

**learning
and skills
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agency**

Stories from the front line

The impact of inspection
on practitioners

Sandra Rennie, Bradford College

Yorkshire and Humberside
Learning and Skills Research Network

**research
report**

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Aim of the research

This paper explores the impact of the new inspection arrangements on practitioners in further education (FE) colleges. It is based on a small study, involving FE practitioners who kept a record of their experiences before, during and after inspection. The aims of this research were to investigate a range of personal experiences of inspection in colleges and to build research capacity among the participants themselves. This research should shed light on the impact inspection has in colleges and provide useful information about the inspection experience for the inspectorates, for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and for all post-16 stakeholders.

The methodology

This research was linked to a larger, ESRC-funded research project 'Transforming learning cultures' (TLC). The method of diary-keeping was based on the TLC research project and was explained by Professor Phil Hodgkinson in the initial briefing workshop attended by six of the volunteers. At the beginning of the project the volunteers attended a 2-hour briefing workshop covering the diary-keeping methodology and various issues to do with research ethics and confidentiality. Four weeks later they all attended a second workshop where they shared examples of their diary writing and aired their views about the emerging issues around inspection. After their diaries were completed, they attended a third workshop where they commented on the findings emerging from the research. Finally, a month later, they attended a fourth workshop where they discussed some of the theoretical issues underpinning their experience of inspection. All these volunteers were involved in all stages of the research project and had opportunities to reflect on the findings as the research progressed.

Initially we asked for volunteers to take part in this research from several different colleges in the north of England. By the end of the project six volunteers from three different colleges had produced diaries for analysis (see Table 1, page 7 for details). The participants in the 'Impact of inspection' research were all self-selected and chose to keep their diaries because they wanted to. This has meant a considerable time commitment for the volunteer diary-keepers at one of the busiest times of the year for them. Yet they were so committed to telling their stories and reflecting on their impact, that some of them recorded their experiences and thoughts at all times of the day and night. For some there was also an added bonus of finding the experience 'cathartic' at a time of great stress. The diary-keepers need to be viewed as a collection of interested and committed individuals from different kinds of colleges, performing different job roles and with differing backgrounds. They are not a representative sample in the traditions of positivist research. This was a small-scale study with six active diary-keepers: 'Country College' provided three diary-keepers, 'Big College' provided two and the 'City College' provided one. The report reflects perceptions of a particular set of lecturers, middle managers and learning support staff and not senior managers; as such, it cannot fully reflect perceptions of inspection across the professional base. However, when the initial findings were presented to the diary-keepers at the third workshop, they all identified their own college from the descriptions provided and said they recognised parts of their own college in the

descriptions of the other two colleges. Thus the research findings should be understood as qualitative information that sheds light on the experience of being inspected, provides a picture of the image of inspection and tells the stories of those subject to inspection. These findings should not be used to provide a critique of a particular college's management approach or of the activities of a particular group of inspectors. They are individual perceptions of a collective experience that should be used rather to extend our understanding of similar experiences in other education institutions and inspection regimes.

All names and some other details have been changed to protect the participants' anonymity.

Background information

FE college inspections

There have been rapid changes in inspection regimes over the last 2 years and the FE colleges that took part in this study were at the receiving end of the first round of the new inspection arrangements. From April 2001, post-16 inspections in FE colleges are no longer carried out by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) are now responsible for inspecting sixth form, tertiary, general further education and specialist colleges. ALI is responsible for adult learners, while OFSTED reports on 16–18 year olds. A joint OFSTED and ALI inspection team inspects many FE colleges.

The old FEFC inspection regime had a whole-college approach concerned with gathering information about wider organisational issues such as resources, student services and management. Their assessment criteria focused on records and figures of achievement, recruitment and retention of students. The new OFSTED/ALI Common Inspection Framework (CIF) is very different as it focuses specifically on the learning and the learner. The assessment follows a greater number of classroom observations than did the FEFC regime and the inspectors have more contact with teachers than with management and ancillary staff. In consequence, their conclusions should reflect more information about students' learning experience and less information about the corporate health of the institution.

16–19 area-wide inspections

In its White Paper *Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning*, published in June 1999, the government instructed OFSTED to lead area-wide inspections of 16–19 education and training, encompassing all providers (including schools, colleges and independent training companies). Most colleges experience an area inspection as a 'lighter touch' than a college inspection.

All the colleges in the study had recently experienced an OFSTED-led area inspection. They had also previously been inspected by FEFC. During the study they each underwent a full college inspection carried out by a team of OFSTED and ALI inspectors.

Consultants

With the advent of new inspection regimes, senior managers in FE colleges have identified a need to change their management strategies and their information recording procedures to fit into the new assessment categories and the new aims of inspection. Some have responded to this change by ensuring the senior management attend specialist training on inspection and quality assurance. Some FE colleges within the region have made use of independent consultants who have previously trained as inspectors. Two of the colleges in this research study used the same OFSTED-trained inspector as a consultant. In this capacity she provided pre-inspection briefings, organised a simulated mini-inspection for one college and provided help with post-inspection de-briefing and action planning.

NATFHE

Negotiations over pay and Teacher Pay Initiative (TPI) money were ongoing with the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (the lecturer's union, NATFHE) throughout this research period. Inspection preparation involved classroom observations, but the publication of observation grades was a sensitive issue for NATFHE because of possible future links with performance-related pay. As a trade union, NATFHE was also campaigning nationally over stress-related sickness and high turnover of staff. Locally, during the research period, NATFHE officials regularly dealt with both discipline and grievance cases related to stress, sickness and high workload. Two of the diary-keepers in this research were active members of their local NATFHE branch.

