



Further education: the first Ofsted inspection cycle and the way ahead

Better
education
and care

David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools

Association of Colleges' Annual Conference, 17 November 2005

Age group	Published	Reference no.
14-19	November 2005	

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I am very pleased to have been invited to your annual conference, not least because I may not always have been your favourite person. You may recall that the Ofsted report *Why colleges fail*, and my comments on it, attracted a certain amount of attention some months ago. I don't retract what I said but I'm happy to be here today to tell you the rest of what I think about further education and the broader 14–19 agenda.

I can begin though by welcoming, categorically and without reservation, Sir Andrew Foster's report on the future of further education. This is a timely and powerful piece of work that charts a clear course for the sector. You may not agree with every detail but I would urge you not to carp. Rather, I hope that you will seize the opportunity to make an active contribution to what will, I am sure, be an important debate in the months ahead.

Sir Andrew makes a point that I fully endorse: further education matters. And because it does, Sir Andrew and I have been willing to court some unfavourable reviews; we see the urgent need for it to be better and, eventually, to become world class.

Further education 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 improve their qualifications; to equip themselves for higher education; or to improve their employability or chances of promotion. It matters because across the country if learners are to have the full range of opportunities they need an effectively functioning further education sector is essential.

It matters, too, because employers need a well-equipped workforce. We should all be pleased that Sir Andrew has repeated this point with substantial force this week. To summarise, there is hardly any aspect of the social, cultural and economic life of the country which further education does not materially affect.

Ofsted, with the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), took over the inspection of further education from the former Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in 2001. The new inspection regime adopted was, as you all know, more extensive in coverage. Through the Common Inspection Framework, it was also more intensively focused on teaching and learning. Most comment from the sector has suggested that the focus has been broadly welcomed, and the cycle of inspection has given us a more detailed picture of further education than ever before.

We have published today a report on the findings from the last four years of inspection¹. Much of what we found was good. I'll repeat that, because you may have missed it. Much of the provision we have looked at in 424 college inspections, 4,000 areas of learning and 70,000 lessons has been good or outstanding. In so far as I can detect a trend, it is one of improvement.

¹ *Further education matters: the first cycle of college inspections*, HMI 2532, 2005.

So I will begin by listing quickly the many good things about further education colleges. All of these characteristics provide a powerful launch pad for the Foster recommendations. I then want to go on to examine why some things have turned out less well; and I want to elaborate on this analysis, because there are elements of it that we haven't shared publicly before, which, to my mind, suggest important ways forward.

It can, I know, seem mean-spirited to dwell on the weaknesses, but I would justify this by saying that the same weaknesses have been remarkably persistent and have done a lot of harm to the reputation of FE. Not only that, they have led to mission-stretch which, in a number of ways, has had unfortunate consequences.

Before I go on, let me make it clear: I have no intention whatsoever in indulging in college-bashing. Things are improving, and some of the things that are preventing colleges from moving ahead even faster are outside their immediate control.

Here are some of the good things:

- Success rates increased from 59% to 72% between 2001 and 2004.
- The number of learners enrolled in further education colleges rose by about a million between 1999 and 2003.
- Over 2.3 million basic skills learners and 750,000 adults were helped to achieve their first qualification in literacy and numeracy.
- Over a quarter of a million young people are on apprenticeship programmes.
- 58 learning and skills beacons have been awarded.
- 90% of learners are satisfied with their experience.

That is pretty good for starters, but let us consider a few more.

First, there are signs of improvement, not just in the success rates, which we know will bear a certain amount of interpretation, but in some elements of inspection judgements as well. For example, the proportion of colleges with satisfactory or better leadership and management rose by 5% – to 87% – between 2001 and 2002 and 2003 and 2004. That means **all** colleges, not just sixth form colleges, though the consistent success of sixth form colleges is one of the glories of the education system, which we ought to celebrate, not disparage or try to explain away.

Second, we have shown that many further education colleges serve their whole community well. They are inclusive institutions in the proper sense: they offer all students a real chance of experiencing success and of contributing more fully to the social, economic and cultural life of the communities in which they live.

