Until recently in England, local authorities were the providers of educational services for young people permanently excluded from school. Schools had responsibility for young people who they suspended and excluded on a short-term basis. The government is now changing the ways in which these statutory obligations are distributed. Pupil Referral Units, previously run by local authorities, are able to become Academies. The government has also been trialing the devolution of alternative education funding and commissioning to schools so that they become fully responsible for ensuring that permanently excluded young people and others unable to attend school are ensured a full-time education. The government’s intention is to make this a universal approach.

OfSTED and the ConDem government are clear that alternative education must provide remedial educational and therapeutic support so that young people can return to mainstream education. The explicit intention is to regulate the alternative education market, and to extend the reach of government audit and inspection regimes in part through school commissioning processes, and in part via OfSTED. Alternative education providers are to be inspected and required to meet a modified standards agenda in which attendance data, tests and examinations will be key.

It is in this context that The Princes Trust commissioned a research project to investigate the possibility/desirability of developing a “fit for purpose” quality framework which the sector might potentially self-manage. This paper reports on the range of issues that underpin our thinking about an approach to quality different from the dominant English standards and audit assessment mode. The paper draws on a review of international literatures including that on quality, consultation with key national alternative education providers in the third sector, and eleven qualitative case studies of alternative education provision in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Our analysis suggests that there are two primary, key issues, germane to both quality and inclusion which underpin the development of a “fit for purpose” quality framework for alternative education, viz:

1. whether the purpose of alternative education is to fix the student, offer a flexible learning alternative with multiple possible outcomes, and/or also to work to transform the system from which the students have been pushed out, and

2. whether it is possible to expect the same outcomes of alternative education provisions which are both full-time and part-time, long and short-term and offer a diverse variety of educational, social, therapeutic and vocational approaches.