



Ofsted inspection in the general further education and skills sector in England

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Executive Summary

Context and rationale

In the last decades the further education and skills (FES) sector in England has gained traction from consecutive central governments by building compelling cases for reform to drive the country's productivity, economic growth, social justice and respond to the demands of the labour market. Although studying the FES sector is crucial for accurately representing the system and delivering the skills and social justice agendas, there is astonishing paucity of academic research, particularly regarding what is working well and what needs to improve.

This study adds new evidence by exploring the impact of FES's key external accountability lever provided by The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections and its Education Inspection Framework (EIF) judging colleges and other providers' performance. Focusing on the impacts of Ofsted and the strengths and weaknesses of the EIF in FES is timely, as recently the inspectorate has come under increased scrutiny. Current reviews of the impact of Ofsted in the school sector have stressed the need for reform, as negative effects on teacher wellbeing, school improvement, student academic performance and stakeholders' distrust have been documented. Ofsted itself is evaluating the process and theory of change of the EIF on FES and other sectors as part of its wider review with its full findings to be published by 2026 (Ofsted, 2023). Findings from Ofsted's 'Big Listen' consultation were published in September 2024.

Aim of the study

A team of researchers based at the UCL Institute of Education and The Edge Foundation led by Dr Bernie Munoz-Chereau conducted this study to explore the views of stakeholders (tutors, lecturers, teachers, governors, middle managers, vice principals, deputy principals, and principals) working in general further education colleges, sixth form colleges (SFC), land-based colleges, art, design and performing arts colleges, and institutes of adult learning (formerly specialist designated colleges) about Ofsted inspection in their institution.

The study aims at complementing and expanding Ofsted research by contributing new evidence about the impacts, strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted inspections and the EIF in FES. By exploring how Ofsted inspections are currently working, strengths and limitations can be identified, improvements can be highlighted and a better system for all can be built through recommendations for policy and practice. Therefore, this study aims to inform and contribute to the policy development driven by the new His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) in place since January 2024.

Literature review

We conducted a systematic review of the literature focusing on empirical academic research on Ofsted inspections in FES in particular, and previous systematic reviews on Ofsted school inspections conducted over the last three decades in general. We found scarcity of academic research exploring the impact of Ofsted inspection in FES. From the 14 studies found, all of them raised concerns about the negative effects that Ofsted inspections are having on the sector. Focusing on the three previous systematic reviews on Ofsted school inspections that draw on dozens of studies, these raised concerns regarding its negative impact particularly on schools working in disadvantaged contexts; staff recruitment, retention and workload; narrowing of the curriculum and the scarcity of well-defined improvement support following an inspection. It is suggested that Ofsted inspections in the FES and the school sector come at a high cost, as negative consequences are more prominently reported than its benefits in the academic literature.

Methodology

The study uses a Parallel Mixed Methods Design (PMMD) by combining surveys and interviews to explore stakeholders' views in the general FES sector. A total of 53 participants took part in the study. A sample of 35 participants answered the survey, and a criterion based purposive sample of 18 participants were interviewed working in below and above 'Good' inspected colleges and providers, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences.

Findings

1. **Positive impacts of Ofsted in FES:** Participants underscored that Ofsted inspections impacted their organisations and themselves positively working as (1) a stamp of approval or quality assurance, (2) a confidence booster and as a (3) marketing strategy to attract future students and their parents.
2. **Negative impacts of Ofsted in FES:** Despite participants identifying the positive impacts of Ofsted inspection mentioned above, they critically identified six negative impacts. Participants recognised that Ofsted inspections impacted negatively their (1) workload, (2) wellbeing, (3) staff retention, (4) performativity, (5) innovation and improvement and (6) empowerment.
3. **Strengths of EIF:** Most participants found that the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) introduced in 2019 was better than the previous one. Interviewees identified that the strengths of the EIF are its (1) focus on the curriculum, (2) focus on student's learning and progress, (3) broader quality judgement, (4) better sub-judgements descriptors and (5) that it is implemented by trained and experienced inspectors.
4. **Weaknesses of EIF:** Participants also mentioned that in comparison with the previous Common Inspection Framework (CIF), the EIF was (1) reductionist, (2) superficial and (3) could lead to subjectivity or biased judgements.
5. **Suggestions for improvement:** Participants articulated the following suggestions for policy and practice to improve Ofsted inspections in FES:
 - reduce the high-stakes nature of inspections
 - make inspections more developmental and supportive
 - remove overall grades or single words ratings
 - expand inspection reports to better support improvement
 - extend inspection visits

Conclusions and discussion

Our research adds nuances to what is working well by identifying not only the positive impacts of Ofsted inspections in the general FES sector, but also the strengths of the current EIF. However, when considering the positive and negative impacts together, Ofsted's strategy which intends to be an intelligent, responsible, and proportionate force for improvement, is falling short on its responsibility and proportionality, as negative impacts are more numerous than the positive ones identified by stakeholders, particularly in those colleges and providers working in more disadvantaged contexts. This is an important reminder that Ofsted's actions and modes of working have strong consequences, therefore we hope the policymakers and practitioners working in the sector will consider these findings, as well as the five suggestions made by stakeholders to improve the system.

1. Introduction

This section aims to provide a context for the study by describing the further education and skills (FES) sector in England, the governance in FES through Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and the aims of this study.

1.1 The further education and skills (FES) sector in England

Historically, government and societal considerations have positioned the English further education and skills (FES) sector at a lower hierarchical level in comparison with schools and universities. Over time the FES sector has been described as the "neglected middle child of schools and universities" (Coffield, 2017, p. xix). Yet, in England most students (around 60%) do not follow an academic track, nor go to university, but enrol in FES colleges (Ruiz-Valenzuela et al., 2017).

In the last decades, FES has gained traction from consecutive central governments by building compelling cases to reform the sector to drive the country's productivity, economic growth, social justice and respond to the demands of the labour market (Leitch, 2006; Wolf, 2011; Sainsbury et al., 2016; Keohane, 2017; Augar, 2019). More precisely, the Leitch Review (2006) developed a policy framework for delivering the UK's world class skills system by 2020. The review of vocational education (Wolf, 2011) stressed the need for improving the quality of the sector. The Post-16 Skills Plan conducted by Sainsbury (2016) underscored the role of college-based and work-based (apprenticeships) learning for preparing individuals for skilled employment which requires technical knowledge and practical skills valued by industry. More recently, the Augar Review (2019) put forward a strategy for boosting the country's productivity and social mobility through the FES sector. The 2021 White Paper "Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth" also placed an emphasis on the importance of the sector in helping to bridge higher and technical skills shortages post Brexit and address the UK's continued under performance in productivity.



The FES sector is diverse. It covers general FE colleges, land-based colleges, specialist adult education institutions, sixth form colleges and independent training providers along with adult education provided by local authorities and third-sector deliverers of adult skills. In England, there are 218 colleges - which includes 157 general further education colleges, 39 sixth form colleges, 10 land-based colleges, 10 specialist designated colleges/institutes of adult Learning, and 2 Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges (AoC, 2024). These are all subject to inspection under Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework; as well as 266 ACL (adult and community learning) providers mostly under local authority control as adult education services delivering AEB (Adult Education Budget) funded courses, which contribute to 2000+ providers in the publicly funded post-16 education sector.

The prominence of FES also derives from the fact that the sector educates millions of young people and adults per year. Current colleges enrol approx. 1.6 million students (600,000 young people (16+) and 1 million adults (19+)) (DfE, 2024). The FES sector develops their skills and career opportunities to support progress to university, higher level vocational education or employment. One third of young people aged under 19 enter university via UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) from English colleges, whereas 33% of young people aged 16-19 study in colleges or sixth form colleges rather than in school sixth forms. The sector also delivers apprenticeships up to Level 7 alongside universities. Therefore, studying the FES sector is crucial not only for accurately representing the system, but also to deliver the skills and social justice agendas, as the sector educates students with prior lower educational attainment, coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and who are at higher risk of dropping out in comparison with the higher education sector. "Further education is therefore a key determinant of England's educational level, social mobility, unemployment, and other labour market indicators" (Ruiz-Valenzuela et al., 2017, p.1).

