

A new National Improvement Strategy for the learning and skills sector

Developed and endorsed by the National Improvement Partnership Board

A new National Improvement Strategy for the learning and skills sector

Who this document is for

The term 'learning and skills sector' refers here to the wide range of learning providers and the national partners responsible for planning, funding and quality improvement. It includes the staff, boards and governing bodies working in these organisations.

Throughout the document we have used the generic term 'learning provider' to refer to:

- further education colleges;
- sixth-form colleges,
- special designated institutions;
- learning providers of work-based learning;
- employers;
- local authorities (former external institutions, adult and community learning provision and, where relevant, work-based learning);

- Jobcentre Plus providers;
- centres of higher education offering further education;
- school sixth forms;
- independent former external institutions;
- offender learning providers;
- Ufi/learndirect hubs; and
- specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

We have used the term 'learners' to include all:

- learners;
- students;
- trainees;
- Nextstep clients; and
- participants in Jobcentre Plus/DWP programmes.

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Foreword

On behalf of the sector representative bodies, national agencies and government departments that make up the National Improvement Partnership Board (NIPB), I am delighted to present to you a new National Improvement Strategy (NIS) for the learning and skills sector. This draws heavily on your feedback and is intended to be relevant for the breadth and diversity of all providers.

This strategy - which replaces the January 2007 publication, *Pursuing Excellence* – provides an overarching framework to enable everyone in the sector to take greater ownership of their own organisation's improvement and so achieve even greater success.

The sector is already doing a significant amount to achieve continuous improvement and we hope that this new strategy will encourage even greater progress in developing the quality of learning provision wherever it is delivered.

One of the ways in which the new NIS will do this is through the development of a single online directory of services.

The directory will contain information on the programmes and services the national partners provide and how that support may be accessed. The first phase of this directory will be available at the end of September 2009.

The new NIS recognises the role and contribution that everyone within the sector – learners, assessors, teachers, trainers, boards, governors, directors, trustees, providers, employers and national agencies – has to play in order for the sector to be even more responsive and so deliver a consistently high-quality learning experience for everyone.

On behalf of the NIPB, I wish to thank everyone who contributed to the consultation earlier this year. Your feedback was overwhelmingly supportive of our proposed direction of travel and I am pleased with what we have developed together.

The challenge for the NIPB now is to turn this strategy into action to deliver a coherent, responsive, flexible and sustainable service across the whole of the learning and skills sector.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Graham Hoyle". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'G' and 'H'.

Graham Hoyle OBE
Chairman
National Improvement
Partnership Board

Introduction

The learning and skills sector exists to help people to acquire and develop their knowledge and skills for living and working. This is self-evidently of fundamental importance both for the lives of individuals and to the nation as a whole. This strategy is intended to be one key means by which the sector will improve year-on-year its ability to help people learn.

We have renewed the National Improvement Strategy (NIS), which in January 2007 brought together for the first time the national partners' strategies and activities in support of the sector.

Given the pace of change and move towards shared regulation, the strategy needed to be refreshed; this was supported by government, and LSIS led this work on behalf of the sector and the national partners.

The National Improvement Partnership Board (NIPB) agreed that the new NIS should be redesigned from the outset as a coherent national strategy which would inform the sector-support strategies in the corporate plans of the national partners.

The approach and core ideas of the new NIS have been subject to extensive informal and formal consultation with the sector, leaders of representative bodies and partners and at national conferences.

Overall, the respondents showed strong agreement across the sector with the six principles. There was overwhelming agreement that self-improvement should be the key priority. Learning providers and partners collectively agreed that embedding a culture of continuous improvement is critical to the success of an organisation. Likewise, nearly all respondents agreed that individual professionalism of staff will be crucial in the future. The vast majority also agreed that the sector should influence national policy development.

