



15/12/2011

An ALT response to the The Scottish Government's White Paper "Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our ambitions for Post-16 Education"

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is a charity and learned body with over 700 individual and over 200 organisational members including nearly all Scottish Universities, many Scottish FE colleges, and a wide range of businesses and agencies with an interest in technology in learning. SQA is a sponsoring member.

The ALT Scotland Group, which is responding to the consultation, brings together representatives of the Scottish members and it considers and responds on consultations within the country. This is a response from that group, made in the names of Linda Creanor (a former Chair and President of the Association) and David Dyet (a Trustee of the Association, and Chair of the Association's FE Advisory Committee), both of whom are Scotland based.

Last year, on behalf of the ALT Scotland Group, Linda Creanor and Seb Schmoller (ALT's Chief Executive) met Michael Russell MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning about technology in learning issues. Subsequently, at Michael Russell's request, we wrote *How might learning technology impact on the modern delivery of learning in Scotland?*¹ We developed these ideas further in a meeting with Officials earlier this year.

While many of us have views, in some cases strong views, on many of the other items in the white paper and the consultation questions, these will be expressed through other channels. This response concerns itself with issues to do with Learning Technology and its efficient and effective deployment to help meet the objectives outlined in the white paper.

It is perhaps first worth noting that it is slightly disappointing that the paper makes no mention of technology as an effective means of delivering the aspirations in the paper (and in some cases the only possible means). Scotland is a country well provided for in distance when compared for instance with other parts of the UK. Accordingly, the aspirations in the paper to make it easier for students to undertake learning journeys should address that.

The articulated need to concentrate on young people also strongly points towards more use of technology in delivery and more use of existing standards and technology that are very familiar to young people in particular.

We accept the overall purpose of the paper as helping to ensure that Post-16 education meets the criteria articulated in para 21. Here we especially want to pick up sustainable, open to all, flexible, excellent and international.

We now take each subsequent section in turn.

¹ <http://repository.alt.ac.uk/838/> last accessed 15/12/2012

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Efficient, flexible learner journeys:

Technology should play a major role in easing and supporting the transition/articulation process, e.g. through transferable e-portfolios, preparatory examples of university level learning activities to work through, induction support, online case studies, interaction through social software, blogs, wikis etc.

It would also be a considerable help if various standards for transferability were adopted widely throughout the system. Standardisation work is ongoing in Europe and internationally and Scotland needs to influence and track these developments, through JISC or otherwise.

There is an opportunity here to create pathways for the development of digital and information literacies from school to college and university which would help learners to make the most effective use of technology for learning at every stage in their education, including preparing for self-directed and lifelong learning. Part of this should include the creation of a personal e-portfolio using existing tools available from Google, Microsoft, Apple and other cloud based solutions.

It will be impossible to reach and support all 16-19 years old in Scotland without accepting that much delivery will need to be remote. This requires a continuous process of investment in networking bandwidth and human infrastructure.

Also required is continuous updating, in all sectors, of those involved in delivery as to the possibilities, standards and resources available. The pioneering work of the Scottish Universities especially UHI and the Open University needs acknowledging and building on. More should be made of the creation and sharing of open educational resources across institutions, within Scotland and internationally to support learners at different stages of their learning journey.

This will make articulation and progression easier and more coherent. SQA and the SCQF would provide an excellent framework for taking much of this forward. Government action is needed to reinforce the use of appropriate technology, discourage wasteful non standard one off initiatives and ensure that infrastructure is in place. Efforts should be made to ensure that the systems of Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Qualifications Authority all support the learner's journey and supply relevant information that tracks progression of learners through the vocational and education systems.

There are also a number of areas where there are skills gaps within both the FE and HE and training provider workforces. It would be worth considering the seeding of some massive open on-line courses to encourage both the development of technical and delivery skills along with fostering greater co-operation across the sectors - events might be as simple as approaches to teaching Mathematics in Engineering to more technically specific such as introduction to Java or other technical skill - here the audience and participants might be teachers and learners.

We should set some challenges around short targeted, blended courses. Both the university and college systems need to be more flexible in reaching into homes and the workplace.

Scotland with the strength of a relatively homogeneous education system should be able to support events of this kind.

Widening access:

There are several studies showing that use of technology, especially mobile learning, can be effective in engaging disaffected young people in learning which could potentially encourage them to continue with their education.

Solid technological underpinning for the Activity Agreements would make it easier to track learners effectively, and support remote learners better. Again work in other parts of Europe is relevant.

