Inspection and FE Colleges
An AoC discussion paper

Mick Fletcher | March 2015
Foreword

AoC and its members are always seeking to contribute to long-term discussions on a range of policy areas that affect our colleges and students. In my roles as a member of the AoC Board and Chair of AoC’s Quality Portfolio Group, I commend this AoC-commissioned independent report from Mick Fletcher. It focuses on inspection and quality improvement in colleges.

The report has been discussed at the Quality Portfolio Group, a group of 20 college principals, some with very recent experience of inspection and all of whom have witnessed the changes to inspection over the years. Although the Group accepts that the role of Ofsted in inspecting education and training for 14 to 19-year-olds is likely to remain unchanged, there are a number of questions about Ofsted’s role in inspecting post-19 provision. In this area of work, there is renewed emphasis upon the role of the employer and provision is increasingly financed by contributions from individuals and/or their employers. Plans to enhance and improve information available to the public, for example outcome based success measures, may well raise the question of whether it is right and timely to move away from a traditional inspection process for adult education and training.

Based upon the comments and responses to this paper, AoC may investigate different approaches to safeguarding standards and quality in relation to post-19 provision, including the best practice evident in the sector on peer review and challenge.

This report is intended to stimulate discussion, to gather views and to encourage a debate on how the college sector can realise sustained improvement for all the people we serve. In the immediate term, AoC continues to work with Ofsted to improve the sharing of good practice, particularly in relation to teaching, learning and assessment of maths and English. AoC is also calling for clarity within inspection reports, indicating what has been covered by the inspection, and more detail on the new inspection framework due in September 2015.

To comment on this report please contact David Corke, Director of Education and Skills Policy on, david_corke@aoc.co.uk or 020 7034 9900 by Friday 3 April 2015.

Best wishes

Dame Asha Khemka
Executive summary

1. The purpose of this report is to inform debate about the future of quality assurance and accountability in English further education. It does so by describing the history of inspection in England, presenting evidence as to its impact and outlining the arrangements made in similar sectors in other jurisdictions. It considers a number of alternative options and concludes with clear proposals for change.

2. Inspection, along with other internal and external arrangements for quality assurance, has played a central role in the operation of the FE sector since the incorporation of colleges in 1993. Since that time the sector has experienced different approaches to external inspection, initially from agencies specific to the sector but more recently from Ofsted, the national body responsible for inspecting all education (other than HE) and children's services. Over time the emphasis of inspection has moved away from supporting improvement and become more narrowly focussed on accountability.

3. Inspection needs to be seen alongside other quality assurance and accountability mechanisms. In English FE external inspection has operated alongside institutional self-assessment and an evolving set of performance indicators, some of which define minimum acceptable standards. Its impact has been strengthened by links to funding and most recently by the new role of FE Commissioner.

4. A range of other agencies, from awarding organisation to financial auditors, inspect or assess aspects of FE provision. Colleges offering higher education also need to engage with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Current proposals to award ‘chartered status’ to colleges that demonstrate consistently high standards are merely the latest in a long line of similar initiatives.

5. The majority of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries inspect schools that provide compulsory education, though their approaches and emphases differ. Vocational schools for this age group are usually subject to the same processes; however, their application to post-compulsory education and work based learning is rare. This may reflect the fact that FE in the UK is unusual in combining initial education with continuing vocational education for adults in the same institution.

6. Evidence on the impact of inspection is mixed. The introduction of a national system of inspection in FE was associated with improvements in the retention and achievement of students and feedback from institutions was generally positive. At least some of the improvement, however, is likely to have resulted from better and more timely performance monitoring and financial penalties for institutions with poor retention and achievement rates.

7. There is evidence (not just from FE) that ‘high stakes’ inspection has sometimes encouraged ‘gaming’ behaviour and perverse outcomes such as ‘cream skimming’. It can also encourage institutions to focus on the perceived preferences of inspectors rather than their own judgements of the needs of learners. Such a ‘tactical’ response to inspection is encouraged by a growing view that Ofsted seeks to judge compliance with current government enthusiasms rather than develop a shared understanding of quality.
8. Some argue that the FE sector is now sufficiently mature to move to self-regulation in line with higher education institutions. Colleges have over 20 years’ experience of self-assessment and have regularly been promised greater responsibility for their own improvement. Moreover, in a world where individuals and employers are increasingly expected to fund FE, a college’s focus should be on their paying customers rather than a government agency.

9. On the other hand there is strong political support for the retention of external inspection. It is seen as more objective and is increasingly well established across the public sector. Inspection of provision for those who are compelled to participate seems to be the norm in most (though not all) comparable jurisdictions, although inspection of post-compulsory provision is rare.

10. The conclusion of the report is that the time is right for radical reforms that separate arrangements for school age students from those for older learners. There need to be changes to the way that provision for those up to the age of 19 is inspected, but the approach should be common across all educational settings. For adults there needs to be a decisive step towards self-regulation.

11. The report recommends:

- A slimmed down and more independent Ofsted inspecting provision for those up to the age of 19 in schools, colleges and other settings.
- A peer review process for adult provision linked with expanded arrangements for local accountability.
- A revised approach to quality assurance of college based HE giving more weight to the distinctive nature of higher education delivered in college settings.
Inspection and FE colleges

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a summary account of the development of inspection in English FE colleges, a commentary on its impact and effectiveness and suggestions as to how it might be reformed. Its purpose is to inform debate on how arrangements for inspection in colleges and associated mechanisms concerned with performance management and quality improvement should evolve in light of the growing maturity of the sector. It draws on published reports, interviews with both inspectors and institutional managers, and comparative material from similar jurisdictions.

The paper is organised into five main sections. The first seeks to give a narrative account of the development of inspection in relation to FE colleges, focussing principally on the last 20 years – the period for which these institutions have been independent incorporated bodies. It looks at changes to the scope and nature of inspection in FE in colleges and seeks to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the varying approaches to inspection, providing a background to subsequent discussions.

The second section places inspection in the wider context of funding arrangements and performance management, and the role of improvement or development agencies. It highlights the development of statistical performance indicators, which partly underpin and partly serve as a complement to inspection reports.

The third section compares the inspection of FE colleges in England with practice in similar sectors in other countries. The availability of relevant comparable material is limited since the English model of independent and autonomous colleges operating in a relatively free market is somewhat unusual. Useful insights can be gained from the experience of other UK nations and to a more limited extent from parts of Europe and Australasia where broadly comparable circumstances exist.