1.2 External accountability in FES: Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF)

Despite the uniqueness of the FES sector regarding its size and learner population and programme diversity, when it comes to external accountability the same approach used in preschools, schools, and universities are applied by Ofsted through the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) when assessing the FES sector quality of education. Ofsted inspects apprenticeships, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funded study programmes for young people, and Mayoral and Combined Authority (MCA) adult education budget courses, independent training providers, as well as high-needs provision as any subcontracted provision of a provider during an institution's inspection. This has been recently criticised by the sector, who is asking for a streamlined EIF that reflects the considerable diversity in provision. "A highly technical apprenticeship provider should not be prevented from achieving 'Outstanding' because they do not spend precious off-the-job hours promoting healthy eating or personal fitness. The judgement should be primarily focused on the technical training, potentially fantastic career progression and valued output into the employer's business" (Boffey, 2024, no page).

Since the creation of Ofsted in 1992, the sector was initially inspected by FEFC (Further Education Funding Council) and then the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) from 2000 up to 2007, until ALI became part of Ofsted. From 2015 to 2019 the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) was used across the sector. Since 2019, the current EIF has been in operation to review the quality of education. Irrespective of the complexity of the post-16 FES sector and its variations in size and scope of providers - ranging from small independent training providers to large complex multi-million-pound college group structures that span diverse geographical locations - all are inspected under the same framework evaluating learners' experience. Hence stakeholders have criticised Ofsted's claim that the EIF is based on relevant research, as by excluding FES research pedagogies, children and schools are overrepresented (Exley, 2019).

While the school sector has seen a recent drop of the single-word overall grade (with a commitment from the Department for Education that other settings, including colleges, will follow suit), the EIF in the FES sector has been making an overall effectiveness judgement using the four-point grading scale ranging from Inadequate (Grade 4), Requires Improvement (Grade 3), Good (Grade 2) to Outstanding (Grade 1), and four sub-judgements: quality of education and/or training, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. Since September 2022, inspections for colleges include in its overall judgement an assessment of how well the college is contributing to addressing skills shortages in the local, regional and national economy through engagement with employers, civic and community partners and other education establishments with a judgment on this being awarded as 'strong', 'reasonable' or 'limited' contribution to meeting skills needs. All colleges, sixth forms and designated adult education institutions – irrespective of historic grade – are expected to be inspected in full by September 2025 (Ofsted, 2023a), and inspection reports from September 2022 include an evaluation on each college's contribution to help meet the local skills needs. The FES Ofsted handbook sets out that in order to achieve at least a Good judgement for 'quality of education and/or training', inspectors must see evidence that leaders provide a curriculum that is "appropriately relevant to local and regional employment and training priorities" (Ofsted, 2023a, paragraph 243, no page).

Ofsted's latest annual report (2023a) shows that nationally 91 per cent of the general FE colleges have reached Outstanding and Good. Despite this three percentage point increase compared to the previous year, it does not necessarily mean that the overall quality of the sector has improved – as when underperforming colleges are merged, Ofsted grades are removed – it certainly signals strong overall performance in the FES sector.

Ofsted itself identified in autumn 2023 that the premise of the EIF is intended to cause change referencing 'change management theory': "We expect inspection to contribute to changes in behaviour. As a result, we expect children and learners to receive a higher quality of education and be better prepared for their next steps. Ofsted expects the long-term benefits of the EIF to improve learner success, improve overall effectiveness, and develop a 'shared concept of quality.'" (Ofsted, 2023a, no page).

Moreover, in its five-year strategy Ofsted (2022) stated that it intends to be an intelligent, responsible and proportionate force for improvement. By 'intelligent' Ofsted (2022) means "making sure that our work is evidence-led and that our frameworks and regulatory approaches are grounded in what works best to improve outcomes for children and learners" (p.4); by 'responsible' Ofsted (2022) means "understanding the perverse incentives and unintended consequences our work can have, and minimising those as far as possible. Regulators and inspectorates should be proportionate and seek to avoid imposing unnecessary burdens on those they regulate and inspect" (p.4). By 'focused' Ofsted (2022) means "directing our resources to the areas that have the most impact and where children and learners are most at risk. It means being efficient and prioritising our inspection and regulatory work to provide the greatest possible level of assurance about the quality of education and care" (p.4) and by being 'a force for improvement' Ofsted (2022) means that its "work does lead to improved standards" (p.4).

Being the largest inspectorate of schools in Europe, Ofsted has been in place more than three decades conducting inspections of providers of education, training and care. While the inspectorate is considered exemplary in many parts of the world – inspiring accountability regimes from the Middle East to Latin-America (Munoz-Chereau, Gonzalez and Meyers, 2022) – at home it has come under increased scrutiny, given its negative consequences. Recent reviews of the impact of Ofsted in the school sector have stressed the need of reform, as negative effects on teacher wellbeing, school improvement, student academic performance and stakeholders' trust have been documented (Perryman et al. 2023).

1.3 Aims of the study

As Ofsted introduced the EIF in 2019 to inspect the FES sector, alongside mainstream schools as well as early years and special education, it is timely to evaluate its impacts, strengths and weaknesses, especially in FES where to date little academic research has been conducted. While there are wider aspects of quality and standards checks and monitoring across the FES sector from the FE Commissioner (FEC), the Office for Students (OfS) and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) audits, these are not included in this research. The reason why we focus on Ofsted's EIF is because it powerfully levers FES's behaviours by using its regulatory force to judge performance which have significant impacts on organisations. As the FES sector provision is very diverse, this study focuses on the general FES sector. In other words, we reached stakeholders working in general further education colleges, sixth form colleges (SFC), land-based colleges, art, design and performing arts colleges, and institutes of adult learning (formerly specialist designated colleges) to explore how inspection is working and the experiences of stakeholders.

Ofsted itself is evaluating the process and theory of change of the EIF on FES and other sectors as part of its wider review with its full findings to be published by 2026 (Ofsted, 2023b). Findings from Ofsted's 'Big Listen' consultation were published in September 2024. Given the astonishing paucity of academic research focusing on FES and Ofsted (Exley, 2019), a team based at the UCL Institute of Education and The Edge Foundation aims to complement and expand Ofsted research by contributing evidence about the impacts, strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted inspections and the EIF in FES. By exploring how Ofsted inspections in FES are currently experienced by stakeholders, strengths and limitations can be identified, improvements can be highlighted and a better system for all can be built through recommendations for policy and practice. Therefore, this study is timely, as it can inform policy development by the new HMCI, Sir Martyn Oliver, who came into post in January 2024.

1.4 Research questions

The main research question is:

What are the impacts of Ofsted inspection in the general further education sector in England?

The three research sub-questions are:

- What are the strengths of Ofsted's EIF in the general further education sector in England?
- What are the weaknesses of Ofsted's EIF in the general further education sector in England?
- How do FES stakeholders experience Ofsted inspections?

2. Literature review

This section presents a systematic review of the literature focusing on empirical academic research on Ofsted inspections in FES in particular, and previous systematic reviews on Ofsted school inspections conducted over the last three decades in general.

2.1 Ofsted inspections in FES

Overall, there is a paucity of academic research in FES and Ofsted inspections (Exley, 2019), with a few notable exceptions. Coffield & Edward's (2009) earlier research on Ofsted's Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and its impact on the FES sector is critical of its impact on improving lecturer practices, as are findings from Mather & Seifert (2014). Coffield et al. (2014) articulated five consequences of inspection on educators in the FES sector. These unwelcomed behaviours reported by teachers and the sector are compliance, control, survivalism, gamification for formal observations and ultimately teachers "exiting" the sector.

