DRAFT JISC STRATEGY

COMMENTS FROM THE ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

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. Our URI is http://www.alt.ac.uk/.

2. We welcome the fact that JISC is an ALT Corporate Member and that in recent months the relationship between ALT and JISC has consolidated, through occasional high-level exchanges of information on issues of joint concern, and through JISC's decision to invite ALT to nominate an Observer onto JISC's Committee for Learning and Teaching. ALT is especially grateful for JISC's recent decision to grant-aid ALT to take forward its work on the accreditation of learning technologists, and for JISC's support for ALT, through sponsorship of the ALT annual conference.

3. This document contains some comments on the 2004-2006 JISC Strategy. The comments were originally written on the website version of the draft strategy dated 3/10/2003, and were subsequently modified to take account of changes to the draft strategy which was included in the papers for the 17/11/2003 meeting of JCLT.

4. To the extent that we are commenting on a moving target, late in the day, it is not our intention to publish these comments externally in the way we now normally do (see http://www.alt.ac.uk/documents.html).

General comments

5. We have a strong sense of disappointment that the context section is too long and general, and that it contains insufficient reference to JISC's considerable achievements over the last, say, 5 years, nor to any background data or supporting evidence especially financial (capital/revenue, income and expenditure), and service-utilisation, as the backdrop against which readers can understand the strategy.

6. The section on research is rather "thin", being not particularly focused on research *per se*, with its references to the Academy belonging more properly elsewhere in the document.

7. There are occasional inaccuracies, which we must assume will be weeded out prior to the document being finalised, for example the references to a unified e-learning strategy, when at present what exists is a consultation document of that title, and to HEFCE's e-learning strategy, which is, again, only a draft, and the four bulleted ways in which JISC is "uniquely placed to promote integration in *three* dimensions".

8. Despite the context section's references to NLN and the LSC, the draft is generally overly oriented towards HE, and as a whole lacks clarity as to where beyond HE and college-based FE JISC does or will reach. The currently widely

used term "HE and FE" obscures the fact that FE currently embraces 6th form colleges, as well as some Adult and Community Learning, and some Workplace Learning.

9. The second part of the section entitled "JISC's Role" contains what we can only describe as a bizarre list of advantages offered by the "focus on integration", some of which seem to have next to no connection with integration. We would advise against retention of this section unless it is substantially reworked.

10. We are not comfortable with the "pick 5 from 30/21 objectives" approach to the consultation, for three main reasons:

    •   the audience from which responses are likely to be drawn is disproportionately familiar with the HE world, at the expense of FE and ACL;

    •   the exceptionally uneven relative significance of the various points, for example, in the 3/10/2003 draft "21. to re-think its priorities within the content arena" (which, regrettably was dropped altogether from the 17/11/2003 draft) vs. "29. to support institutions on IPR and licensing issues", and the extent to which the points fall into completely different categories, for example, in the 3/10/2003 draft "23. to constantly review standards" vs. "22. to give consideration of (sic) future-proofing e-infrastructure activities" vs. "16. to engage with non-traditional student (sic), to discover their needs";

    •   the list of possible objectives seems slanted away from those relating to the provision of infrastructure, which to a considerable degree is rightly seen as one of *the* main things which the JISC enables.

Specific comments

11. We believe that JISC has played a crucial role in UK education, and that it must continue so to do. We think that the development of its long term strategy needs to be underpinned by a systematic review of JISC's activities, differentiating between core infrastructure activities, and services in the digitisation, content provision, and advisory areas, with a firm focus on establishing on a case-by-case basis which of the latter are used sufficiently to justify their ongoing sustainability. The inevitable anxiety which such an approach might generate would be outweighed by the greater confidence that the JISC would have that its strategy is both soundly based, and defendable against external scrutiny.

12. Whether or not the above approach is taken, we think that JISC should concentrate particularly in its strategy on what it does well, and avoid spreading itself too thinly. It should:

    •   develop a smaller number of services in priority areas (for example CETIS, and the Open Source Advisory Service) perhaps strengthened by more user-involvement, and more powerful advisory groups, and stronger (i.e. fewer, better resourced) demonstrator projects than is presently the case;

    •   continue to prioritise international work i.e. learning from and representing to colleagues and institutions especially in the EU, US/Canada, and Australasia, possibly with some changes to the way it consults with communities of experts in areas that are not especially JISC's forte (for example, it should be through JISC rather than serendipity that the community learns about

outstanding developments such as Penn State's "managing online tutor workload" report, or the Maricopa Learning Exchange);

- increase it commitment to Open Source developments, since to the extent that JISC can economically show others the way to do things more cheaply and reliably, in a manner which avoids vendor lock-in etc, then this will be of great benefit to the JISC's constituency;

- make available the enormous amount of acquired experience in strategically significant areas which JISC has to the whole of its constituency, for example by enabling NLN to take advantage of JISC know-how in relation to content procurement and portal development;

13. Having expressed reservations about the options selection process, we are not so purist as to avoid highlighting those options from those in the 17/11/2003 draft which we think are most important! We believe that JISC should concentrate especially on the following clusters of options.

4. Sustain e-science infrastructure and help embed e-science techniques more widely across research.

11. / 19. Promote staff development. / Support the development of learning technologists as a profession (these two are clearly very close to ALT's heart and we would welcome being involved, with others as one of JISC's "support-partners")

10. / 20. Understand and help shape management of rights policies for information resources (taking careful account of the Creative Commons license options which are growing in importance especially in the US). / Support institutions on IPR and licensing issues.

6. / 8. / 9. Ensure future-proofing of e-infrastructure etc…. / Review, develop (surely apply?) appropriate international standards etc…… / Connect learning environments across education etc……

Seb Schmoller, ALT Executive Secretary, 20/11/2003

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, 4 of whom will be based in the ALT Office at Oxford Brookes University (see http://www.alt.ac.uk/team.html).

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, or our response to the 21s Century Skills White Paper.

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, Wendy Hall - Professor of Computer Science, University of Southampton, and President elect of the British Computer Society, and Ron Oliver - Foundation Professor of Interactive Multimedia at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia);

- 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.