

Executive summary

- 1 This is the third summative evaluation report for the JOS Work Programme (“work programme”). The work programme is a rolling series of sub-programmes and projects that support the JOS committee’s overarching theme of “helping institutions develop in order to meet their needs in times of change”.¹ At any one time, there are a number of projects within institutions and other organisations, undertaking work on a range of topics as guided by the JOS Terms of Reference² and Strategic Framework.¹ The four current sub-programmes are Greening ICT, Strategic Management of Institutions, Relationship Management, and Staff Roles and Responsibilities. The essence of the work programme is that projects, sub-programmes and the overall work programme produce information and guidance that influence managerial decisions in institutions and help produce better outcomes.
- 2 Historically the work programme has had an annual budget of around £650k, although this has increased in recent years to reflect the importance of the work programme in delivering the new JISC strategy, and the incorporation of other budget lines. Expenditure for the work programme was £1,304k in AY 2008-9, and £2,533k in AY 2009-10 (the increase was required to fund activity originally planned under capital funding). The budget for AY 2010-11 is £1,923k.
- 3 This report has been produced by Curtis+Cartwright under a contract for evaluation support and is in line with the work programme’s evaluation framework.³ It covers the period May 2010 to the end of November 2010. Whilst the evaluation is reliant on projects, this is a programme-level evaluation so does not seek to make judgements on individual projects themselves. This executive summary sets out the main headlines whilst the body of the report addresses the more detailed evaluation questions.
- 4 Future evaluation reports will build on this one and will provide an increasingly rich picture of programme follow-on activities, of lessons and of long-term impact. Subsequent reports will be delivered by the programme team in line with the future evaluation approach (outlined in sub-section 7.3, p82).
- 5 This version of the document (V0.4) has an Executive Summary for circulation to the JOS committee, following review by the programme team. The remainder of the document will be reviewed and revised before wider release.

Approach taken for this report

- 6 At the April 2010 evaluation review workshop the approach taken by the evaluation support team changed. As directed by the Programme Director (the owner of this evaluation) this report identifies commonalities when considering programme design and provides illustrative examples for use and impact rather than detailed judgement and inference.

¹ *JOS Strategic Framework*, JOS(10)19, Agenda Item 10, 15 October 2010.

² <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/aboutus/committees/subcommittees/jos>> [accessed 2 September 2009].

³ *JOS Innovation Work Programme: Evaluation Framework*, September 2008.

Work programme status

- 7 All work programme activities are mid-flow and the report provides a snapshot of activities rather than a complete summation:
- The current phase of the Greening ICT sub-programme is due to finish early in 2011, and the next phase to start concurrently.
 - The Strategic Management of Institutions has several large projects (perhaps better referred to as mini-programmes) in progress – with two about to undertake piloting and field testing of outputs.
 - A phase of the Relationship Management sub-programme finished in December 2010; the next phase of commissioned projects is due to start in February 2011.
 - The Staff Roles and Responsibilities sub-programme is due to finish in early 2011, no further activity is currently planned.

Key findings

Work has continued in a turbulent and uncertain time

- 8 This evaluation reporting period has seen continued high-profile changes to higher education within an already turbulent and uncertain environment across the sector. Despite this, work has continued in all areas, and grown in scale in some. Institutions have shown that they are still responsive to JISC activities, in spite of the risk that institutions would be sidetracked by reactions to the many external issues and be less able to engage with JISC activities.

Opportunities and solutions have been successfully identified

- 9 The work programme continues to address areas of institutional need. The recent higher-than-expected response to grant calls issued for further phases of some of the sub-programmes indicates there is still a strong appetite to engage with JISC defined areas of activity. The growing maturity of many of these sub-programmes will increasingly mean that 'solutions' are available to address institutional opportunities and concerns.
- 10 The work programme maps well against JOS' Strategic Framework and against JISC's strategic objectives. Given later points about the scale of some of the challenges, and the mix of JOS' broader portfolio of work, no new areas are identified for funding.

