

Pursuing excellence:
an outline improvement
strategy for consultation

Developed by QIA in
partnership with
organisations in the
further education system

Deadline for responses: Friday 20 October 2006
Email: pursuingexcellence.feedback@qia.gsi.gov.uk

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Foreword

It gives us great pleasure, on behalf of our national partners,¹ to introduce *Pursuing Excellence*, the outline Improvement Strategy for the further education (FE) system.

The relationship between a prosperous economy, a fair society and our national skills base is well known and has most recently been persuasively argued by Lord Leitch.² Skills enable productivity and growth, which are of benefit to individuals, communities and the country.

As colleges, providers and employers, you have a central role to play in this national effort. Through your organisations, millions of people - from the age of 14 upwards - learn skills and gain qualifications every year. You are helping the country to tackle some long-standing skills gaps. Your success rates are rising steadily. However, as excellent as all this is, we agree with Sir Andrew Foster that the further education system has unrealised potential.

The radical reforms in the White Paper, *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances*³ will help your organisations to realise that potential. The success of the Government's strategies for 14-19 and skills depends upon this. At the heart of the reforms is the drive for improvement - that is, the pursuit of excellence. We all want every young person and adult to enjoy a high-quality learning experience and achieve their goals. We all want to see vigorous action to end performance that is poor or that, while satisfactory, is not improving. We believe that excellence can be achieved.

You have said - rightly - that improvement cannot be imposed or imported. It is for you to assess where you are and where you want to be, to plan how you will get there and to make the journey. But you do not need to travel alone.

The national Improvement Strategy will offer you an action plan towards excellence. For the first time, it brings together all the national partner organisations that plan, fund, inspect and support the further education system. It will ensure that you get the support you need, basing your ambitions and plans for excellence on objective evidence from the new inspection regime and the *Framework for Excellence* which the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is to publish for consultation and which complements this strategy. Colleges and providers that need particular help will receive it. And the culture across the whole system will be one of continuous improvement.

The White Paper was published only a few months ago - a response to the majority of recommendations from Sir Andrew Foster's excellent report on further education.⁴ Since then, we have considered the challenges, we have examined the available evidence on performance, and we have spoken to many of you. The result is this outline strategy for consultation. Now we need your help to finalise it. It is a strategy for the whole sector - for you as colleges, providers and employers, as much as for the national partners who work with you. We want to hear your views so that when the full strategy is published this autumn, you will commit to it. You will know that it will provide

you with the information and services you need, how and when you need them to support your plans for self-improvement and the pursuit of excellence.



Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP
Secretary of State for Education and Skills



Sir Geoffrey Holland KCB
Chairman, Quality Improvement Agency

Timeline for excellence

October 2005	Improvement Strategy preliminary consultation events launched
November 2005	<i>Realising the potential</i> - Sir Andrew Foster's review of further education – published
November 2005	Improvement Strategy development group and theme groups established with college/provider representation
March 2006	<i>Further education: raising skills, improving life chances</i> published
April 2006	Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) open for business
June 2006	<i>Pursuing Excellence</i> , the outline Improvement Strategy published and consultation period begins
July 2006	<i>Framework for Excellence</i> consultation begins
September 2006	<i>Framework for Excellence</i> consultation period closes
October 2006	Improvement Strategy consultation period closes
Autumn 2006	Improvement Strategy published with full implementation plan
Autumn 2006	Final report of Leitch Review of Skills
Autumn 2007	First review of progress on the Improvement Strategy

March 2009

Anticipated end point for the first Improvement Strategy 2006-09.

Note: The Improvement Strategy is relevant to all those organisations which teach or train young people aged 14 upwards and adults - colleges, work-based learning providers, schools and adult education services. It is also relevant for learners, employers and communities.

We expect that the different types of colleges and providers in the system will engage in different ways with the Improvement Strategy. For example:

- most teachers and trainers, wherever they work, will find items of interest in the Excellence Gateway⁵
- the Government's proposed qualification for principals will have an impact on further education colleges
- in relation to school sixth forms, QIA and the National Strategies for Primary and Secondary Education will work together to ensure that:
 - there is a single integrated strategy for improvement in each school which includes the sixth form and
 - improvement in school sixth forms is consistent with both this Improvement Strategy and with the National Strategies.

¹ The national organisations involved in developing this outline strategy include QIA, DfES, LSC, ALI, OfSted, LLUK, CEL and Jobcentre Plus. Hereafter referred to in shorthand as 'national partners' or 'partners'.

² The Leitch Review of Skills published its interim report, *Skills in the UK: the long-term challenge* on 5 December 2005.

³ DfES (March 2006). *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances*. Cm 6768. The Stationery Office.

⁴ DfES (November 2005). *Realising the potential: a review of the future role of further education colleges*. The Foster report. Department for Education and Skills.

⁵ See page 18 below.

**Whatever type of education or training you offer,
the drive for excellence has to be at the core of your operation.**

**As colleges and providers driving for excellence you will find that
the services of national partner organisations will enable you to improve
your performance, practices and outcomes.**

**These services aim to liberate the creative talent and enterprise needed
to motivate people and organisations for the greater good of the
individuals, communities and economies you serve.**

Executive Summary

The country needs an excellent further education system. This is not something that can be left to chance or individual aspiration. It needs collective and determined action. That is why the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), working closely with national partners, was asked by Government to lead the development of a single, integrated Improvement Strategy, *Pursuing Excellence*, to support the drive for excellence in the further education system.

The vision underpinning *Pursuing Excellence* is of an excellent learning and skills sector that is:

- effectively led
- fully responsive to the needs of learners, employers and communities
- committed to self-improvement through rigorous and challenging self-assessment.

