

9   These comments indicate the need for continued pressure to improve management information and its use in colleges. They underline the integral link between effective use of management information and improving the quality of provision for learners. Recently introduced software, kitemarked by the FEFC, that enables college staff to extract retention and achievement data from their own ISR, has accelerated efforts to improve the accuracy and use of the information which colleges hold on students.

10   This report aims to contribute to the development of effective information systems by providing examples of good practice drawn from colleges inspected over the last two years as part of the normal inspection cycle, and colleges visited specifically as a part of this survey.

The report does not cover financial or other associated systems, focusing primarily on the use of management information systems as they relate to students, their work and achievements.

Data: Accuracy, Responsibility and Access

11 Effective collection and use of data by all college staff are key factors in setting strategic and operational objectives, and the targets which help to ensure they are achieved. Governors and college managers require reliable information to ensure that objectives and targets are realistic. They also require accurate data to measure progress against targets, overall effectiveness and improvement. The accuracy of data is a paramount concern.

> In an Eastern Region college, there are regular discussions between middle and senior managers to ensure the integrity of the data produced by curriculum teams. The discussions are particularly useful in checking the accuracy of student achievement records. Curriculum managers are asked to sign their agreement to a range of data on courses, guided learning hours and additional qualifications being undertaken by students. All staff work co-operatively to facilitate the collection and validation of data and there are spot checks to ensure that the information being recorded is accurate.
>
> At another college, the capturing of information on students correctly, and once only, at the point of enrolment is a particularly significant principle in the initial generation of data. Individual interviews with students enable staff to enter details directly onto the CMIS, dispensing with paper enrolment forms. Students are later asked to check the accuracy of the information. They appreciate the individual attention and guidance they are given and the fact that they don't have to fill out a mass of confusing documentation.

12 Problems with data can occur at almost any time; for example, as a result of students changing their programme after starting their course. Errors can thereafter accumulate until confidence in the accuracy of data is lost. Inspectors frequently find that teachers and departmental managers mistrust the accuracy of the data held on central college systems. This is an issue which has been highlighted by the chief inspector in recent annual reports.

13 The integrity of management information systems may be particularly at risk if there is a reliance on paper-based procedures to effect amendments. Several colleges have introduced electronic means of amending information. These have the obvious advantages of being easier to control, creating a preserved record of changes and speeding communication.

> There is an expectation that electronic mail will be used as the primary means of communication. Formats relating to changes of course and to other alterations to students' details are designed to be used with minimum effort. Most involve a series of menus and 'pick lists'. Staff were happy using the system and after becoming familiar with it they found it quick to use.

14 Although there should always be someone who ultimately 'signs off' data as accurate, the fact that all staff feel a shared responsibility for the integrity of the data is a key factor in ensuring that data are reliable. The most unhelpful situations occur when inadequacies are known but the attitude of members of staff is that it's not their problem or that the system is at fault and that fixing it is someone else's responsibility. Inspection evidence strongly suggests that the high profile given to self-assessment in the last four years has had a beneficial impact in tackling these kinds of issues.

> The college considers that managers and staff are now far more comfortable with data. They understand the importance of ensuring the integrity of centrally held data and the accuracy of the ISR. Staff see their own roles in gathering and analysing data as part of a whole-college approach to the management of information. Self-assessment has been a unifying influence in establishing an 'evidence-

based' culture, helping to raise the status of management information.

15   The ability to set targets that are accepted as realistic and achievable is a major factor in persuading staff to 'sign up' to the achievement of higher standards. It also helps to ensure that improvements happen. Good communication and discussion at all levels in the college enable staff to develop an informed view of appropriate standards and targets.

In one sixth form college, curriculum managers recognise that many factors can affect year-on-year variations in performance but agree that the dialogue that takes place over the setting of targets helps develop a feeling of responsibility and accountability at course and subject levels.

16   Sometimes the organisation of the data is a factor which affects the attitudes of staff. The quality of the data is certainly a significant factor.

Initially, 45 managers were responsible for the data relating to their own area of work. Gradually, the college has developed an effective centralised information system. Staff feel responsible for ensuring that data are accurate and that they use the system effectively in monitoring students' performance.

17   A growing number of colleges employ programmers to develop facilities which help staff get the most out of management information. Clearly, there are significant advantages if those responsible for management information systems understand the curriculum and how it is taught, and have some knowledge of the students.

The technical manager of the management information team at a sixth form college is

also a skilled programmer with an in-depth appreciation of the educational context in which he works. The team has developed appropriate software, beginning with a specially designed system for monitoring attendance.

Programmers at another college have written software to provide senior managers with funding unit estimates by course and for the whole college. These are used to set the recruitment targets for departments.

The senior manager of the management information team in a general further education college has a thorough operational knowledge of the curriculum and a familiarity with student issues as well as IT skills.