Work continues to benefit institutions involved

- 11 A growing evidence base is showing how an institution's involvement with a work programme project benefits that institution. A common, and potentially enduring, benefit is that capacity for ICT-enabled institutional change can be built in the sector through the skills and knowhow vested in individuals. Another benefit articulated by many project teams is that the profile of internal activities is raised: JISC funding often confers additional legitimacy and importance upon a project.

The testing of outputs is more widespread and is advantageous

- 12 The testing of outputs (either through review by a sample of the intended audience, piloting, or so-called field testing) is more widespread. For example, there has been systematic review and piloting in two of the four sub-programmes.
- 13 Although such testing will generally increase the time taken to take an output from development to widespread promotion and use, it is likely to increase quality and the uptake of the outputs. Testing has the advantage of providing experience (to the development team, testing team and JISC) of the application of outputs, identifying potential improvements and allowing examples and case studies to be included. Reviewers commonly request more sector-specific examples. Clearly, as these are new ideas there may not be many examples – so expectations of review and pilot teams also need to be managed.

An effective approach to starting and supporting change has been identified

- 14 The strongest evidence for genuine change and learning comes from the experience gained where recommended practices have been applied to real situations. Such experiences come from piloting, embedding and other assisted uptake activities, as opposed to research and development of new concepts and tools. The experience is often more difficult than originally expected for the participants, but the gains are greater. The finding is also backed by other JOS-funded activities, including the concept of practice groups. This suggests that traditional dissemination activities (*ie* simple provision of information and guidance) have limited ability to stimulate broader change in the sector. This view is reinforced by the argument that the parallel activity of building capacity in the sector to manage and deliver institutional change is a necessary complement to identifying and promoting good practice.
- 15 Though it was difficult at times, there has also been an example of a successful transition phase between the original project team that developed concepts and tools, and a project team that is well suited for long-term embedding and sustaining. This was achieved by having both teams involved in the one project – providing continuity from the former, and enabling ownership for the latter. The challenge of doing this more widely is considerable, and may not be reliable in outcome, but undertaking the transition offers an opportunity for enduring impact rather than outputs of limited use.
- 16 The work programme has demonstrated that forming partnerships with sector bodies can lead to effective interventions. Whilst the Strategic ICT toolkit work with the LFHE, and the staff roles and responsibilities work with various staff development organisations, is still at an early stage, benefits (including improved understanding of target audiences) have been accrued and there is promise of further and enduring benefits. Building and maintaining partnerships to embed JISC-relevant ideas and practices is not a perfect solution however – one common observation is that it is effort-intensive and requires sustained commitment. As one participant put it, “partnership building is hard... it’s not efficient, but it is effective”. The actual economic cost does not need to be great – for example the piloting within the Embedding Work-with-IT was done at comparatively little direct cost, but did necessitate substantial effort. An impact and value for money assessment after the end of the project will help understand the effectiveness and value-for-money of partnership building.

Effective means of providing project support have been identified

- 17 The work programme has used various means of providing support to constituent projects within a sub-programme, and evidence has been gathered on what works well. In essence,

good practice entails a dedicated support team that is put in place to provide early support and who establish and maintain a simple, clear support infrastructure. This has been shown to work well, and problems have arisen where this has not been the case. Good project support has a multiplier effect, helping to ensure that the greatest possible value is obtained at the project and programme-level.

The freeze on marketing has affected dissemination and broader impacts

- 18 Externally imposed restrictions on marketing and communication expenditure have meant that very little programme-level dissemination has been possible during this evaluation reporting period. Each sub-programme is increasingly reliant on the projects and the individual programme managers to disseminate their results. This has happened successfully, for example with the Service Design briefing paper, and is becoming more widespread. Given that a number of activities have reached or are nearing maturity, there would be a massive amount of dissemination and other assisted uptake that could be done if external restrictions allow.
- 19 If external restrictions continue, then more-creative approaches to promote uptake (*eg* further embedding either directly with institutions or via sector bodies) may be necessary. This could fit with a cultural shift towards embedding with REF-style monitoring of impact. Training and support will need to be provided to project teams to make this a successful approach.

