

Association for Learning Technology

Shaping the Academy Consultation: Responses to questions

1. Should we be concerned with all aspects of the student experience? If not, which aspects of the student experience should we focus on?

We welcome the emphasis on the student experience. However, we believe that the Academy will be most effective if it restricts its focus to the teaching and learning aspects, as this is already a broad area. The use of ICT, and off-campus as well as on-campus learning, are no longer “wider issues” but are properly regarded as part of the teaching and learning process. By working within existing networks, and with independent organisations such as ALT, the Academy will be better placed to facilitate change in this area.

2. Should the focus of the Academy's work be “transformative” (leading change in practice to improve the student experience) or should it be “facilitative” (supporting institutional and individuals’ efforts to make the student experience better)?

We are not convinced that there is a dichotomy between transformative and facilitative change in relation to leadership. In our experience transformation can occur through supporting the efforts of individuals and institutions, and facilitation sometimes happens through the exercise of leadership. A mix of these approaches may be necessary according to the perceived need. For example, by building up a repository of good practice the Academy will be seen to be facilitating change. Transformative action by comparison will necessitate longer time frames than the five years proposed in this strategy and will consume greater resources. The Academy will need to judge which areas are already making substantial progress and which are not, and choose the approach accordingly. A careful assessment of the risks involved will be necessary before embarking on large-scale transformational projects, many of which have not succeeded in higher education in the past. Collaboration with partners will be important in minimising the risks and avoiding the temptation to reinvent the wheel. In the e-learning domain it is particularly important to take account of the lessons learned outside the UK, for example the Pew studies (<http://www.center.rpi.edu/PewGrant.html>).

3. Are our proposed strategic objectives relevant to your needs? If not, what are your priorities over the next five years in terms of supporting and improving the student experience?

ALT welcomes the objective to lead on e-learning and the appreciation of the need to work in partnership. However, we would caution against being overly ambitious. We would welcome more information regarding the priority areas and timescales for achievement of the objectives, as the current document does not give any indication of these.

The ALT strategy for 2004-2007 is appended to this document.

4. What actions might your organisation take to enhance the student experience and develop the professional learning and standing of its staff?

ALT has twelve years’ experience of supporting academic staff in the use of learning technology through its events, publications and advice. We have developed an accreditation scheme for learning technologists which will be launched in spring 2005 (Certified Member Association for Learning Technology – January 2005

of ALT - CMALT). The scheme has been developed in partnership with colleagues in the Academy, the JISC, LSDA, Becta and others. The ALT accreditation scheme will both improve the professional standing of staff in education and enhance the student experience through the better application of learning technology.

The Association would welcome continued involvement in the Academy's accreditation framework consultation and collaboration on future CPD developments.

5. What are the key services you would expect from the Academy?

The Association would expect the Academy to

- work with the community to facilitate the development and implementation of an appropriate national research agenda;
- work with the community to develop a context and broad standards framework for professional development and accreditation, within which different schemes and interest groups may be situated;
- develop an evidence-based repository of best practice; and
- disseminate information from, and promote and work with cognate organisations, rather than seek to substitute for them.

6. What should be the key measures of our success?

One key measure will be evidence that the Academy is operating as an independent body, representing the interests of practitioner members. In this context the balance of fees against grants will be important for reasons of autonomy and probity.

7. How would you like to engage with the Academy and its work?

In general, ALT would wish to work with and not be overwhelmed by the Academy, and to have our distinctive role in the development of learning technology – established over twelve years – acknowledged. In common with other professional and scholarly associations, we see the relationship as “dovetailing” and not duplicating effort. ALT believes the Academy's role should be facilitating, brokering and resourcing, rather than taking on everything itself. ALT would wish to be consulted whenever learning technology matters are under discussion.

More specifically, ALT members represent a significant body of expertise which we would like to see exploited by the Academy at the individual level and through strategic partnerships to pursue common aims. ALT's independent status (a registered charity), like that of other professional bodies, brings an additional dimension to partnerships of this kind. To this end we recommend early discussions with the Academy and with other professional bodies to establish a viable framework for the creation of Memoranda of Understanding between professional bodies and the Academy. Such a framework would facilitate the setting out of where our interests align, identification of common targets, and descriptions of working practices intended to jointly achieve those targets. Some examples to be covered by the Memoranda could include higher education policy, accreditation¹ and research.

ALT welcomes the proposal for funding joint research fellows in HEIs and we would like to explore joint learning technology fellows with the Academy (see appended the 2004 ALT “Scoping learning technology research” paper). Likewise, a joint lecture series with ALT on learning technology would be timely.

¹ For those bodies which, like ALT, operate accreditation schemes an additional set of issues pertain, and these will need discussion with the Academy.

We would welcome opportunities to publish jointly with the Academy on learning technology issues, as has been done very successfully in the past with the LTSN Generic Centre.

Where appropriate, ALT would welcome involvement in relevant Academy committees.

ALT would be interested to help the Academy with communications to other sectors and to other organisations. For example, ALT could act as a conduit through to further education and the commercial sector on learning technology issues.

In addition, we welcome the proposed international agenda. ALT has formal links with organisations outside the UK, such as SURF (Netherlands), ASCILITE (Australasia) and SLOAN-C (USA), and through our membership we have good, informal working relationships with relevant organisations in other countries.

8. Is the range of our activities relevant to your needs as a member of the HE community?

The range of activities appears relevant. ALT bridges the FE, HE and commercial sectors and we would wish to link with the Academy to provide activities relevant for and run by our HE members.

9. What do you think will be the main constraints on achieving our strategic objectives?

The achievement of these objectives will depend on funding levels, expertise of staff, the clarity of the objectives, good management, effective communication, and good co-operation with other organisations. If the Academy aims to substitute new services to replace existing networks, that will place a further constraint on the strategy. The time frame of five years is too short for most of the transformative goals.

10. Do you have any other comments on our purpose, aims and objectives and ways in which we will work?

It is essential that the Academy recognise the need to work in collaboration and harmony with a broad range of organisations, agencies and services as well as HE institutions to take advantage of specific skills and effective practices. The Academy can play a critical role bridging between these different agencies and brokering effective partnerships. We suggest that while the global vision to be first choice of the sector for knowledge, practice and policy by 2010 is laudable, it undervalues the contributions of other key players, for example, existing providers of evaluation services in HEIs.

With regard to the proposed observatory function, we believe that it would be more valuable if the Academy worked in collaboration with the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, funded by UK, Commonwealth and other organisations. Likewise, international discipline links are already well developed and are more properly the responsibility of discipline groups and professional associations.

A constructive approach would be for the Academy to position itself as a leading partner in a coalition of agencies and to support cross-promotion of coalition organisations, services and activities where these are mutually reinforcing. For example, the Academy proposal to create networks of Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Principals fits well with ALT's aspirations to enhance services for Institutional members, in particular senior strategic staff.

Appendices: ALT strategy 2004-2007; Scoping Learning Technology Research paper.