The fourth section focuses on the impact of inspection with reference to the current Ofsted regime. It seeks to assess both the impact of present arrangements on the quality of provision and the potential to contribute to improvement in the future. This section draws on relevant material related to inspection in the school sector and a limited amount of evidence from overseas.

The paper concludes by outlining a number of options for the future and commenting on their relative strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the status quo, and further moves towards full self-regulation, it considers whether the complexity of FE requires more than one agency or approach, segmenting the sector by students’ age or by mode or level of learning.
Inspecting colleges in England

The process of inspection began to play a major role in the operation of FE institutions and the FE sector only after the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993. Before that date colleges were subject to occasional inspection by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) and in most local authorities by local inspectors of education. For several reasons, however, the process had far less impact on college operations than it does today.

Regionally based HMI had regular but infrequent contact with colleges and from time to time carried out inspections or surveys of types of provision. Regional Staff Inspectors took the lead in helping plan the distribution of advanced courses, though this seems to have been more of an administrative role than inspection itself. Although individual HMI may have been respected and their advice welcome, inspection was infrequent, the process was less formal and of less consequence than it is today; reports were either seen as supportive or simply ignored. This may be because any intervention in schools and colleges was then seen as a matter for local education authorities (LEAs) rather than central government.

LEAs varied in their practice but most had a staff of inspectors or advisers working alongside the education officers who administered local education systems. The varied classification reflected the varying roles of these staff and differed across the country. In most cases the expertise of the inspectorate was organised around the school curriculum and few had an understanding of or involvement with FE colleges. Where they did have involvement it was as much with staff selection and staff development as it was with our current definition of inspection.

The FEFC Inspectorate 1993 - 2001

The incorporation of colleges in 1993 removed FE from local authority control and established a national further education system for the first time. It required the establishment of a national funding body, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which had responsibility for funding FE but also assuring its quality. It sought to carry out this latter responsibility in two ways: through the development of performance indicators and the creation of a new inspectorate.

The new FE Inspectorate consulted with the sector on an approach to inspection in Circular 93/11. There was widespread agreement with the arrangements proposed and FEFC published the outcomes in Circular 93/28 Assessing Achievement. The new system introduced:

- Regular inspections of every college on a four year cycle.
- A fixed three month notice period for inspections.
- A five point numerical grading scale.
- The extensive use of associate inspectors drawn from the sector.
- An explicit and transparent inspection framework.
- A process of systematic annual self-assessment.

Overall, the new regime was seen as helpful by colleges. The active involvement of many senior staff as part-time inspectors helped establish a shared understanding of the key features

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1 The FEFC funded and inspected FE provision in FE colleges but not HE
of good practice. The process also helped develop institutional expertise in making secure, evidence based judgements that underpinned an increasingly important self-assessment process. Inspection judgements were reinforced by elements of the funding system – colleges were not allowed to grow in areas of provision that had been identified as of poor quality. Nevertheless, the arrangements were essentially seen as supportive rather than confrontational.

The Training Standards Council 1996 - 2001

The Training Standards Council (TSC) was established in 1997 by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in partnership with the TEC National Council to help improve standards in work based learning carried out by private training providers and employers. It commenced operation in 1998 when it published its framework for inspection and self-assessment ‘Raising the Standard’. It was led by a former senior inspector from the FEFC Inspectorate and built on many of the features of the former body, most notably an explicit assessment framework, the use of a five point numerical grading scale, an emphasis on self-assessment and the extensive use of directly contracted and trained part-time inspectors with current sector experience.

Unlike the FEFC Inspectorate it was established as a company limited by guarantee and was therefore at a greater distance from government. Its powers were not established by statute but enforced by conditions attached to providers’ contracts. In its latter years it extended the scope of its operations by offering inspection services on a commercial basis both in the UK and overseas, employability programmes under the government’s New Deal and occupational training in the criminal justice system.

TSC introduced inspection into many organisations that were less familiar with teaching and learning than colleges and perhaps for this reason placed greater emphasis on supporting the learning and development of providers as well as judging their strengths and weaknesses. Evaluation reports suggest that TSC was successful in establishing good working relationships with providers and that the arrangements described in ‘Raising the Standard’ commanded broad assent.

The Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted 2001 - 2007

With the creation of the Learning and Skills Council in 2000 colleges fell under the remit of two inspectorates. Ofsted took over responsibility for inspecting provision for young people while the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) combined the TSC’s work based learning responsibilities with the FEFC Inspectorate’s work with adults in FE colleges and Ofsted’s adult community learning role. Colleges were inspected by joint teams with the lead inspector nominally determined by the proportions of work in the institution concerned. In most colleges a count of full-time equivalent (FTE) students showed the centre of gravity to be 16 to 18-year-olds, although the greater number of students were often over the age of 18.

The approach of the two inspectorates diverged despite agreement on a Common Inspection Framework. While Ofsted focussed primarily on making judgements of college performance, ALI placed increasing emphasis on its role in provider support, for example through the publication of a monthly magazine, Talisman, in which it set out details of its thinking on quality matters.

2 The national body representing the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) that funded work based learning
This was further developed through the creation of *Excalibur*, an online service showcasing good practice, and through the establishment of a Provider Development Unit intended to help providers who had been identified as failing.

A revised inspection framework in 2015 confirmed a move from a five point to a four point grading scale (outstanding; good; satisfactory; inadequate), intended to force inspectors to make positive judgements by removing a middle grade.

**Ofsted 2007 – the present**

In 2007 Ofsted took over the functions and most of the staff of ALI and the sector returned to having a single inspectorate for the first time since 1993. Government explained the change by talking of the advantages of a single common inspectorate covering every stage and mode of education, applying common standards and a consistent approach. It did not, however, include higher education, which maintained its very different arrangements based on peer review.

The move also seems to have been prompted, at least in part, by a desire to save money – an annual reduction in cost of £80 million was quoted at the time. A further and possibly more important consideration appears to have been a desire to separate the inspection function from the provision of quality improvement services. The Excalibur database, for example, was transferred to the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). This separation of assessment and support reflected wider trends in thinking around the management of public services.

The move to bring all college inspections under Ofsted was controversial at the time. Many saw the move as a takeover rather than a merger and argued to retain the distinctive approach that the ALI had developed. There was criticism of Ofsted’s practice of subcontracting out the provision of associate inspectors, its lack of involvement with improvement activities and its failure to develop the potential of institutional self-assessment. It was also criticised as lacking independence from government – Ofsted is a non-ministerial department whereas the ALI and TSC were independent charitable companies. The impact of inspection judgements on providers was heightened by Ofsted’s introduction of a single numerical grade for overall effectiveness, which was more appropriate in a schools context than when applied to large and heterogeneous colleges.