18   Ensuring easy access to CMIS is a key factor in building enthusiasm for the effective use of management information. Good access also helps to remove any mystique about the information used to manage the college.

In a large general further education college, all staff have access to a personal computer and most have access to electronic mail. The college network provides access to data on students such as class lists, student status and in-year retention.

In a college in the South West each member of academic staff has a computer and all computers are connected to the college intranet and through this to the Internet.

At a college in the North West, every full-time member of the teaching staff has a home computer supplied by the college and some have opted for extra peripherals such as scanners. Staff can access the college network in the evenings and weekends through modem links. The college has created folders on the network holding all course documentation, minutes of meetings,

examination results, timetables, schemes of work, lesson plans, assignments, sample work, and information from verifiers. The folders are accessible to all staff.

In a Yorkshire and Humberside college, there is direct access to the management information system in staffrooms. Regular use of reports on attendance, achievement, and recruitment has increased the effectiveness of school management teams.

19   Good access needs to be backed up by effective staff training and time for staff to get used to, and subsequently to make the best use of, management information systems. Much has been achieved through national initiatives to improve the general information technology (IT) skills of teachers and other staff. Colleges need to build on these developments to ensure that staff have the skills necessary to use the college's management information system to best effect.

Improving staff skills in data analysis has been a key objective within the college. Curriculum managers are now comfortable in handling data and have made excellent progress in using the CMIS to obtain the data on which to base their decisions.

20   It is much easier for colleges to develop a focus on standards, performance and achievement if staff throughout the college have confidence in management information, good access to the CMIS and the skills to use it effectively.

Many of the staff in a college in the South West referred to the speed of development of information systems over the past two years and the range and quality of information which is now available to support judgements about the college's performance. The management information system

provides data on the performance of the college in relation to neighbouring colleges and national benchmarks. It also provides comparative information on courses within the college.

At a college in the North West, the expectations of staff have been levered up by the systematic evaluation of examination results, involving analyses of trends in performance, comparisons with national, regional and sector averages, and league table and examination body data.

At another college in the same region, there are monthly and termly reviews of CMIS data to ensure that staff maintain confidence in its reliability. Course teams agree targets with sector managers. An extensive range of internal performance indicators have been developed and are used in planning.

An evaluation conducted by a West Midlands college, shows that staff training and regular use of the CMIS have increased teachers' understanding of their role in achieving targets.

Key points

21   The key points to emerge from inspection evidence are that:

- the integrity of the data is central to the effective use of management information systems
- there need to be sound procedures for amending data
- an important factor in ensuring the reliability of data is that all staff feel a shared responsibility for management information
- effectively organised information, focusing on the importance of reliable centrally held data, helps to build staff confidence in using management information
- there are clear benefits if the central management information team have a good

understanding of the curriculum and of issues related to teaching and learning

- good access to management information is crucial if it is to be used effectively

- staff need appropriate training in IT and time to learn how to use the CMIS.

Targets and Target-setting

22   More efficient and effective use of data, the growing expertise of management information teams, improved self-assessment and the availability of benchmarking data are enabling colleges to set targets for an increasingly wide range of activities. It is now the norm for self-assessment reports to include judgements about performance against benchmarks and for targets for improvement to be incorporated into subsequent action plans.

23   A whole-college approach to setting targets is essential if all staff are to accept responsibility for achieving the targets set. Clear guidance is required to achieve a common level of understanding about what is required and how requirements should be met.

At one college in the North West, a helpful booklet entitled 'Addressing Retention and Achievement' has been issued to all course teams. It describes the process of target-setting for retention and achievement. It also includes details of successful strategies undertaken by individual course teams and information from a Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) research project. The booklet has been valuable in pooling ideas and strategies arising from the efforts of course teams, the pastoral team and FEDA and in developing a consistent approach to retention and achievement rates.

At another college, there are clear guidelines on setting targets for attendance, retention and achievement at college, departmental and course levels. The guidance specifies that the starting point for setting these targets is the historical trend identified by the ISR data for the previous three years but the targets must also take account of the college's own targets for various types of course and FEFC benchmarking data.

24   Targets need to be challenging yet realistic if they are to bring about improvements. They are most likely to be achieved when they take account of the contexts in which colleges work. Information from a wide range of internal and external sources can be used to inform the debate and set the targets.

Four years of data on the college's previous performance against targets are readily available on the CMIS. Staff within the college also refer to a range of external benchmarks, such as Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) tables and FEFC benchmarking data. Targets are set for each student group.

As a matter of routine, the registrar of a sixth form college downloads relevant information from the Internet and makes it available to staff for use in setting targets. The information includes general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) pass rates.

At one general further education college, the strategy of widening participation includes setting targets for particular courses based on previous performance. Managers are able to identify the potential contribution of particular courses to widening participation by analysing the postcodes of enrolled students. Postcode statistics form one element of the data referred to in setting retention targets.

