



## Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM CoE Award



**School Name** Nisai Virtual Academy  
Stockton-on-Tees, TS17 6PT

**CEO** Mr Dhruv Patel

**IQM Lead** Ms Victoria Reaney

**Date of Review** 21<sup>st</sup> March 2025

**Assessor** Mrs Emily Carr

### **IQM Cluster Programme**

**Cluster Group** Inclusivators

**Ambassador** Mrs Emily Carr

**Next Meeting** Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2025

**Meeting Focus** Inclusive Education Conference

### **Cluster Attendance**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
<b>Autumn 2023</b>	10-06-2023	Yes
<b>Spring 2024</b>	01-25-2024	No
<b>Summer 2024</b>	07-03-2024	Yes
<b>Autumn 2024</b>	11-13-2024	Yes
<b>Spring 2025</b>	03-12-2025	No

### **The Impact of the Cluster Group (with details of the impact of last three meetings)**

Nisai Virtual Academy is committed to being part of the IQM Inclusivators Cluster group. The IQM Lead articulated how they are pleased to attend meetings and enjoy the opportunity to network with other professionals and share good practice. They shared how they have gained some new ideas from attending the meetings and speaking with colleagues from other settings.

The IQM Lead was able to give examples of how the Cluster meetings have impacted on their thinking and allowed Nisai colleagues to reflect and develop. She updated how the autumn term meeting at High Tunstall College of Science allowed colleagues to see how another school provides an inclusive offer for their children. Nisai also had the opportunity to share their virtual mentoring, CIAG and Personal Learning Support Programme (PLSP) provisions with other schools to offer support.



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The special schools' cluster group, which was held in November, had a focus on wellbeing and the IQM lead shared how it had been good to compare their offer to other schools and realise that they have a robust package of support for their students, even though it is mainly online and virtual.

In discussions, the IQM lead shared how they like having the opportunity to share resources and see good practice in other settings to inform their thinking and development.

Due to their strong inclusive offer, Nisai colleagues are going to exhibit at the IQM Inclusive Education conference, in July.

### **Evidence**

Over the course of the one-day review the assessor evaluated the school's commitment to inclusion, and progress made against their action plan, through a range of written evidence, including:

- The school's Annual Review and Action Plan document.
- Previous IQM reports.
- Nisai website.
- Nisai LinkedIn social media page.
- Ofsted report.
- Curriculum planning.
- Teacher system - Nisai system (electronic platform similar to SIMs).
- Scheme of work system.
- Student one page profile.
- CPD calendar.
- Parent/carers feedback.

The assessor also toured the site, talked with staff, and observed some online lessons.

### **Meetings held with**

- CEO (via phone call).
- Deputy CEO.
- Chief Operating Officer (COO).
- Head of Teaching and Learning.
- Senior Teachers.
- Customer and Student Support Team Manager.
- Team Leaders for Exams and Progression and EHCP services.
- Head of Personalised Learning Support Programme (online via Teams).
- Head of Progression, Exams and Qualifications.



### Evaluation of Targets for last 12 Months

**Target 1: To increase SEN Awareness and collaboration between departments to ensure that all student needs continue to be identified, understood and supported.**

Leaders are clear that this target area has been a priority over the last 12 months and has been very successful, with all departments now having a greater awareness of SEN needs and working more collaboratively together.

Leaders shared how they have seen an increase in the number of students with complex additional needs, and an increasing proportion of children with social, emotional & mental health difficulties. Although the virtual academy already has skilled staff, as the needs of pupils are becoming increasingly more complex, leaders identified that more support, CPD and regular training was required. Leaders wanted to upskill the workforce to support students, in order to ensure they access an appropriate curriculum and get their needs met.

The Head of Teaching and Learning shared how teaching staff and Personalised Learning Support Programme (PLSP) staff have scheduled fortnightly meetings to share updates, review student progress and highlight any area of needs, and specific students, to focus on. She shared how they have ensured that their annual CPD calendar has a clear focus on SEN for all departments to access, updating on recent topics covered such as SEN CPD linked to Tourette's, Autism, ADHD, and PDA. Leaders also upload all resources to Teams so that staff can revisit training and access useful documents as needed. The Head of Teaching and Learning shared the example of how they made an internal training video overviewing old and new features of the virtual classroom and how these features are used in lessons to support SEN Learners, which colleagues can access as often as they like. This video has been shared and used in departmental training.

