



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT DECEMBER 2000

# Queen Alexandra College

## SUMMARY

Queen Alexandra College offers residential vocational training for people with disabilities. Training in engineering, manufacturing and business administration is good. All students have the opportunity to achieve additional qualifications, alongside their main occupational qualification. Students' work experience in college enterprises and on work placements is well structured, but students are not assessed enough at work. Few students leave their programme early. Students receive high levels of personal support and have access to a range of support services. Initial assessment is rigorous and is used effectively to identify individual training needs. However, progress reviews are not used effectively to set targets and track progress towards students' qualification aims. The college promotes equality of opportunity and staff and students are strongly aware of equal opportunities. Monitoring of employers' equal opportunities policies and practice is weak. Staff are strongly committed to the college's values and benefit from extensive staff training. The college does not have systematic arrangements for evaluating the quality of training. There are no service-level agreements with subcontractors and internal verification practices are not consistent. Data are not used effectively to support planning and target-setting.

### GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	2
Manufacturing	2
Business administration	2

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

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good learning resources
- ◆ programmes designed to meet individual needs
- ◆ supportive work placements
- ◆ good retention rates
- ◆ effective promotion of equality of opportunity
- ◆ success in recruiting students from under-represented groups
- ◆ thorough initial assessment
- ◆ well-co-ordinated support services
- ◆ well-co-ordinated on- and off-the-job training

### KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities for workplace assessment
- ◆ unsatisfactory training in woodworking
- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities on work placements
- ◆ ineffective deployment of some staff
- ◆ no systematic arrangements to assure the quality of training
- ◆ inconsistent internal verification practices

## INTRODUCTION

1. Queen Alexandra College is a specialist residential college which provides vocational training for students who are blind or visually impaired. Many students have additional disabilities and/or learning difficulties. The college chooses to refer to all its learners as 'students'. The college is situated in Harborne, a residential district of Birmingham and was, until 1998, a part of Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind. The college is now an independent establishment and a registered charity. The college provides residential vocational training to enable people with disabilities to obtain and sustain employment. The residential accommodation is situated on the main campus and in houses in the local community. The college also provides social and leisure facilities to help students to develop healthier lifestyles and enjoy a variety of social activities. The college employs 103 members of staff. These include managers, teaching, welfare and maintenance staff, administrators and staff who manage the college's enterprises.

2. Queen Alexandra College is one of 14 specialist residential colleges funded directly through the Residential Training Unit (RTU), a department of the Government Office for the North East. The RTU requires that each residential training provider should provide a planned programme of practical training set out in an individual training plan for each student. In addition to the work contracted by the RTU, the college receives funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for its work with students aged 16 to 25 years. The Employment Service funds assessment and work-preparation programmes for students with disabilities who are undecided on their choice of vocation. The college also raises money for capital projects through fundraising. The scope of this inspection was restricted to the vocational training funded by the RTU.

3. Students are recruited to Queen Alexandra College from all parts of the UK. Eighty per cent of students are resident. At the time of inspection, there were 96 students, 48 of whom are following work-based learning for adults programmes funded by the RTU. Thirty-nine of the adult students are residential and nine have day places. Queen Alexandra College offers work-based training for adults in the occupational areas of engineering, manufacturing, business administration, retailing and customer service, hospitality and health, care and public services. Students work towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1 to 3 and other nationally recognised qualifications or follow other training programmes. Thirteen adults are on engineering programmes, 12 are following programmes in manufacturing, 16 are working towards a qualification in business administration, four are following programmes in retailing and customer service, one is in hospitality and two are on a health, care and public services programme. Training is provided on site by college staff in classrooms and real working environments. Many students acquire job skills through the completion of work tasks commissioned by outside customers. Three students are taking courses at other local colleges with support from staff from Queen Alexandra College. These courses are not provided at Queen Alexandra College. Students generally spend 12



months at the college although this may be extended if students need additional time to complete their training.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Queen Alexandra College was inspected by the FEFC in April 1998 and is used to conducting self-assessments using the FEFC's quality standards for self-assessment and inspection. The college completed its first self-assessment report of the work-based training it provides in August 2000 in preparation for this inspection. Responsibility for producing the report was taken by the vice-principal working with other members of the senior management team and teaching staff in each occupational area. Preparation of the report started in June 2000, following a meeting for all college staff on the process of TSC inspection and self-assessment. Staff contributed to the report through a series of meetings and working groups. Self-assessment was undertaken using the RTU's standards. The self-assessment report is not organised according to the occupational areas outlined in *Raising the Standard*. Engineering is not reported separately, but has been included in the manufacturing section of the report. The self-assessment report is detailed but many of the judgements are not sufficiently specific and the report does not reflect fully the diversity of provision. Some tutors had little involvement in the collection of evidence for self-assessment. The final draft of the self-assessment report was endorsed by the college's senior management team.

5. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 19 days at Queen Alexandra College in December 2000. They inspected training programmes for people with disabilities funded through the RTU in the occupational areas of engineering, manufacturing and business administration. There were few students in retailing and customer service, hospitality and health, or in care and public services, so these areas were not inspected. Inspectors examined a wide range of documents, including students' personal files, achievement and progress data, RTU contracts and audit reports, management and quality assurance documents and minutes of meetings. Inspectors observed 11 instruction sessions and visited one work placement. They interviewed a disability employment adviser, 26 students and held 53 meetings with college staff, including the principal, members of the senior management team, teaching staff, internal verifiers, support staff and administrators. They inspected students' files and work portfolios. The following table shows the grades awarded to the training sessions observed by inspectors:

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Engineering	0	3	1	0	0	4
Manufacturing	0	4	1	0	0	5
Business administration	0	2	0	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11</b>

## OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

### Engineering

### Grade 2

6. There are 13 students on work-based learning for adults programmes in engineering. Of these, nine are working towards an NVQ at level 2 in engineering machining, three are following an NVQ at level 1 in performing manufacturing operations (assembly) and one is registered on a non-NVQ manufacturing processes programme. College staff do all theoretical and practical training and assessment in college workshops. Assessors observe students carrying out work-based tasks in the workshops and evaluate the evidence that students have gathered in their portfolios. Staff are occupationally experienced and hold appropriate trainers' and assessors' awards. They can also read Braille. Training at the college lasts for up to 12 months. Students generally undertake six weeks of work placements within the programme, either in college or with outside employers, usually close to the students' homes. All students are offered the opportunity to take additional key skills qualifications. An integrated approach to the teaching and assessment of key skills is being developed. There are five specialist engineering staff in the division. They are supported by a team of learning support assistants and other professional college staff. Of the 56 students who began an engineering programme since 1997, 31 completed their individual training programme. Achievement rates are satisfactory. The self-assessment report included engineering within the manufacturing section. The self-assessment report identified the same issues as both strengths and weaknesses. The opposing aspects of these judgements were supported by different evidence lists. Inspectors considered that some of the strengths were no more than would be expected as normal practice and that some strengths and weaknesses were more appropriate to the generic aspects of the report. Inspectors agreed with other strengths in the report. They identified additional strengths and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ well-equipped workshops
- ◆ individual training programmes to suit student needs
- ◆ supportive work placements
- ◆ strong emphasis on health and safety
- ◆ good retention rates

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ missed opportunities for workplace assessment
- ◆ some students not aware of progress in their qualification

7. The engineering workshop provides a welcoming environment. The lighting is good and it is clean and spacious. It is well equipped and laid out in a realistic way to simulate a real working environment. It contains modern machinery which fully meets industrial standards. Very little adaptation has been made to the machines, enabling students to gain confidence and experience using similar machinery to that which they will find when they enter industry. Hand tools and machine cutters are less modern and not so plentiful. The assembly area space allows flexibility. Workshop furniture can be re-arranged to suit the variety of activities undertaken by students. Tactile and audible measuring gauges are used, along with a number of adapted training materials in Braille and on tape. Raised drawings and magnifying equipment are also used by students.

8. The engineering courses provide students with good training which takes account of their individual needs and the range of their physical and learning disabilities. Most off-the-job training is carried out on an individual basis and staff adapt their teaching styles to suit each individual. Students are given realistic but challenging targets and are encouraged to work independently. The students strongly influence their training programme. Each student has an individual timetable, formally reviewed every six weeks, but which can be amended or adapted at any time to accommodate changes in circumstances. For example, one student who is experiencing increasing difficulties with night vision has an additional mobility session timetabled into his programme as the days get shorter. Credit is given for relevant prior learning, which aids progression. A student who had extensive engineering experience before starting at the college had his knowledge accredited and is concentrating on learning new skills to operate computer-controlled engineering machinery.

9. Work placements provide good support for students. Employers used for work placements are chosen with care. Considerable support is given to prepare employers to work with the students and students report that they feel comfortable and safe in their placements. Placements for the engineering manufacturing programme include bathroom-fittings manufacturers and other light engineering companies. Engineering machining students have placements in commercial industry and sheltered employment. These work placements frequently result in the offer of permanent employment. The college business enterprise unit tenders for engineering work for the college and students gain real work experience by fulfilling these contracts. The contracts include manufacturing component parts to high levels of accuracy, packaging materials and addressing and sorting materials for mail-shots. The contract work is carried out as a typical assembly line operation, with each student taking turns at each stage of the process.

10. A high priority is given to health and safety training. College staff implement rigorous health and safety practices and students have a good awareness of safety issues. Before using a machine the student is given a demonstration, diagrams of the machine and detailed instructions on use and aspects of safety. Students using

machines are closely supervised until they achieve competence and they are then given regular reminders to ensure safe working.

11. Student retention rates are steadily improving. The high level of support given by all staff who work closely with students and the good relationships between staff and students support effective training and has a significant impact on students' motivation. Retention has increased from 50 per cent in 1997-98 to 73 per cent in 1999-2000 and is currently 100 per cent for 2000-01.

