

# Perceptions of how external evaluation affects institutional culture and experience in Further Education settings in South East England.

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how a group of lecturers from Further Education colleges (post-compulsory 16-19 education) in South East England, who are Masters students of educational leadership, perceive external evaluation of their work-place settings. Their experiences and ideas on how 'the metric' (Donaldson, 2016), encouraged by systems of external evaluation, impacts on their practice and sense of professionalism is considered through a group interview and a rich picture methodology. Their aspirations for and concerns over the new Common Inspection Framework from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England are also explored. Questions arise about these lecturers' roles in preparing for and experiencing Ofsted Inspection and how this impacts on the authenticity of their prac-

tice and their sense of professionalism.

**Keywords:** Further Education, external evaluation, Office for Standards in Education, Common Inspection Framework, professionalism, rich pictures.

## ***Introduction - The External Evaluation Context in England***

Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) in England has been described as delivering a 'vigorous' form of inspection (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). The effect of the inspection body on practice in education and on teachers has also been described as 'an attack on the autonomy and respect traditionally granted to professionals (O'Neill, 2002). Along with the campaigning role Ofsted has taken with regard to improvement in educational settings and the raising of stand-

ards has been an understanding that, in the drive to raise and secure these standards, the organisation and its inspection remit have 'weaved its way into lecturers' and managers' lives, making an impact on careers, classroom practice and, for some, decisions on whether to remain in the sector (Burnell, 2016). There is recognition that this policy causes lecturers a considerable amount of stress, which creates negative attitudes towards evaluation of practice when, in fact, this evaluation should be an opportunity for genuine professional development.

Coffield et al (2008) observed Ofsted as 'a closed system... (that) treats the workforce as another lever to be pulled rather than as creative and socially committed professionals who should be involved in the formation, enactment, evaluation and redesign of policy' (Coffield, 2008, p. 37). The reality, though, that should be recognised, is that Ofsted is just one influence on further education settings; 'colleges are expected to be increasingly accountable to a wider range of constituents, including communities and employers. This broadening of mission is set against a background of severe funding cuts' (Forrest, 2016, p. 297). This challenging and ever changing context sharpens the inspection experience which in evaluating standards takes little account of the broader contextual background impacting on the sector.

In September 2015 the new Common Inspection Framework was introduced by the Office for Standards in Education (Of-

sted) in England. Ostensibly it appears that there has been a shift in focus for this inspecting body, with a commitment to evaluate 'effectiveness of leadership and management', 'quality of teaching, learning and assessment', 'personal development, behaviour and welfare' and 'outcomes for learners' (Ofsted, 2015). This new framework that identifies welfare and personal development as priorities has the potential to impact significantly on current experiences of education professionals in both school and further education settings, perhaps changing this system hereto seen as 'highly visible, deeply mistrusted by teachers and widely contested' (Hall & Noyes, 2008). However Ofsted's grading of education institutions will remain part of the evaluation experience and further education colleges will be continue to be categorised after inspection as either, outstanding, good, requires, improvement or inadequate. This categorization has huge impacts on colleges and their staff and students and outcomes that are less than outstanding result in increased internal evaluation, producing 'uncontentious technologies of hierarchical observation... which become 'for some teachers the everyday conditions which mould their professional identities and sense of purpose' (ibid, 2008, p. 856).

The continued focus on 'outcomes for learners' (Ofsted, 2015) or student attainment, including in Maths and English, which must be a part of the further education curriculum for any student not achieving prescribed levels in GCSE

public examinations, presents challenges in the sector too as well as creating a culture of 'managerialist positivism' (Smith and O'Leary, 2013) where the processes of teaching and learning become 'reduced to the presentation of quantitative performance data' (Gleeson et al, 2015).

### *The context for the research*

As a lecturer in higher education involved in teaching a Masters in Transformational Leadership to a group of newly qualified lecturers in the further education sector, I was interested to see how they perceived the inspection process and how they considered that Ofsted's new Common Inspection Framework may change the way inspection happens, its effect on themselves as professionals, their contexts and their students. In this article I describe some of the perceived challenges of Ofsted, and explore issues that might impinge on perceptions that teachers in this sector have regarding the experience of being inspected. How this research was integrated into a Master's curriculum, the research design itself and key themes emerging from the rich pictures and their annotation will also be discussed. The way in which these pictures reflect issues with the inspection process as perceived by the research participants, my Master's students, has ramifications for the teachers themselves as well as the leadership of the colleges in which they teach regarding how it responds to and mediates the Ofsted experience.

