Harlow ITeC

SUMMARY

Harlow ITeC provides very good training in information technology and administration. Training in key skills and vocational skills is well integrated. Training resources are excellent. The company promotes equality of opportunity in all areas of its work in an innovative way. Trainees receive continuous help and guidance through frequent contact with staff and an in-depth review of their progress. Management's drive, initiative and planning are outstanding. Staff show inspirational leadership, setting trainees an excellent example. Staff are knowledgeable and there is an excellent staff development programme. The company is consulted about occupational training by national and local organisations. Quality assurance processes including self-assessment are well implemented.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	1
Management of training	1
Quality assurance	1

KEY STRENGTHS

♦ excellent development of trainees' work skills

♦ high level of assistance to trainees

♦ good retention, achievement and employment rates

♦ well-developed culture of equal opportunities

♦ dynamic leadership by managers and staff

♦ excellent relationships with employers and other organisations

♦ excellent staff development programme

♦ outstanding self-assessment and quality assurance action-planning processes

KEY WEAKNESSES

♦ lack of information for trainees in selection of work placements

♦ lack of explanation about national vocational qualifications for some workplace supervisors

INTRODUCTION

1. Harlow ITeC is located in Harlow in Essex. It was established in 1983 as a company limited by guarantee. It was registered again in 1992 as a company limited by share with charitable status. It is controlled by Harlow District Council. There are eight directors and they oversee the work of the ITeC manager who supervises nine full-time staff, six part-time staff and up to 12 regular freelance staff. Harlow ITeC operates from a multi-purpose community building. The building is set among playing fields on the outskirts of the town. The offices, training suites and interview facilities are clean and bright, with excellent information technology equipment and industry standard software. The company has its own Internet site.

2. Harlow ITeC receives contracts for government-funded training from Essex Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Programmes include modern apprenticeships and national traineeships in administration and information technology with key skills at levels one to four. There are 48 trainees on these programmes. Twenty-seven trainees are on administration national vocational qualification (NVQ) programmes and 17 are on information technology programmes of various types. Four trainees are on taster programmes and have not yet decided which programme to take. Harlow ITeC also provides training in information technology which does not lead to an NVQ, private training for unemployed adults, evening courses, and short courses for local industry. Trainees and all other clients of the ITeC are able to obtain training and guidance in software applications, information technology networking, information technology management, and intranet and Internet web-page design.

3. In addition to its funding from Essex TEC, Harlow ITeC also receives funding, in conjunction with other local ITeCs, from the European Social Fund (ESF). This area of activity was not inspected. The company also receives funding for franchised work from a further education college. As this work had been included in the inspection by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) of the college within the last two years, it was not inspected by the Training Standards Council (TSC). The inspection concentrated on the business administration courses. Thirty-four per cent of the ITeC's funding comes from TEC contracts, 24 per cent from the FEFC and ESF funding and 42 per cent from private sources.

4. Harlow district has a population of 75,000 people. With 3 per cent of the population unemployed, it has the fifth highest unemployment rate of the 14 Essex districts but is slightly below the overall Essex unemployment figure of 3.1 per cent. The basic skills agency survey of 1997 revealed that 19 per cent of all people between the ages of 16 and 60 in the Harlow area have poor literacy skills and 25 per cent have poor numeracy skills. The town of Harlow is an industrial centre which is surrounded by farmland. It has good road links north and south, but east-west connections are poor. A 1997 survey of commuting patterns revealed that people living outside Harlow fill 43.7 per cent of all jobs. The town's industrial focus is on research and development in medicines with many international companies

having branches or headquarters there. There is one international research company which concentrates on military defence work such as radar electronics and avionics. The academic and vocational qualification requirements for entry into employment in many of these companies are very high. Employment is dominated by the service sector which employs 74 per cent of workers. Other employment sectors, particularly manufacturing, are in decline. Harlow is officially recognised as the most socially deprived district in Essex.

5. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers in Essex achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 49.3 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent. The 4.3 per cent of school leavers in Essex who achieve no GCSEs compares favourably with the national average of 6 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

6. Harlow ITeC's self-assessment report was very good. The process began in 1998 after senior staff attended a briefing from Essex TEC. A staff member was appointed to manage the self-assessment process. A study was made of other training providers' published inspection reports, and self-assessment was based on the quality statements given in *Raising the Standard*. Self-assessment is a regular agenda item at all monthly staff meetings. A draft self-assessment report was produced. Between January and April 1999, meetings were held at which all staff had an opportunity to identify those areas they felt were strong or weak. They produced evidence to substantiate their claims. These discussions were held without reference to the draft self-assessment report. The draft report was then compared with the new quality assessments and the similarities and differences noted. Each time this process is carried out a new report is produced. An action plan is then written. The company has now produced four self-assessment reports and the action plan has been regularly kept up to date. Inspectors agreed the grades given in the self-assessment report in all but two areas, equal opportunities and trainee support, in which Harlow ITeC had given itself insufficient credit for its good work. Strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report were largely accurately identified. The process had been supported by Essex TEC.

7. A team of two inspectors spent a total of eight days at Harlow ITeC during March 2000. They interviewed 16 trainees who represented 33 per cent of the total. They interviewed nine of Harlow ITeC's staff and nine workplace supervisors or managers at seven work placements. They observed training sessions, trainees' reviews and an assessment. They examined a wide range of documents, including the company's business plan, the quality assurance policy and manuals, trainees' records, quality control documents and training materials including occupational and key skills training notes. They inspected the company's information technology and administration training facilities. They discussed the content of the trainees' NVQ portfolios. They tested the company's management information data system.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration	1	4		1		6
Total	**1**	**4**	**0**	**1**	**0**	**6**

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration   **Grade 2**

8. There are 48 trainees working towards qualifications in administration and

information technology within the business administration occupational area. There are 33 national trainees, seven modern apprentices and eight youth trainees. Twenty-seven trainees are working towards administration NVQs at levels 1 and 2. Eleven trainees are working towards NVQs based on the use of information technology in the workplace. A further six are working towards NVQs in which they learn to operate, install or support information technology systems. Four trainees are on taster programmes designed to help them to choose a suitable programme from those on offer. Trainees are also offered an opportunity to gain a level 1 or level 2 additional qualification in information technology. Potential trainees complete an aptitude test and attend an interview. The aptitude test is used to identify those trainees who need extra training or guidance. Trainees receive an induction during their first week at the Harlow ITeC centre. Induction is followed by a core period of training at the ITeC. In this training period trainees acquire the basic information needed to achieve skills in their chosen administration or information technology qualification. After about four weeks of training, trainees are placed with a local company. Occasionally, when trainees have the appropriate skills upon commencement of training, they may go directly to the workplace. Trainees receive most of the NVQ assessment in the workplace, with a small amount at the ITeC. The ITeC staff are occupationally qualified. Eleven staff have assessor qualifications and one is working towards the assessor award. Eight of the staff are involved both in assessment and training. The self-assessment report clearly outlined the business administration programmes. All the strengths given in the report were confirmed by the inspectors, who identified additional strengths. Some of the weaknesses given in the report were not confirmed by the inspectors. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

♦ good achievement and employment rates of trainees

♦ excellent training resources

♦ constructive relationships with employers

♦ well-designed and implemented key skills training

♦ excellent development of trainees' occupational skills

WEAKNESSES

♦ some workplace supervisors poorly informed about NVQ process

♦ some inconsistent interpretation of NVQ evidence requirements

9. High numbers of trainees achieve their qualifications and obtain employment. The overall retention rate of trainees is also good. Of the 276 trainees who started training in the three years since April 1997, 71 progressed to a further education college and 22 remain on their training programme. Of the remaining 183 trainees, 120 gained employment. The overall rate of achievement is good. Of the 276 trainees who began training since April 1997, 254 have completed their training. Of these, 185 completed their full programmes, an overall achievement rate of 72.8 per

cent. The completion rate on the small modern apprenticeship programme is 52.9 per cent and on the national traineeship programme the achievement rate is 70.4 per cent. The other work-based training programme for young people has an achievement rate of 76.3 per cent. Sixty-nine trainees left their programmes early in the last three years.