25   In addition to targets for student enrolment, retention and achievement, many colleges set targets and standards for a wide range of other activities, including internal services to staff, services to external clients and cross-college functions. In the most successful colleges, all staff, regardless of their role, are working towards targets designed to improve the quality of provision.

In one East Midlands college, there are well-documented service standards and targets which cover all aspects of college operations, including learning support, library services, equal opportunities work, finance, management information and human resource functions, refectory services and grounds maintenance. There are also regular reviews of progress towards achieving the targets set.

In another college, the performance of the CMIS team is measured against agreed performance standards. The standards, both qualitative and quantitative, form part of the annual operational plan for the 'research and statistics' department.

In a third college, an IT policy and resources group is responsible for setting performance targets for CMIS and all other IT-related functions. It is supported in its work by a curriculum user group and a business user group. Relationships between the groups are facilitated by a degree of common membership.

26   Commonly, the standards which colleges set include target levels of response from potential students, students and employers. In colleges with the best practice, these standards cover the admissions unit, business and training unit, library and other services. The college charter provides opportunities to publicise these service standards to clients. Many charters, however, fail to identify easily measurable targets.

In one sixth form college, high standards are set for customer services. The standards are recorded in the college charter. They are reviewed annually against evidence gathered directly from students, parents and business clients and from course evaluation sheets. Performance against charter standards is also subject to internal audit.

27   The quality of teaching and learning is measured mainly through classroom observation and surveys of students' perceptions. Most colleges now have lesson observation schemes and many grade the lessons observed. Some colleges are setting targets for the grades achieved.

The college has set an overall target that the lesson observation profile should match that published annually in the chief inspector's report. The college compares lesson grades for each area with the inspection grades awarded by FEFC inspectors.

28   Students' perceptions, usually gathered through questionnaires, provide valuable information on the quality of teaching and learning. Some colleges set targets for improvement based on the information provided by students in their responses the previous year. Where questionnaires have been designed to allow an analysis of students' opinions by course or module, targets are often detailed and precise.

29   Increasingly, colleges are setting standards for individual students based on past achievements and qualifications on entry.

Students' qualifications on entry and their predicted achievements are automatically taken into account in setting course targets for the current year.

Each student is set a target grade based on entry points scores derived from past achievement. By the autumn half-term, programme leaders had received the GCSE points score for each student, and predicted GCE A level grade or general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) achievement level.

In liaison with local schools, data on achievements are transferred to the college

electronically and used to ensure that students choose appropriate courses. The information also provides some early indication of additional support needs.

At a sixth form college in the Eastern Region, students studying GCE A levels at the college work towards individual performance targets. The targets are based on students' qualifications on entry and are calculated using a computer program designed in the college. The program uses an algorithm based on external benchmarks to produce individualised targets that are then discussed with students during their weekly tutorials. Subject lecturers enter actual performance data for individual students and reports are produced for discussion with students every five or six weeks.

30   The complexity of gathering accurate information and the dialogue necessary to formulate and agree appropriate targets underline the need for careful planning. In most instances this will be geared to internal cycles of quality assurance and strategic planning.

At one college in the Northern Region, the calendar of events leading to the setting of school targets for 1999-2000 was as follows:

July	Training session for staff involving external consultants.
18/19 November	School meetings to discuss levels of achievement and to consider draft 1 targets.
21 January	Meeting with heads of school and directorate to check progress on draft 2 targets.
28 January	Meeting with heads and deputy heads of school to check draft 2 targets.
31 January	Final changes from schools to management information systems manager.
7 February	Aggregate figures from management information systems manager to quality director.
8/10 February	Data check and validation, reformat spreadsheets.
15 February	Check by heads of school.
18 February	Check by directorate.
18 February	Targets and report mailed to governors.

A college in the Eastern Region has successfully integrated the setting of targets and monitoring of performance with its annual schedule of activities. In July, curriculum areas conduct a qualitative review of their activities during the year. During August and September staff discuss performance in relation to targets for retention and achievement. In November the focus is on the degree to which achievement targets have been met. New targets for courses and subjects are agreed during discussions between middle and senior managers. These then inform the consolidated targets for the whole college. Easily accessible data from the CMIS is available to support the monitoring and setting of targets.

Key points

31   The key points to emerge from inspection evidence are that:

- a 'whole college' approach to setting targets encourages all staff to accept responsibility for performance

- clear guidance on target-setting is required

- colleges in which target-setting is effective use a wide range of internal and external sources of information to inform debate before setting targets

- targets should extend across all college operations

- standards and targets should be publicised more clearly; for example, in college charters

- setting targets for internal lesson observation schemes helps to improve the quality of teaching and learning

- the most successful colleges set targets for individual students as part of their drive to raise standards and to help students achieve their maximum potential

- targets for students should take full account of prior achievements

- the process of setting and monitoring targets needs to be given time, integrated with other activities and follow a clear timetable.

