



Further education matters

The first four years of Ofsted/ALI college inspections

**Better
education
and care**

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Executive summary

Further education (FE) matters. It matters because so many learners use it and because they use it for so many reasons: for the love of learning; to learn new skills; to gain more qualifications; to equip themselves for higher education; or to improve their employability or chances of promotion. It matters, too, because coherent provision in a local area depends on an effectively functioning FE sector if all learners are to have access to suitable opportunities. Finally, it matters because employers rely on it to equip the workforce with the skills they need. For many reasons, FE attracts much less public attention than education in schools, but it is no less vital to the economic, social and cultural life of the country.

Over four million learners are currently enrolled in FE colleges, ranging in size from institutions with a handful of students to organisations as large and complex as major universities with upwards of 30,000 students. This report summarises the first cycle of college inspections carried out by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) under the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

The inspection cycle, which began in 2001, coincided with a period of significant reform of FE. The government aspires to 'Success for All', the title of its major reform programme for FE. It sets out very clear aspirations for the sector:

'In every local area throughout England there should be a responsive demand-led system that provides coherent 14–19 learning to meet the needs of all young people, adults and employers, learning pathways into employment and education – and world-class teaching and support.'

These aspirations have not yet been met, but significant progress has been made and further progress seems likely. Colleges are making a historic shift from seeing themselves as isolated businesses to collaborating effectively, particularly with schools, within a local system that serves the needs of young people, adults, communities and employers. At the same time, they are achieving worthwhile improvements in provision, so that they are in the best sense widening participation: not just selling courses, but extending the possibility of success to a wider range of people. They are also maintaining their traditional strengths in support for students and in the teaching of advanced learners.

This progress has been hard won and, for much of the inspection cycle, slowly won. Despite the evidence of increasing quality, it remains true that not all FE colleges are effectively led. There are powerful structural reasons why some colleges fall into inadequacy, but inept leadership and management are still too frequently contributory factors. The failure of a few colleges, perhaps unfairly, colours public attitudes to the sector as a whole. An important element in the progress made recently is therefore that the proportion of inadequate colleges has fallen steeply during the last year of the cycle.

The main obstacles to more rapid progress are largely beyond the immediate control of the colleges themselves; they require changes in national policy, most of which are planned, but not yet fully implemented. They include an excessively complex qualifications framework and a set of performance measures for the post-16 sector which provides a perverse incentive for colleges to steer away from precisely those vocational areas of learning that are most needed, nationally and locally.

The accountability framework for FE, moreover, has been and remains too complex. The existence of too many bodies with an interest in quality has done nothing to clarify what is meant by quality or who is responsible for it. The colleges themselves should be: all involved recognise this, and the recent moves, through the Quality Improvement Agency, to clarify who does what are a welcome step forward. The steps currently being taken to simplify funding arrangements are equally welcome and necessary.

Key findings

- ❑ Most teaching in FE colleges is good or better, and the great majority of colleges are satisfactorily or well managed. Sixth form colleges make almost uniformly good provision.
- ❑ Over the inspection cycle, there has been a slight but accelerating trend of improvement. Success rates have risen, there is more good and outstanding teaching, and the proportion of unsatisfactory provision has fallen. The quality of the colleges' self-assessment and quality assurance mechanisms has improved over the cycle.
- ❑ The greatest achievement of the four years has been the reduction in the proportion of colleges which are inadequate from 11% to just over 4%. This would not have happened without a rigorous programme of reinspection.
- ❑ The main strengths of FE are:
 - the success of the best colleges in diagnosing and serving the whole community through a powerful commitment to social inclusion
 - its contribution to 14–19 developments through increasing collaboration with schools to provide vocational alternatives
 - the quality of support and guidance given to young people aged 16–19
 - the responsiveness of colleges to the needs of employers
 - the responsiveness of colleges to government policies and initiatives.
- ❑ The weaknesses are diminishing, but still include:
 - the persistence of a small number of poorly managed colleges, with particularly poor self-assessment and arrangements for raising standards and quality
 - the lack of a comprehensive vocational curriculum for post-16 learners which provides clear progression from level 1 to 3
 - some poor provision in curriculum areas, especially for non-advanced work
 - the wide differences in success rates between curriculum areas, which creates a perverse incentive for colleges to reduce provision in some vocational areas
 - the difficulty, in some areas of the country, in attracting suitably qualified staff, compounded by the current lack of adequate training for subject teachers in FE
 - a bias towards advanced work. The better qualified a young person is at 16, the better the deal he or she is likely to get thereafter
 - the high rates of inadequacy in independent specialist colleges, which have not responded as well as other institutions to reinspection.
- ❑ There are also some aspects of national arrangements which have an adverse impact on many colleges:

- a lack of success measures which adequately recognise all that is important in FE
- a lack of clarity in funding arrangements
- a lack of adequate preparation for colleges in dealing with the 14-plus age group
- an absence of definition of the over-used term 'quality assurance'
- an excessive number of bodies involved in promoting quality, too much bureaucracy and too little accountability.

Recommendations

The inspectorates, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) should:

- proceed as rapidly as possible with the development and implementation of measures of success which would permit greater differentiation between different types of institution and allow for recognition of the full range of achievement in colleges
- evaluate school sixth forms in the same way as other post-16 provision
- assess FE colleges in relation to their contribution to the area they serve, as well as to individual learners.

The DfES and LSC should:

- simplify and reduce the bureaucracy associated with college funding
- support colleges to be more responsive to the needs of employers
- support further expansion in colleges' roles for learners aged 14–16.

The DfES should:

- clarify the distinction between advice and guidance, regulation, inspection and policy formulation, and make clear who does what
- assign the primary role in promoting quality to colleges themselves.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) should:

- proceed rapidly with the rationalisation of the vocational curriculum and provide models for the development of a coherent 14–19 vocational curriculum framework.

The managers of colleges should:

- continue to improve self-assessment and colleges' capacity to secure improvement in curriculum areas
- look to meet local needs, including those of employers, and in those areas of the country where it is needed, seek to increase the provision available at levels 1 and 2.

The sector as a whole, through the Quality Improvement Strategy, should define what is meant by 'quality' and accept the disciplines associated with clear lines of accountability and sharply defined expectations.

