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Online Learning Task Force Secretariat
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Dear Alan,

We are pleased to contribute to the work of the Government's Online Learning Task Force (OLTF). ALT is a professional and scholarly association which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology. With over 200 organisations and over 600 individuals in membership, we:

- represent and support our members, and provide services for them;
- facilitate collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy makers;
- spread good practice in the use of learning technology;
- raise the profile of research in learning technology;
- support the professionalisation of learning technologists;
- contribute to the development of policy.

We first make some general comments on the task force's discussion paper and then address the specific questions posed in paragraph 20, from the point of view of a professional and scholarly association that has a significant majority of UK HEIs and many of the larger HE-delivering FECs as organisational members.

While the task force was established to support HEIs in exploiting the opportunities offered by online learning, the changing environment may mean that it needs to look again at its legitimacy. Specifically, will the HEIs still welcome the support and does OLTF still have government support? As the report suggests, there is and has been already a lot of activity in the area and many of the ideas are not completely new.

However, the experience of our members is that making sure that activities are research- and evidence-based is essential. Thus a key element identified in the report (which we welcome) is helping HEIs to support and enable staff to develop, and thence put to effective use the research and evidence available, in the UK and elsewhere. Here it should be noted that while it does talk about international work, the report is largely silent about relevant activities nearer home, and in sectors other than HE (including FE and the non HEI commercial sector). Both have a considerable amount to offer.

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Central Executive Committee: *Liz Bennett, Haydn Blackey, John Cook, Linda Creanor, David Dyet, Carol Higginson, Liz Masterman, Dick Moore, John Phelps, Fred Pickering, Steve Ryan, Gilly Salmon Nicola Whitton.*

ALT Ambassadors*: *Dame Wendy Hall DBE FREng FRS, Professor of Computer Science at the University of Southampton; Terry Mayes, Emeritus Professor at Glasgow Caledonian University; John Taylor, Principal of Doncaster College, and past member of JISC and Chair of the Becta Board.*

* Ambassadors provide informal advice to ALT on matters within their area of interest, and act as advocates for ALT.

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It is important to avoid replicating earlier less successful work. For instance it is not clear what “yet another taxonomy” will add at this stage, although the emphasis on HEIs considering all models involving technology, not just pure eLearning, is welcome. In addition, many of the observations such as those about Postgraduate and Professional Development concentrations are already well documented. We thus believe that a focus on staff and their development will best help HEIs wanting support.

We believe that we offer the task force considerable hindsight, insight and foresight into online learning from practitioner and researcher perspectives. We can also assist the task force (or whatever emerges from it) in taking forward the online learning agenda with our community of individual members, who are likely to be at the centre of developments in many institutions. Through our professional accreditation scheme (CMALT) and through our other activities (including our annual conference) we already occupy a unique position and we thus offer assistance as an organisation and through our members to take the work of the task force forward.

Our current strategy (latest revision May 2009) is at http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/ALT_2008-2011_Strategy.pdf. There are many aspects of it that are relevant to the report and to the questions posed.

We now respond to the questions raised in paragraph 20 of the discussion paper.

A – Barriers and enablers

Common barriers

- Staff perspectives and priorities. To instance some common areas there are groupings round “not invented here” (including those relating to the perceived class structure between sectors and groupings), “the teaching that was good for me is good for them”, “why waste time on (innovation in) teaching when it does not count for promotion”, and “best if we do not get involved – it uses too much time, especially with large class sizes”.
- HEI investment in teaching and learning spaces and their use (timetables etc.) that reinforce traditional pedagogy.
- Unwillingness of providers (within and outwith the sector) to pool their resources, whether in a walled garden or as Open Educational Resources.
- Underdeveloped tools and methods for online assessment, both formative and summative, complemented by unhelpful HEI rules and systems.
- The challenge of IPR and copyright, not helped by a policy framework rooted in the pre-digital world.