Monitoring and Reviewing Progress

32   Careful analysis of a college's operations and strategic objectives should lead to a clear understanding of the standards and targets which need to be set in order to achieve purposeful development and improvements in quality. Progress towards targets requires equal clarity about monitoring arrangements. Self-assessment, follow-up actions and the regular routine monitoring of targets to a published timetable are essential elements in making significant annual improvements. These should enable areas of concern to be identified and remedied quickly.

33   A key task is to define what information is needed to be able to monitor and review progress effectively.

At one North West college, the business review process at an operational level is led by managers and is carried out six times each year. The review is closely defined and involves 28 objectives of which 18 require data taken from the college information system.

At another college in the region, course reviews are undertaken electronically. Course review information is held on a standard template for each course. The template contains tables of retention and achievement rates for the last four years and the current year. It also includes national benchmarks so that automatic comparative bar charts can be produced. Course teams are required to comment on the trends in retention and achievement and to complete action plans.

In the South West, a college uses FEFC data to create performance indicators. Its performance, in terms of retention and achievement, is compared with neighbouring colleges and with the sector as a whole.

34   It is often assumed that the responsibility for monitoring performance against targets belongs to those in management positions. In the most successful colleges, however, all staff share responsibility for the college's performance, and data and data analyses are widely available and discussed openly.

At one college, monthly statistical bulletins are available to all staff. They cover enrolments, funding units, and withdrawals by age, gender and postcode and provide analysis down to course level. Corresponding data for the previous year are also published, together with targets for the current year.

At another college, there are regular reports to senior and middle managers, ranging from four-year comparisons of enrolment with completions for the whole college, broken down into schools, to current retention rates on individual courses. Reports are provided routinely to the finance and general purposes committee and to the academic quality committee. Common knowledge of the college's performance, in clear quantitative terms, ensures that staff work in a purposeful climate.

At a third college, each classroom has at least one computer connected to the college academic network. Staff record attendance on a database, registering each student. Information on attendance is, therefore, immediately available throughout the college.

35   Good information systems provide data in an easily assimilated format so that monitoring is easy. The format is dependent on the type of data, level of detail and the type of analysis to be carried out. However, not enough use is made of graphs to illustrate trends.

In one college, retention by curriculum areas is monitored weekly during the first two terms and presented in graphical form. This allows rapid comparisons to be made between successive years.

36   At best, staff are able to gain access to a variety of data and manipulate them into forms which suit their needs. Electronic mail and intranets can be used to good effect.

The intranet ensures that staff have easy access to on-line information. It is available on all sites of the college and in central staff workrooms. The CMIS is part of the intranet and allows access to a range of course and financial data depending on the authorisation status of the user. There is a range of 'push button' reports in standard formats and, in most cases, report data can be transferred to a spreadsheet or to a graphics package simply by clicking on to the appropriate icon. Many staff use the system to create their own spreadsheets of students' in-course achievements or assignment grades.

37   As information becomes more easily accessible, the ability of staff to understand, interpret and manipulate it becomes increasingly important.

Staff have been trained and coached in using the college systems and all heads of school have been provided with laptops, giving immediate access to central data, and sector-approved software that is able to aggregate data to any level required. On-line access to information is available to all staff through staffroom networks. Management information is continuously updated. All managers are aware of trends and performance across the college.

38   Timely monitoring of students' attendance is critical in creating an atmosphere of academic discipline and improving retention and achievement rates. Many colleges have now identified action on attendance as a key priority.

A college in the South East has introduced a computerised register. Regular weekly reports are provided for tutors, who can then follow up swiftly any unauthorised absences. Termly summaries are produced which feed into quality assurance and course review processes.

At another college, students at risk are identified and tracked at regular intervals during the year. 'At risk' categories are based on careful scrutiny of data relating to attendance patterns, punctuality, performance, incomplete work, behaviour, isolation and financial situation. The information gathered has enabled a programme of support to be introduced, focused on students most at risk of failing to complete their courses successfully.

39   Some colleges have developed systems to help tutors support individual students more effectively.

Course tutors at a South West college say that the reports now available help them run their courses more effectively and monitor individuals' progress more closely. The information available includes: course lists with information on students' dates of birth, addresses and telephone numbers; individual students' overall attendance and attendance on a particular course unit; students' use of the intranet including the date and time of the last login. The information is available on tutors' desktop computers. They can, therefore, rapidly follow up erratic attendance or poor performance on a particular unit of the course and e-mail colleagues of any concerns.

40   Inevitably, students' performance is key to many of the targets which colleges set. Students should, therefore, be involved in the process of setting and monitoring targets. This will not only help them focus their energies but assist staff in monitoring and managing colleges' progress towards better performance, as a whole.

