

“Quality” in post compulsory education and training in England and Wales

Background paper for NIACE inquiry, Kate Watters,

Introduction

Scope

This paper attempts to summarise, with some commentary, strands of government policy and strategy concerning the ‘quality’ of post-compulsory education and training in particular and higher education in England, with some reference also to post-compulsory education and training, and higher education, in Wales. These last areas, being less familiar, have been covered in less depth.

The time period covered is mainly the past decade, with some references to the earlier 1990s – i.e. a focus on the period of office of the current administration/government, with reference to continuing policy emphases carried over from the previous administration. It is worth noting though that there has been broad consensus and few overt differences between the various political parties in policy for post-16 (pre HE) education and training, when compared with schooling, and, to a considerable extent, higher education.

Background

Raising the ‘quality’ of post-compulsory education and training provision, and of higher education, has been a preoccupation of government for some time. This needs to be seen in the context of longer term and wider agendas, in particular:

- **wider public sector reform**, and related intentions to import managerial business practices (New Public Management approaches) ;
- the concept of **investment in ‘human capital’** as a key influence on social policy, resulting in an emphasis on achieving the required return on investment, that is, value for (public) money from the education and training system. The major ‘measure’ (in the sense of way of measuring) this return is improved qualifications and skills of the population, being pursued with increasing urgency in the context of globalising influences and forces.

Wider Public Sector Reform agenda

The underpinning of education and training policy by “the Prime Minister’s four key principles of public sector reform” is made explicit in *Success for All* (2002 para 7). These are to *expand choice*; to *promote devolution and delegation* to the front line; to provide *flexibility and incentives for success*; and requiring *high standards and accountability* (original emphases). Later policy statements clearly reflect the *UK Government’s Model of Public Service Reform – a Self-Improving System* and model for continuous improvement, as from the Cabinet Office (date), referred to in the National Improvement Strategy 2007 (Section 2, page 12) and see annex 1 below.

The relevant features of the model in the context of quality matters are:

- **Top Down Performance Management** comprising: Stretching Outcome Targets; Regulation and Standard Setting; Performance Assessment including Inspection; Direct Intervention, and
- **Capability and Capacity**, comprising: Leadership; Workforce Development, skills and Reform; Organisational Development and Collaboration.

Aspects of the two other main aspects of the model also emerge over time:

- employer and learner voice and satisfaction measures (**Users Shaping the Service from Below**) and
- the linking of funding/purchasing and quality, and contestability (**Market Incentives to Increase Efficiency and Quality of Service**)

Given a starting point of a perceived need for major reform, constantly reiterated, it can be difficult to separate out 'quality' matters from wider reform agendas – arguably all improvement is improvement in 'quality' of product or service. This paper aims to identify what policy discourses have included under the heading of 'quality', explicitly or implicitly, and roles in relation to 'quality' allocated to different parties – providers themselves, the various agencies and the relevant government department/s.

Investment in Human Capital

As David Blunkett made clear in the first paragraph of foreword to *The Learning Age* (1998) government policy looked towards human capital theory.

“Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century....this Green Paper sets out for consultation how learning throughout life will build human capital by encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and skills and emphasising creativity and imagination. The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential to our future success”.

More recently government has raised the question of 'who should pay?'. If 'purchasing' education and training can be regarded as an investment in increased knowledge and skills, surely that investment should be shared between the state, employers and individuals? Government is seeking to rebalance the equation, relinquishing some responsibility to employers and individuals. At present their approach to employers is one of encouragement and incentives rather than coercion. Individuals are increasingly expected to see the need for investment in education and training as a duty of self-improvement to ensure continuing employability and productivity. This extends to the wider benefits of learning, which are acknowledged by government.

Talking about providers

How terms are used in official discourses can present difficulties in communication and understanding. It can also reveal underlying perspectives and conceptualisations. Inconsistencies in the use of terms can indicate muddled thinking, a lack of understanding as to the difficulties that this can present, or a lack of concern about these. For example despite the creation of a single 'learning and skills sector (LSS) there has been a persistent tendency during this period to focus on a particular part of the sector, using the term "further education" sometimes to indicate further education colleges alone, sometimes to indicate provision funded by a particular funding stream (FE) and at other times to indicate all post compulsory education and training providers, with the exception of higher education, as in the term 'FE system'.

Other than in quotations, this paper will use seek to avoid talking about particular 'systems' but will refer to groups of providers and types of provision. When dealing with post-compulsory education and training in England, the term 'FE colleges and other FE providers' will mean FE colleges and other organisations funded via Learning and Skills Council (LSC) FE funding streams and subject to FE regulations/requirements. The term 'work-based learning provider' will be used to denote organisations (which may include FE colleges and/or local authorities and voluntary organisations as well as private training providers) which receive LSC funding in England Adult and Community Learning (ACL providers) will be used to denote organisations inspected since 2002 as 'ACL' under previous Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and current OFSTED inspection arrangements. Unless stated otherwise, the term 'ACL' will not denote a particular, now defunct, LSC funding stream. The term 'sector' will be used where appropriate to refer to the Learning and Skills Sector created by the Learning and Skills Act 2000. Particular groups of providers may be referred to as sub-sectors.

When dealing with the situation in Wales the terms used will be those currently used to describe providers in receipt of ELWA/WAG funding to provide training for young employed adults, and by Estyn, the inspectorate for Wales.

The term HE will be used to denote HE institutions, and higher education offered in further education institutions, operating under the auspices of the HE funding councils in England and Wales and subject to Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) procedures.

How can 'quality' be achieved?

Key processes

Policy discourses are rather clearer about how 'quality' is to be achieved than about what constitutes 'quality'. Obtaining or achieving 'quality' is seen as involving several key processes:

- defining standards, in terms of processes and required outputs/outcomes
- meeting or achieving 'threshold' standards/ever higher standards

- controlling quality, through inputs and key processes, and ensuring compliance with specifications (quality insurance?)
- assuring (ensuring and being assured about) quality through implementing appropriate quality assurance systems and procedures
- monitoring and assessing quality and identifying areas for improvement (internal audit, self-assessment)
- measuring performance in relation to key quality or performance indicators
- comparing performance through benchmarking using suitable comparators
- developing a culture of 'continuous improvement'
- improving quality, through actions taken in response to feedback from self-assessment and external monitoring and inspection
- minimising 'risk' (this aspect has become more prevalent recently)
- external monitoring of quality, through audit and inspection

Taken together, they imply a composite, abstract, 'context-free' definition of 'quality'.

The processes and procedures are a mix of internal activity within provider organisations and external intervention. They are variously concerned with inputs, processes, perceptions (e.g. of what constitutes quality, of quality as experienced) direct observation, obtaining feedback, collecting, analysing and using data and information, making comparisons, making judgements as compared with measurements. Both qualitative and quantitative 'evidence' and ways of evaluating 'quality' are involved.

Responsibility for undertaking these various activities and processes rests at several levels and with a range of parties – with government, delegated to particular agencies, at the level of the provider organisations themselves and within organisations at different levels. Emphasising different strands can indicate underlying assumptions about how organisations operate and the motivations and attitudes of individuals. In seeking to ensure and (increasingly) improve 'quality', policy has involved a mix of 'sticks' and 'carrots', as will be seen. The methods used to ascertain 'quality' have moved progressively from micro-level (direct observation of teaching and learning) to the macro-level (analysis of data sets and indicators, increasingly remotely).

Self-assessment

Provider self-assessment has throughout the period covered in this paper and for the further education sub-sector since 1992 been the key 'quality' process. It became a requirement for all providers in the new Learning and Skills Sector to produce and submit an annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR). Local LSCs were initially required to advise on and 'sign off' providers' self-assessment reports (although many providers doubted that those undertaking this had the necessary experience and/or expertise).

The purpose of self-assessment was to enable providers to assess the quality of their provision against the Common Inspection Framework and in due course LSC quality indicators and other aspects such as health and safety

and financial matters. Strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement were to be identified and actions needed to maintain the strengths and bring about improvement formed a quality improvement plan.

In the early days of the LSC providers were required to submit separate self-assessment reports for different strands of funding. SARs were required to include specific actions to be taken to address areas of weakness or in need of improvement. Progress against these was to be monitored and reported on in the subsequent SAR. The SAR was also important in the context of inspection, being a key document for planning and to inform inspection activity. As SARs were to include evidence to support the providers' judgements as to the quality of provision there was an element of 'proving' quality and asserting this to the funding body and inspectors. The primary purpose though was continuous improvement.

Key organisations' and agencies' roles concerning 'quality'

The primary responsibility for quality was and continues to be seen as that of the provider. However a range of other bodies have been and are involved in quality assurance and improvement.

- The role of the relevant **government departments** (DfEE, DfES and now DCSF and DIUS) has changed during this period, with government moving away from direct involvement (such as the creation of an internal Standards Unit) in quality improvement initiatives.
- The role of the **Learning and Skills Council** has changed from being given at its creation major and wide-ranging responsibilities to a rather narrower role relating to planning, risk management, quality assurance, aspects of 'measurement', and relinquishing responsibility for quality improvement
- The role of **inspection** (OFSTED and ALI) /the inspectorate (new OFSTED) has been clarified, ruling out direct involvement in quality improvement activities
- A single national **Quality Improvement Agency** (QIA) has been established, with the LSC and OFSTED as national partners (the role of JobCentrePlus is evolving but still unclear)
- **Lifelong Learning UK** (LLUK) has specific responsibility for workforce development other than leadership, which is the responsibility of the **Centre for Excellence in Leadership** (CEL). CEL's relationship with QIA is evolving.
- The **Qualifications and Curriculum Authority** QCA is responsible for the quality of qualifications, currently, but will be required to work more closely with Sector Skills Councils under the Leitch proposals.

- In Wales the equivalent organisation to the LSC is ELWa, now merged with the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). The single inspectorate for Wales, equivalent to OFSTED, is Estyn. (see section on Wales)
- In Higher Education the Higher Education Funding Council for England HEFCE is responsible for ensuring that the quality of education in the universities and colleges it funds is assessed, and reporting on this. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has similar responsibilities.
- The Quality Assurance Agency QAA for higher education provides an integrated quality assurance service for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, undertaking institutional audits in HEIs and academic review, to become Integrated Quality Enhancement Reviews (IQERs) subject to satisfactory evaluation of a pilot phase from 2008.
- The Higher Education Statistics Agency HESA provides performance indicators and other data for the sector (see section on Higher Education)

How these responsibilities have evolved will be described through tracing policy development and implementation strategies.

‘Quality’ in the Learning and Skills Sector – what does it mean?

As Roger Brown, Vice Chancellor of Southampton Solent University is reported as observing recently (THES 17/8/07) in the context of HE league tables, “There can never be perfect, or even adequate, information about quality, mainly because there is not agreement across higher education about what is meant by quality or how it should be measured”. The same could be said about the Learning and Skills Sector. How then should we understand ‘quality’ in this context?