Table 1 Participants

Participating colleges	Big College	Country College	City College
Type of college	A large, mixed FE and HE, city-centre college	A medium-sized, rural FE college	A medium-sized, general, city-centre FE college

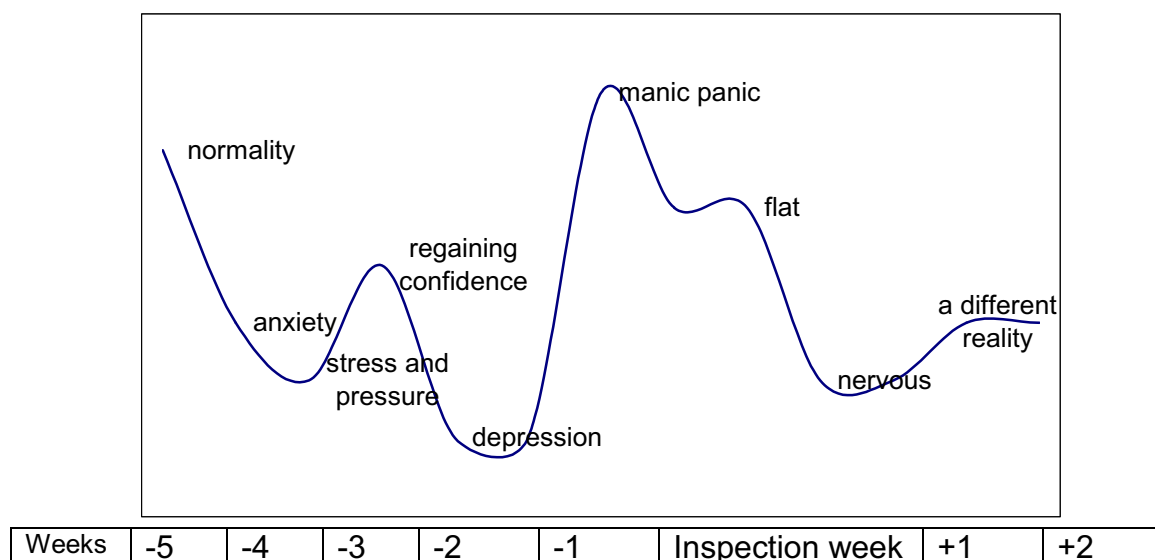
Diary-keepers	Roland	Mike	Kirsty	Colin	Gill	Jane
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female
Job roles	Lecturer, union official	Subject head, teacher, moderator and internal verifier	Librarian	Access tutor, teacher, union official	Section leader, lecturer	Lecturer, internal verifier
Type of diary	14 pages word-processed	11 pages word-processed	24 pages handwritten, 4 pages of appendices	29 pages handwritten, 40 appendices consisting of 158 pages	18 pages partly handwritten and partly typed	15 pages handwritten
Duration of diary	14 weeks	6 weeks	6 weeks	11 weeks	10 weeks	7 weeks
Style of diary	Systematic, considered	Amusing, analytical	Thoughtful, a fresh look	From the heart, detailed	Confidential, personal	Clear, evaluative

The experience of inspection

The experience of inspection provided an emotional roller-coaster for all the practitioners. Some days they were on emotional highs, buoyed up with the confidence acquired from a consultant's encouragement or a mini-inspection rehearsal. Some of the time they felt under pressure and stressed because of the huge demands for paperwork that came in a short space of time. Sometimes they felt low and depressed because of worries about the grades their class or their section might receive. Sometimes they felt cynical and powerless because of a lack of faith in the inspection process.

Six weeks before the inspection there was a relatively small amount of preparation activity reported, for example a few briefing sessions and some memos – there was still an atmosphere of fairly routine normality. By the time practitioners found themselves 4 weeks away from the inspection anxiety, stress and pressure were building up. There was a short burst of confidence at the time of the inspection consultant's visit, but soon afterwards the practitioners experienced more pressure and some reported feeling depressed at the prospect of an inspection. Just before inspection this depression moved into a period of manic activity. Below is a diagrammatic representation of the experience of these emotional highs and lows.

Figure 1 The 8-week inspection emotional roller-coaster



During the inspection week itself some practitioners experienced very rapid emotional ups and downs, depending on how much contact they had with inspectors. Some were described as swinging rapidly from panic and hysteria to deflation or from nervous anticipation to disappointment within the course of a day. Emotions were strongly felt and there were reports of colleagues feeling indignant, sidelined or crying.

Sickness and stress

Every diary-keeper in every college reported sickness and stress during the inspection period. For example, one wrote, 'Struggling to keep going this week as is everyone else. Everybody looks absolutely knackered'. Another person wrote, 'I have had 2 days off sick. I haven't felt well [for] over 2 weeks now'. They all also reported sickness and stress among their colleagues. For example, 'Yesterday I spoke to five people all with medically acknowledged stress conditions. I know of a host of other individuals across the college who can not enter the building without taking medication' and 'I have been covering several classes for an absent colleague, last heard of in hospital following a TIA [Transient Ischemic Attack]'

The image of inspection

Diary-keepers and their colleagues had varied expectations of the inspection process depending on their image of inspection. For some practitioners the inspection had a battlefield image and so those colleges and individuals felt under attack.