Many of the students which Nisai works with will have EHCPs or are in the process of being assessed; therefore, clear targets are identified and monitored throughout their time at the virtual academy. As it says on the Nisai website, *'Whether the young person is in the assessment phase or already has an EHCP, Nisai plays a vital role in delivering the educational provisions outlined on the plan.'* In discussions, The Head of Teaching and Learning updated how they have worked with the IT Development Team to further develop the online systems to include more features to support EHCP outcomes. She demonstrated how they now have an online one-page profile so that staff can quickly look at these whilst working with students in the virtual classroom, to ensure that their needs are being met.

Leaders believe that in order for students to achieve their full potential it is essential to have parent/carer involvement. They have worked hard to encourage parents and carers to be an active part of the community. Parents and carers are regularly informed of targets and progress. Leaders value, and actively encourage, the involvement of parents/carers in supporting their children's learning, engagement, and personal development. The team is now starting to send EHCP feedback forms to parent/carers



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to gain their feedback and lots of good feedback has been received, with parents making positive comments such as: *'The meeting was very well run', 'Communication with the EHCP team and the Exams team has been excellent' and 'It is one of the best meetings I have had for my child. The focus was on my child and the positives.'*

The Team Leader for EHCP services leads on the EHCP process and is supported by a small team of staff. The skilled EHCP Team Leader offers support and advice to staff and schools and families. They shared how approximately 12 months ago they took over the role of hosting reviews and developing the EHCP systems and processes. They have now been more standardised; communication has been further developed and improved and mentors feedback to her before every meeting. Meetings now follow more of a 'Team around the Child' process, with all meetings following the same format. Reviews are more standardised and there is a good quality of reviews. She updated how PLSP staff participate in EHCP reviews and provide feedback and support to the EHCP team and also to the students and families.

The Exams Support for SEN Students has also been standardised and new documentation has been implemented to ensure that the normal way of working statements, access arrangements etc are visible and shared to all. The Exams Lead said, *'We are always developing and evolving.'*

**Target 2: To solidify the Virtual Mentoring Provision that is offered as an option for students to provide a support mechanism with confidence, time management, other pastoral requirements and acting as an intermediary for the students and teachers.**

Since the last IQM visit, leaders have clearly invested in this key area. Staff at Nisai are passionate about ensuring all students have a voice and independence for their future and are committed to enhancing the lives of all the students in their care to enable them to secure the best possible life chances as they move through their educational journey and beyond. At Nisai, they believe that education is more than just academic achievement; it's about nurturing the whole person.

From the meetings with all staff involved in coordinating the mentoring provision, it is evident that everyone is highly committed to providing students with a deeply enriching, inclusive offer that involves all students receiving the support they need for them to experience success. The Leadership team remains committed to their aim of supporting children in a holistic way and the strategic decision was made to heavily invest in this area through quality continuous professional development and ensuring staff are given time and effective resourcing into training specifically linked to this.

The Director of Engagement and Inclusion, who is also the Head of Mentoring, shared how mentoring packages were originally created due to the students who couldn't come into a school setting due to a variety of reasons, such as medical needs, or anxiety, which led to the formation of the Personal Learning Support Programme (PLSP) offer. She shared how each year the mentoring offer grows and expands. Currently, there are 30 mentors across the country, with two managers managing the East and West side.

She shared how the Virtual mentoring came out as a result of leaders reflecting after COVID, when face-to-face mentors were unable to visit homes so the offer had to adapt.



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Children needed an extra level of support but due to the physical barriers, the team adapted their offer to deliver *'virtual mentoring sessions in the virtual classroom.'* These sessions focus on offering pastoral support and developing soft skills, with mentors working through topics such as confidence building and exam techniques. Sessions are bespoke to each individual and their identified needs. Mentors also look at student's EHCP outcomes and they then plan and incorporate targets to develop identified areas and they also support families in the EHCP review process.

The passionate Director of Engagement and Inclusion shared how they don't want mentors to be isolated, so they have created a robust package of support, via weekly team meetings, to share practice and positive outcomes. Staff have access to training about important topics such as SEND, trauma informed practices and resilience so they have more of an understanding of student needs and how best to support them. The training offer has been further developed to involve input from different departments.