Since 2007 Ofsted’s approach to inspection has evolved considerably. Instead of a regular inspection cycle it has brought in a ‘risk based’ approach, focussing inspections on those institutions that desk based analysis suggests could be a cause for concern. As a consequence the proportion of poor inspection results has risen. From 2012 it changed the grade descriptor ‘satisfactory’ to ‘requires improvement’ and introduced a strict timetable for re-inspection of institutions designated with a limited timetable for improvement. It now gives greater priority to the quality of teaching and learning and has dramatically reduced the notice period for inspections, even floating the idea of ‘no notice’ inspections.

Most recently Ofsted announced several important changes to the emphasis of its inspections. The Chief Inspector has stated that when the current contracts for the provision of part-time inspectors expire, the arrangements for their selection, training and deployment will be brought back in house. In another reversal of emphasis HMI will play an increasing role in supporting quality improvement. Finally the inspectorate has announced that it is considering stepping back from grading individual teachers or lessons in light of increasing criticism from teachers and mounting pressure from academic commentators who have queried its efficacy.

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4 See for example memorandum from Dr Terry Melia, CBE and by the Adult Learning Inspectorate
Inspection in context

The evolution of inspection in English further education needs to be seen in the context of wider changes in institutional arrangements. Table 1 on page 15 sets out the timetable for changes in inspection alongside other relevant developments, including the arrangements for funding, supporting institutional development, staff professionalism, self-regulation and performance management. The table does not include everything that might relate to inspection, however. Parallel developments in relation to financial audit or institutional governance, for example, have not been included simply in order to make the table manageable.

Looking at the context it is clear that inspection is only one of a number of mechanisms used by government to intervene in colleges and direct their actions. Inspection, funding and statistical performance indicators, particularly when used together, give the authorities substantial and detailed control over most aspects of college activity.

The relationship between the various strands is not straightforward. Sometimes there is an explicit link, for instance when government deliberately sought to transfer improvement activities away from the inspectorate towards a newly created development agency, the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). At other times any link is indirect: in the first decade of this century, for example, there seems to be a parallel between the increasingly target driven funding regime of LSC and a growing focus of the inspectorate on compliance with government policy. Occasionally developments seem conflicting, such as when Ofsted introduced ‘Learner View’ to record students’ perceptions despite the funding agencies having sponsored a well established national learner satisfaction survey.

Funding

In broad terms there have been four phases in the evolution of FE funding: an early post-incorporation period focussed on growth and increased efficiency alongside the assimilation of all colleges onto a common system; a ‘late FEFC’ phase marked by a reaction against some of the more dramatic instances of gaming and dubious behaviour in the sector with tighter regulation of activity; the period of increased emphasis on central planning and targets that characterised the Learning and Skills Council; and the most recent period in which colleges have greater freedom from targets but are constrained by more elaborate eligibility rules. It is a curious fact that during most of the period when FE had a single funding body it had two inspectorates working in parallel, yet shortly after the creation of a single inspection body the funding agency split into two entities, which have since followed increasingly divergent paths.

Funding levers have been used by successive agencies alongside inspection to influence and direct college behaviour. From the early days of FEFC colleges were not allowed to expand provision in areas graded by the inspectorate as unsatisfactory. The allocation of funding to institutions reflected retention and success rates at the same time as inspection judgements took this data into account when assessing performance: the two systems were therefore mutually supportive. Most recently institutions that are not judged to be good or better are not allowed to offer full-time 14-16 provision by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) or traineeships by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

Poor financial performance and poor inspection outcomes are the two factors that can trigger intervention from the FE Commissioner.
Development and improvement

The recent history of sector development agencies follows a similar trajectory. Two independent bodies concerned with staff and curriculum development were first nationalised in the mid-1990s to form the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), becoming subject to increased central direction and control, particularly after acquiring an expanded remit for Learning and Skills as LSDA. For a short period at the turn of the century the Standards Unit operated as a parallel development body managed within the Department for Education. The ‘purchaser-provider’ split of LSDA into the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) and the QIA, with the latter also picking up the Standards Unit and subsequently the developmental functions of ALI, seems to have reflected wider trends in public service reform and within only a few years a different agenda concerned with ‘sector ownership’ of development came into play. The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the FE Guild, which became The Education and Training Foundation (ETF), sought to reflect greater ‘sector ownership’ of the improvement agenda despite a reliance on central government funding limiting their autonomy in practice.

Discussions of the ‘sector ownership’ of improvement have taken place alongside recurring proposals for self-regulation. In the late 1990s the FEFC Inspectorates developed the idea of ‘accredited colleges’ – institutions that could demonstrate that they had robust quality assurance and improvement processes in place and therefore would not need traditional external inspection. Although welcomed by the sector this initiative seems to have been lost in the move to the more centralised world of LSC, though there were echoes in the thinking around Beacon colleges and perhaps even Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). The self-regulation movement seems to have had a temporary resurgence from around 2007 with a task force that gave rise to the ‘Single Voice’ and the FE Reputation Strategy Group; but though both survive their profile is not high and their achievements difficult to identify.

Most recently proposals for chartered status for colleges have arisen from the Lingfield review of professionalism and, at the time of writing, are still actively (but quietly) being pursued with selected representatives from the sector. Views differ as to the purpose of chartered status and what benefit might flow from membership of a body with a royal charter. Some see chartered college status being awarded to those that demonstrate high quality, though to whom it needs to be demonstrated and how such a designation might sit alongside Ofsted judgements is not clear. Others see the creation of another quality mark as unhelpful and have called for an alternative approach reflecting ownership and accountability.

Performance indicators

The development of performance indicators and performance management arrangements, principally by the funding agencies, has run alongside inspection, often informing the process but sometimes operating independently. FEFC saw the introduction of inspection and the publication of benchmarking data as twin arms of its quality improvement agenda, with the latter primarily intended to influence the system by informing institutional self-assessment. The publication of data on retention and achievement rates is widely credited with having driven changes in institutional performance as was the subsequent focus on completion rates in work based learning by the TSC.

