**TIME TO STOP WAGGING THE DOG**

***“We just wish that providers would write about the improvements they have made, the outcomes of these and the impacts on learners, instead of writing about provision.”***

These words were spoken by Jen Walters, HMI Ofsted, during a recent meeting about how LSIS can best support providers in relation to the new inspection framework. They echo those of Lorna Fitzjohn, Divisional Manager, Learning & Skills Frameworks, Policy and Guidance Development Directorate, Ofsted, when she wrote, “By focusing on quality improvement, you **will** be ready for inspection”.

The message is clear, so why do so many providers feel unable to take it on? Perhaps we can’t quite believe our ears; perhaps it is more natural to be at odds with an organisation that was brought into existence to use external regulation as a way of raising standards, and whose method of doing this was through an infrequent snapshot of activity, than it is to embrace it.

Forrest (2005) suggests that “it is difficult to establish how the inspection process explicitly brings about improvement”; however, he notes that since it is internal rather than external change that is important in driving improvement, “the role of inspection is legitimisation of these internal changes rather than having a direct influence on improvement”. The September, 2009 framework for inspection makes this much clearer. The changes in methodology, the renewed emphasis on the centrality of the learner, the profile of the judgement for *Capacity to Improve*, the emphasis on impact and even the short notice period are strong signals of recognition for such a role.

This framework makes different demands on providers and therefore needs a different approach to self assessment and by implication to the self-assessment report. Inspection is no longer the snapshot on which a judgement is made. Using a variety of inspection methods, Ofsted regards every provider as up for inspection every year. The purpose of the visit is not so much to make the judgement but to test out the accuracy of the provider’s own self assessment and the appropriateness of the response that organisation has made to it. The underlying assumption is of a mature, self-regulating approach, where providers not only know where their provision currently stands but are also aware of the factors that make it what it is, are addressing contributors to underperformance, and have a planned trajectory for further improvement.

Most providers recognise the strong business case for quality improvement. They will have a reasonably good idea of where they currently stand and the most common approach is to write about this in the SAR, presenting the most convincing evidence to support that judgement and including plans to address the gaps. However “action plans abound, but action is rare” (Ofsted, 2008) and no matter how good the improvement plan may be, intention to improve is not the same as capacity to improve.

Providers also tend to find self assessment and the preparation of the SAR a tedious distraction from the real business of quality improvement (“The SAR – I hate that day every year”, said a colleague recently, at one of the LSIS *Prepared for Inspection?* events). Her railing was against the futility of a regime that undertakes self assessment for the purposes of writing a report (or a position statement) for an external agent (Ofsted, the Skills Funding Agency). Alongside others, this colleague was also aware of the futility of a report that makes judgements based on high level (historical) data and improvement plans, based on the same data that will neither improve the experience of the learners on which it was based, nor can be guaranteed to improve that of future learners. What football coach worth his (or her) salt waits until the end of the season before intervening to improve play? The effective football coach looks for the factors (root causes) affecting the likely outcome of the game, addresses these and continuously checks to ensure that the interventions are having the desired effect. By working at this level, the football coach is more likely to improve play in time to influence the outcome of the season. After all, if we want a dog to wag its tail, which of us would focus on the tail........?

So what’s the alternative? An alternative would be to distinguish the report from the process of self assessment. This would allow that provider to embrace the self assessment process – not just summative self assessment for the purpose of making a judgement, but self assessment as the starting point for quality improvement. So that they become engaged in a dynamic analysis of the improvement journey and the difference that journey has made to the learners, an anticipation of its continuation and a commentary on the organisational learning that is gained as a result. In this paradigm, each curriculum or service/support function team gathers its own ‘library’ of improvement stories, analyses the impact their interventions have had on learners and other stakeholders, evaluates what has worked, what has not (and why), uses this analysis to make a judgement and feeds the findings upwards with recommendations for next steps . Each upward layer of management within the organisation collates the reports for that level, and derives its own learning in order to make judgements about its own leadership and management of that area of work.

The result can be a dynamic report that is written by and for the organisation (although it will be read by external audiences, it has not been written for that purpose), is fully owned by the delivery teams, is self generating, focuses on the learner journey and maps back to the Common Inspection Framework rather than starting with it. Where the reports are written as regular updates on the progress of the teams’ improvement plans, the SAR remains current – and the teams are engaging in ‘live’ self assessment, making a difference to the experience and outcomes of their current learners.

Such an approach has implications for PRD groups and the focus of the reviews they undertake. The review becomes more than a validation of self assessment judgements, with direction for the host organisation to take forward in improvement. In addition, the reviewing organisation becomes a critical friend to the improvement plan itself, helping to identify root causes, monitoring its progress, encouraging the host to explore alternatives or change direction if monitoring indicators suggest that is needed – and importantly, supporting the host organisation in assessing and evaluating the outcomes of the plan and its impact on the learners’ experience. As PRD matures, we can shift the focus from peer review and development, to peer review **of** development, and as a result raise the game in the sector and also be prepared for inspection in whatever form it comes in the future.

**Carolyn Watkinson, LSIS**

**Programme Development Manager, Continuous Improvement**

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