A study from Fletcher et al. (2015) – using a narrative review of policy – argued that inspection (alongside audit and marketisation) are key drivers in FES college's decision making. Qualitative research using observations conducted by Martin (2016) focused on FES teachers' perspectives and use of target setting. He identified the "generic pull of colleges to follow Ofsted" (p.536). This influence is evident in decision making, once again highlighting the perceived coercive element of inspection for the FES sector and influencing decision making on teaching judgments. Similarly, a small scale qualitative study oriented to identify the impact of inspection on three colleges' improvement on leadership of teaching, learning and assessment, reported more accountability pressure on the college assessed as requires improvement, in comparison with those classified as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' (Forrest, 2015). In the third category – 'requires improvement', the Principal felt the imperatives of the re-inspection timescale very strongly and this constrained his ability to respond to what the college needed in a landscape with multiple challenges – not just that of inspection however, "only when an organisation is not categorised as 'requires improvement' by the inspectorate was it seen as safe to take risks to put strategies in place that fully address such impacts" (Forrest, 2015, p.296). Two pieces of research from O'Leary (2013; 2015) and more recently from Naz (2023a) referred to Ofsted inspections and their impact on transforming the type of observations undertaken to support teacher improvement within FES colleges. O'Leary's (2013) study drawing on ten colleges emphasised how inspection led to colleges introducing graded observations to be Ofsted compliant rather than seeking to develop teachers through developmental observations. This is echoed by a personal account of experiencing Ofsted inspections, lesson observations and accountability from Burnell (2017), one of the few FES research articles with "Ofsted and inspection" in the title. This personal narrative depicts the experience of being observed in the author's career in one FE college and while informative is not necessarily generalisable to the sector at large.

A relevant previous literature review (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018) commissioned by the Department for Education, explored external accountability arrangements in the FES sector. After concerns were raised about the quality of teaching in the sector in 2004, the government introduced Ofsted inspections in FES for the first time. Coupled with new mandatory teaching qualifications, standards in the sector were expected to rise. Mentoring schemes, informal observation by peers and Initial Teach Training (ITT) lesson observations that were part of the FES culture, were replaced by formal systems of lesson observations with grading mimicking the inspectorate's methods and preparing stakeholders for 'the real thing'. However, these mock inspections were "perceived by staff to fulfil quality assurance or performance management purposes rather than to support teachers' professional development" (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018, p. 29). Despite Ofsted perceiving college developmental observations as less valid and reliable, the authors of the review argued that there is no evidence that the graded inspection approach has positively impacted FES quality. "Evidence of impact of

this approach on learners has not been a research focus, nor how current practices work to improve quality" (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018, p. 22). Boocock (2019) argued that since Ofsted inspections were implemented in the FE sector, transactional leadership brought gaming behaviours and grade inflation as a means of achieving 'success' rather than genuine improvements. To truly improve the sector, distributed leadership - involving a dispersion of responsibility and power to key stakeholders to encourage self-governance and open systems - is needed.

Similar to previous studies, Naz (2023b) saw Ofsted's EIF as a control mechanism from a Foucauldian viewpoint with wider aspects of pedagogy and staff development being affected, echoing the conclusions mentioned earlier by Coffield et al. (2014). Both O'Leary's (2013) and Naz's (2023a) studies examined observation policy and practice as an inspection driven mechanism. While they considered it insightful, both lack a full examination of wider practices in colleges outside of formal observations determined by Ofsted, such as performance indicators and monitoring of other wider aspects that may be inspection driven from the EIF. Naz's conclusions from his own research in one college (2023a; 2023b) was that there is little detailed research undertaken on FE and inspection so far, noting that his own one case study is too limited.

A recent report titled "Further Education and Skills: Changing Systems of Change" commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) for University of Oxford's Saïd Business School (2024) involved 61 interviews with FE sector leaders, academics, government officials and influencers. One of the eight systemic themes identified as a key driver that needs to change to build a sustainable and self-improving sector was Ofsted: "Inspection emerged as a shared concern, reflecting a consensus on the regulatory burden placed upon the sector. The interaction between system and professional regulators adds further complexity to an already over-regulated and reformed system. Participants expressed apprehension that inspections, rather than being supportive, tend to impose restrictive measures" (Maylor et al., 2024, p.14).



2.2 Ofsted inspections in schools

Ofsted school inspections have been conceived as a key accountability mechanism to govern education, as they occupy the middle tier between policy and practice. Their judgements are at both the system level, providing system accountability and the level of individual institutions, providing school accountability (Munoz-Chereau & Ehren 2021). In this way, they connect the macro-politics with the micro-politics of schools by emphasising certain aspects, such as specific teaching methods. Hence Ofsted determines what the focus of quality school practice should be for a Good or above judgement to be given (Kelchtermans, 2009).

Previous reviews of the literature on schools' Ofsted inspections have raised concerns regarding its negative impact on disadvantaged schools, teacher recruitment, retention and workload, narrowing of the curriculum and the scarcity of well-defined improvement support. More precisely, Chapman (2001) conducted a literature review on the evidence of Ofsted inspections as a mechanism for school improvement. While he recognised that Ofsted increased schools' accountability, improvement through inspection was a mere rhetoric, as teachers' practices in the classroom remained largely unchanged. A systematic literature review and meta-analysis conducted by Hofer et al. (2020) investigated Ofsted inspection effects on students' General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results, reported that "in the UK (1993–2000), 36% of the effects [of Ofsted] were significantly negative and 53% of the non-significant effects pointed in a negative direction" (p. 11). A recent systematic literature review (Munoz-Chereau, Ehren and Hutchinson, under review) included a total of 34 studies and synthesised its findings using three key themes. Firstly, regarding academic students' outcomes, they found that, from the five studies reporting this, two presented positive outcomes of Ofsted particularly in low-performing schools and for low-performing students, and three found negative consequences. Secondly, regarding the 19 studies reporting teaching practices and behaviours, most of them (14) reported negative consequences and a minority (5) reported a mixed picture of positive outcomes and negative consequences. Finally, from the 10 studies reporting outcomes on school culture, the great majority (9) described negative consequences, particularly in student and staff wellbeing and only one study reported positive outcomes.

In conclusion, we found scarcity of academic research exploring the impact of Ofsted inspection in FES. From the 14 studies found through a systematic search of the academic literature, all of them raised concerns about the negative effects that Ofsted inspections are having in the sector. Focusing on the three previous systematic reviews on Ofsted school inspections that draw on dozens of studies, these are reporting mostly adverse impacts at the school level regarding student academic outcomes, teaching practices and behaviours, and school culture. It seems that Ofsted inspections in FES and the school sector come at a high cost, as negative consequences are more prominently reported in the academic literature than the benefits. This conclusion has been reached consistently by different authors, using qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods methodologies over the last three decades. This review makes our study timely, as we explore the strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted inspections in the FES sector.

3. Methodology

To answer the main research question and three sub-questions, we conducted a Parallel Mixed Methods Design (PMMD) (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The PMMD study integrated survey and interviews as described below.

3.1 Population and sampling

To gain an understanding of the impact of Ofsted inspection in FES, a qualitative sample was drawn from the population of general further education institutions in England that were inspected from 2019 onwards. First, we created a database of FE colleges and providers inspected by Ofsted from the introduction of EIF in 2019 to date and invited participants through the institutional email provided. Then, we invited participants through existing professional networks by posting open invites into the AOC's social media networks, FE News, FE Week and Edge Foundation's newsletter. We also invited participants by attending events organised by the AOC and other organisations, such as Further Education Associates (FEA). As previous research has suggested that below Good (Requires Improvement and Inadequate) and above Good (Outstanding and Good) inspection grades can influence stakeholders' narratives (Munoz and Ehren, 2021), we ensured a diverse representation of experiences. More precisely, for the interviews we selected a criterion-based or purposive sample (Patton, 2014) by inviting survey participants to take part in an interview. Parallel to this, we also invited individuals from existing contacts as participants. From this sample, we made sure that participants working in colleges and providers graded as below and above Good inspection were included. A total of 53 participants took part in the study (35 answered the survey, and 18 took part in interviews). Given that some, but not all, of the interview participants also answered the survey, we are counting them twice as they provided different evidence in each data collection method.

