

A New National Improvement Strategy: Consultation Response

The Institute for Learning welcomes the proposal by LSIS to renew the National Improvement Strategy. The further education and skills sector finds itself in a rapidly changing landscape, shaped by the need to respond to the demands of economic recovery and the challenge of delivering a low-carbon, resource efficient model for future prosperity. Here the role of the professional, the practitioner at all levels, is key; as described in the recent Cabinet Office report *Excellence and Fairness*.

Question: *Our intention is to develop the new NIS on a shortlist of principles supported by LSIS's and partners' corporate plans and a directory of support. To what extent do you agree that this is the best way forward?*

We said:

If a directory or prospectus is deemed necessary it should be available in a range of media, including hard copy and web-based. Any resulting directory or prospectus should not lead to a crowded landscape in terms of duplication with the workforce strategy. It is important that any such directory or prospectus is accessible not only by providers but also by practitioners so they can factor the support available into their individual planning.

We would welcome the development of the NIS to encapsulate the underpinning features of professional practice: professionalism, development, autonomy, integrity and equality. The NIS should make clear that employers, stakeholders and national partners have an obligation to provide the framework and architecture for individual professional development.

Question: *To what extent do you agree that there should be a major focus in the new NIS on raising the profile and effectiveness of governance in the sector?*

We said:

Governors and board members have an important role to play in self-regulation and improvement and the IfL supports the aspirations of the NIS in this regard.

We are especially keen on the support LSIS will give to staff who are members of governing bodies of colleges and providers as many of these will be our members; teachers and trainers. We are very committed to there being robust ways for governing bodies to ask for and listen to the perspectives of staff, and teaching and training staff in particular - on policies, priorities and performance of the college/provider.

Evidence shows that organisations that are 'porous' to their staff's views really benefit. This approach should be led from the top – the governance. As in the Cabinet Office

analysis, the role of 1) strategic leadership (ie governance), 2) the new professional (ie teachers/trainers and other staff), and 3) the citizen (the learners and employer customers) is the most powerful way for progress in services being self renewing and excellent.

IfL expects to see the national lead on governance having a strong focus on supporting staff governors and also to have robust ways of hearing and responding to the views of staff, especially teachers and trainers.

Question: *To what extent do you agree that embedding a culture of continuous improvement in an organisation is critical to achieving success?*

We said:

This cannot be achieved in isolation from fostering a culture of continuous improvement by professionals and practitioners at all levels. The IfL has the national lead on the self-improvement of individual teachers and trainers and we urge that the NIS reflects this.

Question: *To what extent do you agree that the individual professionalism of staff will be crucial in the future?*

We said:

Excellence and fairness (Cabinet Office, 2008) heralds an era of new professionalism, with the role of frontline professionals seen as paramount in driving forward public service reforms and the IfL supports this vision based as it is on self-improving, self-regulating professionals. It is encouraging to see the shift of focus within the proposal for the renewed NIS towards *professional delivery*; this should include support for individual professionals, especially teachers and trainers.

The twin concepts of *trust* and *ownership* are enshrined within the IfL's purpose and values and underpin the work the IfL leads on professional identity and development, as well as professional regulation. The concepts of the professional being uniquely placed to take full responsibility for teaching and learning and being trusted to exercise professional judgement are central to the IfL's vision of high performing, autonomous practitioners.

The IfL views professionalism as carrying a number of responsibilities, professionalism earned through accountability. Within these responsibilities rest the key features of individual self-improvement and wider collective peer regulation. Nowhere is this better evidenced than in the IfL's model for professional practice and the overarching requirements of remaining in good standing through professional development, where reflection, improvement and peer review are enshrined.

It is this very sense of the individual practitioner being trusted to perform consistently to the highest possible standard that will deliver the aspiration within the renewed NIS for a sector capable of swift and considered response to ever emerging challenges. Individual professionals strive to be equipped to meet the demands of current, future and unknown policy initiatives. Given the strength in diversity and difference across the

sector, real improvement is best delivered through activity aimed at developing the capacity to change at practitioner level.

Feedback from members questions the capacity of the NIS to respond to the voice and needs of individual professionals. In consultation with our membership on the NIS they have said (for example):

- “With the National Improvement Partnership Board comprising of policy makers and employer-led organisations, this raises the question ‘where is the voice of the professional?’”
- “I like the fact that it is written in plain language and that there is a clear focus on teachers and learners. That said, it is not obvious how much involvement teachers and learners have had in getting the NIS proposal this far. Apart from this consultation I would like to know if individual teachers have been involved in the drafting of the document?”