10. The trainees' initial training is well implemented. After a comprehensive induction trainees learn basic information technology skills. Trainers use a series of tasks and assignments to help improve the trainees' skills and knowledge. Strict guidance about workplace behaviour during this period helps trainees to gain confidence. As work placements become available, they are matched against the job preferences of those trainees who have learned the appropriate information technology skills and developed the right work habits. Trainers and assessors meet frequently with trainees on work placements, generally weekly or fortnightly. At these meetings, they assess trainees and plan the work to be done to prepare for the next assessment. Most assessment is based on the trainees' experience in the workplace rather than on simulated work practices in the ITeC. Assessors set appropriate aims for work to be done and trainees gain a sense of progress.

11. The ITeC training rooms are well equipped. Computers and software are up to date and are of a commercial standard. The windows of the training rooms are fitted with anti-glare filters. These rooms also have freestanding fans to help maintain a comfortable environment. Manuals and workbooks are available and contain realistic assignments. The staff are well qualified and show a strong commitment to the trainees. They have considerable expertise in the subjects taught. Training is varied and well designed.

12. Employers who provide work placements are positive about the ITeC's training and assessment programmes. The trainees begin work with a good standard of knowledge and have been well prepared for work by ITeC. The trainees have sufficient information technology skills to become productive very quickly. Workplace supervisors find the trainees to have a high level of skills and enthusiasm, and a willingness to learn and to work hard. They praise the trainees' good interpersonal skills and their ability to work with others and communicate effectively. For example, at one company, two young trainees were engaged in technical support roles, talking to staff at all levels in order to define, diagnose and resolve technical problems. Some employers stated that they preferred to recruit all their junior staff from the ITeC's NVQ programmes.

13. The ITeC and employers co-operate well in developing the trainees' skills. Trainees are employed in a wide variety of job roles in order to gain experience. The ITeC's staff discuss trainees' progress at three- or four-monthly reviews. ITeC's staff and workplace supervisors collaborate in the review process. ITeC's staff are sensitive to any further training the trainees might need and the trainees have access to a wide range of additional job-related training. As a result, trainees receive the appropriate training at the right time, enabling them to bring a range of skills to their work placements. Examples of additional training include learning how to use project management and complex graphics software, word processing,

spreadsheet and database courses, and first aid courses.

14. Trainees attend a number of workshops to develop their key skills. Training is well implemented and trainees are enthusiastic. Some key skills are assessed in these workshops. By developing these skills trainees gain in confidence which enables them to fit with ease into the workplace. When workshops have been completed, assessors work with trainees to see how further key skills evidence can be gathered from the workplace. A key skills workshop was observed. Trainees were working well individually or in groups to develop their communication skills. Trainees were enjoying the session and participating well.

15. On occasions a trainee may be allocated a different supervisor. This may result from staff transfers or because trainees move to another department. In a small number of such cases the new supervisor has not been fully briefed by ITeC's staff about the NVQ process. These new supervisors expressed frustration that they were unable to provide all the help their trainees wanted because of their lack of knowledge. In a small number of cases, assessments lack consistency. Some assessors differ in their interpretation of what represents sufficient evidence for some of the NVQ performance criteria. In a number of cases supervisors and other assessors rely too much on witness testimony. This occurs to a small extent in the administration NVQ programme but to a larger extent in portfolios which trainees produced for the NVQ called using information technology, which was offered in the centre until December 1999. The ITeC internal verifier discontinued this programme. The ITeC is now offering courses which meet the new NVQ information technology standards which were introduced on 1 January 2000. These are being assessed solely in the workplace.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities   Grade 2

16. ITeC's manager leads a working group which manages the promotion of equal opportunities. The working group is responsible for keeping policies and procedures up to date and for considering new ways of improving equality of opportunity. It monitors the implementation of policy by analysing which the company collects, by holding discussions and by taking advice from specialists. The training company uses its external links to promote equal opportunities both at home and overseas. Trainees have their own course committee which discusses a range of issues including equal opportunities. Inspectors considered that the self-assessment report had underestimated the quality of the work done and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

