

Harnessing Technology for FE, Skills, and Regeneration

Some comments from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) on the progress report issued by Becta in March 2008^{1,2}.

ALT, Registered Charity Number Number 1063519, is a professional and scholarly association which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology³. We have around 500 individual learning technologists as members and over 200 organisational and sponsoring members. The latter two categories include Becta, DCSF, DIUS, QIA, LSN, CEL, LSC, JISC and HEA most of the UK's universities and a substantial number of FE and related institutions.

Through our membership of Becta's National Delivery Group (until its final meeting in January 2008), we have stayed in close touch with the ongoing development of the Harnessing Technology Strategy; and prior to the transfer of responsibility for the e-Strategy to Becta from DfES, we played some part in the development of Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy, with the consultation on the strategy originally launched by Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, at the ALT Policy Board in July 2003.

Overall we welcome the Progress Report and its accompanying "Draft Technology Strategy implementation plan 2008 to 2011", because it successfully raises the profile of FE in Becta, and because it represents a serious and genuine attempt to think through the issue of technology strategy in the FE and Skills Sector in a comprehensive way. We approve the 'whole organisational' approach with e-learning becoming the province of all rather than the 'technologically savvy'.

We offer below some general comments, organised under the three headings requested in Section 8 – How to contribute to the strategy, followed by a numbered list of points of specific detail.

whether we have described the right vision for how technology can support a world class further education system

The term "world class" is much overused in current UK policy discourse, and many of your intended readers are unconvinced by it. More generally, there is an over-use of jargon in the document which will put off those not very experienced in the sector.

¹ <http://feandskills.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=35613>

² John Gray, Seb Schmoller, and Fred Pickering and Pete Richardson, Chair and Vice-Chair respectively of the ALT FE Committee contributed to the production of this response.

³ ALT sees *learning technology* as the broad range of communication, information and related technologies that can be used to support learning, teaching, and assessment, and *learning technologists* are people who are actively involved in managing, researching, supporting or enabling learning with the use of learning technology. A very wide range of people in industry and in private and public sector education have learning technology as a core part of their role, irrespective of their job title.

Perhaps there should be a glossary at the end, or at least a footnote added to explain each new jargon term.

The vision statements on page 7 and 19, whilst worthy, lack precision, and they suffer from:

- hinging on the phrase “transform learning outcomes”, when “learning outcome” is a term used in many accreditation frameworks;
- use of language that will tend neither to engage sceptics nor be credible to people who have deeper interest in and commitment to the application of technology in teaching and learning;
- a confusion between output and outcomes (clauses 1 – beginning “improved” – and 2 – beginning “personalised”) – and a characteristic of the supply side (clause 3 – beginning “high-performing”).

A much clearer version of your vision would be:

“A responsive, demand-led, self-improving, and high-performing education system that makes successful and appropriate use of technology to:

- improve participation, engagement, outcomes, and progression for all learners;
- personalise learning and assessment in a way that matches changing learner needs.”

whether our priorities are the right ones

The structure and terminology of the implementation plan are such that it is quite hard for the reader to discern what your priorities actually are. For example, terms like “attribute”, “outcome”, “ambition”, are not part of the standard language of technology strategy, and there are places where swapping an outcome/attribute pair has no obvious effect.

A further priority-related problem is that the strategy lacks clarity and credibility as to who is expected to act on the priorities. Specifically, there is a disproportionate emphasis on Agencies as compared with the organisations (especially learning providers) upon whose actions the success of the strategy is crucially dependent. For example AoC gets one mention, whereas LSC and QIA each get over 20; meanwhile the document is silent on the role of Local Authorities, Ufi/learnirect, Private Training Providers, the TUC, as well as on important entities like e-skills, or, for that matter, ALT, which would be well placed to contribute to several of the Key Actions⁴.

whether we have missed anything out

The High Value Resources Attribute in the section on underpinning infrastructure appears exclusively focused on commercially supplied rather than “open” content, and

⁴ Whatever our reservations about the adequacy of Key Actions 5 and 6 to meet the challenging Outcome and Ambition pair that are set against the learning and innovation Attribute, we would certainly expect that the TUC and e-skills, *inter alia*, would be key partners in Key Action 5, and that ALT, with its Learning Technologist of the Year Award would be a key partner in Key Action 6.

seems to have been written without regard for the changes that are taking place in the wider ICT world, and, in particular to the development of what Lawrence Lessig describes as “the free culture movement”, perhaps best represented across the world by Wikipedia, Creative Commons, and MIT’s OpenCourseWare initiative and in the UK by OpenLearn.⁵ If the fact of these developments was made explicit in the Introduction or the Where are we now? sections of the report, this would provide a backdrop for these issues to be picked up in the strategy itself, with the key requirement being that providers and practitioners learn how to make effective use of the resources that exist outside the commercial world.

