

NENE COLLEGE

Aspects of Full-Time Provision in Higher
Education

26 – 29 November 1990

Reference: 118/91/HE

A REPORT BY HMI



THE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION & SCIENCE

CROWN COPYRIGHT 1991

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

This Report may be reproduced in whole, or in part, provided that the source and its date are stated. However, it may not be used in, or in connection with, a prospectus or an advertisement or for any commercial purpose.

Copies of this Report may be obtained from the Department of Education and Science, Publications Despatch Centre, Honeypot Lane, Stanmore, Middlesex HA7 1AZ.

CONTENTS

	Paragraphs
THE INSPECTION	1
THE COLLEGE	3
ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT	6
TEACHING AND LEARNING	9
CURRICULA	18
STUDENTS	20
STUDENT SERVICES	27
STAFFING	29
Academic staff	
Non-teaching staff	
Staff development	
RESEARCH	35
PHYSICAL RESOURCES	37
Teaching accommodation	
Equipment and materials	
Library	
QUALITY ASSURANCE	44
CONCLUSIONS	49
APPENDICES 1 AND 2	

SUMMARY

Nene College is a well managed institution of nearly 4000 higher education and 1500 further education full-time equivalent students. The college has successfully adjusted to its first year of incorporation and has taken advantage of the opportunities provided by changes in the funding arrangements for higher education. Recruitment to its higher education courses rose by 35% in 1990/91 and the inspection looked at the impact of this growth upon provision. Standards are satisfactory on all of the courses inspected. Course completion rates are high and the employment record of students is in line with national norms. The additional first year students have been absorbed satisfactorily, helped by management efficiency measures, an increase of staff and some improvement to physical resources. However, pressures are evident as a result of the extra numbers, and these will grow as the students progress through the college. Further attention will have to be given to teaching and learning methods, administrative and technical support, learning resources, information technology, and student support services, which have not kept pace with the needs of the enlarged student community.

THE INSPECTION

1. This report is the outcome of a short institutional inspection of Nene College by a team of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in November 1990. Its purpose was to assess the effectiveness of aspects of full-time higher education. Particular attention was given to the growth in student numbers and its impact upon provision, especially the design and delivery of courses, the planning and management of resources, and the quality of student support. The work inspected came within five of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) programme areas: engineering and technology; science; business and management; humanities and social sciences; and art, design and performing arts. A full list of PCFC programme areas is given in Appendix 1.

2. Discussions were held with staff and students and classes were inspected on selected courses, examples of students work were looked at, and the comprehensive documentation provided by the college was scrutinised. The main emphasis of the inspection was upon first-year groups, many of which showed a substantial increase in numbers over the previous year's intake. The courses and subjects inspected are listed in Appendix 2.

THE COLLEGE

3. Nene College is an incorporated higher education institution with about 4000 full-time equivalent (fte) students on higher education courses. It is based on two sites. The Moulton Park Campus, where degree and advanced courses are taught, occupies an open campus of almost 70 acres on the edge of Northampton. The St George's Avenue campus, the major centre for art and technology, occupies a 24 acre site two miles from Moulton Park. The college has work in all nine of the PCFC programme areas and substantial provision in further education which accounts for an additional 1500 fte students. It has an accredited partnership agreement with the University of Leicester, which validates all of its degree courses.

4. For 1990/91, just under 40% of the college's £15.85 million budget income came from the PCFC recurrent grant, 30% from student tuition fees, and nearly 24% from the local education authority for contracted FE work. The college ended its first year of independent operation on a sound financial footing, with a substantial budget surplus, allowing for the establishment of reserves to be devoted to further construction and maintenance. The surplus also allowed the college to increase its revenue allocations to faculties to support the increases in student recruitment in 1990/91. The college seeks to achieve a ratio of reserves to turnover of about 10%. Following incorporation, the work of the governing body has been substantially directed to the successful introduction of new financial procedures. This was helped by the extensive business, commercial and financial experience of its members.

