



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT MARCH 2001

The Royal National College for the Blind

SUMMARY

The Royal National College for the Blind offers good training in hair and beauty. A wide range of opportunities for additional training covers most of the complementary therapies. Training in media and design is outstanding, with excellent links between theory and practical work. The resources are excellent and match commercial standards. Trainees work in the college's recording studio with commercial bands which have specifically requested individual trainees because of their expertise. Business administration is less than satisfactory. There are good computer workshops but there are inadequate recording practices in business administration and poor internal verification processes. Support for trainees is outstanding. There is a strong commitment to equal opportunities. There is an effective and thorough induction which ensures that trainees are able to take full advantage of the facilities in the college. Management of training is satisfactory and effective partnerships extend the opportunities available to trainees. There is little use of data to guide management decisions. Quality assurance is less than satisfactory.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	4
Hair & beauty	2
Media & design	1

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	1
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	4

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ high achievement and retention rates
- ◆ excellent training by extremely well-qualified staff in hair and beauty and media and design
- ◆ comprehensive development and delivery of media and design programmes
- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policy and supporting documents
- ◆ thorough initial assessment
- ◆ excellent pastoral support
- ◆ comprehensive and effective strategic plan
- ◆ integrated and effective self-assessment

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ over-reliance on assignments for evidence in business administration
- ◆ no systematic monitoring of complaints
- ◆ incomplete implementation of new management structure
- ◆ incomplete implementation of procedures to assure quality
- ◆ inadequate monitoring and evaluation of training
- ◆ inconsistent sharing of good practice

INTRODUCTION

1. The Royal National College for the Blind is a charity and company limited by guarantee. It is a residential college, providing education and occupational training throughout the year for blind and visually impaired people. Founded in the 1870s in London, it moved to its present site in Hereford in 1978. The college is situated in 25 acres of grounds within easy walking distance of the city and has good road and rail links. The college offers two main areas of education and training: training for those under 25 years old, funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), and work-based training for adults funded by the residential training unit of the government office for the North East. It also holds contracts with the Employment Service, including a national contract for basic employability training for visually impaired people, a contract with the West Midlands Unit of Delivery for assessing clients on work placements and a contract with the Hereford Unit of Delivery for foundation for work training for people with disabilities. Students and trainees are recruited from the whole of the United Kingdom, and most have accommodation at the college. At the time of inspection, 69 of the 85 trainees following work-based learning programmes were residential. A few trainees come from countries outside Europe.

2. The college's mission is to develop the independence and potential of people who are blind or partially sighted. The college aims to provide a learning environment which encourages a positive attitude to the potential of people who have a visual impairment, and offers specialist training and learning support. There are four halls of residence and also houses both on and off the campus to give trainees a wide choice of accommodation. There is a distance-learning course for trainees in business administration who wish to work from home. There is a wide range of sporting and recreational facilities and trainees are involved in running these. Most trainees are referred to the college by disability employment advisors. The college employs over 190 staff, many of whom are full time. Specialist visiting lecturers are also widely used. There is one member of staff to every four or five trainees, which is necessary given the varied individual needs of trainees. Many of the trainees on work-based learning programmes have recently experienced total loss or reduction of vision and require individual learning programmes which include rehabilitation and personal support.

3. The college offers training in business administration, media and design, remedial therapy, piano tuning and sport and recreation. The inspection did not include piano tuning or sport and recreation as there were insufficient numbers of trainees. At the time of inspection there were 85 trainees on programmes of work-based learning for adults in the following occupational areas:



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Occupational area	Number of trainees
Business administration	40
Hair & beauty (remedial therapy)	19
Media & design	17
Not inspected	
Manufacturing (piano technology)	6
Leisure, sport and travel	3
Total	85

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. In November 1998, the college carried out a self-assessment and produced a report for an inspection by the FEFC in May 1999. The report highlighted many areas of weakness, which the FEFC's inspectors agreed with. The newly appointed principal used the self-assessment and inspection processes to develop a strategic plan for 2000 to 2003. In July 2000, a new associate principal for finance, business and administration was appointed. In August 2000, a further newly appointed associate principal, for curriculum and quality, worked with the course teams and programme teams to carry out a self-assessment. Each team used quality statements in *Raising the Standard* to self-assess its work and prompt discussion. The most critical strengths and weaknesses were identified and an action plan was drawn up to address them. The governors were involved in the self-assessment process. The college carried out an in-house inspection in November 2000 and used the information gained to update the self-assessment report in preparation for the TSC's inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report and identified additional strengths and weaknesses. They agreed with the grades given in the self-assessment report for hair and beauty, equal opportunities and management of training. They awarded higher grades for media and design and trainee support and lower grades for business administration and quality assurance.