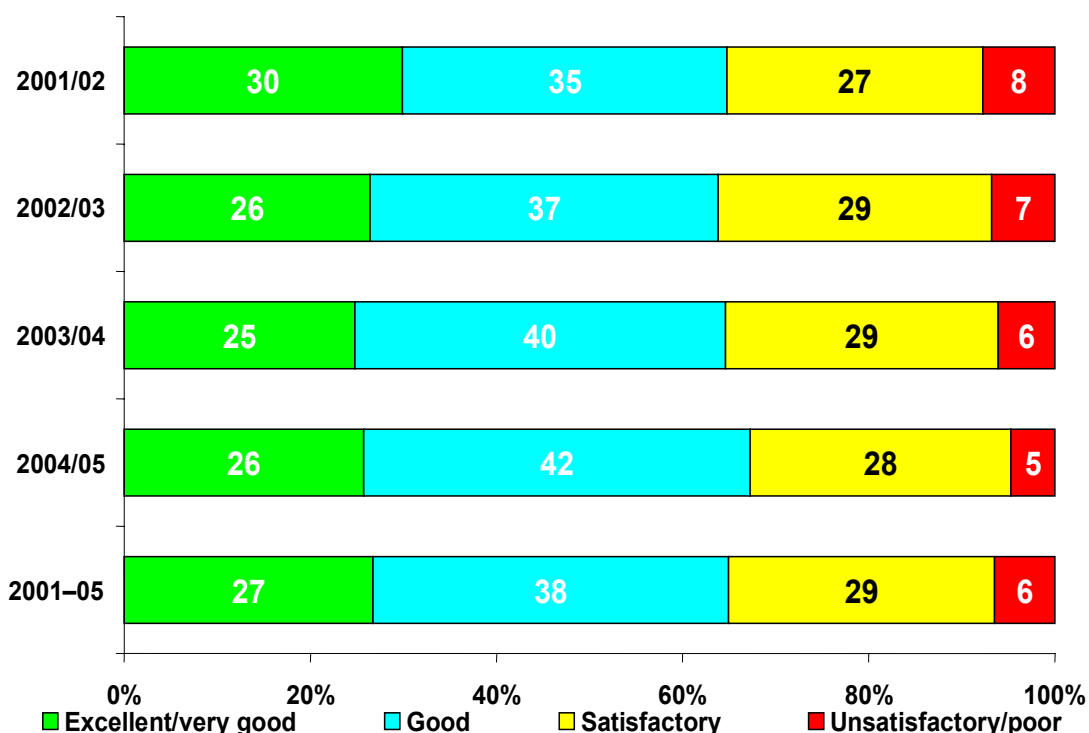
The broad outlines

1. Most of the provision seen in FE colleges over the four years of inspection was good or outstanding. That is the most important finding of this report and of the 424 inspections conducted, the 4,000 areas of learning graded and the 70,000 lessons observed. This cycle of inspections has produced the most detailed account of FE ever assembled, and it has confirmed the broadly positive picture that emerged from earlier inspections conducted by previous inspectorates.

Teaching and learning

2. The teaching and learning in just over six lessons in ten were good, very good or excellent and a further three in ten lessons were satisfactory. About 6% of lessons were unsatisfactory. There was little movement in these figures across the inspection cycle. Nevertheless it is a fact that the proportion of good or better lessons rose slightly, and the proportion of unsatisfactory lessons fell slightly.

Figure 1. Quality of teaching (percentage of lessons).



3. There are some important distinctions to be made between types of learner and types of institution. The teaching in sixth form colleges was better than in general further education (GFE) colleges (see Figures 2 and 3) and the teaching of adults was slightly better than that of 16–18 year olds (see Figures 4 and 5), although the latter difference had all but disappeared by the end of the cycle.

Figure 2. Quality of teaching in GFE/tertiary colleges (percentage of lessons).

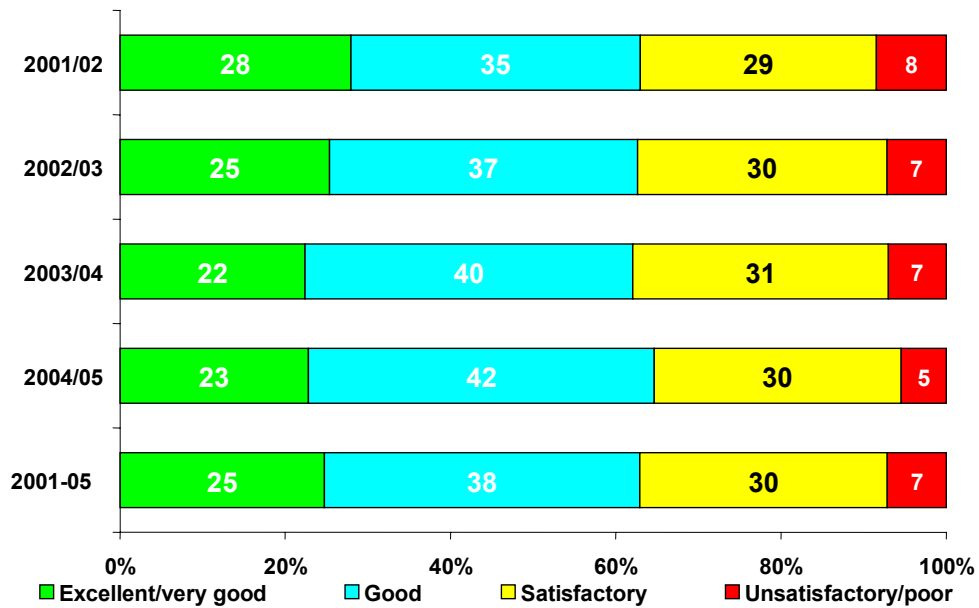


Figure 3. Quality of teaching in sixth form colleges (percentage of lessons).

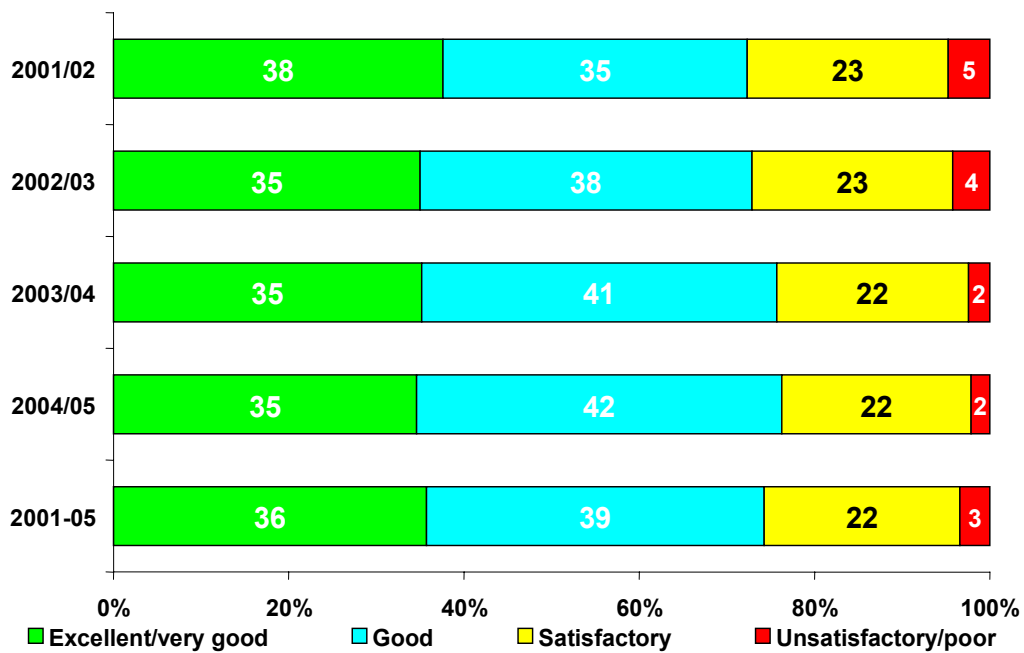


Figure 4. Quality of teaching in lessons for 16–18-year-old students (percentage of lessons).