Question: *To what extent do you agree that there should be a shift of emphasis supported by funding arrangements to enable providers to support and learn from each other?*

We said:

The greatest challenge here is bringing together teaching and learning expertise from professionals and providing appropriate channels for the identification and sharing of practice. Here the IfL is well placed, providing all members with professional networking opportunities through leading edge technology such as the REfLECT personal learning space.

Having received praise from policy makers and national partners, we would urge others not to duplicate REfLECT but instead work with the IfL to embed the technology in all programmes of support for individual practitioners. The IfL’s adoption of leading edge technology for the delivery of highly personalised individual professional learning has made a significant contribution to harnessing technology and the elearning agenda. The IfL is best placed to build on this success and transform the capacity of individual teaching practitioners to support learning through technology.

With **all** teachers in further education and skills having access to a common communication platform through REfLECT as a member benefit we have, for the first time in this sector, a golden opportunity to foster a culture of self and peer improvement through reflective practice and learning from each other. With 25,000 teachers already using REfLECT for their continuing professional development and professional networking and a number of examples of whole provider approaches to supporting organisational learning and development supported by REfLECT, we urge national partners to look to what is working and deploy resources where they can deliver maximum impact. We expect that the NIS continues to promote REfLECT as the means for individual practitioners to plan, record and share professional development and that all national partners look to the IfL’s lead when designing support programmes.

In this regard and related to the wider aspirations of the NIS, we would ask that greater consideration be given to harmonisation across national agencies and support bodies. The NIS has a role to play in articulate the way in which the national agencies work together to complement each other and reduce duplication or overlap. Through our consultation on the NIS, members have expressed concerns that this is not sufficiently address in the proposal:

- “I’ll admit to being really confused. I thought Ofsted held the brief for inspection and, therefore, improvement. The document makes little reference to Ofsted and the relationship between the national improvement strategy and inspection, so what status does it have?”
- “Good to see the IfL named as a partner, not so good to see that there was little reference to the role of the IfL in practitioner self-improvement. Not much of a reference to Ofsted either. Surely the role of any national improvement strategy is to describe the way the various agencies and bodies work together to promote improvement.”
- “Where is the mapping? We see a lot of names – IfL, LSIS, QCA, LLUK, Ofsted, LSC, etc – but no indication of how these work together. And what takes precedence – the NIS, IfL’s CPD requirements, the Common Inspection Framework? And isn’t a directory of support available from national partners exactly what LLUK’s workforce strategy is?”

The final point is an important one in terms of the proposal for a directory or prospectus of support from national agencies. This has previously been a commitment within the workforce strategy work led on behalf of the sector by LLUK and there are plans to continue this approach as the strategy is reviewed and refreshed. We would not want to see overlapping work on detailing the support available and subsequent confusion across the sector.

Question: *How might LSIS and the NIS partners make greater use of the sector practitioners in delivering programmes and supporting each other?*

We said:

There is much effective practice and we have identified the desire from professionals to share and learn from each other – act locally: think globally. We believe that there remain insufficient opportunities or resources for individual professionals to come together, physically or virtually, and share practice. Geography alone presents a significant challenge, as does the continuing demands of the ‘day job’, with members stating that timetabling prevents practitioners from having the time or the capacity to support each other.

There is a real leadership issue here for the sector. It is vital that leaders in the sector consider how they can free up practitioners more from timetabled or other prescribed activities for their own CPD, so that they can stay up to date both in their subject and vocational areas and in teaching and learning methods, including new technologies. A few colleges we know are looking hard at how they can reduce administrative burdens and quality assurance procedures to generate more creativity and more excellence in teaching. QA procedures can only take us so far, but to get to excellence front line practitioners need to be freed up to drive their own CPD and practice. LSIS can help leaders share ways in which they can look afresh at where teachers’ time is spent and

how to maximize teaching, reflection, CPD so these are not encroached on by other tasks that are extraneous to the core business of teaching and training professionals

Time and resources are key, but it is also important to have the means to elevate the highest performing professionals to the national stage to showcase their successes and achievements. Peer review has an important role to play in delivering this, with practitioners encouraged to share and critically examine practice. There is also the need for national support programmes to be publicly peer reviewed both to cascade learning and to further develop the support that is available.