The Head of Mentoring shared how strong relationships are developed between each student, their family and the virtual mentor and updated that the team is about to expand from 2 full time virtual mentors to 3. The team has received positive feedback from students and families and this has supported the leaders' vision and determination to develop this offer further. Nisai staff are constantly raising awareness, internally and externally, about the Virtual Mentoring provision including in end of term reports so that it can be accessed by more pupils who need support in this way.

Virtual Mentoring has seen a great increase in the number of students accessing this provision and staff have been able to streamline and solidify the processes and the overall offer, including the delivery, with processes being evolved and refined over time.

It is clear, from evidence presented throughout the day, that the wellbeing of students is a key driver at Nisai and that the mentoring programme is supporting students, and their families.

### **Target 3: To redesign and develop a robust CIAG programme, taking into account the needs and aspirations of students.**

Although leaders have worked on this target area, they were honest and reflective that this target will be carried over to the next 12 months. The IQM lead discussed how they are continuing to work on this target area as it is still not where they want it to be. She was reflective about the progress they have made and some of the issues they have encountered, sharing that due to a change of staffing in this area, progress has not been as rapid and sustained as they would have liked.

The team shared how teachers are continuing to support subject-related enquiries and PLSP Mentors are supporting PLSP students with localised requirements. The Head of Teaching and Learning shared how they *'interweave careers into all curriculum areas, looking at skills in the course and how they can be used at employment.'*

Leaders have also recently signed up to Unifrog and will be embedding the use of this system over the coming 12 months, to further improve their offer. The purpose of the Unifrog platform is to help students find their future. The online system brings all



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available information into one comprehensive, user-friendly platform that *'helps students make the best choices and empowers teachers to manage progression effectively.'*

On the review day, discussion was also had about how Nisai can make contact with The Careers and Enterprise Company: the national body for careers education in England, supporting schools and colleges to deliver modern, 21st century careers education. They recently presented at a Cluster group meeting that Nisai was unable to attend.

Leaders are clear that the development of the CIAG programme and offer is a priority area and have clear plans to ensure it is successful.

### Agreed Targets for next 12 Months

**Target 1 To increase attendance rates and to focus on decreasing unauthorised absences and to work collaboratively with customers on overall participation in lessons.**

Attendance is already monitored closely at Nisai, as the leaders recognise the relationship between attendance and progress as well as the emotional and social development of the students. Students are rewarded as individuals and as a class for engagement and attendance through the use of virtual house points. If there is an attendance issue with any pupil, the issue is raised sensitively and with the support of the Nisai CaSST team. One staff member said, *'We want to dig deeper and look for patterns.'*

Leaders are realistic that due to the nature of their cohort, attendance will always be lower than national average but they want to focus on the unauthorised absences - checking attendance codes that are N. The team updated how they already have a process for this: speaking with parents/carers first and then to the customer (school or LA) if a student doesn't attend, but they are looking at if this process can be improved further.

Leaders also shared how they record all lessons, so students can access them at a later date if they have missed a session due to ill health etc, but they want to see if they can capture this in a more formal way if a child accesses a full lesson recording and completes work set in that session after the date of the original lesson.

The virtual academy now has a dedicated person to look at attendance due to this being an ongoing priority area and they will be focussing on this target area, with the leadership team, over the coming 12 months. It is clear that there is a big commitment to improving attendance at Nisai.

The following actions have been identified to meet this target:

- To look at internal reporting and improve dataset options to focus on the coding and reasons why.
- To identify dedicated staff from CaSST (Customer and Student Support Team) to follow up on non-attendance and have meetings to look at strategies for non-attendance/authorised absences.



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- To study links with assignment submissions rates vs attendance.
- To identify patterns and proactively set some attendance goals either per student/per class/per term.
- To look at attendance reporting and what customers can access and how often they are doing so.
- To break down attendance by offer (such as PLSP, Short term etc).

**Target 2 To ensure that correct Exam entries are made for every student with an exam centre, and that all special consideration, access arrangements are in place as needed.**

The Head of Progression, Exams and Qualifications is committed and dedicated. She talked with passion about how they work hard to ensure that all students can leave them with qualifications to support them in their future.