Table 1: Survey and interview demographic characteristics

| Respondent characteristics | | Surveys | Interviews | FEWDC*, 2024 |
|--|--|---------|------------|--------------|
| Gender | Female | 66% | 67% | 65% |
| | Male | 31% | 33% | 33% |
| | Prefer not to say | 3% | N/A | 1% |
| Ethnicity | White British or White other | 77% | 78% | 77% |
| | Other | 21% | 22% | 21% |
| Role | Principals, Deputy Principals or governors | 23% | 22% | 3% |
| | Middle managers | 57% | 67% | 31% |
| | Tutors, Lecturers or Teachers | 20% | 11% | 40% |
| College or provider latest Ofsted grade | Above Good | 80% | 89% | 91% |
| | Below Good | 20% | 11% | 9% |

*Further Education Workforce Data Collection

3. Methodology

As seen in Table 1, the gender of participants that answered the survey and took part in interviews, corresponds to the national trends. More precisely, from those that answered the survey and interviews, 66% and 67% were females; 31% and 33%, respectively were males. This is in line with the latest Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC) that states that, from the estimated 205,200 people working in FE, 65% are female (DfE, 2024).

Regarding the ethnicity of participants, this also is in line with the national picture. While 77% and 78% of survey and interview participants were White British or White other, 21% and 22% of the survey and interview participants respectively belonged to an ethnic minority group. This is in line with the latest national picture, where 21% of the further education workforce identified as belonging to an ethnic minority group (DfE, 2024). More precisely, while 9% of survey respondents were Asian or Asian British; 6% of the national workforce identified as Asian or Asian British in 2022/23. Nine percent of the survey respondents identified as Black or Black British, in comparison with 3.7% identifying as Black or Black British nationally. Also 3% of survey respondents belonged to Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups.

Regarding participants' roles, more than half of participants answering the survey and the interviews were Middle Managers (57% and 67% respectively), with less than a quarter being Principals or Deputy Principals (23% and 22%), or Tutors, Lecturers or Teachers (20% and 11%). These figures depart from the national picture, where Middle Managers account for 31%, Principals, 3%, and Teachers 40% of the workforce, respectively (DfE, 2024).

Participants also worked in colleges and providers judged by Ofsted as Outstanding or Good (80%) and below Good (20%) inspection grades, which is lower than the national picture where Good or above accounts for 91% and the remaining 9% of colleges and providers are below that grade.

Focusing on the regions where the survey's participants' colleges and providers are located, whilst there is representation of most of the regions across England, the survey is over-representing Greater London (63% versus 11% nationally), while underrepresenting the rest of the regions.

Table 2: Survey regional representativeness

| Region | Survey | National (AOC, 2024) |
|--------------------------|--------|----------------------|
| Greater London | 63% | 11% |
| South East | 11% | 12% |
| North West | 9% | 18% |
| South West | 6% | 9% |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 6% | 10% |
| East of England | 3% | 13% |
| West Midlands | 3% | 12% |
| East Midlands | 0% | 7% |
| North East | 0% | 8% |

All in all, while the sample aligns with the national picture in terms of gender and ethnicity, it has a slight over representation of below Ofsted grades and a significant over-representation of leadership roles and Greater London. While the strength of the study is its rigorous methodological design and novelty, its limitation is its small sample, so these findings are exploratory and should be interpreted considering the wider context and research in the field. Moreover, more research is needed before generalising its findings for the wider population.

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Quantitative surveys

We designed a survey¹ and piloted with two practitioners working in the FES sector that have obtained different Ofsted ratings. We collected quantitative data regarding stakeholders' views on Ofsted EIF inspections. Stakeholders were college employers including: those training to teach; tutors, lecturers or teachers; tutors, lecturers or teachers with additional responsibilities; middle managers, vice principals; deputy principals, and principals working at colleges. The survey was oriented to better understand their perspectives about the perceived positive and negative effects of the Ofsted EIF on different outcomes, such as student outcomes, workload and wellbeing. Given the small sample size, we conducted descriptive statistical analysis regarding stakeholders' views on Ofsted's EIF.

3.2.2 Qualitative interviews

We developed a semi-structured interview schedule to be conducted individually online² and piloted with two practitioners working in the FES sector that have obtained different Ofsted ratings, to gain a deeper insight into stakeholders' experiences with Ofsted EIF in different contexts. Interviewees were sampled from the survey respondents and the networks detailed above. We conducted 18 individual interviews in total.

Qualitative data gathered through interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, which was iterative, allowing findings from each data collection method to inform the final report. The aim of the qualitative interviews was to understand the lived experiences of stakeholders by listening to participants' voices. By paying attention to stakeholders' voices, a novel way of approaching a matter of public policy is developed (Bacchi, 2012).

The qualitative interviews were oriented to unpack the meanings and gain an understanding of the nature and form of inspection phenomena. In this sense, FES stakeholders are well positioned to comment on the impacts of Ofsted inspections. Their lived experiences may help to understand the ways in which inspection impacts the sector.

3.3 Procedure

Participants were invited through a link to the online survey questionnaire. They were required to read the study's information and consent form to understand the purpose, significance, benefits, and confidentiality of the survey before proceeding to the questionnaire. The survey was opened for four months (December 2023-April 2024) to allow an adequate response rate (Muijs, 2012).

¹ The survey is available from The Edge Foundation upon request.

² The interview schedule is available from The Edge Foundation upon request.

The interviews were conducted via Teams and Zoom, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim for the analysis. We analysed the interviews by taking an inductive approach to build an interpretation based on constant comparisons between the different participants. The procedure consisted in breaking down the transcriptions into smaller pieces of information and comparing the pieces for similarities and differences before regrouping them under emerging themes and categories (Silverman, 2016). We coded the data using an Excel spreadsheet.

To improve the validity and reliability of the study, data collection, data source and investigator triangulation were implemented (Patton, 2014). Data collection triangulation was implemented by integrating survey and interviews. Source triangulation was obtained by collecting data from more than one type of participant in order to include multi-angle and diverse perspectives (Carter et al., 2014). Meanwhile, investigator triangulation was attained through the involvement of four researchers in all the phases of the study, discussing its sampling, collecting data, and conducting the analysis of the preliminary findings. This provided multiple perspectives as well as adding breadth to our work.

4. Findings

In order to answer the research questions, we integrated the findings of the survey and the interviews according to the following themes: First, the positive and negative impacts of Ofsted inspections in FES. By 'impacts' we mean noticeable effects, changes, transformations or influences identified by stakeholders. Secondly, we report the strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted's EIF identified by stakeholders, and finally, the recommendations for improving Ofsted inspections in FES articulated by participants according to their experiences.

4.1 Impacts of Ofsted in FES

4.1.1 Positive impacts of Ofsted in FES

Participants underscored that Ofsted inspections impacted their organisations and themselves positively working as (1) **a stamp of approval or quality assurance**, (2) **confidence booster**, and as a (3) **marketing strategy** to attract future students and their parents.