The strategy recognises the three important levers for change provided by the funding, inspection, and accreditation/awards regimes, and this is very welcome. However their importance is so great that each of them would benefit from more explicit emphasis, because unless each of these three regimes is pushing in the same direction in relation to technology and learning, change will be slow and piecemeal.

To the extent that the financial audit regime constrains providers from innovating (we are reminded of the way that emphasis in FE on guided learning hours – i.e. on face-to-face synchronous contact between learners and teachers – discouraged colleges from using online distance learning during the 1990s), we feel that the technology plan needs to include a Key Action relating to this, with LSC as a Key Partner. More generally, the lack of awareness of the costs and benefits aspects of learning technology need attention, both at agency and institution level, building on earlier work such as TCO but with more of a focus on web 2.0, open content and student time aspects.

Specific comments

1. In para 1.2 one should note that these are some but not all of the obstacles.
2. In para 1.4 we applaud the point made about the institutions being crucial but this is not followed through in the rest of the document.
3. In chapter 2 the "Vision" statement is crucial and must be repeated and developed in a totally consistent fashion. Should "outcomes" be added to the first dependent clause? It may be reasonable politically to leave out headline explicit reference to "value for money" as long as it can be deduced logically from other clauses.
4. In para 2.3 "blended" does mean a mixture. Suggest "face to face and online" instead.
5. In para 2.4 the inhibiting effect of VAT on shared services development has been mentioned by high officials and discussion on alleviating this should perhaps be mentioned here at least in a footnote.
6. In para 2.5 the use of the word "intelligent" is vague. Would the word “discriminating” be more appropriate? Also the concept of a safe online environment in the post-16 sector could be conceived as too restrictive. Whilst the environment needs to be as safe as possible there is a key need to educate users as to the dangers they may encounter online

⁵ Also several EU projects.

7. In para 3.1, while "delivering" may have been the approach so far, it is important in our view to recognise that modern approaches to workforce development involve far more than delivery.
8. In para 3.3, we applaud and accept the sentiments in the last paragraph, but it is not completely clear that the earlier narrative justifies such a statement as it is still rather "incrementalist" in nature, Perhaps some reference to future step-change scenarios is required.
9. In page 11 on equity and social cohesion, we applaud the focus on the excluded/disadvantaged and on small business, but feel that the arguments lose force by putting these very different categories together.
10. On page 12, the exclusive focus on high quality content is misplaced and does not take account both of the wishes of the Google Generation and of the development of Open Educational Resources by end-users.
11. On page 12 the point about the delivery chain is so carefully coded that even we are not sure what is meant.
12. On page 12 we applaud the objective to update the guidance and training of inspectors.
13. On page 12 we also applaud the objective to review the funding model but feel it needs even more emphasis given the failures of nerve in this area in the past. There are also some aspects of Bologna which need careful handling in this area.
14. On page 12 re workforce standards we are duty bound to point out that ALT has made and wishes to continue to make a contribution in this area via the CMALT scheme.
15. Re para 4.2 research members have observed that one must be careful of the Hawthorne effect in such trials - only longer-term trends are reliable.
16. In para 4.3 we applaud the link to pedagogy but note that this link is rarely made in this document and it is not clear that the consequences of the link are worked through.
17. **In para 4.4 the stark phrase "blended and online delivery can produce major reductions in unit costs" is just not accepted by the majority in the sector or the majority of expert commentators. The adverse reaction to earlier DfES proposals to develop a version of the Carol Twigg "academic transformation" approach for English HE and FE is merely one of many pieces of evidence demonstrating that. Worse, in HE the negative of the statement is given as policy by HEFCE and believed in many HEIs, who have influence over FE and schools by various routes (HE in FE, FdSc, teacher training). We suggest the phrasing "We believe that blended and online delivery can produce major reductions in unit costs, especially for more flexible provision, but accept that considerable skill will be required by the sector to achieve this - and shall work towards developing such skill"**
18. In para 4.6 the statistic that 22 percent of learners use distance learning is just not believable and flies in the face of other evidence about the limited amount of distance learning provision in FE and HE. There is a real danger that even one wrong or seriously challengeable statistic will drag down the whole document.
19. In para 5.3, the inclusion in the list of "nanotechnology" drags down the credibility of the list. Moreover, to include environmentally friendly practices

- here is the wrong place for such an important issue. We suggest it has its own separate paragraph.
20. In para 6.2 the existence of the GENIE network is not known even to experts and the belief even among experts is that there is very little in the way of international comparative work on benchmarks of e-learning for FE. Thus this point needs more explanation and a URL in a footnote.
 21. On pages 19 following we have many specific reservations about the overall structure of the implementation plan but feel that this is not the right time to add many comments of detail to a plan which may change in considerable detail in the next weeks. At a general level we do wonder whether an implementation plan of this style should be part of the progress report - either the plan should be brief of a bullet point nature (for general readers), or it should be a full one (for specialist readers) but in a separate annex done in full "System Reform" style and correlated back to Scorecard, e-maturity indicators, etc.

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