Research Excellence Framework
Consultation response from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) – 13.2.2008

Respondent's details

Are you responding: (Delete one)	On behalf of an organisation
Name of responding organisation/individual	Association for Learning Technology (ALT). The response has been written by Professor Robin Mason, Professor John Cook, and Seb Schmoller, with input from the ALT Research Committee.
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Response

Consultation question 1a: Do you endorse our proposals for defining the broad group of science-based disciplines, and for dividing this into six main subject groups, in the context of our new approach to assessment and funding?

Learning Technology research is frequently highly interdisciplinary, in which case assessing it when it falls between groups using a metrics-based approach and groups which do not, would be problematic. (We made this point in our Oct 2006 response to the original consultation run by DfES in 2006.)

Is there any evidence that the proposed approach will be more effective than the current approach? In your (laudable) attempt to be fair to all parties involved, the report gives the impression that, in the end, the proposed new system will be nearly as complicated and heavy-handed as the current system.

Consultation question 1b: Are there issues in relation to specific disciplines within this framework that we should consider?

Learning Technology is a developing discipline that has its roots spread between, *inter alia*, "education", "computer science and informatics", "information technology, systems sciences and computer software engineering", and "psychiatry, neuroscience and clinical psychology", i.e. between disciplines that are proposed for inclusion in the new framework and those that are not. We foresee problems under the current proposals (paragraph 21 relates) under which learning technology researchers (and we are sure that Learning Technology is not the only discipline so affected) would have to be identified either as falling within the science-based groups (and subject to bibliometric analysis), or within other disciplines (and subject to light-touch peer review). This boundary issue requires further analysis, as does the more general issue of how the research excellence framework caters for interdisciplinary work.

Consultation question 2a: Do you agree that bibliometric indicators produced on the basis that we propose can provide a robust quality indicator in the context of our framework?

There is a well known problem with citation clubs, in which researchers do deals to cite each others work. How would this be monitored?

Your evidence indicates that reciprocal citations are not significant – the point is, however, that as soon as citation counts become a major factor in determining funding, current behaviour will change. Citations outside of science subjects bear almost no relation to quality – it is not impossible to imagine that the same could apply within the sciences when metrics become a major determiner of funding. Note here that Google's PageRank system for ranking web resources is, in effect, a classic metrics based system for judging the value of a resource. A whole industry, known as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), has grown up around influencing the output of the PageRank algorithm, and Google and other operators of such metrics-based systems have to put enormous resources into countering, not very successfully, the SEO process.

Consultation question 2b: Are there particular issues of significance needing to be resolved that we have not highlighted?

RE the Interdisciplinary point made in answer to q1. The study by Evidence Ltd found no evidence that citation rates are systematically lower for interdisciplinary research. We are generally sceptical about this finding and would offer Learning Technology as a suitable case in point for revisiting the issue; and, as we stress in our answer to q1 we have concerns about how the research excellence framework will cater generally for interdisciplinary work

We strongly support the views attributed to the John Denham in the THE on 24/1/2008 that policy advice should be credited in the new REF and we question how a bibliometric system could take achieve this.

Consultation question 3a: What are the key issues that we should consider in developing light touch peer review for the non science-based disciplines?

Any system in which, for example the PhD completion-rate is used as a metric, needs to take account of the institutional context, for example where an institution has an access mission. (We made this point in our Oct 2006 response to the original consultation run by DfES in 2006.)

Consultation question 3b: What are the main options for the form and conduct of this review?

The fact that no robust ways of measuring quality in non-science subjects have yet emerged is an obvious indicator of the fact that it is not possible to use metrics to measure quality. The focus needs to be on 'light-touch' peer review. Whatever interpretation of this is agreed, the ensuing ratings will be largely, but not wholly fair. The same applies to the current system. Light-touch will at least be a cheaper approach to run. It seems, however, that panels of subject experts will still be needed in order to make discipline-based distinctions to all of the issues used: research funds, citations, student numbers etc.

Consultation question 4: Is there additional quantitative information that we should use in the assessment and funding framework to capture user value or the quality of applied research, or other key aspects of research excellence? Please be specific in terms of what the information is, what essential element of research it casts light on, how it may be found or collected, and where and how it might be used within the framework.

Impact on users (in the case of learning technology this means, typically, learners, and teachers, and learning providers) is very important, but difficult to measure, since "STEM-style" impacts such as patents or spin-off company start-ups are not the norm. (We made broadly this point in our Oct 2006 response to the original consultation run by DfES in 2006.) In fact it is arguable that unless user impact is satisfactorily incorporated, **any** assessment of research excellence, metrics-based or not, is compromised.

ALT would be happy to work on a working group to explore this thorny yet key issue (i.e. how to measure impact on users).

Consultation question 5: Are our proposals for the role of expert panels workable within the framework? Are there other key issues on which we might take their advice?

It seems that the main difference from the current system as far as expert panels are concerned, is that panel members would NOT be reading and assessing individual's research outputs. This is a sensible reduction in workload.

Consultation question 6: Are there significant implications for the burden on the sector of implementing our new framework that we have not identified? What more can we do to minimise the burden as we introduce the new arrangements?

Measures to monitor changing behaviour in e.g. citations and other metrics, in order to prevent distortion, would help. See also our cautionary response to question 2b.

Consultation question 7: Do you consider that the proposals in this document are likely to have any negative impact on equal opportunities? What issues will we need to pay particular attention to?

Large departments seem to have a greater advantage, so perhaps measures to reward small departments are in order.

Consultation question 8: Do you have any other comments about our proposals, which are not covered by the above questions?

In the learning technology domain (and we suspect that this is becoming the case in at least some other disciplines) research output, some of it highly esteemed, is increasingly appearing in collaboratively written environments, such as wikis, or in personal publishing environments, such as blogs, and new methods of publication and dissemination are emerging, some of them outside the ambit of commercial publishing, using Open Access approaches. These changes present major challenges for any research excellence framework, and are gathering pace; yet they are not treated in any depth in the consultation document. They are certainly worthy of further investigation, for example during the proposed March to August 2008 pilot, prior to the research excellence framework being finalised.