

Halton College

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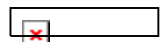
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Basic information about the college

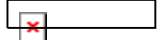


Name of college:	Halton College
Type of college:	General Further Education College
Principal:	Ian Clinton
Address of college:	Kingsway Widnes Cheshire WA8 7QQ
Telephone number:	0151 257 2800
Fax number:	0151 422 9508
Chair of governors:	Peter Kent
Unique reference number:	130622
Name of reporting inspector:	Dave Collier

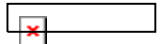
Dates of inspection:

4-8 November 2002

Part A: Summary



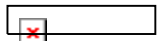
Information about the college



Halton College is a medium-sized general further education (FE) college operating on one major site in Widnes and a new site in Runcorn which opened in September 2002. Outreach provision is offered at around 46 local centres across Halton Borough, Greater Merseyside. Some 79% of full-time students and 26% of part-time students are recruited from the borough of Halton. Students are also attracted from the neighbouring boroughs of Warrington, Vale Royal, Liverpool, Knowsley and St Helens. Approximately 5% of the college's provision is franchised out to other providers. The college has a small amount of work-based learning provision, wholly in engineering. In Greater Merseyside there are seven other general FE colleges and four sixth form colleges. In 2001, post-16 education in the borough of Halton was reorganised and the only local secondary schools which now have sixth forms are the two catholic schools in Widnes and Runcorn. The college's main provision is health and social care, business, information technology (IT) and engineering. Courses lead to qualifications in all 14 Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas of learning, predominantly at levels 1 and 2. The provision in land-based industries, retail and construction is small. During 2001/02, 6% of students were full time and 94% part time; 9% were 18 years of age or under, and 91% were over the age of 19; 5% were from a minority ethnic group; 4% had learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Of all students, 38% were from groups the college considers to be under-represented on courses. Of all full-time students, 51% came from local areas where the college is aiming to widen participation in education and training. The overall staying-on rate in full-time education for pupils from Halton schools was 70% in 2001, which is below the national average. Approximately, a further 7% of school leavers participate in work-based learning. The unemployment rate is 5.3% compared with the national average of 3%. The achievements of school leavers in Halton are low. In 2001, the proportion of 16 year olds in the borough who obtained grade C or above in five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects was 40%, compared with the national average of 47.9%, 7.9% below the national average. The mission of the college is "to raise the aspirations and achievement of people within our community".

During the week of the inspection, college staff took industrial action. No students attended lessons on the Tuesday.

How effective is the college?



The provision is satisfactory in four of the thirteen areas of learning inspected, good in five and unsatisfactory in four. During the past three years, pass rates for students aged 16 to 18 and adult students have been above the appropriate national average, but retention rates have been below it. Retention rates on courses at levels 2 and 3 and pass rates at all levels have risen during this three-year period. Most learners receive good guidance and support. Curriculum management is satisfactory in most areas.

Key strengths

- good support for students
- good tutorial arrangements for students
- effective action to widen participation
- high pass rates above the national average on many courses
- good feedback from teachers to students on their progress
- high pass rates on short courses for adults
- excellent provision in work-based learning
- very good resources at the Runcorn centre.

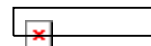
What should be improved

- pre-course counselling to ensure the appropriate placing of students on courses
- students' timekeeping and attendance
- low retention rates on many courses
- low levels of attainment on some courses

- poor provision in basic skills
- commercial experience of teachers in some vocational areas
- use of IT as an integral part of lessons
- dissemination of good practice across the college
- effectiveness of some teaching to meet individual needs.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

Quality of provision in curriculum and occupational areas



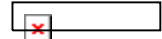
The table below shows overall judgements about provision in subjects and courses that were inspected. Judgements are based primarily on the quality of teaching, training and learning and how well students achieve. Not all subjects and courses were inspected. Inspectors make overall judgements on curriculum areas and on the effectiveness of leadership and management in the range: Outstanding (grade 1), Good (2), Satisfactory (3), Unsatisfactory (4), Very Poor (5)

Area	Overall judgements about provision, and comment
Science and mathematics	Unsatisfactory. There are poor pass rates on GCSE science courses and poor retention rates on General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary (GCE AS) science and mathematics courses. On the access to higher education (HE) course, teaching is good, students learn effectively and many progress to HE. Provision for a significant number of students aged 16 to 18 is inappropriate.
Land-based provision	Satisfactory. Students achieve high levels of attainment in floristry portfolio work and in many practical lessons. Retention rates on National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) horticulture and conservation courses are low and declining. There are effective partnerships with community groups to meet local needs and provide good off-site facilities for practical teaching. There is insufficient checking of students' work and a lack of differentiation in the teaching to meet the needs of students in some mixed-ability groups.
Engineering, technology and manufacturing	Unsatisfactory. The range of college-based courses is not meeting the needs of all learners. There were low pass rates on many of these

	<p>courses in 2001/02. In general, retention rates for college-based students are low. There are excellent retention and pass rates on work-based learning programmes. Learners on these programmes are well supported and make very good progress. Work-based learning in engineering, technology and manufacturing was judged to be outstanding.</p>
Business	<p>Good. There are high pass rates on some courses at all levels, and particularly on some level 3 courses. Many retention rates, however, are still low. There is a broad range of provision. Teaching is good, with many students commenting favourably about support given to them by teachers. There is insufficient use of information and communication technology (ICT) and of current commercial practice in teaching and learning.</p>
Computing and information technology	<p>Good. There are high pass rates on NVQ level 2 and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) advanced courses. The standard of students' work in portfolios is high. There have been poor pass rates on some courses. There is much good teaching. Students have access to up-to-date resources.</p>
Hospitality and catering	<p>Good. Pass rates, in particular at level 1, are high and improving. Retention rates are good at level 1. Teaching is good and lessons are well planned. Students work hard and enthusiastically. They receive a great deal of help and support which they value.</p>
Sports, leisure and tourism	<p>Satisfactory. Pass and retention rates are good at level 3. There is good teaching in many lessons. There is a wide range of courses leading to qualifications at different levels. Students can obtain additional vocational qualifications to increase their employability. Students' attendance is poor. There are inadequate resources for practical activities.</p>
Hairdressing and beauty therapy	<p>Good. There are very high pass rates on all courses. Teaching is good. Students' portfolio work is of a high standard. Students achieve targets and enjoy their learning. There is insufficient work experience for all students.</p>
Health and social care	<p>Satisfactory. There are high pass rates on distance learning and childcare courses but retention rates are low on most full-time courses. Students on the diploma in counselling courses learn effectively. Teaching is unsatisfactory in many lessons on some advanced level programmes. Leadership and management are overall satisfactory, but quality assurance on distance learning is insufficiently rigorous.</p>
Art and design	<p>Unsatisfactory. Retention rates are very low and declining on most courses. Pass rates are low on most courses. Students' attendance is poor. Most of the teaching is satisfactory or better. There are excellent facilities and accommodation.</p>
Humanities	<p>Satisfactory. There are high pass rates on GCE Advanced level (GCE A level) general studies, GCSE psychology and access to HE courses. Retention rates are low on most subjects. Students' attendance is poor on some courses. Most of the teaching is satisfactory or better. There is insufficient integration of IT into lessons.</p>
Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	<p>Good. Teaching is mainly good or better and students' pass rates are high. The standard of students' work is good. Students' learning and support needs are thoroughly assessed and appropriate individual learning plans are developed. The college has taken steps to rectify disappointing progression rates and to widen participation.</p>

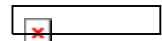
Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages	Unsatisfactory. There are low retention and pass rates for City and Guilds communication. The retention for the main programme of basic literacy is low. There is much unsatisfactory teaching. Individual learning plans are poorly managed and there is insufficient monitoring of students' progress and achievements. There are good partnership arrangements.
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How well is the college led and managed?



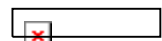
Leadership and management are satisfactory. In view of the college's high average level of funding and low retention rates on many courses, the college does not, at present, provide good value for money. The college is responsive to local needs and is successful in widening participation. The college has made good progress in addressing issues raised at the last inspection. Governance is good. Pass rates in 2001 at all levels and ages are above national averages when compared with similar colleges. The college has low, but improving, retention rates on level 2 and level 3 programmes. At level 1, retention rates are declining. Senior managers provide a clear direction for the work of the college. Students' attendance on a number of courses is poor. There is a wide variation in the quality of teaching in four curriculum areas inspected. Quality assurance arrangements, whilst clear and detailed, have yet to lead to significant improvement in the quality of provision. The college produced a detailed self-assessment report, but this did not identify some key weaknesses in some curriculum areas.

To what extent is the college educationally and socially inclusive?



The college's response to educational and social inclusion is good. There is a strong and effective commitment at all levels to widening participation and promoting learning to all who wish to benefit from it. There is a wide range of courses covering many different levels of study. Over the last year the college has developed more courses at level 1. In addition to the college's two main centres, education and training are provided at over 40 other locations across Widnes and Runcorn. Flexible arrangements for study at community venues allow learners from very diverse and often disadvantaged backgrounds to take part in education and training. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is high compared with the number of persons from such groups in the local population. There is, however, insufficient promotion of equal opportunities with the aim of rectifying the gender balance on courses in some areas, such as engineering and floristry. Effective partnerships with employers and members of the local community help the college to widen participation.

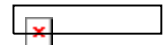
How well are students and trainees guided and supported?



Arrangements for recruiting and supporting students are good. The college provides impartial advice and information to potential students. Most students value the advice they are given and find staff helpful. Arrangements for providing additional learning support are insufficient to meet the needs of all students. The additional learning needs of part-time students on distance learning courses are not

Students receive effective induction to the college and their subject area. Guidance and support for students during their studies are good. There is a comprehensive, effective tutorial programme. Where appropriate, the tutorial programme provides preparation for HE and employment. Students' attendance rates are low but increasing. Personal support for students is good. Financial support is provided through the access fund. The partnership with the local Connexions service is effective and good impartial careers guidance is provided by both Connexions staff and the college careers advisor. The college provides sound welfare services including confidential counselling, and help with childcare and transport.

Students' views of the college



Students' views about the college were taken into account and a summary of their main comments is presented below:

What students like about the college

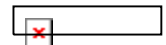
- good accommodation and resources
- good academic and pastoral tutor support
- its facility to give them confidence and extend their knowledge beyond expectation
- overall atmosphere and ambience
- friendly and helpful teachers
- opportunities to mix and make new friends
- doing real practical work
- enrichment activities
- induction

- course content and interesting lessons
- helpful student services
- help with childcare costs.

What they feel could be improved

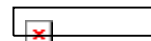
- more social areas
- provision of a crèche at the college
- more outside visits
- price of food to make it less expensive
- car parking at the Widnes centre.

Other information



The college inspection report will normally be published 12 working weeks after the formal feedback to the college. Once published, the college has two months in which to prepare its post inspection action plan and submit it to the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The college's action plan must show what action the college will take to bring about improvements in response to issues raised in the report. The governors should agree it before it is submitted to the local LSC. The local LSC is responsible for ensuring that the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) receives the college's post inspection action plan within the stipulated two months.

Part B: The college as a whole



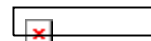
Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Aspect & learner type	Graded good or better (Grades 1 to 3) %	Graded satisfactory (Grade 4) %	Graded less than satisfactory (Grades 5 to 7) %
Teaching 16-18	64.0	27.0	9.0
19+ and WBL*	58.2	30.4	11.4
Learning 16-18	58.2	30.0	11.8
19+ and WBL	59.5	25.3	15.2

Key: Inspectors grade three aspects of lessons: teaching, learning and attainment. The range of grades includes: Excellent (Grade 1), Very Good (Grade 2), Good (Grade 3), Satisfactory (Grade 4), Unsatisfactory (Grade 5), Poor (Grade 6) and Very Poor (Grade 7).

* work-based learning

Achievement and standards

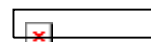


1. The college's 1998/99 ISR data is unreliable and is not shown in Part D table 3 of this report. The poor quality of this data was acknowledged by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) when it agreed a recovery plan with the college during 2000. Subsequent data are reliable. Judgements on how well learners achieve are based on ISR data for 1999/2000 and 2000/01 and college data for 2001/02. During this three-year period, retention rates have been consistently below the national average. Retention rates have risen at levels 2 and 3, and are now just below the national average. Retention rates have fallen at level 1. Pass rates for students aged 16 to 18 and adult students are above the national average and are rising. There are high retention and pass rates on many of the short courses for adults. Overall levels of student attainment are below average. Student attainment is poor at entry and foundation level. Attainment of students aged 16 to 18 in key skills is poor.

2. The standard of students' work is mostly good. On many courses, students are making good progress towards achieving their learning goals. Many students come to the college with little prior attainment or low levels of achievement, and are able to make significant improvements in their performance. The college is effective in helping students develop their personal and learning skills.

3. The separate reports on areas of learning in Part C provide more detail about students' achievements and the standards reached on particular courses.

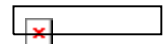
16-18 year olds



4. Retention rates are low for students aged 16 to 18. They are below the national average. Retention rates on courses at level 2 and 3 have risen over the last three years, but those on level 2 courses continue to be below the national average. Pass rates on level 1 courses are high and above the national average. The overall retention rate on level 1 courses, however, is 9% below the national average. Pass rates on level 2 courses fell slightly in 2001/02. There are high pass rates but low retention rates on GCSE, GCE A level and GNVQ advanced courses. Retention and pass rates are low on GNVQ intermediate courses. Retention and pass rates on work-based learning programmes are excellent.

