

## Key issues concerning 'Quality'

**Who defines what constitutes 'quality'?** While responsibility for 'quality' lies with the provider (although this may become a shared responsibility under self-regulation) 'quality' is defined externally – by government and its agencies. Currently inspection reports on quality, LSC 'assures' it and QIA leads improvement. Self-assessment is identified as the key process for self-improvement, now able to be based on internalised 'standards' arising from the experience of being inspected (for different lengths of time for different sub-sectors) and through providers' management personnel working as part time inspectors. In effect this is a form of self-regulation. Self-regulation for the whole FE system is planned. By the time this is in place, external inspection will be by exception and for the 'high performing' providers will have recently been largely data-based. It may be that more local definitions of 'quality' will emerge once more. Currently there are different 'FE system' quality assessment regimes in Wales and England and between these and HE.

**On what basis is 'quality' defined?** Policy has implied changing concepts and terms but has failed to provide clear definitions. Since 1998 the main emphasis has shifted from 'quality' to 'quality assurance' to 'quality improvement' thence to 'improvement' – as in the National Improvement Strategy. Definitions for 'quality' and the specifics included have varied. The common denominator appears to be 'fitness for purpose', 'purpose' being the achievement/delivery of government agendas and targets, informed by a crude version of human capital theory, requiring a measurable return on investment. There has been a similar shift from 'success' (as in *Success for All*) to 'excellence' in line with a requirement for continuous improvement.

**Numerical indicators are privileged:** there has been a concerted drive to provide simple numerical measures of the success and value for money of all provision for government. 'Excellence' is now overtly used as an absolute term, defined in LSC's performance management and measurement framework *Framework for Excellence* in relation to effectiveness, responsiveness and finance measured numerically. In theory all provision will become 'good' then 'excellent' or cease to be government funded. Excellence as a relative concept is viewed by LSC as 'norm referencing'. Inspections of 'high-performing' providers increasingly focus on numerical data. Elsewhere Ofsted make judgements based on data comparisons and benchmarks and professional judgements presumably based on notions of optimum performance. The risks, in terms of only paying attention to what can be measured and presented numerically, are obvious.

**Plethora of organisations, frameworks and 'standards':** The creation of the QIA was intended to simplify the landscape in England for the 'FE system' - the impending merger with CEL will continue this. The roles of the LSC and Ofsted have now been clarified. However there are still several frameworks and a wide range of organisations busily working on aspects of 'quality' – of the workforce, leadership, curriculum design, qualifications, teaching and learning processes, responsiveness to learners and employers, to give some examples.