UHI work on community learning with delivery in part electronic but with community support needs building on. In the area of Basic Skills, the British Army, where Scotland is disproportionately represented, has had distance learning in place for some time with especially good results. The key was to have in place proper support arrangements and “family learning” type structures where the colleagues take on the role of family. Basic skills delivered using technology should be a priority area. Indeed it is important with such people not to replicate the structures of “school learning” where in many cases the learner has already “not succeeded”.

It is easy to legislate for more learner background equality in being accepted to university. Positive discrimination (when compared with exam results) can clearly be mandated. The problem is that of then providing support to enable the acceptance to be converted into achievement. This is again made easier by providing more standard resources and using technology with which these learners are at home. Context is important.

Aligning non-advanced learning and skills with jobs and growth:

Again technology based learning should be at the fore. Learning in or partly in the workplace without costly travel or “busing” costs is essential for activities to make sense.

While the government has ambitious targets to improve Scotland’s broadband infrastructure across Scotland ([Scotland's Digital Future](#)) the digital participation rates remain low. There should be a national initiative where education and the private sector work in partnership to improve digital literacy. This would both improve productivity and improve civil society.

There are a number of target government sectors where a more joined up approach should be made to support learners in formal education, those in employment and those seeking employment. There are learning assets in the further education and higher education sectors that could be made available as open educational resources to provide pathways back into formal learning or as simply short learning bites to improve work-based productivity.

There are also increasingly a large number of organisations who have excellent induction, basic and advanced level skills programmes available on-line who with little persuasion would partner in a national initiative to improve the learning opportunities available to Scottish learners.

Efforts still need to be made to engage those with poor literacy or numeracy skills and any alignment should acknowledge that those at the entry level to skills market often benefit most from general skills development with a focus on core skills. This group need a flexible set of skills as they are liable to change vocational areas as they seek progression to full-time employment or higher level skills development.

The actual skills acquired through undergoing learning on line are themselves a part of those skills needed for jobs.

Finally engaging with employers through technology rather than physically makes it more likely that one will get wider base and more focused involvement from higher up the structure (there is a well documented tendency of employers to send to meetings where there is input to education, the person that they can most spare). This will make the latency between knowledge and skills being identified in industry and the provision of people with the skills and knowledge being provided shorter. There is a tendency for education in this area to be “fighting the last war”.

Market intelligence is thus a major operation here but one outside this response, except in so far as technology is a very good way of obtaining it.

Maintaining Scotland as Global Leader in Research:

Here we argue that Education and especially Learning Technology needs to be an ongoing part of the Research Portfolio as the area is important for Scotland for the reasons outlined above.

Many of the same technologies that support learning are also necessary to help achieve impact. Good connection and a sense of what to promote are key.

Knowledge exchange activities are now electronically based and global. The concept of a “KE office” is already anachronistic and will become more so over time. Money may be saved if it is left off the agenda.

Fair and affordable Student Support Arrangements:

Our request here is that the distance learner should be treated fairly and not disadvantaged.

The current text is largely silent in this area. We suggest that place of learning is irrelevant and that central policies are needed.

Effective and sustainable delivery:

Many efficiencies can be made through sharing IT and learning technology systems between universities and colleges, and also through the use of cloud computing. Discussions are already taking place through the Heads of Information Services (HEIDS) group and with suppliers, with SFC encouragement. However, a commitment (and incentives?) from Government for ongoing support for these initiatives and especially help in putting pressure on suppliers would be welcome. There may also be a case for some systems being provided by National bodies, for example a national student record system would provide a central record for each learner rather than multiple records at different institutions whilst providing centralised real time access to learner data and statistics. Similarly central learning and assessment systems would ensure consistency and leverage the benefits of a largely common SQA curriculum which exists in schools and colleges by removing duplication of effort in resource development and maintenance. Learning technologists need to be part of these discussions to provide a learning and teaching focus, while experienced shared services managers could also help.

Technology can be used to help the regional agenda. Learning missing from a region can be imported and the technology used as a basis for sharing within a region. Again common standards and systems will make this easier. It is also important to involve both FE and HE fully.

This also builds a platform for entrepreneurial activities within the region as SMEs and especially spinouts should be part of the regional structure. This in turn leads to greater sustainability and a virtuous circle can evolve. The international links mentioned are also important.

Simplification of the funding system and income generation: and Performance, Governance, and Accountability:

It is important that data is available about the demographics of student populations, their progress, employment data (some already collected UK wide by HESA) and what students think of their education. Such data needs to be used for the purposes of measuring performance. This should be part of accountability and NUS Scotland has a role to play here.

Such information is necessary in order for SFC to undertake the role outlined here. This is key outcome data. Again technology is of use in both collecting and making the data available.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this White Paper.

Linda Creanor and David Dyet

On behalf of the ALT Scotland Group and the Association for Learning Technology

13/12/2011