One diary-keeper described 'a sense of battle lines being drawn between college and the inspectors' and there was a sense of middle managers being in the firing line if the inspection went badly. As one practitioner put it: 'Management will blame the middle management, they have been setting them up nicely in the past few weeks.'

For those practitioners who viewed inspection as a battlefield, the preparation for the inspection had many of the trappings of preparation for war. Money was spent on new resources eg information technology (IT), but because these had to be rushed through there was little time to make sure they were appropriate or that practitioners knew how to use them. Some of the 'front-line troops' regularly used irony and humour, albeit sometimes a gallows humour, to keep up morale. The inspectors were identified as the enemy and the college members were described as banding together in a spirit of camaraderie and loyalty to the college.

The result of this approach was two-fold. On the one hand morale was kept relatively high during inspection but on the other hand weak practices and practitioners were hidden from inspectors. The practitioners experienced the pre-inspection period as a preparation to be under siege from outside attack. This may have been because they saw the FE sector as a whole as being underfunded and under attack, or it may have been that they felt that their particular college was under threat following the recent, rapid changes in funding and inspection regimes. The grades their college received mattered to them. One diary-keeper reported that in their college poor grades had led to redundancies in one section. Another diary-keeper was worried whether the poor grades they had received would adversely affect recruitment of both students and staff. She wondered whether or not she would be able to find another job once it became known that she had worked for a 'failing college'. In a college where practitioners expected good grades, they expressed feelings of shock and defeat when they

received poor grades in the end. In this college the post-inspection de-briefings led by senior managers were described as 'Nuremburg trials'.

The 'battleground' for inspections is a shifting one. Since the changeover from FEFC- to OFSTED-led inspections, assessment of teaching and learning is now carried out in 14 new 'learning area' categories. These learning areas are different from the 10 'curriculum area' categories used by the FEFC and different again from the category of 'subject areas' used by some colleges themselves. The introduction of these new 'learning-area' categories has had two main effects. First, the information systems in the colleges had to be revised to take into account the different classifications of data required by inspectors in the pre-inspection Self-Assessment Reports. Second, when grades were decided by inspectors they were awarded for each broad 'learning area', which might include more than one 'subject area' or 'curriculum area'. That is, the grades would not necessarily reflect the way each college currently organises their provision. At least one of the colleges in the study had started to re-organise course management to reflect the new 14 learning areas. Others had made attempts to modify their information collection to reflect these categories; however, in at least two cases, it was recorded that they did not trust their college electronic information system or management information system (MIS) to be accurate. Because of this lack of confidence in electronic data, information was also gathered and re-classified by hand, thus causing both confusion and unnecessary duplication of effort. As the battlefield kept shifting ground, senior managers responded to their lack of knowledge and reliable information by over-preparing for inspection. They put more and more pressure on their captains in the field (middle managers) and their ground troops (teachers) to invent and produce large quantities of paperwork as ammunition to counter what they perceived as an inspection attack. This scattergun technique was seen as effective because managers believed that the colleges that got the best grades were the ones that had produced the most paperwork.

For some practitioners inspection had an image of theatre and they behaved as if they and their college were taking part in a show with an audience of inspectors. This theatre image led them to feel either cynical or ambivalent about the accuracy of any conclusions reached by the inspectors.

At some point, in every college studied, inspection was planned and rehearsed for as if it were a show. All the main features of a show were present –there were auditions, scripts, rehearsals and a ‘dress rehearsal’ in the form of a mini-inspection with a consultant; there were new ‘props’ provided and there was an audience (inspectors) who were not expected to know what was going on back stage. In one college, Self Assessment Reports (SARs) were re-written by senior managers and their contents read and learnt by middle managers as if they were a script. In theory, the Self Assessment Reports produced in each section should have given each manager and each course tutor an understanding of how effective their provision was and helped them to make plans for the future. In practice, SARs were seen as resulting from an externally imposed system that had to be complied with to achieve future funding. It was described as difficult and stressful for these middle managers to learn a script when they did not believe in or understand the content. The understanding and use of benchmarks highlights this. Senior managers expected middle managers to be able to discuss their course data in relation to ‘national benchmarks’. However, the middle managers were unsure which benchmarks to use and even where they did know this, they were sceptical about the validity of comparing their performance with other, completely different colleges.

In one college, middle managers attended a rehearsal where they were tested on their knowledge and understanding of the SARs in an environment described as a ‘competition to find the weakest link’. Those middle managers who could not answer questions in the way senior managers viewed as ‘correct’, were told not to talk to inspectors. In one college selected groups of students were rehearsed so that they could practise what to say to inspectors. Students who were likely to give a negative opinion of the college were expected to be kept away from inspectors. One diary-keeper was clearly angry and unwilling to cooperate with idea of selecting students to create a good impression:

We don't pick students on the basis that, like trained dogs, they'll do and say all the right things. I can't in any case believe the inspectors will base their judgements on what one individual may say. We should be seen and understood warts and all.

Despite their expectations that the inspection would just be a ‘show’, some of the practitioners started off hoping that that it would turn out to be ‘a real inspection finding something real out’. However, cynicism about the process intensified during the lead up to the inspection and resulted in a lowering of morale in some colleges.

The endless drive for targets, for measurable performance indicators blah blah engenders a feeling of real desolation inside me sometimes and adversely affects my motivation and would-be commitment levels.