Programme design and funding issues

- 20 The preceding findings give rise to three potential issues that require consideration:
- 1) There is a tension between long and short programmes.

The drivers for longer programmes are:
 - an extended programme start-up period is essential for support projects;
 - testing and embedding phases require time;
 - identifying impact takes time.⁴
The drivers for shorter programmes are:
 - the volatility in the sector makes it hard to maintain initiatives and teams (and impossible to guarantee);
 - many institutions are facing urgent issues and the pressure to show short-term results.
 - 2) Incorporating testing, embedding and benefits-realisation activities into a programme increases the cost of the programme (especially when done in a collaborative manner). Whereas capital-funded programmes have tended to have money for benefits realisation activities, this has not been true for most core-funded programmes (including the work programme). This leads to a tension between the number of activities undertaken and the extent to which the effective practices and interventions identified can be adopted. A key decision is how to balance funding new ideas with ensuring that the ideas developed actually gain traction. Although these activities are expensive, challenging and risky, they

⁴ This assumes that long-term impact is identified as part of a programme.

do ensure that some positive impact is obtained rather than relying on uptake to occur by itself, and may thus increase the overall value-for-money of the programme.

- 3) As more outputs achieve maturity there will need to be funding and mechanisms (including management) in place to maintain and update these outputs systematically, if they are to remain current and useful within the sector. In parallel, the minimum essential capacity to manage and deliver institutional change needs to be built, so that the outputs can be effectively utilised.

Progress made by the evaluation

- 21 The testing of concepts and outputs has led to more evidence for evaluation purposes.
- 22 Project-level self-evaluation has been more inconsistent in this evaluation reporting period: in some areas (particularly where there has been early and sustained encouragement) it has improved; in others the turmoil of sector changes has made it less of a priority. Similarly, the number of examples where sector-wide outputs have been used by institutions that were not participants in the original programme, and of longer-term impact within participating institutions, has increased in some areas and diminished in others.
- 23 There remains much work to do to establish the culture of self-evaluation, as well as mechanisms for tracking outputs, outcomes and benefits to ascertain long-term impact. The proposed future approach to evaluation – where the programme team has responsibility for evaluation and relies on benefits management as part of programme management – should help with this, if resourcing permits. It remains that without a statement of clear objectives, clear intended outcomes and/or clear benefits it will not be possible to say whether they have been met/realised.

Recommendations

- 24 Section 8 (p85) summarises the eleven recommendations made in this report. The ones considered strategic and/or aimed at the JOS committee are:
 - Recommendation 1: The programme team should identify the synthesis, dissemination and embedding requirements of the Greening ICT projects and programme, and develop and document a plan for these activities.
 - Recommendation 3: The programme team should form and foster a community of practice, or a practice group, in one or more domains of Relationship Management.
 - Recommendation 4: The programme team should ensure that a shared communications plan is developed and documented, encompassing all programme-level stakeholders with a role in disseminating Relationship Management information and guidance and embedding good practice.
 - Recommendation 8: The programme team should conduct a follow-up impact assessment of the Embedding Work-with-IT project in approximately 12 months.
 - Recommendation 9: The JOS committee and programme team should consider establishing an assisted uptake fund for each Work Area.

- Recommendation 10: If the model of using support and synthesis projects as project and programme support is to continue, the JISC should identify good practice in these projects (including how they are commissioned and managed) and then promote these practices and make necessary changes to policy and process.
- Recommendation 11: The JOS and programme team should design programmes of work to ensure that a support project is given time to become established (*eg* one to two months) before the projects start.