5. The college has pursued a policy of sustaining growth in student numbers in order to achieve the critical mass it feels necessary for independent operation. In its pursuit of this objective the college has been helped by its relatively low running costs, which have enabled it to make competitive bids to PCFC and to recruit large numbers of students for which the only income received is the tuition fee (fees-only students). The reasons for the low costs include: the composition of its portfolio of courses; the low level of non-teaching support; the willingness of staff to undertake additional duties; and generally sound building stock with manageable maintenance costs. The operating costs of the college will increase as plans are implemented to improve accommodation and learning resources, and to raise the low levels of administrative and technical staffing, and student services. Because of its mixture of further and higher education work, the college had, under the funding policy of the former National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education, had a lower level of funding than many institutions in the sector.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

6. The college is organised into six faculties each headed by a dean. The directorate comprises the director, a deputy responsible for financial, personnel and accommodation matters and an assistant director responsible for academic affairs. The directorate and the deans, together with the heads of units of academic services and administration, form the college senior management team.

7. The directorate, which has been in place only since Spring 1990, has identified many of the strengths and weaknesses of the college. An agenda has been set for pursuing the objectives necessary for the institution to function effectively within a changed and changing higher education sector. Initiatives that are being taken include the introduction of a new administrative support structure and the remodelling of faculties. From January 1991, the number of faculties is to be reduced to four and the deans are being given a clearer management role. Each will undertake college-wide duties in addition to having devolved responsibilities for academic and resource matters within their faculties.

8. The college's management information system (MIS) does not provide the level of support needed by academic and administrative staff in their new management roles. Deans of faculty and their heads of department require additional training and support, including the use of MIS for course monitoring and planning. Within the present structure, corporate policies relating to expansion and its management are generally well understood at the faculty level, but not within course and subject teams. Heads of department and subject leaders are not always clear about their roles and responsibilities.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

9. The inspection concentrated on the first-year cohorts where the growth in student numbers was most pronounced, though a limited selection of second and third-year work was also seen. In general, the quality of work and the standards achieved were satisfactory and in some areas good work was seen.

10. Generally, the most successful classes were characterised by the support and commitment of teaching staff. Many were based upon clear schemes of work and made sensitive use of well produced teaching aids. Amongst the best workshop activities was a first year Higher National Diploma (HND) class in Hardware and Software Engineering, which provided a good example of students taking responsibility for their own learning. Students showed a sound understanding of the subject, which addressed principles of circuit analysis and performance. In testing performance against computer predictions they used professionally relevant computing equipment, produced high quality word processed reports, and showed commitment and independence in working at their task. The most successful lectures were challenging and well structured. Lecturers operated at a brisk pace, used relevant illustrative material and made appropriate references to students' experiences elsewhere on the course. The scholarly activities of staff are a positive influence on student project work and teaching in earth science and geography. In geography lectures and seminars, staff research into the housing market and environmental impact assessment was used to enhance students understanding of the subject.

11. Some good features of the provision are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as a result of the increase in student numbers. For example, some staff are finding it difficult to maintain the high standards of marking and written feedback that have been established. There are effective structures for the supervision of fieldwork and placements, but insufficient attention has been given to the future impact of larger student groups. The amount of individual studio instruction has been reduced in graphic design, but appropriate alternative teaching and learning strategies have yet to be introduced.

12. About 12% of classes were unsatisfactory. The most common shortcomings were a lack of intellectual challenge, insufficient student participation, or a slow and undemanding pace. In geography for example, first-year students were given insufficient instruction for a practical session that dealt with computer-aided mapping. Too little attention was given to the conceptual underpinning of the technique, and students were not given supportive reading. An unsatisfactory language class was dominated by the teacher, who made few demands upon students and failed to test their comprehension. In a number of classes there was a lack of differentiation; the teaching did not take sufficient account of the different levels of confidence, knowledge and experience within the groups. In assignments set for large groups, tutors were not always aware when students were failing to make satisfactory progress.

13. The range and appropriateness of teaching and learning methods varies between subjects, with little sharing of practices even between closely related subjects such as those within science or the social sciences. In business and management a good range of methods are sensitively applied, whereas in psychology and geography the range is narrow. In psychology, appropriate attention is given to practical work but few opportunities are provided for group discussion. In some courses there is a need for learning objectives to be more clearly defined, so that the effectiveness of existing teaching and learning strategies can be monitored.

14. On most courses, the increase in student numbers has had little direct effect upon the teaching and learning methods used. The pressures for change is increasing as larger first-year cohorts progress into second and third years. Many teachers recognise the need to consider new approaches to course delivery but feel constrained by the pressures of full teaching commitments and limited administrative support; they are unable to find the necessary time to develop new course materials or to visit other institutions where they might learn of alternative approaches.

15. Independent study is a successful feature of business and management. On some courses, including graphic design and psychology, teaching contact time has been reduced without providing students with the skills required to make effective use of the opportunities created for private study. In earth science, students are required to undertake substantial periods of private study but this is not sufficiently directed or monitored.

16. The need for students to take more responsibility for their own learning presents the institution with a major challenge. This is recognised by the senior management who have identified within the strategic plan the need for increased staff training and improved learning resources to support the development of directed and self-directed learning.

17. The standard of work is generally satisfactory, and appropriate for the level of higher education study being undertaken. There is clear evidence of progression on courses, and individual student projects of high quality are being produced in earth science and industrial studies. The quality of written and oral work is variable but there is evidence of some good work being produced on most courses. Work is generally well presented, with that in geography making particularly effective use of information technology in its production. Some of the assignments produced by students in geography and psychology are lacking in analytical content, and projects in engineering do not always take proper account of working practices in industry and the professions, particularly team work.

CURRICULA

18. The range of full-time courses covers all of the nine PCFC programme areas, in some cases though enrolments are low. Part-time courses are offered in all areas except humanities and social sciences. The

large BA/BSc honours degree in combined studies offers a wide choice of subject qualifications and includes study routes within six different PCFC programme areas. The introduction of new courses has accounted for many of the extra students who have enrolled. Existing curricula have not been affected substantially, though a wider range of options has been introduced on some courses.

19. The design and development of new courses have normally been the result of local staff initiatives, and this has served the college well in its pursuit of growth. However, curriculum development has lacked coordination, sometimes between closely related subjects, and opportunities have been missed for achieving the economies of operation that can derive from shared course content; this is the case in business and management. The two Higher National Diplomas in engineering have been developed quite independently, as have the local industrial links of each, despite their common participation in the innovative Training Partnership scheme. The college has no degree course in engineering to which HND students can progress, and this has adversely affected full-time recruitment. The college has been successful in its policy of expansion; the senior management has recognised that future curriculum development and increases in student numbers should be targeted more selectively in line with the priorities laid out in the strategic development plan, and with careful regard to the resources needed to support them.

STUDENTS

20. At the time of inspection, the college had a student enrolment of 5,297 fte students, of whom 3,763 were on higher education courses, including 2,953 in the full-time and sandwich modes. A further 203 fte's, including overseas students, were paying their own tuition fees. Over 48% of all full-time students were recruited to the BA/BSc honours degree in combined studies. During the 1980s, the college enjoyed a decade of steady growth, with recruitment to its higher education courses increasing on average by 10% each year. There followed a dramatic increase in full-time numbers between 1989/90 and 1990/91, assisted by highly competitive bidding to PCFC, but more significantly by the entry of the college into the Polytechnics' Central Admissions System (PCAS).