5. A team of five inspectors and one specialist in music technology spent a total of 18 days at the college in March 2001. They interviewed 61 trainees and 27 staff. They observed and graded 18 learning sessions and observed three assessments and five progress reviews. Inspectors examined trainees' individual learning plans, progress-review records, files and portfolios. A wide range of other documentation was examined, including contracts, external reports, internal reports, minutes of meetings, staff records, policies and procedures.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration		2	2			4
Hair & beauty	3	2				5
Media & design	6	3				9
Total	9	7	2	0	0	18

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 4

6. The college offers business administration NVQs at levels 2 and 3 and using information technology NVQs at levels 1 and 2. Trainees can take these qualifications on either a residential or a distance-learning basis. Both courses last for one year. The distance-learning programme has been running for four years and is being expanded. On the residential courses, there are 13 trainees working towards business administration NVQs at level 2 and five trainees working towards NVQs at level 3. There are six trainees on a preparatory information technology course. On the distance-learning programme, there are seven trainees working towards business administration NVQs at level 2, two trainees working towards using information technology NVQs at level 2 and seven trainees working towards using information technology for teleworking NVQs at level 2. On the distance-learning programme, trainees attend college for eight residential blocks, lasting two or three days, spread throughout the year. The computer training rooms hold about 10 trainees but groups are usually smaller. Initial assessment identifies additional aids required by trainees and these are provided. There are 11 staff working in this area and nine are qualified NVQ assessors. Most are very experienced in working with visually impaired trainees and are Braille users. Two newer members of staff are undergoing specialist training in techniques for training trainees with visual impairments as well as learning Braille. Trainees have at least one week's work experience in the general office at the college and assist with other work around the college, such as arranging and helping at special events and carrying out projects for the college's management. The college's work-placement officer arranges an extended work placement for most trainees for up to 13 weeks near their homes. He accompanies them on an initial visit to the work placement and either visits or keeps in touch by telephone during the work placement. Business administration and information technology were dealt with separately in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with two of the strengths and combined three of the weaknesses. They identified a further strength and three further weaknesses and awarded a grade lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-structured distance-learning programme
- ◆ good information-technology resources
- ◆ high achievement and retention rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ over-reliance on assignments for evidence
- ◆ fragmented structure of administration programmes

- ◆ inadequate recording practices in administration
- ◆ poor internal verification processes

7. The distance-learning programme enables trainees to work from home and to minimise the time spent away. Trainees develop the confidence to use computers independently and develop their skills in a range of software used in business, through a successful mix of work at college and home. Trainees start the programme with a two-day residential course. The college's staff arrange for a dedicated line and a personal computer to be installed at the trainee's home. During the well-planned blocks of residential training, new learning and skills are introduced. Trainees take work home to practise. They submit this electronically to their trainer. Good on-line technical and learning support is available according to a timetable given to each trainee. During the residential blocks, trainees receive further training, develop their skills and maintain personal contact with their trainers and the other trainees. Trainers have developed a broad range of tape-recorded materials with accompanying printed versions which the trainees work through, together with their on-line work. All trainees have a period of supported work experience in their home areas during the course.

8. The business administration and information-technology programmes are delivered in computer workshops in two different buildings. Although these resources are shared with trainees on other programmes in the college, there are sufficient computers to provide trainees with ample access time, including for private study. Trainees can use the computers and resources in the college's flexible learning centre, which is also open in the evenings and at weekends. There is a good range of special aids and enabling software to assist trainees according to their degree of visual impairment and individual need, and there is up-to-date commercial software. The college also provides staff with computers for home use if required.

9. There are high retention and achievement rates on both the business administration and information technology programmes. Trainees are keen to join the college programmes to benefit from the specialist training and support provided and are motivated and encouraged to complete their programmes. Since 1997-98, only one trainee in information technology has left early without completing their individual learning plan. In business administration, the number of trainees is higher, ranging from 14 to 20 each year over the past three years, and there is an average retention rate of 90 per cent. In 1997-98, 79 per cent of trainees achieved all the targets on their individual learning plans, and in 1998-99, 85 per cent achieved all the targets on their individual learning plans. In 1999-2000, the rate dropped to 64 per cent. Two early leavers had health problems and three trainees did not leave early but were unable to achieve the full NVQ owing to their visual impairment.

10. Both the business administration and information-technology programmes rely heavily on evidence from assignments. The requirements of the NVQ in

information technology were revised in January 2000 and now include evidence from real workplaces. Trainees recruited since September 2000 have been following a preparatory programme to develop practical skills and theoretical knowledge. The college will not register any trainees for the new NVQ until concerns about the requirements for evidence from the workplace are resolved. Some trainees are due to complete their programmes in June 2001, and the college is currently considering changing to alternative awards in information technology. Developmental work is taking place on the business administration programmes, to move away from assignments and provide opportunities for workplace evidence, in line with NVQ guidance. Trainees are already being placed for one or two weeks in the college's general office, and they help in the college with occasional duties, such as acting as receptionists for a recent exhibition. A new supervisor for the college office has been recruited who is a qualified assessor. Currently, she is providing witness testimony and in the next academic year it is planned that she will carry out observations and assessments of trainees. The college plans to arrange external work experience placements near trainees' homes. In the past, this has usually taken place very close to the end of a trainee's programme or even after the trainee has left the programme. Evidence from such work placements has not been used, although the work-placement officer does visit some trainees during their work placements and is a qualified assessor. Occasionally a work placement has taken place earlier and witness testimony has been obtained from the work-placement provider, but there is no consistent use of this and other work as evidence across the qualification as a whole. The college is planning to establish a Braille transcription service, a central stores and a central technical service, all of which will provide a range of opportunities within the college for real work. At the moment, much evidence is based on assignments or simulations which take place in the computer training rooms.

11. A fragmented structure for programmes in business administration means that evidence produced for one unit is not always recognised as being available for use for other units. Trainees do not therefore recognise that their competence is broadly based. The team for business administration consists of four trainers, who take responsibility and generate tasks for particular units. As tasks are completed, the trainer assesses them and completes a grading pro forma which relates the task to the NVQ requirements for that unit. The tasks or assignments are designed to cover all units, so that once trainees have worked systematically through the required tasks, the course teams assume the trainee has completed the qualification. The structure makes little allowance for the inclusion of naturally occurring workplace evidence and trainees are required to complete all assignments, even when they have evidence from the workplace which makes this unnecessary.