Area inspection has highlighted the importance of further education in leading collaboration between institutions in local areas. At Key Stage 4, many thousands of learners are benefiting from increased access to vocational studies, and more young people are becoming involved in learning post-16. Moreover, despite repeated claims from employers that further education is not sufficiently responsive to their needs; our inspection survey showed that about three fifths of further education colleges go to considerable lengths to meet employers' needs. All should, of course, but my point is that the canard that none do is just not true.

Third, colleges provide mostly good or very good guidance to young people, both in their choice of courses and on personal or welfare issues. A couple of years ago, we conducted a survey on further education colleges which had incorporated 16–19 units within the college. We found that they looked after the young people very well, but no better than other colleges, which did not have the same arrangement.

Fourth, further education colleges are widening participation. Many involve traditionally hard to reach groups by the use of community venues, and by designing curricular and progression routes to help them succeed.

Fifth, the further education sector still responds swiftly to government initiatives. Over the last few years – as if you needed reminding – we've had Curriculum 2000 and the inclusion of key skills, Skills for Life, the skills agenda, Centres of Vocational Excellence, increased collaboration with schools, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act; as well as the safeguarding children legislation.

That's a pretty good list, isn't it? One journalist who cares about further education is Will Hutton. He published a feature in the *Observer* recently entitled, 'Nation with a licence to skill'. The article focused on the work of Newham College in implementing the skills agenda, and ends:

Britain is on the verge of establishing a comprehensive system of lifelong learning that will transform its skills base and the lives of ordinary people.

I think this **may** be true. It may well be that in 15 or 20 years we shall look back and reflect that this was it: this was the moment that we got post-16 right and, more broadly, achieved the status for vocational learning that Ruskin and others were arguing for well over a century ago. More specifically, this is why Andrew Foster's report comes at such a crucial time, as it charts a new course for the sector.

But why can't we be absolutely certain about the future? Well, let's leave aside for the moment some of the difficult decisions that the Foster review will require and reflect on one or two other inhibitors. The first is hinted at, rather

plaintively, by Hutton: ‘...almost nobody knows’. As he says, when the recent Skills White Paper appeared, only one national newspaper reported it: the *Financial Times*. The tabloids could find no space for it in between episodes of the Michael Jackson trial and the latest gossip about footballers, minor royals and the cast of *Coronation Street*.

Even the broadsheet newspapers devote a thousand times as many column inches to university entrance as they do to the institutions to which the majority of the people in this country actually go.

I doubt if there is much that can be done about that. Further education is so inextricably part of the ordinary life of the country that it is rarely likely to be sexy or newsworthy. Too often, the ordinary attracts attention only when it goes wrong, and the fate of the quietly effective is taken for granted.

Certainly, the rate at which colleges became inadequate fell sharply last year, and the rate at which they emerged from inadequacy on reinspection was very encouraging. I would say, provocatively, that the penny finally dropped. To say, as some have, ‘Well, this inspection programme told us what we already knew about years ago,’ is probably the most savage indictment that can be laid at the door of FE. It has taken us quite a bit of time to do something about it and, as Foster properly reports, we are not out of the woods yet.

I won’t claim the improvements that we have seen are simply the success of inspection, because a great many other things had to happen to bring this success about. It does, however, seem incontrovertible that it would not have happened **without** inspection.

My HMI colleagues occasionally remind me of what the Duke of Wellington said of his own soldiers: ‘I don’t know if they frighten the enemy, but by God they terrify me.’ If I knew that HMI were coming to reinspect me, it would concentrate my mind wonderfully. The inevitability of beady-eyed scrutiny would cause me to make me shift to improve. And that, of course, is precisely what your colleagues have done, well within the deadline of two years.

Let’s be absolutely clear: much provision in further education is good; it is improving overall; and that small minority which colours perceptions of the sector is disappearing, like a sea mist in a good stiff breeze.

That’s great, but it is not enough. **All** colleges should be at least **good** colleges, not merely satisfactory, which all too often means no more than merely ‘not inadequate’. I said in relation to schools a year or two ago and I say it now in relation to colleges: ‘satisfactory is not good enough’. Why? Well, show me a business that is interested in providing a satisfactory product today and tomorrow I’ll show you a business that is no more. It’s not just a management book cliché; excellence really has to be the minimum standard.