In 2002 the government published a new strategy document, Success for All, which, as one of its four strands includes a framework for quality and improvement. The strategy, described as

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5 The Staff College and The Further Education Unit (FEU)
6 FE Week: The real case for chartered colleges
being jointly owned by DfE and LSC, introduced the notion of Minimum Levels of Performance (MLPs) described as ‘floor targets’ and calculated in terms of student success rates. Success for All also announced an aspiration to move from the use of raw success rates to calculations of value-added (VA) or distance travelled (DT). This innovation launched a stream of work that resulted in the publication of New Measures of Success and a series of ‘Quality Improvement Packs’ designed to help providers pilot and implement approaches to the calculation of VA, DT and Qualification Success Rates (QSRs) for different categories of student. The LSC developed a ‘Learner Achievement Tracker’ designed to enable all providers to generate this information on a consistent basis. Its application to vocational programmes did not, however, make significant progress for another decade.

In 2007 the LSC published A Framework for Excellence, which set out how a ‘balanced scorecard’ of information would be developed to meet the needs of institutional managers, inspectors, officials and, ‘above all’, users of the system – students and employers. The three components of the framework measured responsiveness to students and employers, effectiveness based on success rates, Ofsted judgements and financial health. It was presented as a joint document but there were signs that different partners had different levels of commitment. Ofsted noted that it was important to build the framework on the solid foundations established by the Common Inspection Framework while the LSC described it as helping ‘the further education sector deliver the skills and learning that are vital for the long-term economic success of the nation’. The joint authors envisaged that the CIF and FfE would ‘converge eventually’ into a single approach.

In the same year (2007) the LSC also published Identifying and Managing Under-Performance, which developed earlier ideas about minimum standards. Its introduction attempts to explain that although the LSC remained supportive of self-regulation it was committed by the 2006 White Paper to ‘eliminating inadequate and unsatisfactory provision across the FE system by 2008’. Minimum Levels of Performance were to be defined in terms of financial health, Ofsted gradings and success rates benchmarked against sector averages. Colleges failing against any of these criteria could be served with a ‘notice to improve’ or a range of other sanctions.

With the change of government in 2010 the funding agencies promoted a different approach. FE Choices, a new website summarising the performance of FE institutions as part of the FE Public Information Framework, is aligned with a resurgence of the view that improvement is driven through better information for users as signalled in the White Paper Skills for Sustainable Growth. Nevertheless, the indicators identified are familiar: success rates, destination data and learner and employer satisfaction scores.

Although the learner and employer satisfaction surveys initiated in 2007 are still running, Ofsted found it necessary in 2012 to launch Learner View, a website where users on college courses could record their comments on FE programmes. Two years later (2014) it launched Employer View serve the same role for employers. It is not clear why it was felt necessary to duplicate existing survey approaches - the Ofsted online approach is certainly much cheaper but far less statistically robust.

The most recent development in relation to performance indicators for FE has been the publication by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) of experimental data on outcomes – destinations, progression and earnings. The indicators, which are currently only at a development stage, are envisaged as supplementing qualification success rates in giving a rounded picture of a college performance.
Higher education
Those FE colleges that deliver higher education will be involved with the HE Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), an independent body that monitors and advises on standards in UK higher education. QAA does not inspect or employ inspectors but oversees a peer review process. Higher Education Review is the method used for assuring the quality of HE delivered in FE institutions from 2013/14; it replaces Review of College Higher Education which in turn replaced the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2012.

The purpose of a review is to assure users that an institution meets the expectations of the HE community in relation to:

- The setting and/or maintenance of academic standards.
- The quality of students' learning opportunities.
- Information about learning opportunities.
- The enhancement of students' learning opportunities (in this context ‘enhancement’ means improvement).

Details of the process and expectations of the higher education community in relation to standards are set out in a handbook and a quality code.

College responses to the QAA are mixed. On the one hand institutions welcome the fact that the review process is seen as developmental and focussed on improvement. On the other hand the dominant role of universities in shaping expectations about the nature of higher education has led some to argue that the distinctive nature of college based HE is not properly reflected in assessments.

The future role of QAA is currently unclear as Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is consulting about future approaches to the assessment of quality in HE prior to a re-tendering exercise. Any new approach is to be introduced on a sector wide basis from 2017.

The FE Commissioner
The White Paper Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills set out proposals for the introduction of a FE Commissioner, charged with taking rapid action in response to evidence of unsatisfactory performance by a college. The three possible triggers for intervention by the Commissioner were: being assessed as ‘unsatisfactory’ by Ofsted; success rates falling below minimum standards; judged by SFA as being in poor financial health. The Commissioner is required to advise ministers within a two week period whether an institution referred to him should be dissolved, its governors replaced or the institution placed in ‘administered status’.

Other approaches
A review of the context for inspection in FE would not be complete without mentioning the range of organisations that work to help assure and improve the quality of their work. Many will make use of national or international quality standards such as ISO 9001 as part of their internal quality processes, UK wide standards such as Investors in People (IiP) or the Matrix standard for their information advice and guidance services. Perhaps the most widespread external arrangements are those made by awarding and validating bodies that review the ability of institutions to meet the standards required to offer and assess their qualifications.
## Table 1: Inspection and associated activities

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Inspection/QA</th>
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<th>Staff</th>
<th>Self-Reg/Dev.</th>
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Inspecting colleges in other countries

The inspection of schools providing compulsory education is widespread in other countries, although the precise approach taken varies. The extension of that same system to post-compulsory and work-based learning does not exist anywhere else in the form known in the UK. This in part reflects the unique nature of FE. Few other countries combine initial vocational education for those aged 16-19 with initial and continuing vocational education and training (VET) for adults in the same institution. The separation makes it much less likely that school-based inspectorates might have extended their remit to adult and work-based provision.

Initial vocational education for 16-19s falls under the remit of school inspectors in several other countries and the approach taken to the inspection of vocational schools seems to mirror that for academic or comprehensive institutions. Some countries appear to require those inspectors assessing provision in vocational schools to have relevant technical qualifications while others make no mention of it. A key difference between systems is the balance between the role of inspectors in school improvement and their role in accountability, for example identifying schools that are underperforming (sometimes but not always described as ‘failing’). There seems to be an increasing emphasis on the former.

The lack of focus on inspecting post-compulsory education in most countries might be inferred from the nature of a conference organised by the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) in January 2015. Entitled ‘Inspecting Post-Compulsory Education and Training’ it acknowledges that this is a new area of potential activity for most countries and draws very heavily on the Ofsted experience. The only other country identified as presenting evidence is the Netherlands.

