Response to the JISC Consultation on a 'Study of Environments to Support e-Learning' from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

ALT is the leading UK body bringing together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in learning technology. ALT was formed 12 years ago, and is a registered charity. Our work is supported by 4.5 permanent FTE staff, 4 of whom are based in the ALT Office in Oxford, and one of whom is home-based. ALT aims:

- to promote good practice in the use of learning technologies in education and industry;

- to represent our membership in areas of policy;

- to facilitate collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers.

Currently we have as members:

- nearly 500 individuals;

- the majority of the UK's higher education institutions;

- a significant number of further education colleges;

- a growing corporate membership including the Department for Education and Skills and Ufi Ltd, sector-bodies such as Becta and LSC, international organisations like SURF, as well as large and small software, hardware, telecommunications, and e-learning businesses.

ALT has made the following response to the consultation questions below that relate to the report of the JISC 'Study of Environments to Support e-Learning', available from: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/e-learning_survey_2005.pdf

The response is provided on behalf of ALT by a group convened from the ALT membership and representative of pre- and post-92 institutions, including those with an FE orientation, and independent practitioners.

G1. How useful is this survey to you and your organisation?

The value of the survey potentially lies in organisations responding to the consultation and any related awareness exercises and enhanced understanding of the data/trends that may occur through this process, rather than in the document itself. However, the ability to monitor changes in sector thinking in relation to learning technologies can be helpful. In addition, comparative results that indicate the way the sector is emerging in relation to certain issues can provide organisations with:
- a valuable benchmark (current position)
- a mechanism for defining future goals (future position), and
- an indication to organisations of how far away they are from their stated intentions. (match)

The survey would have more impact if the data were focused to reflect the four national boundaries than on types of institution. The influence of different national agendas is becoming more significant than distinctions between colleges (FE), pre-92 and post-92 universities. Organisations now support a range of functions across further and higher educational levels. Many have undergone a number of status changes in recent years and no longer necessarily identify with these divisions.

The survey questions should be linked better to national priorities and programmes. It should also highlight different areas of interest between national boundaries better.

G2. Would you like to see future similar surveys?

It is difficult to tell which data sets are of use to which of the groups that are represented. It is possible that a more focused survey may be of more use to particular groups, but it is better to run a large survey with guaranteed commitment than to attempt several smaller overlapping studies that may yield less response.

G3. Is the survey:
G3.1 Too long or too short?

The survey report length is less an issue than the structure. There are too many tables (in some cases more than one per question), although the document may be presented better in an online format with effective use of linking analysis to results.
A text-based report of this length would need to be condensed or an effective overview supplied. It may also be useful to supply a related trends report suitable for use with senior institutional staff.

G3.2 How could it be improved?

If the exercise is continued in future years, the focus should be on the *use* of this process as a tool rather than on continuing the exercise solely as a survey. Different forms of achieving a more useful set of information based on this type of data should be considered. The processes that enhance data collected in a research project should be reviewed to maximise the impact of the work for all involved. This may mean that a different form of presentation will be required in the future. The survey work should also link to internal based consultations on benchmarking for e-learning due in 2006.

Providing gap analysis and some commentary that indicates specific changes in focus for the sector could also be useful, particularly if the survey programme is extended in future years. More direct presentation of any indicators of step changes occurring (or not) in the sector, and its representative parts, would be helpful.

G3.3 Are the questions appropriate?

It is helpful to have the detailed breakdown of the questions and the changes to the questions and process that may affect direct comparison. What may need to be considered in future years is whether the areas around which questions are based continue to be an appropriate scheme both for measuring past & existing activity as well as providing an indication of future directions that are appearing on the horizon.

Any future survey must keep abreast of changes in the e-learning sector and adapt the areas investigated accordingly to prevent stagnation of the dataset.

G3.4 Who should complete the survey within an institution?

It would appear that no individual is in a position to hold the full information set, except where the institutions consulted are small. In larger institutions it could require a sizable consultation team with representation from several units, and areas of work crossing central services as well as faculty members and/or teams. The survey itself reflects this position (1.5). Without these people involved, the data returned would at best be an informed guess or provide results skewed to a particular area of the organisation. The consultation effort for larger institutions should not be underestimated, particularly when a completion time is suggested for the actual document.

It seems questionable as to whether the survey reached the people with the right knowledge for its completion, and whether different results would appear if a different group in each organisation had been consulted. The survey organisers should be confident that all of the right people have been involved.

ALT would like to register disappointment at the low level of consultation of learning technologists (and by implication e-learning specialists) compared to established functional areas within organisations indicated in question 1.5, and suggests that this may also be represented in respondents to the survey. However, ALT is pleased to be represented as an agency to be consulted with and as a recognised provider of staff development activities for the sector.

G3.5 What is the most useful aspect of the survey and why?