Common enablers

- An enthusiasm which is driven sometimes top down, sometimes bottom up from new staff, and sometimes from a champion model. Often this leads with staff development.
- Enthusiasm for online learning from learners who are balancing work/family/social responsibilities with study and who want the flexibility that it provides.
- Consciously matching the learning design to the preferred approaches of those entering a course of study, thereby easing the transition.
- The growing ubiquity of broadband and of Internet-enabled device ownership, increasingly supported by the green agenda that wishes to minimise carbon usage in learning and teaching (travel, buildings etc.).
- The deployment of OER so that providers can concentrate on accreditation and learner support rather than content.
- The existence of good filtering methods and, more generally, a filtering mindset (to filter the right teachers into teaching online, the right learners into learning online, and the right curricula into being delivered online).

B – Organisational structures and collaborations

- Administrators and administrative models that are aware of the different impacts (including on staff workload, staff training and development, scalability) that arise under different scenarios.
- Support and accreditation including experienced teams mentoring new online teachers (both within and between institutions).
- Information literacy/copyright/plagiarism support for students and staff.
- Websites that are friendly to putative blended and eLearning students as well as clear. Postgraduate recruitment at an HEI is now largely electronic and often handled through departmental mechanisms (unlike undergraduate) so it is no surprise that this is where the innovation is
- Providers pooling their resources in order to get things happening at a large enough scale for economies to be realised, and with risks shared and thereby contained. This requires addressing the first barrier above.
- A significant, online learning informed change in assessment regimes.
- A more open approach to content production, ownership and use, flowing from the realisation that what HEIs have of value is essentially process rather than content based.
- A more learner centric and energy conscious approach to making learning opportunities available, perhaps permitting more virtual mobility between providers.

C – Developing appropriate cultures

- Modelling good practice in HE staff development programmes such as Postgraduate Certificates of Higher Education.
- Ensuring that staff who teach online have (probably mandatory) experience of online (distance) learning from the perspective of the learner.
- Motivating staff to become developed in this area - supporting individuals at what they do best (e.g. not forcing an excellent face-to-face lecturer to teach at a distance).
- Rewarding (or using mandates to ensure) the acquisition of basic 'online learning literacy' among staff, preferably accredited.
- Making sure that an evidence based approach to innovation is teaching is used building on up to date research. The ALT "What Research has to say for Practice" guides are especially relevant here.
- Having a clear informed, updated and followed policy on ownership, resources, sharing etc which is in line with good practice (several recent ALT responses to policy consultations relating to IPR, Gowers etc, have covered these issues in some detail).

D – Strategic vision

For ALT this is obviously central and we wish to continue to play a leading role with researchers and practitioners in:

- sharing best-practice;
- addressing scalability issues;
- facilitating and spreading innovation;
- creating learning communities;
- supporting cross-sectoral work;
- growing the number of professionally accredited learning technology practitioners through our CMALT scheme;
- providing a world view giving "voice" to excellent practice and know-how in this area that exists outside HE (e.g. Ufi and FE), and/or outside the UK (e.g. ascilite and Sloan-C).

ALT has an established base. It is a membership body. It is therefore likely to have an ongoing role in the support and up skilling that HEIs and others need and in many cases want. We also have a good understanding of models that work and those that do not: we

This document is available from the ALT Open Access Repository:

http://repository.alt.ac.uk/774/1/Online_learning_task_force_ALT_response_20100513_final.pdf

encourage scholarly discourse through our publications and this has significant impact through their use by practitioners.

Our members – organisational and individual – have been a major factor in the UK being in a good position to “export” technology supported learning alongside our export of learning in general – bringing in students and associated income streams to the benefit of the UK economy.

Government activity has often been characterised by short term initiatives (often shortly before significant elections) seeking rapid, “political timescale” success rather than providing or supporting the necessary solid infrastructure and staff development bases. ALT, in contrast, as a membership organisation, can provide the continuity that is essential if the policy vision is to be realised.

We would be happy to develop these ideas further in direct discussion with the task force.

Regards



Seb Schmoller
Chief Executive