By the end of inspection, widespread feelings of disillusionment and depression were reported in two of the colleges. The same diary-keeper who had looked at inspection positively before the event and had written, ‘The criteria are sound, the process is “Fair”’, was clearly disillusioned by the end of the experience and wrote, ‘The general consensus is that it's a deeply flawed process’.

Some non-teaching practitioners had looked forward to an inspection show and saw it as an opportunity to put their unrecognised work into the spotlight: 'We in learning resources are rather more intrigued, cautiously positive about being under scrutiny.'

However, this hope eventually changed to anger as this diary-keeper realised that their section would not be graded and therefore their work would not be recognised or valued by senior management and colleagues. She asked, 'Is it that we're of no consequence because we are not graded?'

The image of the theatre also lent a feeling of unreality to the proceedings. It meant that it was seen as acceptable to dissimulate, to pretend that conditions and procedures existed that patently did not. Thus Individual Learning Plans, Lessons Plans and Schemes of Work were produced especially for the inspection and in some cases backdated to appear as if they had always been there. Taking part in this show was traumatic for the diary-keepers, each of whom had demonstrated a commitment to teaching, to learning, to their students and to their colleagues. The inspection was an inauthentic experience, which conflicted with their individual ethics and in consequence put them in a position of unnecessary stress.

An alternative image

Both the image of the theatre and the image of the battlefield had largely negative effects on practitioners. However, there was one image expressed that had the potential to produce more constructive results; that is, the image of inspection as an evaluative consultancy. The problem with viewing inspection as a consultancy is that it becomes necessary to ignore the fact that inspection grades are published. When grades are in the public domain it is very difficult for practitioners to be objective about the quality of the service provided; to avoid hiding their weaknesses and boasting about their strengths. Colleges may feel under threat of closure, redundancies or reduced funding if grades are poor. Publication of grades raises the stakes for the participants and does not encourage honest self-criticism.

As it is government policy at the moment to publish the grades, it is essential that practitioners have complete confidence in the inspection procedure. They should not believe that their hidden weaknesses (or strengths) will remain undiscovered and they should have confidence in the inspectors having a standard and fair approach to inspection. The diary-keepers had a mixed experience of the assessment carried out by inspectors; partly good, partly bad and varying with each inspector. One diary-keeper described the confidence he had in one inspector's judgement.

He looked at the sort of things I think I'd be looking for if I inspected a class ... the feedback showed how closely he'd been observing the students – he was fully aware of what they'd done and whether they were learning.

However, in one college there were doubts about whether or not the inspectors were following a standard approach. Practitioners observed some last-minute planning and allocation of inspectors. One inspector was allocated to a curriculum area a few hours before the inspection began and so had little time for preparation. Some inspectors were not subject specialists for the classes observed and some were. This meant that practitioners felt that the results would not be fair or balanced. One diary-keeper reported that a lot of students' work was collected and the inspectors did not even look at the portfolios. She perceived this as a lack of rigour on the part of the inspectors and was also frustrated by the wasted effort in collecting and copying this material. There were also comments doubting the objectivity of some inspectors, one diary-keeper described an inspector's abrasive interaction with a student and then commented,

This student represents an excellent example of a success within the college. The inspector chooses not to notice this and instead look at whatever college area of weakness she seems to have a fetish about.

Not only the practitioners in the study but also the senior managers and one of the principals were reported as describing the inspection process as 'flawed'. The credibility, training and preparation of inspectors were all questioned by practitioners. Diary-keepers from two of the colleges suggested that they or their colleagues were now considering applying to be inspectors as they felt that they could perform as well if not better than the inspectors they had observed.

The grade for one section was reported to staff at an internal feedback meeting as a grade 4. Later, a more official version of the grade was revealed as grade 3. Furthermore, the diary-keeper said that the principal was 'working to negotiate the grade up to a grade 2' and that he would not accept the accuracy of the grades awarded. In this case it was clearly believed by the college senior management that the grades were subject to negotiation and not the result of objective assessment by the application of standard assessment criteria.

The quality assurance manager in one college was able to predict grades with some accuracy in all sections. However, these grades did not reflect one practitioner's view of the quality of the work carried out in that same college. He wrote, 'I reckon we'll get a 4 and that poor management would let us down'. A few weeks later he heard that their management was awarded a grade 2.

This particular college was awarded 'good' or 'very good' grades by the inspectors. This could lead one to the conclusion that high scoring grades were more a reflection of the skills of the quality assurance manager and the presentation of information by senior management than an accurate reflection of the quality of the college's provision for learners.

Reaction to inspection

The way management in each of the colleges dealt with inspection was a reflection of the dominant culture in that college (see Table 2, page 17). 'Big College' displayed an authoritarian, hierarchical, role culture similar to those described by Handy (1986) in his description of school cultures. Organisations of this type have clear role boundaries, formalised communication and procedures and an emphasis on individuals keeping to their area of expertise. Handy argues that this type of organisation is not well equipped for coping with the rapid changes that are now a feature of education. Senior managers in Big College reacted to inspection by increasing their demands for information from middle managers and teachers, sometimes to insupportable levels, and by compulsory briefing sessions for practitioners. 'Country College' demonstrated a 'country club' culture, that is a culture where 'production is incidental to lack of conflict and good fellowship', as described by JS Mouton and RR Blake (cited in Pugh 1971). 'Country College' dealt with inspection by smartening up the appearance of the college, adding coats of paint, plants and new computers and by rehearsing inspection as if it were a show. Finally, City College's learning-centred culture could be likened to the 'task culture', described by Handy (1986). An organisation with a task culture exhibits friendliness and cooperation; it shows little evidence of hierarchy and has the advantage of a flexible approach to problem-solving. Managers in City College saw inspection as an externally imposed government policy and a problem for the smooth running of their organisation. As one diary-keeper wrote: 'I don't want to leave anything more than a bare minimum of inspection crap to do once the students come back.'