If such surveys are appropriately targeted in terms of the content, they can form a useful tool for stimulating discussion, review and/or overview of the education sector as a whole. There is also potential for using aspects of the survey to consider how a new activity may be approached, e.g. in indicating that certain commercial or open source packages that could be considered for the job.

G3.6 What is the least useful aspect of the survey and why?

More detail is required on the implication of the results, and should be provided by the survey team. Providing analysis should not be a major role for the consultees.

The format would have to be reworked for the survey to be an effective tool for influencing policy and practice within institutions, and the approach may need to be reconsidered for it to be drawn to the attention of those who can benefit but may not be attracted by the concept of 'survey results'.

G4. Is the manner in which the data is presented helpful?

It would be helpful to have an indication of why specific questions were included and who requested those questions for what purpose. Linking the responses to concerns of the four countries in the sector would be useful.

There is not enough analysis of each table, and it does not appear that any tool (such as SPSS) has been used to help draw out relevant findings, such as from deeper exploration of the surface data, or through statistical testing to back up the validity or reliability of the results. Adopting a standardised format for the statistical analysis would be helpful. Cross-correlation between questions and ranking would also provide a basis on which to assess the data to respond to questions in the consultation in a more informed way.

G5. In a number of areas the survey reveals a significant gap between reality and aspiration – what should be done to address this situation?

This needs to be separately assessed in relation to the stage of development of the technologies in question (as demonstrated by attempted case-based use in their intended environments), their ability to support or improve learning itself as opposed to only administrative procedures, and the capacity (in all respects) of individual institutions to embed new scenarios. Sustainable business cases appropriate to different types of institutional market, and the initial support for their development will be critical to this ambition. Institutions must also be able to see the long-term benefit to them to initiate case-based development work. As the different countries of the UK take a different approach, it may be possible from this approach to determine whether such aspirations are realistic or applicable, rather than merely attempts to meet enforced requirements of higher level agendas.

G6. What, if anything, concerns you about the findings in the report?

There is an assumption that gaps between reality and aspiration are untimely or inappropriate. Gaps should be examined in context to assess their nature and what this might show about different types of institution and student groups.

The response rate to the survey needs to be investigated. Given that good surveys can attract a 70-80% return rate, the rate here appears to be low. Is the response rate less than expected? Are there national response trends apparent in the data? Is this a reflection of the survey process, in terms of who might be responding to the survey? (See G3.4) Or perhaps the survey relevance in view of timing of other events within the sector? A better incentive is required for completion to ensure more accurate data. However, this relies on the full range of significant individuals in each organisation being consulted.

G7. Are there any specific areas that should be included in future surveys?

See response to G2.

Specific Questions

Section 1: E-learning development

S1.1 There appears to be a move towards functional centralisation models within institutions, for example IT services, and pedagogic support. Is this a sign of development in the use of e-learning?

Operational structures are being developed to accommodate new needs in organisations. However, these are more predominantly hub-spoke or multi-node models where central services co-work on an equal basis with faculty support teams. Central services more commonly provide facilitation, cross-subject/discipline knowledge, practice, and procurement, and assist with central policy development. Subject-based nodes provide specialist support and development functions for more narrowly defined areas of the organisation and input to central activities as representatives of their area.

S1.2 In post 92 institutions is there a move towards a public/private ownership model?

This question is unclear. See also G1.

S1.3 The availability of funding appears to be most significant driver overall – would you agree with this statement in general?

This question is unclear. It could relate to funding as a direct or indirect driver. The implications are quite different. Additional funding is rarely the sole or main reason for developments or change occurring. Educational motivation is normally the main driver for development, but without appropriate funding many needs go unmet. See S1.5.

S1.4 More students appear to be being consulted about e-learning developments – is this true from your experience? What lessons are institutions learning from these student consultations?

Students are generally being and expect to be consulted. For example, all post-graduate courses could be put online, but the organisation needs to know whether students will pay to do the courses that way. Student needs must be included in any developments and the organisation must respond appropriately or the developments will fail.

S1.5 Some respondents indicated that they had plans for inter-institutional collaboration. Are institutions more willing to collaborate and have JISC and funding council initiatives had any bearing on this change?

Yes, to an extent; institutions will collaborate where quality, student retention, or other critical survival issues create the appropriate conditions in a competitive environment. But institutions have already collaborating for a very long time of their own accord, and a little money helps this to happen. Any money in a tightening world is always well-received. There has to be a push-pull factor to prioritise what will happen, and money is one of these.

Section 2: E-learning environments – current and future developments

S2. The following trends have been drawn from the responses <cut>. How would you rank these priority areas for now and in the future? What would you say are realistic timescales for achieving them across say 80% of the sector?

This cannot be answered by a limited consultation response. Priorities will vary according to the organisation. Do the items actually need to be ranked in national terms? This is a suitable proposition to be researched within the next piece of work.