The absence of arrangements similar to those in England can also be evidenced from a 2011 report from the OECD entitled Learning for Jobs – Pointers for Policy Development, which makes no mention of inspection either in its ‘pointers’ for improved policy or its description of the strengths of the 17 countries reviewed. Given that many of the countries surveyed have evident strengths in technical education – Germany, Sweden, Korea, to name only a few – it seems an English style inspection system cannot be a necessary condition for a world class FE system.

Similarly a recent European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) report on developments, VET in Europe 2010 – 2012, has a chapter on quality assurance, discusses self-evaluation processes and outline a range of familiar indicators that are in use but makes only the briefest reference to inspection.

“Evaluation methods that combine control and support with empowerment of providers predominate, while traditional forms of inspection are used only by a few countries.”

Since all four countries in the UK are included separately in the CEDEFOP analysis it seems unlikely that ‘traditional forms of inspection’ apply in many other countries.

Inspection of post-compulsory education does appear to take place in the Netherlands although the translation given is ‘supervision’. The system is risk based and for most

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7 See Policies and Approaches to School Evaluation in Europe
8 ibid
9 SICI - Inspectorates across Europe 2014
institutions, most of the time, the role of inspectors seems confined to desk based analysis and interviewing managers to form a view on the robustness of the institution’s own quality assurance processes. For those institutions where this ‘first order’ inspection raises cause for concern a more detailed inspection is triggered and inspectors may be directly involved in observing teaching, interviewing students etc.

US Community Colleges are subject to voluntary accreditation from one of seven regionally based accreditation agencies. As is widespread in higher education, the agencies’ approach is one of professional peer review whereby external assessors review an institution’s processes and validate its own self-assessment report and improvement strategy.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority defines its role as ‘regulation’ rather than inspection or quality improvement although the overall purpose is to guarantee quality outcomes for users. The operation of the authority appears to be essentially desk based and focussed on compliance rather than any broader assessment of quality through, for example, direct observation of teaching and learning.

Scotland
Systems closer to that found in England exist in Scotland and Wales, though in the former there are moves to change to more local and institutionally driven arrangements. At present Scottish FE institutions are accountable to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC) through an Outcome Agreement but are also inspected by HMI England who are contracted by the Funding Council and work to an agreed set of quality standards. The aspiration seems to be to combine elements of both approaches.

The present arrangements for ‘external quality assessment’ envisage a two stage process. Each college has an ‘Annual Engagement Visit’ (AEV), which is primarily a desk based exercise focussing on systems and outcomes that lead to an assessment of risk. A full external review takes place on a four year cycle: the focus and perhaps the timing may be shaped by any issues identified in the AEV. Both the AEV and the review are led by HMIE, normally with the involvement of one or more Associate Inspectors drawn from the sector. Institutions are given six to eight weeks’ notice of an inspection visit, which normally lasts around three days.

Outcome agreements define in some detail the college plans for the forthcoming year covering both strategic objectives and numerical targets. In effect they describe how the college plans to spend the money allocated to it by SFC and how it proposes to be held to account. They reflect the specific priorities of each region (most regions now only include one college) and the agreement is signed off by the college, the SFC and a representative of the regional authority.

Three colleges in Scotland are piloting a new approach that will reflect the specific circumstances of their region. The aims of the pilots as set out by the SFC are detailed below.

Colleges action: Learning project, 8 July 2014 - project description
There has been a period of radical change in the college sector in Scotland. Regionalisation and the introduction of Outcome Agreements mean that colleges are delivering in a different context and facing new demands. Existing approaches to evaluating colleges’ performance need to adapt and develop to reflect these wider changes. SFC is therefore working with the sector, Education Scotland (ES) and the Scottish Government to develop a new approach. This new approach will:
Integrate

- Integrate performance monitoring of outcome agreements with reviews of quality of learning and teaching. This will reduce duplication of effort.

Develop regional approaches

- Develop evaluation and performance reporting that makes appropriate use of the national quality framework and also reflects the regional context.

Ownership

- Strengthen college ownership and responsibility for self-evaluation of outcomes and quality as the route to real quality improvement.

Challenge

- Ensure that credibility is built into college self-evaluation by embedding independent, external, critical, challenging voices into evaluation processes.
- Enable SFC and other stakeholders to have more frequent (annual) validated assurance that college regions are performing well on all aspects of their work, and that action is being taken on any weak points.

Wales

Inspection in Wales is undertaken by Estyn, which describes itself as ‘a crown body independent of government’ established by the Education Act 1992. It inspects all publicly funded education and training provision in Wales other than higher education. The guidance for inspecting FE institutions was most recently updated in September 2013.

Arrangements for inspection in Wales are in many ways similar to those in England. The starting point has been the college self-assessment report, with inspectors seeking evidence to test a college’s evaluation of its own work. They have used performance data, observed teaching and assessment and looked at evidence of learner views. The team has normally been led by an HMI but usually half of the team has been made up of Additional Inspectors with recent sector experience. Judgements of the effectiveness of provision and an institution’s capacity to improve are made on a four point scale.

There are, however, some differences in inspection arrangements in Wales. Inspections have taken place on a six year cycle; colleges have normally been given four weeks’ notice of a planned inspection and there has been no discussion of ‘no notice’ inspections. Inspectors have made two overall judgements: one on current performance and one on prospects for improvement.

In 2013 Estyn announced that the current arrangements for the inspection of colleges were being suspended since the mergers of institutions to form large multi-campus operations meant that the current approach to inspection was no longer appropriate. Inspectors were reviewing their approach and:

“will update the guidance on inspection, which will still be based on the Common Inspection Framework and will take account of changes to funding, governance arrangements and the curriculum in further education institutions.”
**The impact of inspection**

There is a lively ongoing debate, and rather less robust evidence, as to the extent and nature of the impact of inspection. The evidence is stronger and the debate more high profile in relation to schools as opposed to FE although there is some FE evidence and it is not unreasonable to extrapolate a little from much of the material relating to schools. There is a small volume of accessible international evidence which is also relevant.

It is the negative commentary on the impact of inspection that tends to hit the headlines. There are recurring complaints that inspection, and particularly the ‘high stakes’ model adopted by Ofsted, distorts the operation of institutions and at worst results in ‘gaming’ behaviour designed to give a good impression rather than improve real performance. The validity of some of these criticisms is confirmed by changes made by the inspectorate and others in order to minimise their potential impact.

One recurring complaint is that some institutions prepare for inspection by seeking to rehearse specific activities that they think inspectors want to see rather than focussing on delivering high quality teaching and learning. A colourful example from FE, based on a very small sample, was published by LSDA in 2003 and talks in terms of selecting those students and practitioners to be kept out of sight of the inspectors. One of the principal aims of moving to short or even no notice inspections is to avoid unnecessary and inappropriate preparation for visits.