‘Quality’ in post-compulsory education and training, and higher education is, to judge from government and sector discourses, a complex multi-faceted concept including a number of key elements. While the latter have varied over time, there are a number of threads that run through recent policy documents, and can be traced from *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE 1998) and indeed earlier through to the national Quality Improvement Strategy (QIA 2007) and the new Framework for Excellence (LSC 2007).

How is ‘quality’ included in key policy documents and initiatives?

The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain

Chapter 5 of *The Learning Age* (1998), “Ensuring Standards, Quality and Accountability”, identifies the need for ‘a major drive to raise standards’ so

that learners' entitlement to 'high quality learning' that "*delivers what it promises; gets them to their goals; and takes them as high up the ladder of achievement as they are able to go*" can be realised.

This suggests that 'quality' is seen as linked to the notions of 'effectiveness' and '**fitness for purpose**'. At this stage, the purpose to be achieved was that of the individual; by implication the purpose of education and training is to enable individuals to achieve their aspirations. More recently, the dominant purposes for education and training have become those of government, employers and individuals in relation to employment and the economy.

In 1998 then 'high quality learning' required improved 'standards'. In 1998 the drive to raise standards was seen as involving:

- **meeting individual learners' needs** and aspirations;
- promoting **high quality teaching**;
- setting, publishing and **meeting targets for improving** achievement over time;
- **identifying and dealing with weaknesses**;
- having **objective external assessment**; and
- ensuring good **value for money** (efficiency) (para 5.2 p 57)

So the agenda for 'quality', in the form of 'higher standards', includes improving aspects of learner experience, and outcomes/achievement; and achieving 'value for money'. There is also a requirement for external confirmation.

The Learning Age (Chapter 5, p60) makes specific reference to the need for a consistent approach to **improving quality**, through the implementation of 'quality assurance systems' both internal and, in the form of 'regular independent inspections', external. So **quality improvement** is an outcome of effective **quality assurance**.

Learning to Succeed

In 1999 the DfEE published its White Paper *Learning to Succeed, a new framework for post-16 learning*. This has formed the basis for the configuration of various parties to the quality agenda until the creation of the Quality Improvement Agency in 2006, and contains most of the elements of current policy. It announced the creation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to replace the Further Education Funding Council and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). The LSC was to be complemented by "an independent, rigorous and effective inspection regime" (Foreword, p1). The Welsh Assembly would take decisions about recommendations from its newly-established Education and Training Action Group for Wales (ETAG) – see Appendix 1.

Chapter 5 of *Learning to Succeed* is concerning with "Improving Quality". While acknowledging that there was much good education provision, in order to achieve wider government policy objectives "*all provision must be consistently good and continuously improving. We must aim for the excellence which learners are entitled to expect from publicly*

funded education and training. We need a major drive to raise standards in post-16 provision as we have done in schools” (Chapter 5 para 5.2)

Quality improvement is identified as a critical part of government’s measures (in the sense of action agendas) to improve individuals’ ‘learning chances’. The aim is to ensure that everyone undertaking education and training should expect the provision they access to demonstrate certain features, by implication quality characteristics:

- high and rising levels of retention, completion and achievement
- effective teaching and training by appropriately qualified staff
- a safe and supportive environment
- being well-governed and managed; and
- deploying public funds with probity and to achieve value for money

Chapter 5 outlines changes to inspection arrangements, including **the creation of a new independent inspectorate for adult provision and work-based learning** for both young adults and older people, to work alongside OFSTED which remained responsible for inspecting sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges (paras 5.9,5.10). Area inspections involving both inspectorates are to be introduced for 16-19 education and training. While FE colleges (and a small number of ‘designated’ institutions such as the WEA and City Lit) and TEC-funded WBL providers had been subject to regular inspection, from 1993 by the FEFC inspectorate and from 1997 by the Training Standards Council (TSC) respectively, local authorities, the main providers of adult and community learning, had in practice rarely been inspected by OFSTED (6 inspections during 1999-2000 for example). In future they would be inspected by the new adult learning inspectorate.

Both inspectorates would report to government and through published reports on individual providers on the quality of provision, the standards achieved, the supporting provider infrastructure, management, governance and value for money using a new **common inspection framework** (5.11) Furthermore inspectors will monitor on a continuing basis providers giving cause for concern, and undertaking re-inspections, with a view to improving performance. In addition the inspectorates would prepare ‘good practice’ reports and undertake national surveys of key policy areas. They will also advise the local LSCs on “the adequacy of action plans produced by providers to address weaknesses revealed during inspections”.

Chapter 5 of Learning to Succeed also sets out **the role of the new Learning and Skills Council in relation to ‘quality’**. These are extremely wide-ranging, from agreeing a strategy for quality improvement with the Secretary of State to monitoring and dealing with complaints. The LSC is required to Ensure that “judgements about quality, standards and probity” are part of its overall approach to planning and funding, over time moving to a position where it does not fund inadequate provision. In summary the LSC would be responsible for:

- assuring itself of the quality of the provision it funds
- agreeing a strategy for quality improvement with the Secretary of State

- ensuring it has in place quality and audit systems which enable it to make judgements about the performance of individual providers and elements of their provision
- assuring the quality of provision to individuals (investigating and dealing with complaints)
- rewarding high quality provision through funding
- disseminating excellence
- taking firm action where providers fall short of expected standards including proposing remedial action
- making proposals for closure where provision remained inadequate
- working closely with and supporting providers seeking to make improvements.

Also, to support its overall quality improvement strategy

- undertaking research into quality issues of a long term nature
- advising the Secretary of State on policies and supporting their implementation
- providing (with support – see para 5.12) guidance on and promoting staff training and development
- promoting best practice in education and training
- promoting quality improvement through dissemination
- monitoring the numbers and types of complaints to provide early warning of emerging issues and ensuring high quality service

As will be obvious there are areas of overlap between the responsibilities of the LSC and those of the inspectorates. These have since been addressed and clarified, with the formation of the new single Quality Assurance Agency in 2006 (see below). While the responsibilities of the inspectorates were broadly in line with those of the Further Education Funding Council inspectorate and the Training Standards Council, those of the national LSC and its 47 local 'arms' were far wider than those of the Training and Enterprise Councils in relation to 'quality'. From its inception doubts were expressed as to the capacity and capability of the LSC to carry out this wide range of quality-related duties while inheriting many of its staff from bodies without experience in some of these areas.

In one key area of quality improvement the government stated its intention, in Learning to Succeed, to retain direct responsibility. This was the area of what has become known as 'workforce development', that is, "the development of a range of qualifications for all post-16 teaching and training staff" and "strengthening the ethos of professionalism and parity of esteem" across the sector (para 5.20).

Also included in Chapter 5 of Learning to Succeed, and seen as a key aspect of improving quality, was **the development of the qualifications system**. Qualifications are seen as "a measure of success for both individuals and providers" (para 5.22). This responsibility was given to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) working with the National Training Organisations, along with the development of national standards in relation to basic skills, in response to the Moser Report of (check). This paper does not deal specifically

with wider qualifications reform as an aspect of 'quality', as developments in this field became to some extent hived off from broader quality improvement strategies relating to providers/provision, but will refer to workforce development in relation to those working in provider organisations.

The Learning and Skills Council's 'quality' role

A key initiative in the drive to reform education and training and improve its quality was the formation of the Learning and Skills Council. In its Prospectus, following from the consultation on the White Paper, the LSC describes its role in relation to quality in the context of the new inspection arrangements.

Broadly this echoes the role described in the White Paper with some additions. These include:

- specific reference to providers' need to demonstrate responsiveness to businesses and communities as well as the diverse needs of individual learners (para 5.1)
- reference to **working in partnership with the Employment Service** (ES) when developing the Improvement Strategy (5.3)
- a reminder that **the primary responsibility for quality rests with providers** (5.4)
- LSC's task of building and sustaining **a culture of continuous improvement** (5.4)
- the requirement that providers self-assess against the LSC's 'quality criteria' (5.4)
- the need for the LSC to **validate** the achievement and maintenance of its requirements for quality (and other matters) and its intention to employ staff with the competence to make sound judgements in relation to this (5.14)
- differentiated support for providers, according to need to improve (5.6)
- LSC's role in agreeing post inspection action plans with providers (5.15)
- the expectation that each provider will set rigorous improvement targets using relevant and consistent **performance indicators**, to be developed by the DfEE with representatives of the provider network and the Employment Service prior to the establishment of the LSC(5.20)
- LSC's endorsement of the QCA's criteria for approval of qualifications (5.26).

The aspirations of Learning To Succeed were enacted through the Learning and Skills Act 2000. In respect of its quality role, the LSC initially established a Quality and Standards Directorate.(This was closed down by Mark Haysom shortly after his appointment in 2003).

The LSC's key role in relation to improving quality was confirmed in the LSC's first 'remit letter' (November 2000) by the Secretary of State. The LSC's statutory duty was to secure high standards (para 2, Annex). Taking account of the findings, evidence base and advice of OFSTED and the new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) about the quality of provision, the LSC must work with providers to improve and develop 'high standard learning opportunities' (para 16). It must make the best use of its resources, securing "high quality,

high standards provision and value for money from all its providers” and should “promote excellence and high quality delivery of services (para 35).

As for relationships with other government departments and agencies, the LSC ‘will want to’ work in partnership with the Employment Service “ to develop quality improvement strategies that lead to improved learning and consistently high standards of delivery” (para 8, Annex). The LSC is also expected to continue to support the QCA in regard to its work (para 27).

Annual Grant letters confirmed the key priority for the LSC of making significant progress on raising standards and the focus on driving up reflect provider performance and changes in emphasis resulting from specific ‘reform’ initiatives such as Success for All (2002) and the adoption of a shared approach to achieving PSA targets and implementing key strategies (for an example see Grant letter 2004-5).

Inspection and quality

The extension of rigorous regular external inspection was another key strategy for improving quality and standards. As already mentioned, further education colleges and work-based learning providers were already accustomed to external inspection. This was now extended to adult and community learning (ACL) providers, from 2002-3, with a pilot phase during 2001-2, the year in which the first cycle of inspection under the new arrangements started for FE colleges and training providers. OFSTED took over the responsibilities of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in relation to inspecting FE colleges, tertiary colleges and sixth-form colleges. The duties of the Training Standards Council in respect of work-based learning providers (WBL) were taken over by the new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). ALI was to inspect ACL and in due course prison education and aspects of JobCentre Plus programmes. ALI also assisted (and in practice often led) in the inspection of colleges where there was substantial adult provision. The ALI was regarded as having distinct ‘remits’ to inspect different and distinctive parts of the Learning and Skills Sector.

