

# **FURTHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS: HOW TO BE GOOD OR BETTER**

An analysis by FE Associates of the key themes and strengths emerging from the Ofsted reports of providers who were judged to be good or outstanding since the 2015 common inspection framework was introduced.

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# 1 Purpose

As the FE and Skills sector's leading provider of specialist support and expert insight we have a mission to help all providers in their continuous drive for quality improvement and the maintenance of high standards. As such this publication is designed to support providers by identifying the key themes within the Ofsted inspection reports of good and outstanding providers. Throughout this document, which has been specifically written for leaders and managers with responsibility for quality improvement, we have sought to identify practical solutions and recommendations emerging from inspection reports for general further education colleges, sixth form colleges, specialist colleges and independent learning providers.

Our specialist support services are organised across four key strands:

- Quality Improvement
- Recruitment and Interim Management
- Structural Change and Project Consulting
- People Development

and we are proud to work with hundreds of colleges and providers each year to support them in efforts to provide high quality education and training to thousands of learners.

To discuss this report in more detail or to find out about our quality improvement and support services please contact Edd Brown, Operations Director for Quality Improvement at [edd.brown@fea.co.uk](mailto:edd.brown@fea.co.uk).

We hope you find this publication useful and informative.



Matt Atkinson & Dave Sykes

Joint Managing Directors

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## 2 Introduction

The Further Education (FE) and Skills sector continues to undergo significant challenges and change. In the Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector there were some real positives, recognition of the challenges facing the sector and on-going areas for improvement. The profile for General Further Education Colleges has unfortunately been described by Ofsted as not being good enough (71% good or better) and declining (-6% from 2014-15) compared to Independent Training Providers (81%) and Sixth Form Colleges (89%) who continue to improve. The common themes identified in the 2015-16 Ofsted Annual Report for provision which is not yet good were:

- A failure to equip many students, particularly those studying vocational subjects at level 3 and those studying below level 3, with the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes to achieve and progress to their full potential
- Teaching that was not demanding enough, resulting in slower progress and lower standards
- Too few students achieved passes at a higher grade when retaking GCSE English or mathematics
- Variability of the quality of information, advice and guidance being provided and not meeting the full range of students' needs, such as those who were not intending to make applications for higher education
- Too few students undertook challenging and well-planned work-related and extra-curricular activities; this was particularly the case for students studying below level 3
- Attendance at lessons was low, or an ongoing issue, on most of the study programmes at these providers.

*HMCI Annual Report, 2016.*

Providers now face the significant challenge of responding to these important issues whilst maintaining the learner experience within a context of rapid change and fast moving agendas.

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## 3 Tackling the Issues

### 3.1 Leadership and Management

Ofsted have been very clear about the importance of leaders and managers, at all levels, taking more ownership for the quality of provision and driving up standards. Led by strong governance, leaders (particularly middle managers) need to tackle underperformance in provision, this includes at course level, by staff members and with individual learners.

Ofsted example: The constant focus of senior leaders on teaching and learning leads to very high levels of achievement and enjoyment for learners. Major factors contributing to learners' excellent progress and success are the very high quality of the support given and the caring atmosphere of the college in which learners and staff thrive. Leaders and middle managers provide excellent resources that teachers and learners use imaginatively and extremely effectively in teaching and learning. (GFE Provider)

In order to achieve this a provider must:

- Simplify quality systems, which are often complicated over time by various agendas, to focus on the learner experience and supporting staff to improve this. Fewer and simpler systems will result in the quality and consistency colleges require.
- Develop internal systems that make key performance indicators and in year data accessible. This will result in support and interventions being targeted more effectively and implemented in a timely manner.

Ofsted example: Middle leaders have direct responsibility for standards and for learners' achievements; they rise to the task very effectively, maintaining exceptionally high-quality teaching, learning and assessment. When improvements are needed, these are made rapidly and clearly. Teachers and managers have ready access to comprehensive information about their learners and use this information exceptionally well to set challenging goals and motivate learners. They are constantly looking for ways to improve and, as a result, learners achieve well and frequently exceed their targets. (GFE Provider)

- Ensure self-assessment is from the bottom up, robust and continuous. Ensure quality improvement plans are live documents with actions and their impact reviewed regularly against key performance targets.