♦ comprehensive and well-established policies and procedures

♦ innovative inclusion of additional concepts of equality of opportunity

♦ good programme of training for staff and trainees

♦ well-designed and implemented complaints procedures

WEAKNESSES

♦ some improvements not yet fully established

17. Harlow ITeC works closely with Essex TEC on matters relating to equal opportunities. It has a good equal opportunities policy. The company has had an equal opportunities working group since 1993. The group holds regular meetings which are minuted. It has devised comprehensive policy and procedures which are regularly reviewed. The policy is promoted to staff, trainees and external organisations including work-placement providers and employers. It is written in clear language. It covers employment and recruitment issues, staff training and development, redundancy and redeployment, course design and implementation, advertising, recruitment of trainees, work placements, grievances and responsibilities. An external advisor from Essex TEC has reviewed the policy.

18. The policy includes procedures for the promotion of equality in areas such as race, colour, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, disability, age and gender. It also sets out the company's attitude towards criticism or prejudice against trainees who lack formal qualifications. There are measures to ensure that bias does not enter into publicity and advertising or affect access to training. The latter includes awareness of the need to ensure that trainees do not feel prejudice owing to the wording of training notes or other materials. The procedures cover the deliberate or inadvertent misuse of the Internet and electronic communication. Staff can work flexible hours to help with family and other commitments. There is a separate code of practice covering staff behaviour towards trainees and each other. There are procedures to protect trainees from bullying and harassment. Trainees have their own course committee. The minutes of the committee's meetings set out the discussions on resources, health and safety and NVQ issues as well as equal opportunities issues. The ITeC has an adapted lavatory for those with disabilities. The ITeC is in contact with the disability employment advisor and can obtain finance from this source to buy special equipment. The ITeC has large screen computer monitors for those who find it difficult to see small-sized lettering.

19. Trainees are well informed. They make recommendations to ITeC's staff about ways in which aspects of equality might be better implemented. Harlow ITeC is connected by e-mail to a partner in Pakistan and has passed on information about equality issues to the staff and trainees there.

20. There are regular training sessions for trainees and staff on equal opportunities. The training is well done. It covers the work of the commission for racial equality and the equal opportunities commission, and the principal acts of parliament. Discussions are held on abusive language, offensive jokes, unnecessary physical contact, lewd gestures, suggestive comments, the unfair allocation of work and responsibilities, exclusion from conversation and intrusive questioning about sexual interests, racial or cultural matters. All trainees attend these training sessions in

addition to their induction, no later than two months into their NVQ programmes. Many trainees have a sophisticated awareness of equal opportunities issues.

21. The ITeC has a comprehensive complaints policy which covers the handling of complaints from staff, trainees and private customers. The procedures to be followed in case of complaints are carefully explained to trainees and given to them in writing. Examination of documents showed that few complaints had been received over the years. All had been dealt with promptly and in a professional manner. Trainees are briefed on how to complain if there is an incident at their work placement. They have access to an independent person should they not wish to confide in their assessor or tutor.

22. The working group keeps data on trainees, including data on ethnic origin and disability, age and gender. The data on trainees are obtained through interview and on analysis of recruitment patterns. The data show that over a three-year period the ITeC exceeded the Essex TEC's average of 2 per cent for the recruitment of trainees from minority ethnic groups. The average was over 5 per cent and the current total is 5.6 per cent. As far as the recruitment of trainees with disabilities is concerned, the ITeC recruited just under Essex TEC's average figure of 2 per cent. The current recruitment total is 1.1 per cent. The employment rate for people from minority ethnic groups has improved. In the past, 8.8 per cent of trainees from minority ethnic groups had no record of having obtained a job. Of the current intake of trainees, 100 per cent of trainees from these groups have obtained employment. The number of trainees from minority ethnic groups who have achieved an NVQ has risen from 90 per cent three years ago to 100 per cent now. In its recruitment of men and women the ITeC has improved on the Essex TEC's average ratio of 40 per cent women and 60 per cent men in every year. The current recruitment is 52 men and 48 women. All marketing material is examined for bias. Course programme leaflets, which advertise the ITeC, have pictures of trainees of both sexes and from minority ethnic groups. A notice board is used to promote jobs in a way which will encourage trainees to consider non-traditional employment. It is supported by a display of photographs about a trainee who has recently achieved a qualification and a job in a non-stereotypical area of work.