The curriculum for the MA Transformational Leadership (CCCU, 2012) involves a range of modules to support professional development in the leadership of learning and encourages reflective practice on themes such as professionalism and a values-based approach to leadership, of both learning and organisations. I was curious to discover how these newly qualified professionals, my students, might configure the Ofsted experience and its impact on themselves in their settings and their students. To do this I took the opportunity to construct a small scale qualitative research project involving the creation of rich pictures and the discussion of these pictures. The methodology really had a twofold purpose; as well giving the Master's students opportunity to consider their own professionalism in the light of the questions I asked about their ideas on how Ofsted impacted on them, their colleges and their students, they also had an opportunity to explore the rich picture method, its strengths and weaknesses and to enhance their critical methodological perspectives as they began to design research for their Masters dissertations which they were due to begin within weeks.

The ten students involved in the research all work as lecturers at a variety of further education institutions in South East England. Individually they teach a range of academic subjects from Mathematics, Art and Design, Literacy and English as well some vocational subjects including Information and Communica-

tion Technology and Engineering. Their own further education students within these settings range in their age and purpose for post-compulsory study. However since 2015 the law in England has stated that young people need to be in education and or training until the age of 18 and this means that the further education sector can no longer strictly be described as post-compulsory. School leavers continue their education in Further Education college and are sometimes reluctant receivers of this extended education opportunity. This factor can influence their commitment to study and also have a negative impact on the attainment and qualifications that Ofsted are keen to analyse in their categorisation of colleges as outstanding to inadequate (Ofsted, 2015).

Although these students were relatively new to the sector, having only qualified in July 2015, they had all had experience of Ofsted. Six of the students had experienced an Ofsted inspection and four students were in colleges which were anticipating imminent inspection. What was interesting was that they all experienced a range of evaluation processes on a regular basis in their colleges which were there as preparation for Ofsted. These have involved lesson observation and feedback for improvement, scrutiny of student work, analysis from tests and examinations and departmental reviews, including the activities mentioned. These activities were usually carried out by department leaders and/ or other members of the college's senior leadership team. The criteria

used in these evaluations of practice were all based on Ofsted criteria and those who hadn't yet experienced Ofsted were well aware of preparations ongoing in their institutions to prepare for inspection.

### *The Methodological Approach*

The research that I undertook with this group of students focused around four key questions. I asked them to draw and annotate a picture to share their perceptions of how they perceived that Ofsted affected them, their settings and their students. As the fourth question I also asked them to write a brief answer explaining how they felt the new Ofsted Common Inspection Framework (2015) may make a difference compared to inspection priorities and practice before this time. I asked them to be fair in their comments and acknowledge any positive perceptions as well as negative ideas towards the inspection process that had been articulated as we began the activity. They were well aware of the new framework and had seen the documents in their colleges and had experienced staff meetings and had discussion with colleagues and line managers about the new requirements and focus for inspection.

As this activity was also an extension of Master's learning in terms of research methodology, I gave the group a period of 45 minutes to complete their rich pictures individually, aware that there would be potential to discuss how framing this activity within a set time might

affect the opportunity it presented for deep thinking. I also asked the group to ensure that pictures were annotated to support clarity of interpretation and there was some opportunity for individuals to discuss their pictures as I tried to ensure that my perceptions of what had been presented were as accurate as possible.

Rich pictures are a qualitative research that could be conceived as ‘soft science, journalism, ethnography, bricolage, quilt making or montage’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). Rich pictures use ‘brief images to create a clearly defined sense of urgency and complexity’ creating and bringing ‘psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience (ibid, p. 7). The researcher becomes the interpreter understanding that the research is then shaped by her own understanding, experience and possible bias. The opportunity of drawing a rich picture, using paper pencil and coloured pencils offers an opportunity for intensive self-reflection and a dimension to thinking that may produce results which can surprise both the research participant and researcher. This methodology, a picture drawing exercise, allows participants to explore, reflect on and review themes and underlying causes, ambiguities and also the concept of content and message (Bell & Morse, 2013). Rich pictures can be analytical tools for ‘an enhanced dialogue’ (Fouger & Habib, 2008) and indeed a dialogue between researcher and participant is necessary to really support understanding of the images, the writing and the themes they convey.

