In this issue:
Where we are today
Testing and trialling events
Where we are today

Over the next five years, we will be moving to a very different further education system. Colleges and providers will be more focused than ever on meeting the demands of customers: learners and employers.

The Framework for Excellence (the Framework) is being developed to help bring about this radically different further education system. It will enable moves towards self-regulation by providing a clear and transparent definition of excellence, by informing the choices of customers and by providing increased accountability.

The purpose of the Framework is to:

- set out the levels of performance and progression required to deliver the highest quality provision to learners and employers
- provide clear, unambiguous information to learners and employers about providers
- be a management tool to help providers to improve quality
- enable moves towards self-regulation
- provide a transparent mechanism for the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) to support (or to challenge) providers.

The FfE policy paper will be published later in March.

Roger Marriot
Director of Quality and Evaluation
Increased collaboration: listening and responding to the views of the sector

In July 2006, the LSC published a consultation paper inviting the sector to comment on the Framework for Excellence. In total, 218 responses were received from colleges, providers and stakeholders; a written record of the views held by delegates attending consultation events was added to these. Colleges formed the majority of respondents.

The overall response to the Framework was one of cautious acceptance. The sector generally agreed that the principles underpinning the Framework were solid ones. There were, however, a number of caveats expressed.

- There was a strong preference for the use of the four-point scale from the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) throughout the Framework, and support for a single Framework that integrates the Framework for Excellence with the CIF.
- It was felt that a star rating on its own is too simplistic and should at least be combined with an accompanying statement.
- There was widespread support for self-assessment being the basis of the Framework, and a strong feeling that qualitative as well as quantitative judgements should inform overall performance assessments.
- Respondents felt that the timescale for implementation was unrealistic, with a view that this should be delayed until 2008.
- There were strong views that school sixth forms should be included in the Framework.
- There were widespread views that, given the growth and expansion of mixed-economy institutions, not only do the LSC, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Ofsted and QIA need to endorse and use the Framework, but so too should the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA).
- There were serious concerns that the Framework would increase rather than reduce bureaucracy.

It is also worth noting that there was much less support for the proposed principles and scope of the Framework from sixth form colleges than from other respondents.

So what has been done about these concerns?

Ministers have agreed to a revised schedule of testing and development: from September 2008 for FE colleges, sixth form colleges and work-based learning providers, and from September 2009 for all other providers. Ministers have also agreed to the use of the four-point scale from the CIF throughout the Framework.

The LSC has extended the number of interested parties to ensure that it is able to serve a greater number of needs. A wider group of stakeholders including HEFCE, HESA, QCA, the Cabinet Office, the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office now has input into the development of the Framework.

The principles of the Framework have been revised and extended to include development and implementation. It will evolve rapidly, with a rolling and transparent formative development process taking the sector rapidly but safely towards a self-regulatory environment.

The phrase ‘key performance indicator’ has been replaced with the phrase ‘key performance area’.
Testing and trialling events

In order to develop a fully functioning prototype ready for use by the summer, the second phase of development testing of the Framework has now started. This builds on the experiences of last year’s testing and trialling, and will also incorporate changes made to the Framework as a result of the consultation (see page 3). These workshop events will help providers to test the coherence and consistency of the Framework and its components.

We are specifically looking to test grade boundaries, identify any areas of systemic bias, experiment with a number of algorithm models and weightings, and compensate for differential application, among other things. The degree of burden will also be carefully measured to ensure that the Framework is practicable across the range of providers.

Invitations to attend these events have been extended to those providers and stakeholders who have been taking part in the testing and trialling process to date.

Launch events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 8 March 2007</td>
<td>Holiday Inn</td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 9 March 2007</td>
<td>Leeds City Hilton</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday 14 March 2007</td>
<td>Thistle Marble Arch</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-up events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 17 April 2007</td>
<td>Leeds City Hilton</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 20 April 2007</td>
<td>Holiday Inn</td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 27 April 2007</td>
<td>Thistle Marble Arch</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working together: QIA, LSC and AoC national peer referencing pilots

April 2007 sees the final evaluation of the eight, year-long, national peer referencing pilot projects that have been jointly sponsored by the QIA, LSC and Association of Colleges (AoC). The Institute of Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned to evaluate the pilot projects and, following its interim report in November 2006, plans to publish its final evaluation by the early summer of 2007.