12. There is not enough assessment in the work place. All assessment takes place in the college by observation, assignments and questioning to check understanding and theoretical knowledge. Insufficient use is made of work placements for providing witness statements and additional portfolio evidence. One portfolio examined by inspectors contained photographs, but this was unusual. The contract work undertaken by the college provides assessment opportunities in an industrial setting but these are not always taken.

13. Records of an individual student's progress are maintained by teaching staff and progress is also recorded in the student's portfolio. Information about unit achievement is also discussed at the six-weekly reviews. However, this discussion often only concentrates on what has been achieved. Some students are not aware of which units are outstanding or what they need to do in order to achieve a full qualification. One student who had completed the NVQ was unaware of this.

## **Manufacturing**

## **Grade 2**

14. There are 12 students on the manufacturing programmes. Six students are undertaking a qualification in cycle mechanics and repairs, two are working towards NVQs in signwork at level 2 and one is following an NVQ in glass decoration at level 2. Three students are undertaking an award in handcrafted furniture. Some of the students completed a six- to 12-week prevocational course at the college before starting the manufacturing programme. Manufacturing programmes last for up to 12 months. Students are able to take additional qualifications and mobility training. Training takes place in the manufacturing workshops. The college manages commercial cycle repair and signwork operations on the college campus where students gain further work experience. Students undertake work placements in cycle repair shops and a variety of manufacturing companies, particularly in the Birmingham area. Assessments are carried out in the workshops and the commercial operations. There are 15 staff in manufacturing, 12 with teaching qualifications. Eleven of the staff have or are working towards assessor qualifications. Staff have substantial occupational experience, including managing businesses. In 1997-98 29 per cent of students successfully completed their individual training plan. In 1998-99 71 per cent completed their training plan and 29 per cent left without a qualification. In 1999-2000 this improvement has been sustained, 50 per cent of students have completed their programmes successfully and the remaining 50 per cent are still in training. Weaknesses in woodworking were not identified in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed



that the quality of training and the resources are strengths. They identified additional strengths and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

### STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training
- ◆ good workshop resources
- ◆ training responsive to students' needs
- ◆ good retention rates

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor tracking of students' progress
- ◆ unsatisfactory training in woodworking

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*A woodworking student wishing to gain employment making garden furniture is developing these skills in the college workshops. One piece of furniture needed routing, a job the student could not do because of his visual impairment. The staff developed a routing jig along with the student so the student could complete the task.*

15. The training programmes are tailored to individual needs and are designed to give each student the skills needed to prepare them for employment and the achievement of qualifications. There are as many teaching staff as there are students, which enables staff to provide individual coaching and allows each student to progress at a pace that matches their ability to learn. All tutors are aware of the disabilities of individual students and take this into account when giving training or tutorials. Tutors guide students in the workshops with great care and attention, providing sufficient support and assistance while encouraging independent working wherever possible.

16. All the workshops are well equipped and some contain the most recent equipment available on the market. For example, the signworking department has a plastic laser cutter. Three of the sections in the manufacturing area have commercial ventures attached to them. This allows the students to work on real tasks, while still in the college workshops. This enables students to experience the commercial pressures of working to deadlines and meeting customer requirements that they will face when they go out on work placements and gain employment. Students also have the opportunity to work in real working environments, such as the cycle repair shop where they gain experience in customer care when dealing with members of the public.

17. Training is responsive to students' needs and all students have the opportunity to take further training in addition to their main occupational qualification. Students can, for example, take qualifications or training in English, mathematics and computing. When a student identifies a potential job opportunity staff discuss and agree immediate training priorities to enable the student to prepare successfully for the job application and interview. For example, one student identified a vacancy in which he was interested shortly before he was due to hold a review with his tutor. Consequently a significant part of that review was dedicated to deciding what the student required to support his application.

18. The retention of students on manufacturing programmes is good. The retention rate has been improving each year since 1997-98. In that year 71 per cent of students left without achieving a qualification. In the following year this had fallen to 29 per cent. Since April 1999 no students have left their programme early.

19. Training in woodworking is unsatisfactory. Until recently students had been undertaking training that did not lead to any accredited qualification. The training has been poorly managed. Lesson plans are not used and individual training sessions are not part of a structured training plan. Student files have been mislaid and students have not been developing portfolios of evidence. The college has recognised these problems and a newly appointed member of staff is putting in place the appropriate arrangements, including the introduction of an appropriate qualification.

20. The tracking of students' progress is weak. Reviews and observations take place on a regular basis and the student's performance is recorded on a pro-forma which is then filed. In order to determine the progress made by individual students staff and students have to scan each review for information. There is no overall tracking system which would enable the student and the tutor to see, at a glance, the progress that has been made and what remains to be achieved.