Pursuing Excellence has been developed by QIA in partnership with organisations across the further education system (identified in Annex B). This includes colleges and providers, national partners and other interested parties. QIA has ensured that the strategy takes account of current LSC-led developments and intends to continue the involvement of interested groups in the further development and implementation of this strategy.

In developing *Pursuing Excellence*, four principles have guided our approach and are fundamental to the success of the strategy:

- partnership – no organisation can succeed alone
- enterprising leadership – no organisation can improve without a lead from the top
- self-improvement - no external organisation can impose improvement
- excellence – no organisation should settle for the average.

QIA along with the national partners wants to create and maintain a national framework in which colleges and providers can achieve local excellence to maximise the benefits the further education system brings to learners, employers and communities, secure the commitment of every organisation in the system to continuous self-improvement and work in partnership to make available a coherent framework of support that enables self-improvement.

The principal beneficiaries of our pursuit of excellence will be learners and employers. Learners must have equality of access to appropriate, high-quality learning opportunities that are taught by expert, highly motivated, well-trained professionals and employers require learning programmes that are responsive to their needs. Learners, employers and communities should be valued and respected as 'customers', their diverse needs met and their views and requirements used to shape future provision.

However, the priorities set out above for learners and employers can only be met through the further education system so colleges and providers must be

clear about what is expected of them and have access to the tools and support they need to do their job effectively . The pursuit of excellence must be an integral part of colleges' and providers' business planning processes and be supported by a fair and transparent planning, funding and accountability system with greater autonomy and further reductions in bureaucracy.

To develop a culture of continuous improvement where the pursuit of excellence is the norm requires action throughout the further education system. This can be done by sharing definitions of excellence, clarifying roles and responsibilities, identifying and sharing effective practice and bringing about rapid improvements in areas of known or potential weakness. It is also essential to support the reform of the qualifications system, make the most of the potential quality by supporting collaboration and partnerships and by introducing new colleges and providers into the system.

The outline Improvement Strategy sets out the key actions of the national partners to achieve these aims but we must be clear that the responsibility for improvement lies with all of us. Most notably, colleges and providers should feel they have the support necessary to address improvement needs and national partner organisations should work coherently to enable this.

Pursuing Excellence – presented here in its outline form for consultation - is addressed to all who contribute to the further education system. We invite your responses to a number of specific questions and also welcome your general comments on the outline strategy.

The full Improvement Strategy, together with an implementation plan, will be published in autumn 2006 along with an analysis of consultation responses. It will be subject to regular review and evaluation until 2009.

The deadline for responses to this consultation is 16.00 on Friday 20 October 2006.

Part One: Our vision for improvement

Who is this strategy for?

1 The three-year national Improvement Strategy - presented here in its outline form for consultation - is addressed to all who contribute to the further education system.⁶

2 Our further education system is complex. You may be working in a further education college with students aged from 14 upwards; you may be in a sixth form college, school sixth form or independent specialist college; you may be helping offenders learn new skills; you may specialise in vocational training for apprentices and employees; you may be providing adult education classes to people learning for their own enjoyment in community settings. Whatever your remit or specialism, we believe that continuous self-improvement - the pursuit of excellence - has to be a priority for you.

3 It is for those of you who are leaders in the system. Strong and innovative leadership and management, which develop and release the talents of staff, are essential to the pursuit of excellence.

4 If you are a teacher, trainer or a tutor, or you work in services that support learning, this strategy is for you too. The quality of the teaching, training and support offered by your organisation has a clear impact on your learners, local employers and the community at large. Your skills, experience and qualifications can make all the difference.

5 The learners and employers who define the demand for provision will benefit from this strategy. A college or provider must be responsive to the needs of employers and learners in developing its mission, its provision and its plans for improvement. Many colleges and providers already have effective ways in which they involve learners and employers in the design and delivery of their courses and programmes. We want to see these deepened, strengthened and spread throughout the system so that learners and employers can really influence provision.

6 In short, we believe that there is something in this outline strategy for everyone working or learning in the further education system. We are clear that the responsibility for improvement has to lie with each individual organisation, owned and directed by the people working in it and responding to the needs of learners and employers. We do not claim that we can deliver excellence for you. Nor do we claim to have all the answers - we are open to learning and improving along the way, as we believe you are, in order to pursue excellence. Through the services we propose to develop and offer we can enable and empower you to pursue and achieve excellence.

Why should we invest in excellence?

7 The pursuit of excellence across the further education system will address five major issues that are of great significance to our country and its future:

Economic prosperity

To be competitive in the future the country will depend upon the skills of its people to support economic prosperity. Employers will need to invest in the training of their people. They will need high quality, responsive colleges and providers to help them develop skilled and qualified people so that they achieve their business goals.

Social cohesion

Our society faces many challenges and we need people to feel they can play a proper part in shaping its successful future. Further education at its best plays a major part in raising aspirations, providing educational opportunity, re-starting careers and contributing to social mobility and strong communities.

Individual fulfilment

People need the skills and qualifications to become active members of society and to improve their chances in employment, education and life. Excellence will mean many more people including employers will be willing to invest in gaining these benefits.

College and provider performance

Our country needs the best from those who provide further education and training. Colleges and providers need to be able to concentrate on the quality of their services and to know that excellence will bring greater autonomy and merit greater public esteem and understanding of their contribution to national achievement.

Further education system workforce development

An excellent system requires that the talents and enterprise of staff are encouraged and that staff are fully motivated to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement. Excellence enhances the reputation and generates trust in the professionalism of its staff and will support recruitment, retention and motivation.

