21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential, Individuals, Employers, Nation

The Association for Learning Technology's response to the White Paper

Introduction

1. The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is the leading UK body bringing together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in learning technology. There is a brief overview of ALT in the Appendix.

2. Whilst we welcome the White Paper, and the motivation behind its publication, we are disappointed that a document, which describes itself in the Foreword as a "skills strategy to 2010 and beyond", and which was issued on almost the same date as the "Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy" Consultation Document, seems so disconnected from the e-learning strategy consultation. And we regret what we can only describe as half-hearted treatment within the White Paper of the use of ICT to support teaching and learning in general, and of e-learning in particular.

3. As a relatively specialised association we have limited our response to areas in which the Skills Strategy that is developed out of the White Paper can be strengthened as it relates to e-learning. We concentrate on 5 specific issues:

   • cross-sectoral integration;

   • encouraging and applying research into e-learning in ways that benefits education and industry in the UK;

   • developing e-learning as a delivery mechanism;

   • qualifications and assessment;

   • implementation issues (audit and local LSC staffing).

Cross-sectoral integration

4. The White Paper acknowledges the need for stronger links between FE and business. But it is largely silent in Chapter 7 - "Partnerships for Delivery" - on the need for links between FE and the rest of the education and training community, in particular HE, as well as on the crucial work of the Joint Information Systems Committee, which is taking a strongly cross-sectoral approach to the creation of infrastructure, content, and know-how relating to e-learning in post-compulsory education and training. The work of the JISC should be fully articulated within the Skills Strategy.

5. Learning technology is a domain where skills are readily transferable been education sectors and between education and business, and there is considerable movement of skills between the various educations and training sectors. For this reason ALT, with the support of the JISC, is working to create an accreditation scheme for learning technologists on a unified cross-sectoral basis. We hope that this work can be expressly supported in the Skills Strategy.

6. The different education and training sectors also need to act in concert in their work with the IT industry if, for instance:

    •   appropriate educational influence is to be exerted over the commercial development of systems and platforms for e-learning, or if

    •   infrastructure and software are to be procured on a cost-effective basis.

    This approach seems to have been understood within DfES; it now needs to be carried across into the Skills Strategy.

Research into e-learning

7. The e-learning research community is in its infancy. Learning technology research is interdisciplinary and, as with other such research, is increasingly conducted by distributed teams, sometimes of part time workers, supported by technology. Some rival countries such as Canada have identified this trend and have strategies to support it.

8. The growing body of research into the deployment of technologies to facilitate learning is evidence that a new discipline is arising, described more fully in "ALT's perspectives on learning technology" in the Appendix below. The discipline is not a simple application of computer science to education or vice versa. A substantial body of practice-based research is now being supplemented by theoretical work. Researchers come from a variety of backgrounds: relationships with technologists and with education and training professionals are being established based on mutual trust and recognition.

9. ALT believes that sound research and evaluation remain essential for the development and deployment of effective educational and training systems and e-learning products across all sectors of education, and we welcome the specific reference to research in 6.25 (d) of Chapter 6 of the White Paper. In relation to research procurement, ALT is well placed to act as a broker between the people and organisations who need e-learning research undertaken, and the researchers who are active in the field.

e-learning

10. The use of e-learning to give flexibility to learners on campus, for distance delivery and in "blended" learning, is increasing steadily and rapidly. A wide spectrum of models, from the constrained, strongly controlled, high investment and very high overhead model (e.g. Ufi/**learndirect**, and the NLN content procurement exercise), to the "make it available as is on the web" model have all been deployed. To date greater success is coming from models that are soundly grounded in pedagogy, and with greater levels of learner support. Examples of this in the FE and skills sectors include the Sheffield College's English GCSE Online course - www.sheffcol.ac.uk/gcse_english, and the South Yorkshire FE Consortium's 2003 National Training Award winning Learning To Teach On-Line course, LeTTOL - http://www.lettol.ac.uk/.

11. Technology provides a means to bridge many of the perceived disjunctions in the education and training system. For example, appropriately used, it can ensure that learners moving from FE into HE, are properly supported at the key stage at which they are most likely to drop out. In particular it can increase flexibility and reach of provision, thereby widening access at all levels, for example to those in work or with family commitments, as the Sheffield College's English GCSE Online course has demonstrated. Greater reference to this aspect of e-learning should be made in the Skills Strategy than is currently evident in the White Paper.