To City College the problem that needed a solution was the fact that inspection could interfere with the learning process. They dealt with this by organising rehearsals and arranging for practitioners to learn the contents of the Self Assessment Reports. Managers in this college were like the 'strategic compliers who find ways of maintaining their core values ... while adapting to pressures which arise from broader agendas relating to college performance and income and resourcing pressures' (Gleeson and Shain 1999).

The principal in Country College attempted to provide a vision for the college through a presidential style of leadership but the vision of one or two people is not enough to ensure shared values throughout the college. The vision and stated shared college values need to filter down to the day-to-day reality of how the performance of educational practitioners is supported and managed.

In none of the colleges was there general evidence of a culture of self-evaluation linked to the value of promoting continuous improvement. Performance was assessed and monitored but rarely linked with staff development. In more than one college internal classroom observation grades were kept secret or not acted upon. Poor performance was either unacknowledged (Country College) or resulted in threats (Big College). Even in City College, where there was a more constructive and supportive leadership, there was no evidence that management had moved beyond the stage of discussing and analysing performance to a stage of developing staff performance. Like the senior management in the other two colleges, they concentrated on collecting information, rehearsing and preparing

their best side to present to inspection. To promote a culture of self-evaluation and reflection within a college it is necessary for practitioners at all levels to understand and use self-evaluation techniques. Unfortunately in the colleges studied, only senior management seemed to be aware of the details and the implications of the Self Assessment Reports and there was little evidence of this information being used directly to improve teaching and learning.

Table 2 Descriptions of the different organisational cultures and working environments in three colleges

What was described	Big College	Country College	City College
The culture in the college	An authoritarian, hierarchical 'role culture'	A friendly college, 'club culture'	A reflective, learning centred, 'task culture'
Leadership and senior management	Aggressive and bullying leadership	Presidential-style leadership	Constructive, supportive leadership
Management of performance	Poor performance resulted in threats	Poor and good performance unacknowledged	Performance discussed and analysed
Working conditions	Stress-related sickness, long hours, inadequate resources	Stress-related sickness, long hours, inadequate resources	Stress-related sickness, long hours, inadequate accommodation
Senior management response to inspection	Compulsory inspection briefing sessions, huge demands for information, consultants used, new resources provided	Pre-inspection rehearsal of classroom observations, consultants used, new resources provided	Pre-inspection learning the script and the rules of the game, gathering a mass of data
Ethics as demonstrated by the diary-keepers	A commitment to students and taking care of colleagues	A commitment to students, to the college and to the promotion of learning	A commitment to reflective practice and individual learning
Practitioner's perception of inspection grades	Grades will be used as a tool for allocating praise and blame	Grades will affect the college's funding and recruitment	Grades suspected as invalid and used as only one source of evidence

Conclusion and recommendations

The image of inspection in all three colleges was that of a battlefield or theatre rather than of a consultancy. This image affected practitioners negatively and influenced their expectations of the outcomes of inspection. Senior managers, in their approach to preparing for inspections, further reinforced these images, rather than using inspection as an opportunity for promoting self-evaluation and reflection. The cultures of the colleges varied but none of them appeared to be based on the notion of collegiality or on the ethic of continuous improvement. Sickness, stress and increased staff turnover were reported in all cases during and as a result of the inspection process. In the short term, the inspection experience did not seem to fulfil the function of improving teaching and learning. The grades that colleges received did not reflect the reality of the college experience for these practitioners and there was little evidence to show that colleges generally used them from one inspection to another to help improve their practice. The content of these diaries demonstrated that it was not just the large amounts of extra work that stressed teachers so much but also the expectation that they compromise their integrity and their commitment to teaching by producing what they saw as unnecessary and invented paperwork. Inspection will continue to be a stressful experience for practitioners until a culture of self-evaluation and continuous improvement is embedded at all levels and all sections within the college.

Recommendations for inspectors

- 1) In the changeover period from the assessment categories used by FEFC to those used by OFSTED and ALI, it would be helpful if account were taken of the time necessary to restructure the information collection processes of colleges. This may mean reducing requests for quantitative information before inspections.
- 2) Steps need to be taken to ensure that practitioners are convinced that a fair and standard approach is taken in arriving at grades.
- 3) Some inspectors may benefit from training in giving constructive feedback after classroom observations.

Recommendations for college managers

- 1) If senior managers treat inspection as a game show or a battle rather than a quality enhancement tool then practitioners will also see it in this light. It is essential that managers do not encourage or exhort practitioners to produce materials just to satisfy the requirements of inspection.
- 2) Self-evaluation and the collection of qualitative management information should continue throughout the year and at all levels in the college. It should not just take place in the few weeks prior to inspection.
- 3) There is a need to ensure the accuracy of electronic quantitative information in the MIS. This system should replace, rather than duplicate, manual information recording systems.

