



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JANUARY 2001

Royal National Institute
for the Blind
Vocational College

SUMMARY

Royal National Institute for the Blind Vocational College enables people with visual impairments to achieve and progress towards independent living. Good use is made of thorough and comprehensive initial assessment to develop individual training plans. Training in administration and information technology is good. The rate of achievement of NVQs is high, although insufficient opportunity for work experience is given to trainees. Support for individual trainees is outstanding and is provided by experienced and well-qualified staff. Support services fully meet trainees' needs for learning and for personal and social support. The college's buildings are purpose built to meet the needs of people with visual impairments. The college has excellent resources, especially in its provision of computer access technology to enable independent learning. Maintenance of equal opportunities is good and trainees are well protected from discrimination. Written policies and procedures, however, including those for equal opportunities, are under developed. The college is well managed, with good use of open communication leading to effective teamworking. Quality assurance is good, with systematic use of self-assessment to make continuous improvement.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent resources for learning
- ◆ good achievement and progression rates
- ◆ experienced and well-qualified staff
- ◆ extensive individual support
- ◆ effective development of independent living and mobility skills
- ◆ good deployment of staff and excellent teamwork
- ◆ improvements through effective use of self-assessment

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient opportunities for work placements
- ◆ no specific references to trainees and training in equal opportunities policy
- ◆ insufficient written procedures

INTRODUCTION

1. Royal National Institute for the Blind Vocational College (RNIB Vocational College) is a national, residential college for blind and partially sighted people. It offers specialist further education, vocational training and rehabilitation, as well as support for visually impaired learners in mainstream training. The college is owned by RNIB, a national charity and administered within the RNIB's education and employment division. The college is situated on a campus in Loughborough. RNIB Vocational College occupies premises, completed in 1989, which provide purpose-built accommodation to meet the needs of people who are visually impaired. Before 1989, the college was called RNIB Commercial Training College and it was located in London. The college has expanded its services considerably since its move from London and now works in close partnership with a local further education college. The college's residential accommodation is within a short walking distance of the buildings used for training and offers places for up to 78 students and trainees. The main building, Pembridge Hall, will be replaced by new accommodation adjacent to the college, due to be opened in August 2001. RNIB Vocational College derives around half of its income from its contract for work-based learning for adults with the residential training unit of the government office for the north east. The remainder of the college's income is derived from contracts with the Further Education Funding Council and the Employment Service and from commercial contracts for training and assessment.

2. At the time of inspection, RNIB Vocational College had a total of 44 adult trainees following vocational programmes. Of these, 31 were engaged on courses leading to NVQs in administration and information technology at the college and 13 were on vocational courses, in engineering, leisure, sport and travel, and health, care and public services, at the further education college. Trainees are recruited to the college nationwide following referral by the disability employment advisors of the Employment Service. The college carries out functional and clinical assessments of trainees with low vision before their admission, and an induction programme. Accurate identification of trainees' additional learning needs caused by visual impairment is used in the development of individualised training programmes. The college promotes its mission statement to meet, and help others meet, the needs of people with visual impairment for education, training, rehabilitation and personal development. It employs 47 full-time and 67 part-time staff. The college's staff are experienced and appropriately qualified in the training and support of people with visual impairments.

3. The college is situated close to the centre of Loughborough, in the East Midlands region. The region, which has a population of about 4.2 million, has a good road and rail infrastructure and has easy access to airports and motorways. Over the past three years, 32 per cent of trainees recruited to RNIB Vocational College on work-based learning programmes came from the region. Although the 1991 census showed that people from minority ethnic groups represent only 4.8 per cent of the East Midlands' population, the proportions of people from minority

