

ALT response to *Towards a Framework of Professional Teaching Standards – a Universities UK, SCOP, HEFCE and HE Academy consultation*

1. The Association for Learning Technology (ALT – <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>) is a UK-based, professional and scholarly body representing learning technology practitioners, researchers, and policy makers across HE, FE and corporate sectors. We have nearly 500 individuals and over 200 institutions and organisations (including the HE Academy and HEFCE) in membership.
2. ALT welcomes the proposal to commission work on the development of professional standards for academic practice and continuing professional development to support the enhancement of HE teaching and learning. We would like to take this opportunity to respond to the consultation on behalf of ALT members and the learning technology community.
3. ALT gives broad support to a professional standards framework that aims to consolidate quality enhancement activity. In particular, we support the overall aim of recognising the value and contributions of all staff who contribute to development of teaching and learning. At the same time, we see an important development in acknowledging the complementary nature of subject-specific and generic forms of expertise within institutional accreditation programmes.
4. We would, however, like to highlight two areas that give us concern, that of values and the diversity of roles/responsibilities. Both relate to issues surrounding distinctiveness of different sector contexts, which we do not feel have been taken fully on board. This is relevant to increasing movement of staff between HE and FE and professional/industry sectors. (One illustration is the accreditation of clinical teaching staff from medical practice, NHSU.)
5. ALT is currently completing work to develop and pilot a cross-sector accreditation framework for learning technology professionals, grant-aided by the JISC. There are many parallels to the framework proposed for HE professional teaching standards. The ALT Accreditation Project aims to review existing work on accreditation for learning technologists and from this develop an accreditation scheme which could be linked to ALT membership and which would meet the needs of learning technologists working in higher education, further education and commercial sectors. The preparatory work has included a review of the literature, existing programmes and schemes as well as consultation with relevant professional bodies, employers and learning technologists themselves. Full details of the preceding work are in background reports which are available from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/epd/alt-accreditation/>.
6. ALT is keen to promote a *responsive* framework. In the Certified Membership of ALT (CMALT) scheme¹, created in the course of the work referred to above, we have defined some core areas and avoided specifying standards, leaving the options definable by the applicants. We are concerned that the Academy proposals appear to focus on a “list-style” definition. We explicitly rejected this form of approach, which we believed to be inflexible, over-simplistic and suggestive of an audit-logic. The danger is that a framework based on a list style definition is antithetical to

¹ The name and acronym are provisional at the time of writing (July 2004)

changing ideas and values, incapable of promoting personal buy-in and ownership and incapable of fully supporting a reflective professional development culture and community.

7. ALT seeks strategic partnership with organisations like the HE Academy in taking this work forward on behalf of its individual and institutional members. Given, the diversity in roles and sectors represented by its membership, ALT would be delighted to be involved in further consultation and advice on the development of this framework. *{also annotated below in our response concerning Question F}*
8. Our specific responses to each of the consultation document sections are given below.

Title:

Whilst the document clearly attempts to encompass both teachers and staff that support (the development of) teaching and learning, the framework of “Professional Teaching Standards” serves to distance these categories.

Question A: Principles

11. No mention of professional values underpinning practice.

UK-wide model needs to take account of European and International practices.

ALT strongly supports the proposed position to build the framework on the ethics and values held within the sector. We would suggest, however, that this may not be as straightforward as has been suggested. Such values and codes of practice differ from institution to institution, discipline to discipline, role to role, and may evolve through time. Accommodating this complexity is vital if the proposed standards are to reflect, rather than over-rule, the values of those working to support student learning. There are many examples of attractive statements on values that are essentially meaningless. Agreeing on statements that will have an influence on practice is not easy to achieve, but ultimately this is what should be sought.

Question B: Role of the HE Academy

15. Dealing with range of expertise and interests poses many challenges.

Similar or complementary routes of accreditation for different roles/responsibilities is an issue being explored by ALT in developing its accreditation scheme. The model of Core plus Specialism(s) has been proposed giving a rich set of professional profiles to which standards and CPD planning might need to be applied.