21. The college's growth has been characterised by its commitment to recruit marginally funded students and it has declared its intention to continue recruiting over and above the numbers funded by PCFC. In 1989/90 it recruited 2782 fte students to its higher education courses, which was 365 or 15% above the numbers allocated by the National Advisory Body for that year. In 1990/91 the total fte's recruited was 3763, which was 1053 or nearly 39% above the numbers funded by PCFC, and a 35% increase over 1989/90. The growth was greatest among full-time students, with subjects in business and management, and humanities and social sciences recording the biggest increase.

22. The growth in student numbers has substantially exceeded the targets set out in the college's development plan for the period 1989 to 1992. Total fte's for 1990/91 are 14% above the projection for the year, and are already nearly 5% over the numbers planned for 1991/92. Significantly, the increase in part-time students has been less than that for full-time. The proportion of part-time student fte's to the total is decreasing and now stands at about 20%, compared with the college's target of 30%. There is a need to take stock and for the college to monitor carefully this change in the student profile. Particular attention should be given to its significance for the college's declared intention 'to provide opportunities for students of all ages and backgrounds who might not traditionally have secured entry into higher education.'

23. The college has introduced specific initiatives to increase the number of non-traditional entrants on its courses. It has established a joint agency with the University of Leicester to validate access courses

within the region. Seven courses are approved to prepare students for higher education study, from which 67 full-time students were enrolled at the college in 1990/91. Mature students, defined by the college as those aged 21 and over on entry, account for 56% of full-time HE enrolments, a substantial increase on the figure for 1989/90, and in line with college policy. Franchising arrangements are in place for college courses to be provided in three institutions, at Bedford, Peterborough and Milton Keynes. The further development of this provision is being actively considered.

24. Student progression and completion rates are generally good. For example, the completion rate on the Combined Studies degree overall is in excess of 90%, although the drop-out rate in the first year was significantly higher for the larger 1989 cohort. The college should give careful attention to this development, particularly in the light of a further growth in the size of year groups. The destination statistics provided by the college for its own purposes would benefit from more detail about the nature of the employment taken up by students and improved feedback from those leaving the combined studies degree. This information is important for the effective implementation of monitoring and evaluation strategies, and to inform curriculum planning.

25. Statistics for the 1989 leavers show that the percentage of graduates in known employment, including teacher training, was at about the sector average of 63%, while those going on to further study was marginally less than the average at 14.5%. Excluding teacher education students, 45% of graduates are known to be in employment and 24% in further study, with the destinations of 20% unknown. Confirmed employment from the college's HNDs is some five points above the sector average at 56%, with those going on to further study eight points below the average at 24%. These figures suggest that the achievements of graduates and diplomates of Nene College are broadly in line with sector norms with diplomates particularly meeting the needs of employers.

26. The diversity of students backgrounds and experience is evident on a number of courses, particularly those such as engineering and some aspects of science, where recruiting to targets has proved difficult. The backgrounds of students is not always recorded at the course level nor are the learning difficulties faced by some students always recognised. A few students are working on practical assignments without receiving the extra tutorial support they need, even on courses where bridging studies have been introduced or where prior experience has been recorded. For most students, tutorial support is satisfactory, though the schemes for its implementation are subject to a wide variety of practice. Pressures on tutorial time are growing with increased numbers. Regular tutorials are not being offered in some areas, to the disadvantage of those most needing support. The college should consider carefully the effectiveness of its present tutorial arrangements in the light of increased numbers and the wider mix of students within year groups.

STUDENT SERVICES

27. Student services cover accommodation, counselling, health and institutional guardianship. They are the responsibility of the Dean of Students, who is the only designated counsellor. The number of professional staff has changed little in recent years as the provision of services has been outstripped by the demands of an enlarged student community. Although nearly 40% of students are female, there is no woman counsellor. The number of students in the college seeking help with financial problems is increasing and consideration should be given to improving the expertise available to assist them. The careers suite, refectory and student common room on the Park site are all heavily used and often overcrowded. Mobile food sales points have been introduced to ease the congestion and a consultancy review of the catering service has been commissioned. A playgroup was opened in September 1990 in

response to the increasing number of mature students; it is well run and equipped though there has been a low take up in the first term of operation.