5. Although there is much good teaching for students aged 16 to 18, their overall attainment is low, particularly on courses at entry level and level 1. The standard of students' work is high on many courses. Portfolio work is well produced and course files are usually well organised. In some subjects, for example ICT, students work well on their own and produce good course work and carry out assessment tasks effectively. Some students in art and design produce work of an unsatisfactory standard.

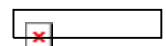
Adult learners



6. The large majority of the college's provision is for adults. Retention rates for students over the age of 19 are low and below the national average for courses at levels 1, 2 and 3. There has been a significant improvement in retention rates at levels 2 and 3, but a marked fall in the rate at level 1. Pass rates are above the national average and have risen at all levels during the past three years. A large number of students over the age of 19 undertake short courses. Retention and pass rates on these courses are high.

7. There is some good attainment by adult learners. However, as with provision for students aged 16 to 18, attainment at entry level and level 1 is poor. In other areas, many students demonstrate high levels of technical skill. The standard of work produced by many adult students is good. Portfolios are often meticulously maintained. The portfolio work of floristry students is of a particularly high standard. Written work is usually well presented. Many students gain in confidence and self-esteem during their course. The standard of students' work on literacy and numeracy programmes varies considerably, and is sometimes low. There are inadequate arrangements for monitoring students' work and progress.

Quality of education and training



8. Teaching, learning and attainment were graded by inspectors in 190 sessions. Most teaching is satisfactory or better. The best teaching was in business, hairdressing and beauty therapy, computing and ICT, and in hospitality and catering courses. In four curriculum areas, business, ICT, hair and beauty, and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, there was no unsatisfactory teaching. In over half of the lessons for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, the teaching was very good or excellent. However, there is also much unimaginative and uninspiring teaching. In many lessons, there is insufficient variety of appropriate teaching methods and the pace of learning is slow.

9. In the better lessons, teaching is well planned to extend students' knowledge, understanding and practical skills. In lessons, teachers draw effectively upon mature students' life experience. Nearly all teachers display very good subject knowledge and expertise, and where appropriate they use their

industrial or vocational experience to relate theory to practice. They succeed in sustaining students' interest and motivation. In some lessons, time is given to helping students develop the skills of working effectively on their own and in collaboration with others. Students learn well on the access to HE course. Teachers use teaching materials and a variety of appropriate classroom methods which meet the needs of adult students effectively.

10. In a significant number of lessons, the pace of learning is too slow. In some instances, students are given activities which are not demanding enough. In only a minority of instances do teachers recognise the differing requirements of individual learners and structure their lessons accordingly. There is insufficient checking of students' understanding. For many students, information learning technology (ILT) is insufficiently integral to the curriculum. In some curriculum areas, students are not punctual and fail to attend regularly. During the week of the inspection, staff took industrial action. In four curriculum areas, the attendance rate for the lessons observed was below 70%. In some practical lessons there is not enough attention paid to health and safety issues.

11. Teachers are well qualified. They participate in good programmes to further their professional development and these aim to improve the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of learning. All staff training relates to the college's strategic objectives. The college received a Beacon Award in staff development in partnership with the North West Consortium of Colleges. Few teachers of vocational subjects have secondments to industry to enable them to update their commercial and industrial experience and keep abreast of current developments in the world of work. Appropriate teaching resources are readily available in all classrooms on the college's main campuses. Many classrooms have data projection facilities which enable teachers to use web-based resources and make PowerPoint presentations. The extent to which students use computers in lessons varies considerably across subjects. In some subjects, teachers have developed good computer-based learning resources which are well used. In others, computers are not available within the classroom, and little reference is made to ways in which students can use IT in their private study. Students have good access to modern computers with up-to-date software packages, and the Internet. A small range of learning materials is available in the college's learning resource centre.

12. The college has successfully implemented a strategy to make substantial improvements to its accommodation. An excellent new purpose-built centre opened in Runcorn in September 2002 and students, particularly those aged 16 to 18, enjoy working there. Accommodation at the Widnes centre has been refurbished cost effectively and its maintenance is well planned. There is good specialist equipment in many subject areas, much of which has recently been renewed. Both main centres are accessible to persons with limited mobility. There are clear policies and procedures for health and safety, but few staff and students are aware of them. Staff do not take sufficient steps to ensure their implementation. Students carry out many practical activities in science and engineering without adequate personal protection. Drinks are taken to computer stations and consumed there. Student refectory facilities at both centres have been improved recently and are good.

13. There are arrangements for the initial assessment of students at the commencement of their course but these are not fully effective. At the start of their course, full-time students undertake some written work at an interview and are given an initial assessment of their key skills. They are then given a learning agreement for attainment in key skills with clear targets. Individual learning plans for students on hospitality and catering courses and for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are drawn up well, and their implementation is monitored carefully. In some instances, students are placed on an inappropriate level of course. Most students on distance learning or part-time courses do not receive initial assessment. During their courses, students are assessed regularly and effectively. Assessment is planned thoroughly. Students' progress is monitored carefully. Students are set good and imaginative assessments and these help them to learn effectively. Assignment briefs are clear.

14. When carrying out assessment, many teachers give students helpful and detailed feedback on how they can improve their work. They tell the students what their strengths and weaknesses are. In humanities, however, some teachers do not provide students with sufficiently detailed feedback on their work. Some teachers of basic skills do not assess students against the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy specified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Internal verification is satisfactory. Most external verifiers/moderators comment very positively on the quality

of assessment and internal verification. There is good internal verification of assessments in engineering. Some internal verification is not planned sufficiently. There is no internal verification of assessment on basic English programmes validated through the Open College Network (OCN). Internal verification is co-ordinated across the college and internal verification records are audited. Action plans are devised and their implementation is monitored effectively, following audits and receipt of reports from external verifiers. Good practice is shared at monthly meetings of internal verifiers. All aspects of assessment on work-based engineering courses are good.

15. The college offers courses in a wide range of curriculum areas on a full-time or part-time basis. In some areas, there is a good variety of courses at different levels providing clear progression routes. In childcare for example, students can progress from foundation level to level 3 and the college is investigating the possibility of offering a foundation degree in partnership with a local university. In other areas, however, there are gaps in suitable provision. Some students are inappropriately placed on courses, particularly at level 2, which do not meet their needs. Many either do not complete these courses or fail to obtain the relevant qualification. The college is widening the range of courses it offers at foundation level and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is now good. The college has also recruited 25 students for a new 'Routes To' programme in three curriculum areas, designed to provide a bridge to vocational studies at levels 1 and 2. Each student has an individual programme of vocational options and core skills, and they follow this until they are ready to progress to their chosen course. More vocational options are being offered for the next academic year.

16. Currently, the outcomes of initial interviews and assessments are not taken into account fully when planning students' programmes. Students' needs for help with literacy and numeracy are not identified or met systematically. Courses are not organised flexibly to take account of the different interests or capabilities of students. Few advanced level students combine vocational and academic options. Many teachers do not plan lessons which allow students to work at different levels. Constructive partnerships are being built with employers and community groups to broaden the learning opportunities available to adults. Courses in IT, business, and basic skills are offered in a number of community venues. Excellent engineering training is provided on employers' premises.

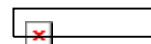
17. Since September, there have been improvements in the way key skills are taught. Hitherto, key skills were taught as a separate component of learning programmes but they are now an integral part of students' main courses of study. Attendance and pass rates were low in 2001/02. All members of course teams now have a shared responsibility for helping students achieve proficiently in key skills. For GCE A-level students, the integration of key skills with the content of their general studies course provides them with exciting and stimulating learning opportunities. Key skills support tutors and teachers are now working well together to help students and to ensure that key skills assignments are meaningful. These arrangements for teaching key skills, however, are working much more effectively in some curriculum areas than in others.

18. Arrangements for recruiting and helping prospective students are good. The college provides impartial advice and information for potential students. Students value the advice they are given and find staff helpful. A comprehensive range of information leaflets and brochures are available. The needs of full-time students for additional learning support are identified early. Full-time students are encouraged to take advantage of the help available to them. Across the college, however, arrangements for providing students with additional learning support are inadequate and some students do not receive the help they need. In some curriculum areas the support is not effective. Part-time and distance learning students' additional learning and basic skills needs are not identified systematically. Some students are not well matched to courses. Many students enter the college with low prior attainment but few receive additional learning support. In 2001/02, 255 full-time students and 76 part-time students benefited from additional learning support. Students receive an effective induction to the college and subject area, and are given college and subject-specific induction packs. Guidance and support for students during their studies are good. There is a comprehensive and effective tutorial programme consisting of both individual and group tutorials. There is centrally produced tutorial guidance for tutors. A tutorial co-ordinator observes tutorials and audits tutorial records. Tutors from across the college meet monthly. They help to devise tutorial procedures and good practice is shared. There are appropriate systems for monitoring the progress of students and trainees towards achievement of learning goals. Where appropriate, the tutorial

programme prepares students for HE and employment. On many courses, students have a poor record for attendance and punctuality although attendance is improving. Attendance monitoring has been introduced. Systems are being introduced to reward attendance, punctuality, performance and behaviour, such as a 'student of the month award', and bus passes are only issued when all criteria are met. These initiatives are not effectively co-ordinated. A retention improvement officer has recently been appointed and so far has successfully encouraged 13 students at risk of leaving early to stay on their course.

19. Financial support for students is provided through the access fund. The partnership with the local Connexions service is effective and good impartial careers guidance is provided by both Connexions staff and the college careers advisor. Connexions provide a full-time retention and support strategy personal advisor who works with students identified as being at risk of leaving. The college provides sound welfare services including confidential counselling, and help with childcare and transport. Advice, guidance and welfare services are accessible and well regarded by students. Personal support for students is good. There is a student liaison officer who liaises with students effectively and works with the college to meet their needs.

Leadership and management



20. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Over the last two years, senior management has been successful in reducing a serious budget deficit and increasing student numbers. There is strong leadership and direction that manages change effectively. The senior management team has a systematic approach to rectifying weaknesses identified through self-assessment, quality assurance and external auditing processes. Managers have been successful in developing a culture of continuous improvement. Management is open and there is mutual trust between staff and managers. Staff are motivated to adapt and respond openly to change. Communication is good and staff are fully involved in the decision-making process. A weekly newsletter from the principal keeps staff informed on a range of issues. Regular staff meetings are held. Managers respond effectively and promptly to issues raised in feedback from students, employers and staff. Complaints are actioned and resolved quickly. Students value the opportunity to talk with senior managers on both an informal and formal basis through student council meetings.

21. The college has collaborative involvement with a significant number of organisations and community groups in Widnes and Runcorn and Greater Merseyside. It is responsive to local educational and training needs and is successfully applying initiatives to widen participation. The principal is chair of the local chamber of commerce and vice chair of the local strategic partnership. He is involved with neighbourhood watch committees and the Halton community foundation. Staff within the college network effectively with local, regional and national educational groups. The college has good links with local industry, particularly in the engineering sector.

22. Aspects of quality assurance are good. The quality assurance system and policies are clear, detailed and well structured. A thorough annual review of college performance at curriculum level is conducted, as are all aspects of curriculum and operational management. Areas of work are reviewed regularly and graded. Action to rectify weaknesses is identified. Findings from reviews are taken into account in the self-assessment process and systematically reported to the academic board and the board of governors. Staff are informed of annual findings. Targets are set for retention and pass rates at both course and college level, and progress towards achieving them is monitored. Many curriculum areas are satisfactory or good. In these areas management is effective. Communication is good between staff teams. Staff work well together to ensure proper planning, adequate resourcing and management of the curriculum. In four curriculum areas, however, there is poor management of the learning process, and students' attendance, retention and pass rates are low. Quality assurance processes, whilst accurately identifying significant weakness in two of these areas, have yet to lead to significant improvement in provision. The management of some curriculum areas is fragmented. There is insufficient sharing of good practice among staff who teach basic

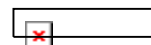
skills, ESOL and provide learning support. Some courses provided by more than one department, such as access to HE courses, are well co-ordinated but others, such as the pre-GCSE and GCSE courses, are not. There is an effective system of annual staff appraisal. During their appraisal, clear targets and their training needs are identified. The implementation of action plans is monitored. The quality of management information has improved significantly during the past two years. Managers and most staff have access to this information and make effective use of it in monitoring performance.

23. The college's commitment to upholding equality and respecting diversity is clearly publicised in the student, employer and parent handbook. Clear policies have been developed that cover all aspects of equal opportunities, with the exception of bullying and harassment. There are, however, explicit policy statements on harassment and bullying. A recently formed equal opportunity committee has developed a three-year plan to increase the focus on equality and diversity issues. There are clear statements on behaviour expected of both staff and students. At induction, students are issued with an effective leaflet outlining appropriate behaviour required of them at college. A student behaviour group has recently been established. This has representation from both staff and students. The group aims to promote and strengthen the college's ethos of respect for all individuals and further the aim of ensuring a safe working environment for all staff and students. Some of the college's publicity materials carry pictures which suggest that only men work in some occupational areas and that only women work in others. The college has not launched any initiatives to promote, for example, engineering to women, or floristry to men. At present, there are few female students on engineering courses and few male students on floristry courses. Staff training has taken place about the responsibilities placed on the college in relation to the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. Governors are monitoring compliance with the act. Similarly, the college has responded positively to its increased responsibility to have an anticipatory duty for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or those with difficulties under the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Disability Discrimination Act 2002. However, staff training to meet the diverse cultural needs of students who are mainly speakers of other languages will not take place until June 2003. Some staff, including those who work in admissions, do not feel confident enough to identify the needs of prospective students from minority ethnic groups. Such prospective students are often referred to the ESOL department, but this may not be the most appropriate course of action.