Ofsted example: Teachers and managers contribute very well to improving teaching and learning through self-assessment and course reviews. Teachers' and middle managers' ownership of their courses has created a collaborative culture in which teachers and support staff learn from each other. They are confident and innovative when changes need to be made. (GFE Provider)

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning through an observation process that focusses on the progress and skill development of learners with observers who are trained well and confident in observing.
- Ensure that observation reports are detailed and time is given to high quality coaching and feedback sessions that focus on improving the progress of learners.
- Ensure all staff have an improvement plan following any observation and that managers are ensuring the targets set in the improvement plan are being achieved.

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- Provide a readily available and variable programme of staff development which is valued by staff and motivates them to bring about improvements in their practice and their learners' experience.

Ofsted example: Rigorous performance management and extensive staff development combine very effectively to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Managers have established a strong culture of continuous improvement, which has resulted in excellent cooperative working by staff in different roles to build a 'team around each learner'. Managers' support tutors well to improve where their teaching is judged to be less effective. They take swift and appropriate steps to ensure that those staff who are unable or unwilling to respond to the support provided and improve their practice, leave the organisation. Staff are open and honest about their needs when they seek support, such as to improve their ability to manage learners' behaviour. Inspectors found numerous success stories of staff who have benefited from support and gone on to provide similar effective support to their peers. (Independent learning provider)

- Engage with local employers and other key stakeholders to curriculum plan and offer a curriculum that is focussed on developing the skills learners need to be successful once they progress.

Ofsted example: The rich and varied curriculum ensures that learners can take subjects that prepare them very well for their future learning and employment. College leaders understand the nature of the local and regional economy and analyse the results of each course that learners take. Consequently, the curriculum provides many opportunities for learners to take courses that suit their interests and aspirations for higher education and future careers. A clear sense of enterprise exists throughout the college. As a result, staff are creative and thoughtful about their teaching. Recent innovations include a growing sporting excellence programme; college-wide promotion of the idea of the 'growth mind-set' to encourage skills improvement; and the introduction of a well-regarded religious studies course (Sixth Form College)

- Ensure the progress and destinations of learners is captured throughout the year and includes learners who have left their programme.

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## 3.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

In providers where the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practice is better, there is a strong culture and ethos of reflective practice by teachers who collaborate and share with each other. The culture is underpinned by teachers who have the highest expectations for themselves and their learners, lessons are engaging and purposeful and this results in a good pace contributing to the progress of all learners. This is achieved by:

- Focussing planning on 'planning for learning'. The best lessons are categorised by outcomes that are focussed on learning new skills and knowledge, not tasks. This results in learners being more purposeful in lessons, they can see the benefit and value of sessions and demonstrate progress regularly.

Teachers' assessment of learning is excellent. They use a wide range of assessment methods very well. They have a very good understanding of their learners' progress. They use this information skilfully to give well-thought-out feedback which guides learners very effectively on what they need to do to make further improvements. (GFE Provider)

- Staff who are passionate about their subject and plan challenging lessons that create excitement and inspire learners resulting in high levels of motivation and engagement.
- Initial assessment and learners' starting points are used incredibly well to plan lessons that meet the individual needs of all learners. Planning ensures that not all learners are working on the same tasks, at the same time and at the same speed.

Ofsted example: Tutors conduct a thorough initial and diagnostic assessment to identify the learners' starting points clearly. This includes a careful diagnosis of English and mathematics skills and learning needs. Staff identify learners' support needs quickly and accurately. Tutors use the findings of diagnostic assessment to plan bite-sized learning tasks, which build individual learners' confidence and motivation as they consolidate their skills. However, in a very small minority of cases, tutors set learners targets that are focused on the completion of tasks rather than on achieving learning objectives. In such cases, targets are not time bound or specific enough to enable learners to achieve challenging goals. (Independent Learning Provider)

- Deploying in-class support staff extremely well by planning their responsibilities based on individual and group needs.