The purposes of inspection

The main purposes of inspection were, and remain, as follows:

- To give an independent public account of the quality of provision, the standards achieved and the efficiency with which resources are managed
- To help bring about improvement by identifying strengths and weaknesses and highlighting good practice (extended to ‘judging what steps need to be taken to improve provision further’ in 2005)
- To keep the Secretary of State, the Learning and Skills Council and the Employment Service/Department of Work and Pensions informed about the quality and standards of education and training
- To promote a culture of self-assessment among providers, leading to continuous improvement or maintenance of very high quality and standards

An additional purpose was added in 2005 as a result of the Children Act 2004 which applies to all inspections other than those of providers who make provision solely for adults:

- To make judgements that inform joint area reviews of children's services in the local area

For any inspections of provision made for young adults aged 16-19 inspectors must now take account of the extent to which the five outcomes identified in the Children Act for children and young people are being met. These are:

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution
- achieving economic well-being

As the former Chief Inspector once wryly observed it is hard to see how these can realistically apply to young people currently serving in the armed services. The provisions of the Act do apply to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to some extent. When the relevant legislation becomes statute inspectors will also need to take account of the need to safeguard 'vulnerable adults' in contexts specified, for example where teaching is provided in care settings exclusively for such adults.

A Common Inspection Framework was introduced subsequent to the Learning and Skills Act 2000. This initially comprised seven key questions, subsequently reduced in 2005 to five, and grouped under three main areas, as follows:

CIF 2002	CIF 2005
Overarching question: How effective and efficient is the provision of education and training in meetings the needs of learners, and why?	Overall Effectiveness: How effective and efficient are the provision and related services in meeting the full range of learner' needs and why? What steps need to be taken to improve the provision further?
Q1 How well do learners achieve? (Achievement and Standards) Q2 How effective are teaching, training and learning? Q3 how are achievement and learning affected by resources? Q4 How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learning? Q5 How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interests of learners?	Q1 How well do learners achieve? (Achievement and Standards) Q2 How effective are teaching, training and learning? Q3 how well do programmes and activities meet the needs and interests of learners? Q4 How well are learners guided and supported?

Q6 How well are learners guided and supported (The quality of education and training)	(The quality of provision)
Q7 How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? (Leadership and Management)	Q5 how effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? (Leadership and Management)

Grading of provider performance during inspection changed from a five-point scale to a four-point scale in 2005, since when provision has been judged

- Outstanding
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Inadequate

Grades have been given for leadership and management (and for WBL Equality of Opportunity and for ACL Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement by the ALI) and for subject/skills areas, fewer in the case of colleges for the past two years or so. Since 2005 there has been a grade for Overall Effectiveness. Since April 2007 there is now a grade for Quality Improvement, all providers will be graded in relation to Equality of Opportunity but no separate grades will be given for quality improvement. Fewer subject/skills areas are now being graded due to proportionate inspection although all subject/skills areas are taken into account when judging Achievement and Standards. The OFSTED practice of awarding grades for Achievement and Standards and the Quality of Provision has been extended to all providers.

Proportionate inspection

Since 2005-6 the system of inspection for most further education colleges in England has moved to one of 'light touch', that is, high performing colleges, which are in the majority, experience inspections that depend substantially on data analysis rather than direct observation. Some of the highest performing colleges will shortly receive merely desk-based inspection. The ALI insisted that the appropriate term was 'right touch' as in other parts of the sector many providers were not performing at a level, which justified less intense inspections. The term now being used for OFSTED inspections across the Learning and Skills Sector is that of 'proportionate' inspection, revealing another shift, that towards the use of risk-assessment in determining the type and style of external inspection.

Quality matters in Wales

This section looks briefly at arrangements for Wales, which have broadly followed patterns in England. The National Assembly for Wales, established in May 1999 was responsible for taking decisions as to the implementation of government policy as set out in *Learning to Succeed* (1999), in response to

recommendations from the Education and Training Action Group for Wales (ETAG) in the first instance.

Key organisations

Following the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council in England, the equivalent body for Wales was **ELWa**. ELWa subsequently merged with the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) in 2006. Following the merger, a new **Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills** (DELLS) was established, and retained responsibility for quality improvement in Wales as well as for monitoring quality. Following national elections in Wales in May 2007, the department became the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning & Skills (DCELLS). Whereas in England from 2001 until 2007 there were two inspectorates responsible for inspecting post-compulsory education and training, in Wales a single inspectorate **Estyn** has operated across the learning and skills sector as well as inspecting schools – the position that from April 2007 has existed in England. Wales also has its own Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCW).

The role of ELWa in relation to quality

ELWa acquired a statutory responsibility, under the Learning and Skills Act 2000, to ensure that high quality provision is secured. A Quality Framework has been developed, following from consultation with providers and taking account of the Quality Assurance Expert Committee (QAEC) set up to advise ELWa. This committee includes representation as members or as observers from all provider groups, statutory bodies including the Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities, the Learning and Skill Council and the Employment Service, the inspectorate Estyn, the National Union of Students, relevant agencies for example Careers Wales, and employers.

The Quality Framework provides the basis for the way that DCELLS works with providers to develop the quality of provision and sets out how quality, performance and standards are to be monitored and measured across the learning and skills sector. As in England the intention is that in time the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) will only fund provision that meets the necessary criteria for being deemed high quality provision.

Provider Performance Review

Provider Performance Review (PPR) is seen as a key process for achieving WAG's objectives relating to the raising of quality and standards and for shaping DCELLS's interactions with the providers it funds. Full details of the underpinning principles and the process are included in ELWa's Quality Handbook, first published in 2005 with updates in 2006 (*nothing later on website*). Operating PPR is intended not only to maximise provider performance but also to inform DCELLS's comprehensive overview of quality and performance thus enabling support, through its Quality Improvement strategy to be effectively targeted. To this end, a short term Quality Improvement Fund in 2005-6 supported 14 quality improvement projects the

learning from which will be made available to providers via the ELWa website
(*not sure if this continued in 2006-7 – no info on website*)

PPR considers four areas of performance, as follows:

- Participation and Responsiveness
- Learner Experiences and Achievements
- Planning and Management
- Finance and Compliance.

For each of these areas there are a number of performance measures, cross-referenced to Estyn's Common Inspection Framework.

All providers in receipt of DCELLS funding are subject to PPR, although for community learning delivered by local authorities the process is being piloted through a 'focused' version of PPR that covers only Learners' Experiences and Achievements and Planning and Management in the first instance, in 2006-7. Higher Education Institutions that deliver FE and/or WBL are included; schools are not.

The PPR process includes a **Formal Review** of provider performance, based on published measures and criteria (included in ELWa's Quality Handbook and updates) informed by a range of evidence submitted to DCELLS including Self-Assessment Reports and related Quality Development Plans, inspection reports, strategic plans, data returns, financial data, health and safety returns. Formal Reviews are undertaken by DCELLS. They are followed by a '**focused interim review**' dealing with areas where improvement is required. Funding may be available to support quality improvement work. It is also expected that outside of formal meetings there will be ongoing dialogue between DCELLS and its providers, and that other processes such as audits and health and safety monitoring will also contribute to the evaluation of provider performance. It is envisaged that the Welsh Assembly Government's assessment of providers will be better structured and more systematic as a result of the introduction of PPR.

Self-Assessment and quality development planning

Self-assessment is seen as the key process in raising the quality of provision and is a key element of the Quality Framework. All providers are currently (since June 2006) required to submit an annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and Quality Development Plan (QDP) to the DCELLS. These are intended to be used as 'a starting point' for DCELLS' monitoring of performance during provider performance review, for example. Further guidance relating to the new requirement and self-assessment processes and reporting was issued in June 2006 to supplement ELWa's Quality Handbook, published in 2005 after a two-year development phase. DCELLS does not prescribe a specific format for self-assessment reports as it is intended that these can be used for a range of internal and external purposes relating to continuous improvement.

Self-Assessment Reports are expected to address the key questions in Estyn's Common Inspection Framework (see below) and in addition to comment specifically on a range of other matters, as follows:

- Bilingual and Welsh medium learning
- Sustainable development
- Other cross-cutting themes: equality of opportunity and planning for social inclusion
- Health and Safety (in relation to which ELWVa publishes detailed guidance)
- Compliance with relevant legislation
- Child protection
- Data management and systems
- E-learning
- Collaboration and partnership
- Basic Skills
- Equality and Diversity – how equalities duties are being fulfilled
- Marketing

Self-Assessment Reports and Quality Development Plans are evaluated by the regional Learning Provision Team using standardised evaluation forms made available to providers in the Quality Handbook; these are used also as the basis for providing feedback to provider organisations.

The role of Estyn

Estyn is the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales. Estyn's aim is

“to raise standards and the quality of education and training in Wales through inspection and advice, in support of the vision and strategic direction set out by the Welsh assembly Government.”

Estyn is responsible for inspecting all learning and skills provision. For FE and work-based learning, this is done on the basis of inspecting single providers, in the case of WBL providers by Welsh region (North, Mid, West and South East). For community based adult learning, inspection is on a local authority area basis. In the case of adult community based learning reporting does provide some feedback on individual provider performance, however judgements about leadership and management are made across the provision and are determined by the assessment of each and all of the providers as well as at a strategic level. In effect all partners in the provision of such learning share a responsibility for effective leadership and management. The importance of collaboration and partnership is strongly emphasised by the Welsh Assembly Government and key organisations.

As in England regular inspection of FE began earlier than for WBL, with arrangements for community based adult learning being developed more recently and likely to be subject to further changes. Inspection is on a longer timeframe than in England – inspection now takes place on a six-year cycle

(according to ELWa website *Quality Improvement FAQs*). Estyn also inspects Jobcentre Plus programmes. The starting point for inspection is the provider's most recent SAR. Where arrangements are well established (for example for FE) inspection planning operates on a risk assessment basis as in England.

Estyn's Common Inspection Framework

This is based on seven key questions, as follows:

- How well do learners achieve?
- How effective are teaching, training and assessment?
- How well do the learning experiences meet the needs and interests of learners and the wider community?
- How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?
- How effective are leadership and strategic management?
- How well do leaders and managers evaluate and improve quality and standards?
- How effective are leaders and managers in using resources?

The requirements of Estyn and of DCELLS as seen as complementary, with shared expectations, as follows:

- providers are seen as having prime responsibility for raising standards and quality
- self-assessment and action planning are seen as a regular part of a provider's quality and performance management activities
- all staff are expected to be involved in self-assessment including monitoring provision and evaluating outcomes and priorities for improvement.

A formal Partnership Agreement sets out the arrangements for collaboration between Estyn and DCELLS, which includes clarification of respective roles, arrangements for sharing data and information, working together to disseminate best practice and identify improvement areas, mutual consultation on key developments and regular meetings and workshops to ensure complementary practice and to review progress, monitor outcomes and plan for the future.

How has inspection improved quality?

This section comments on inspection in the learning and skills sector in England and does not attempt to deal with the position in Wales.