Ethical issues in such a research involve voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity as well as the impact of the researcher, a Master’s tutor to the group. Although participation was voluntary the Master’s students were keen to experience this methodology and to consider how useful it may be as a method in the future research they were designing and all chose to participate. However it was important that neither they nor their colleges could be identified through the process so the exact name for the cohort of this Masters has not been shared, neither have their college names. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym so that their ideas through the contents of their pictures could be shared without their identities being disclosed.

I was aware that my role as participant researcher might an issue in this activity with my Masters’ students and that my own ‘subjectivity has no free and independent existence... the researcher does not speak the archaeology; the archaeology speaks the researcher’ (Scheurich, 1997, p. 171), but again as with the method itself, discussing these issues presented itself as an opportunity to prepare the students for their own future research and to be aware of their own bias and role as participant researchers.

#### *Key Issues from the Rich Pictures*

The ten rich pictures produced by the group appeared to share many similarities. The time given for this activ-

ity seemed exactly right and students felt they had sufficient time to engage with the set task. Participants in the research drew and annotated themselves, students, colleagues and buildings to represent their colleges. The annotations revealed a great deal about perceptions of Ofsted. In representing the findings from the research it is probably best, in the interest of clarity, to share some pertinent written comments as well as an idea of the images depicted and then to describe more generally the arising themes.

*Rudiger's picture depicted a college decorated with banners to welcome Ofsted and outward images of perfection; a smiling principal and students. Around the corner troublesome students were being shooed away and around the other side of the building a teacher lay on the floor with the speech bubble, 'I give up'. In a window a manager can be seen flogging a teacher and a weather vane crowns the building and is labelled 'obsessive measurement of the climate'. Clouds in the sky raise the questions, outstanding or inadequate?*

*Fenella's picture depicts various floors of a college with the 'God' of Ofsted beaming from the sky above saying, 'You must do what I say or you will be destroyed'. Classrooms in the building present a range of images annotated with the words, 'Ofsted encompasses our very being in education and focus is removed from the students'. 'Practice is severely impacted'. 'Less time is spent planning*

*and preparing for teaching. 'Ofsted inspections do not demonstrate a realistic view of education. Having survived one, I felt that I was living in a charade in which we were all fearful of our downfalls and being punished'. 'Inspectors expect teachers to 'bow down to Ofsted' by engaging fully and pretending to love the process'. 'Teachers feel they have too much to do and can't cope'.*

*Gerald's picture was of an iceberg, visible below and above the sea. The 'visible' part of the iceberg represented what was obvious to Ofsted, the presented practice in college and a small picture to the side illustrated this as a series of hoops to be jumped through, with a side comment, 'I'm a professional, I know what I'm doing'. The submerged part of the iceberg was annotated with reflective comments on 'me', including 'anxiety', 'disenfranchised from my professionalism' and a split between 'what I consider important', and 'what my employers considers important (for Ofsted)', as well as the question, 'Does a good Ofsted equal a good education?'.*

*Kay's picture was of a hand with a thumb in a support bandage. Questions surrounded the detail on the drawing. On the fingers was written, 'each is different but all are expected to be the same (conformity). A wedding ring is labelled with the words, 'til death us do part: the social 'norm'. The bandage is labelled with the words 'corrected growth to the expected form' and 'constraint based on expectation, both narrow and painful'.*

Sam's picture showed the outline of a person surrounded by hands to represent Ofsted, labelled 'the guiding hands'. The following words accompany the drawing; 'The ideal practitioner is a malleable entity, flexible to all and every possible change in expectation. In the ideal case a teacher can be formed by the modelling hands of Ofsted. There is a feeling of lack of trust and autonomy, a lack of individuality and personhood'. There is a positive comment too; 'I finally experienced the real value of building a plenary into my lesson (from Ofsted). Might I have understood this eventually though through reading and peer evaluation – undoubtedly yes'.