ethnic groups in the larger cities, such as Derby, Leicester and Nottingham, are as high as 30 per cent of the population. Regional rates of unemployment have been consistently below those nationally during the past few years. Currently, the unemployment rate for the region stands at 3.6 per cent, compared with the national figure of 3.5 per cent. However, pockets of high unemployment and areas of social deprivation exist in some inner-city wards. Manufacturing contributes nearly 30 per cent towards the gross domestic product and employs 27 per cent of the workforce. Goods produced range from textiles and clothing to aerospace engines. Employment within the service sector is growing faster than at the national rate, especially within employment related to information technology. Agriculture remains a significant employment area, with 45,000 employees, and accounts for 10 per cent of the United Kingdom's agricultural output.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Self-assessment is well established at RNIB Vocational College and is conducted annually as part of quality assurance. The self-assessment report incorporates evaluation of all the services provided by the college regardless of funding source. The college's service teams, residential support team, internal programmes team, visual impairment support services team and programme management team, undertake independent self-assessment within their operational areas. Procedures for self-assessment are clearly laid down and the judgements are supported with evidence. The principal ensures that findings are discussed at management meetings, corroborated and agreed, before being drawn into a single document. The self-assessment report, which incorporates the college plan and action plan, is endorsed by the board of governors before publication. The most recent self-assessment report was published in November 2000, following a series of meetings of the college's management team. Judgements were cross-referenced to statements within *Raising The Standard* in order to identify strengths and weaknesses and give grades.

5. A team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at the college during January 2001. The inspection covered work-based learning for adults in the occupational area of business administration and information technology. The numbers of trainees following vocational courses at the further education college were low and so this area of training was not inspected. The further education college was visited to view facilities and meet support staff. Eleven learning sessions were observed and inspectors interviewed 23 trainees. Meetings were held with a total of 29 staff, including senior managers, teachers, support staff, residential staff, administrators and technicians. The college's premises were inspected, including the learning resources centre and the social and residential areas. Inspectors examined a range of documents including business plans, policies, the college's charter, external audit report, minutes of meetings, evidence of staff qualifications, job descriptions, staff-appraisal records and work-placement agreements. Trainees' files and portfolios were inspected, together with records of assessments and internal verification and data on trainees' achievements and progression.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration	2	9				11
Total	2	9	0	0	0	11

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 2

6. There are 31 trainees on business administration programmes. The number of trainees has remained fairly constant over the past three years. Two trainees are working towards NVQs in administration at level 1 and 16 towards NVQs in administration at level 2. A further 13 trainees are on programmes leading to NVQs in information technology, 12 at level 2 and one at level 1. Key skills are incorporated into the training, although no trainees are working towards key skills awards. On average, trainees spend 47 weeks achieving their NVQs. Trainees may join the courses at any time. During the past four years, 75 per cent of trainees starting training have completed their full programme. Trainees learn through trainer-led lessons and private study. They attend college five days a week. Opportunities for work experience at the college or with employers are given to all trainees. Trainees' progress is supported by a team of course trainers and assessors. The self-assessment report was accurate in identifying the college's strengths and weaknesses in business administration. Inspectors found additional strengths and agreed with the grade given by the college in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ experienced, well-qualified staff
- ◆ excellent resources for learning
- ◆ good achievement and progression rates
- ◆ good training programme
- ◆ wide range of additional qualifications in information technology

GOOD PRACTICE

The college arranged a one-week work placement for one trainee. On arrival, the trainee found that all their specialist computer equipment had been installed at the employer's premises. The trainee was presented with a learning plan for the week which had been prepared together with the employer. Colleagues all had a copy of the learning plan, which set out objectives for the week, and ensured that the trainee had a structured and valuable experience.

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient opportunities for work experience
- ◆ little off-site work-based assessment

7. Staff are well qualified as teachers and trainers, and have specialist qualifications in teaching people with a visual impairment. All assessors and internal verifiers are appropriately qualified. One member of staff, who has achieved a master's degree in special educational needs, has used her knowledge to design an effective initial assessment programme for trainees. Staff have expertise and long-standing experience of teaching trainees with visual impairments. They are highly knowledgeable of the administration and information technology NVQ standards. Staff have excellent working relationships with trainees. Three members of the team who are visually impaired provide good role models for the trainees.

8. The college has a wide range of good learning materials. These include modular handbooks to promote interactive information technology learning, and well-structured schemes of work and lesson plans. All materials are available in a choice of formats, including Braille, audiotape and disk, and in various sizes of print, and are highly effective in enabling trainees to make progress. Trainees speak highly about the learning methods and the materials which support them. Each trainee has a designated workstation, equipped and laid out to reflect the facilities likely to be found in employers' premises. Computer hardware, standardised across teaching departments, is up to date and specialist equipment is installed at every workstation to support each trainee's requirements. These include requirements for speech-synthesis and text-enlarging software, close-circuit-television systems, calculators with Braille keys and Braille embossers, and adjustable lighting systems to provide illumination appropriate to each trainee's needs. Trainees work in the college's office several times during their programme to gain some experience of handling the demands of a real workplace. For trainees in work experience on employers' premises, all the necessary equipment is transferred and installed to enable independent working.