Multiple accreditation schemes, overlap/duplication, fees. Again, core plus a number of specialisms. Focus on the core and the nature of the relationships with other accrediting bodies/communities of practice.

The literature on learning technology as a profession highlights some of the professional values and perceived boundaries indicated in this response. This work may serve to illustrate the many issues in professional diversity prevalent in the HE sector: for instance, with regard to roles and career aspirations, expertise, interests and motivations, culture and communities.

Question C: An outline model of a professional standards framework

We welcome the suggestion that the framework should be flexible and incorporate common principles and expectations (which we might perhaps term “values”) and in particular the multiplicity of roles in related academic areas.

Terminology of practice requires clarification as to which staff/practices for which standards are being sought/developed – teaching, facilitating learning – academic staff, what about course design, development of learning materials, learning software design, etc. This is referred to later within the framework, but this needs more clarification, particularly in the possibly ill-conceived message that innovative modes of delivery necessarily involve the use of e-learning techniques. Despite its focus on learning technology, ALT would wish to emphasise – as it does in its own accreditation framework of values and core areas of professional practice – that e-learning is best seen as a subset of innovation. We strongly recommend that this area should be re-framed as “innovative approaches to teaching and supporting learning”. Furthermore, we believe that innovation for its own sake should be guarded against, and that innovations should be expected to demonstrate (or at least attempt to demonstrate) that they have actually been good for those involved, using the principles, values and ethics to define “good” and “effective” practice.

The model does not appear to consider the links/synergies between teaching, research and learning at a disciplinary level, i.e. beyond the scholarship/educational research focus. Neither does it pay sufficient attention to those roles vital to the support of learning. This should be made explicit and any development should involve groups (such as ALT, SCONUL, etc.) that represent professionals in such roles.

ALT supports an incremental progression approach. However, overall, the proposed framework is very much a route for academic teaching staff. The proposals do not take account of the movement of people across or within sectors, particularly cross-institutional or (inter)national roles. This has emerged as important in the ALT accreditation work. Institutions generally have poorly developed HR strategies/career progression for academic support staff, particularly given the short-term nature of contract arrangements which are prevalent for this category of staff. Frameworks such as CMALT can also provide a very useful curriculum for identifying requirements and induction training for new appointments and might be relevant in addressing such inadequacies.

Again, ALT would suggest a model of ‘core plus specialisms’, where a specialism must interact with the broader teaching community to help to clarify and accommodate the dimensions of both depth and breadth of skills accredited and offer a means for developing and tracking professional and career development.

Other issues not considered explicitly in the framework, include:

- nature of the core areas, (dis)inclusion, dual paths/streams, legislation;
- key new area is communication skills and the development of (international) capability in collaborative initiatives/projects/teams;
- evidence and evaluation – scholarship/research agenda, links to RAE for engagement/motivation, bringing research and teaching professions closer together;

- promotion and management of innovation/change;
- process of renewal/levels of membership.

Threshold standards are suggested in relation to informing new staff development. A key area of need is in relation to engagement in professional standards, innovation and CPD for established staff. How might this agenda address this challenge?

Question D: Accreditation arrangements

22. National bodies developing generic standards. In the learning technology domain there is not much that is particularly special about UK HE. As outlined above, ALT is developing CMALT, a set of cross-sector values, principles and standards for accrediting learning technologists. More broadly, this includes those involved in the design, application and evaluation of learning technology practice, including a growing body of research and best practice.

Peer assessment, use of mentors in the application process.

Question E: Next steps

Through professional bodies, possibly mentoring schemes.

Core plus specialisms – PDP, profiling.

Acknowledge:

- the fast-moving nature of learning technology as a field;
- movement of staff between sectors and roles;
- the additional challenges for standards and practices in ensuring and enhancing quality.

Question F: Steering further work

Given the diversity in roles and sectors represented by its membership, and the development work on appropriate standards undertaken to date, ALT would be delighted to be involved in further consultation and advice on the development of this framework.

Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

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