23. Some aspects of the policy are not yet fully established. Some leaflets do not contain any information about equal opportunities. There is no mention in any marketing or advertising material of the ability of those using wheelchairs to gain access to the training facilities.

Trainee support   Grade 1

24. Trainees are recruited by word of mouth, by the careers service and through the presentations the ITeC makes to local schools. All potential trainees take an aptitude test and have an interview. Those with a need for extra help are identified. Trainees are referred to other training providers if they cannot be offered a suitable occupational programme at the ITeC. Trainees sign a training agreement which sets out the background to the training. This explains the behaviour which is

expected of the trainees and details the complaints and grievance procedure, the equal opportunities policy and health and safety information. It gives details of the staff and an outline summary of the trainees' training programme. Trainees receive a full induction in their first week. This includes an initial assessment of their basic and key skills. Trainees are given extra help in these areas if required. Through their time at the ITeC trainees are supported through reviews of their performance. They meet regularly with their assessors. Their progress is reviewed at approximately quarterly intervals by a separate member of staff. The self-assessment report was self-critical and comprehensive. All the strengths given in the report were confirmed by inspectors and other strengths were identified. One weakness given in the report was not confirmed but another weakness was identified. Inspectors found that the support for trainees was outstanding and awarded a higher grade than that given.

STRENGTHS

♦ well-designed and comprehensive induction

♦ well-devised and robust review process

♦ excellent range of work-placement and job opportunities

♦ high level of guidance and assistance for trainees

WEAKNESSES

♦ lack of information for trainees in selection of work placements

25. The induction programme includes detailed information on trainees' rights and responsibilities. Separate briefings are given on the behaviour and dress expected of trainees, on equal opportunities and health and safety at work. Staff stress that the training centre is to be regarded exactly like a place of work. Most trainees reacted positively to these requirements. The induction includes a computerised initial assessment of trainees' basic and key skills in communication and application of number. In an example of good practice, trainees who are assessed as having further training needs are invited to attend the key skills workshops, even when their NVQ programmes might not require it. Their information technology skills are also assessed to decide whether a trainee will begin training at NVQ level 1 or at level 2. Training plans are tailored to meet individuals' needs. Initial assessment takes into account the requirements of potential work placements and helps the company decide which trainees will be selected for work-placement interviews. There is no minimum time set for trainees to spend in the ITeC centre. Those who are judged by ITeC's staff to be ready for work placements can begin them immediately, subject to a successful interview with their prospective employer. The induction includes an assessment of trainees' existing skills. Trainees are helped to identify where previous qualifications and work experience might be used as evidence for their qualification. The trainees' induction into their work placement is also well designed. The ITeC provides a pack for employers which includes a request to the employer to define the trainees' conditions of service and to set out the trainees' proposed activities in the workplace. It contains an explanation of the

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GOOD PRACTICE
This is an example of the use of information technology to help trainees gain employment. Harlow ITeC have a special website on the Internet which allows trainees to promote their skills to employers. The website uses an electronic enquiry form to permit employers to check on the availability of trainees with particular skills in information technology with a view to offering a full-time job or a work placement.

GOOD PRACTICE
This is an example of good practice in arranging to include the workplace supervisor in the review process without breaching trainees' confidentiality. In the formal tripartite workplace reviews, the trainees meet in private with their reviewer. The reviewer meets in private with the supervisor. Then all three parties meet. In this way, any confidential matters can be discussed between the parties without breaching confidentiality.

NVQ process and the role of a work-based supervisor. It sets out the ITeC's equal opportunities policy. After a trainee has been interviewed and selected by an employer or work-placement provider a series of meetings between ITeC's staff and the employer is held to ensure that, as far as possible, the work placement will be safe and successful.