12. Recording of assessments and evidence in administration portfolios is inconsistent. Regular action-planning is carried out by trainers with the trainees but this is not always recorded and there is no evidence of this process in portfolios. As a consequence, there are no action plans for trainees' reference between meetings. Trainees know they have to complete all the assignments but are not able to relate evidence, particularly evidence of real work, to the units and

elements for themselves. They do not take responsibility for this process and do not identify additional evidence and opportunities for assessment. There are no records of observation of trainees by assessors and no documents for recording this process. Evidence is related to performance criteria only and there is no clearly recorded assessment decision to show that trainees have achieved whole elements and units. Trainers keep their own logs of each trainee's progress but there is no record in the trainee's portfolio to show what they have achieved.

13. There is no written policy or procedure for internal verification. Most of the course team are qualified internal verifiers and carry out this process across the teams, but practice is inconsistent as there is no procedure to follow. There is no planned schedule for internal verification during, and at the end, of programmes. Internal verifiers decide when to verify by looking at portfolios to see if there is sufficient work to merit sampling. A feedback sheet is completed. Some feedback sheets identify good evidence and action points, which are usually followed up, but many are very general with little comment. There is little, if any, observation of assessment by internal verifiers and little recording of this. The lack of a systematic approach to internal verification leads to problems with assessments being missed, or left too late to remedy in time to assist the assessor and trainees.

Hair & beauty (remedial therapy)

Grade 2

14. The college offers a qualification in remedial therapy through a one-year course, with the opportunity to extend that period, according to trainees' needs. The course has been running since 1987. Before starting the course, each trainee is assessed on a two-day residential assessment course. There are 18 trainees working towards the qualification and one trainee upgrading skills. There is one full-time member of staff and eight part-time staff. All staff either have, or are working towards, a teaching or training qualification. All staff are working towards a qualification in training people with visual impairments. The training team has a range of qualifications which covers most of the complementary areas. There are regular visiting lecturers. All training and assessment is carried out at the college. An external examiner also visits the college. Trainees have a period of work experience after completing the qualification. This usually lasts for two months but it can be extended according to trainees' needs. Work experience is usually in the trainee's home area. The main objective of work experience is to improve employability and to consolidate newly acquired skills. Trainees are not assessed at work. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report, particularly the strengths relating to achievement and the staffing profile. Two of the weaknesses from the self-assessment report had been rectified by the time of inspection. An additional strength and weakness were identified. The grade awarded by the inspectors is the same as that given by the college.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ inspirational training
- ◆ extremely well-qualified staff
- ◆ good range of additional opportunities for training
- ◆ high achievement and retention rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient specialist accommodation
- ◆ no systematic feedback from trainees

GOOD PRACTICE

Every quarter, a group of former trainees is invited back to work with current trainees and staff. The former trainees act as professional, visually impaired mentors. They bring to current trainees experience of working in the occupational areas as a visually impaired person. They also bring complementary training experiences which they share with trainees and the training team.

15. Trainees feel stimulated and enjoy their training. Training is individualised and appropriate to trainees' needs. There are effective, supportive relationships between trainees and staff. There are comprehensive schemes of work and individual learning plans. Individual trainees' practical work is recorded. Specialist training resources are used which meet individual needs. Tactile handouts, Braille materials and models are used with trainees. Professional journals and other text are available on tape. A variety of strategies is used to teach practical skills to visually impaired and blind trainees. Massage is demonstrated using touch, as trainees cannot always see demonstrations. There is much effective individual work with trainees. Trainees are challenged and stretched to a high standard. In anatomy and physiology, trainees work above the standards required. They feel this gives them an advantage, both for further study and for job seeking. Trainees are well motivated and work well without supervision. Punctuality and attendance rates are good and well managed by the college. Trainees' work is of a high standard. Trainees display a high standard of client care and professionalism when working with clients. The external examiner gives good feedback on the quality of trainees' practical work. The college supplies professional clothing for use in practical sessions. There are sufficient consumable resources and clients for practical sessions.

16. The training team has a good range of qualifications which cover most of the complementary areas. Most of the team are members of professional organisations. Guest trainers are used who bring commercial relevance to the training. Some of these have a high profile within the industry and have published their work. The team is introducing new complementary therapies to the trainees. This allows trainees to access good-quality, up-to-date training. There is a European exchange of training staff and this brings further expertise to the training team.

17. Trainees have the opportunity to access a good variety of additional training. Most of the complementary therapies are taught. These include Indian head massage, acupressure, baby massage and vertical reflexology. Trainees attend exhibitions which keep them up to date with developments in this area. There is the opportunity for trainees to experience many types of practical work with clients. In addition to clients who visit the clinics at the college, work is carried out with children, with people with physical disabilities or sports injuries and in

hospices. This gives trainees the chance to experience the wide range of clients they may work with in the industry. It also allows them to develop their skills with particular client groups, where they may wish to specialise.

18. There are consistently high retention and achievement rates in remedial therapy. In the past three years, 53 of the 55 trainees who started programmes have achieved their individual learning plans. Retention rates have been at or above 94 per cent. Ill health is the main reason for trainees leaving early. The rates of progression to employment outcomes on leaving the college is low, at 37 per cent, but ongoing monitoring of trainees' destinations shows that up to 58 per cent go into employment or self-employment within the occupational area.