> At a sixth form college, management information and tracking systems provide regular data on attendance, retention and progress to teachers and tutors. Students discuss and evaluate their performance with subject and personal tutors. Targets for improvement are agreed and resulting action plans are monitored. Action-planning folders are maintained electronically and tutors are able to obtain, on-line, a total overview of students' progress and grades across all of their subject areas.

41   The take-up and impact of additional learning support are an important part of the monitoring of students' progress.

> The college uses a database developed in-house to record learning support activities, allowing tutors to monitor the progress of each student and to evaluate the impact of learning support on overall performance. Records can be linked to other data on individual students, such as gender and ethnicity, to provide information relating to the college's performance targets in other aspects of work, such as equal opportunities and inclusivity.

42   In a number of colleges, the 'learning centre' has become a significant high-quality learning resource. Some colleges have invested considerable time and effort in developing systems for tracking students' work, monitoring the use of the centre and improving its cost effectiveness.

> The development of the college-wide network allows learning materials to be accessed by students using their unique 'log-in' and password. The procedure automatically registers the student as using the materials. Subject teachers and tutors are, therefore, provided with an indication of the study completed by students and can take action if necessary. Electronic mail further enhances the system for students and staff.

43   Students' and other clients' views are important in guiding improvements.

> Throughout the year students' views are sought on a wide range of subjects from pre-course 'tasters', open days, induction and enrolment, college facilities and the quality of teaching and learning. The data are fed into the CMIS and generate a range of reports, from executive summaries to feedback to individual teachers.

44   Some colleges have refined the process of seeking students' views to good effect.

> The college has taken advantage of the electronic system of collecting students' views through the college intranet by making the questionnaire more flexible. The questionnaire is 'adaptive' for each group of students and the questions presented are focused and relevant. Students say that they spend more time completing the questionnaire because they identify the relevance to their particular programme of study. Course teams find the responses more helpful in conducting self-assessment.

45   Although the feedback from students is not always used to best effect, there is much good practice to be found in the use of questionnaires and regular meetings with student groups. The opportunity for students to express their

opinions, and to effect changes, helps them feel part of the college's drive to raise standards.

After a steady upward trend for a number of years, students' levels of satisfaction with the quality of information provided before enrolment started to fall significantly. The college, therefore, undertook a review of its procedures and staffing levels.

At another college, grade profiles for classroom observation in each of the curriculum areas are compared with information from the student perception questionnaire. Retention rates are also compared with previous years. A downward trend in retention rates, observation grades or levels of student satisfaction results in further investigation into course content, teaching, students' backgrounds and learning resources.

In a third college, there are routine meetings with the students' course representatives twice a term. The meetings are minuted. Action points identified are referred to a member of staff to deal with and a timescale is set for reporting back. The minutes are posted on the college intranet. Progress on the action points agreed are also posted on the intranet and monitored by the student union. Student union members felt the college responded quickly to issues raised.

Key points

46   The key points to emerge from inspection evidence are that:

- it is important to define exactly what information is required for monitoring to be effective
- openness and transparency help to persuade staff that they all share responsibility for the college's performance
- attention should be given to how best to present information; graphical formats are particularly useful

- the best information systems allow staff to manipulate data into a form which suits them
- timely monitoring of attendance is necessary so that prompt action can be taken where necessary
- students should share in the monitoring and target-setting process, particularly in relation to their own performance
- all learning activities should be monitored, including additional learning support and the use of open-access learning centres
- information from students' and other clients' perception surveys should inform improvement strategies and targets.

47   Guidance issued by the FEFC to all corporations[1] makes it clear that governors have ultimate responsibility for the educational character and quality of education provided by their college. Amongst other things, the guidance indicates that the governing body:

> … *should expect to monitor the college's performance and ensure that any changes necessary to bring about improvement are implemented and thus ensure that standards are maintained or raised.*

and it

> … *will be expected to consider and formally approve annual targets for student retention and achievement and monitor the college's progress towards achieving them.*

48   The guidance also indicates that the college principal should report regularly to the governing body on the quality of provision and on the standards achieved by students. Suggestions for what the governing body should receive include:

- regular reports and analysis of students' achievements and retention (also, possibly, attendance and punctuality)

- an annual self-assessment

- regular information on a range of key performance indicators, especially performance against annual targets for retention and students' achievements, focusing particularly on the range of students' backgrounds and groups which are under-represented

- performance against charter commitments

- summary information on associated staff appraisal and development

- progress on the implementation of action plans.