8 Our vision is therefore for our further education system to be the best in the world. The task is to inspire both belief in this vision and the will to achieve it together. We believe the pursuit of excellence should be the driver for the strategy – and by extension that ‘poor’ cannot describe anything we do and ‘satisfactory’ has to become ‘good’.

What do we mean by excellence?

9 We believe that excellence means developing, maintaining and delivering to the highest standards of responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency. This must be underpinned by a commitment to continuous

organisational and individual learning and development. For our further education system, it means that:

- colleges and providers meet the needs of learners and employers and are responsive to local and national priorities
- colleges and providers of all types are well managed, provide value for money and have clear purposes that address needs effectively
- inspiring and challenging teaching, training and support are available from expert and qualified professionals
- a wider range of learners achieve their goals, leaving with the skills and qualifications they need to progress
- colleges and providers make best use of resources, including ICT, to enable effective teaching, learning, support and management
- colleges and providers focus on doing what they can do well to meet local and regional needs and are willing to let others do what they can do better
- equality of opportunity is actively promoted
- people learning and working in the further education system feel valued for their diversity, staff are motivated by the focus on improving education and training and the reduction in what they see as bureaucracy
- the prevailing culture is one of continuous self-improvement where people are open to learning through reflecting on their work
- excellent colleges and providers strive to help other organisations improve, willingly sharing expertise
- there will be no poor or underperforming provision after 2008.

10 Pursuing, achieving and maintaining excellence will be a different journey for each organisation. The partners in this national strategy will offer support and share the commitment to work towards excellence. Excellence is a high ambition. We know from inspection reports that there is much excellent provision but also that there is considerable variability in quality and performance across the system. Current performance is set out in Annex A. Happily, there are year-on-year improvements, with much less poor performance than there used to be.

Why are we developing an improvement strategy?

11 The country needs an excellent further education system and this is not something that can be left to chance or individual aspiration. It needs collective and determined action - and that requires a strategy. To address

the issues outlined above and to pursue excellence in further education, the Quality Improvement Agency, working closely with national partners, was asked by Government to lead the development of a single strategy to support the drive for excellence.

12 The Government has set out the characteristics of the colleges and providers it believes the country needs, and that are capable of supplying the 14-19 and skills strategies. You will be:

- responsive to the needs of learners, employers and local communities, contributing to the achievement of local, regional and national priorities for learning and skills
- effective in enabling all learners and employers to succeed in achieving their planned goals
- efficient in using your resources to achieve your business plans
- clear about your mission and committed to developing specialisms in key areas to support that mission
- committed to a culture of continuous self-improvement.

The principles for enabling transformation

13 In developing this outline strategy, four principles have guided our approach. These principles are fundamental to its success:

Partnership

No organisation can succeed alone - we must work in partnership.

Enterprising leadership

No organisation can improve without a lead from the top - we must have strong, innovative, enterprising leaders at all levels to drive the pursuit of excellence.

Self-improvement

No external organisation can impose improvement - we need to focus on self-improvement, with each college and provider taking responsibility.

Excellence

No organisation should settle for the average - we must all commit to excellence.

What are we aiming to achieve?

14 We want to create and maintain a national framework in which you can achieve local excellence. Our aims, through this strategy, are to:

- Aim 1** **maximise the benefits the further education system brings to learners, employers and communities**
- Aim 2** **secure the commitment of every organisation in the system to continuous self-improvement**
- Aim 3** **work in partnership to make available a coherent framework of support that enables self-improvement.**

What next?

15 In Part Two, we will explain the roles of each of the national partners for improvement and show how, by working together in a coherent manner, we can bring clarity to the drive for improvement and excellence. In Part Three we set out the initial improvement priorities identified by the national partners, and outline the key actions we, the national partner organisations, will undertake and the services we will develop to support that drive. In Part Four, we give you the opportunity to comment on the content of this outline strategy.

16 The LSC is leading a consultation on its *Framework for Excellence* in parallel with this outline Improvement Strategy. It sets out proposals for the development of a framework, to be used throughout the further education system, as the common basis for measuring performance, building on the Common Inspection Framework, inspection results, *New Measures of Success* and developments in the use of self-assessment.

Question 1: The improvement strategy aims to offer a shared, coherent vision for pursuing excellence across the further education system. To what extent is this outline strategy offering a vision that you aspire to and that you would commit to?

Question 2: Do you agree that the principles and aims identified on pages 11 and 12 are the right ones for the strategy?

Question 3: And if they are met will the vision be achieved?

⁶ In developing this outline strategy, the issue of terminology for describing the further education system has proved a constant source of debate. After discussion, we have opted for the terms 'colleges and providers', 'learners', 'staff', 'further education system' and 'national partners' which will be used from here on throughout the document. A full definition of what we mean by these terms is found in Annex D. We hope this terminology is acceptable to you and have included a consultation question so that you can feed back your views.

Part Two: Improvement through partnership

17 The primary responsibility for improving quality rests with you, the leaders and staff of colleges and providers. The national agencies support your pursuit of excellence. To do this, we have to be clear what each agency does and how our support works. We have to work as partners giving clear and consistent advice. Colleges and providers have urged us to address this issue. This spirit of partnership is intended to drive the Improvement Strategy and underscores the truth that we gain more working together than in isolation.

18 This approach to partnership will also help to ensure that the further education system can be clear about its purposes and can work with other relevant agencies, including Regional Development Agencies, higher education, Local Education Authorities, Small Business Service, Jobcentre Plus and Regional Skills Partnerships.