28. The college has purpose-built residential accommodation for 270 students and has responded to the increase in demand by the construction of a new 211 place residential block, which will open in 1991. Many of the 1990 recruits faced difficulties in finding accommodation and the college worked hard to ensure that they were all placed for the beginning of the autumn term. The college is actively engaged in addressing the deficiencies in its provision of student services and plans to invest further in physical improvements. In addition to the new accommodation block a new students' union building is planned; both are to be funded through lending arrangements or from capital reserves. Nevertheless, there is concern being expressed by students that the scale and timing of the building may have underestimated the demand being generated by the increase in student numbers. Despite the shortcomings in student services, the college provides a supportive environment for its students, helped by positive relations between students and academic staff.

STAFFING

29. The college has 308 full-time equivalent academic staff, excluding the directorate, and for 1990/91 is working to a student staff ratio (SSR) of 15.7:1 across all higher and further education provision. Increased student numbers have helped in raising the SSR from less than 14:1 in 1989/90 to bring it close to the college higher education target for 1991/92, of 16:1. Within the six faculties, SSRs range from nearly 20:1 in business and management to just over 11:1 in the faculty of humanities. All of the other faculties operate at or within two points of 15:1, including the faculties of art and design, and technology, which embrace most of the further education work. Some 47 members of teaching staff are notionally funded from the income generated by fees-only students. The college employs 289 fte non-teaching staff, of whom 144 are administrative, 52 technical, 91 manual, and 2 are research assistants. Of these, 44 technicians and 35 administrative staff are attached directly to faculties.

30. It has been the college practice to appoint additional staff once the extent of increased student recruitment to courses is known. In some subject areas such as psychology, the effects of the delay in appointing teaching staff following the large 1989/90 increase in first-year student numbers are still being felt. However, the senior management is now striving to meet the staffing needs of the enlarged higher education corporation. All categories of staff within the college have been increased, including a major expansion of the administrative and secretarial support staff. The system for allocating staffing within the college is being changed from the existing historical approach with retrospective adjustments. A formula-based scheme is being introduced for the 1991/92 financial year, which closely reflects that used by PCFC for the allocation of institutional funds. It is already affecting the approach to faculty management; deans are able to plan the human resources needed to support growth, and negotiate to have new staff appointed in advance of students being enrolled.

Academic staff

31. In 1990/91, the college increased its teaching staff by 6% in direct response to the growth in student numbers. In general, academic staff are appropriately qualified and well matched to their teaching roles, though some would benefit from professional/vocational updating. They are consistently supportive of their students with many working beyond their timetabled commitments. Teaching staff undertake inappropriate administrative tasks, a problem recognised by the senior management of the college in its appointment of extra support staff. The administrative burden is increased for some full-time academic staff, including those in modern languages, where teaching teams include a high proportion of part-time

staff. Generally, the staff teaching on courses provide an appropriate balance of expertise, though not all work effectively as teams.

Non-teaching staff

32. Administrative and secretarial staff are being increased by 25% in 1990/91 over the previous year, and technical staff by 9%. The college has set a target to increase its spending on non-teaching staff from the present low proportion of 16%, to 20% of annual expenditure. Technical staff provide effective support for students and staff. However there are areas, including geography and modern languages, where the level of provision is unsatisfactory. In the science faculty the ratio of technicians to academic staff is significantly lower than is usual for higher education. Administrative and secretarial support is generally inadequate, though the impact of the additional appointments has yet to be felt. The quality of service is sometimes reduced because of poorly defined staff responsibilities in relation to those of their teaching colleagues.

