Whither (or wither?) inspection? Changing times, changing models in assuring and improving quality in adult education

Ann Jackson, Adult Educator, UK

Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Introduction

As universal education became a right – and indeed a requisite - for the population of the UK, so systems were developed to ascertain that the public purse was being well served. A major instrument in the battery of systems has been and continues to be inspection, with its twin purposes of ensuring accountability and of improving quality. However, the relative dominance of each of those two purposes shifts in response to concerns and issues both within and beyond education. In a very real sense, inspection is perpetually a child of its times.

This paper builds on an on-going research project carried out over the past five years and reported to successive SCUTREA conferences. It explores the changing nature of inspection, in particular within the non-higher post-compulsory sector in England, and reports on a case study in progress of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), which was brought into being on 1 April 2001 as a result of the Education Act 2000, and ceased to exist exactly six years later. It examines the political, economic and social pressures which led to the creation of the ALI, and the shifts in those pressures which led to its demise. Through a literature and document search, and through interviews with ALI directors, inspectors, and those who were inspected, the case study seeks to analyse the impact of the inspectorate on the sector in terms of those twin justifications of accountability and improvement.

The paper continues with an analysis of the current situation and climate, which is rendering inspection within the non-higher post-compulsory sector in the UK ever more vulnerable when set against the growing ascendancy of self-regulation.

Proliferation of inspection

The ALI came into existence at a time of proliferation of inspection in the public sector in the UK, as a means of assuring the quality of services dependent on the public purse (Jackson and Wallis, 2006, pp.198 – 206). As David Sherlock pointed out in response to a nostalgic view of a perceived ‘golden age’ of inspection by the then director of the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), the inspection of education, and in particular of post-compulsory education, had not enjoyed a history of consistent rigour. Indeed, some parts of the sector had no, or very little, history of inspection at all:

What (he) failed to mention was that full inspections of public institutions (no work-based learning in scope for inspection then) happened once in a blue moon. When I first got a principal's job in 1980 I confidently anticipated a whole career without a full college inspection. And if one had occurred there would have been no vulgar grades. Indeed, publication of a report might have been delayed by a year or two of polite negotiation on the wording. My main contact with HMI was a fireside chat with my friendly regional staff inspector every six months or so over a glass of the college gin and tonic. (Sherlock, 2003, pp.1)
What the new Labour government’s *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) white paper and the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* envisaged for inspection was a system which would support accountability and lead to improvement across the whole of the disparate, non-higher post-compulsory sector by subjecting it to more comprehensive scrutiny than ever before.

For the first time in this country we have a single framework which brings together all elements of post-16 inspection, thereby enabling an overall assessment of the quality of post-16 education and training to be made, and valid comparisons between constituent parts of the sector to be drawn. (ALI, 2002, pp.3)

And according to the ALI’s chief inspector, it had the desired effect:

The *Learning and Skills Act 2000* has had the disturbing effect that was intended. More rigorous inspection has identified where opportunities and problems lie. (ALI, 2003, pp.21)

The ALI built on the work of the former Training and Skills Council (TSC), the inspection arm of which had recently begun the very first monitoring of publicly funded work-based learning, with a team of 30 full-time inspectors led by David Sherlock as chief inspector, and which existed for an even shorter time than the ALI (TSC, 1999). During its six year life-span, the ALI grew exponentially, bringing into the inspection cycle parts of the post-compulsory, non-higher sector which had previously either not been inspected, or had undergone very infrequent inspections. As annual reports indicated:

the extraordinary breadth of the ALI remit will allow us to make significant comparisons between the standards achieved in each area of learning, according to the context in which that learning takes place. (ALI, 2002, pp.4)

In the past two years the ALI has more than doubled in size and in the range of its work. (ALI, 2003, pp.2)

However, it owed much of its existence to pressure brought to bear at a political level by employers, whose perception of the largest player in the field of education inspection, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), was of a hostile organisation which would not understand work-based learning and or take account of the fledgling nature of work-based learning inspection.