19 If you, the colleges and providers of the further education system, are to drive for excellence, you must:

- be empowered to take responsibility for improvement
- feel trusted in doing so
- work in a system that enables and supports your continuous improvement.

20 This is all consistent with strides towards a dynamic system where self-regulation and greater freedom are among the rewards for excellent colleges and providers. We have already seen some significant developments here, including a more proportionate approach to inspection and annual planning review, and we have reflected these developments in this strategy, but there is still much to be achieved.

21 The most important people in improving quality are staff working in colleges and providers. The quality of service a user experiences - either a learner or employer - depends not only on how the education and training are organised and taught but on the calibre, capability, skills, and motivation of the staff delivering and supporting this experience. For this reason, creating the conditions for staff in colleges and other providers to be effective and innovative is central to the success of this Improvement Strategy. This strategy demonstrates how the capability of the further education system workforce can be enhanced through improvement approaches in leadership and management and professional development.

22 The respective responsibilities of colleges and providers, QIA, the LSC, the inspectorates and others (set out in more detail in Annex C below) lend themselves to a systematic cycle of continuous improvement based on effective planning, action and review. The LSC's well-established business cycle provides the means by which we, the national partners, can align our own processes and planning activity with those of colleges and providers.

Improving quality

23 QIA has a primary responsibility to enable colleges and providers to build their capacity for continuous improvement. QIA works with colleges and providers to:

- support your own action plans for improvement arising from self-assessment, enabling you to respond to strategic change within the further education system
- enhance the pursuit of excellence by researching what works best to drive improvement and translating this into action with colleges and providers
- support colleges and providers in your efforts to respond to reforms in curriculum, skills provision and further education
- identify effective practice, facilitate its dissemination, and promote a culture of self-improvement across the system
- bring about rapid improvement where there are risks to provision for learners and employers and in support of the LSC's quality assurance role.

24 The Centre for Excellence in Leadership improves leadership and management, and Lifelong Learning UK develops the skills, knowledge, professionalism and experience of those working in the system. QIA works in partnership with these agencies.

Assuring quality

25 The LSC's role is to work with colleges and providers so that the provision it funds is, initially, at least satisfactory and improving over time. Its focus is on the unique contribution that each college and provider makes to the local, regional and sectoral provider network. In *Planning for success*,⁷ the LSC explained how quality assurance and improvement are integral to colleges' and providers' own processes for planning, evaluation and improvement. Through its annual business cycle it carries out its assurance role and manages the risks to learners and employers arising from provision that is poor quality or fails to improve. In future, the LSC will adopt a more proportionate approach to its assurance activity with colleges and providers, based on the analysis of risk.

Assessing quality

26 Assessing quality is a shared responsibility between colleges and providers, which assess their own performance, and the inspectorates, which offer objective external evidence and data, using the Common Inspection Framework as the basis for their judgements.

Partnership in action

27 As we work to develop further partnership arrangements throughout the further education system, we have much on which to build. At national level, the partners will work together through the national Partnership Board and regularly consult national stakeholders. At regional level, we have established Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships (RQIPs) that bring together providers and the regional representatives of the national partners. RQIPs met for the first time during May and June 2006. They will play an important part in identifying improvement priorities at regional level, shaping the development of support programmes to address them and advising on the impact of improvement activity.

28 We will need to extend our partnership arrangements to ensure that we can support wider reforms in skills and 14-19 provision, for example in relation to the development of Specialised Diplomas and the implementation of local area agreements.

29 The LSC and the National Union of Students (NUS) are currently establishing a National Learner Panel to give those who benefit from the further education system a greater say in its development and improvement. We do not have a similar national forum for representatives of employers and this is a priority to be tackled early on in the life of the strategy.

30 Finally, we will want to look at how we can extend developments within the LSC's *agenda for change* programme, particularly with the use of data, to support partnership working and to reduce further the burden of bureaucracy on providers.

Question 4: Do you think that the partnership approach set out in Part Two will offer a coherent framework to enable improvement across the system?

Question 5: How might wider partnership working across the sector be best developed so that coherent policy, strategy and implementation across the further education system can be achieved?

Question 6: Do you support the proposal to establish an advisory forum for employers?

Question 7: If so, how might this best be done?

Question 8: What should we be doing to ensure coherent development between this Improvement Strategy and the LSC's Framework for Excellence?

⁷ LSC (December 2005) *Planning for success - a framework for planning and quality*.

Part Three: Pursuing Excellence - priorities for action

31 In this section, we, the national partners outline our priorities for excellence and the key actions to achieve the aims that we set out in paragraph 14 above. These actions are amplified in the QIA *Programmes and services 2006-07*, the LSC's *Framework for Excellence* consultation report, the LSC's *Planning for Success*, and CEL's and LLUK's plans.

32 We recognise that colleges and providers will have your own plans for continuous improvement. The following actions are intended to support and to help accelerate these plans. Through the consultation, the national partners will want to know both how well the proposed actions will support your aims of self-improvement and, of course, of further actions that would prove beneficial. The list is therefore not exhaustive but gives a clear indication of planned actions in support of improving quality.

Maximising the benefits of the further education system - our priorities for learners and employers

33 The principal beneficiaries of our pursuit of excellence will be learners and employers. It will be their perceptions of excellence that will ultimately determine the success of the Improvement Strategy. To deliver excellence for learners and employers our priorities are to ensure that:

- learners have equality of access to high-quality learning opportunities that are tailored to each individual's needs
- learning programmes are responsive to employers' needs in terms of time, place, content and method of delivery
- learners are taught by expert, highly motivated, well-trained professionals, and employers benefit from staff who have expertise in utilising appropriate new technologies and a good, up-to-date understanding of the world of work
- learners, employers and communities are valued and respected as 'customers', their diverse needs are met and their views and requirements are used to shape provision.

