In the 2013 document, *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* [1], the then Government set out the main policy objective to be achieved through quality assurance in further and adult education as that of raising standards across a diverse range of provision to allow people to achieve qualifications and skills which meet their needs and respond to the needs of employers and the economy.

Monitoring of performance and inspection form part of the accountability system under which providers in receipt of public funding are judged on the standard of their provision. There is an emphasis on raising standards through developing a more robust system of intervention which is activated at an earlier stage where provision is deemed to be poor.

Linking funding requirements with the standard of provision and strengthening governance arrangements and self-assessment capabilities are also aimed at improving quality. Increasing the range of information which colleges and providers are required to give is intended to increase their incentive to achieve high standards and support student choice.

**Responsible bodies**

The primary responsibility for assessing and improving the quality of provision in adult education and training lies with the providers themselves.

For further education colleges [2], which are independent corporations, responsibility for the quality of provision, as well as for the college’s financial health, lies ultimately with the board of governors. The accounting officer, normally the college principal, takes personal responsibility for assuring the board of governors that there is compliance with the Financial Memorandum (the agreement made with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) – see below) and all other terms and conditions of funding.

**Department for Education**

The Department for Education (DfE) [3] is responsible for the regulatory framework and policy governing adult education and training.

**Education and Skills Funding Agency**

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) [4] is an executive agency of the Department for Education. It funds education and skills for children, young people and adults and monitors the financial health, financial management and financial performance of providers. The ESFA is also responsible for some direct intervention when it has concerns about financial health or control.
Further Education (FE) Commissioner

The Further Education (FE) Commissioner provides independent advice to Ministers and to the Chief Executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Since the post was created in 2013, poorly performing further education and sixth-form colleges have been referred to the FE Commissioner. The Commissioner is responsible for assessing the capacity of leadership and governance in colleges that have serious weakness in quality or financial health. He/she acts as a single point of contact between the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted (the inspectorate, see below) and the ESFA.

The FE Commissioner is a member of the Principals Reference Group, alongside seven serving chief executive college principals. The group supports, challenges and advises the FE Commissioner in his/her role of improving performance in colleges.

The post of FE Commissioner was introduced to strengthen the intervention process in colleges, as outlined in the 2013 policy paper, Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills. This built on earlier reforms set out in New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan, published in 2011. The reforms included making funding arrangements for providers simpler and more transparent, with funding directed specifically at high quality provision and a new process for rapid intervention for failing providers. The role of the FE Commissioner was expanded in November 2017. For further information on this and on how the intervention process operates, see the subheading ‘External inspection’ below.

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills

Ofsted is the non-ministerial government department responsible for the inspection and regulation of colleges, youth work, work-based learning and adult education. It also regulates and inspects day care and children’s social care, and inspects children’s services (including services for vulnerable children), schools and initial teacher training.

Ofsted reports directly to Parliament and not the Department for Education. It is headed by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI), a Crown appointment, who has a statutory duty to make an annual report that is laid before Parliament.

Association of Colleges (AoC)

The Association of Colleges (AoC) is a membership organisation for further education colleges, adult education centres and sixth-form colleges in England. It provides its members with support during Ofsted inspections and with information and support for quality improvement.

Education and Training Foundation (ETF)

The core function of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) is to support the improvement of teaching, learning, leadership and management in the further education and skills sector, covering the entire workforce. It undertakes work in four main areas:

- professional standards and workforce development
- vocational education and training
leadership, management and governance [14]

research and innovation [15].

The ETF is owned by the representative bodies in the sector - the Association of Colleges (AoC); the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP); and the Association of Adult Education and Training Organisations (AAETO) [16] HOLEX [18]). It was launched on 1 August 2013 and operates through the HOLEX and LEAFEA (Local Education Authorities Forum for the Education of Adults) networks and is funded by the Department for Education (DfE).

Historical note on responsible bodies

This note provides a brief outline of some of the many organisational changes to the bodies contributing to quality assurance in further and adult education over the last two decades.

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was created by the Learning and Skills Act 2000 [19] as the body responsible for the inspection of provision for those aged 19 and over, of work-based learning for those aged 16 and over, and of adult and community learning. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 [20] transferred the inspection remit of the ALI to Ofsted (see above) and the ALI closed on 31 March 2007.

The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) for Lifelong Learning came into operation in 2006, with the aim of supporting an increased emphasis on quality improvement, led by the sector itself. In April 2008, the QIA merged with the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), which provided learning, support and advice to leaders and aspiring leaders in the learning and skills sector. The two organisations formed the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The sector-owned LSIS aimed to be a centre of expertise in improvement, leadership and innovation for the system of further education. At the beginning of 2013, the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) announced that it would discontinue funding LSIS from July 2013, and that a new organisation would be established. This organisation would assume responsibility for many of the broad areas of activity then being undertaken by LSIS. It would also take forward the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) standards related work for the further education teaching profession, and vocational and industrial trainers and instructors. The new organisation was originally to be known as the FE Guild, but was incorporated as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) [11] in May 2013 and launched in August 2013. UKCES closed in March 2017.