Staff development

33. The responsibility for staff development is devolved to faculties, each of which publishes a statement of policy. The quality of these documents is varied, particularly in the clarity with which priorities are identified. Staff are encouraged to undertake staff development and most of the demands made by individual teachers have been met. Staff development strategies vary, with some faculties, particularly those with a clear subject focus such as business and management and technology, providing overarching objectives, often related to curriculum developments. In other faculties, staff development is more dependent upon individual staff requests, and there is less coordination. While all faculty annual reports provide a record of staff development, the activities themselves are not always evaluated. A feature of staff development at the college is the substantial involvement of technical staff, which includes opportunities to study for higher qualifications. This is an important investment for the institution, though the cover provided for technicians during their absence is unsatisfactory at present.

34. The college strategic plan, through its statement of objectives and priorities, offers a clear agenda for staff development. An issue for the college is to ensure that institutional priorities are effectively addressed within the devolved system. This is of particular importance where change is to be supported across the institution as a whole, as, for example, in the development of new teaching and learning strategies to support the teaching of larger and more diverse student groups.

RESEARCH

35. The amount of research undertaken by college staff is small, but growing. Positive action has been taken to increase research to inform undergraduate teaching. This includes a doubling of the research budget for 1990/91 to £86,000, and the establishment of new research assistant posts in addition to the two that already exist. College funding gives priority to research that enhances the quality of the taught courses, or leads to commercial and income generating opportunities.

36. There are pockets of successful practice from which research and other scholarly activity can be developed. These include: published work in environmental biology on organisation identification; the involvement of earth science staff within specialist national research groups; and the doctorates obtained by geography staff through studies of the housing market and environmental impact assessment. In each area, scholarly activity has provided an enrichment to the development of the subject within the college, rendered improvements to the syllabus, and given added relevance to the teaching offered to students. In contrast, in engineering scholarly activity is needed to sharpen the subject identity and give a clearer focus to curriculum development.

PHYSICAL RESOURCES

Teaching Accommodation

37. Teaching accommodation is generally adequate with a few areas of high quality provision and some that are unsatisfactory. Room utilisation has been improved, helped by the introduction of centralised timetabling and a modest extension to the working day on some courses. This has been a significant factor in enabling the college to manage its extra students. Nevertheless, there is pressure on the accommodation in several areas, including business and management where growth is set to continue. The effects can be seen in the extensive use of hatted accommodation, some of which provides a poor learning environment. There is a lack of an identifiable base for some business courses, and for geography. In modern languages, the language laboratory is well equipped, but is unable to meet the needs of the increased numbers of students and the proposed new courses. Where good specialist learning resource centres have been established there are problems of access. Such is the case in graphic design where size, opening times and supervision variously reduce the effectiveness of the well resourced photographic and desk-top publishing suites. There is good accommodation in science where the specialist laboratories for environmental biology are well managed and matched to the needs of the course.

38. Major improvements were made to the college's accommodation in 1990. These included a library extension, a new central computer suite, many minor works and improvements to student support provision. However, the continued growth of the institution requires further major developments, as is recognised in the draft corporate accommodation strategy, which is presently being considered by a governors' working group. Moves to change the teaching and learning methods have highlighted the need for more large lecture spaces, small group tutorial rooms, private study areas, and learning resource centres.

Equipment and materials

39. In 1990/91, the college received a capital equipment allocation from the PCFC of £616,000, which accounted for 90% of its capital equipment spending. The monies are allocated internally through a system of bidding in which college and faculty development plans are taken into account. Provision is variable, with some of the best equipment in areas where recent investment has been made. Some good computing facilities are available to students in engineering, graphic design and geography, while the college's central provision has been enhanced by a new 50 work station laboratory. Despite these improvements, computing provision is insufficient to meet the needs of many courses, including those in business and management. Good specialist equipment is available in some areas, exemplified by the image processing facility in earth sciences. In contrast, work in engineering is inhibited by a lack of modern workshop machinery, and the word processing facilities in psychology are inadequate.