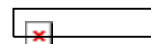
24. Governors are keen to help the college succeed. They take a particularly close interest in the college's work and discharge their responsibilities conscientiously and most effectively. A new governing body was formed in October 1999. Governors monitor the quality of provision and their own performance well. They play an active part in providing a clear strategic direction for the college and take into account both local and national priorities. The strategic plan is clear and comprehensive. There is a well co-ordinated strategic planning process which involves staff, managers and governors. Governors have established performance indicators and they review the college's performance against these. The board is in the second year of a scheme whereby individual governors are paired with the curriculum areas which they visit regularly. The scheme has enabled governors to gain greater understanding of the college's provision and it is well regarded by staff. The governing body is currently working towards achievement of the government charter mark in public service.

25. When new governors and a new senior management team were appointed in 1999/2000 the college was in very serious financial difficulty. The college's financial position has improved significantly over the last three years, following strong leadership from the principal and senior management team, clear direction from the governing body and the help and support, initially of the FEFC, and more recently of the Greater Merseyside LSC. The college has successfully reduced its dependency on franchised provision and has reduced high operational costs through a programme of restructuring and rationalisation. The construction of a new campus in Runcorn was developed in partnership with Widnes and Runcorn sixth form college, which shares the same site. Further cost reductions are needed to ensure full financial recovery. The college has low, but improving retention rates on level 2 and level 3 programmes. At level 1, retention rates are declining. Innovative strategies have been introduced to improve retention and attendance rates. These are proving effective in some, but not all parts of the college. Aggregated pass rates in 2001 are high for all age groups when compared with the national average. Given the college's high level of funding and low retention rates on many courses, the college does not at present provide good value for money.

Part C: Curriculum and occupational areas



Science and mathematics



Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (grade 4)**

Strengths

- good teaching on the access course
- success of many access course students in progressing to HE
- some very good specialist resources.

Weaknesses

- low pass rates on GCSE science courses
- low retention rates on GCE AS science and mathematics courses
- inappropriate provision at level 2 in science for students aged 16 to 18.

Scope of provision

26. The college has recently introduced a course leading to national diploma in applied science as an alternative to its GCE AS science courses, which have not recruited in 2002/03. The GCE AS mathematics course has been retained, but in 2002, enrolments on it fell to eight. GCSE courses in science and mathematics attract the largest numbers of students, with 112 students starting daytime and evening GCSE mathematics courses in 2001. There is no full-time level 1 provision in science. The access to HE course offers pathways for adult students to nursing, midwifery and paramedics, sports science and science. Student numbers have increased significantly since the introduction of the course, and provision has been extended to a second site to accommodate the growing number of adults seeking to progress into a career in nursing and midwifery.

27. Provision at levels 1 and 2 in science does not meet the needs of students aged 16 to 18. The college has recognised this weakness and plans to introduce a foundation diploma course in applied science in 2003. The access to HE and national diploma in applied science courses meet learners' needs. Students from these courses become technicians or enter the nursing profession, thereby helping the region meet its employment needs.

Achievement and standards

28. Retention rates on GCE AS courses in science and mathematics are low. In 2002, the retention rate in GCE AS biology fell by 10% to 55%, well below the national average of 84%, and in GCE AS mathematics, the retention rate was 17% below the national average. In the last three years, the retention rate for GCSE human biology has risen steadily but it remains well below the national average, and the retention rates for GCSE mathematics and science and technology have varied considerably and some are low. Retention on the access course rose to 80% in 2002, but the proportion of students who achieved the full certificate fell to 60%.

29. The pass rates on GCSE science courses are low. In 2002 only 20% of students achieved a higher grade C or above in GCSE science and technology, well below the national average, and in 2001, only 2 of the 36 students who started the course achieved grade C or above. In 2002 only 24% achieved grade C or above in human biology. Pass rates vary considerably on GCE AS courses and some are low. In 2002 the pass rate was high at 88% in chemistry, whilst the pass rate in biology fell to 44%. The pass rate in GCSE mathematics is declining but in 2002, 37% of those who completed the course obtained grade C or above, slightly above the national average. There are some very high pass rates for the individual units on the access course.

30. Overall, the standard of students' work is satisfactory. Access students make notes effectively and their subject files are well organised. Attainment in GCE AS mathematics is unsatisfactory. Several students in the GCE AS mathematics group were unable to carry out basic calculations on their own quickly.

A sample of retention and pass rates in science and mathematics, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
GCSE mathematics	2	No. of starts	100	100	112
		% retention	59	52	65
		% pass rate	54	52	40
GCSE human biology	2	No. of starts	28	26	28
		% retention	46	58	61
		% pass rate	77	27	24
GCSE science and technology	2	No. of starts	16	36	30
		% retention	75	58	67
		% pass rate	58	10	20
GCE AS biology	3	No. of starts	*	20	29
		% retention	*	65	55
		% pass rate	*	54	44
GCE AS mathematics	3	No. of starts	*	24**	12
		% retention	*	46**	50

		% pass rate	*	64**	50
Access to HE (science)	3	No. of starts	149	96	134
		% retention	92	59	80
		% pass rate	***	65	60

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* *course not running data unreliable*

** *aggregate of mathematics and mathematics (pure)*

*** *data unreliable*

Quality of education and training

31. Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning on the access to HE course are good. Teachers establish productive working relationships with students and the teaching methods meet the learning needs of adults. In one human physiology lesson, the teacher questioned the students skilfully and engaged them in discussion in which they drew on their life experiences to further their knowledge about balanced diets. In another lesson the teacher used packets of crisps effectively to help students gain a better understanding of the digestive system.

32. There is some unimaginative teaching on mathematics courses with over-reliance on the use of the whiteboard and worksheets. Most teachers do not use IT enough in their teaching, although many students use IT effectively in assignments. Experimental work in applied science is set effectively in an industrial context. However, in a minority of practical lessons, insufficient attention is paid to safety issues. For example, in one lesson, students did not wear laboratory coats or safety glasses when handling potentially hazardous chemicals, and in another lesson, students consumed drinks in the laboratory.

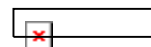
33. There is a wide range of specialist equipment for science courses. Some of this has been obtained through links with industry. Other equipment has been purchased for use on HE courses. Students on FE courses benefit from access to this equipment. Whilst the laboratories on the Widnes campus do not provide a stimulating learning environment, the science centre and the new laboratories on the Runcorn site are impressive facilities. Staff are well qualified and suitably experienced.

34. Coursework assessment is rigorous. Documentation is clear and thorough, and assessments are fair and justified. Teachers of some subjects provide students with detailed, written feedback on their work that highlights the students' strengths and weaknesses. Students on all courses receive good support from staff. Teachers regularly interview their students to monitor their progress and to sustain and increase their motivation. Since the introduction of these interviews, retention rates on some courses have risen.

Leadership and management

35. Science and mathematics is one of five sections within the faculty of science, humanities, engineering and IT. Leadership of the science and mathematics section is effective. Staff work together well and give each other good support. Communications within the section are good but links with humanities are fragmented. Laboratory safety rules are clearly stated. These are not always observed with sufficient thoroughness, however, and the management of health and safety is unsatisfactory. Teaching staff and technicians are fully involved in curriculum planning and self-assessment, but key strengths and weaknesses are not explicitly identified in the self-assessment report.

Land-based provision



Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**

Strengths

- high levels of attainment in floristry portfolio work
- good use of off-site facilities for practical teaching
- highly effective collection of evidence of students' acquisition of NVQ competences.
- productive partnerships with community groups to meet local needs
- good course monitoring and action planning.

Weaknesses

- low and declining retention rates on NVQ horticulture and conservation courses
- poor attendance and lack of punctuality of students on floristry courses
- insufficient checking of students' learning during lessons
- no provision at level 3.

Scope of provision

36. The college offers full-time and part-time horticulture and conservation courses from foundation level to NVQ level 2. Current provision includes a basic horticulture foundation course and NVQ

amenity horticulture at levels 1 and 2. The NVQ course in environmental conservation failed to recruit sufficient students in the current year. A foundation level course is being run in conjunction with the Department of Social Services for a group of students attending a local day centre. There are 24 students on these courses, of whom 10 are aged 16 to 18.

37. In October 2002, the college introduced a new course in conjunction with the Department of Social Services for students on a supported employment scheme. There are 11 students all over the age of 19 on this course and they receive basic horticultural training one day a week. A new partnership has recently started between the college and Halton Borough Council's landscape division. The college is providing for six of the division's staff and assessing them for NVQ horticulture at level 2 or 3. College staff are also training two of the division's foundation modern apprentices. Floristry courses were introduced in 1999, originally leading to NVQ level 2. These were replaced by national certificate courses at level 2 in January 2002. A foundation certificate in floristry is being run for the first time in 2002/03. Part-time courses are also offered in wedding flowers and balloon skills. There are 92 students on these floristry courses, of whom 8 are aged 16 to 18. There is currently no provision above level 2.

Achievement and standards

38. There are low and declining retention rates on NVQ amenity horticulture and environmental conservation courses. Pass rates on these courses are at or above national averages. Pass and retention rates on NVQ floristry courses were low in 2000/01 but rose considerably in 2001/02. There are good levels of attainment on most courses. Students are highly motivated and apply themselves enthusiastically to their practical work. Portfolio work is of a good standard and some students demonstrate high levels of attainment on the national certificate in floristry course. In 2002, most students who completed horticulture, floristry and conservation courses, progressed to employment or continuing education.

A sample of retention and pass rates in land-based provision, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
NVQ amenity horticulture	1	No. of starts	8	13	20
		% retention	75	46	45
		% pass rate	50	83	56
NVQ floristry	2	No. of starts	*	18	8
		% retention	*	44	88
		% pass rate	*	37	71

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* course not running

Quality of education and training

39. Much of the teaching is satisfactory. In the better practical lessons, teachers involve students closely in the planning of tasks. They ensure that these tasks make sufficient demands upon the students, require all their concentration, and enable them to acquire good practical skills. Students value the practical teaching in real work situations and take pride in the work they produce. Learning support staff assist individual students effectively and also help to supervise other students during practical sessions. Good handouts are produced to help students in their portfolio work. Little use is made of handouts during lessons, however, to complement students' note making. There is often insufficient checking of students' learning during lessons. In several lessons, students from different year groups or levels are combined together to make viable groups. Teachers do not always ensure

they meet the diverse needs of all the students in these classes. Many students are late for floristry lessons and miss all or part of the initial demonstration. Attendance is poor.

40. All teachers are appropriately qualified to teach but some lack vocational qualifications above level 2. The college has produced appropriate staff-development training for these teachers.

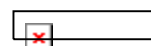
41. There are highly effective arrangements whereby students collect evidence of their acquisition of NVQ competences through their practical work, for the purposes of assessment. A college shop with a cool store has been set up near the college's main reception area and this serves as a valuable learning resource. There are no facilities to teach practical horticulture or conservation on the college campus, but good use is made of a number of off-site facilities through partnership agreements. These sites provide good practical teaching facilities but lack social and recreational facilities. Good use is made of IT by floristry students to enhance presentation of work in their portfolio. There is insufficient teaching space in the floristry classroom for the size of groups that use it.

42. A recent development has been the provision of short introductory courses at foundation level in both floristry and horticulture at the start of the year. These courses are intended to ease students into their studies, help them understand portfolio building and raise retention rates. Students' needs for additional learning support are identified effectively through initial assessment. There is, however, no initial assessment of students' vocational competences. The introductory foundation courses provide an opportunity for students to be transferred to a course more appropriate for them after five weeks. There is no tutorial support for part-time evening classes. Attendance and pass rates on key skills were low in 2001/02. The teaching of key skills is now an integral part of courses. Attendance rates are much higher this year.

Leadership and management

43. Course files are of a consistently high standard. Course monitoring and review are carried out rigorously, with good use of college data and benchmarks to evaluate performance. Firm action is taken to address problems identified. Such action includes the replacement of the NVQ floristry course with the national certificate course, the development of short introductory courses in horticulture and floristry, and small prizes for attendance and punctuality. Students are able to express their views about the college and its provision by attending meetings and answering questionnaires. There are no comparable arrangements for collecting feedback from employers. The failure to recruit male students to floristry courses has been identified as an equal opportunities issue. Action to recruit more male students on these courses, however, has not to date had much effect. The use of off-site facilities for teaching practical horticulture and floristry enables small classes to be taught in a cost-effective way.

Engineering, technology and manufacturing



Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (grade 4)**

Contributory grade for work-based learning is **outstanding (grade 1)**

Strengths

- high achievement and retention in work-based learning
- excellent work-based learning programme

- good links with schools and industry
- good linking of industrial practice with theory in lessons.