26. The trainees' review process is helpful and well designed. Trainees have two separate meetings with ITeC's staff. The more frequent is the assessment and NVQ planning, and goal-setting meetings with assessors. Trainees are able to choose whether these should be weekly or fortnightly reviews. At these meetings the trainee and assessor plan the work and evidence to be covered by the next meeting. Trainees report to their assessor on any health and safety, equality of opportunity or other issue that concerns them. Separately during these visits, they are assessed on the work they have produced. The reviews are well recorded and give a clear record of the trainees' progress towards their qualification. The second review is the three-monthly review. These reviews are not carried out by the trainees' assessor but by a qualified ITeC staff member. This allows the trainees to raise issues in confidence and allows for any conflict with an assessor or workplace supervisor to be brought to the attention of ITeC's managers. These reviews are highly structured. The ITeC's staff member meets with the trainee separately, and with the supervisor. Then they are brought together for a joint discussion. The discussion covers any workplace or personal problems the trainee might be having. All non-confidential matters are discussed with the supervisor. Finally the trainee, the supervisor and ITeC's reviewer meet to report back to the trainee and agree plans for the next few months. In order to ensure consistency of the review process, the trainees' review documents are read by senior staff at ITeC. Action points arising from these reviews are entered onto a database on the ITeC's network drive and allocated to appropriate staff. This process results in improvements being made to policies and procedures to the benefit of trainees and workplace supervisors.

27. The ITeC markets itself well, using a paper-based system, the Internet and e-mail. The centre's website enables trainees to advertise for and obtain information on jobs. The employment co-ordinator works well to build working relationships with employers to secure appropriate work placements and to promote the contribution trainees can make to the workplace. Many workplace supervisors work hard to help trainees improve and successfully complete their training programmes. The work placements are of a good quality and offer sufficient variety of job roles to enable trainees to complete their qualifications. The ITeC establishes a clear idea of the employer's requirements. This helps them identify suitable candidates for the work placement and contributes to the number of work placements in which the trainee is eventually offered employment.

28. Trainees receive excellent support. Once trainees have decided on their job preferences they receive appropriate guidance. ITeC's staff have a good awareness of job opportunities and refer trainees appropriately. Staff have good links with external agencies and know how to gain access to financial assistance which is required for additional equipment or other help. A staff handbook details

the guidance procedures and policies. This covers the duties and responsibilities of ITeC's staff, the limits of that help and the need for confidentiality.

29. The selection of work placements needs further refinement. When a work-placement opportunity arises, the training co-ordinator and other staff identify those trainees who might be suitable. The trainees' curricula vitae are sent to employers and interviews are arranged. The system can give rise to some resentment in those trainees not selected, or those sent to a work placement for which they did not really want to apply. The ITeC has recognised these problems. They are carefully examining the best way to improve the allocation of work placements.

Management of training   Grade 1

30. Harlow ITeC's board of directors includes Harlow district council members, the principal of the local further education college and a senior manager of a large telecommunications company. The board has appointed a manager who is responsible for three strands of ITeC's organisation. These are training, customer service, and administration and finance. There are nine full-time staff and six part-time staff. The company subcontracts with up to 12 freelance self-employed trainers or assessors using service level agreements. These sessional staff receive a full company induction and access to the full range of staff development and appraisal systems. The work of all staff is quality assured. The company gained the Investors in People Standard in 1993 and has since received regular reaccreditation. The company has a written annual business plan, a mission statement and a written set of long-term aims. It has a quality management manual which integrates quality and management procedures. All staff have job descriptions which include quality criteria. The training department has a team consisting of the ITeC's trainers and assessors and external trainers and assessors, including sessional staff. There is a training co-ordinator and an employer co-ordinator. In the customer service department there are two marketing officers. The administration and finance department includes a course co-ordinator who is responsible for a receptionist and a course administrator. A finance officer deals with contract claims, budget, salary and purchasing matters. Inspectors confirmed the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

♦ dynamic leadership by senior management and staff

♦ excellent working relationships with external organisations

♦ staff's involvement in national course developments

♦ excellent staff development programme

♦ innovative staff appraisal and target-setting system

WEAKNESSES

♦ inconsistent application of some procedures

31. This is an exemplary training centre. The implementation of training is excellent. ITeC's manager sets a good example to staff by thinking deeply about local and national issues in training and development. The manager joins with staff to implement many innovative and imaginative policies and procedures. Because of its good reputation, the ITeC is consulted by national and international bodies. The management team drives up standards through the systematic use of self-assessment. The staff provide excellent leadership to trainees. They are firm in their intent to move new trainees from their sometimes uncaring attitude about work and personal improvement to a successful career. This is achieved using a combination of firmness and humour. The staff are experts in their fields and provide good training in information technology and administrative techniques.

