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Ofsted – ‘brief encounters of a second kind’?!  
November 2006  

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Key words  
OFSTED, Inspection, Initial Teacher Training, Physical Education, Secondary  

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Method

The account is informed by data from various sources. ITT staff kept journals for a period of 7 months leading up to, during, and following the inspection in which they detailed their Ofsted activities, experiences and reflections. Staff periodically completed their journals recording the preparation, work and meetings they were involved in, and noting and reflecting on any problems, issues, concerns, anxieties, frustrations and/or other emotions they experienced. Documentary evidence in the form of Ofsted Handbooks, Guidance plus other paperwork the inspection generated was also collected for analysis. Finally, to augment and support the findings from the journals and documentary evidence, a review of related literature was undertaken. Analysis of the data involved identification of key issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on our experiences and reflections and the findings from the literature, a number of issues and limitations with the inspection process and framework are highlighted. Given these, we declare that we remain cynical about the whole process and the validity of the outcomes. We contest the notion that the inspection process is effective, efficient and cost effective and feel that it still places an enormous burden on providers. Further, we suggest that the framework is fundamentally flawed which could have serious consequences not only for the future of our own course, but for the future of ITT.

Introduction – A ‘brief’ update on developments

Since 1995, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)\(^1\) has inspected the quality of all Initial Teacher Training (ITT) provision in England on behalf of the Training and
Development Agency for Schools (TDA)\textsuperscript{2} (formerly the Teacher Training Agency (TTA)). A number of possible purposes of inspection in ITT have been identified including assessment for improvement, comparison, resource management (Williams, 1997), or compliance (Blake et al., 1995). According to the current Ofsted framework, the main purposes of the inspection of ITT are to:

- ensure public accountability for the quality of ITT
- stimulate improvement in the quality of provision
- provide objective judgements on providers for public information
- inform policy
- enable the statutory link to be made between funding and quality
- check compliance with statutory requirements. (Ofsted, 2005a, p. 1).

Ofsted inspection results are published and are highly significant because the TDA ‘has a statutory duty to have regard to the outcomes of them when funding ITT provision’ (Ofsted 2005b, p.1). The evidence gathered from inspections is converted to grades and is taken into account in the allocation of trainee numbers and funding to ITT providers, and in accreditation decisions. If any aspect of provision is judged to be non compliant, accreditation of all the ITT courses an institution provides may be withdrawn (Sinkinson, 2004). Following inspection, the TDA use the Ofsted data to produce ‘quality categories’ on an A-E scale (where A is the highest category), which are published as ‘league tables’. Thus, there is a close and crucial link between the outcome of the inspection of any course and the viability and reputation of the ITT provider (Sinkinson, 2004), with institutions standing to make significant gains or losses
consequent upon the outcome (Williams, 1997). Furlong et al., (2000) note how in
some instances, quality ratings have led to the disciplining of higher education
institutions (HEIs), whilst Ghouri & Barnard (1998) have reported that unsatisfactory
inspection reports have led to the closure of courses, and in some cases, whole
institutions. Similarly, Jones & Sinkinson (2000, p.81) warn how a poor Ofsted rating
can lead to ‘…course closure, while even satisfactory ratings can lead to uncertainty
over course quota, leading to a spiral of decline in course viability’. Indeed, Sinkinson &
Jones (2001) note how issues concerning funding allocations, trainee numbers and
institutional reputations, not to mention lecturers’ jobs, are a direct consequence of the
outcomes of inspections and argue that it is therefore vitally important that all involved
have confidence in the inspection methodology and judgments made.

Yet, generally the response to the inspection process from teacher educators has been
negative (Graham, 1997; Sutherland, 1997) and inspections have been viewed as
heavy handed and invasive (Furlong et al., 2000). Furthermore, concerns have been
expressed over the reliability, validity and credibility of inspections (Campbell &
Husbands, 2000; Cale & Harris, 2003; Graham & Nabb, 1999; Jones & Sinkinson, 2000;
Hardy & Evans, 2000; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001; Sinkinson, 2004; 2005) and the
methodology and/or ‘high stakes’ involved (Campbell & Husbands 2000; Jones &
Sinkinson, 2000; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001; Tymms, 1997; Williams, 1997). For
example, fired by a mix of dismay and frustration for the practices Ofsted and the TTA
demonstrated in the 1996/97 inspection of our secondary Physical Education (PE) ITT
course, Hardy & Evans (2000) highlighted numerous faults and limitations in the system
which they claimed needed to be addressed for it to have validity and credibility.

Following a survey of all HEI partnership providers of ITT courses, Graham & Nabb (1999) reported that fewer than 10% of 152 providers were confident that the inspection of courses was a valid, reliable and consistent process. Similarly, on the basis of analyses of published Ofsted inspection reports for secondary mathematics (Jones & Sinkinson, 2000; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001) and humanities courses (Sinkinson, 2005), a number of variations and inconsistencies in reports were highlighted. Sinkinson & Jones (2001) concluded that there was ‘much room for development in order that all participants in the process …are confident that it is reliable, valid and robust’ (p.235). In 2004, Sinkinson (2004) focused on the role of the managing inspector in effecting consistency of judgement and reporting in reports of four HEI-based providers. Revealing several important inconsistencies of reporting in the data and examples given, she questioned how confident providers should be about the consistency of judgements made through inspection.

Likewise, based on evidence drawn from inspections of ITT between 1996-1998 at the University of Warwick, Campbell & Husbands (2000) argued that the inspection methodology and the application of published criteria were insufficiently reliable to bear the weight of the consequences of the outcomes. Tymms (1997) meanwhile, adopted a simulation approach to estimate the likelihood of an institution being identified as non-compliant. From his analysis he concluded that ‘very satisfactory institutions have a high chance of failing an inspection’ (p.1). In a previous article (Cale & Harris, 2003) we noted how, the penalty for our ‘mediocre' set of grades following our first inspection of
secondary PE ITT in 1996/97 was a ‘dented’ reputation and a 10% reduction in trainee numbers with an associated loss of funding, not to mention reduced morale. Following a successful inspection in 1999/2000, we still reported many limitations of ITT inspection, and suggested that ‘the credibility of the process remains questionable’ (Cale & Harris, 2003, p.136).