## **Business administration**

## **Grade 2**

21. There are 16 students on business administration programmes. The programmes normally last for one year, but can be extended. Ten students are following NVQ information technology courses, seven at level 1 and three at level 2. Six are taking NVQ courses in administration, three at level 1 and three at level 2. Some of these students are not working towards a full NVQ but are taking units or parts of units. Students are recruited nationally and on joining the college they receive an induction which lasts for one week and includes an introduction to the occupational programme and an explanation of the qualification structure. Most training takes place in the college. Students are trained in practical skills and are taught theory. Students attend weekly job-search sessions which include writing a curriculum vitae, searching the internet for jobs, letter writing and preparation for interviews. Students gain work experience at the college business centre and at work placements. The college has difficulty securing suitable work placements. One trainee was on placement at a local charity at the time of the inspection. Students' progress is reviewed every six weeks, by a tutor when they are in college, and by an employment officer when they are at a work placement. There are eight business administration training staff. They are all suitably qualified and experienced. Of the 22 students who enrolled on courses in 2000-01, 10 completed their individual training plan, five left with a full NVQ and nine students gained additional qualifications. Five students gained employment, four left without completing their training plan and six are still in training. Inspectors considered the strengths in the self-assessment report to be no more than normal practice.

They identified additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good training and coaching sessions
- ◆ additional qualifications gained by all students
- ◆ supportive work placements
- ◆ programmes designed to meet individual needs

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ missed opportunities for assessment on- and off-the-job
- ◆ poor management of real work tasks

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

*Staff have set up weekly meetings with all students. Students take turns to chair, set the agenda and write minutes. Sessions are recorded and students write the minutes with audio typing equipment. This gives students confidence to speak in public and an opportunity to gain evidence towards their qualification.*

22. Training sessions are of high quality and take place in small, well-managed groups during which students receive individual coaching. Staff are all well qualified and all have training in Braille as well as teaching and assessment qualifications. Tutors are experienced in meeting a wide variety of needs and take full account of students' abilities, experience and preferences and learning is paced accordingly. Staff have developed good working relationships with students and are responsive to their needs. Students enjoy training sessions and express satisfaction with the support and guidance they receive from tutors.

23. All students study for additional qualifications. Single-subject qualifications taken by students include word and text processing, mail merge, audio typing, the switchboard operator service certificate and presentation of paperwork. All students are taking at least two extra qualifications, and some have taken as many as eight. One student has achieved a word-processing diploma at level 3 with distinction. These qualifications are highly sought after by employers and increase students' employability.

24. All programmes are planned to meet individual students' needs. Where appropriate, students are encouraged to progress quickly through the NVQ or given extensions to enable them to complete their training. All teaching and coaching is adapted to meet individual requirements. Some students' sight deteriorates during their training programme and staff respond promptly to make the necessary changes to qualifications, teaching styles and equipment. Training facilities are good and include well-furnished training rooms, equipped with networked computers, appropriate software packages and office equipment to enable students to acquire the skills needed in a modern office. Machines have been specially adapted and all have additional software that enables students to see text in extra large size, or with coloured backgrounds, as well as enabling students to hear what is being typed.

25. Employers provide good support to students. Work placements offer students useful occupational experience and opportunities to develop their skills. For example, a three-month placement at a local charity has provided a student with the opportunity to work on reception, to use a switchboard unaided, to audio type and to meet and greet visitors. She is treated as part of the staff team and is included in all social events. The student is also provided with meals and residential accommodation. Placements help students gain confidence and a sense of independence. Placements are carefully matched to students' needs and interests and are difficult to obtain. Employers offering placements willingly provide extra support where students have additional needs. In some instances, employers make a member of staff available to assist the student when they are finding their way around office buildings. Placements at the local council offices offer a wide range of duties including telephone work, filing, audio typing and reception duties. A placement at the local police headquarters has enabled a student to gain experience audio typing recorded interviews.

26. There are a number of missed opportunities for assessment, both on and off the job. The employment team visits work placements to review students' progress. Assessors rarely visit work placements, even when they are local. Naturally occurring evidence that is generated while students are in the workplace is not assessed. Witness testimonies are not requested until part way through a placement and opportunities to observe students are not always taken. While in college, students are given real work tasks from within the college as well as from external customers. Although tutors attempt to simulate a real work environment by interrupting students and trying to create the pressure of a normal office the interruptions and subsequent student responses are not recorded. As a result, evidence relating to the qualification units 'working with others' or 'improving one's own learning' is lost. In administration, the assessment of tasks for external customers lacks rigour. Students work on these tasks during unsupervised sessions and as their hours are not recorded it is not possible to judge how long the student has taken to complete the task.