9. Records over the past three years indicate that 74 per cent of trainees have achieved their main NVQ objectives. Many trainees start courses with no experience of office practices or computing. Trainees are thoroughly assessed to evaluate their existing skills and identify additional learning needs. Where appropriate, trainees engage on an initial foundation skills course to help develop literacy, numeracy, and computer skills, as well as to develop the necessary competence in touch-typing before starting the main vocational course. The learning programme is good. The NVQ course is highly structured, but delivered flexibly to meet individual learning needs. Each trainee has an individual timetable. Training sessions are run in a purposeful manner, with trainees fully engaged in those activities which enable them to acquire new skills. Trainees demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm to learn. There are frequent opportunities for trainees to get feedback from staff on their progress. All training groups are small, with usually no more than six trainees in any one session. In many cases, the trainer is accompanied by a learning advisor, who provides a high level of individual support. Staff respond promptly to trainees' questions and support needs. Good teaching practices are demonstrated by staff, who routinely evaluate the effectiveness of learning sessions with a view to improving their quality.

10. Trainees have opportunities to develop their computing skills through training leading to qualifications additional to the NVQ. The college offers a good range of examination-based courses to enhance trainees' employment prospects, including training in spreadsheets, databases, text processing, audio transcription and Internet technologies. Trainees work towards these qualifications as an integral part of their individual programmes. About half of the trainees gain additional qualifications, with several achieving distinctions.

11. The college's main administrative office is staffed by trainees supervised by the office manager. Trainees deal with requests from inside and outside the college, which provide them with good work experience in a supportive

environment. Each trainee usually spends six weeks working in the college's office. The weekly performance of each trainee is routinely evaluated by the office manager and the course tutor. In addition to working in the college's office, trainees spend one to three weeks on work experience with an employer, either in Loughborough or in their home towns, towards the end of their course. However, there are insufficient opportunities for work experience. Some trainees expressed concern about their abilities to cope with work outside the supportive environment of the college. In some cases, work placements with an employer do not provide sufficient preparation for progression into sustainable employment. Although trainees are routinely assessed during their time in the college office to provide evidence for the NVQ, there is little off-site work-based assessment. Opportunities are not taken by college staff to assess trainees' competencies for NVQ during work with employers. During the past three years, 12 per cent of trainees have moved into jobs on completion of training. In line with many providers of training for visually impaired people, the college has difficulties in finding and sustaining support from employers.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

12. The college states clearly in its charter its commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity for all. Joint responsibility for equal opportunities lies with the principal and the vice-principal. All job descriptions include an equal opportunities statement requiring each member of staff to comply with the RNIB's corporate equal opportunities policy. Equal opportunities statements are included in all advertisements for jobs and in the guidance sent to prospective applicants. There is a corporate policy and written procedures for the selection and recruitment of staff which require routine monitoring of applicants in terms of gender, marital status, ethnicity, disability, age and religion. Recruitment data from the past three years indicate that at 31 per cent the college has recruited a higher proportion of women students than the average of 15 per cent achieved by other colleges funded the same way. During the same period, the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups has been 8.2 per cent, compared with an average of 5.8 per cent for other colleges funded the same way. All trainees are given a handbook which includes the equal opportunities statement and procedures for complaints. The contents of this handbook are discussed during the induction programme. Staff training in the support of people with visual impairments and awareness training for *The Disability Discrimination Act 1995* is compulsory. Inspectors agreed with the findings of the self-assessment report and awarded the same grade as that given by the college.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ range of formats for information and guidance materials to meet trainees' needs
- ◆ equality of opportunity for trainees to progress and achieve
- ◆ good protection for trainees against discrimination and harassment
- ◆ promotion of equal opportunities initiatives through collaborative working
- ◆ action in response to effective monitoring of trainees' disabilities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no specific references to trainees or training in equal opportunities policy
- ◆ inadequate paperwork for ensuring equal opportunities in work placements