Given the above, and following two further inspections in the past three years, we have felt compelled to once again share with fellow professionals our experiences and reflections on ITT inspection, this time based on our most recent ‘brief’ encounter with Ofsted. We use the term ‘brief’ intentionally here as our previous two inspections have both been ‘short’. Since last writing, there have been two further revisions to the inspection framework (Ofsted, 2002a; 2005a), and the current framework (Ofsted, 2005a) (as was the preceding one) is differentiated and comprises full and short inspections. According to the quality of provision, an institution receives either a full or short inspection (Ofsted, 2005a, p.1). Category A and category B providers receive a short inspection whereas category C providers receive a full inspection. According to Ofsted and the TTA, recent changes to the inspection arrangements propose to ‘both improve the effectiveness of inspection in ITT and reduce its burden’ (Ofsted & TTA, 2004, p.1) and aim to ‘be efficient and cost effective for both providers and Ofsted’ (Ofsted, 2005b, p.2). The focus of short inspections is on Management and Quality Assurance (M&QA) across an institution’s ITT provision as a whole (referred to as the M cell), and the main purpose is to check that, overall, at least good quality training provision has been maintained (Ofsted, 2005b). Thus, although individual secondary
subjects are still centrally involved in the inspection, they are no longer individually
inspected, graded and reported upon.

The secondary ITT course at Loughborough is a one year Post Graduate Certificate in
Education (PGCE) course which trains approximately 130 teachers a year in three
subjects, Design & Technology, Science and Physical Education. By way of
comparison, and as a follow up to earlier commentaries, this paper provides a critical
account of our 2005-2006 ‘short’ inspection, reflecting on the inspection as a whole, as
well as at subject level within one of the three subjects, Physical Education. In
particular, we consider the extent to which the process is effective, efficient, cost
effective, less burdensome and represents a ‘brief encounter’.

The account is informed by data from various sources. From receipt of the news from
Ofsted that we were to receive a second ‘short’ inspection until the publication of the
final inspection report, a period of approximately 7 months, ITT staff kept journals in
which they detailed their Ofsted activities, experiences and reflections on the whole
process. The journals were completed periodically, with staff recording the preparation,
work and meetings they were involved in, and noting and reflecting on any problems,
issues, concerns, anxieties, frustrations and/or other emotions they experienced leading
up to, during, and following the inspection itself. During this time, documentary
evidence in the form of Ofsted Handbooks, Guidance plus other paperwork the
inspection generated was also collected for analysis. In addition, to augment and
support the findings from the journals and documentary evidence, a review of related
literature was undertaken. Analysis of the data involved identification of key issues, some of which the literature revealed to be common to ITT inspection and all providers, and others of which were unique to our experience. Based on our experiences and reflections and the findings from the literature, a number of issues are highlighted and discussed in the form of a chronological commentary.

As before (Cale & Harris, 2003), the commentary presented within this paper, whilst at times critical of the inspectorate and the inspection process, is not intended as a reflection of the quality of the individual inspectors involved, nor should it be taken to imply that we are anti-inspection. To the contrary, we accept the importance of accountability and strive for continuous improvement in our course. However, we agree with Jones & Sinkinson (2000, p.81) that the inspection of teacher education should be open to ‘proper academic scrutiny’ and that ‘the Ofsted inspection process is not itself above critical examination’. As this paper reveals, we have also been very pleased with the outcomes, albeit not with the implications of, our last three inspections, a point which we re-visit later within the paper.

**An expected ‘brief re-encounter’**

Gray & Wilcox (1996) suggest that the frequency and scale of Ofsted inspections since 1992 represents external scrutiny on a scale hitherto unparalleled in the world. Given our last inspection had been three years ago, it came as no surprise to receive official confirmation on 23rd November 2005 that we were to receive another ‘short’ inspection. The Ofsted Handbook for the Inspection of Initial Teacher Training (2005-2011) states
that ‘providers will normally be informed of the inspection at least eight weeks before the
first inspection visit’ (Ofsted, 2005b, p.2). However, our inspection was to take place
during the week commencing 30th January 2006 and the Managing Inspector (MI) was
to make his preliminary visit on 9th/10th January, meaning we were given only 6 weeks
notice to the first visit and 9 weeks notice to the inspection itself. With the Christmas
holidays falling within this period, this left us with just 4 and 7 working weeks
respectively to prepare.

Added to the above, we received news from the TDA on 21st December that, in line with
cuts nationally, our ITT allocation was to be reduced. We were particularly concerned
to discover that the allocation for PE was to be reduced by a total of 21 places between
2006-2008. In percentage terms, this represented a 26.3% decrease in places meaning
we, along with one other much smaller provider, had been hit harder by the reductions
than any other PE ITT providers in England, irrespective of Ofsted category rating4.
Such cuts would have serious financial implications and pose a real concern for the
sustainable future of ITT at Loughborough. Thus, far from satisfactory ratings leading to
uncertainties over quotas and the viability of courses (Jones & Sinkinson, 2000), it now
seemed that ‘good’ ratings could lead to the same uncertainties. On top of the Ofsted
preparations therefore, lengthy and time consuming communication also began
between ourselves and the TDA to urge them to re-consider this decision, as well as
with Ofsted, the Association for Physical Education, our local MP and the Joint Advisor
to DfES/DCMS to alert them to the situation.
The timing of the inspection week itself was not ideal in that it was to take place during one of the busiest weeks of the PGCE year. The inspection fell during the first week back for the trainees following their first block teaching practice. During this week sessions were scheduled for the trainees from 9am-4pm each day and a number of administrative and other tasks also required completion at this time such as audits, school evaluations and personal tutorials. Given there is only one week respite between the end of the first teaching practice and the beginning of the serial practice in a second school, these tasks need attending to urgently in order that the relevant information can be passed onto schools.