19. The accommodation in the remedial therapy unit at the college is too small, especially the reflexology clinics. There is a lack of space when working on clients. These trainees often have mobility difficulties, which means that they are particularly affected by lack of space. A small entrance to the unit, where personal belongings are stored, is insufficient for its purpose. There is no reception area or space for consultation with clients. There are no toilets in the unit and trainees and clients have to go outside and into another building for toilet facilities. There are written plans for an extension to the unit. This will provide an area for client consultation and reception but will not address the issues of space to work in and toilet facilities.

20. The college does not systematically collect feedback from trainees. If trainees complain or give their views, this is addressed. Trainees feel that the college reacts to their feedback but that this does not always lead to improvements to the course. There is a students' representative but he is not invited to attend staff meetings. Trainees are not aware of his role and responsibilities. This weakness was identified in the self-assessment report and the college is beginning to rectify it.

Media & design

Grade 1

21. There are 15 trainees who are all taking national diploma programmes, leading to full- or part-certification over a two-year period. Thirteen trainees are studying music technology. This is the largest group in the area and includes eight first-year and five second-year trainees. Two trainees are studying performing arts and two trainees are working towards an intermediate general vocational qualification (GNVQ) in art and design. Most trainees come with little prior technical knowledge for their chosen subject, although many have a natural ability in music, acting or dance. In the area of music technology, few students come with experience of musical performance. Musical skills are considered fundamental to the successful completion of the course but this is not a prerequisite for entry. By the end of the course, trainees are expected to have developed understanding and skills in the practising and theory of music. They should be able to communicate effectively with the musicians they will be working with. Trainees taking performing arts are expected to want to work in theatre, dance or a related field, such as performing arts journalism. All trainees attend on a full-time basis and are

GOOD PRACTICE

A mature trainee had spent 17 years in a hospital-radio position before coming to the college. Weekly individual sessions were arranged with a specialist lecturer working on computerised radio-editing equipment. The trainee quickly gained high-level editing skills, and work experience was arranged at a national television company. The letters of commendation from the company encouraged the trainee to re-enter the field of broadcasting.

given individual timetables to suit their own chosen paths of study. There are three full-time staff in music technology, supported by four part-time music specialists. In addition, a specialist in literacy communications provides assignment support. In performing arts, there are two full-time staff, supported by visiting specialists. All staff in this area report to the music technology team leader. All the teams work closely together and frequently meet to discuss trainees' progress. Trainees are all allocated a trainer who oversee the timetabling of their course and regularly review their individual progress. The resources for this area include theatre and workshop space and high-technology equipment. The self-assessment report contained accurate judgements, and inspectors found additional strengths. Full action plans had been developed for the two weaknesses in the self-assessment report. These had been eliminated by the time of inspection. Inspectors awarded a grade higher than that given in the self-assessment report

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high rates of achievement and progression to employment
- ◆ comprehensive development of programmes
- ◆ excellent training with integrated theory and practical work
- ◆ strong encouragement of individual achievement and progression
- ◆ well-qualified staff with good links to industry
- ◆ effective use of good resources
- ◆ wide range of creative talents among staff and trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ cancellation of some classes

GOOD PRACTICE

A mixed group of 18 trainees attended night and weekend performance rehearsals to prepare for a performance at a local theatre. The work included 16 improvised dance pieces devised by trainees. Many of the accompanying musical pieces have been composed by trainees and the sound recordings carried out by trainees. The performances are to a high standard and trainees' motivation is outstanding.

22. All trainees are carefully matched to a programme which suits their personal aspirations. Over the past three years, the rate of achieving targets on individual learning plans has gone up from 73 per cent to 84 per cent. During the same period, the rate leaving early has steadily fallen from 14 per cent to 8 per cent. Most of the small number of trainees who have dropped out have done so because of poor health. Over the past three years, 59 per cent of leavers gained a positive outcome. Of these, 24 per cent gained paid employment or self-employment. At least four trainees have successfully set themselves up as freelance music engineers. They have gained prestigious work producing for professional artists in commercial recording studios. Others are involved in writing and recording songs for their own commercial rock bands, and are negotiating for contracts with major record companies. Two former trainees have set up their own recording studio in Leeds. They are discussing the option of providing work experience for other trainees who attend the college. There is a very high rate, at 35 per cent of trainees progressing to university or other higher-education programmes. Where appropriate, staff actively encourage trainees to see progression to higher education as a realistic target. All trainees have at least one week's relevant work experience. This is normally with a company and arranged through staff contacts in the industry. In many cases, this amount of work experience has been exceeded,

with some trainees spending four or more weeks on work experience. Trainees' work in studios is assessed under workplace conditions. An observed assessment included sound engineering trainees working with a fee-paying commercial band from the Herefordshire area.

23. The music-technology course is modular in structure. This flexibility allows the development of a wide range of music and performance-related skills. Up to 24 modules give solid breadth as well as depth of training experience. All trainees are guided at entry on this wide choice of available options. This effectively prepares them for the music and performing arts field. Schemes of work are very well organised. They are available to trainees through the college's intranet. All staff use the detailed lesson plans which have been developed for each scheme of work. Trainees are also prepared well for an appropriate route into information technology occupations. A high level of information-technology and computing skills is developed. At least 50 per cent of the trainees follow these additional programmes. Internet skills form an essential element of all study options. Trainees carry out research on the Internet to supplement their assignments. A new initiative developed during the past year is a joint music-technology programme with a local college of technology. Recruitment for this is underway, with up to 10 sighted trainees from the college attending each class. Trainees currently on the course have been involved in discussions on this initiative. They are given weekly briefings about the course's progress. All these trainees are keen to work alongside sighted colleagues, who come with more experience in basic technology.