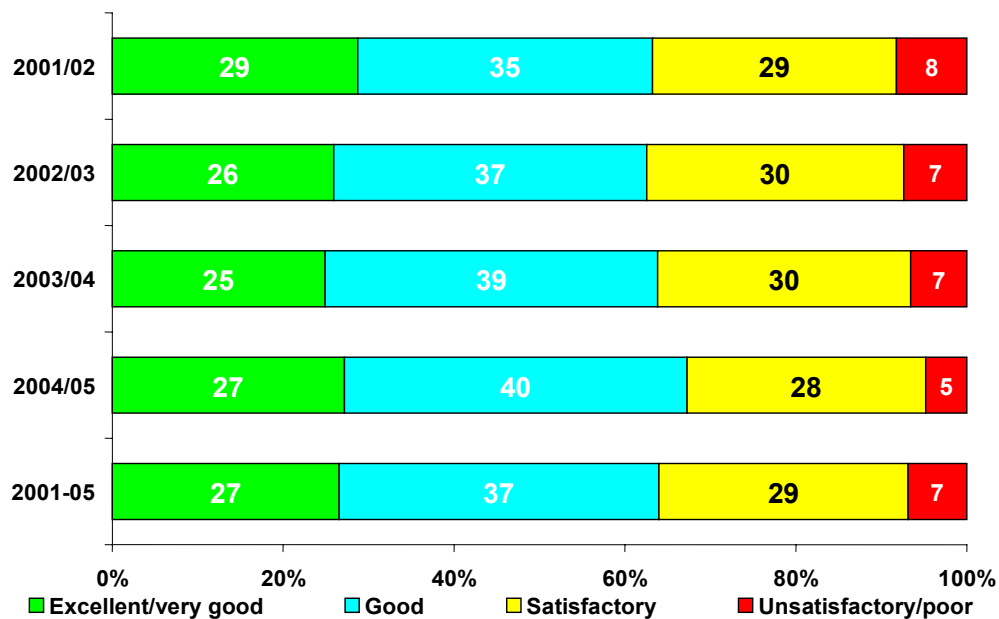
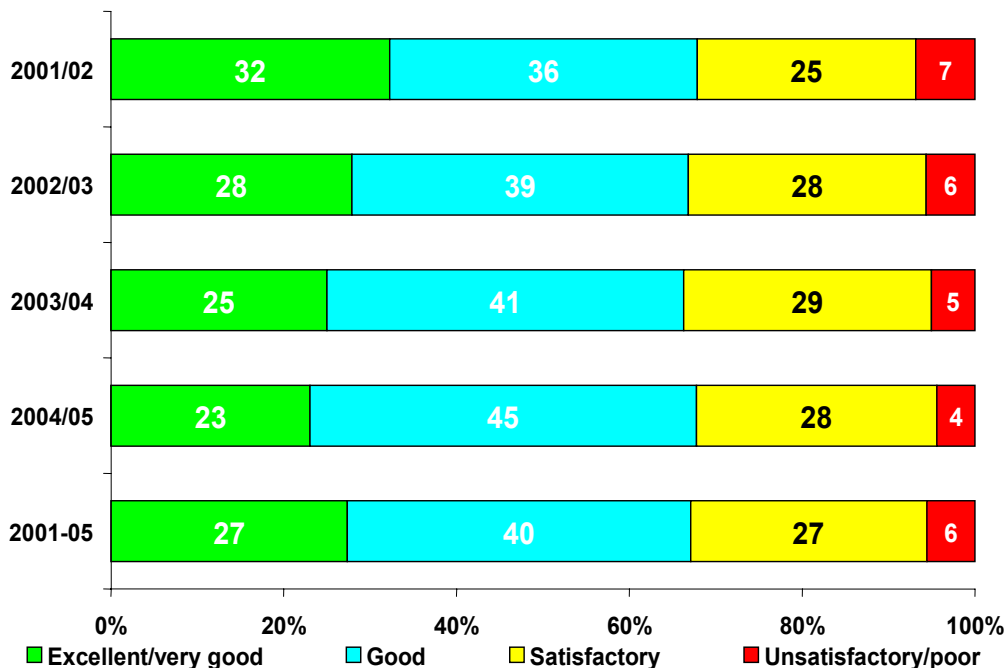


Figure 5. Quality of teaching in lessons for 19-year-old or older students (percentage of lessons).



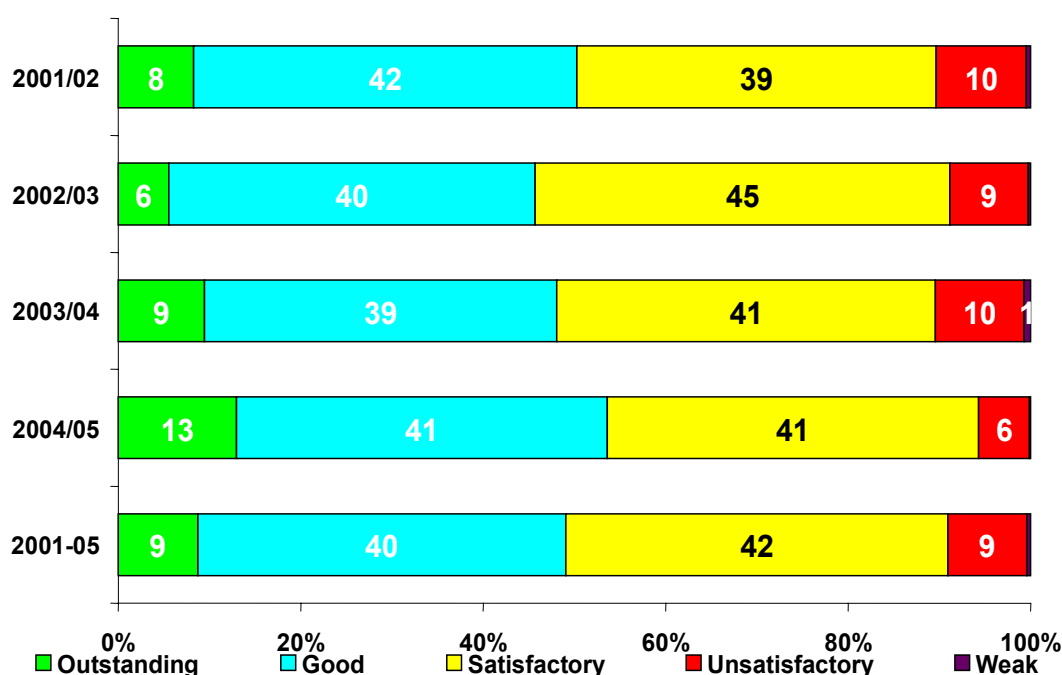
Curriculum areas

- Inspectors also made overall judgements of areas of learning, which are much broader than school subjects. A large area of learning, such as business for example, may encompass a wide range of subjects and types and levels of qualification. In making their overall judgement of the area, the inspector takes account of the quality of the lessons observed

according to a carefully constructed sample, the achievement of learners, including their success (or otherwise) in achieving the qualifications they set out to gain, the extent to which the courses offered meet the needs of the learners, the support they are given, and the leadership and management of the area.

5. Judged in this way, about half the areas inspected were good or better and more than 90% were at least satisfactory (see Figure 6); 9% were unsatisfactory, which is too high a proportion. Most of the unsatisfactory provision was located in GFE colleges.

Figure 6. Overall effectiveness of curriculum areas (percentage of areas).