In ‘theory’ though, since this was to be a ‘short’ inspection, we should have been more than adequately prepared and able to cope with the associated pressures and demands. However, when scrutinising the new 89 page Inspection Handbook more closely (Ofsted, 2005b), it became evident that there was still much involved in preparing for the inspection. The pages of guidance notes outlining the process, requirements and inspection activities made us soon begin to doubt whether Ofsted’s interpretation of the word ‘short’ was the same as ours, and we suspected that this was going to be no ‘brief re-encounter’.

**The ‘brief’ preparation begins**

On receipt of the news of the inspection, one of the first tasks was to inform all parties concerned, which led to a flurry of e-mails and letters. In accordance with the requirements of Circular 2/02 (DfES & TTA, 2002), our secondary ITT course is based
on a model of partnership between the university and schools and the university works in partnership with over 50 schools spanning five counties. Thus, numerous individuals required notifying about the inspection including the Dean of Faculty, Heads of Department/School for the three subjects, all full and part time university-based ITT staff, plus staff in the 50+ partnership schools.

An urgent task was fully familiarising ourselves with the requirements and procedures for short inspections outlined in the latest Ofsted framework and Handbook (Ofsted, 2005a; Ofsted 2005b). As in previous inspections, a managing inspector (MI), with the support of an assistant managing inspector (AMI) and specialist (subject) inspectors (SIs) would carry out the inspection. The MI arranges the inspection programme in consultation with the provider, manages the inspection team, and leads on the inspection of M&QA. In short inspections, SIs make judgments in a sample of subjects about whether the quality of provision is at least good, and contribute to the judgment on the impact of M&QA on training and outcomes (Ofsted, 2005a). We would be informed of which subjects were to be focused on during the MI’s preliminary visit but until such a time, preparations had to be undertaken across all three.

In summary, the short inspection comprises a preliminary visit by the MI and the inspection week itself. The process includes scrutiny of documentation, interviews with university staff, trainees, visits to schools and interviews with school-based staff including headteachers, professional tutors and mentors. These requirements were all familiar and reflected those of previous full inspections. Staff were thus well aware how
time consuming the above were going to be. A notable change from this to previous
inspections however, was the emphasis placed upon self-evaluation. In reality though,
the perception was that the only real difference between a short and full inspection was
that the former did not involve the ‘dreaded standard visits!’ (Cale & Harris, 2003,
p.154). The Standards visits assess the extent to which trainees meet the QTS
Standards⁶ and involve providers ‘grading’ trainees against the Standards and
inspectors judging the accuracy of this assessment. The issues and problems
presented by these visits and the grading have been well documented (Cale & Harris,
2000; Campbell & Husbands, 2000; Hardy & Evans, 2000; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001;
Tymms, 1997) and are not relevant here. Suffice is to say that their absence on this
occasion was as a relief.

Another imminent task was collating and in some instances producing the
documentation requested by Ofsted. On this issue, the Inspection Handbook states that
‘the minimum information necessary to carry out the inspection will be requested’ and
how ‘it is not intended to place heavy demands on providers to produce documentation
specifically for the inspection...’ (Ofsted, 2005b, p.4). The ‘minimum information
necessary’ and requested for the inspection is summarised in table 1.

Insert Table 1

Whilst much of this information was already in place and simply required collating and
presenting in a coherent fashion, in itself a time consuming process, other aspects took
a good deal of time to prepare. For example, as a provider keen to continually review, develop and improve our course, there had been a number of changes worthy of drawing to the attention of the inspectors within the ‘summary of significant changes’ and ‘subject questionnaire’ documents. It was important that we did not under sell ourselves by failing to provide full details of all such developments.

The tedious job began of printing, photocopying, collating and checking the documentation and organising it into evidence files for the inspectors. Administrative staff were paid over time to manage this task whilst tutors worked tirelessly without reward into the evenings and weekends to check the files. The outcome was four lever arch files (A-D) of documentation comprising: A: generic documentation; B: subject specific documentation; C: evaluation data; and D: record of training and meetings. On completion of this task, and to allow easy access to the documentation during the inspection week, the MI requested for the files to be duplicated three further times in order that each inspector had their own copies. To us this hardly involved providing the ‘minimum information necessary…’ (Ofsted 2005b, p.4) and entailed yet more time, effort and expense.

The Managing Inspector makes a ‘brief’ appearance

As noted earlier, the MI’s preliminary visit was arranged for 9th/10th January. In readiness for the visit and on request, an office with telephone and internet access was set aside and prepared for the MI’s use over the two days.
The objectives of the preliminary visit are to discuss any issues arising from the self-evaluation, clarify and establish the procedures for the inspection, prepare a pre-inspection commentary for the inspection team, and use preliminary evidence to form hypotheses about how effectively the provider is meeting requirements (Ofsted 2005b). During the visit the MI scrutinised the preliminary documentation and met with the Director of Teacher Education (TE), the Partnership Manager (PM), and subject leaders (SLs) from all subjects. He confirmed that two of the three subjects, Science and Physical Education, would be under scrutiny. During the meetings, the inspection programme and arrangements, including the schools to be visited, were agreed. In addition, the general needs and requirements for the inspectors during the week were discussed. These included meeting rooms, access to plug sockets, internet, printing, and photocopying facilities, car parking, lunches, refreshments and maps.

During his preliminary visit, the MI appeared keen to re-assure staff and answer any questions about the inspection and arrangements. Indeed, during a meeting with the Director of TE, the PM and SLs, and presumably in an effort to give re-assurance, he advised that we should ‘regard the inspection as free consultancy’. This comment raised a sigh of disbelief amongst the group as we pondered over the enormous cost to the university already incurred by the inspection in terms of staff time (including overtime), energy and resources. Before his departure, the MI shared with us areas that were to be a focus of the inspection leaving us feeling reasonably clear about the preparations that were required. Despite this, we realised that the main visit would seem far from ‘brief’ and that it would no doubt present many challenges.
The ‘brief’ build up

During the ‘brief’ build up to the inspection, numerous meetings took place. These included regular meetings between university staff, plus meetings between university and school staff and between university staff and trainees. The former were held to organise and agree the detailed arrangements, programme, procedures and protocol for the inspection week and to agree common responses to questions. Given the inspectors’ numerous requirements and needs, and because staff and trainees were so heavily committed during the inspection week and rooms were heavily booked for teaching, planning the programme proved to be a complicated jigsaw.