49   The responsibilities of governors with respect to quality and standards have also been

---

[1]*The College Governor,* Further Education Funding Council, March 2000

the subject of comment by the chief inspector in his annual reports. In his 1998-99 report, the chief inspector, commenting on self-assessment, said:

> *As signalled in last year's report, governors and senior managers cannot abrogate their responsibilities by grading themselves highly when the academic record of their college is mediocre.*

50   In 1999-2000, the revised guidance for governors was published, training materials were produced and a programme of training for consultants was launched. The chief inspector was also able to report more positively in his annual report for the year:

> *It is particularly encouraging to note that governors are paying more attention to standards, and that the more effective governing bodies play a key part in setting and monitoring targets for student retention and achievement.*

51   A key task for governors is to ensure that the flow of information about college performance suits the needs of the corporation. In his 1999-2000 annual report, the chief inspector commented that colleges have responded positively to the government's recommendation that they establish a 'standards committee'. Whether or not this specific arrangement is adopted, it is common for a subgroup of governors to be charged with the task of receiving and considering information about quality and standards before reports are brought to the full corporation.

In a college in the South West, much of what is reported to governors is first considered by the finance and general purposes committee. This committee receives comprehensive reports on all aspects of college performance including monthly updates on student enrolments and the college's financial position. It also monitors the college's position with regard to meeting its targets for funding units.

In another college, an extensive range of data is made available to the corporation to enable governors to understand performance and trends in key areas. A curriculum and quality subcommittee receives three-year trends in key areas of performance.

In a third college, the academic quality committee considers and then passes to the full corporation the full range of retention and achievement data, together with appropriate performance indicators against which to judge the college's performance. Information on enrolment, retention and achievement by gender and ethnic origin also affords the corporation the opportunity to monitor equality of opportunity.

52   These kinds of arrangement are helpful because steering improvements in college performance is complex. The ability of any college to raise its standards will necessarily be affected by the curriculum and how it is developing, staffing and staff development needs, recruitment policies and students' backgrounds, the availability of resources, self-assessment outcomes, and many other factors related to the particular circumstances of the college and its strategic development. It pays to have a group of governors who consider such issues, and how they are related, with a particular interest in recommending targets for improving quality.

53   This underlines the need for good development programmes for governors and a constructive and open interaction between college staff and the corporation.

In a North West college, before corporation meetings there have been useful briefings on a wide range of curriculum and funding issues. Sessions have been provided on unit generation, retention and achievement, FEFC benchmarking data, funding units,

and sources of external funding. Governors have found these half-hour briefing sessions useful. The sessions enable them to assimilate and interpret more easily the information presented to them. A wide range of staff makes the presentations to the board. Students have also made presentations.

In another college, the standards subcommittee, at its second meeting, received a presentation on the types of data collected by the college and a suggested list of non-financial reports that it might wish to receive. The subcommittee was able to select the reports it required. It also asked for an additional report that combined the data on retention and achievement, to indicate how many of the students enrolled were successful.

54   Self-assessment is a valuable mechanism for increasing governors' appreciation of the daily work of a college. Apart from assessing their own performance, corporations in the best colleges are fully involved with the process which leads to the whole college making judgements about its performance. Governors also need to understand and support subsequent decisions about actions needed to make improvements, particularly where these will have an impact on resources and progress towards strategic objectives.

A checklist for governors has been developed (adapted from the FEFC publication *Effective Self-assessment*) to help them to validate curriculum and cross-college self-assessment reports. The checklist also provides a framework for evaluating evidence, asking relevant questions and commenting on grading. The process has been greatly valued by governors and curriculum personnel. Some governors saw it as the best governor

training they received because of its breadth and sharpness of focus. It brought governors directly into the process of looking at evidence drawn from lesson observation, benchmarking, trend analysis and management information system summaries.

55   Perhaps the most challenging task for governors is to decide what information they need in order to meet their responsibilities for college performance and standards, and in what format they want it. They also need to decide the timetable for receiving information.

Each year, the curriculum and quality subcommittee of the corporation of an Eastern Region college receives and considers reports on three-year trends in key areas of work. The current key performance indicators included in the annual review are: income, FEFC funding, capital, staffing, financial ratios, equal opportunities, student recruitment, market share, student services, IT and learning resources, student satisfaction, stakeholder satisfaction, teaching quality, student retention and student achievement.

A North West college has adopted an approach to monitoring progress on the strategic plan which provides a broad overview of the educational character and performance of the institution. Quarterly monitoring reports on the strategic plan address the key areas of: partnerships, customers, students, processes, business, people and resources. These are then used as a basis for evaluating market success, student success and business success. Management information, research, trends in data and performance measures are structured around these key areas concentrating on priorities for that quarter.

Another college in the region considers its overall performance using the six FEFC key performance indicators. Performance is benchmarked against the median for general further education colleges, local general further education colleges and the sector as a whole. Presentation of data to governors is formatted to ensure that analyses are clear.

In a London college, the governing body and its subcommittees receive regular and comprehensive data about the student cohort. The data show three-year trends for: student numbers (by college and by curriculum area); gender, age, ethnicity and disability; catchment area statistics; mode of study; fees levied; types of fee concession; primary qualification aims; qualification levels. The data are presented in a user-friendly format, using tables and charts. The data are accompanied by a management summary discussing key features and trends.

56   Openness is a key to effective college leadership. In relation to quality and standards, it helps staff throughout a college to know what information is being considered by governors.

