

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

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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 X | Work Based Learning Provider |
| Employer | Representative Body |
| Sectoral Body | National Organisation |
| Regional Body | Voluntary Organisation |
| School | Individual |
| Other (Please specify) | |

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

UCU and its 41,000 members working in the learning and skills sector are committed to delivering quality learning programmes to young people and adults. The strategy contained in the outline presented in the consultation document does broadly offer a vision that UCU and its members can largely aspire and commit to.

However we do have reservations about some of the underlying philosophy and serious concerns about how the strategy may be implemented which may impact on our long term commitment to the strategy. We will outline these in our responses to the questions contained in the consultation. But we would wish to make some points about the vision as outlined in the document:

- On the 5 major issues stated in the consultation document that underpin the pursuit of excellence, we would argue that economic prosperity, social cohesion and individual fulfilment are inextricably intertwined that one cannot be achieved without the others: that no single issue should be given primacy above the others and that this should be made clear in the strategy:

We would also argue that excellence in college and provider performance must be judged in relation to the circumstances colleges and providers find themselves. These judgements must also take into account the resources that colleges and providers are allocated.

UCU would also argue the paragraph headed "further education system workforce development may be better worded "a properly rewarded and recognised FE system workforce". We do not disagree with the statements in this section on the workforce, but we would strongly argue that among the principal determinants of excellence was a workforce that was properly rewarded and recognised through national salary structures and pay and professional status that were equal and equivalent to comparable sectors, in particular schools and higher education.

- The meaning of excellence: again we broadly agree with what has been set out in this section of the paper (paragraph 9). However we would prefer the term "employment" used rather than "employers" as the former term would encompass the needs of both sides of the employment relationship - employees and employers.

We would also urge that the government policies, on which the sector's activities are based, have a degree of coherence and consistency that has not always been present in recent years. Pursuit of excellence needs a foundation of stability in government policy if it is to be consolidated. Colleges and providers are diverse and complicated organisations. Sudden switches in government policies and conflicts between government policies can sometimes leave those who have been judged excellent in relation to one set of policies, unsatisfactory in relation to another new set of policies if there is insufficient time or resources to make necessary adjustments.

Paragraph 9 states that colleges and providers make the best use of resources. We would wish to see this extended to state that the resources that can ensure quality and excellence in the light of the governments' policies and challenges for the sector are allocated to the sector. This means equity of funding for comparable activity with comparable groups of learners.

Although this part of the paper states that equality of opportunity is actively promoted, UCU would wish to see equal opportunities given greater prominence in the strategy as it should be at the heart of all the sector's activities. We would wish to see equal opportunities among the characteristics of colleges and providers that the country needs and that are capable of supplying 14-19 and skills strategies.

The consultation paper states that there should be no poor or under performing provision after 2008. This is a worthy aspiration but we wonder how achievable at it is, especially given the need for some stability in the sector.

- We do not believe that quality improvement can be built on cultures of blame, victimisation and scapegoating which has sometimes characterised some managements' efforts at quality improvement. All within an institution or service must take appropriate responsibility for their part in poor provision, and seek relevant actions of improve it

Aims and approaches

| | |
|---|------------|
| <p>Question 2: Do you agree that the principles and aims identified on pages 11 and 12 are the right ones for the strategy?</p> | <p>Yes</p> |
|---|------------|

Comments

Whilst not disagreeing that the principles identified on page 11 of the strategy are the right ones, UCU would wish to see them amplified in the following way:

- Partnership: we agree that that partnership should be an underpinning principle of the strategy. We would argue that partnership has to operate within a provider as well as external working with other organisations. Excellence can only be achieved if the management of colleges and providers work in partnership with their staff so these staff feel part of such policies and thus have ownership of the process, rather than feel policies aimed at improving and maintaining quality have been imposed on them.
- Leadership: again whilst agreeing that excellence needs leadership from top, it also needs ownership and commitment from the rest of the organisation too. Leaders that try to impose excellence may achieve short term gains but will not achieve lasting excellence. Just as the principles argue that no external organisation can impose improvement, no leader can impose improvement within an organisation
- The section on principles states that no organisation should settle for the average. We are unclear exactly what the term "average" means in this context. We think that it is use it what seems to be a negative way seems unnecessary. We note that the Framework for Excellence suggest criterion referencing which would establish a concept of absolute excellence. QIA should describe quality and excellence in a way that does not conflict with the way it may be described through the Framework.
- Similarly UCU would not dissent from the aims of the Strategy set out on Page 12 of the consultation document. Again we would wish to see these aims modified so that in Aim 1 "employers" is changed to "employment interests" for the reasons we have outlined above. In Aim 2 we would not want the processes of continuous self-improvement becoming burdensome and a treadmill for staff that alienates them and weakens the very commitment to quality and self-improvement that is being sought. We also would not wish to see this continuous self-improvement becoming just an empty bureaucratic exercise
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Question 3: And if they are met will the vision be achieved? Yes

Comments

If the principles and aims are amended in the ways that we suggest, then the vision that has been set out could be achieved.