I'd also make this point. Inconsistency between colleges is, in many ways, a more serious problem than inconsistency between schools. For national employers, it can seriously impede their training and development strategies if they cannot rely on the quality of the further education on offer to be uniformly good.

I've referred to the Foster review already as throughout this speech, so let me stop and dwell a bit more on it at this point. I would like to mention at the outset that Sir Andrew drew a great deal from Ofsted's evidence in coming to his conclusions. It is gratifying that he made good use of our extensive knowledge of the sector.

When I first started doing this job, what immediately struck me, in comparison with the school sector, was that there was no clear policy narrative in further education. There was no hint of what Mozart scholars call *il filo*: the thread of continuity that passes from one movement to another and makes the work identifiably the same. I agree with Sir Andrew that there has been no such continuity for further education.

Of course, there have been repeated changes, some of which have been so substantial as to amount to a shift of paradigm. This is rarely achievable, and never repeatable. You can tell a cat that it is actually a dog, but it will not easily believe you, and its attempts to bark will lack conviction. Further education colleges have been asked to transform themselves from institutions functioning cooperatively within a local system to quasi-entrepreneurial outfits operating in a market, and then to go part of the way back again.

This is unlikely to happen without some difficulty, and since change has been supported by an incredible degree of micro-management, and by such complex bureaucratic procedures, it is not surprising that much of the further education sector is sick of change and not inclined to associate it with improvement.

Don't get me wrong: further education is good at responding quickly to initiatives. It has to be. But there have been more than enough. One example is the vocational curriculum. The repeated changes, from ordinary national diplomas to national diplomas, to GNVQ and then AVCE have not provided the stability of context needed for the time-consuming work of improving teaching and learning to take place. It is no wonder that colleges are perceived as not fully realising their potential.

So, surely it is a good week for further education that someone as eminent as Sir Andrew has called for a clear statement of purpose for further education. Not only that, I also believe that he is absolutely right in calling for it to play a central role in developing the skills required for our citizens to become productive employees.

As I said earlier, there are still some colleges which are consistently underperforming and failing to meet the needs of their learners and local communities. We do need to have tougher mechanisms to call to account those colleges that are unable to improve, and I strongly support Sir Andrew's contestability review for colleges that do not improve after a prescribed time. When the stakes are high, colleges find ways to improve. Colleges' success in responding to reinspection surely makes the point strongly that responsibility for quality can only be located at a local level.

Sir Andrew is also right to argue that colleges have not been able to discern confidently what is meant by quality or where the responsibility for it resides. Ofsted is working closely with the ALI, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the DfES, and the emerging Quality Improvement Agency clearly to define and rationalise the quality infrastructure and to aid the development of a culture of self-improvement in the sector. The launch of the quality improvement strategy in June 2006 will, we hope, be a significant move towards a greater coherence in the quality agenda.

The further education review also recommends the need to develop more rounded measures of success which cover equality and diversity, learner satisfaction, value for money and responsiveness to employers. Ofsted strongly supports these measures and is actively involved in the various groups that are developing them.

I also agree with Sir Andrew that there is a need to reduce the burden of inspection. Early signs from the first few inspections under the new post-September 2005 inspection system are positive. Colleges welcome the shorter-notice inspections. The 'lighter touch' approach to those colleges that have a record of good performance is also being well received, and we are proving that it is possible to get a good understanding of the central nervous system of a college. The first reports will be published at the beginning of December. We will take Sir Andrew's comments forwards in our future development of inspection methodology.

I couldn't talk about the review's proposals for inspection without touching on Sir Andrew's recommendation that one inspectorate should be responsible for post-compulsory education. I agree. I am pleased, too, that he has drawn out the fact that we work very effectively with the ALI on college inspections. However, in my view there would be a greater coherence, economy of scale and reduction in bureaucracy should the decision be made to expand Ofsted's remit to encompass the work of the ALI.

If the announcement does indeed recommend that our remit is to be enlarged, you can rest assured that we would build on the considerable skills and expertise of the inspectors who are currently within the ALI. Do not believe the scaremongers who suggest either that we are not interested in post-19 work or

that it will get lost in an enlarged Ofsted. Further education matters and will matter even more in an expanded Ofsted.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly some other reports that we are publishing today². These include our findings on the development of a coherent 14–19 phase, developments at Key Stage 4, work related learning and young apprenticeships and developing enterprising young people.