An important undertaking during the preliminary visit had been agreeing the sample of schools to be visited, based on the criteria the MI had given us. The MI and AMI would visit four schools between them during the inspection week. The MI requested that the schools selected should ideally train teachers in all three subjects, be in relatively close proximity to the university, include a mix of high schools (11-14 years) and upper schools (11-16/18 or 14-18/19), plus a school with a new mentor and a school that was new to the partnership. In theory, given the number of partnership schools we work with the selection should not have posed a problem. However, the criteria narrowed the field and we were left with relatively little choice as to which schools could be involved. Four schools which collectively met the criteria plus two reserve schools were eventually selected. Whilst we have confidence in our partnership schools and nothing to hide, we...
are also realistic and aware of the variable practice that exists amongst them and were
anxious about this being all too evident to the inspectors.

Immediately following the MI’s preliminary visit, the schools concerned were contacted
to inform them of their involvement and of the details of the inspection. In addition, we
proposed for the Director of TE and the PM to visit the schools, including the reserves,
approximately 10 days to two weeks in advance to help them to prepare for the visit.
The intention was to meet with the headteacher, professional tutor and mentors in each
school to discuss the purpose of the inspection and the issues that were likely to be
pursued by the inspectors. Conscious of the disturbance these ‘preparation’ visits
would cause, each school was offered a financial contribution towards supply cover to
release staff to attend the meetings. Whilst this was both time consuming and
expensive, previous experiences of inspection had taught us that it was best to leave
nothing to chance (Cale & Harris, 2003). We wanted all involved in the process to be
well versed and to feel adequately supported and prepared.

Given the short notice we and subsequently the selected schools received and the
limited time therefore available in which to conduct the visits, it was perhaps not
surprising that some difficulties were encountered. The professional tutor who was also
the PE mentor in one school was away on a school trip during the week of the visits,
whilst the PE mentor in another was involved in off-site professional development on the
day of the visit. All meetings nevertheless went ahead with the staff who were available
and they agreed to ‘relay’ information to ‘missing’ colleagues, as appropriate. Follow up
phone calls were also made by the PE SL to offer support and discuss any issues that had arisen during the meetings.

Whilst school staff on the whole gave generously of their time and appeared appreciative of the support they were given by the university, it was interesting to note that, despite ITT being a partnership, the consensus view seemed to be that it was the university that was being inspected as opposed to ‘the partnership’. This paralleled our experiences in previous inspections (Cale & Harris, 2003). On this issue, Cale & Harris (2003, p.138) remarked how, ‘despite the requirements for partnership…, it is interesting that the base for an OFSTED inspection is the university, and the resulting report is issued to the university’. Similarly Williams (1997) has noted how, regardless of the level of control actually exercised by the university, the public perception is that it is the relevant and responsible organisation. Indeed, Furlong et al., (2000) suggested how, because schools’ involvement in ITT is a voluntary commitment and one which, if they are found to be failing to deliver adequately, they can withdraw from at any time, it is those in higher education who are in effect held responsible. This point was perhaps exemplified by the comments made by staff in two schools during the visits who asked where they should send their invoices to cover the time they were to spend with Ofsted.

Equally though, it could be argued that we are in part responsible for and reinforce this view. On the one hand, and as we noted in 2003, we have endeavored over the years to involve all members of the partnership including school-based professional tutors and mentors in all aspects of provision and decision making. In fact, the progress we have
made in this respect has been formally acknowledged in our Ofsted and External
Examiner reports in recent years. Yet, as in previous inspections, as soon as Ofsted
arrived on the scene, aware of the high stakes involved and that, as highlighted by
Williams (1997), we would ultimately be viewed as responsible, we reverted back once
more to ‘driving’ the proceedings, temporarily abandoning the ‘true ethos of partnership’
we have worked so hard to develop (Cale & Harris, 2003, p.144).

Also of interest was the fact that the school-based ITT staff again appeared content for
us to take the lead and grateful for our intervention. Our experiences during this and in
past inspections (Cale & Harris, 2003) reinforce the findings of national survey and case
study work which have revealed that, whilst the role of schools in ITT is changing and
schools are generally willing to take on more responsibility for the support of trainees in
developing practical classroom competence, the majority do not want to take on more
than this and are unwilling to do so (Furlong et al., 2000). As a consequence, in the
vast majority of courses those in higher education remain ‘firmly in charge’ (Furlong et
al., 2000, p.113).

In addition to preparing the schools for the inspection, we also felt it necessary to
prepare the trainees. During the preliminary visit the MI established that the inspectors
would wish to meet approximately 50 trainees across the subjects. This number was to
comprise 23 PE trainees (29.5% of the cohort) plus 6 reserves. Within the sample, the
MI also requested for us to select ‘special cases’ or ‘stories’, which might include a ‘high
flying’ trainee, a ‘baseline’ trainee, and one or two trainees with special needs who had
used the services offered by the university’s Disabilities and Additional Needs Service (DANS). We had concerns with the MI’s requests on a number of counts. Firstly, the number of trainees involved seemed to be excessively high. Secondly, for the inspectors to gain a representative view of the quality of the course we would rather them meet a representative sample of trainees as opposed to ‘special cases’ or ‘stories’. It was also frustrating that the MI asked for additional information to be made available to the inspectors for each of the ‘special cases’ they were to meet, over and above the information already provided. This included a summary of the trainees’ backgrounds and details as to how their individual needs were being addressed on the course. This request resulted in the PE SL having to produce detailed notes about the trainees specifically for the inspection, contradicting the guidance given on documentation in the Inspection Handbook (2005b). Extracts of these notes for two trainees are presented in table 2.

**Insert Table 2**

A final concern related to the MI’s request to meet with trainees who had received support from DANS. This raised data protection and confidentiality issues in that permission had to be sought from the trainees to firstly share this information with Ofsted, and secondly to be interviewed by the MI about their needs, experiences and the support they had received.
Once the trainees had been selected, all were contacted and requested to attend a half-
day meeting at the university on 16th January from 1-4pm. The meeting aimed to
explain the purpose and process of the inspection and to help the trainees prepare for
their involvement. Trainees were also asked to bring their teaching practice files to the
meeting, records of mentor meetings and targets, plus relevant assessment information
including coursework.