Another type of gaming behaviour involves the manipulation of data. A more recent example, again from the FE sector, suggests that a small number of colleges may have inflated success rates by removing under-performing students from their data returns, on occasion sacrificing the income associated with them to improve their performance indicators. There are suggestions that one or two colleges that suffered dramatic falls in their overall grading in recent years might have gained their initial high grade on the basis of carefully presented data rather than genuine high quality practice.

It is not possible to assess how far apparent ‘improvements’ in the outputs of FE are genuine and how far they reflect more effective ways of presenting data. What has come to be referred to as ‘Campbell’s Law’ suggests that in a high stakes regime some degree of distortion is inevitable. Conversations with college principals suggest that many combine a genuine passion for improved outcomes for learners with a pragmatic understanding of the importance of how their data is presented.

Specific reports concerning the impact of inspection on FE institutions are available for the period when FE had a separate inspectorate. The ALI published a report in 2000 based on an independent survey of providers in which large majorities said that they had found the inspection process helpful in improving outcomes for their learners. The introduction of the requirement for self-assessment had also been positive. Annual reports of the TSC reported strong support for the view that inspection had a positive impact on outcomes. An ALI memorandum to the Education Select Committee stated:

> “Over 85% of providers said that their work had improved after ALI inspection. Respondents said that between 40% and 90% of their improvement was directly attributable to the inspection and its findings.”
In 2004 Ofsted published an independent evaluation of its work that had been led by the Institute of Education (IoE). Although primarily about schools it contained a separate section on post-compulsory education and sought to assess the impact that inspection had. The report concluded:

“In virtually all cases, colleges reported that the monitoring visits helped them to remedy weaknesses. An external view from inspectors was felt to have assisted them to focus clearly on the actions needed to address shortcomings, and set useful goals to be achieved by subsequent visits.”

The report also quoted an Ofsted survey in which 71% of principals reported that they felt the gains from inspection outweighed the negative impacts, a slight increase on the figures for the previous year.

More recently (2009) the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) published a report evaluating the impact of the revised (2005) approach to inspection in schools. They concluded:

“Inspection was seen to have a direct, positive impact on school improvement – particularly for improving assessment practices, the quality of teaching and attainment.”

Ofsted does not appear to have conducted a similar evaluation more recently, much to the regret of the authors of an article in FE News. They quote a recent publication by the Skills Commission on the subject. In a review of approaches to institutional improvement across the public sector the Commission recommended inter alia that Ofsted evaluate and publish the impact of its arrangements to support colleges that need to improve.

Most recently there has been a growth in the academic literature relating to the impact of inspection and associated improvement activities. Although it relates primarily to schools the lessons seem relevant to the post-compulsory sector. The findings are conveniently summarised in a paper by Ehren et al at the IoE. Noting that the findings of a number of reputable UK studies are not consistent they conclude:

“There is, then, no clear picture of the impact of school inspections on student achievement.”

International evidence is also mixed. The authors quote some studies, suggesting that inspection has most impact on performance when stakes are relatively high, i.e. when funding and reputation depend on it, while others report that the main consequence of such regimes is an emphasis on test preparation and quick fix solutions.

A recurring criticism of the ‘high stakes’ inspection regime in England is that it is one of the factors that encourages schools and colleges to focus on the concerns of government agencies rather than the needs of their users: students, parents and employers. It was perhaps most colourfully expressed by former Minister John Hayes when he accused the previous administration of having ‘infantilised’ the sector with external controls and micro-management.

10 Speech to the AoC Conference November 2010
The validity of this criticism is underlined by the way its focus appears to shift with current political pre-conceptions rather than remaining fixed on what service users might think of as quality. Assessing an institution’s contribution to ‘community cohesion’ for example suddenly became a focus for inspection but was just as quickly removed in direct response to political priorities. More recently Ofsted has turned its focus, some would say disproportionately, to the ‘Prevent’ agenda and employer engagement. In the case of Ofsted the charge is reinforced by the fact that all but one of the Chief Inspectors have been political appointments with no significant experience of undertaking inspection.
Issues and options for the future of inspection

The future of inspection is of course shorthand for a consideration of how the arrangements for quality assurance and improvement in English FE should be organised. At a very general level there are only three options: self-regulation where institutions working individually or collectively hold responsibility; external inspection where a third party takes the lead; or some combination of both. In practice there are many variations within each option, some of which are as important as the differences between them.

Self-regulation

Across the world some form of self-regulation, supported by peer review, is near universal practice for assuring and enhancing quality in higher education. It is the pattern in English HE and indeed across the whole of the UK in that sector. It is the approach adopted by US Community Colleges. It also appears to be the practice in most OECD countries where post-secondary institutions, not including schools, offer the equivalent of further education. A number of high performing jurisdictions such as Finland, however, also rely on self-regulation to maintain and improve quality in their school system.

In English FE there have been several moves towards a self-regulating system over the past 20 years: some have stalled and some are still current. A move by the FEFC to develop ‘accredited colleges’ in the late 1990s had little success. A self-regulation task group established a few years later made proposal to the sector and ministers but, it seems, to no great effect. The most recent proposals, that colleges should be able to work towards ‘chartered status’, are being taken forward quietly but their outcome is uncertain. The lack of progress seems in part to be caused not by a lack of enthusiasm for the concept but by a fatalistic view that the centre will never really relinquish control.

Self-regulation, in the guise of ‘sector ownership’, appears to have gained greater traction in respect of development and improvement activities. LSIS was, and ETF is, a sector owned body at the rhetorical level although funding comes directly from government and seems focussed on current government priorities. The Foundation’s claim to sector ownership is probably enhanced by recently assuming the roles of the Institute for Learning (IfL), a membership body concerned with the professionalism of teaching, and Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), the body charged with setting standards for staff in the sector.

Perhaps the strongest basis for asserting that self-regulation in FE is feasible comes from the centrality of self-assessment to college quality assurance and improvement strategies. Colleges now have over 20 years’ experience of self-assessment underpinned in most cases by increasingly sophisticated data analysis and well established arrangements for the observation of teaching and learning. In the best colleges institutional judgements of quality coincide with those of external inspectors and provide a secure basis for an improvement strategy. Those institutions with HE provision are also familiar with the QAA model of institutional review.