24. Staff adapt their style of training to suit the group of trainees they are working with. Groups will normally not exceed a ratio of five trainees to one member of staff. In sound-recording sessions this ensures that all trainees are able to work on their own allocated equipment, with the trainer close by at all times to provide individual support. All practical sessions begin with the trainees together reviewing the learning gained from the previous sessions. This method runs across the whole area of music and performance. All trainees become confident in theory. Acquiring skills is established as a natural part of what trainees do following effective theoretical sessions. Experimentation is freely allowed without the worry of making mistakes or errors. Trainers make good use of demonstrations of equipment. This allows trainees to experiment with equipment and improvisation techniques.

25. Daily encouragement is given to trainees regarding completion of assignments. There is a strong commitment to work in all classes, workshops, studios and performance halls. This maintains a high pace of learning. Staff and trainees are highly motivated to succeed. Staff are aware of the individual aspirations of trainees. They carry out full subject reviews at regular intervals. The written records are comprehensive and assist trainees to plan their work in a logical manner.

26. All full-time staff have teaching qualifications. Most of the part-time staff also have teaching qualifications. Four trainers have degrees, while all staff have specialist music and performance-related qualifications. The team leader has

experience as a head of music, advisory teacher, and trainer at a national centre for music technology. The expertise of all staff is well co-ordinated across the area. Staff offer a wide range of specialist input into training and maintain their own professional work in their related fields. At least two of the music-technology staff have worked with prestigious well-known artists in the rock-music field. Trainees are aware of these links and proud that their staff are involved in such work. Trainees gain confidence in their own aspirations through working with staff who have realistic expectations and experience of the industry.

27. The music-technology area has outstanding physical resources, located in smart accommodation. The combined facilities for the national diploma include six digital recording studios, two hard disc editing suites, two midi audio teaching suites, seven studio-linked recording areas, an acoustic teaching studio, an electrical engineering workshop, and other well-equipped teaching areas. New musical instruments are readily available for use, including grand pianos, full-size drum kits and electronic synthesizers. Trainees are given ample opportunity to use these facilities, including during evenings and the weekend. Staff encourage trainees in this area to involve other college trainees in performance-related activities.

28. There is a high level of creative energy among trainees and staff. The programmes have been tailored to the requirements of trainers with visual impairments. Staff are aware of the competitive nature of the industry they are preparing trainees for. There is a balanced experience of music and performance which combines technological and musical skills. Where appropriate, trainees are assigned to many different work projects. They are encouraged to foster creative links with like-minded trainees. Various projects come to fruition, including the setting up of performing bands and staged plays.

29. Timetables are centrally co-ordinated by the team leader. These are effective in allowing trainees a flexible approach to attendance at different modules. Each trainee has a printed personal timetable. This is discussed at meetings with the trainees to reinforce trainees' awareness of where they are on the programme. There have been times when trainees have been unsure which module to attend and have opted to go on modules which have been timetabled at the same time. On a few occasions during the past six months, classes have been cancelled. There is a strong culture across all classes of good attendance and punctuality. But as a result of limited technical support for some music functions, staff have occasionally been late to start workshops. When this has happened, trainees have been able to carry on working on practical assignments but this does not assist to promote good punctuality.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

30. The college has an equal opportunities policy which was rewritten in November 1999 and updated in February 2001. The supporting procedures have recently been updated. The college's principal has overall responsibility for equal opportunities. All the relevant policies and procedures include equality of opportunity. There is a complaints and grievance policy. Work-placement agreements require that employers adhere to the college's equal opportunities policy. Trainees come from a wide range of cultural and social backgrounds and, in the past three years, 5 per cent have been from minority ethnic groups. Twenty-seven per cent of trainees are women and 33 per cent of all trainees have a disability additional to visual impairment. The grounds and buildings have all been specially adapted to facilitate not only people who are blind or have visual impairment, but also those with sensory or additional mobility needs. The campus is signed throughout in Braille. Inspectors agreed with two of the strengths in the self-assessment report. The third strength related to how complaints are dealt with. Inspectors considered the handling of complaints to be satisfactory but identified the recording process as a weakness. One of the two weaknesses in the self-assessment report has been rectified by the time of inspection and the other weakness was not judged to impact on trainees' experience. Inspectors identified other weaknesses and gave the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policy and supporting documents
- ◆ good understanding and practising of equal opportunities
- ◆ effective protection of trainees against discrimination and harassment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no systematic monitoring of complaints
- ◆ insufficient recording of monitoring of work placements

31. There are comprehensive policies and procedures to support the principle of equality of opportunity in all aspects of college life. A disability statement, students' charter, marketing policy, implementation guidance, data protection guidance, application forms and legal guidelines support the equal opportunities policy. Specific procedures cover staff development, rights, bullying, complaints and physical, emotional and sexual abuse. All are well written and easy to understand. The documents, like all of the college's forms and correspondence, are available in large print or Braille. Taken as a whole, they clearly set out the college's strong commitment to equality of opportunity in the widest sense.

Although the college has the special purpose of serving those with total or partial visual impairment this is not at the expense of any other area of equal opportunities.