**Reducing bureaucracy and cutting costs**

The demise of the ALI again owed much to political pressures, rather than reflecting the effectiveness with which the organisation carried out its remit. The then Chancellor’s budget announcement in March 2005 that the eleven public sector inspectorates would be pulled together into four ‘super-inspectorates,’ one of which would cover education and children’s services, was an indication of the power of the new bureaucracy busting orthodoxy which had been gathering momentum over the preceding five years (DfES, 2005). Accountability and paperwork overload were now seen as interfering with, rather than supporting, quality improvement.

Too much management time has been spent chasing and accounting for funding and not enough on raising standards and relevance of teaching and learning. (DFES, 2002, pp.5)

The significantly entitled Bureaucracy Busting Task Force (BBTF) spelt out not only the determination to reduce auditing and paperwork requirements within the post-compulsory sector in the UK, but also the consequent trust which would be placed on the sector to
monitor and improve itself:

The further education (FE) sector is full to overflowing with regulation and administration, much of it aimed at monitoring levels and kinds of activity to ensure contract compliance, reconcile data and assure funding claims.

Over-regulation and excessive administrative burdens distract and pre-occupy colleges so that the learner and learning can at times seem like incidentals rather than the heart of further education…… It soon became clear to the Task Force that any lasting gains could not be achieved within the existing pattern of culture and relationships. (BBTF, 2002, pp.5)

The new relationship ‘must centre around trust and transparency rather than monitoring, supervision and multiple review overlays…..’ (BBTF, 2002, pp.5)

Following the confirmation of the new inspectorial landscape for the post-compulsory sector by the Secretary of State for Education late in 2005, the white paper outlining the direction and purpose envisaged by the UK government for further education, published in the following year, reinforced the themes of a changing role for inspection, of reducing bureaucracy, of reducing costs, and of an increased reliance on self-assessment.

Colleges and providers will be responsible for driving up quality within their own organisations, with an increasing emphasis on self-improvement…. A central finding of the Foster report was that the FE system is over-regulated and too complex. We agree. If colleges and training providers are to meet the challenge we are setting, they must have the space and freedom to do so. (DfES, 2006, pp.8-10)

A mark of the increasing trust in the sector to monitor and improve itself has been the move to establish the ‘Single Voice’, which it is envisaged will speak for the non-higher post-compulsory sector as a whole in terms of self-regulation. In its phase 2 proposals to the newly formed Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Self Regulation Implementation Group (SRIG) sees the key objectives of the Single Voice as ‘enhancing the sector’s capacity for self improvement…..’ and as ‘simplification of the regulatory landscape’. (SRIG, 2007, pp.2) The proposals spell out the implications for inspection in this shift to self-regulation within the sector:

Such a system would allow the inspectorate to focus on the effectiveness of the self regulation at a system level, consistent with the role of an external regulator. In the immediate term it is anticipated that OfSTED will give increased recognition to the findings of peer review activity as part of its own evidence base for inspection. (SRIG, 2007, pp.10)

However, the ability of the non-higher post-compulsory sector to monitor itself is still seen very much in terms of the colleges, by far the most powerful voice in the sector, and the most seasoned in inspection. There is little evidence at this stage of consideration of how, or indeed if, self-regulation is to permeate the sector as a whole, or of thought being given to the support needed to enable that to happen and to be effective.

In addition to bureaucracy cutting, the new inspection arrangements had the undoubted political attraction of cutting costs within the public sector. As John Stone, Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Network pointed out:

There are, of course, other pressures. The tight comprehensive spending review settlement has brought our old friend "value for money" closer to the top of the agenda, and saving even a proportion of the £500m or so spent on external regulation would be a welcome contribution. (Stone, 2007)
The SRIG also sees a commensurate advantage of its proposals for self regulation for the post-compulsory sector as cutting costs:

Self-regulation will streamline regulatory processes and reduce the level of regulation undertaken by external agencies. This should ensure the more efficient and effective use of public funds. (SRIG, 2007, pp.16)

The justification of the changes to the inspectorial landscape in terms of financial savings was made clear in the chancellor’s original announcement, and confirmed at the outset as a requirement of the new Ofsted. One ‘super-inspectorate’ was now to cover all children’s services and learning, with cost-cutting of one third by 2009.