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

A partnership approach both externally across the sector and internally between managers and leaders and their staff is the only realistic approach to improve quality across the sector. We strongly agree with the statement in Paragraph 21 of the document that “the most important people in improving quality are staff”. This is the reason we stress the need for internal partnership. We are disturbed that we are receiving reports that the more proportionate approach to inspection is leading to a disproportionate response by some provider managements to self-assessment. We believe that this is due to the future introduction of contestability as outlined in the recent White Paper. The threat of this is leading some managements to a heavy handed approach to such activities as professional development and classroom observation which is undermining staff confidence, motivation and ownership of quality improvement as outlined in Paragraph 23 of the paper.

We are also concerned about how external partnership will work, particularly as we believe that the strategy document could be clearer in describing the separation of the responsibilities of the various national partners and agencies for quality improvement and how each set of responsibilities will interface with each other. For example it is not clear how organisations representing college and providers staff will relate to and be consulted by the Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships. We note that there is already work being undertaken between the LSC and NUS in establishing a National Learner Panel and there is clearly an intention to create an employers forum. But there seems no place for staff views, and ultimately it is staff that deliver quality learning programmes

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

Our response to Question 4 above makes a suggestion on how the wider partnership could be improved by giving access to staff to the various policies and strategies and their implementation.

We would also recommend that there should be some resources set aside centrally to fund some of the activities outlined for improving quality such as research and identification and dissemination of good practice. We are mindful of the good work undertaken under Theme 2 of Success for All in terms of using staff actively engaged in good practice in colleges and providers to identify issues and solutions around teaching and learning. We are also mindful that parts of this work suffered because colleges became increasingly reluctant to release staff for this work because of pressures on funding.

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

Comments

In line with UCU's desire to see the use of the term "employers" replaced by "employment interests". We therefore would wish to see any advisory forum being for "employment interests".

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

Comments

An employment forum would include employer and employee representatives. It would be important that a range of trade unions both within the sector and outside it are represented and we would recommend that the TUC co-ordinate this. We would also want to see wide representation of employers including medium, small and micro businesses. Clearly this should include representatives of the CBI and Federation of Small Businesses. It may be that the various sector skills councils could also recommend employer representatives. But it will be important to go beyond those employers who are already involved with training and the sector.

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

Comments

Both the Improvement Strategy and the Framework for Excellence are developing strategies that will reach their full implementation over time. It will be essential that coherent development is achieved between the two and there are not disjunctions between the aims of the Improvement Strategy and the means of the Framework. This must also include the underpinning philosophies of the two. It will be little use if the Improvement Strategy's vision of partnership is seriously undermined by overly bureaucratic and non-consensual performance measures and definitions of quality arising the Framework. There must be synergy between the two. Both the Improvement Strategy and the Framework need to be created from the bottom up and not imposed from above. This means that there must be both good consultation and good communications on the progress and outcomes on both, and that all stakeholders feel involved and listened to. Any communications strategy must reach as deep as is possible into the sector and not just involve the national partners and leaders of institutions and services. We understand that there is an Implementation Steering Group. It is important that its terms of reference are known and that all stakeholders have access to its deliberations. It will essential that work on both the Strategy and the Framework uses the same terminology. It will also be important that bureaucracy is kept to a minimum and we would recommend that the sector Bureaucracy Reduction Group is kept informed of progress on developments on both the Improvement Strategy and the Framework

Priorities

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

Comments

UCU agrees that the priorities identified in Part 3 are broadly the right ones. As we have indicated we have anxieties about how they will be implemented. We also are concerned about the use of the term "customers" in Paragraph 33. We would prefer the terms "users", "beneficiaries" and "learners".

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

Comments

Whilst agreeing that the priorities identified for learners are the right ones, we would wish to see included in the priorities, reference to good, relevant and appropriate information, advice and guidance. Without these there will not be equality of access to high quality learning opportunities.

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

Comments

We have already expressed several times our wish to see the term employment interests used rather than employers.

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

Comments

We can only find one reference to priorities for communities and this only refers to them being valued and respected as “customers”. Given the centrality that colleges have in their localities, we think this is insufficient. There needs to be far greater exploration of how the needs and wants of local communities can be expressed and met, and then how the quality of these services can be improved. Only then can the priorities for communities be articulated.

