

Improvement in the Further Education Sector:

A consultative prospectus for a new sector-owned organisation

Response From The Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

Name

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Please indicate with a tick which type of organisation you represent

General further education college	
Sixth form college	
Work-based learning provider	
Adult safeguarded learning provider (eg, PCDL)	
National agency	
Sector Skills Council	
Representative body	
Trade union	
Employer	
Learner	
Other – please specify	Cross-sectoral UK-based professional and scholarly association, with QIA, CEL, DIUS, and LSN amongst our members.

¹ Steve Ryan (Vice-chair of ALT) and Fred Pickering (Chair of the ALT Further Education Committee) contributed to the drafting of this response.

**Question 1: Are these, broadly speaking, the right mission and aims?
Is there anything you would like to add or delete?**

The focus on learners and learning is

The new organisation's mission might better be seen as **developmental** rather than **transformational**. The former term is more realistic, and use of it in the mission would make it clear that any transformation of the FE sector that takes place will be done by providers in the sector rather than by the new organisation.

Amongst the aims – which we generally welcome – clear reference should be made (in the aims as well as in the key activities section) to priorities needing to be evidence-based. Aspirational terms like “leading edge” and “world class” are now so overused as to have become clichéd; and from the point of view of learning and learners, what matters is effectiveness rather than whether something is “leading edge”. (This is particularly the case in the learning technology domain.)

Within the aims there is some confusion between the work of the new organisation, and the work of the FE sector. For example it will be for providers to “implement economic and social policy priorities effectively”, and for the new organisation to help them do this.

To extent that the new organisation becomes independent of Government, its aims need to be written in such a way that it would be open for the organisation to differ in its aims from those espoused by the Government of the day.

**Question 2: Are these, broadly speaking, the right activities?
Are there others which it should undertake?**

Yes. However:

- i) the reference to partnership working should not be restricted only to refreshing and updating the National Improvement Strategy;
- ii) the provision of “flexible, practical, and tailored solutions” should surely be in response to more than just “market need”;
- iii) explicit (rather than implicit) reference should be made in this section to the new organisation undertaking activities that are relevant to the work of practitioners².

Question 3: Is this the most appropriate form of governance to achieve the mission and aims?

One issue which support agencies face is disconnectedness from the organisations that they serve, and on its own, a coherent governance model does not necessarily prevent this. One way forward would be the new organisation to adopt a collegiate model in which its activities are guided by a wider range of people from within the sector than can take part in the work of a board of governors. JISC, with its Board and “domain-focused” Subcommittees, upon which people with credibility in FHE sit, with representation from Agencies, Government Departments etc, does provide a workable model.

Question 4: Is this the best way for the sector to play its part in the governance of the new organisation? How might the relationship with the Single Voice evolve over time?

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² In 2005 (with LSDA) and in 2007 (with QIA and CEL) ALT ran very successful post-16 e-learning practitioner conferences. This kind of activity should continue.

Question 5: Are the proposals based on funding and contract values the most equitable and effective ways of drawing the voting membership from the sector? If not is there an alternative?

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Question 6: Is the 35:65 per cent balance right? If not, what should it be? For example alternatives might be 50:50 or 65:35 (ie individual provider members having a third rather than two-thirds of the vote).

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Question 7: Will the arrangements that are described here allow the new organisation sufficient room to shape its mission coherently, innovate and be a thought leader on behalf of the sector?

See our answer to Question 3.

Question 8: How can learners, employers and communities have an influence on the overall direction of the organisation?

Two options are:

- i) including a requirement to give learners, employers, and communities influence over the overall direction of the organisation in its remit;
- ii) providing some form of stakeholder representation on the Board, on Subcommittees, and in the voting arrangements.

Question 9: Does the sector at large need to inform the direction of the new organisation and its services other than through membership?

The approach suggested in our answer to Question 3 provides one possible approach to enabling the sector at large to inform the direction of the new organisation.