Given the trainees were undertaking their block teaching practice at this time, their
attendance required them to miss half a day of school. All partnership schools were
therefore contacted asking for those trainees involved to be released from teaching
commitments on this afternoon. To minimise the inconvenience this would cause and to
try to ensure continuity and progression of learning for the pupils affected by their
teachers’ absence, the group were requested to plan any lessons they would have been
teaching in advance and pass their plans onto the usual class teachers. Thus, the
disruption caused by the inspection now extended beyond the university and the four
(plus two reserve) schools to be visited, to approximately 50 trainees, 30 more schools,
and hundreds of pupils.

During the meeting the purpose, requirements and programme for the week were
outlined and checks were made that trainees had all their paperwork in order. The
areas the MI had identified were to be a focus of the inspection were shared with the
trainees and the group was reminded of the course policies, processes and procedures
with respect to each. For example, we were aware that selection was to be a focus of
the inspectors’ questioning but it was over 12 months since many of the trainees had
been interviewed for the course. For some this experience had now become a feint and
distant memory and some memory jogging was required.

The PGCE course is demanding and intense at the best of times and concerns have
been expressed previously over the increased workload and pressure inspections place
on all involved, including on targeted trainees (Cale & Harris, 2003). Whilst staff
reassured the trainees they were not being assessed during the inspection they, as their
predecessors before them did, found it difficult to disassociate an assessment of the
course from what they felt would be an evaluation of themselves. Eager to present
themselves in the best light, it was evident that some were already feeling the pressure
and were concerned about the added burden the inspection was going to pose.

The ‘brief’ inspection gets underway

Predictably, the week beginning 30th January was particularly hectic and stressful for
university staff. Not only did Ofsted appear on the scene but, as explained earlier, it
was the first week back for the trainees following their first block teaching practice. The
Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, 2005b) clearly outlines the activities to be undertaken on
each day of the inspection week and this was closely adhered to.

The inspectors had a total of 16 files to read between them and set to work scrutinising
them upon arrival on day one. Given the volume of paperwork the inspectors were
faced with however, it came as a surprise that the MI should still want more. The MI
requested to see ‘raw’ school evaluation data which he was aware was being gathered from the trainees that very morning.

At lunch time on day one an orientation meeting was held between the PE SI and PE SL and mid afternoon the MI met with the Director of TE and the PM. The day concluded with the PE SI meeting a group of 8 PE trainees for an hour. Given that this followed a full day of sessions, we feared the trainees may not be at their best. Nonetheless, they were under pressure to ‘do their best’. During the meeting the trainees were reportedly asked about a range of issues not dissimilar to those we had anticipated and afterwards the general feeling was that the meeting had gone well.

Days two and three however, were when the school visits and the bulk of the interviews took place. Given that we were pleased with the progress and developments that had been made since the last inspection and the MI had forewarned us of the main issues to be pursued during the inspection, the interviews were not expected to pose too many surprises or problems. The MI had requested that the Director of TE, the PM, SLs and a further 15 PE trainees be interviewed over the course of days two and three and meetings were arranged around the school visits and the inspectors’, though unfortunately not the trainees’ commitments. This inevitably led to some disruption to sessions and to the learning experience for the trainees concerned.

The meetings with the trainees on these days involved separate group meetings with the MI and AMI and a sample of trainees selected from each subject, as well as
meetings with trainees who had been placed in the schools they had or were due to visit. Following these, the PE trainees again seemed reasonably confident that they had gone well and from their feedback it was evident that the inspectors were consistent in the issues and themes they were pursuing. Given the efforts we had gone to in briefing all concerned on such matters, we just hoped that the inspectors were hearing consistent responses.

A meeting was held between the PE SL, a senior PE colleague and the PE SI on day two. The discussion focused predominantly on developments since the previous inspection which we were keen and appreciative of the opportunity to elaborate on. Some searching questions were asked with regards to the impact of the developments on the trainees’ and schools’ practice, but we felt satisfied we were able to provide the evidence of impact Ofsted was looking for. Two lengthy meetings were also held between the Director of TE, PM and the MI which focused on a range of issues. Some of these included the issues being ‘pursued’, whilst others had arisen from the documentation and interviews during the inspection week.

Finally, the school visits went ahead as planned which involved the MI and AMI visiting the four selected schools. This aspect of the inspection perhaps troubled us most for a few reasons. For example, just as we were concerned about the increased workload and pressure the inspection was placing on trainees, we were also worried about its impact on schools, professional tutors, and mentors. Recognising that schools are under no obligation to be involved in ITT, Williams (1997) suggests that schools may
well opt out if unreasonable demands are placed on them. School staff had already
given generously of their time during the preparatory meetings and visits but it was also
clear from these that a couple of individuals were not overly interested or enthusiastic
about the prospect of their involvement. This left us wondering how well they would
prepare and perform for Ofsted for, as has been acknowledged elsewhere (Williams,
1997; Furlong et al., 2000), whilst inspection and quality control in ITT are a priority for
university staff, they are not for schools whose concerns are with its pupils. A final and
related concern was that, despite public perception and Ofsted’s view that we are
responsible and accountable for the quality of the school-based training, in reality, we
know we have minimal control and influence (Cale & Harris, 2003). Despite the above
however, we were hopeful that most schools and staff would do their utmost to perform
well in the knowledge that they were representing over 50 partnership schools. In
speaking to school staff after the visits, it was reassuring to hear that they felt the visits
had gone well and that there had been no surprises in the questions the inspectors had
asked.

The ‘brief’ verdict

On day three, and following a review and moderation meeting involving all inspectors, the
PE SI met with the Director of TE, the PE SL and a senior PE colleague to provide oral
feedback on the subject specific elements of the inspection. According to the PE SI, the
feedback was restricted to the ‘major areas of strength’ she had identified and the aspects
that made the practice distinct. The feedback was extremely positive with a few of the
more notable comments including:
‘The overall judgement is that there are many elements of very good and outstanding practice’.