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? No

Comments

UCU is not confident that the strategy at this stage meets the particular needs from the perspective of our members. We will need to see how it is to be implemented. We have expressed already in this response our disquiet at the actions of some college managements already before the Strategy has been accepted and the performance measures and definitions of quality that will arise from the Framework for Excellence have been agreed.

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

Comments

We have begun to outline what we perceive to some of the difficulties with the Strategy and especially itself implementation in the previous answers. To recap we consider that there may well be difficulties around

- Gaining sector staff ownership, support and involvement in the strategy implementation in that it may be perceived as being imposed from above rather than being grown from the bottom upwards. This belief is being reinforced by current actions of some college managements who seem to be intent on imposing disproportionate self-assessment within their institutions.

- The flaw in the Improvement Strategy lies not so much in the Strategy itself but in the political and policy context in which it is being introduced; that of contestability in the event of provision being judged inadequate and not improvable. We would describe the perception that many learning and skills sector staff perceive the relationship of the policy of contestability to the Improvement Strategy as the iron fist in the velvet glove,
- We still remain unconvinced that self-assessment and the efforts to define quality and measure it will not be weighed down with excessive bureaucracy. As we have indicated above some of these difficulties could be overcome by concrete efforts to consult and involve sector staff at national, regional and local levels, and by a good communication policy and strategy.
- We also believe that firm and speedy action by the DfES, LSC, QIA, the Inspectorates, the Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Lifelong Learning UK could persuade some college managements to abandon some of the worst of their current inappropriate actions in relation to quality improvement.
- The issue around the perceived threat of contestability is going to be more difficult to counter as it is government policy.

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

This question is not applicable to UCU

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

Comments

UCU's response to questions 16 and 17 are the same: we would find the most helpful way for effective practice to be shared across the system as springing from our answer to the question of which examples of good practice we would find most useful. We would find most useful examples of good practice that sprang from real practice and real solutions to problems that arise in the teaching and learning. As we have indicated above we considered that the way that Theme 2 in Success for All identified issues and problems with the assistance of staff in the field, and then enlisted these and other staff to create solutions. Similarly the ways that the Success for All Curriculum Teams tested, cascaded and disseminated the materials they evolved, was effective in sharing that good practice, as did the practice of trying to establish subject coaches and networks at regional level. It did require resources to release staff to identify the issues and problems, come up with solutions and act as champions, mentors and coaches, as well as resources to allow staff to attend events at which the materials and the good practice was disseminated. We are concerned that the policies around contestability may militate against the sharing of good practice on the part of some managements.

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

Comments

See answer to Question 16

Impact measures

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

Comments

The consultation document states the publication of the full strategy will be accompanied by an analysis of the impact measures for the strategy, and that existing measures of success for the system will be the starting point. The parallel consultation on the Framework for Excellence is beginning the discussions around what will be the new performance indicators and definitions for quality. It is therefore difficult at this stage to describe a full range of measures for the impact and success of the strategy as we are not clear which measures will finally be used. The Improvement Strategy consultation paper in paragraph 38 expresses QIA's wish to consider other available measures. We would suggest a number that might help especially in trying to demonstrate whether people across the FE system identify with the strategy and are taking ownership of it.

- staff satisfaction surveys at institutional level. In passing we note that paragraph 39 identifies dialogues with learners and employers, but fails to describe any similar dialogue with staff. We also note that the dialogue with communities is to be through the Regional Quality Improvement Strategies. We do not think that this will elicit the full range of community needs or satisfaction with the learning and skills sector
- A range of human resource management measures such as turnover, exit interviews, industrial relations record, number of union learning organisation, whether the organisation has a learning agreement with the staff representative bodies representatives
- Polls/surveys of sector staff on perceptions and opinions of the Improvement strategy.

We would also wish to see some measures and performance indicators around college and providers' work with unions. This is line with our desire to see the term "employment interest needs" used rather than "employer needs". We know that there is extremely valuable and crucial work with unions, sometimes supplementing work with employers, but sometimes stimulating employers to become involved with training, and even in some workplaces work through unions is the only overt training that is taking place. This needs to be recognised and valued.

Terminology

Question 19: Do you feel that the terminology and definitions used throughout this document are sufficiently clear and inclusive? No

Please indicate where you feel this is not the case.

Comments

We feel generally that the terminology and definitions are not sufficiently clear or inclusive. We understand this is partly because of where we are at the moment in the process of developing the Improvement Strategy and Framework for Excellence. In particular our understanding is that the current Framework for Excellence consultation is the start of a process of further work on definitions and terminology.

We have indicated throughout this response our disquiet at the use of the term "employers" instead "Employment interests"

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

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