Weaknesses

- low retention rates on college-based courses
- low pass rates on college-based courses in 2001/02
- narrow range of programmes
- poor teaching of key skills
- insufficient checks on students' understanding and progress in lessons
- poor health and safety practices in the motor vehicle workshop.

Scope of provision

44. The college offers full-time and part-time engineering courses from level 1 to 4. The range of courses is narrow. The provision includes courses leading to NVQs at levels 1 to 3 in motor vehicle studies, level 1 in welding, mechanical and electrical engineering, and a national certificate. Computer-aided design is offered as an evening course. The college also offers higher national certificate courses and programmes for 14-16 years olds. Of the 336 students on college-based programmes, 64% are adults and 73% are on part-time courses. A further 585 adults are on work-based programmes provided at employers' premises. There are 62 students on motor vehicle programmes. Work-based learning is carried out wholly in the workplace. The vast majority of work-based learners are with one employer.

Achievement and standards

45. Retention rates on college-based courses are low. The retention rate for the national certificate has declined over each of the past three years and is now below the national average. The pass rate for the national certificate programme has risen steadily over the past three years and is now above

the national average. In 2001/02, the pass rates for most college-based courses were particularly low. In 2001/02, the college ran NVQ level 2 in performing engineering operations for the first time. None of the 72 students completed the course. Pass rates for key skills units have been consistently low. In contrast, the retention and pass rates on work-based learning programmes are very high. They have been above the national average for three years and are rising. There is very high attainment by work-based students but the attainment of college-based students is often low. The standard of work of most learners on work-based programmes is high. The standard of work of most students on college-based programmes is satisfactory, but in some instances, it is not.

A sample of retention and pass rates in engineering, technology and manufacturing, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
NVQ vehicle mechanical and electrical systems	2	No. of starts	14	35	28
		% retention	43	47	56
		% pass rate	83	75	33
Computer-aided engineering competencies	2	No. of starts	17	15	7
		% retention	76	40	57
		% pass rate	54	67	25
NVQ engineering foundation	2	No. of starts	18	92	72
		% retention	44	66	47
		% pass rate	88	60	0
NVQ performing manufacturing operations	2	No. of starts	*	*	585
		% retention	*	*	91
		% pass rate	*	*	86
National certificate in engineering	3	No. of starts	7	69	15
		% retention	100	96	60
		% pass rate	60	72	83

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* data unreliable

Quality of education and training

46. Much of the teaching is satisfactory but uninspiring. Some teachers set clear objectives for their lessons and, at the end of the lesson, they check whether they have been achieved. Other teachers, however, do not plan their lessons well. They fail to set lesson objectives or specify the teaching and learning methods to be used. In many lessons, teachers use their industrial knowledge to relate theory to workplace practice. In a lesson on timing belts and chains, the tutor was able to talk about a wide range of current vehicle engines and the specific issues relating to them. In the majority of lessons, teachers do not check students' understanding regularly. In many instances, teachers direct questions at the whole class rather than named individuals and they do not use questioning as a means of finding out which students are having difficulty understanding the lesson. Teaching in a few lessons was unsatisfactory. In some lessons where IT is employed as a learning aid, teachers fail to give students enough guidance on its use. For example, in one lesson in mathematics, students were introduced to the Internet 'blackboard'. They were given access codes and passwords

but no instruction on how to use the information to be found. A number of classrooms are fitted with electronic display boards but they are rarely used. In many lessons, students have concepts explained to them and are not required to work them out for themselves. In many lessons, students seldom ask questions or engage in discussion and only have anything to say when they are questioned directly.

47. The teaching of key skills and provision of additional support are poor. Engineering students cover only two of the key skill units. Students have undertaken diagnostic tests in numeracy and IT. Their results in these determine the level of key skills the student will study. Individual learning plans for key skills have been developed. Teachers do not take these plans into account, however, when planning lessons for groups made up of students of widely differing abilities. No assessment of students' literacy is carried out and there are no arrangements to help students who have weaknesses in literacy. Students on motor vehicle courses are required to find their own work placements without help from the college. Learners on work-based programmes receive an assessment in basic skills and additional help is given if they need it, which is recorded during the guided learning sessions. A learner with dyslexic problems has been provided with a laptop computer.

48. The accommodation for motor vehicle courses is appropriate. The supply of vehicles is sufficient for students' needs, although much of the vehicle stock is dated. There is no rolling road facility but the college has recently acquired a modern computer-based portable fault-finding machine. Tools and equipment are frequently in short supply and are seldom up to industry standard. Workshop practices do not consistently meet standard health and safety requirements. The mechanical engineering and welding workshops have an adequate range of machines and equipment. These workshops are clean, well maintained and are a safe environment in which to work and study. The electrical workshops are adequate, but uninspiring. The resources of the larger companies which are used for work-based learning are very good. Learners on work-based programmes are enabled to develop a wide range of skills and develop a breadth of relevant knowledge.

49. Internal verification is carried out regularly and provides feedback to students and assessors. The assessment and verification process for work-based learning is good. For the purpose of assessment, students gather evidence of their acquisition of a wide range of competences. Students' portfolios are carefully checked and verified. Internal verifiers observe assessors regularly and check that they are assessing to requisite standards. Students' progress is closely monitored using charts displayed on the walls in the employers' training centre. Students can progress to higher national certificate level. Some students on level 1 courses are making good progress. They cannot, however, go on to a course at level 2 until their second year, after they have completed their level 1 course.

50. There are some poor health and safety practices in the motor vehicle workshops. Staff do not ensure that students use gloves or barrier cream and do not set a good example. There are insufficient gloves available. Teachers do not reprimand some students who have unsuitable footwear. The motor vehicle workshop is poorly maintained. Students do not have adequate working space and during one lesson, tools were left lying on the floor. Benches are covered with engine and vehicle components giving very little room to work.

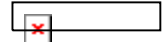
Leadership and management

51. Management issues in this curriculum area have been slow to be addressed. The management of the department has changed over recent months with the appointment of a new head of department and new section leader. Managers are aware of issues that need to be addressed. The department has produced a strategy to improve performance, and intends to concentrate on provision at level 1 and 2 in the short term. There are some signs that this strategy is having a beneficial effect.

52. Staff meet to discuss performance against strategic objectives and targets. Formal meetings take place at programme area level but do not address operational issues. On work-based learning programmes exit questionnaires are given out and analysed. Quarterly management reports are given to the employer. There is little promotion of equal opportunities. The engineering department

makes little attempt to promote courses to groups under-represented in the college. There are few women on engineering courses. The college has good links with schools. There are over 60 school pupils studying GCSE engineering at the college. Teachers visit schools to promote engineering courses. The department has many links with local industry and is responsive to their needs. The extensive number of work-based learners reflects the college's responsiveness to local industry needs.

Business



Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**

Strengths

- high pass rates on level 3 courses
- good teaching across all levels of provision
- broad range of provision to meet learners' needs
- good support for students.

Weaknesses

- low retention rates on some courses
- lack of use of ICT in business courses
- insufficient updating of teachers' vocational experience.

Scope of provision

53. There is a broad range of business-related courses, including business, administration and management programmes. Full-time and part-time students can study on level 2 and 3 vocational courses or at GCE A level, but there is no foundation level business studies provision. Specialist professional training is available through the Certification in Personnel Practice (CPP) course, and

courses accredited by the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM/NEBSM). Many students are able to progress from entry level 1 to level 3 in business administration. There is also extensive provision of IT-based administration courses offered through the college's growing community programme. A distinctive feature of the curriculum area is the trade union education programme, offering both general representative and specialist courses, such as those on health and safety and ICT. These courses are taught in Widnes and Warrington, and are also provided elsewhere in response to trade union demand.

Achievement and standards

54. Pass rates on most level 3 courses are high. For example, in the past few years, pass rates on GCE A-level business studies, CPP, NEBS management, Business Technology Education Council (BTEC) national certificate, NVQ administration and trade union representative's stage 2 courses, have been above the national average. There are very good pass rates for bookkeeping stage 1. Retention rates are good on the CPP course. Retention rates for GNVQ advanced and Advanced Certificate in Vocational Education (AVCE) business courses have been mostly low, retention rates for AAT courses have also sometimes been low.

55. The level of students' attainment and the standard of most students' work are high. Students enjoy working together and on their own in class, and they produce work of a high standard for the stage of the course they have reached. Many gain in confidence and self-esteem and are able to analyse, criticise and present logical arguments with increasing intellectual maturity. Written work is usually well presented and many portfolios are set out meticulously and carefully organised. However, there is insufficient integration of ICT with course content. Students do not make effective use of ICT for research or presentation of their work.

A sample of retention and pass rates in business, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
Bookkeeping stage 1 (one year)	1	No. of starts	51	53	72
		% retention	84	77	81
		% pass rate	86	76	53
Word processing 1 (part 2)	1	No. of starts	74	56	41
		% retention	86	77	83
		% pass rate	80	67	67
Trades Union Congress (TUC) representatives stage 1	2	No. of starts	18	42	46
		% retention	89	100	93
		% pass rate	94	98	86
GNVQ advanced business (two year) AVCE double award	3	No. of starts	22	13	7
		% retention	50	46	100
		% pass rate	91	83	57
TUC representatives stage 2	3	No. of starts	*	19	16
		% retention	*	100	88
		% pass rate	*	89	93
NVQ administration	3	No. of starts	17	11	42
		% retention	82	64	85

		% pass rate	36	86	88
Certificate in personnel practice	3	No. of starts	26	23	14
		% retention	96	96	100
		% pass rate	96	95	93

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* course not running

Quality of education and training

56. Most teaching is good. Teachers plan lessons well and use a variety of appropriate teaching methods, making frequent checks to ensure that students understand the work. Teachers have a good rapport with students and encourage them. They provide them with a range of learning activities, which link theory to practice effectively. For example, in a lesson on the AVCE course, students identified management style problems from a video they had viewed, came up with precise solutions and linked these to Belbin's theory. In a lesson on the certificate in administration course, students enjoyed applying their learning when working in the real office environment of the college's administration centre. Teachers also make lessons topical. For example, in a lesson on health and safety on a trade union course, students were involved in discussing differences between civil and criminal law linked to current cases in the news. In lessons for NVQ business administration students, key skills are taught as an integral part of course content. The introduction of a 'best practice' feature as a regular agenda item at staff team meetings has encouraged all teachers to think about new methods of teaching. In some lessons, teachers use poorly produced resources. In some weaker lessons, the teacher talked too much, or made the students spend a disproportionate amount of time merely copying notes, or gave them practical activities which although novel, taught them little. There are good IT resources but these are not fully used in the curriculum planning, or in lessons. Students speak highly of the different ways in which teachers help them with both curricular and personal issues. Prospective students choose their course with guidance from teachers. Some accounting students, however, have been placed on NVQ courses at a level that is inappropriate for them.

57. A key feature of many lessons is the planned way in which teachers try to identify the differing requirements of individual learners in groups and ensure learning is inclusive. In business administration and community IT lessons, teachers identify the needs of individual students in their lesson plans and they show how they will meet them.

58. Students on most courses receive carefully considered feedback from tutors on the quality of their work. This feedback is especially detailed in the case of some GNVQ intermediate and AVCE assignments and shows students how to improve their work in the future. Students on IT courses at community venues have their progress monitored carefully in order that their learning needs can be identified. Procedures and standardised documentation for the internal verification of marking have been introduced but these are not used effectively by all staff. There are regular progress reviews for all students although the documentation does not allow for a full record of these or detailed action planning.

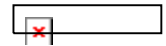
59. Teachers are well qualified. They benefit from a continuous programme of staff development but this does not include activities for updating their commercial experience and expertise. Accommodation is good, particularly at the Runcorn campus, although few visual materials are displayed in classrooms. Library resources are good and students can obtain information through the 'blackboard' intranet site.

Leadership and management

60. The curriculum area is well managed. Communications are good. Managers set clear strategic

goals. Staff morale is high. Staff aim to achieve excellence in their work and meet the targets they are set. Arrangements for monitoring the quality of provision work effectively. Some problems, however, and particularly those relating to low retention rates, remain unresolved. Quality assurance procedures are well established and effective. Course reviews are thorough, although in a minority of cases, review reports are perfunctory. The self-assessment report acknowledges links with industry are not sufficiently developed to benefit students on vocational business courses. In community-based business IT provision, there are a large number of part-time teachers who are very well supported by managers, but it is sometimes difficult to fully involve them in all aspects of curriculum planning and review.

Computing and information technology



Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**

Strengths

- high pass rates on NVQ level 2 and GNVQ advanced courses
- good resources for IT
- good induction programme
- high standard of students' work
- good teaching.

Weaknesses

- low pass rates on some courses
- poor matching of some students to courses.

Scope of provision

61. The college provides ICT courses from entry level to level 3. The provision includes GCE AS IT,

GNVQ IT foundation, intermediate and advanced, AVCE in ICT, NVQ levels 2 and 3 install and support IT, Integrated Business Technology (IBT2), European computer driving license (ECDL) and City and Guilds courses. Many of the part-time courses are available at the college's two main centres and at many locations within the community, including local schools, the hospital and community centres. The college also has an Internet café in the town centre. There are currently 601 students attending computing/IT courses at the college's main centres and 390 students attending community venues. Overall, 60% of the provision is for students aged over 19 and 40% is for students aged 16 to 18.