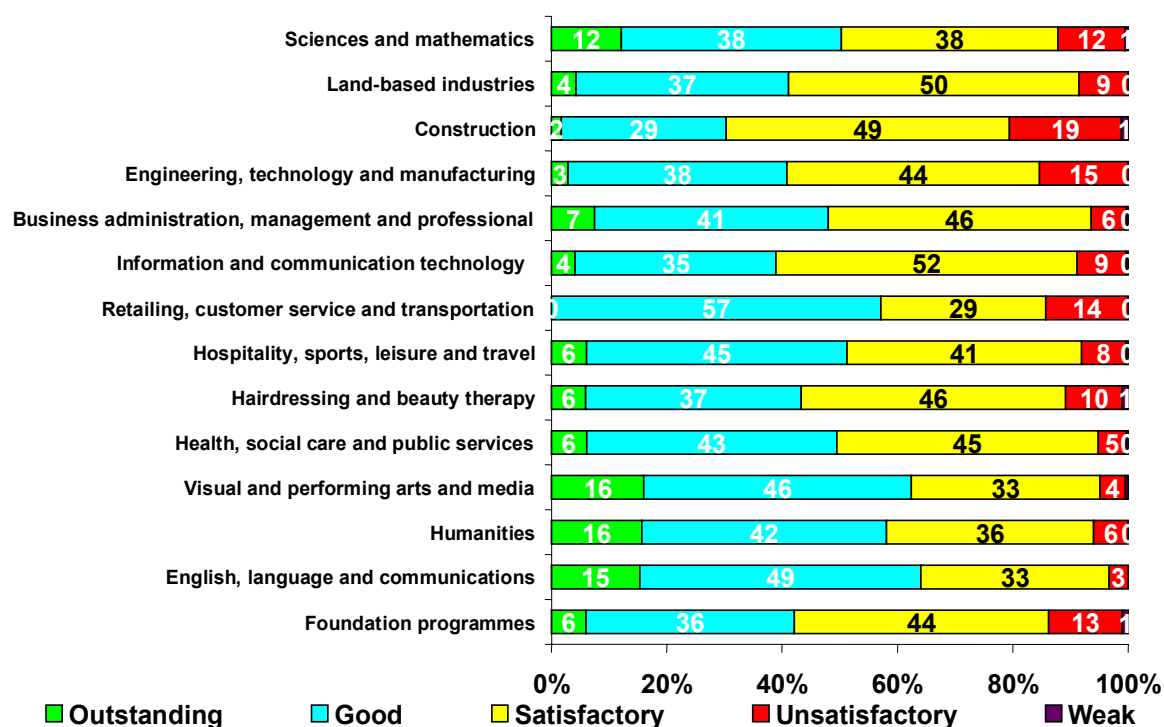


6. There were significant differences between areas of learning (see Figure 7). The success of areas such as humanities, the visual and performing arts, and English, modern foreign languages and communications needs to be set against the much less positive outcomes for construction, engineering and foundation programmes. Construction and engineering provide important vocational programmes, often for large numbers of learners. Work-based training frequently constitutes a significant part of the overall provision in the area and all too often it was found to be weak. Foundation programmes entail teaching basic skills to young people and adults. All three are critical to the life chances of the learners they attract and are often vital components in the provision of necessary economic skills within an area.
7. Leadership and management of curriculum areas were usually at least satisfactory, but still required improvement in a minority of colleges, where the evaluation of teaching and action to improve it were less sharp

than they needed to be. There was often too little sharing of the better examples of teaching and learning.

8. Some general trends in teaching were observed. First, inspectors commented regularly that the teaching of theory was less effective than that of practice. Where theory was taught separately, it tended to be handled unimaginatively and met the needs of only those learners with particularly high boredom thresholds, partly because the teachers were often less comfortable with theoretical discussion than with practical demonstration. Second, the teaching of key skills remained problematic, in that pass rates for communication and application of number were still too low in too many colleges. However, there was some improvement during the cycle, particularly where key skills were successfully integrated into vocational areas, so that learners ceased to regard them as extraneous and unwelcome. Third, there was a clear distinction in quality between level 3 teaching, which was usually good, and that of levels 1 and 2, which was much more erratic. Finally, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enrich learning became more firmly established during the course of the cycle, but still needs further development in most curriculum areas.

Figure 7. Overall effectiveness of curriculum areas (percentage of areas).



9. Achievement followed a variable pattern across areas of learning and types of qualification within an overall context of gradual improvement. Over the four years of the inspections, the proportion of 16–18 year olds who succeeded in acquiring the qualifications they set out to gain rose. Many 16 year olds entering GFE colleges have lower attainment than

those entering sixth form colleges; nevertheless, they mainly made satisfactory or good progress. However, in areas such as construction, engineering, ICT and foundation studies, they did less well than they should. The proportion of learners completing many National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and key skills qualifications remained obstinately poor.

Leadership and management

10. The leadership and management of colleges are judged primarily in relation to outcomes. It is therefore no surprise that there is a close correlation between inspectors' assessments of individual curriculum areas (see Figure 7) and their judgements of the leadership and management of the whole college (see Figures 8 and 9). It is no surprise, either, that sixth form colleges were found to be better managed than GFE colleges. Most sixth form colleges are highly effective institutions, the best of them superlatively so, but the range of courses they offer and the intake they attract are not as complex as those found in a large GFE college. To compare the two institutions is not to compare like with like.

Figure 8. Leadership and management (percentage of colleges).

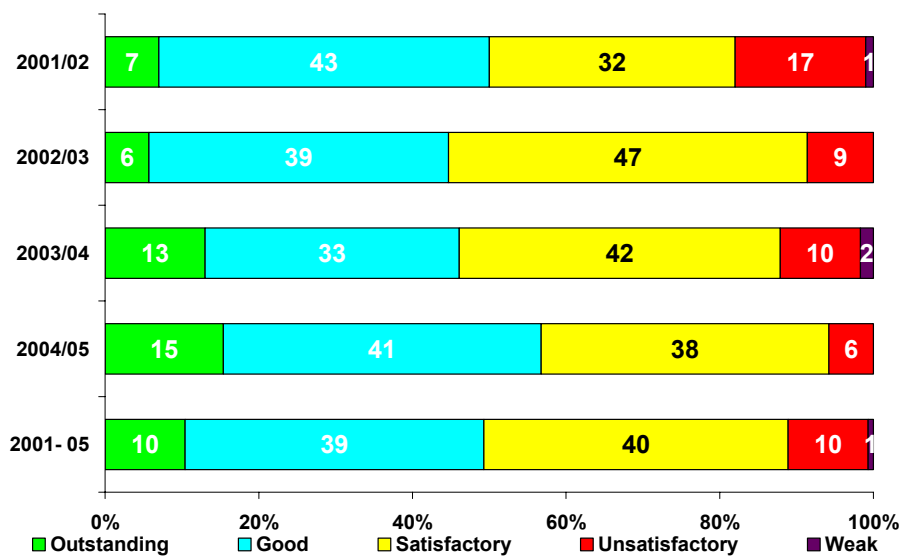


Figure 9. Leadership and management by type of college (percentage of colleges).

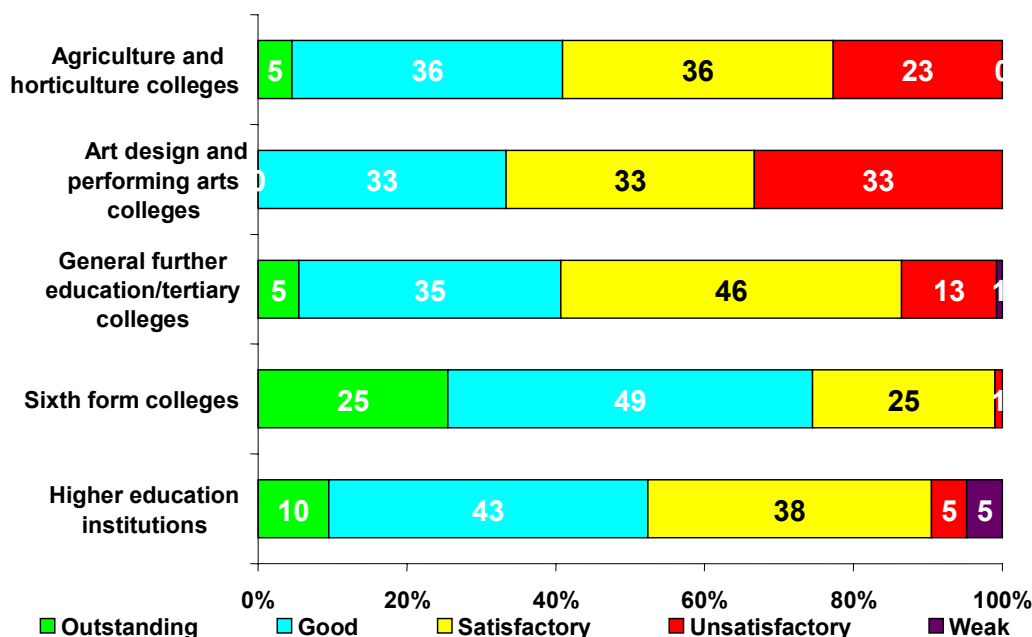


Table 1. Inadequacy by type of college.