Although the majority of respondents agreed that these were the right principles some groups of learning providers felt some principles were less important for them or that they were expressed in a way that was less meaningful for them. This is inevitable given the very diverse sector. However, as their corporate plans and the directory of services are developed to take forward the six principles the national partners are committed to working with all

parts of the sector to ensure that the strategy can be fully understood and owned.

The challenges

The shift towards the sector taking greater responsibility for regulation and the increasing importance of self-improvement in the sector require a new approach to improvement. However, the basic challenge to the sector – ensuring everyone has the skills for working and living – remains set out starkly in the following ministerial statements:

“We must ensure that all young people can achieve well through education and training. We must enable today’s adult workforce to gain new skills and qualifications. And, in the coming years, we must ensure that everyone can continue to improve their skills throughout their life.”

John Denham and Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver, March 2008

“We aim to create an economy in which every person has the opportunity to realise their potential, overcome disadvantage and achieve economic well-being by improving the nation’s skills at every level.”

John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills
DIUS business plan 08-09

Recent events have, however, demonstrated that the nature of this basic challenge can change dramatically and suddenly. The economic downturn demands the most effective and tailored response possible in each locality and this need provides probably the strongest argument for seeking to achieve a self-motivated, self-improving, highly skilled and professional learning and skills sector.

Context for a new approach

The new NIS is firmly rooted in the government’s proposed new model for high quality, inclusive public services as set out in the Cabinet Office paper, *Excellence and Fairness* (June 2008).

The model is founded on strategic leadership, customer empowerment and professional delivery by service providers. This new NIS is designed to foster a professional service in the learning and skills sector fully in line with *Excellence and Fairness*.

Basis of the new approach

The twin keys to professionalism are *trust* and *ownership*. The government has taken significant steps in showing it is prepared to trust the sector to become increasingly autonomous and to take a greater share of the responsibilities and duties involved in regulating its activities.

The sector now has the opportunity to show that it can be trusted to take ownership of its performance to provide a universally excellent, relevant and responsive service to the nation.

Real commitment to improvement will flourish only where people, in their range of professional roles at all levels in learning providers and partners, take full responsibility for what they do and know that they are being trusted by society to use large-scale public investment to do a precious job to the best of their ability.

The new approach

The new approach is to build consensus among learning providers and partners for a manageable number of core self-improvement principles based on trust and ownership.

These core principles are the fundamental states which, if achieved by the sector, would be most likely to lead to a highly effective, continuously self-improving sector.

These principles will be the focus for all relevant support activities provided by LSIS and the national partners, both individually and collectively, and for funding by government departments.

They will provide the platform for a coherent, concentrated set of improvement activities, likely to have the greatest impact on further improving the performance of the learning and skills sector.

The creation of LSIS as a sector-led organisation embodies this new approach.

Components of the strategy

This new self-improvement strategy has four components:

- six core principles;
- commitment of the national partners;
- a single directory of services; and
- review of progress by the NIPB.

Core principles of the new National Improvement Strategy

Improvement principles

The principles are directed solely at self-improvement: by individual members of staff, by individual learning providers, by staff or providers working together in groups, and by the sector acting collectively.

They are intended to define the sustainable characteristics of a self-improving, self-regulating sector: what Ofsted calls ‘the capacity to improve’.

They do not aim to address explicitly particular government policy priorities but their whole purpose is to enable the sector to be increasingly well positioned and successful in achieving those priorities now and in the future, while also achieving the sector’s own vision of its potential.

It is for this reason that we have not made specific references to policy. Instead we have focused on achieving greater success through the long-term achievement of the principles to position the sector to respond better to any policy priorities or to economic and social contexts which will change over time.

The current economic downturn provides a striking illustration of why it is important to develop the capacity of every learning provider to respond thoughtfully, intelligently and effectively to changes in circumstances that may be not only unheralded but also unprecedented.

Applicable to all learning providers

The principles are written in simple terms and plain language to ensure that their purpose is clear and to be relevant to practitioners at all levels.