Inspections are perceived as contributing to quality improvement both by exposing poor provision and by identifying good practice to be described in inspection reports and other publications. Prior to the clarification of roles in the context of establishing the Quality Improvement Agency, both inspectorates included in their handbooks, which were publicly available, information about for example the purpose and importance of self-assessment and issued guidance as to what constituted good practice.

The ALI in particular has made a significant contribution to quality improvement. For a short time the ALI (in response to a request from government) ran a Provider Development Unit offering intensive support to providers who had performed particularly poorly at inspection. This role has now been taken on by the QIA's Improvement Adviser Service – see below. From its early stages the ALI provided much information to support provider improvement, for example issuing specific guidance to providers on how to interpret the CIF in different sector contexts, to support effective self-assessment (and to ensure that inspectors took proper account of context, one suspects). By contrast at the time of writing OFSTED are still using an Inspection Handbook for inspecting colleges, updated in April 2007, to inspect WBL and ACL provision.

Specific examples of providers having made improvements were shared through ALI's Talisman broadsheet and the development of Excalibur which offered case studies and exemplars of good practice. Excalibur also offered a range of other 'products' including, a range of advice and guidance to support quality improvement, including training materials for providers to use. Some aspects of Excalibur have now transferred to the QIA and good practice examples are commissioned from OFSTED so that the connection with actual observed practice, so valued by providers, is maintained. OFSTED have now taken over the publication of Talisman. The role of supporting quality improvement is firmly located with QIA. The inspectorate will from 2007 undertake few monitoring visits for colleges (which previously received an Annual Assessment Visit). For providers who have failed in some or all areas re-inspections will be combined with monitoring visits. Satisfactory providers will also receive monitoring visits to ensure that they do not remain merely satisfactory or slip back to inadequacy.

For some parts of the Learning and Skills Sector the publication by the Chief Inspector of the ALI of an Annual Report covering FE, WBL and WCL, as well as JobCentre Plus programmes and prison education, was particularly helpful in giving a comprehensive picture of the provision inspected and clear indications of areas for improvement. Detailed information for benchmarking purposes was available on-line. OFSTED together with ALI has published some survey reports that focus on FE, However as to date OFSTED annual reports cover all areas of OFSTED's remit including schools, locating the relevant sections concerning the quality of FE provision inspected has been less easy – the reports have to be 'mined' to find the relevant charts and paragraphs and far less detail is available. It is to be hoped that this will change.

A further change to inspection arrangements will also make it more difficult in future to discern trends, unless annual reporting arrangements adapt. From April 2007 all local authority inspections include any and all provision made by the local authority that is funded by the LSC. This could include work-based learning for young council employees, workforce development and Train to Gain WBL for adults, personal and community development learning (PCDL), Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC) and Family Learning, and possibly provision supported partly through ESF funding.

Has the quality of provision improved?

Both inspectorates assert that inspection has driven up standards and the quality of provision. For example OFSTED noted in the Chief Inspector of Schools' Annual Report for 2004/5 that at the end of the first cycle of inspection since the Learning and Skills Act only 4% of colleges (excluding specialist colleges) remained 'inadequate'. In that year 56% of colleges were judged good or excellent in leadership and management and the picture was broadly similar in 2005-6 with 11% being judged outstanding. In 2005-6 the inadequacy rate for WBL dropped to 12% with over 50% of providers being judged good or outstanding. Although performance in relation to curriculum delivery was generally satisfactory or better during the first cycle of ACL inspections (ever, for these providers) with around 30% being judged good, little was outstanding. The inadequacy rate for ACL providers halved in the last 3 years of the first four-year cycle but remained relatively high at 22%. While the percentage of ACL provision judged to be good or better in leadership and management 'leapt' (in the words of the ALI's Chief Inspector) from 22% to 38% between 2004 and 2006, very few 'outstanding' grades were given in ACL during the first cycle (with the notable exception of some former designated adult colleges and one voluntary sector provider) and the first local authority to be graded outstanding for leadership and management was Telford and Wrekin in late 2006 (check publication date).

Success for All – reforming Further Education and Training 2002

Despite its name, this 'vision' statement applies to all providers in the Learning and Skills Sector, as is evident from the Foreword by the Secretary of State. Further education and training, he asserts, must be given its proper place "as a vital part of the education system" if the government's agendas concerning "the dual and inextricably linked foundations of social justice and economic success" are to be achieved. However in return for investment, there must be 'bold and comprehensive' reform, a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity' for the learning and skills sector.

The reform strategy comprises four elements, two of which specifically refer to quality; both will involve a leading role on the part of the LSC. Interestingly the inspectorates are not referred to in *Success for All*, other than as partners and key stakeholders.

The LSC's lead roles are to be:

1. Meeting needs, improving choice by improving the responsiveness and quality of provision in each area to meet learner, employer and community needs:

4. Developing a framework for quality and success by establishing a new planning, funding and accountability system, based on greater partnership and trust, including three year funding agreements (these fell by the wayside)

The other two elements were:

2. Putting teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do by establishing a new Standards Unit [within the DfES] to identify and disseminate best practice, which will guide learning and training programmes

3. Developing the leaders, teachers, lecturers, trainers and support staff of the future including setting new targets for full and part-time college teachers to be qualified [*workforce development and professionalisation*], and developing strong leadership and management through a new leadership college

Elements 2 and 3 had previously and have subsequently been perceived as factors relating to 'quality' and aspects of the national [quality] Improvement Strategy – see below

Subsequent to *Success for All*, the LSC's role in ensuring the "right mix of provision of the right quality to meet learner, employer and community needs and drive up standards and success rates" (para 28) which is the key aspect of **Meeting needs, Improving choice**, has become increasingly important at a local and regional level. The link between planning and [at least adequate and ideally improving] quality becomes more specific. However the definition of 'quality' is later expanded to include 'relevance' (see below). In *Success for All* there is a clear intention that providers should be encouraged to clarify their missions, operate within these, and focus on their strengths. Later policy formation included the definition of a mission for further education as a whole (Foster Report, FE White Paper). In the shorter term local and regional LSCs have required some providers to diversify their provision in the absence of any 'track record' or experience in order to meet targets and plug gaps in the provider base.

Developing a Framework for Quality and Success required the LSC to develop its approach to performance management of its providers (other than school sixth forms). The performance management system would include:

- **Floor targets** for different parts of the sector, that is, minimum acceptable levels of learner success rates (success is defined as the percentage of learners who start and course who complete it successfully by achieving the planned outcomes, currently in the form of a qualification). Floor targets have now been replaced by 'minimum levels of performance' across the sector for provision funded as 'FE', to be raised annually. Failure to meet these results in intervention by the LSC – see below under QIA/Improvement Strategy.
- The agreement of three year **funding plans including specific improvement targets** including student number targets, employer engagement targets, success measures and teacher qualifications; a strategy for improving teaching standards, a strategy for the development of the workforce.
- The development by the LSC of **ways to measure learner and employer satisfaction**, for benchmarking purposes.

- The **development of 'value-added' measures** for the sector, commencing in 2003 for implementation in 2005-6. These last two aspects were taken forward by the LSC in partnership with DfES and the Inspectorates under the title of 'New Measures of Success' – see below.

Learning and Skills – the Agenda for Change

In August 2005 the LSC published its Prospectus for the Agenda for Change. This policy initiative, pre-dating the Foster Report, the Leitch Report and the FE White Paper, aimed to build on Success for All and enable the 'FE sector' whose moment, according to Bill Rammell, had come, and which must change from being 'an unsung hero' to being widely recognised as 'the engine room for skills and social justice'. It announced the need for 'FE' to "step up to the enormous and exciting challenges" involved in delivering government's learning and skills policies, in particular the reform of education and training arrangements for 14-19 year olds, according to Mark Haysom, Chief Executive of the LSC. The Agenda for Change signals a fundamental shift in policy and specifically the role of the LSC, as indicated by Mark Haysom in the Foreword:

*We know we have to move away from micro-management to support; from complex to simple funding; **from focus on inputs and data to focus on quality outcomes**; from transactional deals at local level to working partnerships; from adding overhead to the system to adding value."* (my emphases)

One of six themes is a commitment to "work together [with providers] to improve the **quality** of provision, funding excellence and promoting the very best to serve as beacons to others" (original emphasis)

As is clear from the section on Quality, despite an acknowledgement that the LSC has so far worked mainly with colleges, "many of the proposals...on quality would have wider application across the sector".

That the primary responsibility for 'managing change and **improving quality**' lies with the provider is reiterated; the LSC's role is to assure the quality of the provision it funds. To this end, the LSC wants "to develop a strategic approach to investment in good and excellent provision", addressing 'underperformance', so that more provision improves from satisfactory to good or excellent. At the same time the LSC will withdraw from funding provision that is poor. (paras 33-35, original emphasis). The clear implication is that 'satisfactory' performance is not in fact satisfactory, but is 'underperformance', a failure to improve despite years of investment (para 33).

What is needed is a five point plan to 'develop a culture of self-improvement', ensure 'more effective measures [ways of measuring] of performance, and 'strategically links quality assurance to development planning' (para 36). Specifically the LSC will:

- encourage rigorous **self-assessment** and '**peer-referencing** approaches' (this last a new element)
- make sure that quality is integral to LSC/provider **annual planning reviews**
- develop/adopt meaningful **measures of success** as a basis for quality improvement
- clarify **roles and responsibilities** for 'quality' on the part of agencies 'tasked with supporting quality improvement – the LSC, the inspectorates, and the QIA'
- 'collectively' promote diverse first class **leadership, management and workforce development** across the sector

The roles and responsibilities of the various bodies 'in the quality arena' as seen by the LSC are defined in para 50:

- colleges [providers] – individually and collectively (this is a new emphasis and heralds moves towards self-regulation) *improving* their own quality
- Inspectorates – *assessing* quality
- LSC – *assuring* quality and the effectiveness of providers in meeting skills needs and priorities [indivisible from 'quality', by implication]
- QIA – *supporting and enabling* self-improvement.

(original emphases)

Planning for Success

The LSC subsequently published, for action, *Planning for Success – a framework for planning and quality* (December 2005). This announced a differentiated approach to the relationship with providers, with a 'light touch' relationship with providers performing well, support for underperforming providers and in the last resort intervention where providers fail to improve. The LSC's role is further clarified as "assuring itself that the provision it funds is initially, at least satisfactory and improving over time" (para 8). The LSC will extend its use of **minimum levels of performance benchmarks** and link these to 'strategic analysis and subsequent commissioning decisions', taking action where these minimum levels are not met (paras 31, 52) (also see below).