Take 14–19 area reviews. Over the two years that the inspections took place, we saw important developments in 14–19 education and training. Local authorities and local LSCs succeeded in promoting a climate of greater collaboration between providers. Discussion flourished in many areas. However, in the first few years they were slow to act and did not always provide the strong and persuasive leadership required to move matters forward. But there are signs that things are now improving.

We've also looked at the progress that has been made in broadening the scope of the curriculum at Key Stage 4, making it more relevant and appropriate to learners. This success has been especially apparent in the Increased Flexibility programmes. Individual initiatives have proved very successful but too little analysis has been carried out to identify the gaps and inequalities in provision, and clear pathways for 14–19 year olds are lacking. Hopefully, the proposals in the white paper will make a difference here.

An area that I feel particularly strongly about is that of advice and guidance. There is still a lack of impartial advice to inform young people's decisions at key transition points. Careers staff in schools often take little account of vocational qualifications and pathways up to 19. In many areas impartial advice on post-16 opportunities is not sufficiently widely available. This is particularly the case for work-based learning, where the take up of this provision is severely hindered because young people are not provided with information that would give them a true understanding of its nature and purpose.

The support provided to young people on joint programmes could be greatly enhanced if information about learners and their needs were shared more effectively between learning providers. In too many instances, teachers in the receiving institutions are not aware of the learners' prior achievement or their support needs. This can result in learners being inappropriately placed on courses, or not being provided with the support that they need.

² *Creating opportunity for young people*, HMI 2444, 2005.
Developing a coherent 14–19 phase of education and training, HMI 2442, 2005.
Developing enterprising young people, HMI 2460.
The Key Stage 4 curriculum, HMI 2478, 2005.

The report we publish today on enterprise learning also provides a good insight into the ways that schools are developing their provision for 14–16 year olds. As you know, enterprise learning is seen by the Chancellor as a key component in improving the economic well-being of the nation and individuals. The government has provided additional funding of £180 million over three years from September 2005 to support the development of enterprise learning for 14–16 year olds.

Our findings conclude that those schools that have been effective in the pilot phase share strong commitment by their senior managers and a common understanding of enterprise education. Many schools are using outside expertise to enhance their programmes; this is an area in which colleges could collaborate with schools further.

On work-related learning though, there is still resistance to the idea that this opportunity should be available to all. There is no doubt that learners enjoy these new approaches and are overwhelmingly positive about the changes to the curriculum.

I know that some people argue that there is little point in the Oxbridge candidate taking part in work-related learning. I would argue the opposite. We know that employers say that even the brightest of graduates do not always come out of university attuned to the demands of the workplace. Giving youngsters a taste of modern business is as important in school as it is at university and I think there remains a big challenge here for the **whole** education system.

But employers, too, need to be prepared to step up to the plate on this one. They have to help educational institutions find the right opportunities for young people to learn in practical and meaningful ways. They also have to be prepared to contribute their ideas and expertise as new courses and qualifications are developed.

I'm actually very optimistic about this. As the DfES moves towards the publication of its 14–19 action plan, I sense a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of employers towards the changes afoot. I've been very struck by the extent to which employers across the economy believe that the strong and continuing emphasis on basic skills, alongside more specialised and vocationally orientated work post-14, could bring about a revolution in our approach to education and training.

Consistent with the spirit of the Foster review, further education colleges have a crucial role to play. Equally, our findings suggest that there will need to be a significant amount of collaboration to bring about what we all want to achieve by 2013. To repeat the point: further education colleges will need to be key

partners in these collaborative arrangements if the vision has any hope of being achieved. I am sure that the sector will again rise to the challenge.

I feel huge optimism about further education. The general drift of policy is right, and the signs of improvement are unmistakably there. Sir Andrew Foster's report offers a timely intervention. My message now is this: focus on a clear purpose and expect to be judged on the particular job you do. To government, I paraphrase Sir Andrew and say: fund FE colleges to do that job, incentivise collaboration and demand that these vital institutions be in the vanguard of economic and skills development.

We shall not arrive overnight at a society in which everyone is well trained and educated. However, through your efforts we can get closer to that ideal than we have ever managed before.

Good luck in the future and I wish you success in all that you do.