She shared some of the issues that they have faced with getting appropriate exam centres identified for some students and how this continues to be a priority area moving forward. The CEO and Deputy CEO also confirmed this as a high priority area, talking about how changes are needed so that all students can sit exams and how they are lobbying for these changes.

The Head of Progression, Exams and Qualifications also updated that they have been working on giving standardised and simplified communications to customers, students and parents. The team has been working on making templates for each qualification to simplify checking of information to find out if the information they have is correct, as it can often be out-of-date.

Moving forward the team are also working on simplifying the course details documents: for each qualification there is currently a PDF document with all the course information on but they are working on simplifying the information, and how it is presented, to make it more user friendly. The team is also working on creating an Exams FAQ/manual that can be used by students and stakeholders.

It is clear that work has already started on this target area and that the team are committed and passionate about making further improvements.

The following actions have been identified to meet this target:

- To review exam requirements for Nisai students with an Exams Centre and those who do not have an identified Centre.
- To review the messaging on documentation/contracts to ensure it is clear what the exam requirements are.
- To research private centres and look at the standardisation of a process and create guidance for parents/customers and students.
- Review processes and communication methods.
- To provide further training for Exams Team and Teachers.



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### **Target 3 To review and increase the quality of the delivery of lessons and resources ensuring we provide the highest standard of education to our students.**

Leaders are always focussed on developing their offer further and are currently reviewing the curriculum offer and are aiming to broaden the curriculum, with more subject areas being offered in the coming months.

Leaders are also focussed on developing more resources and content to ensure that all students access the highest standard of education possible.

The following actions have been identified to ensure that the highest standard of education is offered to the students of Nisai:

- To review the current lesson observation cycle and process.
- To implement regular quality checks on resources.
- To spot check assignment quality and differentiation.
- To standardise the delivery templates using Nisai branding.
- To use subject leads for subject quality observations.
- To ensure that feedback provided is constructive and that required actions are followed up.
- To revamp the current observation monitoring log.
- To ensure CPD is relevant to the needs of the teachers.

### **Target 4 To redesign and develop a robust CIAG programme, taking into account the needs and aspirations of students.**

The following actions have been identified to meet this target:

- To continue to review the current CIAG offer.
- To design and create new resources.
- To research LMI in key areas where majority of students are based.
- To support the redesign of the Wellbeing Centre and make it more interactive.
- To research external agencies who have programmes/support resources that can be integrated.
- To build in CIAG in NS3 (Y9) classes.



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### Overview

Staff at Nisai have their learners at the centre of all they do. It is a setting of hope and aspiration. An organisation that is dedicated to developing and enhancing inclusive practice.

Staff are committed to an innovative and relentless approach to find ways to break down barriers to enable children to reach their potential and succeed. Leaders have worked hard to create an ambitious and inclusive culture. Their vision to engage, educate and support some of the most vulnerable pupils, across the country and also internationally, is lived and breathed by each staff member. On the review day, the Deputy CEO and COO talked passionately about how they want to ensure a good learning experience for all and that students are at the centre of this organisation. The team looks at what a learner is able to achieve and supports them to get that.

Senior Leaders describe how all students are valued and are supported so that they can all achieve their best. Staff offer children and young people, with a diverse range of additional needs, the opportunity to learn in a supportive online environment, where differences are celebrated, and every pupil is valued and encouraged to achieve their own potential. One leader explained, *'We all learn in different ways and need to access learning in different ways. At Nisai there is a culture of responsibility and we work together to ensure our students can learn, develop and achieve.'*

There is a strong and stable staff team who have all bought into the vision. This setting has genuine collaboration and teamwork embedded in its ethos. Leaders talked with passion about the effective team they have and how staff are happy working there and tend to stay. Many staff have been at the setting for 12, 15 or even 17 years! One leader said, *'I started my Nisai journey and could see the vision and wanted to be part of it. I really love it here!'* The leadership team talked about how the CEO's values, and vision, are deep rooted and embedded and how all staff live and breathe these values. Throughout the review day it was clear that staff are fully committed and supportive of the Nisai vision.