Annex C expands the clarification of roles and responsibilities in the Agenda for Change Prospectus (see above) as follows:

- DfES – *developing the policy* for post-16 quality improvement and establishing programme performance management and accountability arrangements for the QIA, the LSC, Inspectorates and 'other partner agencies'
- CEL – *providing leadership development* informed by research, and tailored leadership support to all provider organisations working with LLUK
- LLUK – *providing a standards-based qualifications infrastructure for the workforce* for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (my emphases)

This circular also bring to the fore the principle of risk assessment as a guide to action, now well established. Providers will be required to undertake “ a more holistic self-assessment and strategic analysis” of their performance, seeing self-assessment as ‘a fundamental element of day to day management’ linking quality improvement with planning and development. Specific improvement indicators will be identified by providers during self-assessment and planning reviews and a number of these then agreed with the LSC, ‘in inverse proportion to the quality of provision delivered and therefore the degree of risk posed to the local LSC’ (para 43). The LSC will work with providers in developing a method of jointly assessing risk (paras 15, 23) to complement the approach used by the Inspectorates (para 24). This will inform ‘a more holistic approach to self-assessment’. Thus risk assessment becomes a key aspect of self-assessment and, for the LSC, the inspectorate and for providers, of planning. (see below on Risk Assessment)

The LSC broadens its own definition of quality in paragraph 5 and Annex B of Planning for Success, now to encompass the achievement of policy priorities as in its view “it is not longer possible to define quality on the basis of success rates and inspection grades alone”. For the LSC, from this point onwards, “high quality provision is characterised by its:

- **relevance** to local, regional and national learning and skills needs and priorities, and **the contribution to the achievement of Government targets**
- **effectiveness** in enabling all learners **and employers** to succeed in achieving their planned goals, currently expressed in terms of success rates and other achievement measures
- **efficiency** in the use of resources **to achieve agreed plans.**”
(my emphases)

(n.b. In *Framework for Excellence 2007* ‘relevance’ is replaced by ‘responsiveness’ and ‘efficiency’ is replaced by ‘finance’.)

The clear implication of this definition of quality is that for the LSC provision that does not demonstrate these specific characteristics cannot be deemed ‘high quality’. This smacks of the old TEC culture of ‘contract compliance’. Anything ‘off-plan’ or not contributing to targets and planned outcomes is, by definition, not ‘quality’.

Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances (2006)

This White Paper is another example of a policy document that seems to apply to FE but in fact applies to the whole of the Learning and Skills Sector. Again the link with public sector reform is explicit (para 11, executive Summary). There are six main areas of reform, two of which are explicitly concerned with quality.

Again **the primary responsibility for driving up quality** rests with of ‘colleges and providers’ within their own organisations but now with “an

increasing emphasis on self-improvement” (para 26 and Chapter 4). However, the QIA will in future provide the necessary support in doing this. The White Paper announced in the Executive Summary that the QIA would “lead the implementation of a national Quality Improvement Strategy *for teaching and learning in FE*” (my emphasis). The work of the former Standards Unit in the guise of the ‘national teaching and learning change programme’ will be taken forward under the auspices of the QIA – the development of new teaching materials backed by subject coaches, to support the introduction of new Diplomas for 14-19 year olds. The improvement strategy will be backed up by new measures [action agendas] to support workforce development including a new compulsory CPD requirement and the quality of managers and leaders will be enhanced.

A national **Quality Improvement Strategy**: Chapter 4 of the document makes it clear that the national Quality Improvement Strategy will in fact include four elements:

- support for quality improvement and workforce development
- publication of performance indicators to drive improvement and enable well-informed choice
- intervention where necessary in order to tackle cases where quality is not good enough
- an inspection regime to provide objective, external evidence on quality and standards.

The work of CEL and of LLUK “will be integrated within the QIS” (para 4.3).

The White Paper makes it clear that **failure to improve will not be tolerated**. The bar will be raised so that all provision is good or improving, ‘coasting’ will result in a ‘improvement notice. The LSC is to be awarded new powers to change governors and/or leadership when intervention is deemed necessary. Its remit will be broadened to include the promotion of diversity [in the provider base], choice and specialisation [on the part of providers] (para 32 and Chapter 5). A new **‘balanced scorecard’ and single performance indicator** similar to that used in the Audit Commission’s assessment of the performance of local authorities will be developed. This builds on the LSC’s Agenda for Change and presages the development by the LSC of the Framework for Excellence.

Also formally announced is the merger of the Adult learning Inspectorate with OFSTED, creating one single inspection organisation for the Learning and Skills Sector (paras 5.9 and 5.10). Inspections will be continue to be more proportionate with less inspection for higher performing providers, and expenditure on inspection will be reduced (para 5.11).

New Measures of Success

In December 2003 the LSC published *Measuring Success in the Learning and Skills Sector*, in the context of the *Success for All* initiative. This was a discussion document setting out a proposed set of ‘success measures’ [ways of measuring ‘success’] devised by the LSC working with the DfES and the two inspectorates OFSTED and ALI, that taken together would enable the success of the sector as a whole to be measured. It was argued that the then

existing 'lack of consistency on measurement systems' inhibited this. It was also argued that these 'new measures' to be used across the sector would underpin "our collective commitment to equality and diversity and success for all learners" (Foreword).

The aim was to develop a coherent set of numerical/quantitative 'measures' which would apply across all state-funded provision. This was described as a 'basket' of measures, which applied to varying degrees in different contexts. Some were at least in theory straightforward

- **success rates** in achieving qualifications, i.e. percentage of those starting a programme who completed and achieved the qualification
- **learner satisfaction** (consistently collected/measured)
- **learner destinations** (in practice difficult without a unique learner number)

Further work was to be done on the use of the national learner satisfaction survey to enable it to contribute more effectively to the 'basket' of measures. Further work would also take place to explore how learner destinations could be reliably included. This work has been taken forward in LSC's Framework for Excellence – see below.

Other measures required complex calculations, specifically notions of

- **Value Added** and **Distance Travelled**

Calculating the 'value' added to an individual's existing sum of knowledge or skills by the provider institution involved representing prior achievement (for example GCSEs or GNVQs taken at 16) numerically, representing achievement at the end of a learning programme numerically (for example A level scores) and calculating the difference – the 'added value', and/or the distance travelled by the learner. Linked to these notions was the intention to provide data as to average levels of attainment at the end of particular programmes so that individual and cohort 'added value' or distance travelled could be compared with benchmarks to see whether learners had made as much, less or more progress than the average. Also linked in was the concept of predicting what 'added value' or distance travelled there 'should' be for a learner with a particular level of prior attainment/particular numerical value to their existing achievement at the start of a course, by the time they completed.

The promise that 'value-added' and 'distance travelled' measures held out was that data could be generated that would show the success of individual learners, groups and cohorts and when aggregated, individual providers and groups of providers, enabling in all cases comparisons with averages. So relative as well as absolute 'success' could be measured.

The problematic area (over and above 'doing the Math) to create the necessary data sets and designing the software) was that of adult learners who might not have any measurable 'prior attainment' in the form of qualifications, or whose qualifications might well predate GCSEs, the basis for the starting point numerical values. They also might not be accessing a course that led to a qualification to which a numerical value could easily be

attached – A levels and subsequently vocational qualifications including (then) GNVQs and NVQs. In reality the system that was being created was designed around full time 16-19 academic or vocational education as a continuation of schooling. It had to be further developed to include work-based learning for young people on apprenticeship programmes. The compromise in 2003 was to propose using a process indicator or measure to recognise adults' progress and achievement, known as **RARPA – the recognition and recording of progress and achievement** through initial, formative and summative assessment.

The 'basket' of measures also included measuring **the 'capability' of providers' staff** to ascertain whether they were suitably qualified. This was challenging in the absence (still) of relevant qualifications for some parts of the sector and different legal requirements. Also announced was the intention to measure **employer engagement**, already a headline target, in a more consistent way, possibly through an employer survey. This work has been taken forward in the context of Framework for Success – see below. The final 'measure' in the 'basket' was **giving value for money**. Work has continued on trying to ascertain unit costs that can show the cost per successful outcome for providers and parts of the sector.

A 'Quality Improvement Pack' about Piloting the New Measures of Success was published by the LSC, 'in partnership with' the inspectorates and the DfES in January 2006. The 'suite of measures' included were "designed to be used to measure the performance of LSC-funded providers for the purposes of accountability and *stimulating reflection and improvement*" (my emphasis). The measures would it was declared enable providers "to present a more rounded and contextualised picture of their performance to those making judgements about the quality of provision across the sector".

The pack gave further details about the measurement of Value Added (VA) and Distance Travelled (DT) for young people and the Learner Achievement Tracker (LAT), a piece of software designed to generate VA and DT reports of three main types:

- **summary charts** showing VA or DT scores for provider organisations and for qualification types/subject groupings
- **national comparison graphs**, showing the performance of the provider in a given qualification against national performance
- **national chances charts**, showing the 'chances' of a learner with a given prior attainment achieving a particular outcome in a given qualification – these charts were intended to be used to motivate learners and teachers to maximise learner performance and achievement

These measures would be used for planning and during inspections in the pilot phase by OFSTED and ALI. Currently inspectors can access detailed reports on performance for FE and WBL providers before undertaking inspection and to assist with planning. Work is underway to explore the possibility of obtaining a similar level of detail for ACL providers. However as much ACL provision remains non-accredited this is problematic.

In relation to **success rates**, these would now be considered in two ways – the **overall success rate**, that is the proportion achieved at any time; and the **timely success rate**, that is success achieved by the planned end date. This concept of achievement with an anticipated time period is carried forward in the work on Minimum Levels of Performance – see below.

In relation to RARPA the pack confirmed that implementing the stages of the RARPA process would continue to be a 'process measure' but signalled that the possibility of developing numerical measures in relation to this continued. From 2005-6 the ALI and now OFTED must include a judgement about the extent to which the staged process of recognising and recording progress and achievement for adult learners is effectively supporting learners' progress and achievement.

The creation of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA)

The creation of the QIA in April 2006 was designed to bring together under the aegis of a new single body/agency the "quality improvement and development activities" of the Learning and Skills development Agency (LSDA), the DfES Standards and Skills for Life Units, the LSC and the ALI, thereby offering "a single, integrated approach to quality improvement and development across the sector" (FE: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances 2006 para 4.2). This was in part a response to feedback from the sector that the range of agencies providing advice and support and their roles in relation to quality improvement was confusing and there was not universal confidence in their capability (see for example GHK's report to the DfES on *Improving Colleges and Other Providers' Capacity for Self-Improvement and Self-assessment in the Learning and Skills Sector* 2005).