Following machinery of government changes in 2016, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) was replaced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) [21]. BIS’ responsibilities relating to education and skills, including the regulatory framework and policy governing adult education and training, responsibility for the Skills Funding Agency and the funding of the Education and Training Foundation, were transferred to the Department for Education (DfE).

In April 2017, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) was established, following a merger of two bodies:

1. the Education Funding Agency, which was an arm’s length body of the Department for Education, responsible for funding education for learners between the ages of 3 and 19;

2. the Skills Funding Agency, which was an executive agency of the Department for Business,
Innovation and Skills, responsible for funding colleges, private organisations and employers to provide adults, young people and the unemployed with low skill levels to get the skills needed for employment.

The merger aimed to ensure that the funding and regulation of schools, colleges and other providers would be both more efficient and effective.

For a comprehensive overview of changes in inspection and quality assurance bodies and activities since the incorporation of colleges in 1993, see the discussion paper [22] on inspection published in March 2015 by the Association of Colleges.

**Approaches and methods for quality assurance**

**Self-assessment**

As independent organisations, further education colleges [2] and other providers are responsible for identifying and managing their own risks. Annual self-assessment is standard practice for providers of adult education and training, although it is not a statutory requirement. Self-assessment is linked with the regime of external inspection by Ofsted: the robustness of the self-assessment contributes to the key judgement on the effectiveness of leadership and management during an external inspection. There is no prescribed framework, but the Association of Colleges (AoC) advises its members to use Ofsted’s Common Inspection Framework [23] (see subheading ‘External inspection’ below) as the basis and to ensure that the self-assessment framework satisfies the following headline conditions:

1. it deals with all aspects of the college’s activities and focuses on the quality of students’ experiences and the standards they achieve;

2. it is self-critical and evidence-based, using national performance data as reference points;

3. quality improvement targets are realistic, but also stretching;

4. self-assessment considers the performance of all student groups.

The AoC also provides a set of national standards for self-assessment and a self-assessment tool for member colleges. Other tools available include benchmarking tools, such as:

- the [financial benchmarking tool](#) provided by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), which allows colleges to compare their financial performance with others in the sector;
- the national minimum standards of performance (qualification achievement rates (QAR); see subheading ‘External monitoring of performance’ below);
- the [compare school and college performance service](#), which provides a summary of results data, usually over a three-year period, and allows for comparisons with other colleges or providers;
- MiDES [26], a service provided by the AoC to its members, which provides colleges with a suite of in-year benchmarked data covering topics such as in-year retention; recruitment; curriculum profile; apprenticeships recruitment, completion and withdrawals; deprivation profile; and learner progression.
In addition, the further education sector has developed a set of performance indicators that cover aspects of provision including success rates, views of learners and employers, and learner destinations. These indicators were first introduced in 2010 as the ‘Framework for Excellence’. They now form the basis for the ‘FE Choices’ statistical data set. This online resource allows users to view information for any organisation offering further education. Available data for each organisation is published alongside comparative data for similar types of organisation and for all other organisations.

**External monitoring of performance**

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) assesses providers in respect of their financial health and/or financial management and control. It publishes guidance on how it selects colleges for financial assurance reviews, which aim to ensure that ESFA funds have been used by providers for the intended purposes.

The ESFA also monitors providers with respect to national minimum standards of performance set by the Department for Education (DfE). These are threshold qualification success rates. In 2014/15, qualification success rates were renamed qualification achievement rates (QAR), in preparation for the development of a wider set of outcome-based success measures, to include learner destinations (into further learning or sustained employment), and learner progression (to a higher level qualification). Following a consultation undertaken in 2014, and a second consultation undertaken in 2015, the DfE now also publishes outcome-based measures covering the destinations (into employment and learning), earnings, and progression of learners on its website.

**External inspection**

**Ofsted inspections**

The inspection of further education colleges and other education and training providers for adult learners is the responsibility of Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, under the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Ofsted evaluates how efficiently and effectively education and training provision meets learners’ needs. Where provision requires improvement, providers are offered challenge and support to improve. Where provision is deemed inadequate, this triggers a process of intervention. All inspection reports are published, with the aim of informing the choice of potential learners. The inspection process also aims to promote improvement for all providers by setting expectations, increasing the accuracy of the provider’s self-assessment, and identifying best practice.