College type	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	Total
Agriculture & horticulture colleges	0	0	2	2	0	4
Art design & performing arts colleges	0	1	0	0	1	1
General further education/tertiary colleges	2	11	8	11	3	35
Sixth form colleges	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher education institutions	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total number of inadequate colleges	2	13	10	13	4	41
Total number of colleges inspected	5	100	105	115	104	429
Percentage of inadequate colleges	20.0%	13.0%	9.5%	11.3%	3.8%	9.6%

11. Half of all colleges and three quarters of sixth form colleges were well managed. Outstanding leadership and management were found in 26 sixth form colleges and 15 GFE colleges. Many of the latter are large and complex institutions serving disadvantaged and highly diverse areas. Their leadership combined a commitment to serving the needs of all learners with a well-researched and sensitive appreciation of those needs and of the local economic context, along with an ability to set and maintain high expectations across a broad range of provision.
12. As with much else in the sector, the trend over the four years of the inspection cycle was one of improvement: the proportion of good and outstanding leadership and management increased, while the proportion of unsatisfactory leadership and management fell. In particular, the quality of colleges' self-assessment and quality assurance processes improved during the cycle, as senior and middle managers focused increasingly on the primacy of teaching and learning. Here, the influence of the common inspection framework was often very clear.

13. The Learning and Skills Act 2000 requires inspectors to judge whether the education or training provided by a college is of a quality adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. Despite the relatively positive overall picture, it remains a matter for concern that as many as 41 colleges (1 in 10) were judged inadequate. It is equally a matter for concern that the judgement came, in many cases, as a surprise. This indicates a lack of management capacity in the college itself and, often, some weakness in the accountability mechanism. Where this judgement has been made, an action plan must be drawn up and implemented, with the support of the local LSC. In addition, the college is subject to reinspection within two years, following regular monitoring by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and ALI inspectors.
14. The judgement that a college is inadequate can reduce morale. FE colleges are critically important institutions in the areas they serve. Local media inevitably, and rightly, focus on what may be seen initially as a failure. Staff and students are concerned; some may leave. Changes in senior management are usual. Interim management may well be required, and the task of turning the college around may well appear daunting.
15. Nevertheless, far more often than not, it is achieved successfully, and the less time the college spends in a state of inertia, the quicker its recovery is accomplished. Substantial progress is made most quickly where senior staff acknowledge the weaknesses identified, analyse them carefully and set about devising remedies. Sometimes they need support to accomplish this and, in the early part of the cycle, effective support was not always readily available. Now, it appears to be more so. With or without support, 20 of the 21 colleges found to be inadequate when reinspected had improved to the point where they were making broadly satisfactory provision; four others had merged or closed. Of the 86 curriculum areas originally judged unsatisfactory or poor in those colleges, 70 were judged on reinspection to be satisfactory or better.
16. It follows from this that 17 of 389 colleges currently remain inadequate, that is, the rate of inadequacy has halved over the inspection cycle and is now below 5%. This is a significant success for the senior managers in question, particularly since several of the colleges have done much more than merely emerge from inadequacy, and for the sector as a whole. It is also a success to which inspection has contributed through accurate initial diagnosis, followed by regular follow-up inspections.
17. During the inspection cycle, about half of all colleges had some unsatisfactory provision. Much of this, too, was reinspected and usually (in about nine cases out of ten) found to have improved to the point of becoming satisfactory; by the end of the cycle, the rate of improvement for work-based learning was not significantly different from that of other provision. This, too, is a significant achievement. For many years, perhaps

unfairly, the reputation of FE has been damaged by the existence of a small but apparently intractable rump of unsatisfactory provision and inadequate institutions. This failure is, however, not intractable. Colleges have improved, and the improvement has been concentrated where it was most needed.

Independent specialist colleges

18. The record on **independent specialist colleges** is much less encouraging. These are predominantly small institutions which cater for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, often of a highly specific nature. The young people who attend these colleges are extremely vulnerable, but also challenging to deal with, and the tradition of many colleges, particularly those which are boarding institutions, has to been to emphasise care, sometimes at the expense of education. The decision to inspect them under the Common Inspection Framework was intended to change this emphasis.
19. The inspection of independent specialist colleges by Ofsted and the ALI began in 2002. Over the three years of inspection, 12 of the 63 colleges were found to be inadequate. This is too high, and the early signs are that the weaker colleges lack the management capacity, and cannot find the support, to meet the challenge of reinspection. Of the 19 curriculum areas reinspected, only nine had improved sufficiently. Two colleges were reinspected in full in 2004/05; both remained inadequate, and none of the curriculum areas originally found unsatisfactory in those colleges had improved significantly.
20. In addition to the 12 colleges found to be inadequate, leadership and management were unsatisfactory in 10 others. These colleges lack the capacity to undertake adequate self-assessment, and often have little or no meaningful data on students' abilities and achievements: because they are incapable of self-diagnosis, they lack any adequate basis on which to plan their own improvement. Improvement usually needs to be stimulated by high-quality external support or consultancy.

Strengths of FE colleges

21. The history of policy development in FE over the last two decades is quite different from that of schools. For schools, there is a broadly consistent policy narrative, defined by the provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988. For FE colleges, there has been no such consistency. The move to incorporate colleges and to end the link to local education authorities (LEAs), as well as the arrangements introduced by the Learning and Skills Act 2000, were changes, not of detail, but of definition. FE colleges have been asked to see themselves first as partners within a local system, then as entrepreneurs operating in a market, and then again as institutions collaborating with others to take forward a locally defined strategy. Such fundamental changes are not easily assimilated, and a marked characteristic of the sector is scepticism about the value of repeated change.
22. Nevertheless, **speed of responsiveness to government initiatives** remains one of the strengths of the sector. For example, over the last 20 years, colleges have responded to frequent changes in the qualifications framework. Changes from ordinary national diplomas to national diplomas to General National Vocational Qualifications to Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education have all been well argued, and the reasons for them broadly understood, but they have not provided the stability needed by those responsible for planning provision in colleges. Nevertheless, most colleges responded positively to Curriculum 2000 and the inclusion of key skills qualifications. Similarly, most have reacted swiftly to the Skills for life initiative, the skills agenda, the creation of centres of vocational excellence, increased collaboration with schools catering for the 14–19 age group, and major pieces of legislation affecting all public bodies, such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Discrimination Act 2001 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.
23. In the case of the best colleges, that responsiveness to changes in policy is a matter of principle, not merely expediency. Without exception, such colleges have **a strong sense of mission** and of service to a particular community. In its report *Why colleges succeed*, Ofsted identified 29 such colleges in all areas of the country. All understand the particular nature and needs of their local community and are flexible in meeting those needs. They have high aspirations and the practical knowledge to achieve their ambitions.
24. Such colleges are in the best sense **focused on social inclusion**. That is to say they are interested not merely in boosting their enrolments, but in aspiring to success for all and are deeply conscious that success means different things to different learners. An Ofsted survey of 2003/04 found that colleges were making real progress in drawing traditionally hard-to-reach groups into learning. They were making good use of local

partnerships and links with local communities to widen participation among under-represented groups. They were making increasing use of community venues to attract people for whom travel is too expensive or otherwise difficult, and were tailoring curriculum and progression routes to give learners the best chance of success.