Achievement and standards

62. Retention rates on the majority of courses have continued to rise over the last two years and are mostly satisfactory. The pass rate on the GNVQ advanced course is high, having improved significantly over the past three years. The pass rate on NVQ level 2 has been high during the past two years, although it declined in 2001/02. The pass rate on some courses is low. Some students on these courses, however, join them with the intention of only completing some of the units rather than the full qualification. This is particularly the case with the City and Guilds 7261 courses. Retention rates on this course have been consistently high and well above the national average, but pass rates have been well below. The college has recognised this weakness and has replaced the City and Guilds 7261 courses with 7262 courses from this year. On some of the computer literacy and information technology (CLAIT) courses, the retention rate is satisfactory but pass rates are low. The community-based courses are undertaken by learners whose experience of mainstream education has been negative, and who have a fear of examinations. Staff are working effectively to build up these learners' confidence.

63. The average attendance rate in the lessons observed was 78% and close to the national average for general FE colleges. Attainment in lessons is very good. Students demonstrate high standards of computing and IT skills. They work well on their own and produce good course work and carry out assessment tasks well. Students speak enthusiastically about their courses and the supportive and friendly attitude of staff. Students in the community feel their career prospects have been enhanced and that through their learning, they have been given a new interest.

A sample of retention and pass rates in computing and information technology, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
GNVQ intermediate IT (one year)	1	No. of starts	17	38	38
		% retention	71	63	81
		% pass rate	92	45	*
CLAIT short	1	No. of starts	39	262	135
		% retention	77	91	82
		% pass rate	37	63	53
City and Guilds 7261 IT certificate short	1	No. of starts	79	73	88
		% retention	90	85	92
		% pass rate	45	11	47
IBT 2 (one year)	2	No. of starts	102	120	116
		% retention	85	83	78
		% pass rate	31	48	42
NVQ install IT products	2	No. of starts	37	45	50

(one year)		% retention	89	78	78
		% pass rate	70	97	89
GNVQ advanced IT (two year)	3	No. of starts	27	31	26
		% retention	56	71	76
		% pass rate	50	71	89

Source: ISR (1999 and 2000), college (2001)

* data not available

Quality of education and training

64. Teaching is good and students learn effectively. Lessons are effectively planned and managed well. Teachers ensure they meet the needs of all students in the class and tailor learning activities to match students' abilities. They use a wide range of appropriate teaching methods and resources. In one lesson, the teacher used an interactive electronic 'smartboard' to demonstrate the use of a design package. Group teaching is effective. Students are given demanding tasks that require their full concentration. All students have timetabled tutorials and their progress is monitored during these. Assessment is carried out regularly and feedback to students is timely and thorough. A new assessment monitoring system has been introduced through the college intranet.

65. There is a new induction programme in place. Students and teachers are equally enthusiastic about it. Students spend the first two weeks of their course completing an induction assignment. Teachers mark the assignment and identify students' needs for additional learning support. Students also take part in a number of team-building exercises. Students make good progress on courses. Students follow much of their course by using workbooks on their own. They are set demanding targets and receive good support from teachers. When necessary, they are given additional learning materials to help them acquire the requisite competences. There is a strong sense of achievement amongst students and they all say their self-confidence has increased since joining their course.

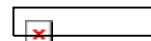
66. There has been considerable investment by the college in IT resources and facilities in recent years. Many of the IT rooms, such as those in the learning centre are purpose built. All equipment is fit for purpose and of industry standard. All teachers are occupationally qualified. Some of the community-based classrooms are noisy or too small for the classes using them and students have to queue to use printers.

67. Students express considerable satisfaction with their course and the college. Many have progressed from previous courses. They have access to, and make good use of, a range of support services, including student services, which they value. These services provide many students in this curriculum area with advice on practical, financial and pastoral matters.

Leadership and management

68. The ICT team has responded effectively to considerable changes in the last few years. It has implemented new practices and, since the introduction of these, there has been some increase in retention and pass rates. Staff are well led and the sharing of good practice is encouraged. All staff report a great deal of job satisfaction. There is a good programme of staff development. All staff have access to additional training which is funded by the college. Links with industry and employers are insufficient and full-time NVQ students do not have enough work experience. Course review and evaluation is effective and action is taken to rectify identified weaknesses.

Hospitality and catering



Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**

Strengths

- well-managed programmes
- good teaching
- high retention and pass rates at level 1
- success of many students in gaining relevant employment.

Weaknesses

- some poor attendance
- low pass rate on level 2 food service course
- insufficient customers in the training restaurant.

Scope of provision

69. The college provides a range of full-time, part-time and short programmes in hospitality and catering. NVQ programmes are available in food preparation and food and drink service at levels 1, 2 and 3. A restaurant management programme at NVQ level 4 is also available. Programmes in food hygiene are provided and an introduction to licensed house management and the national licensees certificate lead to qualifications for the licensed trade. At the time of the inspection, there were 34 students aged 16 to 18 and 20 adult learners on full-time courses. On part-time and short courses, there were 28 adult learners and no students aged 16 to 18. Students usually join NVQ programmes at the start of the academic year, although students are also recruited throughout the year.

70. Following the establishment of closer links with schools, the college has reversed a decline in recruitment to courses. The link programme provides theoretical and practical work both at college and in school for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils. Other pupils attend one day a week on a chefs' course and gather evidence of their acquisition of competences towards achievement of an NVQ at level 1.

Achievement and standards

71. In 2001/02, students' retention and pass rates for both NVQ level 1 in serving food and drink, and food preparation and cooking were above the national average. Retention rates on both courses, and the pass rate on the food and drink course, were higher than they were the previous year. Recruitment to both these courses also improved on the previous year. Both retention and pass rates at level 2 food preparation and cooking have consistently risen during the past three years, and the pass rate is above the national average. Both the retention and pass rate, however, on the NVQ level 2 course in serving food and drink have been below the national average. Students can complete additional units on their courses and work towards achievement of the basic food hygiene certificate. Full-time students also develop key skills.

72. Students work well on their courses. They demonstrate good technical skills in food preparation, and cooking and food service lessons. Students co-operate well with each other and often work with little supervision. Their experience at college prepares them well for the world of work. Students' levels of attainment are high.

A sample of retention and pass rates in hospitality and catering, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
NVQ serving food and drink (one year)	1	No. of starts	26	16	25
		% retention	62	64	76
		% pass rate	88	67	84
NVQ food preparation and cooking (one year)	1	No. of starts	35	13	38
		% retention	74	54	82
		% pass rate	96	100	84
Professional cake decoration introductory	1	No. of starts	11	20	16
		% retention	100	69	64
		% pass rate	64	100	71
NVQ food preparation and cooking (one year)	2	No. of starts	15	27	19
		% retention	53	67	84
		% pass rate	38	67	85
NVQ serving food and drink (one year)	2	No. of starts	12	22	6
		% retention	58	62	60
		% pass rate	43	31	33

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

Quality of education and training

73. Teaching is good in all areas. Teaching schemes are comprehensive, containing good detail of what is to be taught during lessons. They cover the content of lessons and specify what resources are to be used and how learning will be evaluated. Students are able to obtain a variety of experiences in both food preparation and cooking and food service. Lessons are well structured and carefully planned. At the start of lessons, teachers share learning objectives with the students. At the end of lessons, however, teachers do not always check that these objectives have been met. When working in the practical areas, students have defined job roles and they are encouraged to exercise initiative, take decisions and carry out tasks responsibly on their own. In lessons, teachers draw effectively on their own experiences and relate theory to practice. Most teachers use questions well

to check students' understanding of the lesson. In a few instances, teachers asked questions of the whole class and did not direct them at individual students to make sure they understood what was being taught. In practical lessons, students work at different levels, reflecting the structure within industry. They work together well and are highly supportive of each other. Students also value all the support teachers give them. Theory teaching is supported by good learning materials. With the aim of increasing students' motivation, the department has introduced a student of the month award. Students are able to gain a breadth of experience through their work in the practical areas. Resources in these areas are adequate but some equipment is not up to date and of industry standard. Key skills are taught in a vocational context and students understand their relevance.

74. Many students progress to employment on completion of their studies. In 2002, all students on the introduction to running a public house course and all NVQ level 2 students gained relevant employment. Students enhance their employability by working part time in the industry while at college. Teachers prepare students well for applying for suitable employment at the end of their studies. A variety of industrial visits are arranged for students so that they may gain a better understanding of the hospitality industry. Many students progress to a further course. Of the level 1 students who completed in 2002, 90% progressed to level 2, and the college provides routes to level 3 and also level 4 restaurant management.

75. There is poor attendance in some courses. During the inspection, attendance was 72%, which is below the average for the sector, and also below the target set by the college. The attendance of some groups of students over the term has been erratic. Tutors address poor attendance effectively. Non-attendance is followed up by tutors and disciplinary action is taken against persistent absentees.

76. Students are assessed in the realistic working environments of the college mainly by observation. Customer numbers in the public restaurant are low. Students on food preparation and cooking or food service courses are not able to gain sufficient experience of dealing with customers in a commercial environment. Tutors are now marketing the restaurant's services with the aim of increasing customer numbers. Assessments that students undertake are appropriate. Students carry out good action planning to prepare themselves well for assessment. They are fully involved in deciding when they are competent to be assessed and negotiate times for assessment with tutors. Students are fully aware of what they have achieved and what is required of them for the successful completion of their course.

Leadership and management

77. Courses are well managed. Staff have a clear sense of direction and they have clearly defined roles. There is a well-developed structure for meetings which are well recorded. Appropriate action is taken to address any issues identified at meetings. Records of action do not always specify a timescale within which the action must be carried out. Staff know what the college's targets are and monitor progress towards their achievement. Staff appraisals take place at regular intervals. The training needs of staff are identified during appraisals. Much of the staff-development activity is related to teaching, but there is a requirement for staff to update their industrial experience and expertise. Courses are timetabled flexibly in order to meet the needs of students who cannot always attend during normal college hours. For example, staff ensure that students are assessed when they need to be, in order that they may progress satisfactorily towards achievement of their qualification.

78. Arrangements for course review and evaluation are effective. All staff contribute to the self-assessment report through course reviews and they monitor attendance, retention and achievement against targets well. The self-assessment report was comprehensive. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths cited in the self-assessment report but they found some weaknesses the college had failed to identify. Student representatives attend monthly staff meetings and report back to the student groups during tutorial time, providing good communication between teachers and students.

Sports, leisure and tourism

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**

Strengths

- high pass and retention rates for level 3 courses
- good teaching in many lessons
- wide range of progression routes and additional qualifications.

Weaknesses

- poor attendance and lack of punctuality on the part of students
- inadequate practical facilities
- insufficient monitoring of the effectiveness of quality assurance.

Scope of provision

79. Courses in leisure, sport and tourism include those leading to a GNVQ in travel and tourism at intermediate level, ACVE travel and tourism, BTEC first diploma and BTEC national diploma in sport and exercise sciences. Courses also lead to NVQs in sport and recreation at level 1, in activity leadership at level 2, and travel and tourism at levels 1 and 2. Students progress to higher national diploma and degree courses. Students also work towards qualifications which have currency in the industry, such as the community sports leadership award and resort representative certificate.

Achievement and standards

80. Pass rates on level 3 sport and tourism courses have risen above the national average. In these courses there has been an improving trend even though pass rates have always been above the national benchmark. For example, retention and pass rates on the AVCE travel and tourism course are significantly above the national average. There are satisfactory retention and pass rates on most level 2 courses. The course leading to the BTEC first diploma in sports at level 2 has only recently been introduced.

81. Students' attainment is mostly satisfactory but in some instances it is low. The work of some students is of high standard. The work of many students is satisfactory, but lacking in flair. A wide and varied range of sport and travel programmes is offered on both campuses that meets the needs of students. As part of their programmes, students work towards useful and relevant industry awards, such as coaching awards, basic hygiene, welcome host and first aid qualifications, to enhance their employability. The travel section has a comprehensive database of local employers who provide work placements for students.

A sample of retention and pass rates in sports, leisure and tourism, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
Community sports leaders award	1	No. of starts	12	30	31
		% retention	27	83	47
		% pass rate	0	4	*
GNVQ intermediate leisure and tourism	2	No. of starts	20	27	34
		% retention	63	59	42
		% pass rate	92	88	64
Resort representatives certificate	2	No. of starts	48	26	15
		% retention	53	65	87
		% pass rate	60	47	*
First diploma in sport science	2	No. of starts	**	**	19
		% retention	**	**	59
		% pass rate	**	**	*
GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism	3	No. of starts	39	**	**
		% retention	64	**	**
		% pass rate	67	**	**
National diploma in sport science	3	No. of starts	21	15	20
		% retention	76	73	65
		% pass rate	71	100	75
AVCE in travel and tourism	3	No. of starts	**	19	39
		% retention	**	100	79
		% pass rate	**	100	70

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* data not available

** course not running

Quality of education and training

82. There is much good teaching. There are positive working relationships between teachers and students. Teachers use their subject knowledge and recent industry experience well in lessons to explain and clarify content. In some lessons, the teachers draw on the students' own experience effectively as a means of helping students understand and explore concepts. Students are motivated and have a good grasp of their subjects. In the better lessons, case studies are used effectively by teachers to develop concepts. There is frequent checking by teachers of students' understanding. Teachers hold relevant occupational qualifications.