There are several potential advantages of an approach based on self-regulation. Perhaps the most important is that it would better recognise the variety and complexity of the FE sector and the differences in the local and employer communities with which they operate. Despite recent moves towards de-regulation, all schools deal with part of the same limited age range and offer a substantially similar curriculum, making a standardised approach much more feasible.
Self-regulation would enable the development of an approach relevant to the nature and circumstances of FE rather than being driven by political considerations that inevitably reflect the schools agenda. For example:

- The attempt to sum up the quality of an institution in a single grade makes less sense in a large college than in a school. The FE inspectorates downplayed the idea of an overall grade but it has been central in Ofsted thinking.
- Recent ideas about ‘no notice’ inspections seem to have been driven by a focus on schools and ignored the practical difficulties of organising a realistic schedule of observations and conversations in a college with substantial work based activity.
- Large parts of college activity – HE, full cost and overseas students, for example – fall outside the remit of Ofsted, making a whole college grade even less appropriate.

There is a strong argument that when the users of college programmes meet the full cost (as will increasingly be the case) they and not the government should be the final arbiter of quality. External intervention might then be limited to ensuring that appropriate quality assurance systems are in place and an agreed set of basic information is made available to actual and potential purchasers. This is akin to the situation in HE where government insists on the production of a common data set but does not directly judge quality.

The major argument against self-regulation concerns trust. Public trust in both public and private organisations has been eroded through scandals such as those affecting MP’s expenses and the banking sector. The Learning and Skills sector has not been without its share of scandal. An external inspectorate is probably seen by the public as more independent and reliable than public bodies that appear to be accountable only to themselves.

A subsidiary argument concerns the desirability of a ‘level playing field’ between schools and colleges. Having long argued for convergence in terms of funding (successfully) and VAT treatment (unsuccessfully) it would be odd for colleges to argue for different arrangements for quality assurance, particularly in respect of substantially similar work. Despite increasing professional criticism of aspects of Ofsted’s approach there seems little evidence that the general public wishes to see the end of external inspection of schools. Recent concerns around some Academies and Free Schools may even result in pressure for more independent inspection.

It is possible that progress towards self-regulation might be made were colleges to establish their own quality assurance arrangements alongside Ofsted. Such a step would enable colleges to highlight different aspects of performance and give stakeholders a more complete picture of an institution's strengths and weaknesses. If it were done with sufficient rigour it might encourage government to reduce the scope and frequency of external inspection and increase trust in colleges’ own judgements. It would of course involve extra cost and potential disruption, offset to some extent by more useful feedback.

External inspection

There is a plausible argument that the introduction of external inspection has resulted in improved quality in further education. It may be better therefore to deal with issues raised about current arrangements by changing the nature of the inspectorate or the way that it works rather than abandoning external inspection altogether. This may also be easier to achieve politically.
Such an approach would ‘go with the grain’ of much current thinking. Ofsted is reforming its practices in a number of significant respects – piloting ungraded lesson observations and moving to concentrate inspection efforts on those institutions where data analysis suggests there may be greatest cause for concern, for example. It has also sought to address concerns about the quality and experience of many inspectors by bringing the management of part-time inspectors back in-house.

A recent report by the think tank Policy Exchange is critical of Ofsted and supportive of moves to focus external inspection, and particularly lesson observation, on the few institutions causing concern. They argue that Ofsted should make it clear that it does not have a single preferred model of teaching and learning – institutional leaders should take the lead in determining what constitutes effective practice in their context. Although the focus of the report is on schools much of its argument applies with equal force to the FE sector.

Reforming the way in which Ofsted works, to focus mainly on ensuring that institutions have a robust self-assessment process in place, would align the English system of quality assurance more closely with those in the few other jurisdictions that have an element of external inspection. This appears to be the way the Dutch system works. Current moves in Scotland envisage the inspectorate working with other external stakeholders to scrutinise and challenge a college’s self-assessment report.

For most of the time that colleges have operated as incorporated institutions they have had a separate FE inspectorate working alone or alongside Ofsted. The TSC inspectorate focussed on work based learning while ALI focussed additionally on all work with adults. They were able to develop a different approach to inspection, widely felt to be better attuned to the sector’s needs.

It would be possible to return to a system of multiple inspectorates, particularly if a slimmed down model of operation was adopted. A split along the lines of the Ofsted / ALI arrangement would recognise the powerful arguments for equal treatment of 16 to 19-year-olds but at the same time allow a different way of working with those elements of FE that are most distinctive, such as the work based programmes and those substantially funded by learners. It would, however, have the effect of making the FE voice within Ofsted weaker and limit recognition of those differences that do exist at the 16-18 stage. There would also be extra costs in establishing a new Chief Inspector’s office plus additional burdens for colleges if subject to two different inspection frameworks.

A ‘half-way house’ solution might be to retain Ofsted but to have a more sharply differentiated approach to the inspection of adult and work based FE within it. Although Ofsted’s work in the sector is led by an HMI with substantial FE experience, concerns are frequently expressed about aspects of provision being inspected by people with little or no understanding of the FE context. There are also fears that commentary on the sector from the Chief Inspector takes insufficient account of the differences between colleges, other FE providers and schools. These concerns would be reduced if the Chief Inspector were to be appointed on the basis of expertise in inspection rather than political considerations.

**A mixed system**

It is perfectly possible to have part of the work of FE colleges subject to a system of external inspection and part under self-regulation. Any split system has the potential for confusion between the two and risks involving extra cost, but in practice this system operates already. Those colleges offering HE are part of a self-regulated system for that part of their work, while
some aspects of college work other than HE fall outside the scope of Ofsted. The discussion therefore is not about whether there should or should not be a mixed system but whether the current boundaries are in the right place.

The logical basis for making a split between those areas subject to external inspection and those subject to self-regulation might be whether work is primarily concerned with young people or adults. This boundary will increasingly align with the division between work, which remains 100% state funded and in which government has a powerful interest, and that which is funded mainly by the user, whether through fees, loans, or employer co-funding of apprenticeship programmes. This currently also aligns with the boundary between DfE and BIS\(^{11}\). The development of such a dual system would be aided by continued investment in public information so that users are able to signal their preferences effectively through the operation of a free market.

If the practice of Ofsted (or indeed any independent FE inspectorate) changed to give a much greater role to the validation of a college’s own self-assessment reports this would align well with a mixed system. One can imagine arrangements whereby a single comprehensive self-assessment report was produced by a college and validated by a coalition of stakeholders within which the inspectorate was appropriately represented. If local authorities and Local Education Partnerships (LEPs) were part of the validating coalition, the views of the inspectorate would be contextualised, diminishing concerns that an institution might be labelled as inadequate (or outstanding) on the basis of only a subset of its activity.