Following its origins in the AoC self-regulation agenda and the LSC-initiated national project, the QIA assumed responsibility for the leadership of the pilots in April 2006. As identified in the interim report, the pilot groups have approached peer referencing from a number of perspectives including institutional reviews, validating self-assessment, sharing best practice, benchmarking and exploring a regulatory structure. Building on the tremendous enthusiasm from participants about the benefits of involvement in peer referencing, the final evaluation will draw out the key messages and will also assist with the roll-out of peer referencing across the learning and skills system. To support the evaluation, representatives of the pilots, which have involved over 60 FE colleges, meet for the final project workshop at the QIA in Coventry on 14 March 2007.
Bill Rammell MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education

In a written answer to a question about the Framework for Excellence raised by Boris Johnson, Conservative MP for Henley, Bill Rammell MP, the Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, replied:

‘The Framework for Excellence (FfE) and the associated strategies announced in the White Paper Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances will be developed and implemented as part of a coherent and evolving package of reform. The FfE should help to improve the quality of post-16 provision and support better-informed choices and decisions by employers and individuals, thereby contributing to better and more relevant outcomes for end-users, increasing skill levels in the workforce and increased productivity.

‘The framework is in an early stage of development and it is not possible to estimate potential savings in administration at this stage. However ... FfE will be more streamlined than existing arrangements and will reduce bureaucracy.’

Bill Rammell MP, 24 January 2007

This builds on Mr Rammell’s earlier public statement about the Framework:

‘The Framework for Excellence is a new approach to performance management. Both learners and employers will be able to identify the very best provision for their needs. It will also give colleges and others the information they need to help them improve their standards, specialise and focus on business needs and skills for employability. We want excellence for all and look forward to working with colleges to achieve it.

‘Our further education system is a great national resource from which learners and employers deserve the best. The sweeping reforms in our recent White Paper will strengthen it to make it fully responsive to the needs of our economy and local communities.

‘The Framework for Excellence, as a key measure underpinning the National Improvement Strategy, will help change the further education landscape.’

Bill Rammell MP, 24 July 2006
A clear definition of excellence

Why keep score if it doesn’t help us to do better? Chris Thomson, the Principal of Brighton, Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College, made the following point in The Guardian recently:

‘A scorecard (the Framework for Excellence) no more tells me, as a college principal, how to maintain excellence than a cricket scorecard helps a batsman hit double-centuries.

‘Scorecards are for team selectors and statistics collectors – so presumably the truth is that the scorecard isn’t for college principals at all, but for the government?’

The point may be true but it isn’t so easily applied to the Framework. To continue with the cricketing metaphor, the goal of the Framework is to ensure that batsmen, bowlers, umpires, the crowd and the journalists covering the match are all assessing the quality of play using the same standards – which has not always been the case in the further education system.

In fact in many cases, if colleges are the cricket teams, they are playing according to many differing sets of rules. Once we have all agreed the rules of play and what a double-century (in educational terms) is, we can go on to analyse who is hitting the ball well, and decide what steps we can take to emulate their success.

Mr Thomson’s point is one of several very helpful comments that have been made in various quarters about the Framework. These opinions are proving invaluable to the teams putting aspects of the Framework through rigorous testing, clarifying issues for providers, learners and employers alike.

Having agreement about what excellence in the sector means does not automatically make every college, training company and adult education service excellent. It does mean, however, that there will be a clear understanding of excellence; the Framework will show:

- which areas of performance are important
- what indicators will be used to assess that performance
- what level of performance can be said to be excellent.

And sixth forms?

If the rest of the post-16 sector needs the Framework for Excellence, don’t school sixth forms need it too? School sixth forms certainly do need disciplines to support their improvement every bit as much as providers in the rest of the further education system. Improvement of the further education system generally does not preclude the improvement of schools within that ambition.

But the straightforward application of the Framework for Excellence to schools would be extraordinarily difficult. Sixth forms are managed within the management arrangements of the schools to which they belong. So the emphasis in the schools sector is on developing schools’ self-evaluation, data systems and external accountability to address the scope of the Framework for Excellence as closely as possible.