83. Students enjoy and value the induction process. They appreciate the opportunity to meet teaching and management staff at an early stage. The team-building activities during the induction period help them to become familiar with one another and settle into college life. Many students, however, fail to attend regularly or are late for lessons. During the inspection, attendance was only

58%. Insufficient action has been taken to address students' absenteeism. A high percentage of students are late for lessons. By arriving late, these students often disrupt the lesson but teachers seldom demand an explanation for their lack of punctuality. Lateness has an impact on the planned lessons. Students receive individual and group tutorials. During their tutorials, individual students draw up action plans.

84. Most classrooms are adequately equipped. The Runcorn site has clean, attractive and spacious rooms. There is satisfactory specialist equipment for both travel and sports programmes. In sports there is sufficient practical sports equipment for game or skill development and also basic fitness testing and diagnostic equipment. However, practical facilities are inadequate for sports students. Students have to use general public facilities, including a leisure centre hall and playing field, when doing practical activities. Runcorn students have to spend a considerable amount of time travelling to these facilities. Students in one practical lesson had to share the hall with an aerobics class. They found it difficult to hear the instructions their teacher was giving them against the loud music being played during the aerobics session. Lots of people kept entering and leaving the hall, and the students found this distracting.

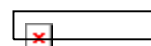
85. There is currently no travel shop at the college where students can gain experience in a realistic work environment. There are plans to open a travel shop on the Runcorn campus. Students do, however, carry out a range of training activities which enable them to apply knowledge gained in lessons and to develop practical skills. At the Widnes site, the learning resource centre cannot, at certain times, accommodate all the students who want to use it for research activities.

Leadership and management

86. The curriculum area is managed effectively. Management in the curriculum area gives priority to improving teaching, learning and attainment. This has led to some improvement in retention and pass rates on level 3 courses and improvements in teaching and learning. Courses are reviewed on a continuous basis. Staff meet three times a year to review courses and action is taken to address issues identified. There are regular meetings at which the outcomes of reviews are discussed. However, there is insufficient monitoring of the implementation of action plans arising from these meetings. Communications with staff are good and regular meetings ensure that staff are fully informed about developments in the curriculum area. Teachers have recently attended industry-specific equal opportunities training session. On most courses there is an appropriate balance between the number of male and female students.

87. There is insufficient monitoring of the effectiveness of the quality assurance process. For example, there are significant inconsistencies in the way key skills are taught, but these have not been identified through the quality assurance process. There is a lesson observation scheme but not all teachers receive feedback. Internal verification is not robust. Teachers are not aware of the college's policy for verification or its importance in the quality assurance cycle. Documentation is not used consistently and there are no standardisation meetings across courses. Half of the internal verification is carried out by staff who are qualified and experienced verifiers. The rest of the internal verification is carried out by staff who are not qualified or experienced verifiers and they are not given appropriate help or training. Lesson plans lack detail. Some schemes of work are missing. The majority of lesson plans do not have clear aims or objectives which reflect course requirements and the needs of the students.

Hairdressing and beauty therapy



Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**

Strengths

- high pass rates on all courses
- very good teaching
- high standard of students' portfolios
- effective widening of participation through provision of foundation and level 1 courses
- successful sharing of good practice across course teams.

Weaknesses

- insufficient work placements
- lack of computerised tills in reception areas.

Scope of provision

88. There are approximately 450 students on hairdressing, beauty therapy and holistic therapy courses. The college offers a broad range of courses. Provision includes full-time courses in hairdressing at foundation level and NVQ levels 1 and 2, beauty therapy courses at NVQ levels 1, 2 and 3, and theatrical and media make-up and holistic therapy courses. Part-time courses include those in barbering, hairdressing, nail-specific techniques, beauty therapy and Indian head massage. Courses for students under the age of 16 and at level 1 have been developed as part of the college initiative to widen participation. There are now good progression routes for students from foundation level to level 3 in beauty therapy, and from level 1 to 2 in hairdressing. However, the college does not currently offer any hairdressing courses at level 3. From September 2002, hair and beauty courses have been offered at the new site at Runcorn as well as the main site in Widnes.

Achievement and standards

89. There are high pass rates on all courses. For example, the pass rates on reflexology and sports massage courses are 100%. There are also pass rates of 97% for NVQ 1 and 2 in hairdressing, well above the national average. NVQ level 3 hairdressing was 60% in 2001/02, well below the national average of 79%. Retention rates on the NVQ level 2 hairdressing and NVQ level 3 beauty therapy courses have risen to 95% and 81%, respectively. The retention rate on the beauty therapy course, however, is still 4% below the national average. Retention rates on courses in three subject areas, including reflexology, have declined. The retention rate on the reflexology course at 79% is now 6% below the national average. There are positive initiatives to address the issue of students' poor attendance. These include the awarding of free places on additional courses, such as those in nail

art, for students whose attendance record in any term is 100%.

90. The level of students' attainment in lessons is high. In hairdressing and media make-up, highly motivated students produced very creative work. The standard of work in students' portfolios is high. The portfolios contain a variety of evidence from a wide range of sources. Students use IT effectively, including pictures from the Internet, to illustrate their work. Students in some classes produce practical work of a standard above that required of them at their stage in the course.

A sample of retention and pass rates in hairdressing and beauty therapy, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
NVQ hairdressing (one year)	1	No. of starts	48	76	44
		% retention	91	83	80
		% pass rate	100	97	97
NVQ beauty therapy (one year)	2	No. of starts	45	49	61
		% retention	86	78	74
		% pass rate	89	89	82
NVQ hairdressing (one year)	2	No. of starts	15	44	38
		% retention	93	69	95
		% pass rate	62	93	97
NVQ beauty therapy (one year)	3	No. of starts	20	25	16
		% retention	90	76	81
		% pass rate	94	89	85
Diploma in reflexology	3	No. of starts	10	25	29
		% retention	90	88	79
		% pass rate	100	100	100
Sports massage certificate	3	No. of starts	10	9	29
		% retention	40	56	76
		% pass rate	100	100	100

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

Quality of education and training

91. There is much very good teaching. Teaching is particularly good in practical lessons. The teaching is well planned to meet the needs of students. There is some innovative use of a variety of teaching techniques and visual aids to help students learn more effectively. Teachers demonstrate good, up-to-date subject knowledge and skills. Students are producing practical and theory work of a high standard. Key skills are now an integral part of the curriculum and of the subject that students are studying. Some students, however, are not given tasks which require them to develop key skills and use them fully and effectively.

92. Assignment briefs set clear, specific goals. Arrangements for assessment of students' practical work are effective and the students themselves are fully involved in carrying them out. For example, students assess one another's work and also carry out self-assessment of their own performance.

Those students who are able to work effectively at a faster pace are encouraged to do so in order that they may gain their qualifications early. Assessment is carried out regularly, supported by a rigorous internal verification system. Students are also encouraged to complete units as soon as they can. Links with local industry are being developed in order that students may have work experience and be assessed in the workplace. Students also mentor each other within their groups.

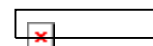
93. Well-qualified and effective teachers are deployed efficiently to meet the needs of the students. Teachers have made good use of staff development opportunities to improve their understanding of teaching and learning, equal opportunities and IT, in addition to updating their professional skills. Salon facilities on both sites are good. In practical sessions in the salon, students use a variety of products and broaden their understanding of theory and practice. There are no computerised tills in the reception areas. Students make good use of other IT facilities which are readily available to them.

94. The tutorial system is effective and valued by students. The tutorial curriculum covers equal opportunities, careers guidance and health and safety. Tutors help students with curricular and personal issues. Additional learning support is available to those who need it. For example, two Chinese students receive language support and two students with learning difficulties who have progressed to level 2 in hairdressing have a support tutor. However, the individual needs of all students are not always identified or met. The section has introduced tutorials for part-time students and careers guidance for students over the age of 19. Prospective students receive an initial interview with the aim of ensuring that they are placed on a course at the appropriate level. Employers of part-time students receive assignment schedules, copies of students' action plans, and a regular hair and beauty newsletter to encourage them to further their employees' training in the salon and become more involved in the learning process.

Leadership and management

95. There is effective management of the hairdressing and beauty therapy section. Members of the course team work together enthusiastically and well. There is a sharing of good practice across the hair and beauty teams. Weekly team meetings take place at alternate sites, at which staff share good practice and check that standards remain consistent. Agency staff are an integral part of the team. They are invited to meetings and receive minutes of all team and course meetings. They receive an effective induction to the college and their work, are mentored by a full-time member of staff, and are able to observe other teachers in the classroom. All members of the team are involved in setting targets and reviewing the effectiveness of courses. The section has responded well to college initiatives, particularly those relating to widening participation and inclusive learning.

Health and social care



Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**

Strengths

- high retention and pass rates on distance learning courses
- consistently high pass rates on childcare and education courses

- good learning attitudes on diploma counselling courses
- good assessment feedback on health and social care and distance learning courses
- wide ranging and flexibly arranged provision.

Weaknesses

- low retention rates on most full-time courses
- unsatisfactory classroom practice in one quarter of lessons on advanced courses
- inconsistent use of initial assessment
- insufficiently rigorous quality assurance of distance learning provision.

Scope of provision

96. The college has responded to local needs for a qualified workforce in care and childcare. New programmes have been introduced this year to give students a wider choice of provision at levels ranging from pre-foundation to advanced. The department offers courses in care, health studies, childcare, health and safety, and counselling. A national diploma course in public services is also offered and this is the only course which attracts a significant number of male students. Part-time counselling courses are available at introductory, intermediate and advanced level. Total numbers on these courses last year were 283. There were 3,662 students on first aid at work courses and there are a small number of students on NVQ care programmes. A large number of students follow distance learning programmes, and over 2,700 did so in 2001/02. These programmes have been developed both directly and through franchised agreements. There has, however, been a substantial reduction in the franchised provision this year.

Achievement and standards

97. The pass rate on many distance learning courses is high, at over 85%. The pass rate for five out of six groups on the certificate in care practice course was above 88%. The pass rate on the foundation GNVQ health and social care course has risen over the past four years and in 2001/02 it was 100%. In contrast, the pass rate on the first diploma in caring has declined each year. In 2001/02 it was 10% below the national average. The pass rates on childcare and education courses are consistently above the national average, and a large proportion of students achieve high grades. Last year, the proportion of students who achieved high grades on the certificate in childcare and

education course was 74%, compared with the national average of 18%.

98. The retention rate for most full-time courses is low. The retention rate for the GNVQ foundation course fell to only 50% in 2001/02. Over the last three years, the retention rate for the first diploma in caring and the diploma in childcare and education courses have been consistently below the national average. Last year, the retention rate for the national diploma course in health studies was 10% below the national average, and in the year before, no students stayed on for the second year of the course. The retention rate for most distance learning courses is high, at over 80%. On other part-time courses, retention rates are either in line with, or just above the national averages.

99. Most students' attainment is satisfactory and is only high in a few instances. Students' written work in lessons and assignments is mostly satisfactory. Some students on GNVQ foundation and first diploma in caring courses produce work of a high standard in assignments. Students on distance learning courses are highly motivated and give each other good support. They use resources and their own expertise well to extend their knowledge and analyse care issues effectively.

A sample of retention and pass rates in health and social care, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
GNVQ health and social care foundation	1	No. of starts	4	10	10
		% retention	100	70	50
		% pass rate	50	71	100
Distance learning certificate in care practice	1	No. of starts	*	720	1,514
		% retention	*	89	87
		% pass rate	*	89	88
First diploma in caring	2	No. of starts	13	11	16
		% retention	69	64	69
		% pass rate	89	86	73
Certificate in childcare and education	2	No. of starts	*	11	26
		% retention	*	73	88
		% pass rate	*	86	96
Intermediate counselling	2	No. of starts	26	7	22
		% retention	96	100	86
		% pass rate	92	71	89
National diploma in health studies	3	No. of starts	16	5	14
		% retention	44	0	62
		% pass rate	100	0	88
Diploma in childcare and education	3	No. of starts	43	50	31
		% retention	74	80	61
		% pass rate	100	95	94

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

** course not running*

Quality of education and training

100. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Only one lesson was less than satisfactory. In a few lessons, teaching was stimulating, carefully planned, and it held and excited the students' interest. In one good lesson for foundation level studies, the teacher used relevant visual aids well. She helped them to identify various methods of cooking, through imaginative use of the whiteboard and in conjunction with stick-on notes. Teachers draw effectively on mature students' life experiences when exploring theoretical concepts. Much teaching, however, fails to inspire students and make demands upon them. Although many lesson plans specify methods to meet individual learners' needs, they are not always put into practice. In some lessons, the teachers talk too much and do not give the students enough scope to ask questions, engage in discussion and carry out activities themselves. On the counselling diploma courses, students learn most effectively. They are lively and enthusiastic and can relate theory to practice. In one lesson, the students shared and extended their knowledge and understanding effectively through discussion and case presentation. They were able to identify clearly what they had learnt from each other. In a quarter of the lessons on advanced level courses students did not learn effectively. In one lesson, students did not work well on their own and their learning did not have a clear focus when the teacher was not with them. In another lesson during which the students were exploring the reasons for the action required of them in the workplace, the teacher failed to relate theory to practice sufficiently. The key skill of communication is frequently taught effectively as an integral part of vocational lessons.