Regular reports on student enrolment, retention and achievement are considered by governors and the operational management team. Targets and performance indicators, including student retention and achievement rates, form part of the strategic plan. Outcomes of quarterly reviews of performance are published and shared widely through the college newsletter.

Key points

57　The key points to emerge from inspection evidence are that:

- governors should be fully aware, from FEFC guidance, of their major responsibilities for improving quality and standards

- it pays to have a group of governors who look at college performance data specifically from the point of view of standards and improving the quality of provision and who consider information before it is presented to the full corporation

- briefing programmes for governors are vital and, in the best colleges, they involve a wide range of staff and, where appropriate, students

- developing governors' role in self-assessment helps them to appreciate the issues associated with standards, quality assurance and improvement

- governors need to be clear about exactly which performance indicators they consider to be important and how performance against these should be presented

- it helps staff to know what information governors consider when they determine strategies for improvement and associated targets.

58   All the effort devoted to ensuring that data are comprehensive and accurate and that there are effective monitoring arrangements will be wasted unless action leads to measurable improvements. Raising standards is key to colleges meeting national education and training targets. It is also central to securing the well-being of the sector as new arrangements for post-16 learning are put in place by the government.

59   It is important for individual colleges to be clear about the measures which will help to guide development and bring about improvements in performance. Equally, it is important to think through what the outcomes of quality improvement initiatives will be. The benefits of accurate data in monitoring improvements and identifying areas of concern have been readily identified in many colleges.

The improved quality of management information and tracking systems has resulted in a number of tangible improvements in standards. Overall levels of achievement have improved year on year since 1995, and schools can point to specific improvements on individual courses. The college is now 2% above the FEFC upper quartile performance indicator for general further education colleges. The retention rate has also risen year on year and, at 86%, it is 2% above the national average for general further education colleges. In the small number of programmes where there is concern about retention and achievement rates, senior managers have implemented robust action plans to address issues of underperformance.

60   Developments do not have to be major ones to make an impact. Sometimes a small refinement to a college system will illuminate good or weak practice at departmental level. On other occasions, a relatively small-scale development for a particular department will have significant benefits.

At a college in the South East, the management information system printouts for December identified computing and IT cohorts for the first time. They indicated that attendance for this group of students has been the highest of all the college's departments.

At a South West college, a spreadsheet produced for the business and leisure team is being used to record grades for the GNVQ advanced in business. Staff are enthusiastic about the facility created to look at an individual student's set of assignments or to compare students' performance on a particular assignment. A spreadsheet developed for the GCE A level studies team, records students' progress and achievement at each half-term assessment. For each student and each GCE A level, the system records achievement, effort, attendance and, by the third assessment date, a projected grade. Staff appreciate the opportunity to examine performance, for example, by tutor group or by GCE A level group.

61   Student retention is often a key indicator in strategies for improvement. It now receives much attention from colleges. Rigorous monitoring of attendance has been shown to improve retention and the use of electronic records greatly improves the ability of staff to analyse and view the data quickly and easily in a variety of ways. The added bonus is the reduction in the amount of paper handled by individual teachers and teachers' increased knowledge of the students they teach.

The college information and tracking system has made a considerable contribution to monitoring attendance, retention and progress. Individual students' performance is carefully monitored and information provided by the system is used in discussion with students at tutorials. Attendance has improved and is significantly above the 85%

required for students to be eligible for free entry to examinations. There has been an upward trend in retention rates since the system was introduced and tutors also report a small reduction in the number of poor homework submissions recorded.

62   There can be no doubt that rigorous tracking of each student's progress increases the potential of tutorial systems to help students by ensuring that their recent performance is discussed and that appropriate action plans are drawn up.

In one college, students discuss and evaluate their performance with subject and personal tutors. The emphasis is on motivating students to set and work towards achieving or surpassing realistic targets with the encouragement of their tutors. The college has also moved forward to develop systems to track students' progress on individual modules within modular GCE A level programmes, using the information gained to design revision and resit strategies for improving performance.

In another college, students considered to be behind with their academic work have an individual action plan which is reviewed daily. The daily performance targets for students have led to improved retention and achievement rates on courses that have traditionally had poor levels of performance, such as some GNVQ intermediate programmes.

63   The reasons for a student leaving a course are not always easy to determine after the event. At this point, anyway, it is often too late to assist the student in question. The key task for college staff is to be vigilant and proactive so that students at risk of leaving receive support as early as possible. Early indications of risk are often available from individual students'

records. These records have to be comprehensive and well maintained if they are to be useful.

The academic quality committee identified problems of retention on a number of courses, particularly in the first term. Analysis of the records of those students who had left the course in the first term indicated that the majority had either joined the course late, had lower than average qualifications on entry, or were in some way non-standard entries to the course. These factors had not been picked up from the enrolment forms. As a result of the analysis, the college has reviewed its enrolment procedures and redesigned the enrolment form.