Doris drew three seemingly unconnected small pictures, a road or pathway with a sign reading 'To Hell' and a figure (identified as Ofsted) leading another (identified as vocational education), along this path. A hangman's noose is also represented and labelled with the words, 'strangling practice with needless duplication and paperwork'. A newspaper has also been drawn and its headline states, 'Hanging Judge Ofsted condemns college' This student had also written some suggestions about 'ideal external evaluation' and articulates this as, 'No judgement but advice and guidance' and 'don't worry about the results...How are your students feeling, progressing, developing and enjoying the experience?'

Zoe's picture shows a large figure channelling light from the sun through a magnifying glass on to two suffering ants. The figure is labelled Ofsted and

those ants suffering under the lens are 'teachers, the obeying ants who are under Ofsted's current threat. They are miserable and victims to ideas of standards'. A thought bubble from the ants reveals a happier looking 'teacher' who 'just wants to help others and create a fun learning environment'. A comment has been added to the label, 'a naïve thought when first embarking on teacher training'.

Glenda's drawing shows quite simply a face labelled with a range of ideas that reflect her responsibility not just for students' achievement but also the work of other staff including, 'Will other staff prepare enough? What will the students say? Will they behave? Will they 'clam up'? Should Ofsted make judgements when they lack subject expertise; what's the point? We are only putting on a show'. The point that there needs to be some kind of evaluation is also raised.

Elsie's response included a few small drawings, an eye, 'Big Brother, a tick, representing a tick box exercise and a pair of glasses annotated 'Great Gatsby's glasses' that refer to the large threatening, all-seeing image from the Scott Fitzgerald novel. There is also a ghost hovering over a rough sketch of a building identified as a college of Further Education. Writing around the drawings makes the points; 'College observations are geared around Ofsted requirements and do not allow for professional development. There is anxiety over the observation process as you are doomed if you get a bad result. It is not a true reflection of our everyday practice,

*it is extra hard work. We are trapped in a box and not encouraged to take risks in our teaching practice or try out new approaches and ideas. Ofsted reduces creativity. Ofsted's phrase 'best practice' suggests there is only one preferred way of doing something. Quality assurance needs to be there but it needs to be positive and the focus should be on development. No one sees this as a positive experience'.*

*Sally's response was not pictorial but she has divided her paper into three sections; Society, Practitioner and Masters Student. In the 'Society' section she asks the questions; How good is my college? Are teachers teaching properly? Are leaders leading properly? The practitioner section evidenced comments that Sally has heard in her own college, 'you need to show evidence of...', 'to get to grade 1 we need to....', 'Use the time before Ofsted come to....; That department will bring our grade down.' 'Will the grade affect my future job prospects?' 'Make sure your lesson plan includes...'. The Masters student section deals with questions that she asks herself; What is the alternative to Ofsted, Why has it become so influential, How can we ensure teachers will want to keep teaching in this context?'*

The results of the rich picture activity were more alarming than I had expected. Pictures of teachers being flogged, teachers and students as ants suggested real concerns over the Ofsted process seeing it as punitive and a huge factor in college life, creating inauthenticity in practice

and, as teaching and learning was prepared for inspection, it seems a particular view of college life and attainment was created for the inspectors. Internal evaluation in college follows the same Ofsted criteria and the factors that Ofsted would focus on become paramount. This echoes points made by Burnell (2015) who describes how many colleges use the Ofsted grading system, mentioned earlier, to make judgements about the quality of teaching in the classroom and these processes restrict creativity and freedom as well as autonomous professionalism. While they may support the raising of standards in narrow measurable criteria they inevitably will restrain innovation and genuine professional development. The rich pictures from my research also suggested a context in which practitioners are not happy; this has implications for a toxic work place culture and the continuity of the profession itself.