Ofsted example: Additional learning support is well targeted and highly effective. Learners' support needs are identified promptly and accurately. Learners with complex needs receive excellent additional support in discrete and mainstream provision. This helps them to work with increasing independence. Specialist additional support for learners struggling with their English or mathematics is very good and easily accessible. Guidance and resources to help teachers to support learners with, for example, dyslexia, emotional health difficulties or behavioural problems are very good and are used very well by teachers (GFE Provider)

- Providing feedback that identifies what a learner has done well and what needs to be developed to improve future work.

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- Teachers use formative and summative assessment methods to track the progress of their learners against challenge grades.

Ofsted example: Teachers take a forensic approach to the monitoring of learners' progress and achievement. Teachers use ongoing assessments and checking of learning very effectively to pinpoint priorities for development. They set homework regularly and mark it promptly, and the majority provide detailed and timely written feedback to learners. They encourage learners to evaluate their own performance, and set their own clear and challenging targets for further improvement. As a result, in the current year a large majority of learners are making sustained progress, with many exceeding their target grades based on their prior achievement. (Sixth Form College)

- Links between tutorial, curriculum and cross college events ensure that learners are prepared for life in modern Britain and they demonstrate exemplary behaviour and respect for each other.

Ofsted example: Learners are fully engrossed in their work and can speak clearly about what they have learnt. Tutors plan activities carefully and imaginatively to promote discussion and to make links between the different aspects of learners' programmes. For example, a research project related to world population day is used very effectively to enable learners to apply their mathematics skills and gain knowledge about diverse cultures and people in the world. Learners develop sound awareness and understanding of important information about safeguarding, employability, welfare, British values and diversity. They use this to their advantage to gain skills or employment. This learning is skilfully reinforced through displays, discussions, contextualised activities and questioning. (Independent Learning Provider)



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### 3.3 Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare

Establishing, developing and tracking the wider skill development of learners during their programme of study is an important aspect of the 'progress agenda'.

Ofsted example: Learners develop excellent communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills that significantly boost their employment potential. All learners participate in high-quality work experience, work-related activities and a wealth of very well-thought-out college programmes and activities covering aspects such as music, enterprise, engineering, medicine, hospitality and sport aligned to their long-term employment aspirations. (GFE College)

Holistic skill development and developing the whole learner is a feature of the best colleges, it threads through all provision and can be achieved through:

- Developing a tutorial programme that focusses on 'behaviours for learning' and giving learners the skills to be successful through:
  - Identifying learners' starting points through induction
  - Reviewing their progress regularly and tracking the development through tutorial provision
  - Ensuring learners have targets linked to the development of these skills
  - Including the pertinent skills on learners profiles so that all tutors are aware
  - Ensuring learners are aware of the progress they are making to increase their confidence.

Ofsted example: Learners are highly disciplined and demonstrate a professional approach to their studies. This ensures that they quickly develop excellent industry-relevant skills and understanding. Attendance in most lessons is high, and teachers investigate any learner absence promptly and put plans in place to help those learners who may have difficulties. (Independent learning Provider)

- In order to demonstrate that good progress is being made providers should plan to develop skills over time. Update schemes of work so that opportunities are identified when and where wider skills can be developed. This is important so that learners see connections between curriculum, tutorial and other aspects of their study programme. It also ensures opportunities are not missed to develop any skill.

Case study: In one provider, different types of employment, appropriate to the level of programme were integrated into the curriculum. In lessons, skills required to be successful in that employment were embedded throughout the programme and acted as a thread connecting different aspects of the study programme together. (GFE College)

- Write learning outcomes that focus on wider skill development, not just knowledge and content outcomes.
- In 'progress reviews' or tutorials incorporate wider targets and the process of learning, not just the intended outcome, for example, unit completion.
- Focus relentlessly on attendance, punctuality and conduct so learners are prepared for the workplace. They also need to demonstrate safe working practices in sessions.

