

Improving Student Performance

How English further education colleges can improve student retention and achievement



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
HC 276 Session 2000-2001: 2 March 2001

summary

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Summary

- 1 Further education is a crucial part of the Government's strategy to combat social exclusion, unemployment and skills shortages. Raising educational standards is critical to the Government's social and economic agenda. The Government has set targets to achieve substantial improvement in students' participation and achievement in education by 2002, and further education has a key role in the achievement of these National Learning Targets.
- 2 In England there are 3.8 million students studying for some 6 million qualifications in over 400 further education colleges, at a cost to the public purse of some £3 billion. In 1998-99, the last year for which there are complete data, some 15 per cent of students did not complete their courses; and of those courses completed, the students failed to achieve 26 per cent of their qualification aims. In the light of this, and concerns expressed by the Committee of Public Accounts (63rd Report 1997-98, HC 665) on the variability of student achievement, we examined the reasons for student non-completion and non-achievement in colleges, and recommend ways in which retention and achievement rates can be improved.



- 3 We identified the reasons why students do not complete or fail to achieve their qualifications by interviewing some of those who have left their courses, and by holding discussion groups with students still at college. We analysed student and college performance data to gain further quantitative insights into student performance. We also surveyed a third of all colleges, and visited eight. This enabled us to identify best practice, and make recommendations on what more colleges can do to help students achieve their qualifications.

Our main findings

- 4 Over the past five years, the sector has increased student numbers by 70 per cent. Achievement rates have improved whilst overall retention rates have remained steady. This is due, in part, to successful initiatives launched by the Department for Education and Employment (the Department) and the Further Education Funding Council, aimed at improving teaching quality and providing incentives for colleges to raise completion and achievement rates. These include:
 - annual targets set from 1998-99 for retention and achievement for colleges, based on benchmarking data introduced in 1997; and
 - the Standards Fund, introduced in 1999 to support colleges in improving the quality of provision and raising standards of achievement. It funds:
 - improvements at colleges causing concern;
 - improvements in teaching and learning;
 - training and development for principals and senior management teams;
 - a good governance programme; and
 - dissemination of good practice and an achievement fund (for 2000-2001 only). This includes the introduction of "beacon" status and college accreditation, whereby colleges with high standards are provided with money to disseminate good practice.
- 5 In addition, the Department has introduced a number of measures to encourage people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enrol at college and complete their studies. These include Access Funds (introduced in 1993 but much increased in 1999), the Education Maintenance Allowance (piloted since 1999), the Connexions Service (planned to roll out from April 2001) and the Connexions Card (planned for Autumn 2001).
- 6 A new Learning and Skills Council will be operational from April 2001 and will take over the role of the existing Further Education Funding Council. The new Council will also take over responsibility for adult and community learning and for funding work-based training for young people. From September 2002 the new Council will also be responsible for funding school sixth forms.
- 7 The overall success rate - the proportion of qualification aims embarked upon that are successfully achieved - is 56 per cent for 16-18 year olds and 51 per cent for older students. Although this represents a substantial improvement in recent years, the success rates will need to be greater if the sector is to meet the Government's National Learning Targets for 2002. Retention rates in general and sixth form colleges for full-time students vary between 98 per cent and 72 per cent. The variation in achievement rates is much greater, between 98 per cent and 33 per cent. This variation is only partly explainable by factors external to colleges (such as funding or student deprivation).



- 8 Our analysis showed that there are no marked differences in retention and achievement rates between different subjects studied. Broadly, there are also no clear patterns in retention for different kinds of student, although some types of students find particular difficulty in achieving their qualification objectives. These include those employed for long hours of part-time work in parallel with their studies and students experiencing various kinds of deprivation. Colleges have a range of methods available to support such students, and should be able to identify those at greater risk of non-completion or non-achievement who would benefit from support.
- 9 We have identified best practice by which colleges, with the support of the new Learning and Skills Council, can improve student performance. Our recommendations are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Choosing the right course

- 10 Students often decide not to complete their studies because the courses are not what they expected, or because they only wish to acquire certain skills or knowledge rather than a qualification. Also, when they are not enjoying the work, or find it too difficult, they are more likely to fail their exams. The problems are of various types:
 - students may have chosen the wrong subject; in particular, the wrong course for their career ambitions;
 - they may have chosen the wrong level (and therefore difficulty) of course. Students will sometimes ignore college advice and sign up to the highest level course offered to them, and subsequently find it difficult to keep up; and
 - students may not be fully aware of the commitments they are taking on. Particular problems may occur for those students who also have part-time jobs, or who have other responsibilities, especially if they did not at first appreciate the hours of course work required. And students with limited finances may have difficulties if they are presented with unexpected bills for materials or awarding body registration fees.
- 11 Although we found that most colleges provide detailed information sheets to supplement the college prospectus, a minority do not provide full information on time commitments and costs. We recommend that:
 - i) Some colleges could do more to get prospective students on the right courses and ensure that the college experience matches students' expectations by providing better pre-enrolment information about courses.