Following the rich picture activity and discussion the participating lecturers in further education were asked to jot down any thoughts they had about the new Ofsted Common Inspection Framework (2015) and how they felt it might improve their and their colleges experience of inspection. The following comments were made:

*'It is interesting that Ofsted will be looking at 16-19 study programmes as a whole and no individual departments will be accountable for grades'*

*'The new framework is more focused*

*on student experience. This might force teachers to make lessons more student centred but it might also mean that teachers do some pointless activities’.*

*‘The shifting posts still don’t reflect what’s really going on with the teaching’.*

*‘Adding British Values to the inspection remit is problematic. It is an ambiguous notion and in conjunction with ‘diversity’ will just increase confusion and difficulty’.* (Author’s note: education settings have a duty, inspected by Ofsted, to ‘actively promote’ (gov.uk, 2014), the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. These values were first set out by the government in the ‘Prevent’ strategy in 2011.

*‘It’s all more ‘smoke and mirrors’ and the new framework will make no real difference. Our work will still be Ofsted cantered, not student centred’.*

*‘We will see more emphasis on starting points and student destination and work experience, on top of teaching and learning’.*

*‘The fact that lesson observations won’t be graded is a small step forward, but there will still be the same pressure and anxiety over the prospect of Ofsted inspection’.*

*‘I think a stronger focus on student well-being is positive but I fear it might*

*be another ‘tick box exercise’. How can they possibly measure these factors?’*

*‘I feel that the new framework has no made no real difference as Ofsted as a whole is a negative experience’.*

*‘The Common Inspection Framework should move the onus from what happens in the classroom to what happens in the wider college’.*

Some of the expressions used in these comments are idiomatic but ‘smoke and mirrors’ suggests deceit and the creation of false impressions that bear no relation to reality. ‘Shifting posts’ reflect the constant changes to priorities and criteria for inspection, as well as methods, time frame, make up of inspection teams that there have been since Ofsted’s creation in 1992, and its extended remit, in 2000, to inspect further education colleges. Generally, although there are some improvements identified, for example ‘small steps forward’, these comments are not positive but suggest further disenchantment with the inspection process and a sense that the real business, and challenges, of college will still not be appreciated by the inspecting body and the stress and anxiety of the experience of inspection is unlikely to change a great deal. Relief that ‘individual departments will not be accountable’ still doesn’t appear to detract from a sense that the new Ofsted framework won’t really make a huge difference to how these lecturers feel about the processes. New

inspection focuses and policy reform just continue a sense that these professionals are excluded from this aspect of policy creation which happens ‘to them’ rather than ‘with them’ (Burnell, 2016, p. 7) suggests ‘many lecturers would favour being more involved in policy-making, especially at the consultation stage... as they are effecting the changes that the policies are designed to bring about’. But none of the participants in research mentioned this possibility of involvement, suggesting that such ideas were far from their practice and experience.

### ***Conclusion***

Implicitly and explicitly in the rich pictures and comments from my Masters students teaching in the further education sector there is a sense that there needs to be some form of quality assurance, but a workplace culture in which the principles and practice of continuous improvement in teaching and learning can flourish is what is needed (Burnell, 2016) and this, albeit small scale research, suggests that current external inspection is not authentic in this respect.

Interestingly the research also indicates an acknowledgement on the part of these newly qualified teachers in further education, that there needs to be some fun, engagement and enjoyment in the process of learning in this sector. Lumby (2011) recognises the role of enjoyment in learning as fundamental in achieving a sense of belonging and a sense of sat-

isfaction in what has been achieved but warns that ‘if enjoying learning is to be a priority, then the focus needs to move from attainment and its relationship with satisfaction, to learning and its connection to flow states. The latter do not sit comfortably with the current standards-driven and attainment-focused element in policy’ (Lumby, 2011, p. 263). The contents of the rich pictures present an idea that innovation and creativity in learning is a risky business in a high stakes accountability agenda and this detracts from these professionals enjoyment of their work and sense of value in what they achieve with their students. Ideas about the limiting effect of the phrase ‘best practice’ are interesting and convey the limitations of the inspection model as currently configured. One student has written ‘no one sees this as a positive process’ over her rich picture of a ghost hovering over a college of further education. Until professionals and students perceive external evaluation as something that genuinely supports, and has the potential to develop, teaching and learning, the sceptre of Ofsted will continue to demoralise the profession and make real innovation and progress unlikely.

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