32. The company's business plan is well written. It contains a clear mission statement and a set of commendable long-term aims. It has a marketing strategy, and a priority list of training and development needs. It has a comprehensive list of strategic and operational objectives. Comparison with the previous year's business plan shows significant and consistent improvement in realising the company's aims. This is reflected in the progress made in the self-assessment action-planning system. Agendas of staff meetings are circulated by e-mail or memorandum. Staff meetings take place on a regular basis and are minuted. There is an annual review meeting at which all staff are present. All staff are considered as full colleagues regardless of the nature of their contract and all help to achieve the main aims of the company.

33. Harlow ITeC has strong connections with a number of organisations. Its principal partnerships are with the local college, the TEC, business groups, a national industry training organisation, and other training providers. Harlow ITeC works with the national industry training organisation to develop new qualifications, such as the first national trainee framework in the UK and the information technology occupational standards and qualifications for the UK. An international defence contractor has formed a close working relationship with the ITeC. Many trainees gain work placements there. Seventy per cent of all trainees on work placements at this company gain full-time paid employment. The company publishes information about the good work that ITeC trainees are doing in its monthly newsletter to customers. Another company which deals with business recruitment also has trainees whose stories and achievements are promoted in their newsletter to customers. The staff at ITeC work to achieve excellent working relationships with employers and supervisors. Work-placement providers frequently praise the ITeC. They welcome ITeC's trainees because of their positive attitude to regular attendance and good work.

34. The trainees benefit by receiving their training from staff who are involved in developing new qualifications. One such study is the new key skills 2000 project sponsored by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Such staff involvement in research ensures that they are better able to plan for new qualifications and structures and the trainees gain confidence from the staff's expertise.

35. The staff training programme is well devised and implemented. Staff are well prepared for their training courses. They agree with the staff development manager what both they and the ITeC hope to learn from the training, and this is recorded. They are interviewed about their experiences when they return from courses. They are interviewed again after three months to check that newly learned skills are being implemented. There are regular well-attended staff training days which have specific themes. One such day was called 'What makes a successful training company'. This day included an analysis of excellence in occupational training and gave pointers on how staff could work towards achieving high standards. Staff have attended seminars on strategies to prevent bullying and harassment in the workplace and on equal opportunities issues. Staff also receive training from external sources paid for by the ITeC. In the last twelve months, staff have voluntarily attended courses on first aid, proof reading, neuro-linguistic programming, computer file server software, personnel supervision, and spreadsheets.

36. In a joint project with an external consultant, the company introduced an innovative system of identifying staff's aims, or minimum performance standards which are written into job descriptions. These minimum performance standards are set out under major headings appropriate to the staff member's job role. For example, a training and assessment officer is responsible for implementing training courses adhering to course design, teamwork, business improvement strategies, security and health and safety. Staff sign to indicate they understand their job descriptions, which are internally audited. The staff appraisal procedure is based upon these key requirements of the job. Appraisal takes place at least once a year as decided by ITeC's manager. Performance reviews, in which staff targets are set, also take place annually and occasionally every three months. New staff are appraised shortly after they begin work.

Quality assurance   Grade 1

37. Harlow ITeC's quality assurance policy was first defined in 1991 and has been regularly improved since then. The policy and procedures are contained in a manual. The ITeC achieved the ISO 9001 quality standard in 1992. As the company receives funding from the FEFC, the ITeC is included in the further education colleges' own quality audits. The company receives external verification visits from several awarding bodies and has direct claims status. This means it is trusted to claim NVQ certificates before trainees' portfolios are checked by the awarding bodies. The manager has overall responsibility for quality assurance. Inspectors confirmed the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

♦ outstanding self-assessment and action-planning process

♦ excellent quality assurance procedures

♦ comprehensive systems to assure quality of training

♦ rigorous internal verification

WEAKNESSES

♦ limited scope of internal audit system

38. Harlow ITeC either meets or exceeds most of the standards it sets itself. Managers constantly explore what is meant by an outstanding organisation. They set challenging goals which they attempt to meet through benchmarking and quality improvement strategies. The self-assessment process is good and has led to a detailed action plan. The ITeC action plan had already noted most of the weaknesses observed during the inspection. The action plan for this year started in June 1999. It contains action points which are allocated to individual staff. Dates for completion are realistic. A review date indicates when managers are to check on progress and an actual date shows when action has been completed. The current action plan shows that many actions taken have lead to improvements. All of the proposed courses of action are sensible and well devised. Progress towards achieving the action points is rapid.

