

Feedback on HE in FE Bids

Author - Professor Mark Stiles, Staffordshire University

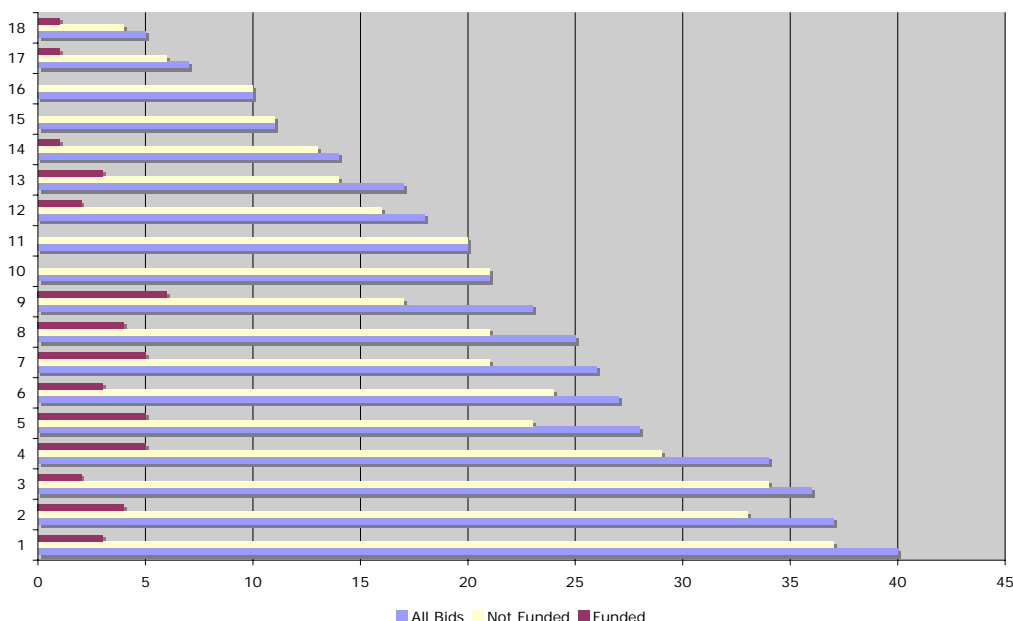
Background

The HE in FE section of the E-learning Appendix D of Circular 4/06 requested proposals for projects to implement and pilot e-learning technologies within one or more HE courses delivered in one or more FE colleges. 8-12 projects were sought, at between £60,000-£100,000 per project. 56 proposals were received before the deadline, and each marked by three markers: two members of the community, and one member of the JISC Executive. 6 English proposals have been selected for funding, with 2 asked to resubmit proposals for further consideration. A decision is pending from HEFCW regarding the proposals submitted by Welsh institutions.

Analysis of bids

The following categories were identified as the key problem areas with bids:

1. Deliverables and/or benefit to the wider community unclear
2. Scope of proposal and/or plan of work unclear
3. Problems with the proposed budget or issues of value-for-money
4. Plans for dissemination weak or missing
5. Concerns over proposed management of project
6. Partnerships weak or lacking
7. Issues around the evaluation of work/activities proposed
8. Issues around the engagement of the proposed project with JISC and the wider community
9. Risk analysis weak and/or missing
10. Doubts that the proposed project team possesses the required skills
11. The bid does not fit/is out of scope of the call
12. Bid not in line with JISC technical approaches – eg eFramework, Open Source, standards etc
13. Doubts regarding the sustainability of the project
14. No evidence that the project is effectively linked to local strategy and/or plans
15. Project proposes to purchase hardware/software/equipment using JISC funding to a level which seems excessive
16. The bid as submitted breaks the rules of the bid in terms of format/layout/template etc
17. Concerns that the required staff are not in place and that recruitment could be a problem
18. The project lacks innovation or “has been done before”



As can be seen from the above chart, there were four problem areas where no bids that evidenced them were funded. These were:

10. Doubts that the proposed project team possesses the required skills
11. The bid does not fit/is out of scope of the call
15. Project proposes to purchase hardware/software/equipment with JISC funding to a level that seems excessive
16. The bid as submitted breaks the rules of the bid in terms of format/layout/template etc.

Apart from these, problem areas occurred in both successful and unsuccessful bids. Unsurprisingly, the *number* of problems evidenced by bids was very different for successful and unsuccessful bids.

Feedback and advice on problem areas

1. Deliverables and/or benefits to the wider community unclear

Too many bids were “locally focused” to an extent that the deliverables of the project, or even the lessons that might be learned, were of debatable value to the wider community.