13. The college ensures that initial information and guidance for prospective students meets the needs of all. Marketing materials are designed to promote the image of equal opportunities by using case studies and images which eliminate the perception that ethnicity, gender or age are barriers to training. Guidance is available in a range of formats, including literature in large print, different colours of ink and paper, audiotapes, Braille and disks on request. The college ensures equality of opportunity for entry into training and for its successful completion. By providing a supportive learning environment, appropriate to the needs of the individual, equality of opportunity for trainees to progress and to achieve is maintained. Outcomes of initial assessment of trainees' support needs are systematically recorded and used to plan individual programmes.

14. The corporate equal opportunities policy meets the requirements for RNIB's employees by focusing on the promotion of equal opportunities and the prevention of discrimination. The corporate policy, a copy of which is given to all staff, contains guidance on the different forms of harassment. The equal opportunities policy, however, does not relate specifically to trainees or training. Although equal opportunities form an important part of the induction programmes for trainees and during induction discussion of equal opportunities is given high priority, trainees are not provided with a detailed policy or written guidelines to increase their understanding of the wider issues of equal opportunities.

15. Trainees feel well protected from all forms of discrimination and harassment in the college. Some members of staff, including those in senior positions, are visually impaired and empathise with the needs of trainees. Co-operative working of staff with the further education college's staff is effective in maintaining a training environment free from discrimination. Levels of support for trainees are high and the close working relationship between staff and trainees enables prompt identification of unfair or inappropriate treatment. Written policies for abuse and complaints are supplemented with written procedures to guide staff in dealing with complaints and grievances promptly and fully. Trainees are given clear guidelines for complaint in the event of unfair treatment. During the past three years, few

serious complaints have been made and incidences of trainees' dissatisfaction have been dealt with appropriately without implementing formal procedures.

16. The initial inspection and evaluation of each employer's suitability for providing work experience are carried out systematically. The emphasis of the initial inspection is on ensuring safe working practices and environments suited to trainees' needs. Health and safety audits are rigorous, but assessments for equal opportunities are less so. Paperwork relating to the employment of trainees for periods of work experience does not address equal opportunities issues adequately. Check lists used by auditors make no reference to equal opportunities. Written agreements between the college and work-placement providers do not require employers to implement equal opportunities and the written guidelines given to employers by the college do not refer to the need to maintain equality of opportunity for trainees. Reliance is placed on close monitoring of trainees at work to ensure equality of opportunity.

17. The college is effective in maintaining links with outside organisations, support agencies and community groups. The college, through collaborative partnerships has engaged in projects to widen participation for people with visual impairments. For example, the college has just completed a two-year project funded by the European Social Fund to improve basic skills for visually impaired people of Asian origin. The college monitors data effectively to identify the changing needs of trainees. For example, records of recruitment data indicated that a high proportion of trainees have disabilities creating learning difficulties in addition to any visual impairment. This information has resulted in the redirection of resources to provide staff training to support those with learning difficulties and to provide a wider range of support materials and equipment, especially software for computers which enables them to use them more easily.

Trainee support

Grade 1

18. All prospective trainees are given detailed information and guidance about training programmes and the college's services. New trainees are assessed to identify their learning support needs associated with visual impairment and these are systematically recorded. All new trainees receive induction training covering matters relating to the college and their chosen courses. Individual training plans are prepared to reflect all requirements for learning and pastoral support. Learning materials and resources are issued to meet each trainee's needs. The college operates a mentoring system by providing all trainees on NVQ courses with a designated member of staff to monitor progress and provide support. Staff are trained to deal with trainees' visual impairment needs and the college has a learning support team to assist trainees during training sessions. All trainees are issued with a college charter and handbook, which explain their rights and responsibilities. For trainees attending courses at the further education college, the arrangements for support for trainees are comparable to those for trainees at RNIB Vocational College. The college has two halls of residence and four residential

houses close to the campus. These offer safe and secure accommodation for trainees and are purpose built to meet the domestic needs of visually impaired people. Trainees have access to a range of counselling and guidance services. During the past three years, trainees' the retention rate among trainees has averaged over 70 per cent for an annual intake of 75 trainees. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report and found additional strengths, relating to careers advice and records of support for trainees. The weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report were not considered to be significant by inspectors. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ extensive individual support for trainees
- ◆ good initial assessment
- ◆ detailed, individualised induction programme
- ◆ well-structured training for career development
- ◆ thorough progress reviews
- ◆ excellent learning-resource centre
- ◆ very effective development of independent-living and mobility skills
- ◆ clearly recorded requirements for trainee support