101. Most classrooms are appropriate for the group size and are well appointed. A few lessons, however, take place in unsuitable rooms. In one instance, an electronics laboratory was used for a childcare lesson. Students on childcare programmes carry out practical and vocational activities in a specially designated room. Displays of students' work in this room help to make it an effective learning environment and emphasise the importance of equal opportunities. Teachers are well qualified and make effective use of their expertise in the lessons.

102. Assessment of students' written work is thorough on most courses. Teachers provide students on health and social care and distance learning courses with written feedback on their work. This feedback is often detailed and helps the students to understand what they need to do to improve their work and achieve a high grade. The feedback teachers give students on childcare and education courses, however, is less informative and not so detailed. The initial assessment given to students on part-time and distance programmes is insufficiently thorough. It does not enable staff to identify these students' needs for additional learning support and help with basic skills.

103. Through their work experience placements, students extend their knowledge, understanding and range of skills. Many students undertake useful first aid and food hygiene courses before they go out on a placement. The college has effective links with community agencies such as the Sure Start Centre, Early Years Partnership and a local initiative for the support of single parents. Students benefit from talks by outside speakers and regular educational visits.

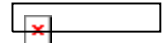
104. Students are well supported through an effective tutorial system. Vocational tutors plan sessions that are directly relevant to the vocational area and students' needs. Tutors do not, however, record students' progress fully and effectively on the relevant tutorial documentation. Not all students are aware of the support provided by the college careers service. Many students prefer to rely on their tutor for support rather than use the college's support services.

Leadership and management

105. Leadership and management of the curriculum area are satisfactory. Staff within each section work effectively together as a team. Staff teams from different sections, however, do not meet to share good practice. Strategies have been developed to address low retention rates but it is too early to know whether these are proving successful. Retention and pass rates are a standing agenda item at childcare and distance learning team meetings. The setting and meeting of targets is often discussed.

106. Whereas the quality assurance of the franchised distance learning is thorough, that of the direct distance learning is insufficiently rigorous. Most individual learning plans are more or less identical and do not reflect or identify individual students' learning needs. Internal verification is not rigorous enough. A new database to monitor learners' progress and a new procedure for internal verification have been developed recently, but it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Art and design



Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (grade 4)**

Strengths

- effective widening of participation through broad range of provision
- excellent accommodation and facilities.

Weaknesses

- poor attendance on some programmes
- low retention and pass rates on most programmes.

Scope of provision

107. The college offers a broad range of full-time courses at levels 2 and 3 in visual and performing arts and a small number of part-time courses. The college year for these courses comprises two semesters. In an attempt to address low retention and pass rates, all new students who enrolled in September 2002 have to follow, during the first semester, diagnostic programmes at level 2 even though they may already have sufficient qualifications to meet the entrance requirements for higher level courses. Visual arts students choose four National Certificate of Further Education (NCFE) units of 60 hours study a unit from life drawing, desktop publishing, dressmaking, graphics, sound recording and photography. Once these units have been completed satisfactorily students then progress to take national diploma courses in graphics, fashion, three-dimensional design and multimedia. All performing arts students enrol on the first diploma. Those who demonstrate swift progress are fast-tracked to achieve their first diploma and go on to join the national diploma course by the end of their first year. Though most students are aged 16 to 18, there are also a significant number of adult students who are returning to full-time education.

Achievement and standards

108. Overall, retention and pass rates are consistently low compared with the national average. Many students fail to attend regularly or arrive late for lessons. Students' absenteeism and lack of punctuality has a particularly detrimental effect upon group activities, especially on performing arts

courses. For example, it is not possible to start some activities on time because students are still arriving for the lesson. Furthermore, students have to take over the roles of absent members of the group at short notice and have not been able to prepare for them properly. In one session, students had to give an in-house performance on which they were assessed. All the students had been notified several weeks in advance for this assessment event and had been told they must be present for it. A significant number of students, however, did not come to this session. The students who were present felt demotivated and let down by those who were absent. During the week of inspection, average attendance was 74%. Standards on the first diploma music course are low. There is some disparity in the standards of work and behaviour teachers expect of students in life drawing classes. In one lesson, students worked closely to a professional standard in a silent environment to produce drawings within a given timescale, whilst in a similar lesson with a different teacher, students listened to the radio and personal stereos and chatted freely and worked in a desultory manner. Students' attainment in lessons is mostly satisfactory and, in a minority of instances, it is high. Retention rates on most courses are low and considerably below the national average. Pass rates on graphics and fashion programmes have declined over a three-year period. However, many students who complete their chosen areas of study are successful in progressing to HE.

A sample of retention and pass rates in art and design, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
GNVQ intermediate art and design	2	No. of starts	*	11	**
		% retention	*	64	**
		% pass rate	*	0	**
First diploma performing arts	2	No. of starts	*	40	**
		% retention	*	100	**
		% pass rate	*	75	**
National diploma performing arts	3	No. of starts	50	13	41
		% retention	70	69	51
		% pass rate	83	100	84
National diploma in design	3	No. of starts	39	34	54
		% retention	69	76	62
		% pass rate	81	65	54
National diploma in three-dimensional design	3	No. of starts	*	*	13
		% retention	*	*	50
		% pass rate	*	*	83

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

* data not reliable

** data not available

Quality of education and training

109. Much of the teaching is satisfactory or better. Relationships between staff and students are good. Performing arts students have acquired good basic performance skills through their

interpretation of Pinter's 'Mountain Language' which they directed themselves. Across the curriculum area, students are expected to work responsibly on their own and exercise their own initiative when carrying out assignments. Students benefit from the professional and vocational experience of staff, particularly in popular music and music technology. Most teachers question students skilfully to make sure they understand the lesson.

110. Teachers and students benefit from the new purpose-built accommodation at the Runcorn centre and the acquisition of brand-new equipment and facilities. Dance lessons now take place in appropriate accommodation with mirrored walls and bars. Popular music students use the equipment in the recording studio with confidence. There is insufficient rehearsal space and the soundproofing in some music areas is not sufficient. Appropriate lighting facilities have yet to be installed in the theatre. Music technology students have good access to current computer hardware. All students express satisfaction with their easy access to ICT equipment, although there is concern about the accessibility and cost of using the one colour printer. The learning resource centre has a small and recently acquired bookstock, and currently, this is little used. External verifiers have praised the assessment procedures.

111. The range of provision is broad, with the aim of widening participation. Students on all courses are of varying ages and they benefit from learning about one another's experiences and perceptions of life and work. Not all students were aware that there would be a diagnostic period of several months before they could join their preferred programme but most were happy about this recent initiative. Several students, including those with hearing impairment and Parkinson's Disease, receive learning support to meet their needs. All accommodation is accessible to students with restricted mobility. The tutorial provision aims to help students acquire and develop good study skills. Students feel confident that their personal concerns can be addressed. The curriculum manager holds a weekly surgery with all course representatives to discuss concerns and students welcome the forum where they can express their views.

Leadership and management

112. Managers have been imaginative in devising recent strategies to address poor retention and pass rates. These strategies, however, have not been discussed in much detail with teachers. Managers have little apparent understanding of how the proper use of management information systems can help them monitor the effectiveness of such strategies. Self-assessment is not used rigorously or effectively to identify curriculum strengths and weaknesses. There are adequate quality assurance procedures for classroom practice and these include observation of teaching. Teachers are encouraged to develop their professional skills. They feel confident that the college will meet reasonable requests for financial help with their training costs. The curriculum manager has a large teaching commitment in addition to his managerial role. This reduces his ability to manage effectively.

Humanities

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**

Strengths

- high pass rates in GCE A-level general studies, GCSE psychology and access courses
- success of students in exceeding their predicted examination grades
- effective use of a variety of teaching styles

- good curriculum leadership.

Weaknesses

- low retention rates on most subjects
- poor attendance in some lessons
- insufficient flexibility in the organisation of access courses
- failure to make ICT sufficiently integral to the curriculum.

Scope of provision

113. There is a wide range of courses for students aged 16 to 18 and adult learners in humanities. GCE AS and A-level, GCSEs and pre-GCSE courses are offered in a broad range of subjects during the day and evening to full-time and part-time students. An access to HE course is available during the day. Lessons were observed in psychology, sociology, history, English literature, law, general studies and media studies. Key skills are taught through general studies. During the academic year 2001/02, there were 1,194 enrolments of students aged 16 to 18 and 3,451 of students aged 19 and over. Many of the students on an access to HE course had been recommended to follow it by friends who had themselves been access course students. The college does not, however, offer the access to HE course in the evening with the aim of widening participation. Furthermore, there are no clear progression routes to the course from other college provision.

Achievement and standards

114. There are high pass rates in some subjects, for example GCE A-level law and general studies. Pass rates in GCSE psychology have risen over the last three years and are above the national average. The college carries out analysis of the extent of learners' achievements. This analysis shows that students who take GCE AS and A-level history, general studies and sociology achieve higher grades than those predicted for them on the basis of their GCSE grades and other qualifications they held on entry. There is a high progression rate to HE from the access course. During the past three years this has been at an average of 85%.

115. The retention rate for the GCE A-level general studies course is high and is going up. On most other courses, including GCSE law, the retention rate is below the national average. Attendance was poor in some classes during the week of the inspection. In humanities lessons observed, it averaged only 63%. It was particularly low in GCSE and pre-GCSE lessons. Some classes are particularly small and where this was the case the range of learning activities the students were able to undertake effectively in lessons was narrow. For example, there were not enough students for group project work or for comprehensive debate and discussion to take place.

116. The standard of most students' work is satisfactory or better. In some lessons, students' attainment is higher than that required for the level and stage of the course. Access students are developing good study skills and beginning to use technical terminology with confidence.

A sample of retention and pass rates in humanities, 2000 to 2002

Qualification	Level	Completion year:	2000	2001	2002
GCSE law (one year)	2	No. of starts	21	18	14
		% retention	57	61	50
		% pass rate	17	55	29
GCSE psychology (one year)	2	No. of starts	19	34	14
		% retention	58	76	50
		% pass rate	73	65	100
GCE A-level psychology (one year)	3	No. of starts	21	24	11
		% retention	48	54	90
		% pass rate	70	54	89
GCE A-level law (one year)	3	No. of starts	22	14	20
		% retention	59	71	55
		% pass rate	92	70	64
GCE A-level sociology (two year)	3	No. of starts	16	10	4
		% retention	44	50	100
		% pass rate	83	100	100
Access to HE	3	No. of starts	15	63	45
		% retention	60	70	62
		% pass rate	80	59	86

Source: ISR (2000 and 2001), college (2002)

Quality of education and training

117. Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. In many lessons, teachers are successful in exciting and sustaining the students' interest. For example, in one GCSE media studies lesson, students were asked to construct characters for a soap opera, identify stereotypical characteristics and write a script. Students were confident enough to challenge the teachers' views and opinions, and they extended their knowledge and understanding through well-informed argument and debate. The integration of key skills within general studies is particularly successful. In one lively and successful lesson for example, the students worked industriously and competently using digital cameras and computers. A member of staff who acted as an IT facilitator gave them valuable help and assistance. The use of a facilitator to support the learning was very effective in this context.

118. A questionnaire is used to enable students to identify their most effective modes of learning. However, there is little evidence that any action is taken on the findings. Although students use IT to produce assignments, they seldom use the Internet for research. The college's intranet, although recognised by teachers as a good learning resource, is not used by humanities students.

119. Teachers encourage students to work responsibly on their own and organise their studies carefully. At the beginning of their course they identify their target examination grade. Students are assessed against this grade. If the standard of their work falls short of this grade, they then identify what they need to do in order to improve it. Some assignments are imaginatively written, specify clear assessment criteria and are marked constructively. Some teachers, however, do not give students clear feedback on their assignment work and explain to them what they need to do to improve it. Although internal verification takes place, there is not a standardised procedure for it. Students have a good understanding of issues relating to equality of opportunity and many cite the advantages of studying in a multicultural environment.

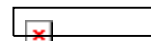
120. Teachers are well qualified and suitably experienced. The classroom accommodation is good. Rooms are large enough for the classes using them. Some course handbooks are well designed, guide students through the course and show them how to work responsibly on their own. Others are less helpful and insufficiently informative.

121. Teachers make every effort to meet students' needs. For example, they arrange to help students during breaks and part-time members of staff keep in touch with students through e-mail. Feedback from students indicates that they appreciate this support. Prospective full-time students receive initial guidance to help them make the right choice of course. This guidance is also given to prospective part-time students who wish to follow a component of a full-time course. Students with additional needs are able to access specific workshops. Strategies have been introduced to raise retention rates. These include interviews with students, at which staff encourage them and aim to raise their motivation, and careful monitoring of students' progress in tutorials.

Leadership and management

122. Curriculum leadership is good. There is effective communication between curriculum teams and middle and senior management. Staff at all levels meet regularly, keep in touch with one another by frequent use of e-mail, and receive new bulletins. Teachers are involved in curriculum decision making. Part-time teachers attend staff meetings. Full-time and part-time teachers contribute to the writing of self-assessment reports and are involved in the setting of targets and the analysis of students' achievement data. Staff-development activities take place and these focus on teaching and learning in specific subject areas. There is little training for the staff on generic issues, such as the widening of participation.

Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities



Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**

Strengths

- some excellent teaching and highly effective learning
- good standard of students' work
- very good and thorough initial assessment

- effective use of individual learning plans
- excellent support for individual students
- timely introduction of new courses to provide progression routes for students.