Although the QIA did not come into being officially until April 2006 a shadow organisation was in place some months earlier. Ruth Kelly, then Secretary of State set out her vision and its strategic priorities in November 2005. The QIA would:

- provide a **national strategic focus** for quality improvement, and assist in a rationalisation of the quality improvement and accountability system in the sector
- **enable providers to improve responsiveness** to the priorities identified by the LSC and the inspectorates in their quality assurance role
- lead on a new **Quality Improvement Strategy** working with a range of partners (LSC, OFSTED/ALI, CEL, LLUK and other 'core partners')
- **promote equality and diversity** good practice. (paras 4-6)

The strategic priority was "to bring greater *coherence and efficiency* to quality improvement activity across the sector while ensuring that practitioners and providers have the services they need in order to achieve and maintain high standards that meet the need of learners, employers and communities" (para 9, my emphasis)

In addition to inheriting and commissioning a range of support programmes, and sources of information to be available on-line via the Excellence Gateway, (FE White Paper para 4.8) and setting up a national network of Quality Improvement Advisers to work with failing and under-performing providers (remit letter paras 20/21) the QIA would also “lead the development of that [sic] Quality Improvement Strategy for the FE sector” (remit letter para 4). This would subsume and build on Success for All and the work of CEL and LLUK would be integrated within it (FE White Paper para 4.3). It would embrace four elements:

- support for quality improvement and workforce development
- publication of performance information to drive improvement and enable well-informed choice
- intervention where necessary to tackle cases where quality is not good enough
- an inspection regime to provide objective, external evidence on quality and standards (para 4.3)

As can be seen, various elements of what in policy terms constitutes ‘quality’ are included and the roles and responsibilities of various agencies are to be brought together.

Pursuing Excellence: the National Improvement Strategy for the further education system

The national Improvement Strategy (the word ‘quality’ having been dropped) finally appeared in January 2007 as a result of delays caused by the requirement to take account of the Leitch Report on Skills of December 2006. Its cover bears the words “co-ordinated by QIA in partnership with colleges and providers, partner and stakeholder bodies” although the QIA’s role in leading its implementation remains clear. The ‘national partners’ are listed as;

- Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) – lead agency
- DfES – policy and strategy for the sector
- LSC – commissioning, funding and securing high quality provision, assuring itself of the latter, and measuring provider performance
- Jobcentre Plus/DWP – planning funding and procuring high quality welfare-to-work provision and assuring and measuring this
- OFSTED and the ALI – inspecting and monitoring quality and reporting on it
- The Centre for Excellence in Leadership – providing leadership development informed by research and capacity building
- LLUK – as the Sector Skills Council for the sector providing the strategic perspective for workforce planning and development and defining standards for occupational competence.
- Skills for Business Network – working through the Sector Skills Development Agency (at the time of publication) to lead the drive to increase investment in skills by employers
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – accrediting and monitoring qualifications
- Awarding Bodies – developing and delivering vocational qualifications in partnership with employers, Sector Skills Councils and providers

- British educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) – leading and supporting the national e-strategy

The roles of the national partners are spelled out in Annex 2 of the Improvement Strategy document. As will be evident not all of the agencies listed above have featured in this paper. The focus has been on the key agencies with direct responsibility for monitoring, measuring and evaluating aspects of quality across the whole Learning and Skills Sector. However the length of the list of partners indicates the difficulty of separating out ‘quality’ from wider reform and improvement strategies. Many of these national partners and several other stakeholders including NIACE are represented on the National Improvement Partnership Board (NIPB), symbolising the concept of shared responsibility for implementing the various strands of the Improvement Strategy.

The aims of the national Improvement Strategy are that:

- All **learners** in the further education system **are equally able to access high quality education and training** that equip them with the skills, knowledge and qualifications they need for work and personal fulfilment
- Training **provision meets employers’ business needs** and employers can recruit people with the vocational and employability skills needed to increase productivity
- The further education **system continuously improves** so that colleges and **providers aspire to and achieve excellence** and no provision is unsatisfactory.
(my emphases)

The current role of the LSC

With the establishment of the Quality Improvement Agency in April 2006 the LSC’s quality role diminished, as signalled above. In its Annual Statement of Priorities for 2007-8 published in October 2006, ‘quality’ is referred to in relation to Priority 1, which is concerned with raising the quality and improving the choice of learning for young people; and Priority 3, concerned with eliminating failure, raising the performance of the ‘system’ and achieving excellence. It is also addressed in the section on planning with specific reference to the improvement indicators to be included in providers’ strategic and development plans; and the stronger emphasis when assessing providers’ performance on Minimum Levels of Performance with intervention when these levels are not met, ultimately resulting in the removal of funding if there is no improvement. Where the quality of local provision is found wanting, the principle of contestability will enable new providers to ‘enter the system’.

Framework for Excellence LSC 2007

In March 2007 the LSC published the *Framework for Excellence* (FfE) which aims to provide the ‘balanced scorecard’ of numerical/quantitative information about provider performance promised in *Further Education: Raising skills*,

improving life chances. It is also intended to provide “important evidence to help action to raise standards” thereby contributing to the national Improvement Strategy – see below – and to make a major contribution to the achievement of self-regulation for the sector – see below. In June 2007 the LSC published details of how the ‘*single unified Framework*’ will work in practice, emphasising that it is still in development, and announcing a pilot phase involving 100 providers before rolling the FfE out across the whole sector from 2008 on a four year cycle till 2012.

Providers will be required to report in relation to three ‘*dimensions*’ of performance

- **Responsiveness** (to learners and employers)
- **Effectiveness** (quality of outcomes and provision)
- **Finance** (financial health, financial control and use of resources)

Key performance areas are identified for each ‘dimension’, and for each performance area there are a small number of ‘*performance indicators*’ underpinned by a set of specified *performance measures* [ways of measuring] and *assessment criteria*. Scores at each level will be aggregated upwards to produce an *overall performance* rating for each provider. These will eventually be published (probably Spring 2009). The LSC have provided detailed ‘rules’ for calculation and combination to ensure that it is no easier to obtain higher grades in one dimension than another.

The Effectiveness dimension includes two key performance areas both concerning ‘quality’. These are:

- Quality of outcomes
- Quality of provision

Quality of outcomes will be assessed on the basis of a range of data including success rates and performance measures relating to LAT reports (see above) showing added value. Quality of provision will be assessed during the pilot using OFSTED’s most up to date judgement of the overall effectiveness of the provider (see above).

Concern was expressed during the consultation phase about the extent to which all dimensions applied equally or at all to all providers. For example the LSC’s own policy guidelines in respect of some funding streams (PCDL and Family programmes funding for example) indicate that these are NOT in the main intended to be used to fund provision that meets employers’ needs – yet an ‘employer responsiveness’ indicator is included in the FfE which will apply in time to all providers. The pilot of FfE will explore whether each performance area should apply to each provider or whether there should be exemptions, investigating “the interplay between data, benchmarks and judgement” and “develop assessment criteria and performance standards that can take account of provider mission and other contextual factors where appropriate” (para 44 FfE March 2007). However the March 2007 circular makes it clear that while context is one consideration, the over-riding ambition is to provide a common set of measures and indicators for the whole sector:

“We recognise that providers will be concerned to ensure that their distinctive missions and unique characteristics are reflected in the Framework. However at every stage we have to balance that against the need to keep the Framework simple, clear and un-bureaucratic. As a general rule, we propose to collect the same data from each provider” (para 43)

As will be evident, the FfE represents the culmination of the drive for a common set of ‘success measures’ that can be applied across the sector and used for comparative purposes to evaluate ‘return on investment’.

The FfE measures are also to be used from 2007 as part of providers’ self-assessment process, and are intended to inform inspection planning (as to the intensity of inspection and focus) and judgements in due course. The LSC anticipated (in March 2007) that *“the Framework for Excellence and Common Inspection Framework will converge into a single approach to performance, quality assessment and quality improvement in the FE system, supporting moves towards self-regulation. (para 52)*

Self-Regulation for the Learning and Skills Sector (FE system)

A stated intention of the QIA’s support for providers’ self-improvement is to also support providers and the sector as it moves towards self-regulation (see Section 1). The QIA’s Grant letter for 2007-8 confirms that the QIA “should support and facilitate the move towards a self-regulating system, developing robust, practical and effective arrangements for collective peer review and improvement”.

What is self-regulation? In Framework to Excellence it is described as follows:

*“self-regulating arrangements in which colleges and providers in the FE sector **collectively** play a leading role in planning, **quality assurance and quality improvement**...with true self-regulation, the sector itself would **intervene to identify and address poor provision**; the best providers would work with those who need help to improve, in order to ensure that learners and employers have access to the high quality provision they need. **External quality assurance will be proportionate to risk, and external intervention will be exception in instances where the sector itself fails to act in the interests of learners and employers.**” (para 57, FfE March 2007, my emphases)*

Peer review and development has been identified as a key quality improvement process to help providers develop the necessary skills and approaches to enable them to take on collective responsibility for quality assurance and improvement, as described. The new quality improvement support programme commissioned by the QIA, *Support for Excellence*, will support 100 pilot peer review and development clusters of providers during its first year 2007-8, with the possibility of an extension of up to two years, building on pilot projects sponsored by the LSC, the Association of Colleges (AoC) and QIA and similar activities within other national quality improvement support programmes such as Support for Success, led by the Learning and

Skills Network (LSN) with NIACE and AoC as partners, and the Train to Gain support programme, led by LSN.

Peer review and development involves groups of providers working together to make judgements about their own and each others' performance, agreeing with reference to suitable benchmarks what needs to be done to improve performance, working together to implement improvement strategies, providing mutual support and encouragement, and collectively evaluating the impact of the actions taken in terms of actual improvement. The Government has established a Self Regulation Implementation Group and set up a website www.feselfregulation.org.uk. Currently a small project team including secondees from the LSC, the Audit Commission, QIA, the Association of Colleges and the Association of Learning Providers is working up a strategy for implementation.

Measurement and judgement

The two main strategies adopted to assess quality and quality improvement are those of measurement and judgement. A fundamental question is whether and to what extent 'quality' can be identified and measured, using quantitative methods alone, or needs to be evaluated on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative data and information, using judgement to 'weigh' the various sources of evidence and their significance in context.

Measurement means finding ways of representing activity or situations in numerical formats such as data sets, for example the LSC's Individual Learner Record national data sets that provide a comprehensive profile of learners in the sector and their participation and achievements. It also involves attaching numerical values to inputs and outputs such as learners' prior qualifications and those achieved as a result of participation, or producing data to represent levels of learner satisfaction or grades to represent the judgements of inspectors when evaluating the quality of provision. So far inspection reports have also included words, expressing their judgements based on qualitative as well as quantitative evidence. This may change – certainly the number of words 'allowed' is declining and the reliance on numerical information is increasing.

Over the past decade or more there has been an increasing emphasis on measurement, finding methods and numerical indicators and data that can adequately identify and 'describe' the performance of organisations (and indeed individuals) and in particular allow comparisons to be made across the sector. Publishing benchmarks and setting targets so that all providers are encouraged or required to match 'the best' is seen as a key strategy for improving performance.