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no significant weaknesses identified

GOOD PRACTICE

On completion of training, each trainee receives a detailed written report which includes contributions from all relevant trainers as well as the college vice-principal. The report is comprehensive and detailed and includes comments on the trainee's performance during work experience. The report provides potential employers with an account of trainees' experiences, achievements and potential for successful employment.

19. All of the college's staff have a thorough understanding of their trainees' needs for pastoral and learning support. Essential facilities and equipment are available to meet these needs. Each trainee's requirements for support are continuously monitored and reviewed by staff and prompt action is taken to respond to changing needs and circumstances. The college has a transcription and adaptation service for adapting learning materials so that they meet the individual requirements of each trainee. Co-operative working relationships with staff at the further education college result in course tutors giving learning materials to RNIB Vocational College's support staff for transcription and adaptation, so that visually impaired trainees can learn independently alongside other students. The general use of support tutors helps trainees to experience well-rounded learning as part of the development of independent living skills. Arrangements for support tutors to accompany trainees during classroom and workshop sessions are effective and trainees benefit from frequent, one-to-one tutorials arranged in response to their needs. The college has gained the praise and respect of all of its learners for its support services. There are extensive links with outside specialist agencies and counselling services. Medical services are provided by a local doctor's practice.

20. Prospective trainees are invited to the college before admission for a day of assessment. Initial assessment is effective in the identification of learning support needs, including those for basic literacy and numeracy support. The outcomes of assessment are used by staff to develop the individual training plan. The impact of visual impairment upon the learning of each trainee is evaluated and recorded, and recommendations for support are made. Further testing, to identify each trainee's needs, is undertaken at the start of training and reinforces information previously gathered. Some trainees complete taster courses before finally choosing their vocational courses. Staff are expert in the administration and adaptation of assessment tests to provide reliable, consistent and meaningful results to enable good preparation of individual training plans.

21. The college provides detailed and individualised induction programmes lasting a week. Each trainee has an individualised induction timetable containing core elements common to all trainees, as well as elements appropriate to each trainee's needs and choice of course. Induction is conducted in small groups of between two and five trainees. Established trainees help with induction and use their experience of the college to familiarise new trainees with their surroundings. Induction materials and a handbook, prepared in a range of formats, give comprehensive and detailed information about courses and the college's services and facilities.

22. The college provides well-structured training for career development. All training programmes include job-search activities. These activities are supplemented with weekly career-development sessions with an experienced careers advisor. These sessions help trainees to evaluate their capabilities and to set themselves targets for the future. The course develops trainees' understanding of employers' expectations, the power of positive attitudes and effective communication. The college is effective in helping trainees to develop good attitudes towards work, and promotes a code of conduct and dress which encourages the work ethic. Records show that during the past three years, approximately 40 per cent of trainees have progressed into employment, self-employment or further education. Support from the college for trainees continues for up to six months after they complete training. Staff travel nationwide to help former trainees find and sustain employment.

23. Arrangements for reviewing trainees' progress are thorough. Trainees' progress is monitored closely by course tutors and progress tutors. A full report is produced every eight weeks and includes contributions from trainees' specialist trainers. Trainers measure progress against set targets in the individual training plan and new development needs are identified where appropriate. Support is swiftly adapted to ensure trainees stay on target. Trainees understand and value the process. Achievement by individual trainees is communicated throughout the college to provide motivation and give public recognition.

24. A key objective of the college is to help trainees meet the challenges posed by visual impairment and so prepare them for independent living. In many cases, because of visual impairment, trainees lack confidence and do not possess those

skills essential for full independence. The college has developed and introduced an excellent programme to address these issues and enable trainees to improve their communication and to increase their mobility. Trainees are encouraged and fully supported in their efforts to realise their full potential. Many trainees testify that their increased confidence is enabling them to overcome many barriers to learning and independence. Trainees' requirements for support are routinely recorded in detail. These records are used effectively by all staff to ensure that they are sufficiently informed to be able to offer appropriate support at all times. Individual record files for trainees are systematically updated. Arrangements lead to a systematic and co-ordinated approach to supporting trainees and ensure that their needs are met.