4.1.1.1 Stamp of approval or quality assurance

Most of the survey participants trusted inspections as a reliable method of quality assurance. More precisely:

- The majority of survey participants (n=25, 71%) felt that, during inspection, **the inspectors saw the 'real' college or provider**, in comparison with more than a fifth (n=8, 23%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

The view that Ofsted inspections were a reliable method of quality assurance was in line with several of the interviewed participants who argued that:

Ofsted sort of had validated internal judgments for many of our lecturers who know that they've delivered strong provision consistently for three years now. (Senior Leader, Good or above college, interview)

- More than half of survey participants (n=18, 51%) strongly or somewhat disagree that they had **changed their practice during inspection**, in comparison with over a third (n=12, 34%) who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement.
- Almost half of survey participants (n=17, 49%) strongly or somewhat agree that **Ofsted inspections are a valid method of monitoring performance, holding colleges or providers to account** in comparison with two fifths (n=14, 40%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.
- Less than half of survey participants (n=14, 43%) strongly or somewhat agree that **Ofsted acts as a reliable and trusted arbiter of standards across the general FE sector**, in comparison with more than a third (n=13, 37%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

The view that Ofsted is a trusted arbiter of standards across the FES sector was also held by many interviewees, who argued that it was out of the question to game the system, for example:

It's harder for institutions to game inspectors because you can't just put in front of them trackers and be like here's what's going on. There is a real focus and exploration about how that curriculum is preparing learners at any level for their next steps (Tutor, Good or above college, interview).

The deep learning that is taking place is something that you just cannot prepare for in 24 hours. That's something you either do or you don't. Yeah, that was the big difference to me (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

The view that the current inspection framework focused on processes and policies was seen as an antidote against complacency by some participants who argued:

I think it's a positive, because it helps organisations make sure that they are delivering the best service possible to whoever's using it. So, if it is in the FE sector, you know with colleges, it looks at your policies and procedures [...] And I just I think it's a good thing. I think it's important that there is somebody there to catch us, so we don't get complacent [...] So I think it's for education. It's a must, you know. As educators we need to know that we are doing the best for our students or our learners (Tutor, Good or above college, interview).

- The great majority of survey participants (n=28, 80%) strongly or somewhat agree that **during inspection they felt their work was valued**, in comparison with more than a sixth (n=5, 14%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Some interviewees also stressed that inspection valued their work, which reassured their approach, for example:

Governors were delighted with the grade. Governors were really pleased because they felt that it validated the sort of whole college approach we've been taking for some time. So, I think that inspection was very helpful, very reassuring. (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

- The majority of survey participants (n=23, 66%) strongly or somewhat agree that **Ofsted inspections give the college or provider the chance to show how good it is**, in comparison with a fourth (n=9, 26%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Some interviewees saw as a positive aspect the performance that colleges and providers put in place in answer to the needs of inspection:

We have real opportunity to demonstrate and to put students in front of inspectors, and for them to see a broad range of work. I actually do like the deep dive element. The fact that they'll go in and they'll look, but that there's more than one deep dive element (Deputy Principal, Good or above college, interview).

4.1.1.2 Confidence booster

Stakeholders described staff and students coming together to demonstrate their knowledge and skills while being inspected and feeling proud after receiving a positive outcome of inspection.

More than half of survey participants (n=19, 54%) felt that during inspection they were able to **voice their concerns**, in comparison with less than a fifth (n=8, 23%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Participants described students feeling proud of being in a Good college or provider, and being helpful in answering to inspectors' demands, as if the inspection grade is also describing their own performance, for example as interviewees explained:

The teachers felt really ready and let's show them the amazing work we do. That was the feeling in the department... don't try to change anything... be yourselves as well in the inspection (Middle manager, Good or above college, interview).

Definitely saw the students really stepping up and engaging in another gear to showcase their skills...to support the college, their teachers and each another (Senior leader, Good or above college, interview).

4.1.1.3 Useful marketing strategy for recruitment

Several interviewees reflected on the positive impact inspection had also on students at the college and how Good inspection grades were helpful to attract future students and their parents, for example:

It will have more impact in terms of future recruitment once they get published reports and we're able to scream about the fact we're a grade one college at the moment (Senior leader, Good or above college, interview).

Once the college has received the grading, they are keen to push their Good grading out to the local community, as one respondent explains:

It's shared that we have been rated as a Good in social media, and obviously in any signatures and emails (Middle manager, Good or above college, interview).

4.1.2 Negative impacts of Ofsted in FES

Despite participants identifying three positive impacts of Ofsted inspection in FES, they were also critical of inspection and identified six negative impacts. Participants underscored that Ofsted inspections impacted negatively their (1) **workload**, (2) **wellbeing**, (3) **staff retention**, (4) **performativity**, (5) **innovation and improvement**, and (6) **empowerment**.

4.1.2.1 Workload

Most of the survey participants were critical about the impacts of Ofsted inspections on the increased, often unmanageable and stressful, workload brought by inspections into the system. More precisely:

- The great majority of survey participants (n=28, 80%) reported that **before and during inspection there was an increase in workload**, in comparison with around a tenth (n=3, 9%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

- More than half of survey participants (n=20, 57%) strongly or somewhat disagree that **Ofsted inspections create manageable work for tutors, lecturers or teachers**, in comparison with a third (n=11, 31%) who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement.
- More than half of survey participants (n=18, 51%) strongly or somewhat agree that **Ofsted inspection introduces unsustainable or harmful levels of burden into the system** compared with more than a fifth (n=8, 23%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

The message that Ofsted inspection created additional work for college staff echoed in the interview data. Some participants described the negative impact of inspection on their workload, for example:

Prior to the visit we get five to six working days' notice. And they will then call for all sorts of paperwork, a huge amount of paperwork, a lot of the stuff they can get off the college's website, because it will be there anyway. But then they will ask to be given access to incredible amounts of data around the learners, the destinations, attendance, punctuality, even individual lesson plans. Basically, they can call for whatever they want to call for. So, I didn't know how they organise all that to be frank because we've got something like 11,500 learners (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

This heavy and negative impact on workload was particularly felt for those reflecting on their experiences working in providers judged to be below Good, for example:

There were sometimes when you're Requires Improvement, where the level of administration that you have to provide of assurances are quite significant and they take up a lot of our time... because you've got this long list of things to get... you get a bit punch drunk (Senior Leader, Good or above college, interview).

However, not all our interviewees agreed that Ofsted inspection generated considerable additional work. Some college representatives explained how they managed Ofsted requests for data and how they pre-prepared materials in case of an inspection. As one explained, most materials were always ready for inspection.

4.1.2.2 Wellbeing

Most of survey participants and interviewees were critical about the negative impact of Ofsted inspections on all college staff wellbeing. This was due to pre, during and post inspection anxiety and stress, and increased workload detailed above. More precisely:

- The great majority of survey participants (n=28, 80%) reported that **before and during inspection, they experienced high levels of personal stress**, in comparison with around a tenth (n=3, 9%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Participants considered Ofsted inspections important and all interviewees were talking about preparing for it. Expectations were high and college staff were clearly committed and eager to sharing with inspectors their achievement. Already prior to the inspection, they felt under stress as one respondent described it:

The stress will inevitably get to you because it's a big deal, it's a huge deal... One or two [middle managers] definitely weren't [able to] handle it and we did have to give them some extra support during the inspection (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

4. Findings

Another interviewee emphasises that waiting for the inspection to happen for a long time will eventually lead to stress:

Because anxiety does build up over time, particularly if you know you've been on standby for inspection for a few months. It's going to be quite challenging basically... just waiting for them to come in and get over and done with... lots of pulling together more so than our usual work and really impacting massively (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

Participants described how the stress and negative effect on wellbeing was not individual, but reached a collective level as it cascaded from leaders and managers to the whole organisation, for example:

I just think it was [stressful] because the senior management team was stressing out, and they kind of projected their stress on the staff. And the EIF has been around long enough for people that needed to know how it works. So, it shouldn't have been a stressful situation at all (Teacher, Good or above college, interview).

Participants also described how stress led to staff leaving the profession, as exemplified below:

It's sad that things have deteriorated and the [inspection] visits are even more stressful. So many great teachers leave as a result - they don't want to focus on Ofsted prep instead of focusing on their learners (how can there be a disparity in these?!). The suicides that have followed inspections in the past will continue in the future if Ofsted continues with the inhumane approach (Survey open response).