One of the attractions of sets of numbers is that they are seen as being easy to interpret without having an in-depth knowledge of the context in which they have been generated. Judgement on the other hand is generally accepted as requiring some experience of and expertise in the relevant field. Measurement is seen as objective, exact and not liable to eccentric or individualistic

interpretation, whereas judgement depends on subjectivity, often seen as a negative factor.

Criticisms of current approaches to quality improvement

In common with other parts of the public sector, there has been concern that setting numerical targets and requiring these to be met or exceeded has a distorting effect in that organisations focus their efforts on ensuring that the numbers are going in the right direction, doing whatever is necessary and allowable to achieve the required outputs and outcomes.

An obvious example of this is to limit recruitment of learners to those with the necessary prior attainment and motivation to make it more likely that they will successfully achieve qualifications – the ‘oven ready’. The introduction of value added and distance travelled calculations although highly complex and bureaucratic has gone some way to offset possible unintended negative consequences of the privileging of success rates when measuring provider performance. However the focus on numbers has led to disproportionate efforts being put into trying to provide numbers to represent qualitative processes such as those associated with recognising and recording progress and achievement on non-accredited learning programmes, and in some quarters the production of so-called ‘data’ achieved through simplistic processes such as ‘counting the ticks’ to represent the extent to which learners have achieved planned learning outcomes and turning these into percentages with no regard to the suitability of the planned learning outcomes or the similarity or lack of it between the individuals, learning groups or learning programmes being included in producing ‘data’ on achievement across a broad subject area by this method. As long as the requirement (usually pressure from the local LSC or inspectors) to produce ‘data’ is satisfied, who cares?

A fundamental objection to an over-emphasis on numerical indicators is that they seek to provide simplistic descriptions of complex matters. For this reason there has been a high level of objection to the publication of a single overall quality assessment score as envisaged in the Framework for Excellence. Another objection is that in the drive for numbers only that which can be measured is measured and so assumes importance, whereas aspects of provision that are hard to measure are overlooked. The approach of using a range of measures seeks to address this, for example by including data about learners’ views on the quality of the provision they experience. Although data collected through any survey is shaped by the nature of the questions asked (which have to be designed to generate the data required) this does at least allow for feedback from participants. The views of the staff working in the sector are not systematically collected although they are still sought during inspections to some extent.

A related question concerns who is qualified to decide what the quality of provision is, and on what basis/bases? Also what kinds of processes are required – is the approach one of critical audit aimed at finding fault, or open enquiry, at best appreciative? What is the role of regulation, and external intervention, and how does this relate to creating a culture of continuous

improvement? what are the characteristics of kind of culture at the level of government/wider society, and at organisational level, that ensures continuous improvement? The concepts of a learning society and organisational learning are relevant here. There are related issues of trust/distrust and concepts of professional judgement, and of what has value and what does not, and to whom.

The problem of performativity

The introduction of systems of measurement and external inspection can be understood as an aspect of 'performativity'. This concept owes much to Jean-Francoise Lyotard (1924-1998) who objected to what he saw as the commodification of knowledge so that its 'value' is the extent to which it serves the needs and purposes of the system (as defined in policy) rather than having 'use value' or being valued intrinsically.

The concept behind performativity is that of optimising the performance of the (in this case FE) system. After Lyotard Stephen Ball describes performativity as

“a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions.....The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’.....as such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement.”

Central to the functioning of performativity “is the translation of complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement” (Ball 2006 p 144). Ball argues that performativity has had damaging consequences for practitioners and managers. Among these are the effects of working in a culture of continuous surveillance, being subjected to a range of different (and not always compatible) ways of being assessed, measured or judged. He sees performativity as undermining of trust and professional judgement, a cause of continual self-questioning and self-doubt – will ‘they’ think what I have done is as good as I do? Performativity has its rituals – inspections, audits, appraisals – and its routines – record-keeping, monitoring and reporting on progress.

One of the most damaging effects of performativity according to Ball is that it works “from the outside in and from the inside out” (Ball 2004 p 145). Ratings and rankings cause competition between individuals and groups within organisations and between them. Continually being measured and judged “can engender individual feelings of pride, guilt, shame and envy – they have an emotional (status) dimension as well as (the appearance of) rationality and objectivity” (ibid). They can also impact on social relations within organisations, as individuals experience or feel from within pressure to maximise their contribution to the performance of their learners, their team or unit, and the organisation as a whole (Ball 2004 p 146).

A further risk is that “commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance” (ibid) as individuals adapt their practice so that it matches the expectations of others – ‘playing the game’ required. It could be argued, in the context of the learning and skills sector, that the direct involvement of practitioners as part time inspectors and as ‘nominees’ has contributed to this by ensuring that they know what the ‘game’ is and how best to play it, from their involvement. It could further be argued that ensuring that practitioners know what is expected reinforces tendencies to self-regulate as well as self-doubt if official views about what constitutes good practice vary from those of the practitioners concerned.

This self-regulation activity Ball argues can lead to ‘impression management’ at not only an individual level but at the level of the organisation. As a consequence, and paradoxically:

“Technologies and calculations which appear to make public sector organisations more transparent may actually result in making them more opaque, as representational artefacts are increasingly constructed with great deliberation and sophistication” as organisations “manage and manipulate their performance” to meet expectations and flourish in the ‘education market’ (pp 148/9).

Ball is writing in the context of schooling. However many working in post-compulsory contexts will recognise some or all of what he is describing. As he notes “the issue of who controls the field of judgement is critical” He suggests that within education there is a struggle over the control of the field, and its values. The key question here is that of who “determines what is to count as valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid” (Ball 2006 p 144).

The short answer may be that ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’ – if government funding is involved, it is government that determines what constitutes quality and how it is best assessed, evaluated and improved. This paper has attempted to outline current government policy concerning ‘quality’ and official strategies to improve ‘it’ in post compulsory education and training. Doubtless it could be argued from a government perspective that education and training policies and intervention strategies have during the period covered in this paper been subject to wide consultation and that a wide range of stakeholders (the great and the good and/or the usual suspects) continue to be involved in national advisory bodies. As this paper has surely demonstrated, there has been a deluge of policies and strategies which have in their various ways focused on ‘quality’, ‘improvement’, ‘success’, and ‘excellence’. The extent to which the fundamental questions raised by Ball have been raised, or if raised heard and taken account of is difficult to discern.

Quality matters and Higher Education

In 1991 a DES White Paper *Higher Education: a New Framework* set out audit procedures for higher education and recommended that new funding councils should be given responsibility for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning

in higher education. In 1992 the *Further and Higher Education Act* led to the creation of the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) for England, Wales and Scotland with the statutory duty to monitor the quality of provision and value for money. HEFCE is still in place. There is now also a Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) reporting to the Welsh Assembly Government and equivalent bodies for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Each of the funding councils set up a quality assurance division. A Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established in 1992 with a UK-wide remit. In 1992-3 subject-by-subject assessment began with quality audits on a 5-year cycle. HEFC also promoted quality enhancement. In 1993 a White Paper *Realising our Potential* called for a cultural change and greater accountability to the taxpayer. Quality was in future to be assured through the introduction of rigorous systems of monitoring, inspection and assessment. In 1997 the National Committee of Enquiry led by Lord Dearing, the main purposes of which was structural change, recommended interventions in relation to quality and standards. The Quality Assurance Agency QAA was established in the same year. *The Learning Age* (1998) includes an intention on the part of government to carry forward the emphasis in the Dearing Report (1997) on improving standards and quality across teaching, research and qualifications in higher education (see Chapter 5, 5-4 – 5-19).

Also in 1993 the **Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)** was established. Its mission is to provide a system of data collection, analysis and dissemination in relation to HE in the UK. The intention is to provide HEIs with quantitative data and information necessary “for planning purposes” and also, as an agency operating on behalf of the HE sector to support and enhance “the ability of Government and its Agencies to determine higher education policy and allocate funding.” HESA provides data on behalf of the four funding councils in the UK and publishes **annual performance indicators** for the sector. These currently cover

- widening participation indicators
- non-continuation rates
- module completion rates
- research output
- employment of graduates

HESA insists that the data tables should not be regarded as ‘league tables’ because “no meaningful league table could fairly demonstrate the performance of all higher education institutions relative to each other” given the diversity of the sector and its institutions. Even the range of indicators and benchmarks to make comparisons used by HESA cannot cover all aspects of an HEI’s performance. (see www.hesa.ac.uk) Nevertheless three national daily newspapers (The Times, The Telegraph and The Guardian), using slightly different methodologies and criteria, produced what the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) termed ‘league tables’ following on the publication in July of the latest HESA data (for the year 2005-6). The HEFCE is currently investigating the impact of such league tables on the behaviour and reputations of HEIs, according to the THES (August 17th 2007 p 4)

The Higher Education Funding Council for England is responsible for ensuring that the quality of education in the universities and colleges it funds is assessed, and for reporting on this. Wales has its own Higher Education Funding Council with a similar remit. The responsibility for undertaking assessment of quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) is contracted to the Quality Assurance Agency which provides an integrated quality assurance service for higher education in the United Kingdom.

In HE a distinction is made between '**academic standards**', which are a way of describing the level of achievement a student has to reach to gain an academic award such as a first degree; and '**academic quality**', that is how well the learning opportunities accessed and experienced by students help them to achieve their award, and the extent to which teaching, support, assessment and the learning opportunities provided are appropriate and effective. In this sense 'quality' can be seen as implying 'fitness for purpose'.

Internal quality assurance

As with the learning and skills sector, policy states that the primary responsibility for quality lies with provider institutions themselves, as (in the case of HEIs) autonomous, self-governing institutions. They address these responsibilities through their arrangements for the assessment of students and those for the design, approval, monitoring and review of their programmes. Many HEIs undertake both regular monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes. The former is usually undertaken at departmental level and may well include programme team self-assessment of performance on an annual basis. The latter normally involve external expertise and are typically on a five-year cycle. Similar reviews may be undertaken in relation to services provided to students. From 2004 all HEIs have been required to make information available about their internal procedures for assuring academic quality and standards.

External examiners

All HEIs appoint external examiners who report directly to the head of the HEI. External examiners are drawn from other HEIs, or from areas of relevant professional practice. Their role is to provide impartial advice on performance in relation to particular programmes. They report to the HEI on the basis of their expert judgement, on the following:

- whether appropriate standards are being met, as judged against appropriate benchmarks such as subject benchmark statements, the frameworks for HE qualifications and the HEI's programme specifications
- the standards of student performance and comparability of these with standards on similar programmes
- the fairness with which assessment and examination processes and the determination of awards are conducted and whether these are sound

What does the QAA do?