25. Many colleges had made progress in **revising their equal opportunities and diversity policies** to reflect new legislation, although, as is often the case, action tended to lag behind policy. Thus, most colleges had race equality policies and related action plans, but not all had implemented them. However, many colleges had made good progress in implementing the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.
26. Crucial to the success of learners, however defined, is the support and guidance they receive from colleges, both initially as they select appropriate courses from the myriad available, and subsequently as they confront the pressures imposed by sustained study on people who may need to combine such study with a job or the lack of a job or with significant family responsibilities. In the majority of cases, learners, whether in GFE or sixth form colleges, receive the quality of advice and support they need and deserve. Four fifths of colleges were judged to be at least good in this respect. The same proportion provided highly effective initial advice and counselling; an even higher proportion provided effective support to students on personal issues. In the best colleges, and particularly in sixth form colleges, the support provided will certainly include, for advanced courses and increasingly for vocational studies, highly intensive academic monitoring of targets set for each individual in the light of his or her prior attainment. The growth and increasing refinement of this value-added methodology has been a powerful mechanism for driving up standards post-16.
27. FE colleges recognise that **16–19 year olds have different needs from adults**. Some choose to recognise this by providing centres for 16–19 year olds in order to establish a separate ethos, although not usually a distinctive approach to teaching and learning, within the college. The Ofsted survey *Focused provision 16–19: a survey of colleges with sixth form centres*, published in 2004, showed that colleges with such centres provided very good support to young people, but no more so than those which made no such arrangements. The key is not the precise arrangements, but the extent to which the college is genuinely committed to the individual learner.
28. Towards the end of the inspection cycle, it was possible to discern an increasing degree of confidence in the sector: a feeling that colleges were improving, and that their place in national life was beginning to receive due recognition. Improving success rates and improving inspection outcomes reinforced the confidence that, as noted in the 14–19 area

inspections conducted, has enabled FE colleges to take a **leading role in the development of the 14–19 curriculum in their areas**. Progress in establishing a 14–19 phase, with a range of pathways designed to meet the needs of all learners, is slow and inconsistent across the country, and it is still the case that, the better qualified a young person is at the age of 16, the better chances they have subsequently. Nevertheless, throughout England, FE colleges are making an important contribution to the increased collaboration between institutions that is required to turn 14–19 aspirations into reality. More young people are involved in education and training post-16, and more 14–16 year olds are studying, often at FE colleges, for vocational qualifications.

29. Some 120,000 learners aged 14–16 now attend colleges regularly to study vocational subjects. The Increased Flexibility Programme in particular has encouraged partnerships between colleges, schools and a small number of work-based learning providers. The response of the pupils has been enthusiastic, so that the numbers enrolling on particular programmes have exceeded original estimates by about a third. If, however, there is to be further expansion, there are problems to overcome. First, in capacity: if there is to be further expansion in construction and engineering, colleges need industry-standard workshop space and equipment. Second, in expertise: FE teachers are not trained to deal with 14–16 year olds, particularly disaffected 14–16 year olds. Third, in expectations: FE colleges rarely have enough information on 14–16 year olds. Often, they pitch their ambitions for them too low. All of these problems have implications for funding, which at present does not reflect the true cost of the provision to many colleges.
30. FE colleges face a complex task in responding to local needs. They must meet the requirements of government and of funding bodies (and these are often intricate); they must meet the demands of learners; and they must be **responsive to the needs of employers**. The Ofsted survey *The responsiveness of colleges to the needs of employers*, published in 2004, found a more positive picture than employers themselves have sometimes suggested. About half of all the colleges surveyed undertook a significant amount of work with and for employers, and this was well received; most were looking to increase the volume of such work. GFE colleges in particular offered an extensive range of vocational courses, which usually met the needs of local employers well. The vocational offer was, moreover, flexible: there were excellent examples of colleges rapidly extending their range of courses to meet significant local priorities, such as acceptance as a European City of Culture. Such flexibility is not easy to achieve, given the complexity of the funding methodology and the qualifications framework, but it can be done.
31. Where colleges had increased their responsiveness to employers, it was usually clear that the lead had come from them, not from the employers. Effective work with employers almost invariably sprang from a needs

assessment undertaken by the college, with provision tailored to the analysis that emerged. The strategic area reviews now undertaken by local LSCs will in future provide a more widely available and better-informed statement of education and training needs for each area. Nevertheless, at this point few colleges set precise targets for engagement with employers. There are no agreed national expectations in this area and no measures against which to assess colleges' relative success or failure.

Constraints on the success of FE colleges

32. The previous section depicted a sector which is, broadly, improving, responsive to changes in policy, flexible in meeting the needs of employers and increasingly effective in meeting the needs of learners: it is a changing, dynamic sector. Such an account of the current state of FE would be by no means a parody, but nor is it the whole truth. In 2004, the ALI's chief inspector wrote in his annual report that FE colleges were 'treading water'. In this, he merely restated the position adopted by both Ofsted and the ALI that there was simply too much inadequate provision in FE and little sign of it disappearing. The progress made over the last year has done much to allay the inspectorates' sharpest concerns, but if the picture of FE as dynamic, expanding and improving is to become the whole truth, a significant amount of change still needs to happen, partly in the colleges themselves, but more importantly in the policy framework within which they work. The FE Review, carried out by Sir Andrew Foster, will be crucial in enabling FE to play the role in national life that the government intends for it.
33. **The persistence of a minority of poorly managed and inadequate colleges** is much less of a concern than it was. The proportion of inadequate colleges is now 4.4% and this is the great achievement of the inspection cycle. Nevertheless, the proportion of inadequate colleges remains much higher among independent specialist colleges, and it remains the case that wherever an FE college can be said to be 'failing', it is a disaster for the area it serves. To say that is to acknowledge the importance of the institution, not to engage in destructive criticism. It is also important to face the fact that teaching on level 1 and 2 courses continues to be less good than on level 3.
34. The Ofsted survey, *Why colleges fail*, attracted a great deal of attention. It sought to analyse the conditions which make it harder for some colleges to succeed than others. Some of the problems are structural and are well known: in some areas of the country, GFE colleges are at the bottom of the pecking order in the choice of post-16 institutions. The better-qualified candidates, or their parents, prefer school sixth forms or sixth form colleges. The GFE college takes in only those young people who have not selected other institutions. Add to that the difficulty, particularly in the south of England, of attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff, and the potential success is made very difficult.
35. In the circumstances described, the natural response would be to accept that the college occupies a particular niche in the market: it exists, virtually solely, to provide vocational courses and qualifications for those young people who have not been among the higher performers at school, or who simply wish to discontinue academic study. The proportion of young people who gain five or more higher grades at GCSE is still only just

over half of all young people. It would surely be viable to design institutions post-16 – or 14–19 – that would cater for those who do not reach the level 2 threshold at 16.