Our actions:

By the end of 2006 we will have:

- established a National Learner Panel, working closely with the NUS to ensure the development of national improvement support activities reflect learner needs and their priorities
- consulted on proposals to enable employers to advise on improvement priorities.

By the end of 2007 we will have:

- developed and disseminated models of effective inclusive learning practice that build on the approach established by RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning)
- developed and disseminated models of good practice in learner and employer engagement drawn from the sector to help colleges and providers with their improvement plans
- fully attuned the improvement programmes of the QIA to the needs of colleges and providers in their quest for excellence, utilising knowledge from RQIPs
- devised a national strategy for collaborative delivery of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, building on the Little report,⁸ and similar strategies for other groups with particular needs.

By the end of 2008 we will have:

- strengthened arrangements for learner and employer feedback on the quality of provision and supported colleges and providers, where necessary, to make this an integral element of their self-assessment
- through the LSC's annual planning and review process in 2006/07, ensured that colleges and providers in their development plans respond to employer needs as set out in Sector Skills Agreements and regional statements of skills priorities
- developed support programmes and materials to enable teachers, trainers and lecturers to offer a more personalised learning experience, and to improve the effectiveness of advice, guidance and tutorial support services
- introduced arrangements to enable the exchange of staff expertise between employers and colleges and providers. These will include helping teachers and trainers (particularly those who lack recent experience) to access structured experience and training in relevant business and industry sectors
- put in place new programmes that maximise the benefits of technology to ensure learning meets the needs of learners and employers
- developed partnerships with the new Skills Academies, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and Beacons to ensure best practice is shared across the whole further education system.

Securing the commitment of every organisation in the system to continuous improvement - our priorities for colleges and providers

34 Our priorities for learners and employers can only be met through the further education system. Our priorities for colleges and providers are therefore to ensure that:

- colleges and providers are clear about what is expected, and there is consistency between the definition of mission and purpose, the use of performance indicators and success measures, and the setting of priorities and this consistency is reflected in the work of the national partners
- the pursuit of excellence becomes an integral part of colleges' and providers' business planning processes supported by a planning, funding and accountability system that is fair, straightforward to administer and transparent
- colleges and providers have developed specialised areas of excellence that accord with their mission which in turn meets local needs
- colleges and providers have the tools they need to do their jobs successfully and also access to the effective support they need to drive their own pursuit of excellence
- colleges and providers enjoy greater autonomy with further reductions in bureaucracy.

Our actions:

By the end of 2006 we will have:

- launched the Excellence Gateway, a single portal for improvement networks, support and materials, to assist colleges and providers in sharing effective practice

By the end of 2007 we will have:

- evaluated pilot projects on peer-review and extended effective practice models across the system and other forms of peer supported improvements
- begun development work on the *Framework for Excellence*, building on the *New Measures of Success* and the Common Inspection Framework
- researched, developed and disseminated models of good practice, drawn mainly from the sector, to assist colleges and providers in making their own improvements
- developed support materials to enable colleges and providers to carry out more holistic self-assessments of performance and to use the findings as the basis for continuous organisation-wide improvement

- supported the introduction of the first Specialised Diplomas by helping colleges and providers develop specialist areas of excellence and networks⁹
- developed programmes and materials to support strategic change within the system including 14-19 provision, Skills for Life, Train to Gain, adult Level 2, offender learning and e-learning
- developed further support programmes for leaders at all levels, including coaching, mentoring and work-shadowing programmes tailored to the needs of under-represented groups
- begun to rationalise programmes and resources to support the improvement plans of colleges and providers and launched a directory of improvement services.

By the end of 2008 we will have:

- developed materials to help colleges and providers to use new performance measures in self-assessment and strategic planning
- introduced new programmes in colleges to support staff recruitment and improve staff retention and also brought in a regulatory requirement for continuing professional development.

Working in partnership to develop a coherent framework of support for continuous improvement - our priorities for the further education system as a whole

35 Developing a culture of continuous improvement and the pursuit of excellence requires action throughout the system. It also requires us all to tackle some significant structural improvements. Our priorities for the further education system as a whole are, therefore, to:

- develop a self-improving system based on shared definitions of excellence, clarity about roles and responsibilities, the identification of effective practice and support for organisational learning and development in all parts of the system
- bring about rapid improvements in areas of known or potential weakness, including in 'failing' organisations and in curriculum areas with low success rates
- ensure our notion of 'excellence' fully incorporates equality and diversity
- provide support for the reform of the qualifications system so that learners are better able to gain recognition for their achievements and employers can understand what each qualification represents in terms of level, breadth and skills gained

- make the most of the potential quality within the system by supporting collaboration and partnerships and by the introduction of new colleges and providers into the system.

Our actions:

By November 2006 we will have:

- published an intervention strategy, identified under-performing colleges and providers and begun to issue improvement notices as necessary.

By the end of 2006 we will have:

- implemented programmes of targeted support for rapid improvement, including a national network of improvement advisers where there are significant risks to the quality of provision available to learners and employers.

By the end of September 2007 we will have:

- established a network of new Centres of Excellence in teacher training for further education teachers, tutors and trainers across the country
- ensured all new entry trainee further education teachers attain fully 'qualified teacher learning and skills' status (QTLS).