Weaknesses

- no use of individual risk assessment in procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviour
- no participation in enrichment activities with other students from other courses
- lack of clear management information data.

Scope of provision

123. The college offers a range of full-time and part-time provision at entry level and pre-entry level for students with learning difficulties. New courses have been introduced to increase progression routes. Link courses are provided in co-operation with schools for students with special educational needs. 'Routes to' offers a small cohort of students a progression pathway to level 1 provision in a range of curriculum areas, with support. Many students on these courses have some degree of disaffection with education and have moderate learning difficulties. Courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are accredited by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) at various levels, and students can work towards additional basic skills qualifications according to their need. ASDAN Workright offers students with more severe learning difficulties, who are mainly aged over 19, with a route to supported employment, in collaboration with the social services department. At the time of inspection there were 58 full-time and 15 part-time students enrolled on courses, of which 38% were aged 19 or over. The college has identified the need to develop provision for students with sensory impairments. Although support is provided as required for students with hearing and visual impairments across the college, there is no specialist provision for profoundly deaf students.

Achievement and standards

124. The level of students' attainment in lessons and work files is high. The college has introduced courses leading to ASDAN qualifications with the aim of increasing the proportion of students who progress to employment or further courses, which hitherto has been around 60%. Many learners develop good personal and study skills. For example, a student with learning difficulties developed increased awareness of personal hygiene through preparing food. Students' folders are carefully organised and contain good photographic evidence of their acquisition of knowledge and skills. Following initial assessment, students are set individual learning targets. Students' logs show that students meet their learning goals well. The best individual learning plans specify clear targets, take

account of students' previous work and attainment, and cover both personal and study skills. Students' progress is reviewed regularly.

125. A number of students depend on specialist transport to get to college. This is often late. The team leader has made efforts to secure improvements in the service provided.

Quality of education and training

126. There is much good teaching and effective learning. Poorer lessons lack momentum and the learning activities fail to hold the students' interest. The best lessons have a clear sense of purpose. In these, the students are fully engaged in demanding and appropriately varied learning tasks. For example, in an essential skills class, students were proud and excited about the high standard of work on Halloween they had produced the previous week. The work was word processed and compiled as a pack, and one of the students had searched the Internet for suitable images for a front cover. Students shared their learning effectively, talking about their experiences of the writing, with lots of laughter about who could tell the scariest story. This experience spurred students on to expect even higher standards of themselves and others when putting together another compilation of their writing about Bonfire Night.

127. In a lesson for disaffected students with moderate learning difficulties, students were led purposefully through a variety of learning activities relating to the costs of baby equipment and the safe procedure for bathing a baby. Students enjoyed work in groups, preparing a collage and costing the items of equipment needed. They were able to draw on their own experiences and gave mature and sensible reasons for safety measures. The tutor established an adult approach by valuing what the students had to say and encouraging them to support one another.

128. Teachers deal with behavioural issues calmly. In a literacy class for a group of disaffected students, the tutor and support worker skilfully created a calm, comfortable and safe atmosphere and defused potentially volatile behaviour. Students relaxed visibly and worked steadily and confidently at the task of learning about spelling by dividing words into syllables.

129. Students on courses designed specifically for those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities do not usually participate in enrichment activities with other students, although they feel comfortable mixing with them in the canteen at lunch and break times. All were excitedly looking forward to the college Christmas party and the college had offered to arrange transport and support as required.

130. Many teaching and support staff have specialist qualifications in special needs education. Support workers are effectively deployed to work with individuals as required. A good induction pack is produced for use in training support workers. Accommodation is good and students make effective use of ILT. However, some classrooms allocated at the start of the year were unsuitable for Workright classes and students complained of frequent room changes. The well-equipped kitchen/lifeskills area offers a comfortable retreat for students, particularly at the start of the year as they gain confidence.

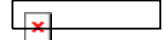
131. Students appreciate the personal support they receive, both in lessons and in personal tutorials. Students are supported intensively in the development of appropriate adult behaviour, but procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviour are not based on individual risk assessments. Students' learning and support needs are assessed in collaboration with schools for students with special educational needs and social services where appropriate. Individual learning plans are well developed and their implementation is reviewed regularly during students' progress reviews.

Leadership and management

132. Leadership and management of foundation courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are satisfactory. There is, however, no clear structure for the overall management of provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities offered to them within mainstream college courses. The college's management information system does not produce data on this

provision which can be used when monitoring the quality of courses. The course files, however, specify clearly what action needs to be taken to address identified issues.

Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages



Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (grade 4)**

Strengths

- high retention and pass rates for City and Guilds communication courses
- good partnership arrangements to widen participation
- effective use of IT in adult basic literacy classes
- well-managed use of volunteer tutors.

Weaknesses

- low retention rates on basic English and mathematics courses
- inadequate use of individual learning plans to meet learning needs
- insufficient planning of lessons to meet all students' needs
- little monitoring of students' progress and achievements in lessons
- no coherent policy and strategy for basic skills
- inadequate arrangements for helping full-time students improve their literacy and numeracy.

Scope of provision

133. The college offers literacy and numeracy courses for adults at entry level and level 1 courses in ESOL, and there are currently 215 and 29 students on these, respectively. It is now college policy to establish programmes of learning which reflect the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy specified in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, published by the DfES. Learning support and courses in basic skills are provided at both Widnes and Runcorn. Courses for ESOL are run at Widnes. Courses in basic skills are offered at five community venues and at one of these, there is a cyber café. The college helps to run programmes in partnership with external agencies in community venues such as a travellers' site, a women's refuge, Halton Lea Library and a Family Literacy Centre. In 2001, 333 received additional help with literacy and numeracy. Since September 2002, full-time students on mainstream courses across the college have had their needs for help with basic skills met through provision of learning support as an integral part of their curriculum, and also through drop-in workshops. Currently, the college's business development team is marketing courses in literacy and numeracy to local industry partners.

Achievement and standards

134. Retention and pass rates for adults are high and those on City and Guilds communication courses are above the national average. These students gain in confidence and self-esteem during their time at college. Retention rates are below the national average on long basic English and number courses. These courses are no longer offered. In 2001/02, 43% of ESOL students with qualifications from their country of origin progressed to FE or HE.

135. As part of the college's policy of developing courses which aim to promote the national standards for literacy and numeracy published by the DfES, all students are required to maintain portfolios of work as a record of their progress and achievements. There is insufficient monitoring of students' learning and achievement in lessons. Few portfolios contain any detailed record of how students are meeting the objectives of their individual learning plans. Students are not given a clear indication of the progress they have made in carrying out their individual learning goals and what they need to improve their work. Teachers do not keep records of students' progress towards meeting their learning goals. Levels of attainment in the lessons observed were very low. In three-quarters of the lessons observed, students were making unsatisfactory progress.

Quality of education and training

136. The quality of teaching and learning is often poor. There is poor use of learning plans as a means of addressing students' learning needs. Learning plans are not much used by students and the language in them is often inappropriate. Lessons are poorly planned and teachers fail to adapt their teaching methods and learning activities to suit the needs of all students in the group. In all areas, lesson plans do not take account of students' needs as identified in the students' individual learning plans. Lessons for groups of students studying at different levels were mainly unsatisfactory and fail to sustain the students' interest. In ESOL lessons, teachers successfully engaged students in developing a higher level of English language skills in practical and lively oral activities. Students on courses at pre-entry level showed little interest in their lessons and made little effort to take part in activities even though there was an additional teacher present to help them. There is extensive use of worksheets in lessons and many are poorly reproduced photocopies. Learning materials are not sufficiently varied in terms of content and level of difficulty to meet the individual needs of students of different abilities. In a learning support lesson for engineering students, literacy skills were not assessed and numeracy support was not tailored to meet the needs of individual students. In basic skills lessons, teachers provide students with materials at one level only, mostly at a higher level. In one lesson, advanced students were not given sufficiently demanding work that challenged them to use their skills to the full, and pre-entry level students failed to complete all the activities successfully.

137. Students on courses in ESOL do not receive enough assessment of their oral and literacy skills.

Students at pre-entry level in English make slow progress. When assessing the work of pre-entry level students, teachers sometimes fail to identify and correct errors in English. The initial assessment process does not provide the detailed diagnostic information required to inform teachers of the literacy and numeracy support required for students on level 1 and level 2 vocational programmes. Through additional diagnostic assessment carried out in lessons, many students are identified as being in need of additional learning support, but few receive it.

138. There are good partnership arrangements with the local authority, voluntary sector and community groups to widen participation. Community venues are central and conveniently located for students, who wish to follow, for example family literacy and travellers' programmes. Students develop in confidence and become better prepared to support their own families and local community groups as volunteers. There is effective use of IT as a means of helping students develop literacy skills. For example, in one lesson students completed a written task through word processing and then they used the spell check facility. Computers are modern. Teachers produce good well-designed materials for community-based courses. Students benefit from the individual attention to help them improve their literacy skills and increase their confidence. Students have access to IT and the Internet at all college sites and at community sites.

139. Teachers of ESOL are sensitive to the needs of their students who come from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. A training programme to familiarise teachers from other sections with the needs of these students is planned to take place in 2003. There is inadequate review of resources for basic skills. The learning materials in the resource room are out of date, contain content which reinforces gender stereotyping, and do not reflect current life styles and contemporary society. The ESOL section is currently reviewing its resources. Accommodation for ESOL courses is satisfactory. Basic skills teachers have appropriate teaching qualifications and experience. ESOL teachers have appropriate specialist qualifications and many have extensive experience of working in the Far East. Few of the support workers hold appropriate qualifications in the teaching of literacy and/or numeracy and ESOL. In some lessons where support workers are present, some students do not receive all the help and attention they need.

Leadership and management

140. Management of the area is fragmented. Learning support, basic literacy, numeracy and ESOL are separately managed. The director for learning and student support is the line manager for the head of the department of community and skills development, who has responsibility for basic skills courses. This director is also the line manager for the head of the department for science, humanities, engineering, and IT, who has responsibility for courses in ESOL and English as a foreign language. There are section leaders for languages and ESOL, English as a foreign language, skills development and enrichment and learning support. There are 14 well-qualified volunteer tutors across all sites who are well managed. There is poor curriculum planning relating to ESOL and basic skills, and little cross-departmental and inter-sectional sharing of good practice. The curriculum is not adequately planned to ensure all the needs of students of varying abilities are met. There is insufficient identification and dissemination of good practice. There are no arrangements for the assessment of basic skills for distance learning students. There are inadequate arrangements for providing additional learning support for full-time students who have poor literacy and numeracy skills. There is no internal monitoring of the quality of adult basic literacy and numeracy lessons.

Part D: College data

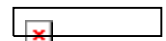


Table 1: Enrolments by level of study and age

Level	16-18 %	19+ %
1	28	25
2	41	31
3	17	8
4/5	1	1
Other	12	34
Total	100	100

Source: Provided by the college in 2002

Note: Percentages have been rounded so columns may not total 100

Table 2: Enrolments by curriculum area and age

Curriculum area	16-18 No.	19+ No.	Total Enrolments %
Science	1,558	2,943	14
Agriculture	20	108	0
Construction	76	160	1
Engineering	208	1,007	4
Business	260	4,330	15
Hotel and catering	346	1,420	6
Health and community care	835	11,044	38
Art and design	158	1,178	4
Humanities	1,194	3,451	15
Basic education	130	724	3
Total	4,785	26,365	100

Table 3: Retention and achievement

Level (Long Courses)	Retention and pass rate	Completion year	
		16-18	19+

		1999	2000	2001	1999	2000	2001
1	Starters excluding transfers	*	437	331	*	3,060	2,399
	Retention rate (%)	*	70	79	*	72	78
	National average (%)	*	80	79	*	79	77
	Pass rate (%)	*	76	62	*	66	60
	National average (%)	*	65	69	*	65	68
2	Starters excluding transfers	*	824	803	*	4,689	2,786
	Retention rate (%)	*	58	63	*	61	59
	National average (%)	*	77	76	*	79	78
	Pass rate (%)	*	63	71	*	59	63
	National average (%)	*	66	69	*	65	70
3	Starters excluding transfers	*	618	655	*	3,143	1,860
	Retention rate (%)	*	71	71	*	65	67
	National average (%)	*	76	78	*	79	79
	Pass rate (%)	*	58	74	*	59	65
	National average (%)	*	75	77	*	66	70
4/5	Starters excluding transfers	*	657	589	*	12061	12104
	Retention rate (%)	*	96	91	*	96	94
	National average (%)	*	**	**	*	**	**
	Pass rate (%)	*	66	67	*	66	81
	National average (%)	*	**	**	*	**	**

* data not reliable

** not applicable

Note: Summary of retention and achievement for the last three years by age and level of course, compared against national averages for colleges of the same type (that is General FE and Tertiary colleges).

Sources of information:

1. *National averages: Benchmarking Data 1999 to 2001: Retention and Achievement Rates in Further Education Colleges in England, Learning and Skills Council, September 2002.*

2. *College rates for 1999 to 2001: college ISR.*

Table 4: Quality of teaching observed during the inspection

Courses	Teaching judged to be:			No of sessions observed
	Good or better %	Satisfactory %	Less than satisfactory %	
Level 3 (advanced)	68	27	5	59
Level 2 (intermediate)	62	32	6	66
Level 1 (foundation)	62	23	15	26
Other sessions	67	0	33	39
Totals	60	30	10	190

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