4.1.2.3 Staff retention

Most of survey participants were critical about the impacts of Ofsted inspections on staff retention.

- More than half of survey participants (n=18, 51%) strongly or somewhat agree that **inspection has a negative impact on retention of tutors, lecturers, or teachers**, in comparison with less than a fifth (n=6, 17%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Specifically, as inspections outcomes 'make or break' careers, the negative impact on retention is through positive job changes and promotions as a result of a Good or above grade, as exemplified by one participant:

I think people have used the result as a springboard to leave... you've gone from Requires Improvement to Good, then they can go to any college (Middle manager, Good or above college, interview).

Inspection outcomes also may lead to forced staff departures out of the organisation and even the sector following a below Good grade, for example:

A lot of people had to leave the organisation... inspection ends people's jobs... I just think that it can't be right (Senior Leader, below, Good or above college, interview).

Inspection reports point to areas for improvement. In order to improve the grade, colleges have to make changes. This requires focused work and may include restructuring resources, as one interviewee noted:

So, it had an impact in that structures were changed ...we felt that we needed to change things and people.... This is where we need to make the improvements. Because if we don't focus in these particular areas, then we're not going to be on that continuous improvement (Senior Leader, Good or above college, interview).

4.1.2.4 Innovation and improvement

- Around half of survey participants (n=17, 49%) strongly or somewhat agree that **inspection stifles innovation and creativity in their college or provider**, in comparison with around a fourth (n=9, 26%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Participants stressed the 'opportunity costs' of inspection, or the things that they stop doing in order to comply, for example:

I always felt inspections removed my focus from student centred to Ofsted centred and these two, very unfortunately, are never the same (Survey open response).

- Around half of survey participants (n=17, 49%) strongly or somewhat disagree that **Ofsted is a force for improvement in the FES sector**, in comparison with more than a third (n=13,37%) who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement.

Participants do not tend to see the inspectorate's work associated with improvement but much more focused on external accountability, for example:

Is Ofsted genuinely a force for improvement? It gives a report, but the experience they get in terms of great practice, that's not shared, generally, across the sector (Senior leader, Good or above college, interview).

A few interviewees have also acknowledged the potential benefit of an inspection and that it should lead to improvement. One interviewee offered an example of inspection for how to achieve this:

Ofsted is meant to be a force for good. Their focus does not fulfil that aspiration. I have worked with many predecessor inspectorates, two of which I recollect did more proactive work with colleges through a link inspector and worthwhile, more frequent visits focused not on judging (weighing the pig), but on developing (nurturing the pig) (Survey open response).

- Almost half of survey participants (n=16, 46%) strongly or somewhat agree that **inspection undermines the ability of principals and managers to focus everyone's efforts on achieving the best outcomes for students**, in comparison with less than half (n=14, 40%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

The view of Ofsted inspection as a barrier to improve students' outcomes was particularly present in those working below the Good threshold, for example:

The students were negatively impacted because we couldn't apply for things when we were a Requires Improvement...The impact was we couldn't do T Levels when we wanted to do them. We couldn't apply for certain grants. We couldn't lead on things (Senior Leader, Good or above college, interview).

A below Good grade may push the college in a downward spiral as the quotation suggests. It is not only about having a negative impact but also about building barriers to engage with activities that could lead to improvements. On the other hand, a significant proportion of participants thought that inspection helped to focus everyone's efforts on achieving the best outcomes for students.

4.1.2.5 Performativity

Many survey participants and interviewees were critical about the performativity staff and students display while being inspected. More precisely:

- More than a third of participants (n=13, 37%) strongly or somewhat disagree that **during inspection they taught a 'normal' lesson or conducted a 'normal' day**, in comparison with around a third (n=11, 31%) who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement.

Over a third of interviewees described how inspection required an element of displaying and performing practices that are not necessarily representative of the college in general, but have a higher chance to deliver what is expected by Ofsted, for example:

there's an element of managing it as well 'cause you're not going to put certain teachers in front of them, you're not gonna put certain managers in front of them... So, the teams, the groups that they see, you're gonna try and put the right teachers, the right students, the right managers, because they're the ones that are going to say the right things (Deputy principal, Below Good college, interview).

Another interviewee describes Ofsted inspection as a play where both sides are aware of what is happening and what is expected and play the game:

There's lots of ways of doing it to help Ofsted and guide them through the right ways, so it's still not absolutely a natural experience the Ofsted inspectors are getting, it's better than it was. But it's heavily guided and curated... they know that they are being manipulated as well, of course, so they will counter for that (Deputy Principal, Below Good college, interview).

However, almost a third of participants argued that they carried on their work as usual, so inspectors got a true representation of the provision, as described by the following interviewee:

With this framework it was really more about what is the deep learning that was taking place and that's something that you just cannot prepare for in 24 hours. That's something you either do or you don't (Deputy principal, Below Good college, interview).

4.1.2.6 Empowerment

Most of the survey participants and interviewees described feeling disempowered professionally, especially when their own judgement of the quality of their work does not reflect the Ofsted judgement of their performance. More precisely:

- Almost half of survey participants (n=15, 43%) strongly or somewhat disagree that **during inspection they felt empowered**, in comparison with more than a third (n=13, 37%) who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement.

The sense of powerlessness was enhanced by the fact that the high-stakes outcome of the inspection is out of their control. *"I think it demoralises staff having a different communication around the standard"* as one Senior Leader noted.

Another interviewee describes how information flow about the college can get out of hand once the grade Requires Improvement, or Inadequate is publicly stated:

It's a terrible thing if a college gets Requires Improvement or Inadequate, it's a terrible thing, because it impacts in all sorts of ways, you can't apply for certain types of funding. Some initiatives are closed off to you if you're requiring improvement. And you know, it's had a terrible impact on the staff, and how these places are perceived, because I think the general public thinks this is really, really bad, if it says that, they don't understand, that it's a shorthand for this place is no good at all, which is absolutely not the case (Governor, Good or above college, interview).

Many also felt invisible when not being included in the inspection visit, for example:

They came in over the weekend to prepare to make sure the classrooms and everything was ready and all the feedback on the work, everything was there and they'd be disappointed because they didn't get a chance to show what they are doing (Middle manager, Good or above college, interview)

By contrast, over a third of survey respondents felt empowered describing how inspections reflected the quality of their work, for example:

I thoroughly enjoy inspections and see it as an opportunity to showcase the departments strengths and empower learners and staff (Survey open response).

4.2 Education Inspection Framework (EIF)

4.2.1 Strengths of the EIF

- The majority of survey participants (n=24, 69%) stated that the Education Inspection Framework introduced by Ofsted in 2019 was better than the previous inspection framework.

Many participants argued that the EIF is well established and guides their practice, for example *"I think it's a pretty good framework for the sector and I think the sector's getting used to it. Now I think it's landed"* (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

Interviewees identified that the strengths of EIF are its (1) **focus on the curriculum**, (2) **focus on student's learning and progress**, (3) **broader quality judgement**, (4) **better sub-judgements descriptors**, (5) **emphasis on leadership**, and (6) **trained and experienced inspectors**.

4.2.1.1 Focus on the curriculum

Participants found particularly valuable that the focus of EIF is on the planned, implemented and delivered curriculum through the deep dives, as opposed to the previous focus on test results, for example:

I like the quality of education aspect of it, where they split it up into the intent, the implementation and the impact. I like thinking about it in that way and I think lots of educators can relate to it. That this is what we intend. This is our planning and implementation. This is the impact of what we're trying to get (Deputy principal, Below Good college, interview).