Teaching and learning needs to be evidenced based, both practice based and research based, so that what works well informs teaching communities and the wider profession.

Question: *To what extent do you agree that the sector should influence national policy development?*

We said:

The IfL is committed to provide teaching professionals with the means for having their individual and collective voices heard by policy makers.

The IfL can offer professionals a voice – but only policy makers can demonstrate that they are prepared to listen. For practitioners to be convinced that their views are valuable there needs to be a shift in focus and language. Take the following response from a member of the IfL:

“Every single provider activity is directed towards providing each learner with just what they need.’ I’m sorry – but as a teacher with over ten years experience I find that more than a little patronising. Surely a high level document such as the National Improvement Strategy shouldn’t be making such basic remarks? Where is the evidence that learners are not getting ‘just what they need’ to the degree that there needs to be a national strategy to sort it out?”

Members are particularly concerned that the NIS is virtually silent on the need for leadership to continuously improve. By implication this suggests that leadership and management has its house in order and members contested this world view. Whilst the NIS talks about self-improvement at all levels, the failure to identify leadership and management for direct action could lead to complacency and members urge that leaders should be reminded of their obligation to improve themselves and their practice.

Question: *To what extent do you agree that these six principles are the right ones for the sector to sign up to and that if achieved will lead to a highly effective, continuously self-improving sector?*

The six principles are certainly important for the sector, but the assumption that leadership and management is inherent across all six is open to challenge. It might well be the case that the skills are prerequisites for the delivery of the six principles but can we really be sure that the sector has the capacity for delivery? Again a view from a member is insightful:

- “The assumption that there doesn’t need to be a focus on leadership and management because these are ‘prerequisites for successful delivery of all the principles’ makes me really angry. It comes across as teachers need to improve but leaders and managers don’t. I don’t see how the NIS can be taken seriously all the time the six core principles do not include leadership and management.”

What our members say

Here is a sample of comments from members in response to the IfL's online discourse on the proposals for the NIS:

- I like the fact that it is written in plain language and that there is a clear focus on teachers and learners. That said, it is not obvious how much involvement teachers and learners have had in getting the NIS proposal this far. Apart from this consultation I would like to know if individual teachers have been involved in the drafting of the document?
- I'll admit to being really confused. I thought Ofsted held the brief for inspection and, therefore, improvement. The document makes little reference to Ofsted and the relationship between the national improvement strategy and inspection, so what status does it have?
- Good to see the IfL named as a partner, not so good to see that there was little reference to the role of the IfL in practitioner self-improvement. Not much of a reference to Ofsted either. Surely the role of any national improvement strategy is to describe the way the various agencies and bodies work together to promote improvement.
- The assumption that there doesn't need to be a focus on leadership and management because these are 'prerequisites for successful delivery of all the principles' makes me really angry. It comes across as teachers need to improve but leaders and managers don't. I don't see how the NIS can be taken seriously all the time the six core principles do not include leadership and management.
- Where is the mapping? We see a lot of names – IfL, LSIS, QCA, LLUK, Ofsted, LSC, etc – but no indication of how these work together. And what takes precedence – the NIS, IfL's CPD requirements, the Common Inspection Framework? And isn't a directory of support available from national partners exactly what LLUK's workforce strategy is?
- Why isn't one of the consultation questions "do we need the NIS?" All I am seeing is a lot of duplication and overlap with areas like Ofsted and the LSC.
- Well, it's a big improvement on the last one. I like the emphasis on the individual practitioner and the recognition that professionals deliver self-improvement through their practice.
- "Every single provider activity is directed towards providing each learner with just what they need." I'm sorry – but as a teacher with over ten years experience I find that more than a little patronising. Surely a high level document such as the National Improvement Strategy shouldn't be making such basic remarks? Where is the evidence that learners are not getting "just what they need" to the degree that there needs to be a national strategy to sort it out? In fact, thinking about it, where is the evidence base for all of the six principles?

- Was this written by LSIS or by the IfL? Am I being cynical in my reading of this document? It seems to be repeating and rehearsing a lot of the IfL's work on professionalism, which begs the question why do we need the NIS?