27. The management of real work tasks is poor. The lack of work placements increases the importance of the real work tasks in college and the work commissioned from external customers. This aspect of training is not used to best effect. Students following programmes in information technology select the real work task they want to complete. In these cases, the students' competence in all areas may not be being fully tested. Students who are good at word processing may, for example, choose word-processing work instead of choosing a challenging task in another skill area. Tutors do not apply tight deadlines to the completion of real work tasks and fail to recreate the pressures that exist in the workplace.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

### Grade 2

28. Queen Alexandra College has an equal opportunities policy which is reviewed annually as part of the review of the operational plan and is updated as necessary. The principal has overall responsibility for equal opportunities throughout the college. There are procedures relating to staff and student recruitment, grievance, mobility and harassment. Staff have recently been issued with an undated version of the equal opportunities policy. Students are given a copy of the policy during their induction programme. The college collects information on staff and students relating to age, ethnicity, gender and disabilities. Of the 103 permanent staff, 54 are men. None of the twelve staff from minority ethnic groups are teachers or managers. Thirteen staff have disabilities. Most staff live in the college locality in which 12 per cent of the local population is from a minority ethnic group. Of the 48 students on programmes funded by the RTU, 38 are men. Nine students are from minority ethnic groups. In its self-assessment report, the college identified five strengths and cited the same five statements as weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that proposed by the college, but is based upon different strengths and weaknesses from those in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ effective promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ wide range of facilities enables students to access training
- ◆ flexible working arrangements for staff
- ◆ success in recruiting students from under-represented groups

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ failure to monitor grievance and harassment procedures
- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities on work placements

29. In recognition of its high importance, responsibility for equal opportunities lies with the principal. Equal opportunities is central to the college's mission statement and has a high profile throughout the college. The equal opportunities policy is clear and includes definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, victimisation and harassment. The college is self-critical and recognises the need to update its application forms for staff and students to ensure that information on applicants' gender, ethnicity and disability do not unnecessarily influence recruitment decisions. Work on this is progressing. However, arrangements for recruitment are unbiased and transparent and ensure that staff are appointed according to their merit and suitability against a person specification. While the staffing profile reflects that of the local community, the college does not mention its commitment to equal opportunities in job advertisements. The college had identified that further work needs to be done with regard to the employment of people from minority

ethnic groups. It recognises that all employees from minority ethnic groups are in care and support sectors, with none employed in teaching or managerial posts. College publicity material is produced in a range of media including Braille, large print and audio tapes, to ensure that it is accessible to all. Staff and students have a high awareness of equal opportunities and demonstrate the principles of the college policy during the course of their everyday work. Staff encourage students to develop independence, exercise their rights and take responsibility for their own decisions. The atmosphere is one of mutual respect.

30. The college has a wide range of measures in place to adapt the environment and provide support to enable students to access training. There is a transcription and learning centre which converts standard text into large print (both 18 and 26 point), Braille and Moon. This facility is used for students and visually impaired staff. Course handouts, including diagrams and notes, are systematically converted for students' use. For staff who are visually impaired, college policies, payslips, memos and notices are also produced in their preferred medium which may be Braille, Moon or large print. The college environment has been adapted to include Braille notices, room numbers and decorative schemes to provide maximum colour contrast. There is a wide range of equipment such as large computer monitors, scanners, close circuit televisions and computer software, to enable students to read text. Specialist aids and equipment are also provided for students' use at work placements.

31. One of the most significant barriers to employment for people with visual impairments is lack of mobility and the ability to travel independently. The college places a good emphasis on developing students' mobility skills and has a team of three staff who specialise in providing such training. Students attend for one or two sessions each week and are helped to develop their confidence and skills in the use of canes and in travelling independently. There is also specialist support for students with hearing impairments. Students are supplied with aids, adaptations and training in sign language. Many college staff have qualifications in British Sign Language and are capable of communicating with students who have hearing impairments. The college has a prayer room which is available to all.

32. The college adopts a flexible approach to working hours for staff, enabling them to combine work with domestic and other commitments. Examples include provision of paid paternity leave for a new father, adaptations to timetables for staff with particular medical or other appointments, and hours for part time staff being negotiated to fit around school times. Staff who bring guide dogs to work are allowed time during working hours to exercise their dogs.

33. The college has taken successful measures to increase the number of women and people from minority ethnic groups in training. Marketing material and literature has been reviewed and changed to illustrate a wide range of people across all training programmes. Arrangements for college staff attending exhibitions and publicity events have been altered to include both a male and a female staff member, to ensure that prospective students have a choice of people to approach. Efforts are made to create learning environments which are appealing to

men and women, particularly in engineering, where colour schemes and the layout of workshops are designed to provide a female friendly atmosphere. The proportion of women on residential training programmes for people with disabilities is low nationally. The average figure for all RTU colleges is 14 per cent. Twenty per cent of students funded by the RTU at Queen Alexandra College are women. Similarly, the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups (19 per cent) compares favourably with national rates.

34. Arrangements for monitoring compliance with the grievance and harassment procedures are unsatisfactory. There are no central records maintained of complaints made, action taken and final outcomes. Managers are not aware of the full extent of complaints made, as they are often dealt with without being recorded. The procedure states that complaints should be initially made to the tutor. The student is required to negotiate a timescale for a reply to the grievance by the tutor. This arrangement places a heavy responsibility on the student and does not cater for instances where the tutor is the cause for complaint. The college harassment procedure is comprehensive and contains a definition of harassment. Where allegations of harassment are made and the resulting investigation does not result in disciplinary procedures no records of the incident are kept.