Another interviewee also positively relates to the EIF and feels that inspectors can have a real insight into how the college and the departments work:

I can think of the deep dive also theoretically. It's quite a good way of getting the real picture of where the department or the college is (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

4.2.1.2 Focus on student's learning and progress

Participants also praised the EIF's focus on learning rather than teaching, for example:

It's quite a positive change because there's a lot more focus on the student and not on the teacher. So, how much progress the student is making, how much the student is engaged (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Another interviewee compares the EIF with the previous Common Inspection Framework (CIF) saying:

Before the inspector went in and out of lessons and seeing how the teacher was performing. With this framework it is really more about what is the deep learning that is taking place (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Interviewees have phrased their views in different ways but all clearly articulated the shift in focus.

So, I think the major strength is the focus being on curriculum and sort of current TLA [teaching, learning and assessment] rather than a focus on results or how the provider's doing in terms of where you can see things (Tutor, Good or above college, interview).

There is a clear appreciation of the EIF and each interviewee brought something slightly different into the fore when talking about the strength of the framework. Another interviewee explains why he finds the new framework useful:

From a teaching point of view, I like it. It's less high stakes for teaching staff, so it isn't about individual lessons and the sorts of tally of grades and how well they've done. There's more about the broader focus of a deep dive. So how is it going for learners in this area rather than how Jack's teaching is going to be assessed or measured or marked? So I think that's really useful as well (Tutor, Good or above college, interview).

4.2.1.3 Broad quality judgement

Participants valued the EIF's focus on aspects beyond academic outcomes. These included focusing more on the learning and learners' experience, for example:

[the EIF is] more focused on the learner voice, they're looking at it from a learning perspective. It's better because it's more versatile and less data focused, it is very much more applicable across all the different types of provision areas; the CIF was a little bit more focused in, and easy to hide behind some of the data and stuff (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Focusing on the learning was further detailed and appreciated by one interviewee:

The learning observations, they've been catalysts for change, I honestly appreciate that and the learning observations, you know, which are non-graded are very useful. And that comes across as more supportive and taking the risks and so on (Deputy Principal, Below Good college, interview)

The broad range of positive comments about opening up the ways quality was judged signal wide satisfaction. The EIF placing learners at the centre of attention has been well received, as another interviewee argues:

It's also trying to look much more on learners – impact on learners... I mean, when they introduced the framework, the new framework, they said this was putting learners at the heart of the inspection process. So, I think that's a positive, because a lot of the questions relate to teaching and learning, but also to student voice. (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

4.2.1.4 Better sub-judgements descriptors

Participants argued that the sub-judgement descriptors of the EIF - quality of education and/or training, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management - were more evidence-informed than previous versions and overall clearer in expressing what was expected, for example:

Behaviours and attitudes and personal development - I think the fact that it's based on research on cognitive load is obviously better (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Participants considered the EIF handbook as a valuable source of information, which can lead to better understanding of judgements and grading. Its helpfulness is explained by one interviewee:

I think the clarity of the handbook and the evaluation of how we'll be judged has been helpful. That overall effectiveness of the key judgments and the grade descriptors, and I think there is clarity in there, around what good quality provision looks like (Tutor, Good or above college, interview).

4.2.1.5 Trained and experienced inspectors

Most of the survey participants thought that inspectors' training and experience were conducive to making quality judgements using the EIF.

- More than half of survey participants (n=19, 54%) felt that **inspectors had the necessary expertise to make the judgement**, in comparison with a third (n=11, 31%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

As expressed by one participant:

In the deep dive the inspector was clear, reflective and discussed through evidence to support the judgements (Survey open response).

- Less than half of survey participants (n=14, 40%) strongly or somewhat agree that **those employed to undertake inspections on behalf of Ofsted have the relevant frontline experience, skills and qualifications**, in comparison with less than half (n=13, 37%) who strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement.

Positive experiences with inspectors while conducting the inspection helped participants value their role:

I worked closely with the inspector for three days in A Levels and this gave me a very good idea of what they are looking for but also the reasons of why they were looking at certain issues, and took a 360 approach (Survey open response).

4.2.2 Weaknesses of the EIF

Despite the aforementioned strengths of the EIF, survey and interview participants criticised that the EIF led to (1) **reductionist**, (2) **subjective**, and (3) **superficial** single-word judgements of the overall performance of the college or provider.

4.2.2.1 Reductionist

Many of the participants argued that the overall assessment of their performance was reduced to single-word judgements. This was often mentioned as an unfair qualifier that signals the quality of a college to the outside world but it is not substantiated and explained. Consequently, single-word judgements' overall helpfulness was questioned:

Inspection has limitations in terms of the fact that it tends to take over a college and you are limited down to that one number. And I think that limited to one number when you do so many things, it is that aspect of it that I don't like. You know we reduce something when we reduce a teacher to a number when you observe their lesson. There's so much more beneath (Deputy principal, Below Good college, interview).

Another interviewee argued that single grading may diminish the content behind the grade, saying:

I think you still end up with a kind of a tick box mentality, because although they're looking at these things, they have to have some way of grading what they're seeing, they have to look at the evidence, and at the end of the day, they have to give this thing a grade. And I think the danger is that you still end up with a tick box mentality (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Some survey participants also mentioned the reductionist approach taken when decisions were made considering a small amount of evidence:

There was still a heavy reliance on evidence as opposed to the wider evidence bank listed in the EIF. Deep dives did not always complete the full activity list and strong judgements were made on small amounts of evidence (Survey open response).

4.2.2.2 Subjective and/or inexperienced inspectors

There is plenty of evidence from the survey and the interviews that most participants **trusted inspectors as reliable external evaluators**. They acknowledged that inspectors had the necessary expertise to make the judgement and had the relevant frontline experience, skills and qualifications. However, many also criticised their **bias** and **subjectivity** they brought into inspecting, as expressed by a survey respondent:

There were some difficult inspectors - it felt subjective dependent on who you had (Survey open response).

Some also criticised their **lack of experience as teachers** working in the sector as another weakness. As one interviewee explained:

There are some crazy Ofsted people out there and there are some inspectors that...have their own agenda...I don't know whether they know it or not, or they're doing it on purpose or not, but some people, they bring their whole characters, don't they? ... and no matter how much you have a criteria and it's all meant to be objective, that's not really, what happened in a week inspection or a two-day inspection; 'cause it's not always that the judgement is correct. (Deputy principal, Below Good college, interview).

Different inspectors have different leanings, interests, skills that influences what they want to see in an inspection (Deputy Principal, Below Good college, interview).

Consequently "At the end of the day, it doesn't seem to be as objective as it promises to be... not the Inspection Framework itself" (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

4.2.2.3 Superficial

Participants were uncomfortable with the length of inspections (with number of days depending on the size of the college), and the conciseness of inspection reports that seemed too short, leading to first impressions or first impression judgements. This issue was particularly important when inspecting large colleges as one interviewee said:

I think also one of the limitations is perhaps in the way it's done around the amount of time you spend on an inspection for large colleges is perhaps challenging to inspectors to get to grips with it (Principal, Good or above college, interview).

This is further complicated for college groups where diversity and complexity are even greater:

Being inspected as one college group - when colleges might be very different and miles away from each other (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

Focusing on a limited number of programmes during inspection, and making far-reaching conclusions based on that evidence, is problematic in any context. In the college context, it would be difficult to find programmes that could be representative of other programmes. Given the diverse learner population in colleges in terms of, for example, age, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, college provisions are often tailored to needs. Therefore, general judgements based on evidence from one/limited programmes would be questionable as this is exemplified by an interviewee:

Inspectors will decide what areas of focus they particularly want to look at when they're coming to make an inspection, they'll say, you know, we're going to be looking at this, or this (...) And I think that's very difficult to make a general judgement when you're only looking at a particular programme, they will decide the areas of focus. And it depends what they choose. I mean, it's up to them entirely. You can't say (Manager, Good or above college, interview).