‘The course is innovative and there is an ethos of continuous improvement’.

‘Loughborough trainees are real ambassadors for the course and the profession’.

‘The course fully reflects best practice across the country’.

Such feedback naturally raised staff’s hopes that overall we would achieve the outcome we were hoping for. However, we were also well aware that under the new inspection framework the focus was on the M&QA of the whole provision, and that whilst the judgment made in PE contributed to the overall judgement, the quality across subjects and the provision was also crucial.

On day four the MI and AMI met to collate, review and moderate the inspection evidence, had a final meeting with the Director of TE and the PM, and spent the remainder of the day drafting their inspection report. All that then remained for the final day was for the MI and AMI to provide feedback to ITT staff on M&QA and on the quality of training, during which staff listened intently as the inspectors relayed their findings. Much to the relief of all, the feedback was again overwhelmingly positive with ‘many excellent features’. A few minor issues were highlighted, some of which we agreed with but some of which we felt could be challenged.

The above point raises questions with regards to how Ofsted conduct the business of giving feedback. Whilst in both feedback meetings the atmosphere was pleasant and
the comments on the whole very positive, the sessions were not seen as a forum for discussion or an opportunity for professional debate. Following our first inspection in 1996, Hardy & Evans (2000, p.70) expressed their views of such a practice suggesting that ‘to reduce discussion of the complexity of ITT provision to an across-the-table (one-way) ‘exchange of views’ was as preposterously risible as it was unhelpful’. Likewise, Campbell & Husbands (2000) have highlighted the limitations of such a system in which decisions are made without dialogue or discussion, arguing that a process designed to contribute to quality enhancement would be committed to outward looking dialogue. Nonetheless, during the meeting we tried unsuccessfully to engage in dialogue with the inspectors over a couple of points of inaccuracy.

Further frustrations with the feedback process were that, despite the amount of positive verbal feedback relayed to us, not all of it would appear in the final report and, because the report was yet to be moderated, no grade could be given to us until after this had taken place. With regards to the moderation of short inspections, the Inspection Handbook explains how, during the moderation meeting the MI and AMI ‘will match carefully the evidence to the grade criteria for the M cell’ which will ‘lead to a recommendation for the provisional grade…’ (Ofsted, 2005b, p.72). A moderation panel then meet to review the report and consider whether the evidence is accurately reflected in the draft report and to moderate and agree the provisional grade. Following this, a draft report is sent to the provider who is invited to check its factual accuracy prior to publication (Ofsted, 2005b). Thus, if we simply did not agree with the judgment or any of the content, we were relatively powerless to change it.
We sincerely hoped that the MI was to recommend a grade 1 for M&QA and present sufficient evidence for this to be agreed at the moderation panel. Whilst in theory this seemed a thorough process, we were still left wondering what exactly the moderation process entailed and whether it had and would be afforded the time it deserved and needed. Certainly flaws have been identified with the moderation of judgements in the past. For example, in Sinkinson’s (2004) study of the role of the MI in effecting consistency of judgement and reporting on four HEI-based ITT providers, several important inconsistencies were highlighted and discussed in terms of the actual and potential role of the MI as the final moderator of consistency. Although Sinkinson (2004) considers that a ‘positive step forward’ has since been made in that Ofsted’s recent frameworks involve on site moderation meetings at each stage of the inspection (Ofsted, 2002b; 2005b), we still felt relatively in the dark and uneasy about the process. On this note, Ofsted’s procedures have been described as ‘clandestine’ (Campbell & Husbands, 2000) and to be ‘kept behind OFSTED’s walls’ (Sinkinson & Jones, 2001, p.235). Sinkinson (2004) notes for example, how Ofsted does not yet allow public or academic access to original inspection data, whilst Sinkinson & Jones (2001, p.235) recommend that such ‘…evidence bases from which assessments are made and moderated should be made transparent and explicit to all involved…’. According to Jones & Sinkinson (2000), transparency is crucial if there is to be confidence in the system.

A ‘brief’ celebration
Following the inspection week, many tasks remained. These included checking and confirming the verbal feedback we had received during the feedback meetings with all in attendance (which was important in the event of us wishing to challenge the outcome or any aspects of the draft report), communicating the feedback to all concerned (including school and university staff, trainees, the Dean of Faculty and Heads of School/Department), and thanking them for their support. The latter also involved sending personalised thank you letters to the schools, professional tutors, mentors and trainees who had been directly involved in the inspection.

In addition, and in light of the feedback we had received, we wasted no time in writing to TDA, Ofsted and our MP once again concerning our reduced ITT allocation. We wished to share the feedback with them and also now question the rationale for cutting numbers on a PE course described as ‘reflecting best practice across the country’. In addition, after the inspection was over we quizzed the MI over the anomalies within the new inspection framework whereby a good (or very good) provider is unable to improve its category rating from B to A. We also asked how a 26.3% reduction in our allocation for PE could be justified when the course reflected ‘best practice’. The MI replied that these were interesting questions which should be pursued with Ofsted and the TDA. We took his advice but this has been to no avail.

In April 2006 we received a copy of the draft report with confirmation that we had again achieved a grade 1 for M&QA and we were pleased to read that, in Ofsted’s eyes, ‘the partnership provides excellent training’ (Ofsted, 2006, p. 5). Furthermore, a number of
key strengths were identified and only two relatively minor points for consideration. It was also satisfying to see that a number of very positive comments relating specifically to the PE course featured within the report. As we expected following the inspectors’ verbal feedback, there were a few issues we wished to and subsequently challenged within the draft report. This resulted in yet further work but on the whole, our points were accepted and minor changes were made to the final report which was published in June 2006.

Whilst the grade 1 was well received, we were nevertheless amazed and exhausted by the work entailed by this ‘short’ inspection which, we had been led to believe, would be effective, efficient, cost effective and less burdensome (Ofsted, 2005b; Ofsted & TTA 2004). In our eyes, the inspection, far from being a ‘brief encounter’ had been an enormous burden on university and school staff and on trainees. With regards to ‘cost effectiveness’ and constituting the ‘free consultancy’ the MI proposed it to be, it had proven to be a huge financial burden on the university in terms of staff time, energy and resources.