Acronyms and website addresses

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate www.ali.gov.uk
COVE	Centre of Vocational Excellence
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council (see LSC)
LSC	Learning and Skills Council www.lsc.gov.uk
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency www.LSDA.org .uk
MIS	Management of information system, electronic systems used in colleges for the collection of data re recruitment, retention and achievement and the management of information generally
NATFHE	National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education the FE lecturers trade union www.natfhe.org.uk
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education www.ofsted.gov.uk
SAR	Self Assessment Report, an official report produced by a college to aid their management and development planning. Copies of these are annually sent to the Local LSC and are also used by inspectors as background information when they are planning inspection of a college

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Addendum

While this research report was being written, a brief diary from a diary keeper based in a fourth college was received. The contents of this diary did not contradict the above findings.

Appendix 1 Flipchart notes from the second workshop

Feelings of diary-keepers

Everyone in the same boat

The experience of diary writing is cathartic

Feeling commandeered by inspection

Management issues

The TPI funding is going to managers not teachers – they are receiving extra money for qualifications, new initiatives, cross-college responsibilities, advanced practitioners

A new job was created for the inspection – that is a section leader for the subject area. But this job is for 3 years only (perhaps because the demands of inspection may change?)

Negotiations with NATFHE re observations

Sickness, stress, teaching long hours, eg 35 hours' contact time

Managers have contact with admin. but don't have contact with what happens in the classroom

Management will blame the middle management, they have been setting them up nicely in the past few weeks

Administrative issues

Lack of accuracy of SAR figures

Inaccurate MIS

Extra cost of inspection

Diary-keepers' opinions about inspection procedure

There should be more warning of inspection to encourage management to improve

Inspectors should see you 'thinking on your feet'

The inspection process is evidence driven. You need written evidence to prove your work to inspectors

Targets coming down from government

How college staff approached inspection

Using inspection to air complaints

Using inspection as a lever for long-term change

Using inspection to get desired short-term changes (manipulation)

Putting on a show

Suspicion – fear: culture of bullying and blame

Competition for grades within the college departments, each department competing for highest grades

Hyped up by management

Hangover from FEFC inspection, management still focused on achievement, retention and procedures and not what happens in the classroom

The process is being managed/orchestrated by college managers

Preparation for inspection

Coaching
Dummy runs
Rehearsal – learning a script

Programme leaders already being selected as scapegoats for poor grades
Crash training courses – briefing sessions
Classroom observations are taking place
Senior management can be seen appearing in public in the college (this is unusual)
Told to produce individual lesson plans in a workshop setting
Typing and re-typing schemes of work

Pre-inspection training

Using consultants for pre-inspection training
Observation and benchmarking of grades by the consultant

Fears and expectations

Good grades = more and better jobs
OFSTED inspection could lead to 'rationalisation' and redundancies
Education policy issues – possible college closures
Part-time staff getting low grades

Experience of inspection

Inspector asked 'Have you done this lesson before?'
Inspectors observing and evaluating 1:1 tutorial sessions
Inspectors asking 'How long have you been here?' to find out about the turnover of teachers
Poor observation grades from inspection, which are lower than grades given previously by line managers
Disruption of students

Practical impact of inspection

Day-to-day planning is going out [of] the window
No field trips – no visits, no placements
There is crisis management instead of long-term planning

Appendix 2 Humour and irony in the diaries

- a) *Got a lovely e-mail from my boss today asking if I knew of a student called Britoil. I was concerned that I could find no record of this student anywhere. I found a name of a student who seemed to fit the bill however, in that they'd somehow been enrolled on an incorrect course code. Before sending the e-mail I spell-checked the document and, sure enough, the aforementioned Britoil came up in the suggestions box as the spellchecker went through students' surnames. Didn't have the heart to point this out to my boss...*
- b) *I've noticed this moving towards a kind of hysteria, with people giggling about the sheer silliness of whatever document they're making copies of, or whatever new folder they're creating.*
- c) *A question has been put to me whether I can do a crash course (12 hours) in business planning. My first reaction is that it is a wind-up but I am given a phone number to ring.*
- d) *I now attempt to reduce stress levels, I produced a bulletin to provide some humour to the proceedings.*
- e) This anonymous poem was sent in by a diary-keeper during inspection:

There's only one F in OFSTED
But that's quite enough for us
If there's no F in lesson plan
There's one hell of an F in fuss

There's no F in parking space
For half the F in staff
Reserved for F in OFSTED
Who have the last F in laff

There's only one F in OFSTED
With its education speak
Thank God there's an F in Friday
To end this F in week

Appendix 3 Diary quotes on the emotional roller-coaster of inspection

Six weeks before – normality

‘Frankly I feel OK about the whole inspection thing.’

Four weeks before – informing and planning – anxiety and stress

‘An air of unreality in that, in the main, managers can drop everything and focus on inspection whereas lecturers still have all their classes to prepare.’

‘I was talking to three different school managers today. All had the same message – overload.’

The consultant’s visit – regaining confidence

‘It [the training session] confirmed and therefore gave confidence.’

‘She was very down to earth and helped people to demystify the process and to relax about it.’

‘We both came away very thoughtful.’

Three weeks before inspection

‘...feeling cautiously positive about being under scrutiny...’

Two weeks before inspection – pressure

‘We all easily feel anxious about the paperwork ... So easy to feel unconfident in this situation or just JUDGED (and found wanting?)’

‘Everyone is furiously filling in paperwork “gaps”’

‘Personnel has asked for an update on our CVs ... the head of school urgently needs a profile for each group.’

‘Others are complaining about the sudden changes in direction which each school (department) takes when another “requirement” for the portfolio comes to light.’

‘I have observed two noisy arguments between different staff members. Feelings are running high in some areas.’

