

HEFCE STRATEGY 2006-2011

The Association for Learning Technology's response

Introduction

1. The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the HEFCE Final Draft 2006-2011 Strategy.
2. ALT is the leading UK body bringing together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in learning technology, within and beyond HE. We have over 200 organisations in membership including HEFCE, over 100 UK HEIs, and over 60 UK FECs. For further information about ALT see <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>.
3. Our brief response is organised loosely under the 5 questions given in paragraph 20 of the draft strategy's executive summary.
4. ALT is a relatively specialised association. For this reason, and taking account of the semi-final nature of the draft, and the fact that the draft has been issued after an extensive pre-consultation phase (in which ALT regrettably did not take part), we have restricted our response mainly to issues relating to technology.

Response

Do you endorse the vision and the broad strategic direction set out in the draft strategic plan – and if not, what elements cause you concern and why?

5. Broadly speaking, yes. We welcome, for example, the draft's inclusion (in paragraph 2) of reference to ICT's capacity to support connection as well as competition, and the strategy's emphasis, in paragraphs 30 to 33, on partnership working.
6. However, we think that the draft's overall treatment of technology is rather weak. We expand on this below.

Do we have the right focus for each of our strategic aims, and do the objectives reflect what you think we should seek to achieve?

7. We recognise that HEFCE's strategy needs to be balanced in its coverage of a wide range of strategic issues, of which technology is but one. But not only is technology central to the delivery, management, and development of many different aspects of learning and research in HE; deploying it also undoubtedly presents, in general, a challenge to HEIs. In particular, changes and innovations in the ICT domain are taking place very rapidly – witness, for example the:
 - take-off of Open Source learning management systems;
 - enormous use being made by citizens of MIT's (and now other institutions, and not just in the US) freely available learning materials¹;

¹ <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html>

- impact of Google Scholar (just 12 months since launch) on the way researchers discover resources;
 - rapid evolution of connected devices, and communications infrastructure, with falling prices, which can quickly undermine the value of institutional investment in technology.
8. It is therefore surprising that there is no mention of technology in the list of complex challenges outlined in paragraph 4 of the draft.
 9. This omission seems then to flow through into the rest of the document, with technology only featuring to any real extent in the “Enhancing excellence in learning and teaching” section of the draft (Paragraphs 63, 65, and 71 to 73).
 10. Furthermore, there is no mention anywhere in the document of the place HE has in the implementation of the DfES e-Strategy². This seems to us to be an oversight that would be worth remedying, particularly since the DfES e-Strategy (which in any case focuses on a wider range of technology issues than e-learning alone) post-dates the HEFCE strategy for e-learning³.
 11. We think that Objective 4 in – *to support innovation and the use of new technologies that enrich the student experience and promote greater skills for lifelong learning* – and the corresponding paragraphs (mainly 63, 65, and 71 to 73) should be strengthened so that emphasis is placed on the:
 - use of learning technology to improve institutional efficiency as well as its educational effectiveness (work done by the National Centre for Academic Transformation in the US⁴ is relevant here);
 - establishment of a properly resourced programme of e-learning related research (anticipated announcements by ESRC and EPSRC are relevant here and could perhaps be directly referenced)⁵;
 - scope for learning technology to provide a more seamless transition into HE from secondary and tertiary education, and the need for HEIs to adapt to the increasing ICT fluency of “incoming” school- and college-leavers.

Key performance targets (KPTs) and key strategic risks

12. We could find no references to technology in the document’s KPTs or in the section on Key Strategic Risks. This could be taken by users of the document as indicating (hopefully wrongly) lack of seriousness in HEFCE about technology strategy.
13. Concerning the absence of any references to technology-related risks, it would be prudent to include, for example, a new Risk 9 “That institutions fail effectively to exploit technology in management, learning and teaching, or research.”

Association for Learning Technology
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² <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/technology/>

³ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_12/

⁴ <http://www.thencat.org/>

⁵ See also the ALT Learning Technology Research Strategy at http://www.alt.ac.uk/ALT_2005_Research_Strategy_20050420.html