In addition, the inspection could prove to be very costly to the university in other ways. For example, the time staff spent on preparing for, undergoing and recovering from the inspection detracted from and barred other important aspects of their work at the time such as conducting research and securing publications for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. Potentially the greatest cost of inspection, however, is that under the new inspection framework, despite having undergone two successful short
inspections and achieving a grade 1 for M&QA, we remain a category B priority provider. In this respect, we are susceptible to further cuts in our ITT allocation and funding and therefore, in terms of our financial viability and future, continue to be vulnerable. This surely raises serious questions over the effectiveness and efficiency of the inspection. Earlier, it was noted how one of the purposes of inspection was to ‘stimulate improvement in the quality of provision’ (Ofsted, 2005a, p.1). In our view, a framework which fails to recognize or reward improvement, or which it could be argued in our case punishes it, is fundamentally flawed and can do little to ‘stimulate improvement’. To the contrary, such a system leaves providers like ourselves feeling frustrated, dismayed and potentially de-motivated.

Further, given the limitations inherent in the inspection methodology, some of which have been highlighted here and others elsewhere (Campbell & Husbands, 2000; Cale & Harris, 2003; Hardy & Evans, 2000; Jones & Sinkinson, 2000; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001; Tymms, 1997), plus the measures we felt we had to take to prepare all involved, we remain cynical about the credibility of the whole process and the validity of the outcomes. Upon making a similar point in our earlier paper we asked ‘What did the report and the grades really reflect and mean? (Cale & Harris, 2003, p.156). Indeed, we believe that our inspection results in part reflect the lessons we have learned over the years in ‘how best to organise, manage and manipulate the inspection process!’ (Cale & Harris, 2003, p.157).
Make no mistake, we agree with Ofsted that the Loughborough PGCE partnership is a quality course. Further, we are keen to further develop and improve our provision. However, and particularly within the current framework under which we are destined to be forever ‘good’, this is in spite of, rather than because of inspection. Others (Campbell & Husbands, 2000; Graham & Nabb, 1999; Sinkinson & Jones, 2001) hold similar views that, contrary to the intended purposes of inspection, the process contributes little to improvement and quality enhancement in ITT. Sinkinson & Jones (2001) for example, note how there appears to be little confidence amongst providers that the feedback given by Ofsted contributes to the development of practice, whilst the survey conducted by Graham & Nabb (1999) revealed that three quarters of providers feel that the system receives insufficient overall feedback about good practice based upon inspection evidence. Similarly, Campbell & Husbands (2000) argue that an inspection regime designed to ensure compliance, and in which criteria are imposed, and decisions are made without dialogue or discussion is ‘able to contribute little to system improvement’ (p.47). It has even been suggested that, far from leading to improvements in ITT, the framework, with its limited conception of quality, failure to acknowledge ‘value added’, and narrowly defined orthodoxy of what is appropriate in ITT within which providers are required to simply comply, threatens development and innovation (Sinkinson & Jones, 2001).

**A final ‘brief’ comment**

As the situation stands at present, given ‘the overall quality of our training is at least good’, we are due to receive another short inspection in three years. By this time, we
will have lost 26.3% of our PE quota, trainees who Ofsted describe as ‘real
ambassadors for the profession’, the financial implications of which could jeopardize the
future of our ‘excellent training’ (Ofsted, 2006, p.5). Further, if we are to face a third
‘brief Ofsted encounter’, we will likely re-encounter the same process and frustrations
and, at best, again be destined to the same positive yet punitive outcome.

Based on our experiences and reflections and the findings from the literature, we contest
the notion that the inspection process is effective, efficient and cost effective and feel that it
still places an enormous burden on providers. Further, as our account illustrates, the
process hardly represents a ‘brief encounter’ and it certainly does NOT constitute ‘free
consultancy’! What the cost of preparing for and undergoing the inspection itself was in
terms of staff time, energy and resources is anyone’s guess but worryingly, the worst
expense may still be to come. The current inspection framework which, in our view, is
fundamentally flawed could ultimately cost us our ITT course. Our colleagues were ‘fired
by dismay and frustration for the practices’ Ofsted and the TTA (now TDA) demonstrated in
1996/97 (Hardy & Evans, 2000, p.58). Disappointingly almost 10 years on, and despite
revised frameworks and promises of improvement, we too are not only fired by dismay and
frustration at their practices, but deeply concerned about the impact these may have on the
future of ITT.

Footnotes

1. Ofsted is the inspectorate for children and learners in England. They are a non-
ministerial government department accountable to parliament that inspects the
quality and standards of publicly funded education and child care services. They inspect, report on, and regulate schools, colleges, teacher training, childcare, children’s services, and youth work.

2. The Training and Development Agency for Schools (the TDA) is an executive non-departmental public body of the Department for Education and Skills. It was formed in 2005 from the merger of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and the National Remodelling Team (NRT). The TDA have responsibility for the initial recruitment and training of teachers and for promoting teaching as an attractive career option. In addition, they have the wider remit for the training and development of the whole school workforce. With regards to ITT, the TDA has a statutory function to accredit and fund providers of ITT who can demonstrate that they will satisfy the Secretary of State's criteria for ITT and to allocate trainee numbers.

3. Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses are University-based initial teacher training courses for graduates and those with equivalent level qualifications, which, on successful completion, lead to recognition of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The duration of a PGCE course is normally one year, with 24 weeks of the course being spent in at least two different schools.

4. The TDA has a legal duty to make decisions on ITT allocations based upon quality of provision and use Ofsted inspection gradings/categories as the quality measure. Due to achieving a grade 1 for Management and Quality Assurance following our previous inspection, Loughborough was assigned ‘category B priority’ status under the previous inspection framework. Under the formula that was applied, and in line with other category B priority providers, we were subjected to an overall 11%
reduction in numbers across three years. However, the other two ITT subjects
offered at Loughborough are both shortage subjects and are therefore protected
from any cuts. As a result, PE was particularly disadvantaged in that it had to carry
the entire reduction.