Management of training

Grade 2

25. The college is owned by RNIB and administered through RNIB's education and employment division. The principal is directly responsible to the assistant director of residential education and training services. The principal is accountable to a board of governors, which meets three times each year. Staff and student representatives, elected by colleagues, are members of the board. The principal is supported in the management of the college by a senior management team comprising the vice-principal, the internal programme manager, the technical and information services manager, the inclusive learning support services manager, the business and finance manager, and the head of residential support services. The college has an organisational structure, with clear lines of management, which is understood by staff, students and trainees. The management structure of the college has undergone recent changes with the appointment of an inclusive learning support manager. This new post takes responsibility for all learning support services at the further education college and at RNIB Vocational College's other associate colleges and centres. The college has a mission statement which is reflected in its policies and practices and which shapes the college's annual report and strategic business plan. Strategic plans are reviewed annually in line with the current priorities. In its contract to provide work-based learning for adults the college has successfully met its recruitment targets for the past three years. Management strategies have encompassed expansion of the college in its range of services and courses and in the numbers and diversity of visually impaired trainees recruited. The college is completing a large building development to provide good accommodation for trainees adjacent to the college. The college holds the Investors in People Standard. The college accurately identified its strengths for management of training in its self-assessment report, as well as identifying areas for improvement. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ clear management structure understood by all staff
- ◆ good use of relevant data to guide strategic planning process

- ◆ good deployment of staff
- ◆ excellent teamwork
- ◆ open and effective communication

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient written operational procedures

26. The mission statement of RNIB Vocational College is well promoted and clearly understood and supported by all staff, trainees and subcontractors. The management structure has been reviewed during the past year as part of management strategies to maintain continuous improvement. The revised structure is clear and is well understood. There is a coherent structure for staff teams operating within different areas of the college. Each team has clearly identified aims and objectives and is set targets for achievement which are reinforced at team meetings. Minutes of meetings, including identified action and staff responsibilities, are recorded systematically. New members of staff undergo a thorough induction programme. There is a large board displaying photographs of staff and their responsibilities in the reception area of the college for the benefit of trainees and visitors. Job descriptions for staff provide clear lines of management responsibility. They are reviewed as part of staff appraisal. Generally staff have a good understanding of their roles and the tasks to be fulfilled. Written corporate procedures from RNIB's head office, for example, for the recruitment of staff, their induction and appraisal, are integrated into operational procedures. However, many of the routine procedures are unwritten and there is an over-reliance on the experience of individual staff to ensure successful completion of tasks.

27. The college produces two strategic documents, the annual review, which identifies strengths and weaknesses, and the annual strategic plan. In consultation with the board of governors and RNIB's assistant director, college managers establish strategic priorities for all aspects of the college's activities. Procedures for reviewing the college's aims and objectives have been established over several years and involve staff from all service areas within the college. A detailed action plan for the college is produced, from which local action plans are developed for each service area. The action plans for each area are monitored and reviewed by team managers on a regular basis. There is systematic use of data by the college's managers to guide the development of strategic plans. For example, good use is made of analyses of information gathered on the age and gender of trainees, trainees' home locations and modes of learning preferred by trainees when designing frameworks for training. The college is developing an upgraded computer database which will be networked to RNIB's corporate database and will give managers and staff better access to a wider range of information.

28. Staff operate in roles which enable them to demonstrate their professional strengths and to use their experience. Teamwork among staff is excellent. Within service area teams staff work cohesively and team members are mutually supportive. Communication and co-operation between the different service area

teams are good and staff work together to address the needs of each trainee. Staff work harmoniously and are focused on the needs of the trainees. Staff receive good support from the college's secretarial and administrative departments. There is open and effective communication within the college. Staff meetings are held regularly and minutes are disseminated to staff within two to three working days. Staff are appraised annually and the professional development needs of staff are identified. Appropriate staff training to meet these needs is commissioned, although there is no overall plan for staff development linked to the strategic objectives of the college.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