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Ofsted example: Learners are highly disciplined and demonstrate a professional approach to their studies. This ensures that they quickly develop excellent industry-relevant skills and understanding. Attendance in most lessons is high, and teachers investigate any learner absence promptly and put plans in place to help those learners who may have difficulties. (Independent Learning Provider)

- Ensure learners take pride in their work and portfolios so that they become a useful tool in future learning helping learners make connections in their learning.

Ofsted example: The standard of learners' work is exceptionally high and, as a result, most achieve their qualification successfully and secure either good jobs or places at university. An industry project, central to each programme, ensures that the standard of vocational skills that learners develop is extremely high. Learners' work is of a professional standard long before they complete their course. (Independent Learning Provider)

- Deliver a highly effective and differentiated careers, advice, guidance and progression service. This should provide a balance between subject specialist information and wider opportunities available to learners.

Ofsted example: Information, advice and guidance are highly effective. Learners benefit from impartial careers guidance enabling them to make informed choices about their future work and study options. As a result, most learners have clear plans for progression. Most learners on study programmes progress to apprenticeships, employment or further study. The vast majority of apprentices progress to sustained employment and, where appropriate, to higher-level job roles or to higher-level training (Independent Learning Provider)

- Learners are employment ready as a result of a differentiated work experience programme, for all levels, and this is supported by enrichment programmes, commercial settings, live briefs, external speakers and careers events.

Ofsted example: Learners acquire excellent employability skills in lessons and from enrichment and other activities. Work experience overseas, additional qualifications, and community performances all help to broaden their horizons. Teachers encourage team working, peer assessment, and effective communication. Learners' attendance and punctuality are very good; (Sixth Form College) and

Learners' horizons are broadened very well by excellent careers guidance enriched by contributions from a wide range of speakers. Consequently, learners understand career options and the consequences of their choices very well. This results in them making very well-informed decisions about their next steps. (GFE College)

- Learners are able to protect themselves from harm because they have become independent, resilient and critical thinkers.

Learners' behaviour is exemplary. They show a very high level of respect for each other, their teachers and college property. Managers and teachers have successfully created a most welcoming and hospitable atmosphere by adopting and promoting fundamental British values as college values to underpin daily life in the college. (GFE College)

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### 3.4 Outcomes for Learners

Outstanding outcomes are underpinned by:

- Highly effective IAG and induction programmes for learners
- Consistently good teaching and learning
- Strong assessment practice and detailed feedback
- Effective tutorial provision and on-going support for learners

This will result in:

- High expectations in which learners take pride in their work and produce work to a very high standard.

Ofsted example: The culture of the college ensures that learners are proud of their work and have high expectations of themselves. They produce work of a high standard and develop good independent learning and study skills. (Sixth Form College)

- Learners developing their practical and personal skills very well making them more confident and independent.

Ofsted example: Learners very clearly demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have acquired and show how these have helped them to develop the habit of continued learning. Apprentices produce a very high standard of work that is valued highly by their employers. Learners on study programmes gain essential skills such as team working, using initiative, problem solving and communication. The acquisition of these skills prepares learners well for their work placements where they can showcase their skills. (Independent Learning Provider)

- Learners making excellent progress based on their starting points and providers have high levels of achievement rates.

Ofsted example: Because of the excellent progress made by learners, high proportions of them achieve high grades. In 2014/15, 61% of A-level learners and 40% of those completing advanced vocational courses achieved high grades, which is well above the national rate.

Learners make excellent progress to higher levels of study and into employment. Progression rates to higher education are very high, and around a third of A-level learners go on to prestigious universities. (GFE College)

Ofsted example: Most learners complete their programmes, enjoy their learning and achieve their qualifications. Learners make very substantial progress. Most achieve positive outcomes such as progression into employment, further education or apprenticeships. This is an outstanding achievement given the very low starting point for most learners on study programmes and the range of barriers many have faced in life, including offending, poor school attendance, exclusion, drug misuse, bullying and being in care. (Independent Learning Provider)

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- High quality and challenging work experience that helps prepare learners for life after education
  - High levels of progression and learners progressing to positive destinations