32. All staff and trainees are well informed about and committed to equal opportunities. In a community in which all the trainees and some staff have at least one disability there is a strong commitment to practising equality of opportunity in all aspects of college life. Thirty-five per cent of the members of the governing body are either blind or have some visual impairment and 10 per cent are former students. Six per cent of staff are from minority ethnic groups, 39 per cent are men, 8 per cent have a visual disability, 1 per cent have both visual and sensory impairments, 2 per cent have a physical disability and 2 per cent have a learning disability. These proportions exceed the averages for training funded by the governments' residential training units and are a result of a positive recruitment policy. There has been recent staff training, some of which was also available to trainees. Equality of opportunity is covered at induction and trainees can recall it. Trainees are all aware of and understand the grievance and disciplinary procedures and their rights. The college's marketing policy reflects its commitment to equality of opportunity in literature which features many non-stereotypical situations. The marketing department has links with various associations for people from minority ethnic groups who are blind, and attends national exhibitions to try to attract a broad range of trainees. Some data are collected which could be analysed to help plan future initiatives but there is little evidence that the college's management fully uses this information to plan or identify trends. This is partially overcome by the prevailing culture of equality of opportunity in the college, but data collection is a contractual obligation and its potential remains largely untapped.

33. Trainees are effectively protected against discrimination and harassment in the college. They are clearly at ease with all the college's staff and feel able to approach any one of them with a grievance, complaint or problem. This is very important because many trainees are at a very vulnerable time in their lives, often having to adjust to traumatic changes. Trainees have access to a wide and varied support network which ensures they are well protected and that any problems are dealt with promptly. Staff are well aware of the need to help trainees to become as self-reliant as possible so they do not become dependent on the help and assistance available at the college.

34. There is no overall monitoring of complaints to give a college-wide overview. Various members of the management team keep their own records in differing formats and deal with these matters. There is no central logging or collation of these records to analyse trends and plan for improvement. Some recording is spasmodic and it is difficult to identify the final outcome. This precludes analysis.

35. A member of the college's staff checks potential work placements and there is some initial checking of the employer's adherence to equality of opportunity, but the work-placement provider's equal opportunity policy is not always checked. There is little reference to monitoring equal opportunities in any of the work-placement procedures. There is a considerable amount of informal monitoring but

it is insufficiently recorded. This is a serious oversight as trainees are still the responsibility of the college and have just moved out of a protected environment into a commercial situation.

Trainee support

Grade 1

36. All trainees are visually impaired. Some are totally blind. Many trainees are experiencing distress as a result of recent sight loss or impairment and need ongoing support. The support is both pastoral and rehabilitative. The college makes education and training available to a wide range of trainees with greatly differing abilities, experiences and needs. Some of the trainees have other disabilities in addition to visual impairment. There is also provision for trainees with learning difficulties. Trainees come from all over the United Kingdom on referral from their disability employment advisor. After referral to the college for a two-day standard initial assessment or a five-day initial assessment for basic employability, trainees have both their learning and support needs assessed. The assessment process also covers trainees' aspirations, preferences and whether they will benefit from training. The results of the assessments are discussed at the start of training, when all trainees have an induction. Each trainee has a personal trainer, a course trainer and a key worker who are responsible for providing comprehensive support. In a few cases, the same staff member has a dual role of personal and course trainer. There are also established links with specialist organisations, community groups and support agencies. Inspectors agreed with two of the strengths in the self-assessment report and identified additional strengths. They did not agree with the weaknesses but identified another weakness. Inspectors awarded a grade higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough initial assessment
- ◆ effective and thorough induction
- ◆ excellent pastoral support
- ◆ excellent sporting and recreational opportunities
- ◆ good residential facilities
- ◆ good support for progression
- ◆ continuous recording of enabling skills

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of uniform recording system

37. There is a thorough initial assessment with trainees attending the college for either two or five days. During this time, they meet all the staff members they will be involved with. The initial assessment covers mobility, visual impairment,

residential requirements, training needs and assessment of basic skills. After the trainee has left, a case conference is called and the trainee advised of the result. The five-day assessment includes a meeting with the trainee and an agreed action plan is sent to the trainee's disability employment advisor. The college refuses to admit only a very few trainees, although in some cases the action plan recommends another college which is thought to be more suitable.

38. The induction is effective, thorough and memorable to trainees. It includes familiarisation with the site, an assessment of mobility, residential protocols and procedures, an outline of ancillary help available and details of leisure and sports facilities. Trainees' course details are fully discussed, along with any additional learning programmes they are to follow. Trainees meet their personal trainer, course trainer and key worker, as well as all other staff who will be working with them. Trainees are well aware of what the college has to offer in terms of facilities and support.

39. Trainees benefit from excellent pastoral support. Each trainee has a personal trainer who has overall responsibility for the trainee and an occupationally focused course trainer. In a few cases this is the same person. Trainees are also allocated a key worker with responsibility for non-training related areas. The key worker is usually the person in overall charge of their residential accommodation. Trainees have the option of approaching any of the support team with any problem regardless of staff responsibilities. This not only gives trainees a choice but also means that support is available all day and well into the night. There are also eight young support workers, who spend a year in college as volunteers. They socialise with the trainees, provide escort duties, act as guides and generally help out. There are also good and established links with professional and advisory organisations.