By the end of 2007 we will have:

- taken forward arrangements for recognising excellence, including building on the Beacon and STAR Awards schemes
- put in place appropriate powers of intervention to tackle under-performance.

By the end of 2008 we will have:

- developed a new model for excellence that relates to the context, purpose and direction of an organisation
- developed coherent standards for recognising excellence at subject, organisation or sector level that drive desirable outcomes and that build on the new generation of CoVEs, Sector Skills Councils' arrangements for quality assurance and best practice already in the system
- supported structural change in the system through identifying and sharing effective partnership models
- developed a support programme to assist new colleges and providers capable of delivering high-quality provision that meets local, regional and sectoral needs.

By the end of 2009 we will have:

- in partnership with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Skills for Business Network, embedded qualifications reform in the system and be supporting colleges and providers to develop flexible learning that better meets the needs of employers
- significantly moved towards all further education teachers attaining QTLS status by 2010.

Issues outside the scope of the Improvement Strategy

36 We recognise that as we are developing this national Improvement Strategy there are other significant developments under way within the system (not least on funding reform through the move towards the majority of adult funding being demand-led by 2015), and that these developments fall outside the direct scope of this strategy. We will be working closely with partners to ensure that we identify relationships between these various areas of work so that we adopt a coordinated approach to structural development within the system and consider any implications for improvement.

How will we know this strategy is working?

37 The publication of the full strategy in the autumn will be accompanied by an analysis of the impact measures for this strategy. Existing measures of success for the system will be the starting point. These include relevant Public Service Agreements and the measures of performance that will be collated through the *Framework for Excellence* - these include, but are not limited to, learner success rates and inspection outcomes. These are set out in Annex A.

38 We wish to consider other available measures in order to reflect the economic impact of this strategy including employability and progression into jobs or education and training. In addition, developing a culture of self-improvement and promoting effective partnership working are both vital to the success of our strategy, so we will report on how this may be assessed and recorded. We will seek to demonstrate whether people across the further education system identify with this strategy and take ownership of it.

39 The strategy will require formal mechanisms to assess its success, to identify emerging improvement issues and whether current responses are adequate. We seek to engage all the 'customers' of the sector in this approach. For example, we will be in dialogue with:

- learners - through the National Learner Panel
- employers - through an engagement strategy developed for employers
- communities and the regional voice - through the Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships.

40 During the consultation, we will seek your views about the appropriate measures that could be used to measure the impact and success of this strategy.

Question 9: Do you agree that the priorities identified in Part Three are the right ones for the strategy?

Question 10: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for learners?

Question 11: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for employers?

Question 12: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for communities?

Question 13: Are you confident that this strategy best meets the particular improvement needs from your perspective or your part of the further education system?

Question 14: If you identify any difficulties here, are there ways these can be overcome?

Question 15: To what extent and in what ways will this strategy enable you to make improvements and meet the challenges you face in your organisation?

Question 16: What would be the most helpful way for effective practice to be shared across the further education system?

Question 17: What examples of good practice would you find most useful?

Question 18: What measures do you think would be appropriate to measure the impact and success of this strategy?

Question 19: Do you feel that the terminology and definitions used throughout this document are sufficiently clear and inclusive? Please indicate where you feel this is not the case.

⁸ LSC (2005). *Through inclusion to excellence*.

⁹ This work will continue, as further Specialised Diplomas are introduced.

Part Four: Shaping the strategy - have your say

Next steps

41 This outline Improvement Strategy has been developed in partnership with a range of organisations set out in Annex B. This publication launches a period of consultation. The next stage is to consider all responses and develop an implementation plan for the full strategy. We intend to launch the implementation plan and full strategy in autumn 2006. You can keep track of progress and find details of supporting consultation events on QIA's website at www.qia.org.uk.

42 The Improvement Strategy runs from 2006 to 2009. It will be fully operational from April 2007. QIA will work with national partners and other stakeholders to determine how to review and update the strategy. We expect to review it annually and to publish a progress report.

Consultation

43 The Improvement Strategy is being developed in partnership with all across the further education system, so it is important that you now take the chance to have your say. To debate the issues arising from this strategy, we will be running consultation events and details will be available at www.qia.org.uk.

44 We invite your responses to a number of questions contained in Annex E and your general comments on the outline strategy. The deadline for this is the 20 October 2006 at 16.00. Your comments on the outline strategy must reach us by that date if they are to inform the development of the full strategy to be published later in the autumn.

45 In developing this consultation we have adhered to the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Consultation. A copy of this guidance is available at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/ If you have any complaints about the consultation process please contact the Consultation Coordinator, Jenny Burnette on jenny.burnette@qia.gsi.gov.uk

Annex A: The further education system: participation and performance - key facts

1 The further education system is large and complex, serving some six million learners in 2004/05.¹⁰

Learner numbers in England 2004/05	Learners
General FE / tertiary colleges	3,351,700
Sixth form colleges	226,000
Other colleges ¹¹	193,500
External institutions ¹²	435,000
Local authorities	914,900
Work-based learning providers	518,500
School sixth forms	349,000
HE institutions delivering FE courses	94,000
Total	6,082,600

2 The system has more 16 year-olds than schools and further education colleges take a disproportionate number from lower socio-economic groups. However, in international comparisons, we are relatively weak on participation at age 17. We know that achievement at age 16 is a significant factor in continuing participation - 89% of those achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C in 2004 are likely to be in full-time education, compared to 32% of those who got 1-4 GCSEs at D-G. Learners from higher socio-economic groups are also slightly more likely to remain in education than those from lower socio-economic groups.