29. The college is committed to providing good-quality services appropriate to the needs of each trainee. Responsibility for quality assurance lies with the principal, with operational responsibilities devolved to team managers. The college has written policy aims for which standards are set, based on the quality statements in the funding body's *Residential Training Handbook* and *Raising the Standard*. Service quality and performance are evaluated against these standards. The college implements an annual planning cycle and self-assessment to review the quality of its training. Arrangements for quality assurance meet the requirements of the contracts with the RTU and the corporate requirements of RNIB. Procedures for internal verification are well established. External auditors' reports for the college have been favourable. Self-assessment is an integral part of quality assurance and includes gathering of evidence through classroom observations of training and feedback from surveys of staff and trainees' perceptions. Arrangements for quality assurance are understood and implemented by all staff. Inspectors agreed with the findings in the college's self-assessment report and awarded the same grade as that given by the college.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective use of self assessment
- ◆ good range of arrangements for monitoring the quality of services
- ◆ good systems for internal verification
- ◆ fully implemented quality assurance arrangements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of clearly defined structure for quality assurance
- ◆ no systematic review of policies and procedures

30. Staff within the college's service teams carry out routine self-assessment as part of annual planning. The effective use of self-assessment has led to improvements in the college's services and actions have been taken to address

inadequacies. For example, the identification of insufficient computers in one training room has resulted in the purchase of additional machines. In another case, the suggestion that trainees' records were held on too many separate files, which inhibited monitoring of trainees' progress, has resulted in the introduction of a single system providing a comprehensive record of each trainee's college experience. Inadequacies in literacy support for some students in information technology has resulted in the introduction of special workshop sessions and the perceived need for better monitoring of trainees' progress towards their NVQs has led to a mentoring system.

31. The college uses a range of methods for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of its services. Good use is made of its annual planning and self-assessment processes to ensure that services meet the needs of individual trainees. Surveys to gather trainees' perceptions are administered at regular times during training and at the end of trainees' programmes. Some surveys are continuous, for example the consultation of trainees on the quality of services provided by the learning-resource centre. Feedback from trainees is analysed and results in plans for action to address any issues raised. In addition to the surveys, trainees' feedback is sought through frequent progress reviews and the students' forum meetings at which trainees are encouraged to express their views about the complete range of services. Students' representation on committees and groups is encouraged at all levels, including at the college's board of governors. The senior manager responsible for teaching and learning monitors the quality of training through classroom observations and working alongside trainers. There is no schedule for these observations, although during the past academic year, 24 learning sessions were observed. Teaching appraisals have resulted in clear identification of strengths and weaknesses and the sharing of good practice. Good use is made of computers for the collation and analysis of monitoring data.

32. Procedures for internal verification are good and well established. Internal verification is progressive throughout training and there is effective working among the internal verifier and assessors. Records are routinely kept for assessment and internal verification and there is widespread consultation between staff and trainees on issues relating to assessment. Observation of assessments by internal verifiers is routine and results in constructive criticism being given to assessors on their performance. Internal verification is thorough, with a broad sample of trainees' portfolios being examined. The college responds promptly to observations and actions required by the external verifiers.

33. Quality assurance systems are understood and implemented by all staff. Induction programmes for new staff and staff development events reinforce understanding of procedures to maintain set standards. The outcomes of self-assessment and frequent staff meetings, especially at service team level, encourage the sharing of good practice. Some policies and procedures, for example those covering harassment at work, equal opportunities, and human resources, are the corporate policies of RNIB, rather than ones which relate specifically to RNIB Vocational College. The college has its own policies for complaints and student disciplinary matters, but there is an over-reliance for quality assurance on the

understanding and willingness of individual staff members. Staff are effective in using their experience and understanding to maintain good-quality services. However, there are no college-wide written procedures for quality assurance, drawing together all aspects of college provision. The underdevelopment of written policies is recognised by college managers and is being addressed. For example, policies for quality and planning, programme management guidance, work experience and careers education and guidance are being developed. Reviews of policies and procedures take place in response to identified needs, especially needs identified through self-assessment. In some cases, reviews are carried out at the initiation of RNIB, rather than as a consequence of the college's policy-review arrangements. There is no written system to ensure review of the college's policies and procedures at regular intervals is part of quality assurance.