Inspections are usually led by an HMI (Her Majesty’s Inspector), who is a civil servant, assisted by other HMIs and/or Ofsted inspectors. Ofsted inspectors are directly contracted to carry out further education and skills inspections, as well as inspections of maintained schools, academies, non-association independent schools and early years settings. Some inspections are led by an Ofsted inspector.

**Framework for Ofsted inspections**

The basis for all inspections is the Common Inspection Framework (2015), which covers schools, further education and skills, and early years settings. Information on the organisation and management of inspections of adult and further education under the Common Inspection Framework, and guidance for inspectors and colleges on the evaluation requirements, are provided in the Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook (updated November 2018).
Inspectors judge the overall effectiveness of a provider against the Common Inspection Framework and make judgements on:

- the effectiveness of leadership and management;
- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment;
- the personal development, behaviour and welfare of learners;
- outcomes for learners.

These are judged using the following grading scale:

- Grade 1: outstanding
- Grade 2: good
- Grade 3: requires improvement
- Grade 4: inadequate.

The frequency of inspection depends on the outcome of previous inspections, as outlined below.

1. A new provider will normally be inspected within three years of the start of the contract to provide adult and further education.

2. Providers judged ‘outstanding’ at their most recent inspection are not normally subject to routine inspection. However, an outstanding provider may receive a full inspection where its performance declines or there is another compelling reason, such as potential safeguarding issues.

3. Providers judged ‘good’ at their most recent inspection will usually be inspected within five years of the last inspection (following all existing good providers being inspected within the three years from September 2015). This will normally be a short inspection, but may be converted to a full inspection where information suggests that this is the most appropriate course of action, for example if the provider’s performance has declined.

Short inspections normally take one to two days. They are mainly concerned to establish if the provider has remained ‘good’. Individual graded judgements are not made, nor are changes made to the provider’s overall effectiveness grade. If the inspection is converted to a full inspection, which normally lasts between two and five days, inspectors will make the full set of graded judgements using the four-point grading scale.

Reports of all Ofsted inspection and re-inspection visits of providers of adult education and training are published on the Ofsted website inspection reports area.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the FE Commissioner are notified when the reports are published and will consider the need for intervention.

Providers judged to ‘require improvement’ are offered challenge and support to improve by Ofsted, which provides guidance on the form this takes. These providers are usually re-inspected within 12–24 months of the publication of the previous inspection report.

When a provider is judged as ‘inadequate’, this triggers a process of intervention. This involves a first monitoring inspection soon after the publication of the report of the inadequate inspection. This
assesses the steps the provider has made in addressing the weaknesses identified in the inspection report and recommends priorities for improvement. Successive follow-up visits continue to assess the impact of measures to improve provision for learners, challenging the provider to improve. Information from these visits is shared with the Department for Education, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Further Education (FE) Commissioner as relevant, and there is a full re-inspection within 15 months.

**Education Inspection Framework 2019**

In January 2019, Ofsted launched a four-month consultation on proposed changes to the inspection framework. The new framework, which is intended to be in place from September 2019, aims to focus inspection judgements and the criteria which underpin them more closely on the substance and the ‘rounded’ quality of the education and training offered by providers.

**Intervention and the Further Education (FE) Commissioner**

Since August 2013, a further intervention process has been in operation in cases where a provider of adult and further education:

- is judged ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted for overall effectiveness; and/or
- has been assessed as ‘inadequate’ for financial health and/or financial management and control by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA); and/or
- has failed to meet national minimum standards of performance set by the Department for Education (DfE); and/or
- has, following a ‘diagnostic assessment’ by the Further Education (FE) Commissioner, been found to not be taking action, or is lacking a realistic plan to improve in areas which have been flagged for concern by Ofsted or the ESFA; or whose existing leadership and/or governance is judged an impediment to securing necessary improvement.

The diagnostic assessment process was introduced as part of an expansion of the FE Commissioner’s role in 2017. It aims to enable the Commissioner to engage at an earlier stage with colleges that are ‘at risk’ from a quality and/or financial perspective, but which have not reached a trigger for formal intervention. The Commissioner is now able to recommend that such colleges can access greater support to improve their capacity. Financial support is available through the [Strategic College Improvement Fund](#), and the [National Leaders of Further Education](#) programme offers support from experienced college leaders who have themselves secured improvements in standards. This approach is intended to enable colleges to improve more quickly and to reduce the likelihood of them requiring formal intervention.

The FE Commissioner diagnostic assessment process does not apply to independent training providers, including commercial and charitable providers or other organisations and employers contracted by the ESFA. These organisations follow the assessment, escalation and intervention process set out in their grant agreement or contract.

More information on the intervention process led by the FE Commissioner is available in this 2017 DfE [policy paper](#).

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