3 It is estimated that the number of 16-18 year-olds will rise to a peak in 2008, then decline sharply to 2018. This means that the country needs the further education system to help adults raise their skill levels throughout their working lives.

4 Millions of adults have poor literacy and/or numeracy skills. The vast majority of Skills for Life training is delivered through the system. Around nine million adults of working age do not have a Level 2 or equivalent qualification. At Level 3 and above, the UK compares well with its neighbours for those aged 18-21, but falls far behind countries like France and Germany by age 25-28. The further education system makes a major contribution to adults gaining skills at these levels.

5 Fortunately, quality is rising across the sector. College success rates stand at 74.8% in 2004/05. Colleges met the Government's target for 2005/06 - 72% - two years early and are on track for the 2007/08 target of 76%. In 2004/05, full framework completions on Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships rose by 9% on the previous year to 40%¹³ (compared to 33% expected). The latest information from the LSC for period 10 2005/06 shows that the figure is 50.42%. It is hoped that it will continue to rise to 55% by 2007/08.

6 However, there is some significant variation in success rates between providers, between subjects and between different groups of learners. For

example, success rates for adults on Level 3 long qualifications lag behind those for 16-18 year olds by 18 percentage points; there is a 25 percentage point variation between the best and worst performing subject sector for Apprenticeship (Level 2) framework completions; and success rates for learners from black and ethnic-minority groups still lag behind those of their white counterparts. Inspection grades too show that while the majority of colleges, providers and areas of provision are at least satisfactory, and some are outstanding, there are many that need to do better.

7 Evidence shows that investing in improvement can have a significant impact. Evaluation of the national teaching and learning change programme¹⁴ found that success rates increased by 2.8% in the phase 1 pilots (covering business, construction, Entry to Employment and science) compared with matched groups without access to the programme.¹⁵ Inspection bears this out. Ofsted's report, *Evaluating mathematics provision for 14-19 year-olds*,¹⁶ noted that the factors supporting achievement include: the teacher's subject knowledge; the effective use of high quality learning resources (including those devised under the national change programme); and professional development for teachers.

8 The Improvement Strategy seeks to build on what works in order to at least reach the targets set out in paragraph 5 above, to address the issues in paragraph 6 and to support the system to move to becoming excellent.

¹⁰ Source: Further education, work-based learning for young people, and adult and community learning - learner numbers in England 2004/05, LSC, December 2005.

¹¹ Agriculture and horticulture, art, design and performing arts and specialist designated.

¹² Local Education Authority-maintained and independently funded external institutions that are funded under a specific financial memorandum with the LSC.

¹³ This figure related to full framework completion only. This success rate lies below the full framework and NVQ combined success rate.

¹⁴ Now taken over by QIA.

¹⁵ Quantitative evaluation, conducted by York Consulting.

¹⁶ Ofsted (May 2006) *Evaluating mathematics provision for 14-19 year-olds*. HMI 2611

Annex B: National partner organisations involved in *Pursuing Excellence*

The national partner organisations involved in the Development Group included: the Department for Education and Skills, the Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus, the Quality Improvement Agency, the Adult Learning Inspectorate, Ofsted, Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.

Theme groups were established to determine specific improvement priorities for the strategy. In addition to the organisations listed above, these groups consisted of people from colleges and providers across the system, most of whom were initially nominated by representative bodies such as the Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Learning Providers (ALP), National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ACSL). The theme groups also included representatives from the Sector Skills Development Agency, Sixth Form Colleges Forum, Ufl, the QCA and Becta.

Other organisations have been consulted on the development of this strategy and are considered key stakeholders with a valuable role to play. These include National Union of Students (NUS) and the Network for Black Managers, trades unions, and others.

The Quality Improvement Agency, tasked with leading this work, would like to thank all those who have given time to help develop this outline Improvement Strategy.

During the consultation period QIA will continue to work with these partners. But we would also like to engage with other organisations who support improvement across the system. If you are such an organisation or have worked with one that you think we should contact, then please let us know.

Annex C: Respective roles and responsibilities of those involved in the improvement cycle

Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning	<p>Leads the development of the Improvement Strategy. It will commission services to enable improvement activity and to support the system in responding to strategic change. It will support colleges and providers through tailored programmes of improvement where this need is identified by providers, Inspectorates or the LSC.</p>
Colleges and providers	<p>Primary responsibility for improving the quality of provision rests with the college or provider. Colleges and providers have to carry out an annual self-assessment that evaluates all aspects of their provision. The importance of self-assessment in supporting the provider's own pursuit of quality is a key principle underpinning the improvement cycle.</p>
Department for Education and Skills	<p>Offers the strategic lead and develops the policy framework for post-16 improvement. Establishes programme performance management and accountability arrangements for national partner organisations.</p>
Learning and Skills Council	<p>Has the primary role for planning, funding and securing high quality provision. The LSC's role is to assure itself that the provision it funds is, initially, at least satisfactory and improving over time so has key responsibility for performance measurement across the learning and skills sector. It will withdraw funding from poor quality provision.</p>
Ofsted and Adult Learning Inspectorate	<p>The Inspectorates, Ofsted and ALI, have responsibility for external quality assessments, giving colleges and providers objective evidence on which to base their plans for improvement, identifying excellence and promoting understanding of what works. The scope and scale of inspection will be based on the inspectorates' analysis of provider performance. Inspection will be risk proportionate, identifying provision that needs improvement, and also making judgements about the effectiveness of colleges' and providers' self-assessments.</p>
The Centre for Excellence in Leadership	<p>Provides leadership development informed by research and tailored leadership support to all colleges and providers. Developing sector-wide strategies for succession planning, leadership and management capacity building. A major CEL focus is providing positive action programmes to improve the diversity profile of sector leaders.</p>