They are intended to recognise the role and contribution that everyone within the sector – learners, teachers, trainers, assessors, support staff, leaders, governors, directors, managers, learning providers, employers and national agencies (including the sector-led ones such as LSIS and membership bodies) – has to play to achieve our national ambitions.

The diversity of the sector is acknowledged: it includes large and small providers; general FE, mixed economy, sixth form, land-based and specialist colleges; work-based and adult and community learning providers, and providers from the public, private and voluntary sectors. In the context of 14-19 reforms, the national partners will also work with schools.

The unique and discrete historical identities of the many elements that have come together to create the sector bring with them the challenge of differences in language.

For the purposes of these principles, the most general term is used so that all types of provider are referred to as ‘learning providers’ and students, trainees and learners as ‘learners’.

The use of ‘board (or equivalent)’ means all forms of strategic leadership found in the sector including boards of trustees, boards of directors, and other arrangements such as local authority reporting lines and contracting intended to fulfil the governance role.

Six core principles for self-improvement

We set out below the six core principles for a self-improving sector. None of them specifically mentions leadership and management because it is assumed that these skills, at every level, are prerequisites for successful delivery of all the principles.

1. Every single provider activity is directed towards providing each learner with just what they need.

This principle focuses on the ultimate purpose of all learning providers and the personalisation of learning.

The phrase ‘just what they need’ is a plain definition of excellent or world-class. ‘Need’ implies a negotiation between the learner and a professional guider to establish what is actually needed while ‘just’ challenges whether the learning is timely, relevant to the learner and the right content, at the right standard.

‘Just’ is to be understood in the sense of ‘being nearly as possible exactly right’ rather than in the alternative more limiting sense of ‘just enough’.

However, this latter sense does emphasise the need for learning to be cost-effective.

Reflective practitioners may not be able to tell whether their sessions were world-class, but a serious challenge is to ask themselves whether they have given their learners ‘just what they needed’.

Giving learners, as individuals, as employees and as members of communities, just what they need must be the aim of everything that learning providers do.

2. Each board (or equivalent) takes full responsibility for all aspects of the performance of its organisation.

Effective strategic leadership is the cornerstone of shared regulation and self-improvement. It has at least two key dimensions: oversight of the performance of the learning provider and discharging the role of ‘public trusteeship’; that is, ensuring that the provider acts always in the public interest and to the standards of conduct expected in the public service when delivering publicly funded provision.

Strategic leadership is arranged in different ways across the sector but it is accepted that the standards of conduct and service expected are the same whatever the type of provider.

Effective board members, governors, directors and trustees know how well a learning provider and its departments are performing.

They encourage and make use of intelligent and rigorous self-assessment in approving plans for improvement.

They are clear about how the performance of a learning provider rates against national and local priorities. They encourage leaders and managers to foster effective partnerships with employers, other learning and skills providers and schools.

They support good working relationships with stakeholders. They set the strategic direction and priorities and the tone for senior managers to take the lead in developing a culture of continuous improvement.

They assess their own performance, setting an example in self-critical learning and ensuring the learning provider is always open to new ways of doing things better.

3. A restless search to do better is firmly embedded in the culture of every single provider.

High quality, all day and every day, can only come from within; within each member of staff and each individual learning provider.

It requires a culture of values that all staff own and to which all staff are committed. Values in which self-assessment is far more rigorous than external inspection. Values that are never satisfied, no matter how many top grades have been awarded by Ofsted.

This transformation to a universal quality culture is both a key part of shared regulation and perhaps the greatest challenge shared regulation poses to the sector.

4. Every single member of staff is a professional – they own what they do and take pride in it.

The foundation of a quality culture is the professionalism of each and every individual member of staff working within a learning provider. Each individual must be committed to working to and sustaining the standards and reputation of their role in a thoroughly professional way.

With the government's new approach in *Excellence and Fairness*, the sector once again has the opportunity to mobilise, release, elevate and celebrate its professionalism and renowned expertise in meeting the needs of learners of all kinds and from whatever backgrounds. The role of professional bodies and membership associations is crucial here.