40. The quality of teaching materials has benefited from the self-help initiatives of staff, though in some cases, items are now out of date and need to be removed from circulation. In geography and science the cost of field trips to students is subsidised by the college; in graphic design students are required to buy their own expensive course consumable materials.

Library

41. The libraries on both of the college sites are heavily used and frequently overcrowded. Despite recent additions and improvements there remain major pressures on the library arising from the growth in student numbers. Nevertheless, the service is valued by students and staff. The Learning Resources Unit

maintains good data on student usage and resources. These show that in the two years since 1988/89, the library budget has been increased by 33%, and overall accommodation by 45% to 1956 square metres. Study spaces have been increased by 19% to 287, though this still provides only one study space for every 18 full-time equivalent students in the college. The total library stock includes 160,000 books and 850 journals, which is an increase of less than 5% on the figures for 1988/89. Student demand has grown substantially when measured by the number of books borrowed and the number of loans per student.

42. Provision for the courses and subject areas is variable, with stocks not always keeping pace with changing student needs. In a few subjects, book stocks are appropriate and up to date, but for others, a variety of problems are evident. These include gaps in subject coverage, and material that is out of date. Subscriptions to periodicals account for the majority of spending in the science subjects and their increasing cost is placing constraints on the purchase of text books. Multiple copies of essential course texts have been increased but are still insufficient to meet the needs of students in engineering, environmental biology and geography. A number of initiatives have been taken to improve the service to students in the face of the increased pressure on the library. These include the re-scheduling of assignments in psychology, and the operation by the library of an effective short-loan system to increase the availability of materials that are in high demand.

43. In pursuit of its policy of encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning, the college has recognised the need to improve the liaison between subject teachers and the staff in learning resources. A major re-structuring of its learning resources will provide librarians with designated faculty responsibilities, and establish the post of educational resources coordinator. The governors and the senior management of the college have identified the provision of learning resources as being in need of development. In addition to the recent investment in physical improvements and the re-structuring of the service, another major library extension is given priority within the college accommodation strategy.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

44. A revised college scheme for course monitoring, review, evaluation and validation is in its first full year of operation. The scheme is the subject of published guidelines, approved by the University of Leicester, within which the purpose and operation of validation, periodic review and annual monitoring are clearly defined. It is designed in accord with the systems introduced in Council for National Academic Awards accredited institutions, and offers an appropriate model for increasing the consistency and rigour of the college's quality assurance mechanisms. It provides a common framework for course annual reports and requires the production of student performance data, which have not previously been used consistently. The scheme would however benefit from a specific requirement that annual reports include comment on the reports of external examiners and moderators, and evaluation of the progress made in responding to the actions identified in the previous years plan. The procedures for periodic review and course validation ensure that teaching and learning strategies are addressed. However, this should also be included in the guidelines for annual course review.

45. The Committee for Academic Standards is a sub-committee of the Academic Board and has overall responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards within the college. It is chaired by the assistant director and has members from all of the faculties. Course monitoring and evaluation are devolved to the course committees, which are required to undertake annual course reviews and produce reports. The role of the deans is a pivotal one, in that they oversee the work of course committees, decide the format of the course annual reports, identify issues for faculty discussion, and produce annual faculty reports for the Committee for Academic Standards.

46. Recent annual course reports are variable in the appropriateness of their content and the rigour of their evaluation. Some, such as those for the HND in Business and Finance, are clear, self-critical, and set specific targets for improvement. However, others lack evaluative comment, and include recommendations that are too general to be useful, and without a timetable for their implementation. The college requires that student views are canvassed, but the outcomes are not always used in the formal process of course review. A valuable feature of the annual review is the need for courses to monitor the provision of central learning resources.