Thirty per cent of the new inspectorate’s budget has to be saved in only two years’ time… (Gilbert, 2007, pp.11)

Amalgamation or take-over?

In creating a single inspectorate from what had previously been four separate inspection bodies with responsibilities for different aspects of children’s services and learning, the government was creating a huge structure. As Christine Gilbert, the Chief Inspector of the new Ofsted, pointed out:

It has an ambitious and challenging remit and its work will touch the lives of almost half the population….. (Gilbert, 2007, pp.11)

It is disputable whether the formation of the ‘super-inspectorate’ was, or indeed could be, an amalgamation of equals rather than a take-over by the largest of the partner organisations, resulting in the significantly named ‘new Ofsted’. Certainly, the then Chief Inspector of Ofsted positioned his organisation very early on in the process in terms which were more indicative of take-over. During a speech to the Association of Colleges (AOC), he remarked, following a consideration of the influential Foster report on the future role of further education colleges (Foster, 2005):

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

If the announcement does indeed recommend that our remit is to be enlarged, you can rest assured that we would build on the considerable skills and expertise of the inspectors who are currently within the ALI. Do not believe the scaremongers who suggest either that we are not interested in post-19 work or that it will get lost in an enlarged Ofsted. Further education matters and will matter even more in an expanded Ofsted. (Bell, 2005)

And Ofsted’s response to the government’s consultation over the future of inspection also clearly endorsed the proposal for a single inspectorate covering children’s services and learning as a means to both cut bureaucracy and save costs, and that Ofsted should be that inspectorate:

- from the point of view of those inspected, fewer inspectorates will mean less complex, less duplicatory and therefore less burdensome inspection arrangements....
• the inclusion of employment based training within Ofsted’s remit would mean that for the first time a single inspectorate was able to speak authoritatively about the relationship between education and employment
• by bringing the work of a number of inspectorates together, it will be possible to realise efficiency improvements in inspection arrangements, coupled with economies in ‘back office’ support. (Ofsted, 2005, pp.1)

In the same response, Ofsted pinpointed the argument for absorbing the ALI into the single inspectorate as ‘even more compelling than that in relation to the work of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA)’, the other two inspectorates to be incorporated into the over-arching inspectorate for children’s services and learning.

In contrast to this bullish stance which placed Ofsted firmly within the politically dominant policy direction, the ALI was searching for possibilities to remain an independent body. This placed the organisation outside of the main direction and flow of influence.

The decision was finally announced that children’s services and learning would indeed come together under one inspectorate, and that all of the ALI’s inspectors would transfer across to the ‘New Ofsted’. However, to accommodate the sole remit work which the ALI brought with it, the Learning and Skills Directorate was established, and with it the risk of creating an organisation within an organisation

All of the work that the Learning and Skills Directorate will do will be based on approaches currently used by the ALI. There should be high levels of continuity for providers, inspectors and learners.

We will be very careful to ensure that we deploy our inspectors sensitively so that they continue to work in areas where they have real expertise….. (Gilbert, 2007, pp.11)

Deploying inspectors in accordance with their skills and expertise is a necessity if inspections are to have validity and influence. However, within the enlarged inspectorate, not all areas carry with them equal political clout. The post-compulsory sector is necessarily the most vulnerable, because of the political profile of pre-school and school-aged children’s services. At a simplistic level, we can say that adults – and therefore the education sector that provides for their needs – can (or should) be able to look after themselves, while children are in clear need of our protection. When high profile cases occur involving a breakdown or failure of scrutiny within the statutory sector, the need for inspection is undisputed. If the cold wind of cost-cutting continues to blow on the new super-inspectorate, it is likely to be the post-compulsory aspect that feels the chill first and most keenly.

Ironically, less than a year after the ALI’s remit had transferred to the new Ofsted, the Department for Education and Skills was split, post-compulsory education coming under the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and Ofsted’s brief consequently extending over two government departments. The new political arrangements create an even clearer break than previously existed between statutory and non-compulsory education, and between provision for children and provision for adults.

Whither now?
So the ALI was born at a time when education – and in particular the quality of education - was at the very top of the political agenda, and when the UK had a Secretary of State who saw the revitalisation – or indeed the vitalisation – of the post-compulsory sector as a
priority. Its importance was captured in the title of the newly created Department of Education and Skills which in 2001 replaced the Department for Education and Employment. The ALI’s inception also coincided with a time of burgeoning growth in inspection. Times have changed, and perceptions have changed, both of inspection and of the post-compulsory sector. The sector, certainly with reference to colleges of Further Education, is considered to be in much better shape and hence able to self-monitor quality. The Self Regulation Implementation Group claims in its proposal to the Secretary of State:

Further education in England has, over the last ten years changed out of all recognition. It has matured, improved success rates and responsiveness. (SRIG, 2007, pp.2)

Bureaucracy busting and financial ‘efficiency and effectiveness’ are now underpinning the dominant discourse around inspection. Consequently self-regulation, and reduced intensity and proportionate inspection have currently an unstoppable momentum. Times may change again, as David Sherlock pointed out in his final Chief Inspector’s Report for the ALI:

Of course, the pendulum may swing back towards detailed specialist inspection. It has done so in the recent past. (ALI, 2006, pp.1)

But the present situation has implications for inspection and the sector. As indicated earlier, the moves to shift to a self-regulated post-compulsory sector are based on the estimation that colleges are sufficiently ready to undertake that responsibility. However, other players in this disparate sector have not yet the experience, confidence, and, I would argue, the capacity in many cases to take on the task of effective self-monitoring and the responsibility of self-improvement.

Moreover, the twin justifications for inspection have always been accountability and improvement (ALI and Ofsted, 2001; Jackson and Wallis, 2006). While success in carrying out the latter function is always difficult to prove (Ofsted, 2004; Wallis and Jackson, 2004), the ALI placed an emphasis on supporting provider improvement, with initiatives such as the introduction of the Provider Development Unit, the Good Practice Database, quality monitoring inspection and re-inspection over time. Ofsted also explored inspection as a catalyst for improvement. However, perceptions of the relative importance of each of these justifications for inspection shift with the climate of political and public opinion. The current moves to reduced-intensity inspection for better providers, and to define the inspector’s role as monitor of a provider’s self-assessment, places inspection firmly within the realm of auditing, rather than as a stimulus for improvement. Indeed, part of the arrangements for inspection under the new regime was to drive a clear demarcation line between inspection and improvement, with the latter function being allocated to the Quality Improvement Agency, another recently created body whose future is now uncertain.

The new inspectorate also faces competing public expectations of delivering more with less. Despite the significant budgetary reductions it is expected to make in a very short timescale, and the move to proportionate and reduced-intensity inspection in response to demands for less external regulation, Ofsted contrarily faces the criticism of not doing enough. As inspection of education reduces in intensity, the cries that inspectors are not doing enough, that important aspects are being overlooked, are already starting to be heard. For example, the Commission for Racial Equality and Human Rights recently attacked the new Ofsted for:

their reluctance to include within inspections an assessment of how well schools are meeting their responsibilities under the duty to promote race equality (CRE, 2007, pp.15)
As noted in the TSC’s guidelines for the inspection of New Deal almost a decade ago:

Inspection can sometimes be a difficult and contentious business. It cannot be conducted successfully unless there is an open and professional relationship, founded on mutual trust, between inspectors and those whom they inspect. (TSC, 1999, pp.34)

Getting the balance right, between quality assurance and quality improvement, between bureaucratic overload and an overly cosy approach which encourages stasis, between an expensive and a cost-efficient (another expression for ‘cheap’) system is no easy task, and requires commitment and consensus to make it work, from providers, from inspectors, from political decision-makers and from the public at large, all of whom are users of public services subject to inspection. Where we are in the ongoing cycle of public and political consensus governs the inspection regime we have in place at any point in time. And that consensus is fluid and whimsical, with dissatisfaction the only constant.

References:
Gilbert C (2007) The ‘new Ofsted’ will build on ALI’s legacy in the skills arena, Talisman 58, Feb 2007, pp.11.
SRIG (2007) Realising self regulation in the further education sector, A proposition submitted to the Secretary of State for Innovation, University and Skills, SRIG.


This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008