5. Circular 2/02 (DfES & TTA, 2002) sets out the Standards for the award of qualified
teacher status (QTS) and the requirements for Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The
requirements for ITT specify what providers must do and are organised into four
sections: trainee entry requirements; training and assessment; management of the
ITT partnership; and quality assurance. Under 'management of the ITT partnership'
all providers must, amongst other requirements, work in partnership with schools
and actively involve them in planning and delivering ITT and in the selection and
assessment of trainees.

6. The Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Standards are outcome statements that set out
what a trainee teacher must know, understand and be able to do to be awarded
QTS. At the time this research was undertaken, these were organised in three inter-
related sections: Professional Values and Practice; Knowledge and Understanding;
and Teaching.

7. Presently, the only providers protected from the TDA’s allocation cuts are category A
providers. However, the current Ofsted framework does not allow good or very good
providers to shift from category B to category A status following a short inspection. It
only permits confirmation of a previous grade. Furthermore, as a good or very good
provider, providers are not eligible to receive a full inspection.
8. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and assesses the quality of research in universities and colleges in the UK. The RAE provides quality rating for research in each HEI across all disciplines and the outcomes are published. Its main purpose is to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. Thus, institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant.
References


### List 1 - Documentation requested for the MI’s preliminary visit

- Examples of programme or course reviews undertaken since the last inspection, together with improvement/action/development plans
- Summary of any significant changes to course design and structure, staffing, resources and partnership arrangements since the last inspection
- Course handbooks, including handbooks in all subjects/curriculum areas and GPS
- Equal opportunities and race relations policies
- Details of the schools in which trainees were placed
- The partnership agreement (including the rationale for the partnership) and partnership handbook
- Details of how resources are allocated between central and school-based provision
- Management structures for ITT and quality assurance arrangements, together with examples of committee meetings illustrating how the provision is managed and/or quality assured
- A list of all staff involved in ITT and their main responsibilities
- Job descriptions for senior ITT managers and for partnership management roles
- External examiners’ arrangements for ITT, terms of reference and reports

### List 2 – Additional documentation requested for the main inspection

- A selection of GTTR forms for trainees, including in those subjects for which there is no specialist inspector
- Guidance for selection interviews and a sample of selection/interview records for each course, including in those subjects for which there is no specialist inspector
- Assessment records and reports for a sample of trainees for each course
- External examiners’ reports for the previous three years (those not provided for subject inspectors)
- Any quantitative data used for benchmarking or evaluation purposes (e.g., employment data)

### List 3 - Subject specific documentation requested for the main inspection

- The subject questionnaire (summarising the changes to the course since the last inspection)
- A list of trainees giving age, ethnicity, gender and subject qualifications
- A sample of ten GTTR forms for trainees
- External examiners’ reports for the past three years and any other monitoring or evaluation reports
- Procedures for assessing and responding to the needs of individual trainees,

**Plus, documentation for those trainees to be interviewed**

- Examples of mentor records to include weekly training plans and details of training activities
- Examples of short and medium term lesson planning
- Lesson observations and formative action plans
- Subject knowledge and ICT audits or other assessments
- Copies of completed assignments
Table 2 – Example summary information provided for the inspectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainee 1 – female ‘high flyer’</th>
<th>Trainee 2 – male ‘baseline’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Graduated with a first class honours degree from Loughborough University in Sports Science with Management in 2004.</td>
<td>• Graduated with a 2:2 joint honours degree from Loughborough University in English, Physical Education and Sports Science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Completed a number of pedagogy related modules (such as equity and inclusion in physical education, adolescence, and analysis and performance in sport (covering dance, swimming, basketball and hockey) as part of her degree course.</td>
<td>• Completed a number of pedagogy related modules (such as equity and inclusion in physical education, teaching and coaching studies, young people, physical activity and pedagogy, and analysis and performance in sport (covering rugby, football, athletics and dance) as part of his degree course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prior to the PGCE course, worked as a teaching assistant in a local secondary school primarily working with children with severe learning and behavioural difficulties.</td>
<td>• Prior to the PGCE course was elected to work for a year in University Sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is particularly strong in the area of invasion games (most notably hockey).</td>
<td>• Is strong in the area of games (most notably rugby and tennis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acted upon all of the recommendations made to her at and post-interview (including gaining a first aid qualification, attending the booster course in gymnastics, and developing subject knowledge in cricket and rugby).</td>
<td>• Acted upon 2 of the 3 recommendations made to him at and post-interview (due to limited availability of places, his application for the gymnastics and dance booster courses was unsuccessful).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has produced an excellent first piece of written work for PE (rated ‘very good’ - (subject to moderation)).</td>
<td>• Has produced written work in PE and GPS of a satisfactory (subject to moderation) and good standard respectively to date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has made very good progress in her teaching on the course to date. The professional tutor at her phase 1 school has specifically written to the TEU informing us what an excellent trainee she has been.</td>
<td>• Has suffered a couple of personal setbacks during the course but has made adequate progress in his teaching during phase 1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The trainee is being challenged via the general and subject specific methods and strategies outlined in the TEU policy paper ‘Meeting Individual Needs’ and within the PE Subject Questionnaire. A specific PE example includes the targets set/agreed for him for phase 1, which focus on developing subject knowledge and observing and gaining experience of gymnastics in schools (given he was not accepted onto the gymnastics booster course prior to the course), and gaining a first aid qualification (a recommendation made at interview that he did not achieve).

The trainee’s prior work experience has given him a good deal of confidence and his social and communication skills are well developed. In this respect, he was invited to put himself forward as a candidate to represent his group on the staff-trainee committee (and was voted by his peers to assume the role of staff-trainee representative).

She is also being challenged to further develop her subject knowledge in some areas by registering for relevant coaching courses organised by the Sports Development Centre here at the university.
He is also a popular and well respected member of his practical group who has been instrumental in promoting the use of LEARN (the university’s server for on-line teaching and learning’) and the subject knowledge development groups (within practical groups).