35. The college does not ensure that equality of opportunity is assured for students when on work placements. Prior to a student being placed with an employer, an initial vetting process is carried out by the college. This process focuses mainly on health and safety issues. The college does not obtain a copy of the employer's equal opportunities policy, nor does it evaluate the quality of the policy. Most employers are large organisations, including charities and local authorities, and their adherence to good practice on equal opportunities is left to trust.

## **Trainee support**

## **Grade 2**

36. Students are recruited to Queen Alexandra College from all parts of the UK. Some students are referred to the college by disability employment advisers, others make direct contact with the college through its website, newspaper advertisements or at exhibitions and open days. An increasing number of students join programmes funded by the RTU on completion of an initial assessment and work preparation course at the college. Prospective students are invited to visit the college for a day to meet staff and see all aspects of college life. They have a series of assessments and an initial interview during which they are given information and guidance on the programmes available. All students receive an induction to the college as a whole and to the relevant occupational area, and details of this are recorded. An individual training plan is drawn up during the induction period. Learning support assistants work with teaching staff to provide additional support during vocational training and in the learning centre. The college employs specialist teams of medical staff, residential care staff and counsellors to meet students' needs. All trainees are allocated a personal tutor when they join the college. This tutor and the head of division reviews students' progress every six

weeks. In its self-assessment report, the college identified four strengths and cited the same statements as weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with one strength and one weakness. They identified additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ thorough initial assessment
- ◆ well co-ordinated support services
- ◆ high levels of personal support to meet individual needs
- ◆ well-established counselling service
- ◆ extensive links with external agencies

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ some poorly maintained student records
- ◆ poor integration of literacy and numeracy

37. Students' assessment on their first visit to the college covers key skills, residential requirements, mobility and medical condition. The assessment is thorough and comprehensive and gathers information from a range of specialist services in the college to provide a full picture of the student's prior learning, vocational interests and specialist support requirements. After the initial assessment students have an interview with a senior member of staff to discuss their occupational preferences and employment aims. Within a week of the initial visit the assessment team holds a meeting at which they each present their report on the student and agree how best to meet the requirements identified during the assessment. The student and other interested parties are informed of the outcome of the assessment within two weeks.

38. With a student's agreement, information on their medical condition is passed to training staff so that staff are aware of the implications for training. There is regular liaison between the medical centre, the mobility team, care workers and training staff to ensure that information concerning students' medical conditions and changing support needs is shared and training programmes adapted to meet these changing needs. For example, the medical team will inform training staff of the implications of a deterioration of vision for safety in the workshops, or the effect of a loss of stamina due to medical condition, on the likelihood of accidents. The medical centre provides awareness training for staff and guidance on medication and the effects of medical conditions. Medical records are held securely and separately from students' personal files in order to safeguard confidentiality.

39. Students at the college receive high levels of personal support. The benefits officer is a highly experienced member of staff with a wide knowledge of benefits entitlements for people with disabilities, such as the disability living allowance,



income support and housing benefits. Other issues dealt with by this officer include housing, financial problems and travel. The college funds essential travel costs incurred by students when attending job interviews or visiting their family in an emergency. All members of staff have a good understanding of their responsibilities and know who should deal with particular issues that arise. Students are visited frequently at work placements and staff take students to job interviews where necessary. The college has negotiated flexible timetables with the RTU to enable a student to meet her childcare responsibilities during term-time and in the school holidays. The college has recently set up a monitoring project for students who have recently found employment. Former students act as 'buddies' providing support to these students to enable them to sustain employment. Practical support is also provided to students when they leave the college and find work in Birmingham by offering them rented accommodation in college houses.

40. The college provides a confidential counselling service that works with about 10 per cent of students at any one time. The service is flexible, widely available in the daytime and the evening and deals with a range of issues including alcohol abuse, the emotional difficulties associated with sight loss and the difficulties created for students by living away from home. Students are informed about the service during induction and it is publicised through leaflets in the students' centre and in college hostels and houses. The counselling team provides training for staff to ensure that they are aware of what the service can offer students and of its confidential nature. The counsellors have a good network of links to national and local counselling and support services and put students in contact with local services when they leave to ensure that they have continuing support where this is needed.

41. The college has extensive links with a wide range of external agencies. The medical team maintains close liaison with doctors, hospitals and specialists to plan and manage students' medical conditions. The college works closely with the national network of disability employment advisers, the benefits agency, social services departments and national organisations such as the disability living centre.

42. The process for drawing-up individual training plans and maintaining student records is not systematic. There is no consistency in the information that is kept in trainees' personal files or in the information that is held centrally or within the divisions. Not all progress reviews include short-term achievable targets that would guide students and the student action plan is not updated to reflect students' progress and achievements. The college recognised this as a weakness in the self-assessment report and has devised a single document that will include all information about an individual student. This has been developed but has not yet been introduced.

43. Literacy and numeracy support is not sufficiently integrated with students' vocational training. There are few resources to enable students to use vocationally related materials during literacy and numeracy support sessions. The college has made a commitment to introduce key skills training and link this to students' occupational training but has not yet developed a strategy for this.

## Management of training

## Grade 3

44. The college achieved independent status in 1998, having been part of the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind since 1904. The college has recently widened its recruitment policy and now contracts with the RTU to provide work-based training for adults with a range of disabilities as well as those with visual impairments. Students join programmes throughout the year and up to 58 adult students are in training or on work placements at any one time. A senior management team of nine, led by the principal, manages training programmes. The principal reports to a board of governors which consists of 12 members. The governing body meets six times a year and is supported by a finance and general purposes committee, a student services committee, a curriculum committee and a human resources committee. The college has a three-year strategic plan and an annual operational plan which is approved by the governing body. The senior managers meet with their staff weekly. There are also regular cross-curriculum meetings, such as internal verifiers' meetings. The vice-principal is responsible for the financial management of contracts, physical resources and all student matters including marketing, assessment and pastoral support. Three heads of division are responsible for work preparation and training in the occupational areas. They are also responsible for quality assurance, the curriculum and resources across the college. Other senior managers are responsible for facilities management, residential care and the college's commercial enterprises. The college is working towards the Investor in People award. The self-assessment report identified the same issues as both strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that proposed by the college, but is based on different strengths and weaknesses from those in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ strong staff commitment to college values
- ◆ well-co-ordinated on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ comprehensive staff training
- ◆ productive links with external organisation

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ staff procedures not fully recorded
- ◆ insufficient target-setting for staff
- ◆ ineffective deployment of some staff
- ◆ poor use of data for management planning

45. The college's ethos and values are strongly promoted by the senior management team. All staff are fully aware of the college's mission statement and are committed to the values on which it is based. Their commitment to support all

students is clearly demonstrated. Students are encouraged to develop their skills and achieve their vocational aspirations and a strong emphasis is placed by all staff on the development of practical skills to support independent living. Staff regularly undertake additional work to ensure that students' learning is as effective as possible.

46. The training that takes place in college and the training students receive while on work placement is well co-ordinated. The college manages a number of business enterprises which allow students to gain on-the-job training and experience of a real working environment. Liaison between staff ensures that this work experience is closely linked to their training and complements it. Students' work placements usually last for one or two weeks. Many students are found placements in their home town. The employment team travel extensively to secure placements and to ensure that employers understand the needs of the students and that the placement is relevant to the student's broader training programme.

47. Wide-ranging staff development opportunities, appropriate to staff needs, are available to all staff. There is a budget for staff development and a minimum of 13 days each year is set aside for staff training. The training and development needs of all staff are identified through annual appraisals. Staff are encouraged to identify training and development requirements. Staff attend external courses and are supported in their studies for professional qualifications. All teaching staff are expected to undertake the course leading to the advanced certificate in education. Additionally, all staff are trained in a wide range of support areas such as mobility, sign language, managing students with Asperger's syndrome and Braille. However, there is no systematic evaluation of the results of training.

48. Good links have been established with a wide range of organisations to the benefit of the students. For example, the college is involved in a project with a national financial institution which is keen to increase the number of people with disabilities that it employs. Links have also been established with an institute for visual impairment in Finland. This will result in an exchange of students and staff. As well as being an opportunity to share good practice such exchanges raise students' morale and commitment. The college markets a carbon fibre cane made in the United States which is stronger than the standard aluminium cane used in this country. As well as earning significant income for the college this initiative has introduced the college to a number of new organisations and relationships are being developed to the advantage of students in terms of placements and employment opportunities.

49. Not all procedures covering the recruitment, induction, appraisal and development of staff have been fully recorded. Those that have are not readily available to staff. Staff were given training in the appraisal process when it was revised in 1999. However, new staff who have joined the college within the last year are not aware of the details of the scheme. The college is aware of this weakness and plans to collate all the relevant procedures in a staff handbook that will be given to all staff.

50. There are a number of college-wide targets, many set by the funding body. However, these targets are not broken down to a divisional level and are not used effectively by staff within occupational areas to support action-planning and the agreement of measurable performance indicators. The individual objectives agreed with staff during the appraisal process are not linked to these targets.

51. The deployment of some staff is not managed effectively. Some staff have multiple roles in the college and work for more than one manager. While there is clarity about the responsibilities related to the different roles, there has been insufficient planning to ensure that staff are not required to do different duties at the same time. For example, occasionally staff are requested to do an additional task when they should be supervising students. This has resulted in members of staff leaving students unsupervised at short notice. There is insufficient contingency planning to cover staff sickness. Two senior members of staff have been absent for some time and this has resulted in delays in assessment, cancelled classes and a lack of supervision on a number of occasions.

52. The college has a reliable management system for the collection of data and is able to respond to most requests for statistical information quickly. The college collects data on the proportion of students remaining on programmes, their achievement of qualifications and their progression to employment. These figures are used to monitor the college's contractual performance. However, data are not used fully to evaluate training and make plans for its improvement. Data are not used at divisional level to help determine which occupational areas need more attention.