36. The difficulty is that a college setting out to fill a vocational niche faces formidable difficulties which undermine national policy in important ways. So considerable are these difficulties that they arguably constitute a perverse incentive for institutions to continue to offer advanced courses even when it is clear that they duplicate provision elsewhere.
37. **The complexity of the vocational curriculum** is notorious and continues to constrain the success of the post-16 sector. There are more than 4,000 separate qualifications from which it can be extremely difficult for a young person, even with effective guidance, to select the mix that suits him or her. Young people seeking an alternative to academic study generally face one of two problems, depending on where they live: a difficult choice from a plethora of alternatives, or very little choice at all because most provision in their immediate area comprises advanced courses.
38. One of the key purposes of further education is to offer effective education and training to young people who have not been markedly successful at school – not just the disaffected, but the very large minority who do not achieve five or more higher grades at GCSE. That offer must be different from what has been available at school if the young person's experience is to be more successful. It must be attractive to young people and meet the needs of employers at the same time. It must also offer routes of progression for 14–19 year olds, extending into adulthood, as young people expand their horizons. The deficiencies of the vocational curriculum have been fully realised by government and others for many years. The traditional remedy has been to invent more qualifications. What is needed is a rigorous pruning, coupled with a drive in all areas, to ensure that young people have an adequate choice of provision that meets their needs.
39. At this point, however, the qualifications taken by learners on vocational courses are not always fit for purpose, and they sometimes lack sufficient esteem even to retain the loyalty of learners when superficially attractive alternatives become available. Too often, vocational courses are seen by those who study them, as well as much of the world outside, as second best. They attract less loyalty than courses which enjoy higher esteem.
40. For this and other reasons, a college which offers a predominantly vocational curriculum risks being judged to be less successful. To a great extent, and rightly so, FE is judged by what students achieve: by the numbers who actually succeed in acquiring the qualification they set out to obtain. Some vocational qualifications have a history of low pass rates. In many areas of learning, a qualification is only awarded when a series of

units, both practical and theoretical, have all been passed. Particularly for lower-attaining learners, overarching qualifications of this kind make it difficult for them to demonstrate success. As Annex 1 of this report demonstrates, a GFE college with a majority of the long courses it offers classified as 'other' will have a lower overall success rate than colleges which offer predominantly GCSE and GCE A levels.

41. Annex 2 to this report shows that the curriculum mix of the college and the choice of areas of learning to be inspected can also greatly influence the outcomes of inspection. It is harder to be successful in science and mathematics, construction, engineering, and literacy and numeracy. These four areas of learning attract a fifth of all learners and contribute a third of all inspection grades; but a half of all unsatisfactory grades.
42. The more advanced learners a college has, the more likely it is to be judged successful against the current measures, which combine retention and pass rates to give an overall measure of success.
43. To be useful, performance measures should compare institutions on an equal basis and in relation to all their important purposes. It is clear that the current measures do not establish a level playing field and, although success in achieving a qualification is a key purpose for those learners who use FE, it is not the only one. The government has recognised this. The Success for All programme includes the development of new measures of success for the FE sector. Following a consultation exercise undertaken in 2003, the DfES, LSC, Ofsted and the ALI are working in partnership to develop a:
 - success-rate measure which can apply to all colleges, work-based learning providers and, later, school sixth forms
 - national value-added measure for 16–19-year-old learners for all graded level 3 qualifications
 - distance-travelled measure for 16–19 year olds, to be applied to ungraded level 3 courses and to qualifications at levels 1 and 2
 - measure of the effectiveness of the provision of education and training in meeting the needs of both learners and employers
 - value-for-money measure.
44. This is a demanding programme of work, which will not in itself be enough. There will also be a need for further work on recognising and recording progress in non-accredited learning and on developing an institutional success measure which gives due weight to the fact that FE colleges are not homogeneous: each provides, or should provide, the mix of curricula needed by learners and employers in its area. The measures will also provide equal comparison of the achievements of students in school sixth forms with those in FE.
45. Nevertheless, if successfully completed, the work on new measures will constitute a highly significant advance: it will enable inspectors and others

to recognise not only success, but the contribution made by a college to the progress of each learner; it will give greater weight to vocational learning; and it will acknowledge the key economic and social contribution made by colleges to their localities. It will also give some content to the notion of 'quality'. A college displays quality when high success rates are achieved, when individual learners make progress that enables them to meet their aspirations and when the curricular opportunities available meet the needs of the widest possible range of learners and of employers.

46. There are problems in the recruitment and **training of FE teachers**, which are now being addressed at national level. There is a particular difficulty in securing adequately qualified teachers of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy and of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), as well as of those vocational subjects which are in high demand in the economy, but the problem is more deep-seated. Until 2001, there was no requirement for teachers in FE to be trained, although many were. Ofsted became responsible for the inspection of FE teacher training in 2001, when new national regulations were introduced. These included a requirement for all new FE teachers to obtain a teaching qualification. In 2002, the government introduced Success for All, two of whose four strands were focused on teaching, training and learning.
47. In November 2003, Ofsted published *The training of further education teachers*. The report, which was welcomed by the government and its recommendations implemented, found that the current system of FE teacher training does not provide a satisfactory foundation for teachers at the start of their career. The tuition that trainees receive on the taught elements of their course is generally good, but they receive few opportunities to learn how to teach their specialist subject, and the mentoring and support they receive in the workplace are often inadequate. Their needs are not adequately addressed at the start of their courses and the training programmes are therefore not sufficiently tailored to them.
48. Inspection by Ofsted and the ALI deals only tangentially with funding: inspectors are accompanied by auditors who provide a separate report on the financial health of the college. Nevertheless, it is clear from our discussions with principals and from our survey inspections that **excessive complexity in funding arrangements** is a significant constraint upon the ability of colleges to make desirable progress.
49. The government has invested substantially in the Skills for Life initiative; that is, in increasing the basic skills of adults, and colleges have done much to deliver a programme that should be seen as a qualified success. Strong partnerships between colleges and other institutions are widening participation; effective use is being made of the teaching and learning materials devised by the DfES; and large numbers of adults are acquiring qualifications. Nevertheless, there are constraints: there are too few

specialist teachers; too many vocational tutors lack the skills needed to teach literacy and numeracy; and there is too much unsatisfactory teaching.

50. Colleges need support, and funding arrangements need to be clearer and applied more consistently across the country and across settings. Project funding tends to be short term and inhibits a strategic approach. Poor information means that some students in some colleges do not get adequate learning support.
51. In relation to responsiveness to employers, it can be argued convincingly that colleges are not being given sufficient incentive to undertake the job the country urgently needs them to do. The bureaucratic hurdles associated with the funding of qualifications, geographic boundaries, project funding and the requirements of the Individual Learner's Record (ILR) are considerable. It is not that the funding is not there, but that only the most determined and ingenious can gain access to it. The LSC has ambitious plans to reduce this bureaucracy through the 'Agenda for change'.
52. **An excessively diffuse and complex responsibility for 'quality'** is a further constraint on the improvement of colleges, although not a fatal one, as the record of reinspection shows. When the stakes are high, colleges find ways to improve, and the success of their response to reinspection surely makes the powerful point that responsibility for quality can only be successfully located at local level. This is not an argument that anyone in the learning and skills sector would take exception to – yet the practice has been quite different, and it is only in the last few months that there has been some early sign of closer match between rhetoric and reality. Colleges have not been able to discern either what is meant by quality, or where the responsibility for it resides, whether it lies with themselves, the inspectorates, the DfES, the LSC, the Learning and Skills Development Agency and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.
53. In this context, the work the government is undertaking to simplify the accountability framework has an obvious logic to it. Policy formulation, the provision of advice and guidance, regulation and inspection are obviously distinct activities. It does not follow that they need to be located in separate bodies, but the sector has a right to be clear about who does what, and to expect both consistency and intelligence among those charged with its regulation.