Recruitment and induction processes for new staff, and new roles, are strong. The Chief Operating Officer talked about how they work hard to get the right people working with them, stating *'We ask: are they Nisai? Do they share our values?'* Once staff have been recruited to roles, there are strong processes in place to ensure all new staff fully understand the policies, procedures and ethos of Nisai. These are revisited over time to allow new staff to learn and implement what is required and become confident about life at Nisai. Leaders shared how there is a strong and supportive 'buddy system' to support staff as they work. The leadership team is a reflective team who ensure all staff are included and valued.

Wellbeing needs of staff are taken seriously by leaders and one staff member articulated how leaders consider their workload and put things in place to reduce this. Another staff member shared how they have a good Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) in place that offers things such as counselling, finance support and medical assistance. There is an easy-to-use app for phones and employers can access it whenever they want. One staff member shared, *'This is a great place to work for wellbeing.'*



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The Senior leadership team is highly skilled and experienced. The leadership qualities of the team have created a culture of reflecting and growing. One Senior Teacher explained, *'This is a dynamic place to work. We are always evolving.'*

Relationships across the whole community are embedded and nurtured. Leaders realise that relationships are key to successful outcomes. At Nisai, relationships truly matter. Leaders are never complacent and regularly consult staff, parents/carers and students about how to further improve and develop. This is done through activities such as pupil voice and parent/carer questionnaires. Nisai is a reflective organisation. The purpose to ensure each student can achieve is at the core of everything they do.

Staff seek to support each student's access to a broad and balanced education appropriate to their potential and educational needs. The curriculum is broad and balanced, with a range of subjects on offer such as English, Maths, Science, History, PSHE, Sociology, Business Studies. Students can also access employability skills lessons, where they can learn about topics such as building a CV or planning a presentation.

Curriculum progression has been a key focus of the teaching team. Leaders have worked hard to recruit subject specialists, and this has had a positive impact across each curriculum area. Students' can leave Nisai with a wide range of qualifications and a core set of GCSEs and/or A Levels. Due to the international growth of Nisai, leaders are also looking at international qualifications that students can achieve. One parent's feedback captured the impact of Nisai, stating *'Staff give my child the support he has needed for a long time and the results speak for themselves. Nisai is meeting his needs - mentoring and learning, and it's great.'*

Staff have a thorough understanding of the challenges their students and families face and are committed to seeking the right support to provide the most effective impact. Mental health and wellbeing needs are taken seriously by the school and the school has a dedicated team who ensure there is a strong targeted support package for those who need it. The Head of Teaching shared how they consider everything they can do to support and motivate students, updating that they put students into 'houses' and they can earn house points and they also have student of the week and student of the term and also teacher of the week that students can vote on. Students also have a form tutor who is a key person and point of contact. As the team is always reflecting and exploring how to improve, the teaching team is currently trialling the use of webcams so children can see teachers and get to know them more and this will soon become the standard way of working. The leaders are also in the process of developing teacher profiles and pen portraits to go alongside a photo of each individual that will be going on the Nisai website.

Leaders are clear about the vision and next steps for the virtual academy. This is an outward facing organisation who share best practice and are keen to learn from others.

It is clear from the review process that the team at Nisai continue to be fully committed to inclusive practice and they successfully demonstrated the positive impact of their work towards the IQM Centre of Excellence targets over the past 12 months. They have proved their expertise over the years of IQM accreditation and I believe they have the passion and capacity to continue to drive the inclusion agenda in their own setting and



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beyond. Therefore, I recommend that the school retains its Centre of Excellence status. The next review will look closely at how the Leaders have fulfilled the objectives outlined in their Centre of Excellence Action Plan and how they have interacted with the IQM Cluster Group, and other schools locally, nationally and internationally, to promote their inclusive vision and work.

I am firmly of the opinion that the school fully meets the standard required by the Inclusion Quality Mark to maintain its status as a Centre of Excellence. I therefore recommend that the school retains its Centre of Excellence status and is reviewed again in 12 months. The next review will look closely at how the school has interacted with its Inclusion Cluster and promoted continuing outreach. Evidence of Cluster working will underpin the capacity for the school to maintain its Centre of Excellence status.

**Assessor: Mrs Emily Carr**

**Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:**

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Joe McCann MBA NPQH  
Director of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd