

Beyond inspection in Further Education Colleges

Inspection and improvement

1. UCU is exploring what an alternative to Ofsted/ESTYN inspection might look like. A noteworthy example that could prove a helpful source of learning and development for the further education and training sector is the Local Government Association which has developed a sector-led improvement model for councils that has now been running for nearly ten years.¹

Local Government Association Peer Challenge

2. The model is based on four key principles²:
 - Councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement;
 - Councils are primarily accountable to local communities;
 - Councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole; and
 - The role of the LGA is to maintain an overview of performance of the sector and to provide tools for support.
3. The support offer is based on strong leadership; challenge from one's peers; the ability to benchmark performance against others through the use of comparable data; and sharing of good practice. Peer challenge and support is a key feature of the programme. Specific areas for focus can include: understanding of place and priority setting; leadership of place; financial planning and viability; organisational leadership and governance; and capacity to deliver. These are adaptable and, for example, a new form of support on climate change has recently been developed.
4. Peers are individuals with current or recent experience in sector and/or in other relevant public bodies thereby adding credibility. The challenges are fully funded and there is an expectation that all councils will complete a corporate or finance peer challenge every five years.

¹ Local Government Association, (July 2020), Sector-led improvement in 2019/20: end of year report, available at:
https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/53.1%20SLI%20End%20of%20Year%20Report_03_2.pdf

² Ibid, p.3

5. The composition of these teams is relevant to the area or nature of improvement being sought. A small team is embedded for five days which goes on to help colleagues understand their key challenges; support councils to counter misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations held locally; provide experience-based practical experience; and offer location-specific advice.

6. Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement-focused; with the scope agreed by and tailored to reflect local needs and specific requirements of a council. The Local Government Association is also clear on what peer challenge is not³:
 - It is not a sector-owned form of inspection;
 - It does not deliver a scored assessment;
 - It is not a detailed service assessment;
 - It is not driven by external requirements;
 - It is not reported to Government though councils are encouraged to publish their results as part of being accountable to the communities they serve;
 - It is focused on making appropriate preparation and ‘maximising the benefits’.

7. The Local Government Association improvement model is one of many that UCU could explore further with a view to learning what could work in our sector.

NEU Campaign - #ReplaceOfsted

8. It is noteworthy that National Education Union (NEU) is currently running a campaign in a similar vein. *‘Replace Ofsted, let teachers teach’*⁴ is a campaign calling for government to:
 - Replace Ofsted with a school accountability system which is supportive, effective and fair;
 - Work with teachers, leaders and other stakeholders to establish a commission to learn how school accountability is done in other high performing education nations; and
 - Develop an accountability system which commands the trust and confidence of education staff as well as parents and voters.

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/council-assurance-and-peer-support/principles-peer-challenge>

⁴ <https://www.replaceofsted.valueeducation.org.uk/sign-petition>

9. As such, further work in this area to explore an alternative sector relevant improvement methodology is timely and further work from UCU in this area could be designed to dovetail with that of our sister-union NEU, but also afford a focus on the further education and skills sector that UCU is well-placed to deliver.