47. For subject programmes within the Combined Studies degrees, external examiners are appointed by the University of Leicester. Their reports are appreciated by course teams and have led to actions being taken to improve course delivery. On occasions however, as in geography, reports are superficial, and sometimes not available for inclusion in the annual course review. Generally, as has recently been agreed for modern languages, external examiners provide reports annually, although the university requirement is that they are produced every three years, at the end of the examiners term of office. The procedures for setting and marking examination papers are adequate, and undertaken in collaboration with the university and the external examiners. The maintenance of standards is assisted by the second-marking of examination scripts by staff at the university. On the HND courses, BTEC moderators' reports are regularly included in annual course reports, though their content is not consistently evaluated in the body of the reports.

48. Annual reviews are complemented by periodic course reviews, which are undertaken every five years. They provide an opportunity for a major retrospective consideration of the course, with its achievements and developments looked at in a wider college context. Periodic reviews, like internal validation, are undertaken by an appointed panel, which includes external members from education and industry, as well as college staff and a students' union representative. A recent science review was undertaken effectively, and led to appropriate changes being made, including the major restructuring of a year programme. In a course validation for the Biology of Man course on the Combined Studies degree, the documentation, while adequate overall, would have benefited from more detail on the course content, teaching materials, and teaching methods and resources.

CONCLUSIONS

49. Nene College is an incorporated higher education institution with about 4000 HE and 1500 FE full-time equivalent students. It has responded energetically to the freedoms offered by incorporation and the funding changes that have been introduced in the sector. Steady growth over a decade was followed by an increase of over 40% in full-time students between 1989/90 and 1990/91. This sharp rise was the outcome of competitive bidding to the PCFC for marginally funded students, and most significantly by the college's entry into PCAS. A heavy demand for places led to the recruitment of a large number of fees-only students. The greatest increases have generally occurred on the less costly of the college's courses.

50. The quality of teaching and learning and the standards achieved by students are satisfactory, with most courses having good features. In general, the increased numbers of first-year students have been satisfactorily incorporated into existing programmes or absorbed by a number of newly introduced courses. This process was helped by the presence of some spare capacity in the institution and positive action by the senior staff of the college to achieve efficiency gains in the management of resources. New staff appointments have usually followed the enrolment of extra students, while improvements have been made to the equipment and accommodation where weaknesses have been identified.

51. The college recognises the need for change and has set an appropriate agenda for action. This includes: the introduction of new academic and administrative structures; the increased devolvement of academic responsibilities; the devolvement of resource management to faculties and the use of a formula driven model for resource allocation; and the development of a corporate accommodation strategy.

52. Forward planning will need to take greater account of the leap in recruitment, particularly as first-year cohorts work through to years two and three. At present, despite the many initiatives to handle growth, pressures resulting from a rapid rise in student numbers are evident. The issues that need to be kept under review, if the quality of the students' academic and social experience is to be maintained and developed in line with the college's aspirations, include the following:

- the need for teaching and learning methods that take account of larger and more diverse student groups;
- the impact of increased marking and tutorial loads on lecturers;
- the pressures upon specialist resources, particularly in respect of IT, and the emerging learning resource centres that are needed to support changes in teaching and learning methods;
- the need to ensure consistency and effective follow-up within the revised system of course monitoring and evaluation;
- the co-ordination of faculty activities, including curriculum and staff development;
- the levels of technical and administrative support;
- the availability and use of management information;—student and college services within the enlarged higher education community.

APPENDIX 1

POLYTECHNICS AND COLLEGES FUNDING COUNCIL: PROGRAMME AREAS

Programme 1
ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

Programme 2
BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Programme 3
SCIENCE

Programme 4
MATHEMATICS, COMPUTING AND IT

Programme 5
BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

Programme 6
HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Programme 7
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Programme 8
ART DESIGN AND PERFORMING ARTS

Programme 9
EDUCATION

APPENDIX 2

THE COURSES INSPECTED

BA/BSc Combined Studies subject areas as follows:

**Earth Sciences
Environmental Biology
French
Geography
Industrial Studies
Psychology
Sociology**

**BA Hons European Business
HND Business & Finance
HND Engineering
HND Engineering (computer hardware/software)
HND Graphic Design**