12. FE and training provider staff should be properly trained to support e-learning, and this training often can go hand in hand with the development of useful content. As the expenditure rises in this area along with numbers, it is vital to ensure that resources are properly planned and in place. Again the knowledge of structures and roles is cross-sectoral. Developing and deploying support for e-learners are skilled tasks with a very limited supply of effective practitioners, often in high demand in industry. This problem of recruitment and retention of high calibre staff would benefit from attention in the Skills Strategy.

13. ALT works with similar bodies in other countries, especially English speaking ones, to ensure a steady exchange of information to the overall benefit of learners and learning technology practitioners. It is important that these links with other countries are maintained and used, and the White Paper's silence on learning lessons from elsewhere in the world, as they relate to e-learning should be remedied in the Skills Strategy. For example Penn State University's recent work on workload management strategies for an online environment - http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/home/fac/workload_strat.pdf, in which the UK participation was from FE, deserves widespread dissemination, as does the Maricopa Learning eXchange (MLX) - http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/mlx/ - an electronic warehouse of ideas, examples, and resources that support student learning at the Maricopa Community Colleges.

14. Chapter 6 – "Reforming the Supply Side – Colleges and Training Providers" – contains "Make best use of ICT to deliver and assess learning" as one of four principles "underlying our approach to improved publicly-funded training provision for adults". Yet the issue gets rather scant treatment in the body of the White Paper, warranting only 2 paragraphs (6.24 and 6.25), of which 6.24 is largely introductory. Of the 4 priorities identified in 6.25, the proposed NLN portal enabling tutors and learners to "carry out a single search across all relevant e-learning resources", with a demonstrator available for trial "from autumn 2003", looks at best rushed, and at worst naively overoptimistic. It is essential that any portal of this kind is developed taking account of, and if possible in partnership with, similar existing and planned portals in the HE and schools sectors, and elsewhere (see reference in the preceding paragraph).

15. The continued major investment in the procurement of content should be handled carefully (ALT has already expressed some reservations about the approach being taken to content procurement in the bullet point paper for the Joint Implementation Group - http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/jig_paper_from_ALT.doc - we were invited to submit in March 2003). In particular we think that some of the procurement funds should be used to encourage the development of online learning content, less media-rich than is currently typical, and at consequently much lower costs per learner hour, with a view to securing wide curriculum coverage within the available resources. As a minimum, a procurement strand of this kind should be created, with monitoring and evaluation of the educational effectiveness of the resulting content as compared with higher cost content.

Qualifications and assessment

16. Chapter 5 – "Reforming Qualifications and Training Programmes" – makes the case for radical changes to learning programmes and qualifications, without touching on the linkage between e-learning and its implementation, and the reform of qualifications. The Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), as they are formed, could jointly ensure that the envisaged reform is "e-learning friendly". Indeed, the SSDA could play a very important role in ensuring that the SSCs give systematic encouragement to the pedagogically effective use of e-learning in delivery, and of ICT in assessment. The Skills Strategy should make explicit reference to this.

Implementation issues

17. **Audit.** A critical issue for the cost-effective and successful delivery of e-learning is that the audit requirements associated with the funding methodology are designed so as to enable e-learning delivery to proceed without a disproportionate amount of staff input having to be concentrated on meeting the audit requirements, in particular on recording individual instances of tutor support. The obligation on providers should surely be on being able to prove that the outputs being achieved (retention, completion, qualifications obtained etc) are sufficient for the amount of public funding being put in, rather than on the amount of time being spent on the provision by staff. In relation to this it is not at all clear in the "Cutting Bureaucracy" section of Chapter 6 of the White Paper that this difficulty will be addressed. It needs to be!

18. **Local LSC staffing.** Our final point concerns the way in which Local LSCs (LLSCs) are organised to encourage and support the use of e-learning within their area. That all LLSCs have a person in post with responsibility for e-learning is of course welcome. But different LSCs attach different degrees of importance to e-learning; and the individual staff with e-learning responsibility vary widely in seniority and experience, and in the range of other issues (if any) for which they are responsible. Such variation cannot make for effective coordination and implementation.

29/10/2003

Appendix
About ALT

ALT is a professional and scholarly association which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology.

ALT aims to:

- promote good practice in the use of learning technologies in education and industry;
- represent the members in areas of policy;
- facilitate collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

Members

Currently we have as members:

- nearly 500 individuals;
- over 150 universities, colleges, and other learning providers;
- over 35 corporate members who currently include act e-learning, BBC, BECTA, Blackboard, BT Education, DfES, Epic Group plc, FD Learning, Granada Learning, HEFCE, HP, JISC, LSC, LSDA, Microsoft UK, NATFHE, National College for School Leadership, NESTA futurelab, NHSU, Question Mark Computing Ltd, RM plc, Scottish Enterprise, Ufi, UKERNA, UKeU, and WebCT.

