Quality
Improvement
Agency

Friars House   T: 0870 1620 632
Manor House Drive   F: 0870 1620 633
Coventry CV1 2TE   www.qia.org.uk

Consultation Reply Form
Pursuing Excellence: an outline improvement strategy for the further education system

The deadline for responses is 16.00 on Friday 20 October 2006

Name

Rhonda Riachi

Organisation (if applicable)

Association for Learning Technology

Email address

rriachi@brookes.ac.uk

Address

Gipsy Lane
Headington
Oxford
OX3 0BP

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	X National Organisation
Regional Body	Voluntary Organisation
School	Individual
Other (Please specify)	

for Lifelong Learning

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
b) that you would commit to?   Yes
Comments

The pursuits of excellence in FE and of responsiveness to learners are self-evidently worthwhile endeavours.

We would offer the comment that those who benefit from FE and contribute to its success have each been too narrowly drawn in the strategy. For example, under para 5, we could add "learners' families" and "society as a whole" as beneficiaries.

Para 9 bullet point 5 could be interpreted as reducing ICT simply to a resource to be exploited. Educational providers are information users, mediators, and creators, and their success is critically dependent on the effectiveness with which they manage and exploit information across the whole of their operation. For this reason "ICT" deserves its own bullet point in this section, for example *"colleges and providers manage and exploit ICT so as to integrate it effectively into curriculum delivery and leaner support, and so as to use it fully in the management of learning"*.

Para 9 bullet point 10 places a welcome emphasis on the sharing of expertise between providers, but gives insufficient emphasis to the importance of collaboration between organisations that are not providers, or between individuals in supra-institutional interest groups, of which ALT is an example. This is an omission.

The 'learners, local employers and community at large' in para 4 is later shortened to 'learners, employers', and in para 5 it appears as though policy plays no role in defining demand, when clearly it has a major influence.

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?   **Not as they stand**
Comments

The emphasis on partnership is welcome, but it should be noted that there has not been a good record of industry/employers willing to pay for training in FE. There can also be clashes of cultures/needs between different cohorts – sometimes practical issues such as timetabling

restricting access to facilities, etc.

Insufficient emphasis is placed on the fundamental importance of a motivated and professional workforce; the emphasis seems more on organizations and their leaders and not on practitioners, whose work is key to success. Research informed policy could be identified as a fourth principle.

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

We feel there is a need to have a period of stability without major changes. Parity of funding between FE Colleges and 6th form colleges will also help this process.

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 - **Partly**

To some extent the section is weak in three areas. Firstly, in relation to ICT and its effective deployment, the strategy does not mention agencies, such as the JISC and Becta, that have a key role to play. Secondly, it is weak on references to entities that represent practitioners, for example the Institute for Learning, UNISON, UCU (and ALT). Finally, the approach has too strong a focus on partnership between *a* provider and its agencies, rather than *between* providers, and between a provider and that provider's *clients* - whether public, private sector or community-based.

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

The three main levers on providers to change are the funding, assessment and inspection regimes. Each of these regimes must actively encourage partnership working if it is to become a reality.

The Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships are an encouraging development, which could broker support/expertise between colleges.

Question 6: Do you support the proposal to establish an advisory forum for employers?   Yes/No
Comments

We are not sure how this would work in practice. There are currently sector skill councils, RDAs, business link etc – will these form the constituency of such a forum?

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

None

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

We would recommend that links be made to the Common Inspection Framework and 3-year development plans.

Priorities

Question 9: Do you agree that the priorities identified in part three are the right ones for the strategy?   **Yes** - **partly.**

Comments

The strategy does not mention how the Internet is changing individuals' behaviour nor the increasing part being played by "free culture" (eg wikipedia, Open Access content etc). The effective use of ICT in learning seems to be largely reduced in the strategy to the appropriate availability of materials; rather it is the *methods* of using ICT effectively in teaching and learning that are key to success.

If "personalized learning" remains a policy priority, then the FE sector needs urgently to increase investment and support in order to deliver it – most emphasis so far has been on the school sector (tomorrow's learners for FE). There needs to be a clear focus on the investment of ICT, eg by including ILT/e-learning in college development plans/CIF/ quality improvement targets, etc.

We would caution against over-reliance on the Excellence Gateway as a

single portal. This is a high risk strategy, since portals have an increasing tendency to be underused, given the primacy of search, rather than visits to subject-specific service-based portals, as the means by which people now find information on the Web.

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

We would welcome more explicit mention of the various routes into mainstream FE to encourage adult returners.

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

See above.

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

Employers need to pay realistic fees for staff training – too often employers use FE when it is either 'free' or heavily subsidized. To warrant this FE must be able to offer high class facilities and quality provision as outlined in this strategy.

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
Comments

See our earlier comments re pace of development/investment – and links to the Common Inspection Framework, etc, to ensure that college leaders are committed to the process.

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

For ILT/e-learning to make a difference it is important for providers to have annual targets, be part of CIF, Self-Assessment Reports, and an e-learning strategy as mandatory elements. Without a strong emphasis ILT slips down the agenda. There is still a huge need to train staff and learners.

The reference to college/employer exchanges is welcome – colleges can learn much from how industry is deploying technology.

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

We recommend:

1. Greater use of peer review/referencing networks as illustrated by the CAMEL project – [http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/camel] – a pilot project to explore the development of a Community of Practice amongst e-learning, systems, and learning technology practitioners working on aspects of promoting Lifelong Learning across institutions. This showed that this approach has a great deal to commend it, not only in the e-learning domain but more widely. (With our partner organization, JISCinfoNet, we

would be happy to assist the QIA in applying the CAMEL model within FE.)

2. Some form of (financial) incentive to colleges to release staff to disseminate effective practice with other colleges – this is a key issue.

3. Using the Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships (RQIPs).

4. In relation to the spread of effective practice in learning technology we would recommend that QIA continues to support initiatives such as the 2005 ALT/LSDA e-learning practitioners' conference, which produced 20 documented case studies about the effective use of ICT in FE, ACL, and work-based learning. [http://www.alt.ac.uk/fepc2005.html]

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

We have no specific suggestions, other than to urge that better use be made of the inspection regime to disseminate effective practice.

Impact measures

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

Two possible indicators would be recruitment and retention of staff and student achievement rates.

Terminology

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

Please let us have any other comments not covered by the above.

Pursuing Excellence is "addressed to all who contribute to the Pursuing Excellence system". ALT is making an increasing contribution in FE, as our *E-learning: making it* work conference in October 2005

[http://www.alt.ac.uk/fepc2005.html] and FE uptake of our certified membership scheme [http://www.alt.ac.uk/cmalt.html] demonstrate.

Whilst we certainly do not think that improvement in the quality of FE or any other provision can be achieved simply by improving the use of learning technology, we do assert that without effective use of learning technology the efficiency and effectiveness of FE will be compromised. To this extent we think that overall the strategy pays insufficient attention to ICT, and that with a few minor adjustments this could be remedied.

Finally, we hope that the QIA will maintain close links with other quality agencies at other levels of education in the UK (particularly HE), as well as sharing good practice in quality development with equivalent agencies in Europe.

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Please post, fax or email responses to:

Pursuing Excellence Consultation Feedback Team
Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning
Friars House
Manor House Drive
Coventry
CV1 2TE

F: 024 7622 9839 – Consultation faxback line only
E: pursuingexcellence.feedback@qia.gsi.gov.uk