QAA was established in 1997. Its role is to “provide public assurance that standards and quality within higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced” (see QIA website). QAA currently undertakes institutional audits for HEIs, and is currently piloting a process, to replace (subject to satisfactory piloting from January 2008) academic reviews for HE provision delivered in FEIs, of Integrated Quality Enhancement Reviews (IQERs). It is also responsible for providing regular information to the HE funding councils, advice to government in relation to applications for degree-awarding powers and for defining clear and explicit standards for HE including:

- a framework for HE qualifications that clarifies the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles
- subject benchmark statements which set out expectations about the standard of degrees in a range of subjects
- guidelines for programme specifications, the sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes
- the code of practice in HE which covers matters such as academic appeals, programme approval, monitoring and review and external examining.

Institutional audit

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It is the QAA's current external review process for England and Northern Ireland. Parallel arrangements exist for Wales and QAA publishes separate guidance in the form of a handbook for England and Northern Ireland, and for Wales. The processes operated are very similar.

Institutional audit has replaced a number of processes in operation during a transition period between 2002 and 2005 including continuation audit, universal subject review and institutional level review. From 2006 Institutional Audit takes place on a six-year cycle.

The aims of **Institutional Audit** are as follows:

- to ensure that HEIs are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard;
- and where relevant, are exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

The process of Institutional Audit combines scrutiny of the institutions' internal quality assurance systems and arrangements and consideration of their effectiveness, with a more detailed investigation at the level of disciplines or areas of academic study as to how well these arrangements are operating and whether they are achieving their intended purposes, including the maintenance of academic standards. Prior to the audit visit the HEI produces reflective **self-evaluation documents** (SEDs) both at the level of the institution and for a sample of subject disciplines. These SEDs are regarded

as key reference points for audit teams when they are conducting their visits. Other reference points include subject benchmark statements and the code of practice referred to above.

During the audit process, teams consider how effectively the HEI is building on the outcomes of their own internal QA systems, the reports from external reviews, feedback from students, graduates and employers in order to develop and enhance the quality of their provision. The accuracy and completeness of the information the HEI publishes about the academic standards of its awards, and the quality of its educational provision, including the published **teaching quality information** (TQI – a set of information HEIs are required to produce by HEFCE – see www.tqi.ac.uk) are also examined. Student representatives are invited to provide the audit team, in advance, with a submission concerning the accuracy of such information, how well students know what is expected of them, the quality of their experience as learners and the extent to which students have ‘a voice’ and are listened to within the institution in question.

Audit teams are selected from people working in higher education who are nominated by HEIs. They are not appointed to teams auditing their own institutions. HEIs are expected to nominate individuals with appropriate seniority, knowledge and technical ability to ensure that audits can be carried out competently and credibly. A QAA Assistant Director co-ordinates each audit, liaising with the HEI, working with the team, accompanying them at key points in the process and, critically, testing their evidence base and ensuring that the reports that are produced are succinct and clear in their judgements and the basis for these. Teams make two visits, one a **briefing visit** at which a range of documentation is provided by the HEI and meetings take place with key personnel; the second the actual **audit visit** during which teams can pursue lines of enquiry identified during the briefing visit can be pursued through meetings with particular groups of staff and students and selected audit trails. Audit visits do not normally include direct observation of teaching and learning in progress.

Audit reports are published. They set out the audit team’s judgements as to their level of confidence in the HEI’s current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and academic standards, and the accuracy and integrity of the information it publishes concerning the quality of provision and the academic standards of its awards. Reports include **recommendations** ranging from ‘essential’ through ‘advisable’ to ‘desirable’. Where essential changes are required a programme of follow-up action is agreed and progress is monitored. For all HEIs, between formal audits there are opportunities for **mid-cycle reviews** undertaken by QAA officers which provide an opportunity for a ‘short health check’ for both the HEI and QAA.

Academic Review

Academic review is a subject level review process which has been applied from 2002 in FEIs providing directly funded HE provision (as compared with franchise arrangements). The process was also used in some HEIs during

2002-4 as part of transitional arrangements. Each FEI produces a self-evaluation document (SED) prior to the review which takes place over several weeks. The review team gathers evidence to test statements made in the SED and to form judgements as to the standards and quality of the provision. The process involves scrutinising documentary evidence, meetings with key staff and with current students, whose views contribute to the review, and sometimes with employers or representatives of relevant industries or professions. In some cases direct observation of teaching and learning takes place. Judgements are framed in terms of levels of confidence in the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities, including learning resources and progression opportunities, which are provided by the FEI, and the institution's ability to maintain and enhance these.

Academic review will operate for the last time in 2006-7 and will then be replaced by **Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER)**, a process specifically designed for HE in FEIs in England. This process is being piloted and consulted upon. In its final form it will operate on a five-year cycle commencing in 2007-8. (*No information available from QAA website on specific arrangements for HE in FEIs in Wales*).

Quality enhancement

HEFCE provides funding to HEIs to support their work in maintaining and enhancing the quality of their teaching and learning approaches and methods so that these continuously improve and are responsive to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Funding is available through the **Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF)** and there are specific funds available to support the embedding of *e-learning* across the sector. HEFCE works in partnership with the Higher Education Academy and with the Joint Systems Committee (JISC) to help institutions achieve their strategies for making best use of technology to support learning.

Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

REAs have taken place at intervals from 1986 until 2001, the fifth such exercise. The purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise is to produce 'quality profiles' for each submission of research activity made by an HEI. These will be used by the four HE funding bodies in the United Kingdom (HEFCE, HEFCW, the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland) to determine their grants for research. The next RAE takes place in 2008 and submissions were required by November 2007. The relevant funding period is from 2009-2010. RAE exercises are based on principles of peer assessment. Experts drawn from HEIs and the 'wider research community' through nominations by for example subject associations and 'users of research' rather than by HEIs and they are appointed by the funding councils. These experts

*"are chosen for their standing in the academic and wider research community, their extensive research experience, **and their understanding of the needs***

of research users and commissioners of research from both the public and commercial sectors.” (RAE website accessed 6.8.07, my emphasis)

Panel members will operate in (sub) panels for 67 ‘units of assessment’ (subject areas for research). Their work will be guided by 15 main panels responsible for ‘broadly cognate disciplines whose subjects have similar approaches to research’. The introduction of the two tier panel system for 2008 aims to ensure greater consistency and ‘internal calibration’ than for previous exercises.

For the 2008 RAE the results of the exercise will be published as a graded profile for each HEI’s submission, using published criteria, generated and applied by the sub-panels of experts. These include information about staff; research outputs, research students and studentships, research income and ‘research environment and esteem’. The period of assessment is January 2001 until July 2007.

Criticisms of current quality assurance arrangements for HE

A useful summary of the development of quality related systems and processes and a critique of these and their impact on higher education is offered by Louise Morley in *Quality and Power in Higher Education* (2003). Morley asserts that quality assurance has influenced culture, relationships, subjectivities and identities in higher education to such an extent that quality has become “a universalising meta-narrative” and a ‘discursive orthodoxy’ has developed, with both material and symbolic consequences to the extent that there has been “a re-formation of academic *habitus* itself” (p.vii, Introduction).

Morley argues that the concept of ‘quality assurance’ achieved through systems is essentially a technology associated with industry, and a related drive for standardization and the elimination of defects and errors in order to increase reliability and consistency of products (p5). She questions whether this way of approaching the improvement of quality in higher education is ‘fit for purpose’ when applied in an academic context. She is not suggesting that improvements are not necessary, but questions the fundamental approach in particular with its reliance on quantitative information and measurement.

Through quality assurance the state asserts its responsibility as well as its power (p.viii). Quality assurance “links the micro-world of the organisation with the public world of policy and politics” (p6). Its introduction, she argues, is linked with other aspects of the new managerialism which has progressively influenced and shaped the ways in which organisations have been managed and have operated during the 1990s and into the current century. In that context the adoption of quality assurance processes can be viewed as a kind of ‘technology transfer’ (p 47).

The drive for reform, Morley suggests, is justified by “constructing the object of reform as wasteful/inefficient/irrelevant/incompetent/outdated” (p 48/9). The ‘object’ here, she implies, could be the HE system, an HEI, a department of

an individual. Adopting this strategy “minimises the possibility of resistance”. Furthermore the language used in official discourses, terms such as ‘enhancement’, ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ “invest quality with a morality that it is hard to contest” (p 49) Organisations, and those working within them, feel obliged to respond and take action, at the very least because “Performance, as an action, contradicts any suggestion of inaction or inertia” (p49). Internally then, QA can be viewed as “a collective self-defence mechanism” (p. ix) in the face of the ‘synthetic panic’ (after Jenkins, p.5) associated with the current ‘risk society’ and focus on minimising risk.

The development of quality assurance is linked to the increasing dominance of consumerism. After Ball et al (1997) Morley suggests that accountability needs to be understood in terms of both political accountability and accountability to the market. She suggests that the analysis offered by Vidovich and Slee 2001 is helpful. They identify four types of accountability: professional accountability to peers; democratic accountability to the community; managerial accountability to governments; and market accountability, to ‘customers’ (p 53). An increased emphasis on the latter two types may be she suggests the price to be paid for the former high levels of autonomy in HE.

Quality audits epitomise the power relationships that obtain in the context of external quality assurance, being “essentially relationships of power between the observer and the observed” (p. ix). Morley suggests that the process suggests an element of policing, and thus lack of trust, and is seen as an infringement of professional autonomy and a substitute for professional ethics. Not participating is not an option and would in any case suggest there was something to hide. Criticism of the audit culture she suggests, after Power (1994) always appears to be defending “elitism, secrecy and privilege” (p 53).

The collection and use of performance indicators comes in for particular criticism. These attempt to define quality in purely quantitative terms. They represent an aspect of the ‘risk society’ and “translate macro-policies into micro-practices”, in effect representing an “encodement of values and priorities”. Systems derived from accounting methods are used to calculate individual academics’ and academic units’ research and publication productivity and ‘effectiveness’ in teaching quality. Performance indicators are centrally determined and the role of managers is to create a culture of commitment to them and their use. This has contributed to the internalisation of audit functions and an increase in ‘self-inspection’ and, by implication self-regulation and self-management in order to conform to new, internalised, norms and expectations. (p 57) This change in professional behaviour is one aspect of the change in *habitus* within the academy that she has identified and is related to Ball’s concept (after Lyotard) of performativity in an educational context.

Notwithstanding the criticisms above Morley concedes that there was room for improvement within the academy. For example she refers to research by Silver (1993) that revealed the systems relating to external examiners to be fairly haphazard with no clear demonstration of common standards, and a

HEFCE review of degree standards in 1997 which found significant differences between universities. A key aspect of what she sees as the insidious effect of current quality assurance systems is that they enable people understandably motivated by a concern to ensure that students are treated fairly and do enjoy a positive experience and outcomes to feel that they are at least 'doing something' to address deficiencies. Thus regulatory power operates through an invisible web of power with which those who are the objects of the systems being used collude, rather than explicit coercion.

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Chart A: The UK Government's Model of Public Service Reform – A Self-Improving System