Section 3: Future development of processes to support e-learning
S3.1 Is the apparent increase in strategies to support e-learning a reflection of funding body requirements or something else?
Many organisations are working to include their e-learning strategies within their TLA and/or faculty strategies, as e-learning becomes more mainstream. It is possible that the production of e-learning strategies is a stage in the development of e-learning inclusion into the mainstream. An e-learning strategy may need to be developed in the first instance to focus an approach, but then later re-integrated into day-to-day business of an organisation using its standard set of operational tools.
S3.2 Is the implementation of a VLE in an institution managed differently from the implementation of e-learning?
Yes. A VLE is not necessarily pedagogically orientated. VLEs now play a smaller part in e-learning than previously.
S3.3 There is some reported increase in the number of institutions who use an e-learning strategy to support the development of processes for e-learning but there appears to be a much higher increase in those who use a teaching and learning strategy and/or a library/learning resources strategy. Does this reflect embedding of e-learning within institutional strategies, the change in the survey question or something else?
The approach largely depends on which tools institutions are using to organise and develop their work. See S3.1. Institutions have been required to produce TLA strategies in order to receive TQEF funds from the funding bodies, making these predominant. In some cases funding has allowed staff to be appointed to support carrying out the strategy, so this approach is more likely to happen in those cases as it has resource attached to it.
S3.4 Strategies from professional bodies or agencies appear to be the most significant source of external information used to support institutional e-learning development. What comments do you have, particularly in relation to the reported use of national strategies?
This finding does not tally with our experience. External information from professional bodies or agencies is generally used more heavily than their strategies. Organisations are interested in services that can help them and the provenance and reliability of information on offer more than where it came from. Strategies appear to contain some oddities based on national barriers. See G1. Different countries have different priorities. Difference in strategies is as important as commonality.
S3.5 In terms of barriers to development in support of e-learning, lack of time scored most highly and institutional culture was in the top six. How might the latter be addressed?
For lack of time, read lack of priority. Better planning regimes to discuss priorities and their implementation might help. But if an institution does not have the business case to support e-learning in relevant forms, then institutional culture will reinforce lack of

priority. If it is important and allocated resource e.g. set up as a unit, it will happen. There has to be local benefit and support, not merely enforcement of external agendas. There also has to be leadership throughout, not just in the initial phases.

Section 4: Virtual Learning Environments

S4.1 In this section, are there any particularly noteworthy trends or changes for the FE sector?

See G1.

S4.2 In-house VLE and intranet developments appear to be one of the most common type of VLE in use. Does this indicate a desire within institutions for greater control and flexibility of VLEs compared with what is available from commercial vendors?

This may be an observer issue. More than one system is used in most places, although more than one may not be centrally supported. The survey needs to look closer at what's really going on and how the systems are classified – it could be reflective of who is responding to the questionnaire.

S4.3 Although there appears to be some increase in the number of staff and students using VLEs, usage is not widespread and the figures reported are quite low. However, the results also show that two thirds of modules of study being web supplemented which would seem to indicate that the 'stuff your notes into your VLE' model is prevalent and increasing. Does this apparent contradiction highlight that there is not a shared understanding of 'e-learning'?

These data provide absolute numbers, not percentages. This does not indicate what proportion of the whole is represented. Is the question properly understood by responders? See also G3.4 – did the right person answer the question?

No, there is not a shared understanding of e-learning. The advantages of introducing technologies in a learning environment may or may not constitute learning. Research is ongoing on various aspects of this. Some aspects we consider as learning may be proven otherwise in 5 years time and be re-classified.

S4.4 The needs of off campus/distant learners have been shown to be different from blended learners. However, the low numbers in the survey responses indicate a lack of awareness in institutions for these groups. What comments do you have?

Specific student groups need to be considered. Distance learners often spend a concentrated period on campus. Some campus learners operate more at a distance. It is necessary to know why these groups operate in the way they do, and by what means, to provide an accurate assessment. Because it is difficult to provide commonalities across these definitions, they are often paid lip-service only at a generic level, although specific solutions to that group may be accommodated within a course environment.

S4.5 The use of mobile technologies to connect to a VLE appears quite high in post '92 institutions. What significance, if any, does this have?

See G1. This could be an observational error. Cross-correlation is needed; it is not possible to tell through some connections whether or not a student is connecting via a wireless LAN, and so to assess level of use of e.g. laptops. It would be more useful to

determine use patterns between different professional and/or subject groups rather than types of organisation. For example, medical schools may have higher use of PDA technology to be compatible with hospital use.

Section 5: Portals

S5. There appears to be a significant decrease in the involvement of library/learning resource centres in the development of an institutional portal. Why is this?

This appears to be an issue of channelling electronic delivery. The scope of portals has increased beyond the sole remit of library/learning resources. Library and learning resource facilities may still be provided electronically and embedded into courses, for example using a VLE or by other means, but this may or may not be delivered through a portal. A portal may also cover PR, information and administrative functions but *not* learning.

Are there any other comments you would like to make?

No.