2. Scope of proposal and/or plan of work unclear

Many bids had problems clearly expressing the actual programme of work proposed. This was usually coupled with problems of scope, with bids showing a lack of clarity about the boundaries to the proposed work – this led, in some cases, to proposals that were unrealistic and over-ambitious. Lastly some bids were “bitty” – made up of separate pieces of work that did not hang together in a holistic way.

NOTE: It is vital that bids state what the project would actually do (and NOT do).

3. Problems with the proposed budget or issues of value-for-money

Most bids struggled with FEC. Bids appeared to have had problems working out what might or might not be appropriate to include, both in terms of the money sought and the contribution made. Many important areas were under-costed, especially dissemination. This, coupled with problem area 1, led to the VFM of many proposals being questionable. The JISC Executive will look to provide further guidance on FEC in the future.

NOTE: Bids needs to provide realistic costing of dissemination, evaluation and partnership working.

4. Plans for dissemination weak or missing

NOTE: Bids must make it clear how effective dissemination will be carried out, with a particular focus on disseminating to the appropriate communities.

5. Concerns over proposed management of project

Problems here included issues around the governance of projects (especially in terms of partnership working) and the staffing of projects. There were a number of projects that intended to employ large numbers of fractional posts (sometimes only these) and where the project manager was a small fractional post in itself.

NOTE: Bids should demonstrate solid project management staffing in sufficient quantity.

6. Partnerships weak or lacking

A major issue where evidenced by bids. Some partnerships looked as if they were “constructed for bidding” rather than had any real basis. In other cases partners were mentioned but no supporting letter provided. The value/expected benefit of the proposal to partners was frequently unclear. The quality of supporting letters was far too often poor. In some cases bids included no partners.

NOTE: Bids should demonstrate that partnerships exist because mutual and/or shared benefits would arise from the proposed work. These must be clearly expressed in bids. Supporting letters should be about “we support this bid because...” and not just “we are pleased to be part of this”.

7. Issues around the evaluation of work/activities proposed

The HE in FE call required pilots to take place. Many bids were weak in explaining how this would take place and be evaluated. Too much evaluation was purely summative.

NOTE: Bids should cover formative evaluation, and evaluation of the project activities as opposed to just project outputs.

8. Issues around the engagement of the proposed project with JISC and the wider community

Many bids did not evidence awareness of activities in the wider community, especially other activities in the JISC sphere. Even where they did, many bids did not explain how they would engage with this wider activity.

9. Risk analysis weak and/or missing

NOTE: Bids should not just identifying risks but supply mitigating actions

10. Doubts that the proposed project team possesses the required skills

Whilst this applied to a range of skills, including technical ones, the most important skill often lacking evidence was project management. It is likely that many bids did indeed have staff that possessed it but failed to provide evidence.

NOTE: Bids need to match what is said about team members to the requirements of delivering and managing the proposed project.

11. The bid does not fit/is out of scope of the call

This applied to a number of bids. Bidders should read the call documentation carefully, and ask for advice (as indicated in call documents) if in doubt.

12. Bid not in line with JISC technical approaches – eg eFramework, Open Source, standards etc

Some bids avoided this issue almost completely. A common associated problem was that of Copyright/IPR, with some bids being either unclear or almost evasive on how outputs would be treated as regards this.

13. Doubts regarding the sustainability of the project

When serious, this problem was often linked to the next area. In other cases the problem was merely lack of clarity.

14. No evidence that the project is effectively linked to local strategy and/or plans

In some cases this evidence was lacking because it was clear from the rest of the bid that the link did not exist! In other cases, it probably did exist but had not been, or was weakly, articulated.

NOTE: Links to local strategies and plans can be effectively expressed via supporting letters without counting towards the page limit for the bid.

15. Project proposes to purchase hardware/software/equipment using JISC funding to a level which seems excessive

NOTE: Bids need to consider carefully and be explicit about resources that can be used beyond the life of the project and what institutional contribution to this aspect might be appropriate.

16. The bid as submitted breaks the rules of the bid in terms of format/layout/template etc

Bidders need to read call documents carefully and ensure that they stick to page limits indicated, provide the required information and only attach those appendices that are allowed.

17. Concerns that the required staff are not in place and that recruitment could be a problem

This was a problem where bidders showed lack of awareness of the implications of the need to recruit, or where the project was highly reliant on staff not in post.

18. The project lacks innovation or “has been done before”

Where a problem, this was further evidence of proposals with little value beyond the local impact.

Professor Mark Stiles
February 15, 2007