Lifelong Learning UK	As the Sector Skills Council for the FE System, LLUK provides the strategic perspective for workforce planning and development within the sector. It is responsible for defining and developing the System's Sector Qualifications Strategy and sets standards for occupational competence in the delivery and support of learning. LLUK also leads stakeholders in the collection and collation of workforce data and provides analysis on workforce characteristics and trends to better inform future workforce planning.
Becta	Leads the strategic development and delivery of the e-strategy in schools and the learning and skills sector. It supports the e-strategy and its partners by providing insight into the developing use of ICT based on evidence and an understanding of innovative technologies and practice.
Skills for Business Network	Employers own and lead the Skills for Business network, working through 25 independent Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). SSCs provide the voice of employers on skills and, with support from the SSDA, lead the drive to increase investment in skills in each sector. SSCs have direct responsibility for helping employers deliver their own solutions to skills problems. SSCs develop and agree high quality forward looking Skills Agreements between employers, government and deliverers of skills development to deliver skills priorities. SSCs also promote learning, including work to develop the vocational curriculum and qualifications from age 14 to higher education, in the workplace and through apprenticeships and Specialised Diplomas.
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	Maintains and develops the national curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations; and accredits and monitors academic and vocational qualifications in colleges and providers.

Annex D: Terminology and definitions

During development of the strategy, issues kept arising about the use of terminology to describe parts of the learning and skills sector. There is a need both to be specific and also reflective of the diversity of the range of organisations delivering programmes of learning, training and skills development, and the wide spectrum of individuals participating in them.

The following terms are used in this outline strategy.

Colleges and providers

By 'colleges and providers' we mean all those organisations who deliver programmes of learning or skills development for young people aged 14 upwards and adults.

For the purposes of this document this refers to colleges; providers of work-based learning; employers delivering LSC- funded provision; local authorities' personal and community development learning provision; Jobcentre Plus providers; centres of higher education offering further education; school sixth forms; independent former external institutions; Ufi/Learndirect; specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; and providers of offender learning.

Learners

By 'learners' we mean people who are taking part in learning, training or skills development. This will include students, trainees and members of your workforce when they are involved in development activity.

Further education system

By further education system we are referring to the wide range of organisations that make up the learning and skills sector and its interactions with individuals and employers and the national partners responsible for planning, funding and quality improvement. Collectively the system provides opportunities for individuals from the age of 14 upwards to participate in programmes of learning, training and skills development and learners of all ages to participate in a range of activities including educational or vocational courses.

National partners

The term 'national partners' is used throughout this document to refer to those key government agencies and organisations that have a role in enabling colleges and providers to improve. A full list of these is contained in Annex B.

Annex E: Consultation reply form

The deadline for responses is 16.00 on Friday 20 October 2006.

Name

Organisation (if applicable)

Email address

Address

Please insert 'X' next to one of the following that best describes you as a respondent.

Further Education College

Sixth Form College

Local Education Authority

Higher Education Institution

Trade Union

Work Based Learning Provider

Employer

Representative Body

Sectoral Body

National Organisation

Regional Body

Voluntary Organisation

School

Individual

Other (Please specify)

If you are interested in receiving electronic updates from QIA – please register your interest at subscribe.eneews@qia.qsi.gov.uk

Consultation questions

Vision

Question 1: The improvement strategy aims to offer a shared, coherent vision for pursuing excellence across the further education system. To what extent is this outline strategy offering a vision:

a) that you aspire to?

Yes/No

b) that you would commit to?

Yes/No

Comments

Aims and approaches

Question 2: Do you agree that the principles and aims identified on pages 11 and 12 are the right ones for the strategy?

Yes/No

Comments

Question 3: And if they are met will the vision be achieved?

Yes/No

Comments

Partnership working

Question 4: Do you think that the partnership approach set out in Part Two will offer a coherent framework to enable improvement across the system?

Comments

Yes/No

Question 5: How might wider partnership working across the sector be best developed so that coherent policy, strategy and implementation across the further education system can be achieved?

Comments

Question 6: Do you support the proposal to establish an advisory forum for employers?

Comments

Yes/No

Question 7: If so, how might this best be done?

Comments

Question 8: What should we be doing to ensure coherent development between this Improvement Strategy and the LSC's Framework for Excellence?

Comments

Priorities

Question 9: Do you agree that the priorities identified in Part Three are the right ones for the strategy? Yes/No

Comments

Question 10: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for learners? Yes/No
Comments

Question 11: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for employers? Yes/No
Comments

Question 12: Do you agree the priorities identified are the right ones for communities? Yes/No
Comments

Question 13: Are you confident that this strategy best meets the particular improvement needs from your perspective or your part of the further education system? Yes/No

Comments

Question 14: If you identify any difficulties here, are there ways these can be overcome? Yes/No

Comments

Actions

Question 15: To what extent and in what ways will this strategy enable you to make improvements and meet the challenges you face in your organisation?

Comments

Question 16: What would be the most helpful way for effective practice to be shared across the further education system?

Comments

Question 17: What examples of good practice would you find most useful?

Comments

Impact measures

Question 18: What measures do you think would be appropriate to measure the impact and success of this strategy?

Comments



Quality
Improvement
Agency

In association with the national partners:

The Department for Education and Skills
The Learning and Skills Council
Jobcentre Plus
Adult Learning Inspectorate
Ofsted
Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council
Centre for Excellence in Leadership

Quality Improvement Agency
for Lifelong Learning

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