40. Sporting and recreational facilities are excellent. There is a well-equipped student bar, which also provides live entertainment, with trainees involved in the day-to-day running. There is a full social programme with a wide variety of events and outings. Events include trips abroad, dining clubs, theatre and concert trips and many more. The college prides itself on the sporting prowess of trainees. Sports include acoustic shooting, goalball, judo, blind football, swimming, cricket, and ten-pin bowling. Trainees have not only achieved national recognition, but some are representing the country in international events. There is a fully equipped gymnasium with equipment adapted for people who use wheelchairs and also a large multipurpose main hall. The college has the only pitch in the country which is marked out and set up for blind football. There is a flexible learning centre with information technology and a library which includes large print and Braille. Facilities are open in the evening and also at weekends and these include the media studios and remedial therapy unit, where trainees can have free treatment. The rich combination of all these social, recreational and sporting facilities means that trainees have access to a wide range of activities which restore self-confidence, keep them fit, establish social and living skills and provide enjoyment.

41. There are four halls of residence. Some of the rooms are en suite and the remainder are in the process of being upgraded. There are also houses both on and

off the campus, to give trainees a wide choice of accommodation. Each residence has support staff. Trainees can have their meals in the refectory or do some self-catering. The college pays careful attention to providing good accommodation as many mature trainees are away from home for the first time in many years.

42. There is good support for progression into employment or further and higher education. The employment team is led by a co-ordinator with three other team members. On arrival at the college, all trainees are contacted and advised of all the services available. Trainees later have an individual meeting to identify their career aims and to identify any additional support needed. Support can be offered with social skills, job search and identifying future educational needs. Many trainees already have a clear idea of what they want to do and, providing it is thought to be realistic, they are encouraged to proceed with this. Whether trainees are hoping to enter the job market or go on to further or higher education, their progression is carefully facilitated. There is a good range of educational literature and the college has established links with various colleges and universities. For job search, newspapers are bought from the trainees' home areas. Ongoing assistance is available, ranging from secretarial support, assistance with research, provision of escorts and the services of a reader. Information is available in both large print and Braille. Work placements are visited before a trainee starts and again during their time on work placement. These visits are clearly recorded. Many work placements take place at the end of the course, with trainees not returning to college. This denies trainees the opportunity to have in-depth discussion of any problems with college staff. It also prevents the college from making overall assessments of trainees' experience. There is a well-resourced job-search room and reference section. Over the past three years, 60 per cent of trainees have been placed on work placements in their home area, a further 23 per cent have been placed in Hereford and the remaining 17 per cent placed at the college. All trainees on the distance-learning courses have been found work placements in their home area. Analysis of recent leavers shows 35 per cent going into self-employment or employment, 25 per cent going on to further or higher education, 5 per cent doing voluntary work and the remainder searching for jobs.

43. There is continuous recording of enabling skills. Each trainee is assessed on entry for every element of the enabling skills which have been defined as part of their programme. The skills are assessed in three areas: information technology, communication and learning, and living skills and mobility. Progress is monitored using the college's own system, which operates on four levels from no effective skills to confident and independent use.

44. There is a lack of co-ordinated records of trainee support. Different staff members keep their own records and there is inconsistency in the amount of detail recorded. There is no system for recording information centrally. Trainees have such a wide choice of people to see that sometimes no single member of staff has the information to take an overall view of a trainee. This problem has been recognised by the college and a 'super-tutor' scheme has been launched. This is proving successful with the FEFC-funded trainees but has not as yet been extended to trainees funded by the residential training unit.

Management of training

Grade 3

45. The principal has overall responsibility for management of the college. There are two associate principals; one is responsible for finance, business and administration and the other for curriculum and quality. These three appointments have all been made within the past two years. The college's board of 20 governors includes the principal, the president of the students' union and the clerk. Governors include former students, professionals who are distinguished in their careers and other individuals who can contribute their expertise. The college's board meets termly. There are also three working subcommittees, human resources, curriculum and quality, and business and finance. The college is undergoing a period of rapid and intense change of culture and organisation. Phase one, which includes the restructuring of management and staff teams, has nearly been completed. There is a three-year strategic action plan covering 2000 to 2003. This gives priority areas for action, a needs analysis, 14 strategic objectives and an operational plan to implement them. The college's management team, which consists of the principal, the associate principals and the five managers, meets weekly. The five managers each have responsibility for one of five areas; 16 to 19 programmes; adult learners; residential support and independence curriculum; learning support and development; outreach and short courses; and estates, accommodation, health and safety and external services. There is a full staff meeting every three weeks and regular team meetings. Minutes of all meetings are available to the staff. The college achieved the Investors in People Standard in 1996 and was re-accredited in 1999. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report and identified an additional weakness, relating to analysis of data. They agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive and effective strategic plan
- ◆ effective partnerships

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ incomplete implementation of new management structure
- ◆ inadequate analysis of data

46. There is a very comprehensive strategic plan, which has been developed in conjunction with the staff. In 1999, the college's management team and governors worked on a new strategic plan, which incorporates the standards and targets set in the action plan developed after the FEFC's inspection. This covers: the structure and relevance of the curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; the development of quality assurance and staff-development systems; the development of external links and the improvement of the college environment. The plan is well

laid out with long-term targets and shorter-term priority areas for action. There is an operational plan for the current year with built-in review dates. The targets in the operational plan are broken down into team targets and individual targets as part of the staff-appraisal system. All staff are aware of the plan and their involvement in it although some have not yet received their individual targets. All targets are written in terms of measurable outcomes and these are monitored to ensure that they are being met. All the targets up to the time of inspection have been met.