The week before inspection – depression then manic panic

‘Several people have said that they are on autopilot. Others have said they are at the end of their tether.’

‘...moving towards hysteria...’

‘I arrive at lunchtime to find my colleagues collectively in a manic mood.’

Inspection week – ups and downs

‘...nervous energy and adrenaline...’

‘...a general mood of shoulder shrugging...’

‘Everyone is saying how worn out they are.’

‘I felt quite deflated, not relieved ... the students were quite disappointed.’

The days after inspection – feeling flat, then nervous

‘...a sense of hiatus...’

‘...a sense of anticlimax and feeling sidelined...’

‘...heard whispers...’

The weeks after inspection – getting results – a different reality

‘Everyone is drained. The week has been gruelling. People really put through the mill.’

‘My own feeling is that the exercise has done our brains good.’

‘What a body blow.’

‘...demoralised...’

‘...she started to cry...’

‘...his voice broke...’

Appendix 4 Images and metaphors used in the diaries

Battlefield language

- 'a hit' (referring to being observed)
- 'Nuremberg trials' (referring to post-inspection debriefings)
- 'look as if we had been brainwashed' (referring to not giving information to inspectors)
- 'ammunition' (referring to information)
- 'the sense of camaraderie, closing ranks' (referring to post inspection)
- 'fighting for a grade 2'
- 'an adversarial situation' (referring to the inspection)
- 'she went straight for the kill' (referring to an inspector)
- 'a sense of battle lines being drawn between college and the inspectors'
- 'being clobbered left, right and centre by inspectors'
- 'they've lit the blue fuse, now we have to wait for the bomb to go off'

Language related to theatre

- 'the inspector arrived on cue'
- 'started gathering my props' (referring to resources)
- 'our technician was an absolute star'
- 'our inspection-meeting rehearsal'
- 'this showpiece approach'
- 'the language used in the memo was interesting – it called the thing I'm going to attend a "rehearsal"'
- 'like trained dogs, they'll do and say all the right things'

Appendix 5 The organisational cultures and working environments of the three colleges

Big College

Culture and leadership in the college

The principal was depicted as distant and out of touch with staff. The senior management were reported as behaving in a bullying and confrontational manner. This bullying was rapidly passed down the line of command and resulted in stress and sickness at all levels. For example in one incident reported, 'The manager who was held responsible by the HOS [the Head of School] and was bollocked yesterday and who passed the bollocking on to programme leaders, is off sick and so is the programme leader she bollocked.'

This stress eventually percolated down to the students. For example: 'I have to spend more and more time counselling students as a result of tutors just 'losing it''.

Senior managers dealt with problems by allocating blame and by threats. An example of one threat reported was, 'Hourly paid (some) P/T staff were told that if they did not attend the meetings, unpaid, in their own time, they would not get another contract'.

There was a culture of confrontation and both the diary-keepers viewed the prospect of an inspection as a lever for change in their college as they could not identify other avenues for expressing their frustrations. One diary-keeper wrote, 'I have no problem in dropping the responsibility and will enjoy reporting that to the inspection'.

Another wrote,

If he has grievances it is a chance for him [to tell the inspectors]. A lot of students give up a lot to come back to education and if they have criticisms as long as they're couched constructively then that's fine.

Individual ethics

The practitioners showed themselves to be committed to their students and their learning needs and demonstrated a concerned care for their colleagues under stress.

Management of performance

There was little evidence of effective management of performance at senior level but there was a lot of evidence of the production of a number of policy documents and guidance for lecturers and other practitioners. That is: documents on target-setting, producing value-added profiles, lesson plans, schemes of work and individual learning plans, information about lesson observation, producing student profiles, tutorial guidance, subject reviews, memos about registers and attendance monitoring, memos about tidiness, memos about installation of new equipment, flowcharts, action plans and ticklists. A large proportion of these documents appeared in the 6 weeks prior to inspection. Most of these documents required immediate actions from the recipients. Each section of the college

operated slightly differently which resulted in lecturers receiving duplicate or conflicting information and instructions. As recorded:

College has employed market tactics – each school is in effect in competition with others. This has resulted in a myriad of policies and inconsistencies all over the place – all operating in separate sections of college.

Teachers were unhappy about management's lack of direction and coordinated planning in the run up to inspection, '... are complaining about the sudden changes in direction which each school takes when another "requirement" for the portfolio comes to light'.

Working conditions

Some teachers were reported as having long periods of time off with stress-related sickness and there was a perceived high turnover of staff. Teachers were described as working long hours because of fear for their jobs, because of covering for absent colleagues and out of commitment to their students.

Reaction to inspection

There was an increase in threats and pressures and an increase in time taken off sick. One practitioner wrote, 'The school manager has just bollocked my line manager because the timetable for one group is out by a day. She says that she has had enough of being bullied and will go off sick.'

He also reported that a teacher was told, 'You won't have a job with us if you comment adversely to inspectors.'

A large amount of paperwork is invented, produced and reproduced as evidence of quality. As was reported, 'Been asked to write an individual lesson plan for each student and backdated to Christmas? Well! How many students? – only 60.' Stress-related sickness and resignations of temporary and part-time staff were reported immediately before and during the inspection.

New learning resources and facilities were suddenly provided with little prior consultation or warning, for example electronic registers, new computers, a new (but temporary) student common room, new desks and chairs.

Compulsory briefing sessions were held for practitioners and managers and a consultant was brought in to provide pre-inspection training and classroom observations.

