MEDIA RELEASE – IMMEDIATE

Association for Learning Technology publishes response to HEFCE proposals on Research Excellence Framework

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) today published its response to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)'s proposals for the new Research Excellence Framework (REF), urging HEFCE to adopt clear guidelines to ensure that interdisciplinary fields such as learning technology are properly judged in the REF.

In its response to the HEFCE consultation, ALT warns that many of its members - as with many others in interdisciplinary areas - are located in departments, units and centres that are not themselves responsible for compiling submissions. For this reason it is important that the REF does not systematically militate against individuals working on learning technologies being entered into the REF in appropriate units of assessment.

On the vexed subject of "impact", learning technology is a discipline whose impact can be judged: but the most informative accounts of impact may well be based on changes to 'host' institutions. For this reason the REF should include among indicators of impact the impact within a researcher's own institution.

Concerning interdisciplinary research, of which learning technology research is an example, ALT warns that many HEIs are likely to discriminate against interdisciplinary research being reported in the REF and against researchers representing themselves as interdisciplinary. This is already having an impact on the work of individual researchers as they bid for project funding and write research outputs. Already ALT detects that advice is being given to our members in their institutions to make sure that they have the right number of "mainstream" outputs rather than those that are interdisciplinary in character. A commitment to ensure that major interdisciplinary groups are represented on panels and to a more open process needs to be articulated very early in the cycle so as to be credible.

Professor John Cook, Chair of the ALT Research Committee, and Professor of Technology Enhanced Learning at the Learning Technology Research Institute said:

"The basic premise of our submission is that steps need taking to ensure that interdisciplinary fields like learning technology are supported rather than thwarted by the REF.

"Collaboration between institutions in research and development areas such as learning technology is a particularly strong part of Government policy. It is regrettable that this emphasis on collaboration is not as strongly reflected in the REF, and this issue needs to be addressed.

"In particular, vigilance by panels and clear guidelines from the funding councils will each be needed to curtail the tendency for institutions to discriminate against interdisciplinary research being reported in the REF, and against researchers describing their work in the REF as interdisciplinary.

"In order to save burden on the system, we urge HEFCE to delay the REF being finalised to 2011, and for it take place in 2014, since activities timetabled for 2010 may need to be significantly reworked, in the light of the likelihood of new funding strictures, and to allow time for the new-style REF to be fine tuned to take account of responses to the current consultation."

ALT's response was submitted on 10 December. For a full copy of the submission, please go to http://repository.alt.ac.uk/683/.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the new (to be implemented under current proposals in 2013) system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). In previous years, research quality has been assessed periodically through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

The REF will focus on three elements, which together reflect the key characteristics of research excellence. These are:

- **Outputs** The primary focus of the REF will be to identify excellent research of all kinds. This will be assessed through a process of expert review, informed by citation information in subjects where robust data are available (for example, in medicine and science).
- **Impact** Significant additional recognition will be given where researchers build on excellent research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. Impacts will be assessed through a case-study approach that will be tested in a pilot exercise.
- **Environment** The REF will take account of the quality of the research environment in supporting a continuing flow of excellent research and its effective dissemination and application.

The consultation, which closes on 16 December 2009, sets out proposals for all key aspects of the framework.

About ALT
The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is a professional and scholarly association which brings together those with an interest in the use of learning technology. It has over 200 organisational members and over 650 individual members, including academic and other researchers who are creators of educational digital content as well as contributors to research and policy. Visit http://www.alt.ac.uk/ and http://www.alt.ac.uk/ALT_2009_Research_Strategy.html.

ALT organises an annual conference. In 2010 the theme will be: *"Into something rich and strange"* - making sense of the sea-change. It will take place in Nottingham, UK from 7-9 September 2010 and will discuss the structural and pervasive shift in the nature of the Internet and its impact on education.

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