Ofsted example: Teachers and other adults act as excellent role models and promote high expectations and aspirations, helping learners to develop a wide range of skills suitable for employment and higher levels of study. Learners communicate well, work independently or collaboratively, follow instructions carefully and readily take on responsibilities. Work experience placements, the varied enrichment programme and additional qualifications all make valuable contributions to the range of skills developed. A high proportion of learners progress to university and almost all others progress to positive destinations including employment and apprenticeships. (Sixth Form College)

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### 3.5 English and Maths

The progress of learners in English and maths continues to be one of the biggest challenges for post-16 providers. Providers need to have a clear strategy for English and maths that connects specialist staff and sessions with vocational tutors and their lessons. Staff development needs to focus on the English and maths skills of vocational tutors, giving them the skills and confidence to develop English and maths with their learners. Improving English and maths provision and learner outcomes can be achieved through:

- A high profile strategy that is owned by all with clear responsibilities and driven by senior managers
- Highly effective initial assessments that inform planning based on the starting point of learners' skills
- Promoting the importance of English and maths skills through the whole learner journey (initial advice and guidance through to progression with an increased focus early on and during induction)
- Subject specialists and vocational tutors working collaboratively to support each other and their learners.

Ofsted example: Specialist teachers in English and mathematics support learners very well to develop their skills in these subjects. Learners benefit from a range of appropriate courses, well matched to learners' skills, goals and prior achievements. Learners receive support to work towards GCSE examinations in English and mathematics. As a result, the number of learners achieving these qualifications at grades A\* to C has improved significantly. Teachers of other subjects reinforce the importance of applied literacy and numeracy very well in subject lessons. Teachers consistently focus on developing learners' use and understanding of key terminology and subject-specific terms. Most learners use this terminology with confidence in their explanations. (Sixth Form College)

- In the best lessons, planning ensures that strategies and resources to support skill development are varied.

Ofsted example: On GCSE English and functional skills courses, the majority of learners make good progress, often from low starting points. This is because standards of teaching are high, and because teachers use teaching time effectively. In addition, subject and vocational teachers integrate the development of learners' English into their lessons effectively; most teachers correct learners' spelling, punctuation and grammar well.

Learners' progress on mathematics GCSE and functional skills courses is good. It has improved rapidly following the implementation of a range of well-conceived strategies similar to those that have been very successful in English. Teachers plan their lessons carefully, based on detailed analyses of learners' starting points. (GFE Provider)

- A provider's marking scheme for spelling, punctuation and grammar is consistently applied and feedback develops maths skills where appropriate
- Marked work should demonstrate progress over time and that skills have improved
- Providers need to develop a method of tracking the progress of learners in-year to demonstrate skill development

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- Learners need to be set targets through tutorials that focus on English and maths skills development
  - Regular communication between specialist staff and vocational tutors, especially to track non-attendance.

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## 4 Summary

Every provider puts the learner first and wants the best for them. Achieving this with the volume of external pressures is challenging and in some cases these pressures result in providers losing focus on their core business or learners not being at the heart of key decisions. In our analysis of Ofsted reports some providers have let the external challenges complicate curriculum and systems and this has had a negative impact on staff and learners.

Providers need to be realistic about what elements of their provision and quality systems they focus on – not everything can be changed at once. Providers need to focus their attention on the things that have biggest impact for them. This will differ depending on the maturity of the organisation and at which point of the journey they are on. Providers need to develop a culture and ethos in which staff and students thrive, expectations remain high and staff can access CPD and support when required.

Every provider wants:

- Satisfied learners who enjoy their learning and attend
- Learners who are ambitious, achieve and challenge themselves to improve
- Learners who develop their skills and knowledge well and progress to positive destinations
- Learners who develop their wider skills and are more rounded individuals better prepared for their intended progression.

The key aspects of the common inspection framework are linked, starting with effective leadership and management. Providers need to focus on the process of teaching, learning and assessment, personal development, behaviour and welfare and the outcomes will follow. Leaders and managers need to empower staff to take ownership for their provision and the outcomes of their learners, where this happens providers are good or better and their learners get the best experience as a result.