Perception of inspection grades

Inspection grades were seen as important because they are used as a tool for allocating praise or blame within the college. One diary-keeper wrote that, 'redundancy notices have been issued for lecturers in the section that got a grade 4'.

Country College

Culture and leadership in the college

The culture of the college was described as 'friendly' and there was a confidence that service provided was very good or excellent, although this seems to have been largely misplaced. One department was being considered for Centre of Vocational Excellence (COVE) status but was later graded as unsatisfactory in the inspection. This culture of satisfaction was fuelled by the feedback given by students. As one diary-keeper wrote, 'Student Services Manager showed us the results of student surveys, told us how good we are and said "We don't want you to change anything, just put a bit of lip on! Fantastic!"'

In the lead up to the inspection this optimism intensified: 'The place was buzzing, and everyone was so generous about sharing advice, resources, ideas and even time (a very precious commodity).'

The principal's management style was to encourage team-building and keep morale high through 'state of the nation speeches', sending encouraging memos and organising a post-inspection party. During the inspection there was a wartime-like atmosphere of camaraderie and loyalty to the college. Staff presented a united front to the inspectors and avoided communicating negative information, as they had been advised to do.

Individual ethics

The diary-keepers demonstrated a student-centred and idealistic ethos. For example, one said, 'We care about our students all the time'. Another said, 'I hope I might be able to change something, eventually, for the better. I think that's why I am in education any way.' The diary-keepers also showed personal commitment to the college as a community and identified with the college aims.

Management of performance

The management was depicted as effective in responding to individual, personal problems, very active in reacting to 'crises' but ineffective in their approach to long-term, strategic planning. Problems of poor performance were covered up by colleagues or were unrecognised or unacknowledged by managers.

Working conditions

Some teachers had long periods of time off with stress-related sickness and others were expected to cover for their colleagues' absences by working extremely long hours.

Reaction to inspection

The physical appearance of the college was smartened up, new coats of paint were added, flowers were planted and extra facilities and learning resources were unexpectedly provided, without planning or preparation.

A consultant was brought in and rehearsals of classroom observations were held. Later on 'auditions' were held to see who would be suitable and sufficiently knowledgeable to talk to inspectors.

The accuracy of basic paperwork like registers and timetables was checked and re-checked. The behaviour of some management members alternated between

blandishments and ill-informed panic. As one diary-keeper put it, 'There is no sense of direction and it appears that panic has set in at the highest level'. There were many last-minute demands for information. For example, 'Each day I seem to have a minimum of 15–18 e-mails about inspection'.

Some of the practitioners saw inspection as a potential impetus for change and were frustrated by their inability to use it in this way. As one person put it: 'If management is not open and instructs staff to keep quiet about failings, what should happen? You have to be open with consultants! Our keeping quiet over several inspections certainly hasn't led to an improvement in our management.'

Perception of inspection grades

Grades were important to practitioners as they indicated how their section was viewed by other parts of the college and how the college was viewed externally. There were concerns that poor grades would result in loss of funding and a reduction in student and staff recruitment.

City College

Culture and leadership in the college

The college was depicted as having a reflective, learning-centred culture. There was evidence of respect for the opinions of both teachers and staff. Among the teaching staff there was also a general suspicion of bureaucracy and distaste for administrative tasks. The leadership was described as 'constructive'.

Individual ethics

There was evidence of an ethos of academic integrity, reflective practice and a concern for ensuring the individual learning of each student. This diary-keeper was unhappy with his college's 'showpiece' approach to inspection but was willing to go along with it for pragmatic reasons. 'They are not trying to present things as they normally are. My question – what is the point of that?'

Management of performance

There was evidence of poor provision of administrative systems and poor coordination of information. Performance was discussed and analysed but the management of performance seems to have been left up to the programme managers and in consequence operated on an individual, *ad-hoc* basis.

Working conditions

Some teachers had short periods of time off with stress-related sickness. The college's accommodation was described as 'not good'.

Reaction to inspection

Inspection meeting rehearsals were held and practitioners were auditioned to select those who would present the best show to inspectors. Practitioners were expected to learn parts of the Self Assessment Reports as a script for inspection. Inspection was treated partly as a game and a show and partly as serious external interference in the smooth running of the college.

One week before inspection, senior management asked for the duplication of a mass of information, as a diary-keeper described it,

Apparently management have told all programme managers (who are the lowest management tier in this college) that they must produce folders for all courses in their area that, more or less, duplicate the folders that all tutors should have for the classes they teach. These folders are to be placed in the inspectors' base room, where, I can only assume, they are expected to read them whilst they eat lunch. I sense overkill here.'

Management was described as producing an undifferentiated mass of files, duplicated records, assignments and handbooks to keep the inspectors busy and therefore not asking awkward questions. The inspection was treated by senior management as a bureaucratic exercise concerned with hard data and not with understanding the quality of teaching and learning.

Perception of inspection grades

Grades were seen as not reflecting the full reality of the teaching and learning taking place in the college. There was a hope that the results of inspection would be treated as consultancy information and as a stimulus for change and development, for addressing longstanding internal issues to do with internal verification of assessment and the development of administrative systems. There were also hopes that grades could be used as evidence in bidding for money for further resources. For example:

The college's accommodation isn't good, but it's difficult to do anything about it without a large cash injection. I wonder whether this being flagged up as a weakness (hopefully among many strengths) will actually end up working in the college's favour?

