

College Inspection Post 2005

In June 2004 Ofsted and ALI issued a joint letter setting out a proposed approach to the inspection of colleges under the learning and Skills Act 2000 to take effect once the current cycle ends in the summer of 2005.

The proposals contained six key principles which underpin the development of the approach. Twenty eight responses were received mainly from colleges but also from local Learning and Skills Councils and others in the post 16 sector. The following is a summary of the comments received together with the response of Ofsted and the ALI.

Most of the proposals received strong support from the respondees, and a recognition that the intention as set out in the letter was to build on the success of the CIF in the current cycle and to respond to the general view that a differentiated approach was now required. Points made by the respondees to each of the six proposals along with the Ofsted/ALI response are shown below. These responses will be considered by the groups developing the detailed arrangements for the next cycle.

To reduce drastically the period of notice given to an institution

This principle received a mix response. The majority of respondents welcomed the reduced notice period with the likely benefits of a reduced burden and stress on institution staff, a more realistic view of the quality of the learners experience and the promotion of a culture of continuous improvement. However, there is some concern that the reduction in notice will affect the scope for inspectors to plan effectively an inspection to give due attention to the scope of provision offered by an institution and for the institution to put in place arrangements logistically to cope with the inspection. There is some concern over whether the amount of documentation required by the inspection team will realistically be reduced along with the time to prepare it. An issue raised by more than one respondent related to the different period of notice given to institutions depending on whether their ALI work will be inspected prior to the team inspection.

Ofsted/ALI response: A number of factors lead us to believe that the notice period can be substantially reduced. Proposals are already in train to reduce to a minimum the amount of information required from colleges prior to an inspection and the inspectorates will work with colleges to seek to reduce this burden still further. In time, the proposed annual HMI visits to colleges will allow information on the nature of the college and its provision to be fed into the inspection planning process. In practice, the notice period for inspection would vary between three and six weeks to ensure that there is sufficient information to cover the remits of the two inspectorates. Planned reductions in the notice period will be monitored very closely, particularly in the early stages of the inspection cycle.

To take account of the track record and current information on a college's performance to determine the scope of inspection

This proposal was clearly welcomed and respondents supported the focus on institutions to improve provision year on year rather than in response to the inspection cycle. Several points were made which relate to the developments proposed elsewhere to produce better success measures of college performance. Some comments related to concerns over the role of the LSC in providing information to inform the review of performance and the accuracy of its college data in relation to the impact this may have on scope of inspections.

Ofsted/ALI response: The new success measures will be included in inspection as they come on stream and after they have been successfully piloted. The issue of data accuracy continues to be a challenge for some institutions where there may well need to be a better understanding between the college and the local LSC of any apparent discrepancies.

To focus inspection more closely on the agenda for improvement by introduction more frequent contact between inspectors and colleges

The move to attach to each college a named HMI is strongly welcomed and is seen as a powerful method of improving the quality of provision. Some commented that visits annually are perhaps too long a gap and suggested more regular and supportive visits. Concern was raised regarding how the annual visits will fit in with the new Learning and Skills Council business planning cycle.

Ofsted/ALI response. The annual assessment visits (AAVs) will include a review of the progress on the college's plans for improvement. They are likely to be scheduled throughout the year rather than concentrated in the period when the LSC may undertake its review of college plans. The model of one visit a year may be reconsidered in future but there will need to be a clear distinction between the inspection function which the AAV is meant to perform and the support arrangements which are currently being considered by the DfES .

Encouraging further use of the self-assessment as an important means of improving the quality of provision

This proposal was universally welcomed. There is recognition that the integrity of data and better measures of success will be important elements which will underpin effective self-assessment. There was a call for clear guidance and more transparent criteria to be made available to inform colleges on how the judgements will be made.

Ofsted/ALI response. The inspectorates are currently working with the LSC which is updating its guidance to providers on self assessment and development planning. The intention is that the LSC will produce a document which includes an indication of the inspectorates' requirements on self-assessment.

Recognising that rigorously developed self-assessment reports can be a valuable source of information about providers for potential students, employers and other stakeholders

This principle raised the most significant doubts. Whilst it is recognised that the self-assessment reports contain valuable information there were serious concerns that if self assessment was to involve a rigorous self critical approach that institutions would be deterred from doing so if their self assessment reports were to be public documents. Institutions would be more likely to be selective in reporting weaknesses and less honest in their approach. One suggestion was to publish a summary of the self-assessment rather than the entire report.

Ofsted/ALI response. We have agreed that inspection reports will not include a table of the college's self assessment grades. We recognise that the publication of the grades might well undermine further progress in some institutions towards robust and reliable self assessment judgements. Inspectors will clearly indicate in reports where there may be discrepancies between some inspection judgements and those made by the college. However, no inspection will cover all grades awarded by a college and it would not be appropriate to publish individual grades which inspectors had not considered. Colleges may well consider the publication of their self assessment grades to be an appropriate matter for their annual reports which are shared with the public.

To ensure that the information from inspection feeds into the arrangements being developed for the inspection of children's services in the area served by the college

Further information regarding integrated inspection of children's services will be welcomed when released.

Ofsted/ALI response. The publication of the draft CIF in November will indicate how the proposed outcomes for the inspection of children's services will be represented in the inspection schedule. The revised handbook for inspecting colleges will be published later in the new year and will offer further guidance on how inspectors will make judgements in this regard during college inspections.

The proposal to move to a 4 point scale was generally welcomed although some felt it was a backwards step and concern was raised with regard to there being only one grade for inadequate provision.

Ofsted/ALI response: The full range of the 7 and 5 point scale has very rarely been used at the lower end. A standard 4 point scale will better represent the range of inspection judgements currently being awarded and will allow a straightforward mapping across one inspection cycle to another.