As mentioned by a survey respondent, the brevity of the inspection report does lead to a superficial approach to improvement: "Inspection reports are too brief and superficial. This does not aid improvement" (Survey open response).

4.3 Suggestions for improvement of Ofsted inspection in FES

Participants articulated the following five suggestions for policy and practice to improve Ofsted inspections in FES:

4.3.1 Suggestion 1: Reduce the high-stakes nature of inspection

Participants agreed that, for inspections to support the improvement of the quality of their colleges, they need to be less threatening, which could be done if the consequences of the inspection are less strong (i.e. making results publicly available, college closures) than currently. The following quotations point to similar issues:

I would ditch it completely and rework it to be customer-led from surveys. And then it would be a supportive visit from a central body, if you like, I wouldn't call it 'inspections' as such, in the first instance, to help put things right. And as an open and honest conversation, so that the Principal can say 'I've got these issues, what do you suggest we do about it?'; rather than Ofsted findings saying 'you've got these issues. What are you going to do about it?' There's a big shift of emphasis, it is very simple (Senior leader, Good or above college, interview).

I think we need to make Ofsted a bit less important, by which I mean a bit less of a huge set piece activity. The entire careers [and] colleges' futures rest on it now, so it becomes more normalised rather than this huge monster scary thing which, if done well, can be great, and if done badly, can be like, you know, [...] That's where we've got to... that the proportionality around that I think has gone wrong. That doesn't mean I don't think we should do them (inspections). I think it means we just need to do it in a way which normalises it a bit more. We need to get away from that sort of place where people think this train's coming down the track and if I get it wrong, that's game over (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

4.3.2 Suggestion 2: Make inspections more developmental and supportive

A large number of open responses in the survey and interviews stressed that Ofsted inspections needed to be non-judgemental and more supportive to aid improvement and share good practice. There is a call for Ofsted becoming “*more advisory rather than judgmental*” (Senior leader, below Good college, interview).

Ofsted inspection becoming developmental in nature has been mentioned by many respondents with all its benefits as one survey respondent wrote:

Ofsted inspections could empower staff to feel better about the work they do and subsequently inspire them to deliver outstanding teaching and pastoral support. They could also check whether the institutions fulfil their duty of care towards their staff, whether staff are inspired by their senior leaders (Survey open response).

4.3.3 Suggestion 3: Remove overall grades

In line with the developmental approach and with latest changes communicated by the inspectorate for the school sector, some survey and interview participants suggested the removal of grades and numeric systems and adopt alternatives, similar to the university Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) ratings. One-word grading has been rejected by participants, as one said:

I would certainly like to get away from this ridiculous overall judgement, the one-word judgement. That's the worst aspect. Because it's what's underneath that judgement that's important. And to just say, overall Good, it's not enough or overall Requires Improvement. And the fact that you can get that if one of the areas doesn't get Good. Well, it leads if you get Requires Improvement for leadership and management, which is what happened the previous time, and everything else was Good, you still get Requires Improvement overall. And I think they need to be much more nuanced in how this is presented (Governor, Good or above college, interview).

One respondent has been debating the usefulness of grades for individual departments:

Ofsted used to give departmental grades as opposed to themes, I would prefer that actual departments are recognised in their own individual way as opposed to the whole provider grading. Each department has strengths and weaknesses and staff feel that their department is not recognised in the overall Ofsted reports and would like departmental grading. (Survey open response).

4.3.4 Suggestion 4: Expand inspection reports

Participants suggested to make inspection reports more useful by making them more explanatory and tailored to support the expected improvements. Moving away from the one-word judgment and the inspection report becoming a supportive document that help colleges develop their improvement strategies would be welcomed changes. Context matters a lot, as one interviewee explains:

The reports have become too short. I remember when I used to get [a] 20 page report from ALI [Adult Learning Inspectorate], you actually read...that that was quite well received.. Now we might get a seven-page report and you think, well, crikey, that's it. We were six colleges at one point in the in the past. I feel the reports have got too short now. For the reports to be a bit more useful...a bit longer and some more contextualisation around the grades, those are the sorts of things that I think can improve (Executive Leader, Good or above college, interview).

4.3.5 Suggestion 5: Extend inspection visits

Changes to timings and logistics of the inspection practices were suggested by participants so inspection would become less concentrated and more spread over a longer period of time to give a true picture of the college or provider. This would allow inspectors to immerse more in the college culture, observe and experience nuances. This would lead to a better understanding of what the college is doing.

I felt rushed at times of the inspections. So, I will say just on the logistics, just to have a little bit more time, it's that they want to get a lot of information, try to cover everything, they type at the same time when they talk to you so I think they (the inspectors) should be little bit more relaxed. I am not sure if that's possible because I know it's difficult to try to go over everything. I think it was rushed.....And still, you know, we didn't have much control about what they wanted to do. I expected to have a little more. They say 'No, we've seen enough. That's the six students we wanted to see' I think it's a little bit of a limitation (Middle manager, Good or above college, interview).

5. Conclusions and discussion

Since the introduction of Ofsted inspections in the further education sector in 2004, it is timely to explore stakeholders' views about Ofsted inspections; in particular, their experiences with the current Education Inspection Framework (EIF). With this in mind, this study has employed parallel mixed-methods to survey and interview 54 stakeholders working in the general further education sector about the impacts of Ofsted inspections, and the strengths and weaknesses of the EIF introduced in 2019. Despite the strengths of the study, with its rigorous methodological design and novelty, its limitation is its small scale, so these findings are exploratory and should be interpreted considering the wider context and research in the field.

Distinct from the knowledge base identified in the studies included in the literature review, stakeholders underscored that Ofsted inspections impacted their organisations and themselves positively (working as a stamp of approval or quality assurance; confidence booster; and as a marketing strategy to attract future students and their parents). Yet, in line with the literature review, stakeholders also raised concerns about the negative impacts that Ofsted inspections are having in the sector, particularly on their workload; wellbeing; staff retention; performativity; innovation and improvement; and empowerment.

Hence, when considering the positive and negative impacts together, it is clear that stakeholders are raising concerns regarding the extent to which the Ofsted strategy (2022), as an intelligent, responsible, and proportionate force for improvement, is being implemented, particularly in those colleges and providers working in more disadvantaged contexts. The numerous negative impacts of Ofsted inspections identified by stakeholders in the FES is an important reminder that Ofsted inspections have strong consequences on colleges and providers. Therefore, we hope policymakers and practitioners will consider the negative consequences carefully in order to devise actions to reduce them.

Regarding the EIF, stakeholders were able to identify more strengths (focused on the curriculum, focus on student's learning and progress, broader quality judgement, better sub-judgements descriptors, and that it is implemented by trained and experienced inspectors) than weaknesses (reductionist, superficial, and could lead to subjective or biased judgements), so agreed that it is a step forward when comparing it with its predecessor.

A tension visible in the findings is the role of inspectors. On the one hand, stakeholders think that they have been trained and have the experience to make quality judgements of their institutions' performance, but on the other, they feel disempowered when inspectors follow their own agenda, are rushed and exclude from their judgements key aspects of the provision. In this line, the five suggestions for policy and practice articulated by practitioners propose significant changes to the accountability model of high-stakes, external evaluations present in England that, if implemented, could help the inspectorate to become a real force for improvement.

Ofsted itself is currently evaluating the process and impact of the EIF on the FES (Ofsted, 2023b), with some commitments already established following the Big Listen consultation published in September 2024. In the meantime, we hope this study will inform and complement policy development led by the new HMCI. In line with the findings of this report, it is promising to see the inspectorate moving away from single-word, headline judgements in the school sector, with a commitment to extend this across other settings, including colleges. Overall, this study identified strengths and limitations of Ofsted and the EIF, and highlight areas for improvement with a view to building a better FES sector that can drive the country's productivity, economic growth, social justice and skills agenda and respond to the demands of the labour market.

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