(Institutional and corporate members are listed on our website – http://www.alt.ac.uk/.)

Governance

ALT is governed by a Central Executive Committee, which is made up of the Chairs and Vice-chairs of our 4 operational committees. These cover, respectively:

- Events;
- Membership;
- Publications;
- Research and Policy.

Activities

ALT's work is supported by 3.5 (soon to be 4.5) FTE staff, 3 of whom are based in the ALT Office at Oxford Brookes University.

We produce:

- a quarterly Newsletter;
- the ALT Journal (an international peer-reviewed journal devoted to research and good practice in the use of learning technologies within tertiary education);

- a fortnightly members' email digest;

- publications aimed at practitioners, sometimes produced in conjunction with other organisations;

- inputs into policy development, for example our bullet point paper to the LSC/DfES Joint Implementation Group, or our September 2003 response to consultation by the UK funding bodies on the review of research assessment by Sir Gareth Roberts.

We organise:

- ALT-C, which is the UK's main academic conference for learning technologists (over 500 people attended ALT-C this year in Sheffield, and next year's ALT-C will be in Exeter, 14-16 September in 2004 – http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2004/, with keynote speakers to include Vijay Kumar - Assistant Provost for Educational Technology, and Director of Academic Computing, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Wendy Hall - Professor of Computer Science, University of Southampton, and President elect of the British Computer Society);

- occasional conferences on topics of interest to learning-technology practitioners, as well as occasional free events such as focus groups and regional meetings;

- visits and exchanges – for example ALT members took part in an exchange to visit colleges and universities in the Netherlands, 7-11 April 2003, with support from SURF Educatief (roughly the Dutch equivalent of the JISC);

- regular workshops, for example on evaluation, peer-to-peer software, accessibility, and learning object design; an annual Policy Board meeting, which brings together senior representatives from member organisations, to consider current significant developments in the learning technology domain. At this year's Policy Board, in July 2003, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills launched "Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy. Next year's Policy Board, in July 2004, at HP Labs in Bristol, will focus on learning technology research policy.

ALT is currently extending its range of activities, for example:

- with the support of the JISC we are developing a cross-sectoral accreditation scheme for learning technologists;
- we have recently established a Special Interest Group for learning technology labs, in conjunction with the London Knowledge Lab;
- we are working with corporate members to establish a number of sponsored learning technology PhDships.

ALT's perspectives on learning technology

ALT understands learning technology as the systematic application of a body of knowledge to the design, implementation and evaluation of learning resources. The body of knowledge – the fruit of research and practice – is based on principles of good learning theory, instructional design and change management but is grounded in a good understanding of the underlying technologies and their capabilities. Learning technology makes use of a broad range of communication, information, and related technologies to support learning and provide learning resources. ALT believes that learning technology adds value to both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the learning process, by offering:

- opportunities to improve and expand on the scope and outreach of the learning opportunities they can offer students;

- ways to ensure equality of opportunity for all learners;

- alternative ways of enabling learners from cultural and social minorities, learners with disabilities, and learners with language and other difficulties to meet learning outcomes and demonstrate that they have been achieved;

- quality control and quality enhancement mechanisms;

- ubiquitous access opportunities for learners;

- enhanced opportunities for collaboration which may increase the re-usability of learning objects and resources.

However, the value that learning technology can add to the learning process is influenced by a number of important factors, including the following.

- The immaturity and volatility of some learning technology mean that there is a lot of work involved in keeping up with available products, especially with a market that is shaking out. Accordingly, much effort is wasted through poor understanding of the technology and its application.

- There are a lot of products and services which are not especially suited to UK FE, HE, and lifelong learning pedagogic models.

- It is possible to make expensive errors when there is a misalignment between technology, pedagogy and institutional infrastructure or culture. These errors are often repeated in parallel between educational providers.

- Standards and specifications are evolving, hard to understand, easy to fall foul of, and tend to be embraced with zeal, without the cost and quality implications being properly understood.

- Much effort is also dissipated through a poor understanding of the theory and pedagogy that underpins the use of the technology.

- The absence of a widely established and practiced methodology by which rigorously to evaluate e-learning, and through which to develop the secure body of knowledge on which to build learning technology as a discipline.