Such an approach would also be consistent with moves to delegate power to localities whether through LEPs, city regions or combined authorities. Decisions on whether an institution should offer traineeships, for example, might better be made on the basis of local knowledge local employment and skills strategies rather than an inspection judgement that takes no account of context. Self-regulation might therefore be positioned as part of a wider move to self-determination within a framework of local accountability rather than seen in the narrower context of quality assurance.

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\(^{11}\) Apprenticeships for 16 to 18-year-olds and those with learning difficulties up to the age of 25 are the two principal exceptions
Conclusions

The consultation on the future of inspection\textsuperscript{12} in England, issued by Ofsted in October 2014, is one of a number of factors suggesting that the time is right for a root and branch review of arrangements for quality assurance and improvement in the FE sector. Other factors include: the criticisms of the Ofsted model of inspection made by academic commentators, head teacher associations and the think tank Policy Exchange; the decision by HEFCE to review arrangements currently made by QAA for quality assurance in HE; and ongoing work in the FE sector on chartered status and new forms of local accountability. This background paper has sought to inform proposals on the direction of change by describing the history of inspection in the English FE system and placing it in a wider context, including approaches to quality assurance and improvement in other jurisdictions.

What emerges from the study is confirmation that the current Ofsted model is not fit for purpose. There are few if any high performing vocational education systems anywhere in the world that adopt a similar model of external inspection for post-compulsory education. The application to work based learning and adult provision of a model of inspection developed for children's services has undermined the positive role that inspection played in the sector in earlier years. Its move to prioritise simple numerical judgements over context-sensitive support for improvement has proved a retrograde step.

It is good that Ofsted has recognised a number of the limitations of its current approach, several of which were problems of its own making. It was wrong to move from directly contracted associate inspectors to large scale sub-contracting and it is good to see belated recognition of the need to treat different modes of learning and different age groups separately. There are, however, more fundamental issues with which the consultation has not dealt. They include:

- Concerns about the independence of Ofsted, a non-ministerial government department, the head of which is a political rather than professional appointment.
- A growing concern that Ofsted focuses increasingly on compliance with government policy rather than a more widely shared understanding of quality.
- The decreasing relevance of government priorities to a sector increasingly financed by contributions from individual adults and employers.
- The negative impact of high stakes inspection on provider responsiveness, innovation and creativity.
- A growing view that in most cases inspection visits add little to the evidence that can be gleaned from statistical performance monitoring.
- The repeated failure to progress a clear political will for the FE sector to become self-regulating and responsible for its own improvement.
- The inappropriateness of awarding a single overall grade to large and complex institutions, large parts of whose remit falls outside the scope of Ofsted.

These issues are too important to be dealt with by tinkering with the timetable of an outdated inspection system. There are, in other countries, in other contexts and even in the FE sector at different times, examples of how things can be done differently and done better. We need to draw on these and other examples to develop a new and improved approach.

\textsuperscript{12} Better inspection for all Ofsted 2014
A fundamentally revised system should therefore be constructed around the following three elements:

1. **A slimmed down and more independent Ofsted inspecting provision for those up to the age of 19 in schools, colleges and other settings.** It seems right that there should be a system of external inspection for those for whom participation is compulsory and right that the same body should be responsible for inspecting all such provision. To further aid comparability Ofsted should continue to report on school sixth forms separately within school reports and should clearly describe the scope and limits of its inspection for FE providers. More emphasis should be placed on regular monitoring of all providers based on the data they supply, with site visits and observation focussed on those cases appearing to give cause for concern. The balance between making judgements and supporting improvement should be tilted further towards the latter.

2. **A peer review process for adult provision linked with expanded arrangements for local accountability.** Quality assurance arrangements for adult provision need to reflect the variety of purposes served by adult FE and the fact that increasingly individuals and employers are paying customers. Any system should build on well established arrangements for self-assessment supported and challenged by a rigorous peer review process. New arrangements should also reflect the growing need to be accountable to local partners, such as local authorities and LEPs, for the quality, relevance and value for money of provision, and perhaps the conditions for the award of chartered status. The outcome agreements being developed in Scotland are a possible model for consideration.

3. **A revised approach to quality assurance of college based HE that gives more weight to the distinctive nature of higher education delivered in college settings.** The current HEFCE review offers an opportunity to retain the strengths of the QAA process while addressing its weaknesses. Institutions have generally welcomed the fact that QAA reviews have been based on institutions’ own quality assurance processes, have involved peer review and have focussed on improvement rather than just passing judgement. There are concerns, however, that a model of HE based on full-time study in institutions with a high proportion of active research staff does not fully reflect the context of much college based HE, which often involves a higher proportion of part-time, older and employed students and more intensively taught programmes.
Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to inform debate about the future of quality assurance and accountability in English further education. It does so by describing the history of inspection in England, presenting evidence as to its impact and outlining the arrangements made in similar sectors in other jurisdictions. It considers a number of alternative options and concludes with clear proposals for change.

2. Inspection, along with other internal and external arrangements for quality assurance, has played a central role in the operation of the FE sector since the incorporation of colleges in 1993. Since that time the sector has experienced different approaches to external inspection, initially from agencies specific to the sector but more recently from Ofsted, the national body responsible for inspecting all education (other than HE) together with children’s services. Over time the emphasis of inspection has moved away from supporting improvement and become more narrowly focussed on accountability.

3. Inspection needs to be seen alongside other quality assurance and accountability mechanisms. In English FE external inspection has operated alongside institutional self-assessment and an evolving set of performance indicators, some of which define minimum acceptable standards. Its impact has been strengthened by links to funding and most recently by the new role of FE Commissioner.

4. A range of other agencies from awarding bodies to financial auditors inspect or assess aspects of FE provision. Colleges offering higher education need additionally to engage with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Current proposals to award ‘chartered status’ to colleges demonstrating consistently high standards are merely the latest in a long line of similar initiatives.

5. The majority of OECD countries inspect schools providing compulsory education though their approaches and emphases differ and some high performing jurisdictions do not. Vocational schools for this age group are usually subject to the same processes though their application to post-compulsory education and work based learning is rare. This may reflect the fact that FE in the UK is unusual in combining initial education with continuing vocational education for adults in the same institution.

6. Evidence on the impact of inspection is mixed. The introduction of a national system of inspection in FE was associated with improvements in the retention and achievement of students and feedback from institutions was generally positive. At least some of the Association of Colleges