39. The ITeC's quality assurance process is very good. This reflects the drive for excellence in the organisation as a whole. The ITeC manager is represented on the management board and is responsible for establishing, reviewing and maintaining the quality assurance system. The company has internal quality audits which ensure that necessary corrective actions are taken. Any staff member may at any time complete a non-compliance form in which problems are identified. Non-compliance relates to any event which causes quality to fall below the defined standard. The non-compliance is investigated and addressed as soon as possible. Internal audits are carried out by staff who are not members of the department being checked. This maintains the independence of the audits. Staff willingly co-operate in the remedial work required. The audit approach is relaxed but professional and improvements are made without causing undue concern. The quality assurance procedures cover, for example, short courses, the design of course materials, management procedures, work-based NVQ assessment, staff employment and development, long courses and work-placement procedures. More detailed procedures cover, for example, repairs to equipment and computer virus checking, marketing, Internet website design, course review and assessment, and the control of the quality of subcontracted staff. This attention to detail underpins the ITeC's current success in attaining high standards in many areas.

40. The quality of training is assured by several carefully considered systems. All course training materials have to be authorised by the course co-ordinator. A paper master copy is kept by the receptionist who is responsible for copying this as required. The receptionist withdraws and destroys all old materials when authorised to do so. All trainers, including sessional staff, have their performance checked once a year by a senior member of staff. The appraisal form includes an assessment of the rapport between the trainer and trainees, training objectives and outcomes and the trainer's expertise. A copy of the form is kept on the member of staff's file and the outcomes are included in the annual appraisal system. If trainers

fall below an acceptable standard, remedial action is taken and extra training or counselling is provided. The quality of the training is sampled by Essex TEC with formal written evaluation given to ITeC's manager. All new training courses are submitted to a well-designed dry-run testing process to ensure that they are satisfactory before being given to trainees. There is a review of equipment and the company uses equipment which in many cases exceeds industry standards.

41. The internal verification system is rigorous and complies with QCA and awarding body requirements. External verification reports confirm the good practices in the company. All assessors are observed carrying out assessments by their internal verifier and are given a written appraisal. Remedial action, including further training, is given when poor performance is noted. Action points regarding poor performance are discussed at regular assessors' meetings. Internal verification records are well maintained. The internal verifier takes firm action when poor practice is detected. There is proper internal and external verification of key skills. All assessors and internal verifiers are taking a key skills qualification. Key skills are assessed and verified to level 4. The ITeC has awarding body approval to offer the training and development NVQ and has agreement to train its own assessors and verifiers. Separately from the normal interim checks, the internal verifier carries out at least one additional check on the trainees' portfolios. This is done through a face-to-face review with each national trainee and modern apprentice during their programme. This quality assurance review process is additional to the normal reviews of trainees' progress.

42. Some minor weaknesses, which were not identified by self-assessment, remain to be tackled. For example, the internal audit system has not been prioritised. The current approach is for regular and systematic checks to be made regardless of the importance of the area being examined. Key areas, which might experience a significant drop in quality, are not examined more frequently than other areas. Almost all of the internal verification system is not included in the internal audit system. Instead, the ITeC relies upon the awarding bodies to check its quality. The scope of the independent internal audit of the internal verification system is limited. For example, the lists which detail the observations of assessors and trainers are not yet subject to internal audit. There is no evidence that any awarding body's external verifier has ever observed and reported on workplace assessment. Some assessors do not have access to all the publications on assessment issued by QCA. Some have older versions and some rely only on notes given during assessors' training. Nevertheless, excellent and accurate guidance, which does meet national standards, is given to assessors by the internal verifier.