### **Quality assurance**

### **Grade 4**

53. The annual residential training handbook, issued by the RTU to all residential training providers, sets out the requirements for quality assurance with which the college must comply. Each provider of residential training is required to implement a system of annual self-assessment which leads to continuous development and improvement. The college has quality assurance arrangements covering all aspects of its provision, although these are not all written down and some are in draft format. Development of quality assurance systems and procedures is co-ordinated by a member of the senior management team. The college meets awarding body requirements in respect of its quality assurance arrangements. Feedback is gathered from students and employers through satisfaction surveys. Students and senior staff meet fortnightly to exchange views. Staff consultation takes place during the termly staff meetings and the monthly divisional meetings. Data are collected and used to measure performance and to support continuous improvement. However, the range of students' disabilities encountered varies from year to year, so a year-by-year comparison of qualification achievements and jobs gained is difficult to evaluate. In its self-assessment report, the college identified four strengths and cited the same statements as weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with two strengths. They identified an

additional strength and several weaknesses not recognised in the self-assessment report. Inspectors awarded a grade which was lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ comprehensive quality assurance policies
- ◆ effective action-planning
- ◆ improvements result from self-evaluation by staff

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ no systematic arrangements to assure the quality of training
- ◆ inconsistent internal verification practices
- ◆ no service-level agreements with subcontractors
- ◆ self-assessment process lacks rigour

54. The college has a comprehensive set of quality assurance policies, which are grouped under the four major headings of management and governance, human resources, physical resources and the curriculum. These are supported by a series of procedures which cover most aspects of the training process and the college's activities. Some are still in draft format or have only recently been introduced. Staff are informed promptly of changes to policies and procedures. This information is disseminated by the principal's secretary, during staff meetings and through the staff room notice board and the weekly events-calendar. Recent amendments include the revision of the college's mission statement and the equal opportunities policy, which have been copied to each member of staff and are displayed on notice boards around the college. There is, however, no check to ensure that the most recent policy is being implemented.

55. Action-planning is a regular activity which results from external inspections, annual programme evaluations and other activities. Action plans are well structured, with realistic timescales and outcomes. Progress towards meeting the objectives within action plans and achieving the intended outcomes is monitored by the manager responsible. Overall responsibility is shared between the principal, who oversees action plans relating to external agencies, and the vice-principal who monitors student issues.

56. The college's management style is open and senior managers are accessible to all staff. All recommendations for improvements to training programmes are considered and discussed by the senior management team and a number of improvements have been introduced as a result of self-assessments undertaken by staff. Examples include equipment purchased to bring workshop facilities to industrial standards and changes in the qualifications offered to students. For example, a qualification in telephone sales was not achieving the expected number

of trainees into jobs, owing to the pressure on students to meet sales targets. Staff investigated the possibility of offering alternative qualifications and an NVQ in processing information using telecommunications has been introduced. To improve quality, regular observation of training has been introduced under the direction of a working group of staff, nominated by their peers. This has been piloted within the college and the working group is evaluating procedures and making recommendations for change before extending the process to all staff.

57. Quality assurance arrangements are not systematically reviewed or evaluated and the college does not have systematic arrangements for evaluating the quality of training. The college does not have a formal system of internal audit and although some procedures are monitored the arrangements are informal and internal auditing is not yet fully established in most areas. Regular inspections are carried out by external agencies but the college does not have a system to ensure that policies and procedures are being implemented consistently across the college. When good practice is identified it is shared, but the sharing of good practice is not co-ordinated across the college. A forum to enable staff to identify and exchange good practice has recently been established.

58. Although assessment and internal verification procedures meet the requirements of the awarding body, internal verification practices lack consistency. College-wide systems for internal verification have been developed but, because of staff sickness, have not been fully implemented. Newly qualified assessors have not been fully briefed and are not aware of all the procedures for internal verification. There are no formal systems for sharing good practice and staff are insufficiently knowledgeable about the new arrangements. Opportunities to develop a planned approach to assessment and internal verification are not taken and there is insufficient sampling of assessments to ensure consistency.

59. The college has no formal service-level agreements with its subcontractors. Subcontractors, mainly colleges of further education, are used to deliver training not available at the college. The college has relied heavily on the reputations of the organisations involved to assure the quality of their training. The college does not monitor subcontractors' performance and has little control over the quality of subcontracted services.

60. The self-assessment report the college produced for inspection was the first it had produced for work-based training. A draft report was compiled by a team of four college managers and shared with programme managers. Some staff were not fully involved in the self-assessment process. Overall, the self-assessment report was insufficiently rigorous. The final report follows the general format of *Raising the Standard* in the presentation of occupational and generic areas, although engineering was included in the manufacturing section and was not given a separate grade. Inspectors had difficulty in identifying the strengths and weaknesses attributed to each aspect as the same statements were cited as both strengths and weaknesses. The evidence used to support the judgements was comprehensive. Inspectors agreed with three of the seven self-assessment grades. They awarded a higher grade for each of the occupational areas inspected and a



lower grade for quality assurance. The self-assessment report contains an action plan, with identified staff responsibilities and target dates for implementation but without measurable performance indicators.