47. The development of collaborative partnerships is part of the strategic plan and aims to extend the range of courses and opportunities for trainees who have visual impairments. Staff in remedial therapy have been working in collaboration with a European company to produce a European manual for physiotherapist and remedial therapists who have a visual impairment. The college is also a partner in a community vocational training programme to develop a uniform model for European masseur training for visually impaired people. These partnerships ensure that the remedial therapy trainees are involved in the latest methods of training and practice. The college is also involved with, and is on several boards of, national organisations. It supports a small number of students at a local sixth-form college and a local college of technology, and in collaboration with four local colleges provides trainees with access to a broad range of curriculum options with specialist support. The integration of students from other local colleges with the trainees creates a greater understanding of visual impairment and trainees have the opportunity to work alongside fully sighted students. For the past two years, students from the leisure and tourism programme at a local college have shared one day a week on the NVQ sport and recreation programme. The shared development of a regional centre of excellence in music technology and sound recording with a local technology college is referred to in the section on media and design. All of these partnerships and others which are still being developed are very successful in extending the curriculum options and opportunities for trainees.

48. The new management structure is still being implemented and is therefore not fully operational in all areas. There is uncertainty among some staff about the full implications of their new work roles. Training has not been given to make all staff fully operational in their new work roles. The setting of individual targets from the operational plan is only partially implemented and some staff are not fully aware of their own specific targets. This partial implementation means that not all of the new areas of development are able to progress as efficiently and effectively as possible.

49. The management team and the college's board receive information on trainees. Achievements against team targets and the targets which are set by the contracts are linked to this information. But the data are not analysed to identify whether there is any bias in achievement, retention or outcomes. There is little overall analysis of the feedback from trainees or of data on complaints. Lack of analysis means that the management team cannot use data to improve performance and its decisions.

Quality assurance

Grade 4

50. The associate principal for curriculum and quality is responsible for quality assurance. The appointment to the new post was delayed as there were insufficient suitable candidates, and the present associate principal had only been in post for six months at the time of inspection. The self-assessment was carried out in the associate principal's first month in post and the quality assurance system is based on the results of earlier self-assessment. Policies and procedures are being developed, in consultation with the staff, and there is an annual cycle for quality assurance which is linked to trainees' activity, management processes, strategic planning and staff development. Specific activities have been identified for each month and these are reviewed by the curriculum and quality working subcommittee of the college board. Guidelines on the procedures are in the staff handbook and the quality handbook is awaiting final approval before being put onto the college's intranet. Individual policies and procedures are being implemented as they are approved. Some feedback is collected from trainees. The college has implemented a system for observing training which links with the system for staff appraisal and development. The self-assessment report identified the key strength relating to integrated and effective self-assessment, but the rest of the strengths were considered to be no more than normal practice. The self-assessment identified that the quality assurance system was not yet fully operational but did not identify the other weaknesses. The inspectors awarded a grade lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ integrated and effective self-assessment
- ◆ clear and tested policies and procedures

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ incomplete implementation of procedures to assure quality
- ◆ inadequate monitoring and evaluation of training
- ◆ failure to meet contractual requirements for individual learning plans and progress reviews
- ◆ inconsistent sharing of good practice

51. Self-assessment is built into the procedures of the college, and the strategic plan is based on the outcomes of the first self-assessment carried out in preparation for the FEFC inspection in 1999. The process is now part of the annual cycle for quality assurance and is the focus of quality assurance activities. The second self-assessment, before the TSC's inspection, was carried out in September 2000 and resulted in a detailed action plan and an in-house inspection to monitor the improvements which were taking place. The self-assessment report and action plan were updated following the in-house inspection. In-house inspections are now part

of the annual cycle for quality assurance and one area will be covered each year. Staff are fully committed to self-assessment and are keen to be involved in achieving continuous improvements.

52. The policies and procedures which have been developed are well written and laid out so that they are easy to understand and follow. Staff are involved in the development of the policies and procedures, and the procedures are tried out before they are finally approved. The governors are involved in the approval of the policies and have requested that they are reviewed on a regular basis. The list of proposed policies and procedures is very comprehensive and most are now being implemented, with a few awaiting further development.

53. The quality assurance system is not yet fully operational. This leads to different members of staff and different teams carrying out work to different standards. An example is that complaints are recorded in different ways by different members of staff. When a complaint is dealt with, this is not always recorded and the information is not always passed to the college's management team so that complaints can be analysed and the information used to make improvements. There is no overall written procedure for internal verification at the college. Staff are strongly committed to ensuring that training programmes are of a good quality but much of the practice is unsystematic and there is little consistency.

54. There is no structure for monitoring and evaluation. Some monitoring and evaluation takes place in most areas but different teams follow different methods. The results of monitoring and evaluation are not always collated centrally and discussed at the college's management team meetings. There is no formal structure for gathering feedback from trainees, and the role of the student's representatives in this process is not clear. This has led to inconsistent practices across the college.

55. There is a procedure for drawing up individual training plans and carrying out progress reviews which meets the requirements of the contract with the residential training unit. Some staff are not following the procedure fully and the timing of progress reviews does not always meet the contractual requirements. Individual learning plans are not used as working documents. Dates of progress reviews are not included on them and amendments to individual learning plans are not always recorded.

56. There are examples of good practice in the college and there are individual staff members with previous experience and expertise from other organisations. This could be used across the college but there is no structure to enable good practice to be shared or for staff to discuss issues outside their team and work with others on ideas to improve practice. The lack of sharing of good practice has resulted in weaknesses. An example is the different internal verification systems in the college.