Do the existing Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships offer a model for this?

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Question 10: Do you think this funding model is feasible and sustainable?

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Question 11: How should the proposed subscription model be developed from the shadow levy?

- Should the aim be to move as quickly as possible to a position where this element of the budget is actually shifted into providers' budgets?
- Once this was done, should the members and other guarantors collectively be able to agree the level of subscription to be levied compulsorily?
- Or would it be simpler to retain a top-slice mechanism, the level of which would be agreed with the sector?
- At what point, and under what conditions, might a move to voluntary subscription be considered?

There certainly would be merit if in the medium term the organisation could be funded on a subscription basis, and many would argue that if an organisation cannot prove its value then it should wither on the vine rather than be funded from top-sliced money that could probably be better spent elsewhere. (ALT is a membership organisation, receives no core funding, relies heavily on subscriptions; and having to do so encourages self-scrutiny, a connectedness to the membership, and a service orientation. It probably also goes some way to ensuring cost-effectiveness.) But subscription models are not easy to sustain, and the

transition from centrally funded model to subscription funded is not an easy one. Furthermore, if the proportion of income deriving from subscriptions is relatively small, then a tension will exist between the needs of the members and the needs of the organisation as a supplier of services to Government and others. Ultimately a top-slice mechanism may be simpler, cleaner, and, importantly cheaper to administer, especially if (as will surely be the case) the amount of the top-slice is small as a proportion of the total sector budget.

Question 12: How quickly should the new organisation move towards financial self-sufficiency?

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Question 13: How do you think that the organisation's core funding should be deployed in the sector? On what should it be spent? What mechanisms should be used for this purpose?

Initially, the new organisation should carry forward the work of QIA and CEL with minimum disruption. How the core funding should be spent should be decided by the board in consultation with the sector (our response to Question 3 is relevant here) once the new organisation's mission, remit, and aims have been finalized.

Question 14: How can learners and employers best influence services?

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Question 15: What are the priorities for action for the new organisation that will be included in the National Improvement Strategy in the next year? Three years? Five years?

Modern learning is increasingly dependent on technology, and there are huge changes taking place in the underlying processes of learning, knowledge creation, and dissemination, most of them underpinned by ICT. For this reason it is very important that the new organisation uses its reach, influence, and grounded-ness within the FE sector to continue to address issues relating to e-learning and the application of technology generally in teaching, learning, and management, and to use ICT effectively in its own operations. This should be done in partnership with, rather than left to JISC, Becta and others.

Question 16: How would the new organisation most effectively work with the national partners and stakeholders to deliver the NIS?

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Question 17: How can the new organisation best use the expertise and knowledge already in the sector to support the sector as a whole and individual providers and staff within it?

By working in partnership with entities with specialist know-how, for example, in the learning technology domain, NIACE, ALT, JISC, Becta, the ELearning Network. It will also be important to look outside the sector, and internationally.

Is there merit in the idea of commissioning providers and/or groups of providers (eg, self-help consortia) to offer services and support to their peers?

Yes. As indicated in our response above to question 11, ALT, and organisations like it, have a connectedness to important activities "on the ground", and the new organisation could usefully act to bring together organisations like ALT to offer services in a coordinated fashion, and in such a way as to avoid duplication. Our guess is that the same sort of coordination would be of value in other domains than learning technology.

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

ALT brings together practitioners, researchers and policy makers from across the learning technology domain. We think it would be in the new organisation's interests (as well as ALT's!) for it to carry forward CEL's and QIA's memberships of ALT, and we look forward to working with the new organisation once it has been established.

Please tick the box if you would like to receive updates on the new organisation and further information on CEL or QIA.

The information you provide in your response will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations, which allow public access to information held by the Department.

This does not necessarily mean that your response can be made available to the public as there are exemptions relating to information provided in confidence and information to which the Data Protection Act 1998 applies.

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