64   Open learning and distance learning programmes can raise a different range of issues. Education for many students is in part a social activity and confidence is gained and shared through contact with other students. As in the previous example, careful analysis of information on record helps to direct improvement.

Retention rates on a number of open learning programmes that students could join at any time were giving rise for concern. Analysis of the enrolment information identified that students who had enrolled on their own, rather than as members of a small group enrolling and receiving induction together, were more likely to leave the programmes early. The college now ensures that there is an opportunity for all students enrolling to meet and mix socially with other students on the course.

65   Larger colleges have often found it difficult to persuade students to take advantage of the additional learning support which they need, and to monitor their progress effectively when they do so. Increasingly, colleges are creating

databases containing individual records of attendance and progress.

Since the introduction of tighter monitoring and improved electronic record-keeping for additional learning support, there has been a rise in the numbers taking advantage of the support following initial identification of need. At present, over 70% of those defined as requiring learning support are receiving it. This has resulted in measurable gains in retention and achievement. The weekly printouts give details of attendance at sessions and there is immediate action where necessary. Link support tutors in each of the departments monitor and review the situation and update the central management information database. The CMIS is also able to report detailed costs for the provision.

66   Comprehensive and reliable data enable colleges to develop consistent procedures for identifying concerns and guiding actions to improve performance. Sound information reduces the need for one-off initiatives because remedial action becomes an integral part of quality assurance arrangements. For example, a growing number of colleges have produced guidelines for identifying and dealing with underperforming courses.

The college reviews underperforming or 'vulnerable' courses in February each year. The criteria for determining 'vulnerable' courses are clear. Attention is focused on those courses with achievement rates below 60%, or retention rates (taken at the February census) below 85% and/or below 80% for the previous year. The CMIS provides the data for the process. Where courses fall into the 'vulnerable' category, initial meetings are held between the curriculum manager for the area and senior management to discuss possible reasons. A range of actions may result from the

discussions, including closing the course or a schedule of meetings to monitor the action plan and to support the team in implementing improvements.

67   It is not easy to measure if a college and its students are achieving at a level close to their potential. One way of measuring the improvement by students during their time in the college is to compare their current performance with a prediction based on previous achievements.

The college has developed its own value-added process and has been using it for two years on advanced courses. Predictions of students' performance have become more accurate and the overall achievement and retention rates have improved. For GCSE and GCE A level courses a traditional points score scheme is used. A similar points score given to BTEC national and GNVQ pass, merit and distinction is proving a less reliable predictor at the present time. Individual students are given their score and there are average scores for courses. Value-added information is also used to set group achievement targets and to monitor how closely the group is to reaching its potential.

68   Evidence of the gains made as a result of quality improvement initiatives will confirm the benefits to the college and its students of the hard work and resources devoted to raising standards. However, the links between the quality improvement initiative and the outcomes of the initiative are not necessarily obvious.

A major role of three middle managers over the last two years has been to implement strategies to improve retention and achievement. They have been supported in this by the quality and curriculum manager. Five critical success factors were identified:

- accurate MIS data
- a cross-college retention team, working closely with course teams
- strong cross-college communications
- good monitoring systems for individual students' performance
- a strong pastoral support system.

The improvements in performance resulting from the project, as identified by the college, were:

- an exceeding of the college's unit target
- the increased numbers of students being referred for pastoral support procedures
- the increased knowledge of individual students acquired by tutors and senior tutors
- an improved record of student attendance
- greater numbers of parents attending parent evenings.

- it helps if there are recognised practices for dealing with courses which are judged to be in difficulties
- it is important to identify and quantify the benefits arising from each improvement initiative.

Key points

69   The key points to emerge from inspection evidence are that:

- clear thinking is needed about which measures to use when seeking to improve the quality of provision and about what the outcomes of initiatives should be
- sometimes, small refinements made to college-wide information systems can have significant benefits for departmental teams because they illuminate local issues
- rigorously tracking each student's progress increases the effectiveness with which tutorial support can be provided
- a key task for staff is to be vigilant and proactive so that students at risk of leaving their course are supported as early as possible
- attention needs to be paid to the particular difficulties which students may face in organising their own learning

Annex

Colleges Contributing to the Evidence Base

Examples of good practice were identified in the following colleges. These were visited as part of the background work for this report. The inspectorate is grateful to staff in these colleges for their co-operation.

Henley College Coventry

Herefordshire College of Technology

Lewisham College

Luton Sixth Form College

Middlesbrough College

North Hertfordshire College

North Lincolnshire College

Oldham Sixth Form College

South Cheshire College

Strode College

Tameside College

Thomas Danby College

Totton College

Trowbridge College (now part of Wiltshire College)

Other evidence and examples used in compiling the report were accumulated as part of the inspectorate's normal cycle of inspections.