Evidence base

This report is based on the findings from the 424 inspections of FE colleges which were conducted between 2001 and 2005. This includes the inspections of 4,000 areas of learning and over 7,000 lesson observations.

It also draws together the findings from a number of Ofsted publications which include:

- *Why colleges succeed*, HMI 2409, 2004
- *Why colleges fail*, HMI 2408, 2004
- *Focused provision 16 to 19: a survey of colleges with sixth form centres*, HMI 2277, 2004
- *The responsiveness of colleges to the needs of employers*, HMI 2358, 2004
- *The initial training of further education teachers*, HMI 1762, 2003.

Annex A. The influence of the qualification framework on qualification success rates

Context

In 2002/03, over 2.8 million long qualifications (of more than 24 weeks in duration) were expected to be completed by learners in FE colleges. Of these, some 58% were successfully completed, rising from 52% in 2000/01 to 56% in 2001/02. The introduction of Curriculum 2000 and its impact on retention and achievement is acknowledged to be a key contributor to the 4 percentage point improvement between 2000/01 and 2001/02.

In 2002/03, sixth form colleges achieved a notably better overall long qualification mean success rate than GFE/tertiary colleges: 76% compared with 54%. Approximately 80% of all long qualifications expected to be completed in 2002/03 were undertaken in GFE colleges.

Long qualifications are categorised in the national LSC data by qualification type. These types comprise: A/AS/A2; GNVQ (including AVCEs); NVQs, GCSEs and other. Table 2 below provides a breakdown of qualification types for FE colleges.

Table 2. Qualification types in further education.

	Percentage				
	Number of starts expected to complete in 2002/03	Distribution of provision	Success rate	Retention rate	Achievement rate
GCE A/AS/A2	683,700	24%	73%	86%	85%
GCSEs	159,000	5%	60%	71%	85%
GNVQs (inc AVCEs & NDs)	218,300	8%	54%	68%	80%
NVQs	287,300	10%	46%	63%	73%
Other	1,532,700	53%	54%	72%	76%
Totals	2,881,900	100%	58%	75%	78%

(2002/03 LSC data)

Success rate

The success rate is determined by the number of qualifications students have gained divided by the number of qualifications started, excluding transfers out. For programmes of study of two years or more, success is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification.

Retention rate

The retention rate comprises the number of students who completed the qualification divided by the number of students who started the qualification,

excluding transfers out. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification.

Achievement rate

The achievement rate is the number of qualifications students have gained divided by the number of completed qualifications. This denominator includes those completers recorded with unknown outcomes in the ILR. Partial achievements are not included as achievements.

Table 2 shows that the highest proportion of qualifications are categorised as 'other' (53%), followed by GCE A/AS/A2 qualifications at 24%. The overall success rate for this major group of other qualifications is 54%, contributing significantly to the overall FE sector success rate of 58%. Some 92% of these were taken in GFE colleges. In the 'other' qualification category, approximately 26% of the starts were learners aged 16–18.

In 2002/03, over 700,000 'starts' failed to achieve the 'other' qualifications for which they had enrolled. This figure represents almost 60% of all long qualification 'fails' across the FE sector.

There is a vast number of different qualifications in the 'other' qualification type category. The LSC's 'other' qualification benchmarking data spreadsheet for 2002/03 provides success, retention and pass rate data for just over 7,000 different qualifications. Many of these qualifications are one-year courses. In a list of 'other' qualifications ranked by the number of starts expected to complete in 2002/03, the qualifications dominating the top of the list are ESOL, IT and basic literacy and numeracy qualifications. Some of the major awarding bodies include City and Guilds, OCN, UCLES, BCS and OCR. The total number enrolled on just the top four 'other' qualifications exceeds the total number in the FE sector enrolled on GCSEs.

In the 'other' qualification category, many of the qualifications with the highest number of starts (and also with the lowest success rates, ranging from 28% to 47%), come under the ICT area of learning.

Table 3 provides a breakdown by qualification categories for sixth form colleges and GFE colleges and gives the corresponding volumes and success rates. It excludes external institutions and specialist colleges, such as art and design, and agriculture and horticulture colleges, which make up a very small proportion of the total qualifications in the FE sector.

Table 3. Qualifications by college type.

College Type	GCE A/A2/AS	GCSEs	GNVQs (inc. AVCEs & NDs)	NVQs	Other	Totals
Sixth form colleges						
Total starts expected to complete in 2002/03	378,500	40,300	28,200	5,000	80,500	532,500
% of total provision	71%	8%	5%	1%	15%	100%
Success Rate	80%	73%	64%	46%	62%	-----
		(all pass grades)				
General further education/tertiary colleges						
Total starts expected to complete in 2002/03	304,000	119,300	183,000	277,400	1,423,900	2,307,600
% of total provision	13%	5%	8%	12%	62%	100%
Success Rate	65%	56%	52%	46%	54%	-----
		(all pass grades)				

(2002/03 LSC data)

Table 3 shows that GCE A/A2/AS qualifications are the highest proportion (71%) of qualifications in sixth form colleges, with a mean success rate of 80%. This group of qualifications has the highest success rate for all qualification types. In GFE colleges, the largest proportion of qualifications (62%) is those categorised as 'other', with a mean success rate of 54%.

The high number of GCE A/AS/A2 qualifications taken in sixth form colleges as a proportion of all long qualifications makes a significant contribution to the high overall long qualification success rate for these institutions. Conversely, the high proportion of 'other' qualifications taken in GFE colleges makes a large contribution to the lower overall long qualification success-rate measure. In both sixth form colleges and GFE colleges, the majority of 'other' qualifications are at level 1 (including entry level), with much of the remainder at level 2.

Annex B. The influence on inspection outcomes of the curriculum mix of the college and the choice of which areas of learning are inspected

Analysis of data shows that for the 247 GFE/tertiary colleges inspected between 2001 and 2004:

- 34 were judged inadequate (13.8%)
- 2,676 curriculum grades were awarded and 310 were judged grade 4 or 5 (11.6%)
- the four areas of learning of science, construction, engineering, and foundation studies, which are essential to government priorities on skills, provide a higher share of unsatisfactory curriculum grades than other curriculum areas.

Table 4. Percentage of four areas of learning judged as unsatisfactory or weak.

Area of learning	Number of areas inspected	Number of areas judged as unsatisfactory or weak	Percentage of areas judged as unsatisfactory or weak	Areas judged as unsatisfactory weak as a percentage of all areas* judged as unsatisfactory or weak	Student numbers as a percentage of all students in further education**
Sciences & mathematics	177	35	20%	11%	3.50%
Construction	149	31	21%	10%	3%
Engineering, technology and manufacturing	175	28	16%	9%	3%
Literacy and numeracy	423	65	15%	21%	11%
Total	924	159	17%	51%	20.50%

* All areas cover all 14 areas of learning inspected in colleges

** from a recent DFES SFR

Thus the four areas of learning provide for a **fifth** of the students and contribute to a **third** of the curriculum grades and **half** of all the unsatisfactory grades. These four areas of learning produce similar levels of unsatisfactory provision in both adequate and inadequate colleges.