5. The greatest effective use is made of sector expertise

The sector has very many practitioners, support staff, managers and leaders, all of whom have a wealth of knowledge and experience of further education. We must mobilise this specialist knowledge to the greatest possible extent.

Plenty of evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of peer support in improving performance.

Routine external and peer benchmarking and a willingness to learn from others are hallmarks of successful organisations.

Consistent with shared regulation and self-improvement, there is much scope for the sector to do more to help itself rather than relying so much on others.

At the same time, there is always likely to be a role for specialists from other fields to introduce new ideas and techniques.

6. Effective collective advice from providers is given to government on all aspects of learning and skills policy development and implementation.

No one has more knowledge of further education and skills training than the huge number of practitioners, support staff, managers and leaders in the sector.

government and its agencies on all aspects of learning and skills policy.

Their voices need to be heard more clearly, helping to set the agenda and being responsive to learners and national priorities.

It will accelerate performance improvement by taking the lead in identifying key changes and policies that are highly likely to be effective and to which the sector will be inherently committed.

As a genuinely self-regulating and self-improving sector, it will give thoroughly researched and authoritative advice to

The representative and membership bodies have an important role to play here.

Commitment of the national partners

These principles have the full support of all national partners and we will work together to implement them collectively and coherently.

The national partners already have our own strategies in place. In due course, we will review our existing strategies, in the context of our FE remit, and develop plans and activities that are based on the principles and dovetail together in a coherent way.

In the same way, we will also seek to support each other's key strategies including, for example, Becta's Harnessing Technology Strategy and LLUK's Workforce Strategy.

Single directory of services

Now that the principles have been agreed, the national partners will together develop their plans of support to the sector on the basis of the principles.

Their offer will be communicated through the directory, the first phase of which will be available in September 2009.

This directory will contain a listing of key relevant programmes and services that the national partners provide, with links to enable easy access to further information about them and details of how they may be accessed.

The directory will set out the programmes in a coherent way so that learning providers can readily understand the purpose and 'fit' of each programme or group of programmes, irrespective of the national partner that will deliver them.

We are clear that the directory must be user-friendly, intuitive and issue-driven, so that learning providers can work through a route map that signposts them to the suitable support.

Review of progress by the NIPB

The NIPB will be the mechanism for ensuring the development of collaborative working arrangements between partners at national level.

The national partners will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the new NIS and the NIPB will provide a means of sharing first-hand feedback on the effectiveness of the partners' support to learning providers.

Through their corporate plans, the national partners will demonstrate how they are contributing to the successful implementation of the new NIS.

The first key objective and milestone is the creation of the single directory. NIPB aims to have this fully operational by the beginning of the 2010/11 academic year.

The directory will provide the basis for NIPB to review the fit and coverage of the partners' services in relation to the core principles and to seek further developments where necessary.

It will also allow NIPB to remove duplication and exploit synergies so as to ensure that programmes and services are as cost-effective as they can be.

At least annually, the NIPB will produce a report of progress and developments. Further updates and news will also be provided.

All this information will be made available on the LSIS website: www.lsis.org.uk

National partners

The national partners that make up the National Improvement Partnership Board are:

- 157 Group
- Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Association of Learning Providers (ALP)
- Association of National Specialist Colleges (Natspec)
- Becta
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- HOLEX
- Institute for Learning (IfL)
- Landex
- Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
- Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)
- Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK)
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (Niace)
- Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- Single Voice
- Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF)

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Developed and endorsed by the National Improvement Partnership Board:

National agencies

- Becta
- Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK)
- Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
- Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)
- Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

Sector representative and membership bodies

- 157 Group
- Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Association of Learning Providers (ALP)
- Association of National Specialist Colleges (Natspec)
- HOLEX
- Institute for Learning (IfL)
- Landex
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (Niace)
- Single Voice
- Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF)

Government departments

- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

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