Induction and support

- 12 In addition to students who find themselves on the wrong course, various categories of students are more at risk of non-completion or non-achievement. These include students who:
- find it difficult to settle into their courses and college, including late entrants who miss the normal induction processes;
 - have poor attendance;
 - are not motivated or are disaffected;
 - have not met, or who have only just met, the minimum entry requirements for the course, and who therefore need additional learning support;
 - need other support, including child-care or financial assistance;
 - combine their studies with long hours of part-time employment; and
 - get behind with their assignments.
- 13 Colleges provide a range of financial and other support to help students complete their courses. For some of these, including child-care and transport initiatives, they receive assistance from the Department and the Further Education Funding Council. However, we recommend that:
- i) Colleges should consider providing more effective activities or other support to help students' integration into the college during the first few weeks, and give special support to late applicants and late joiners.
 - ii) Colleges should encourage students to set up "buddy" schemes or self-help groups, in order to help students to support each other throughout their course.
 - iv) Colleges should monitor student absence closely and allocate clear responsibility for timely follow-up of absences. Where necessary they should also arrange training for staff in how to follow up promptly and sensitively any student absences.
 - v) Colleges need to identify and provide support to students with poor numeracy and literacy skills, including students for whom English is not their first language.
 - vi) Colleges should continue to provide help to students who have weak study techniques, including advice on how to read and take notes effectively, and on how to set out written work coherently.



Teaching and learning methods

- 14 Our analysis showed that the quality of teaching is a major factor affecting achievement, and students told us that issues to do with teaching quality and feedback are important to them. Quality of teaching, together with class size and equipment, are important for all courses, particularly vocational courses where practical assistance may be required.
- 15 A number of colleges have introduced ways of improving teaching and feedback, and these could usefully be promulgated across the sector. Our recommendations are:
- vii) Colleges need to increase the rigour of methods used to identify and improve the weakest teaching and course delivery, and ensure consistency in the quality of courses.
 - viii) Colleges should ensure prompt, regular and constructive feedback to students on their performance and should set targets for students (deadlines and target grades, where appropriate).
 - ix) The Learning and Skills Council should extend ways of sharing good practice (for example by workshops and seminars).

Assessing performance

- 16 Colleges need to assess the performance of students in order to provide the right support, but also to assess the quality of colleges' courses and general management. Colleges do this by:
- monitoring retention and achievement;
 - assessing the progress students are making towards their qualification;
 - monitoring the destinations of students; and
 - surveying student satisfaction with the college and their courses.
- 17 The information collected by colleges has been useful to the Further Education Funding Council in its monitoring of the sector, and to colleges when they benchmark their own performance against the rest of the sector.



- 18** However, some colleges make limited use of data collection and monitoring, and some improvements could be made to the national performance measurement system. There are limitations in the definitions of retention and achievement, so that, for example, achievement is only measured for students who complete their courses. Moreover, data on retention and achievement are not published until 14 months after the end of the academic year to which they relate, largely because the data are based on those used for funding and are subject to external audit in the February following the year end.
- 19** We recommend that:
- x) Colleges should collect better information on the reasons for non-completion, including data on student employment while at college.
 - xi) Colleges should make full use of the destinations data that they collect, for example in informing future course provision.
 - xii) In order to focus on the risks of non-completion and non-achievement associated with different groups of students, colleges should set specific retention and achievement targets for groups of students which they have identified as being at risk of non-completion and non-achievement.
 - xiii) The Learning and Skills Council (the Council) should continue to work with the Department and colleges to develop and recommend measures of "value added" or "distance travelled".
 - xiv) The Council should encourage more benchmarking between like colleges, focusing on improving performance at poorest performing and middle-ranking colleges which have not improved their inspection grade over the last four years.
 - xv) When designing new systems for funding and performance, the Council should seek opportunities to improve the timeliness of published data.
 - xvi) The Council should continue to work with the Department to develop a unique student reference number to facilitate student tracking and the measurement of performance.