

Cover Sheet for Proposals to Circular X/06: Learners Experience of e-Learning Programme (All sections must be completed)	Bid for a: B) Institutional Studies project;
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Name of Institution/Organisation: The University of Northampton

Name of Partners: Northampton College, Northamptonshire Adult and Community Learning.

Name of Proposed Project: e4L (e-learning for Learners)

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Length of Project: 24 Months

Project Start and End Dates: 1st March 2007 to 28th February 2009

Total Funding Requested from JISC: £80,000

Funding Broken Down over Academic Years:
 March 07 to July 07 - £17,000
 August 07 to July 08 - £40,000
 August 08 to February 09 - £23,000

Total Institutional Contribution:
 £91,631.06

Outline Project Description

Previous learner centred studies have provided snapshot reflections from the learner at a particular point in time; they have not reflected on the changes in attitude that those involved in e-learning experience as the learner progresses or is involved in lifelong learning. This study provides a key opportunity to build upon the studies in Phase 1 using an enhanced sample to provide rich information about the learners' experience over a period of time. Although a wide range of learners across the education sector in Northamptonshire (Higher Education, Further Education and Adult and Community Learning) will be involved in the project, a particular emphasis will be placed on those students in HE who will be moving between institutions and subject levels over the course of the study and are able to be tracked for their experiences. All students participating in the study will be assessed at the outset for characteristics which will define effective learners in an e-learning context (based on the LEX report). It will be seen whether the outcomes could then be employed as a predictor of success and the results used to enhance the information for stakeholders produced during phase one. At all stages, the focus will be to attenuate the student's voice and deliver outputs which will be used to inform further systems developments, practitioner use and student's effective use of e-Learning.

1) Introduction

“.....not only are the learners’ aims equal in status to institutional aims but so too might the learner be (or become) an equal partner in the shaping of their own learning.”
Sharpe et al (2006)

Vision: At the conclusion of this project, the sector will better understand how the student will make more effective use of commonly available e-tools to support their learning and how this impacts their experience when moving between courses and institutions consistent with the theme of lifelong learning. Practitioners will be able to use the information to design modules around the student; utilising tools which have demonstrable pedagogical benefits and provide better support and guidance for the student journey.

Google Maps provides its users with a personalised direction and guidance between two points using web 2.0 technologies. In the same way, e-learning is now beginning to address the student’s journey on the path to effective learning whereas previously it has focused on what the tutor may provide or what the tutor believes the student needs with little opportunity to personalise the environment. The work in Phase 1 has begun to readdress the balance in research of effective e-learning, refocusing on the learner’s perspective and moving away from the focus on the practitioner.

The scoping study for the pedagogy strand of the JISC phase one e-learning programme¹; the phase one outcomes; the HEA review into the undergraduate experience of blended learning²; and recent discussions at the BECTA – Harnessing Technology Conference³ have all made progress towards making explicit the learners voice and begin to recognise the value of the experience that students bring with them and how this impacts on their e-learning environment. The draft report from the JISC LXP study notes that students are now making extensive use of personally owned technologies (mobiles, laptops, PDAs and memory sticks) and suggests ways in which the students are changing the way in which they work.

It has been extensively reported that students are now regularly using search engines such as Google to find material to support their personal life, course and assessment. Already we have technology which allows students to easily publish material, personal opinions and thoughts on the internet through blogs (Blogger.com), wikis (Wikipedia.com) and social networking sites (Myspace, Flickr or Piczo). They have tools to communicate more effectively not just through email and synchronous chat such as MSN but also through IP telephony such as Skype. IT Week (13/11/06) reports that some technologies are now combining such as Skype 3.0 now giving the user the ability to create and join public discussion groups and Microsoft Office 2007 will have the ability to write blogs offline and post them to the students favourite site in addition to being able to send and receive SMS text messages straight from Outlook.

Within Northamptonshire, a range of technologies are being used within education to enhance the learning environment. The vast majority of delivery could be termed ‘blended learning’ where the blend represents some mix of online and face to face delivery rather than just pure online or traditional lecture style. Using the dimensions of blended learning listed in the HEA review (see footnote 2) and applying these to the three levels of education available in this **longitudinal** study it becomes obvious that there is an opportunity to address previously under researched areas in addition to better understanding the student experience in order to improve the learning environment. A number of students engaging in ACL and general FE e-learning will be involved in the study not only due to under representation in previous research and a desire of the University to better understand learners in pursuit of its widening participation agenda, but also due to the fact that the CAMEL project⁴ has identified that “you can learn from people who aren’t your most obvious peer group that very different institutions all exhibit good practice”. The LEX project also identified that “similarities between learners readily cross sector boundaries” (p25) and this project will be able to further build on this finding.

2) Nature of Bidding Consortium

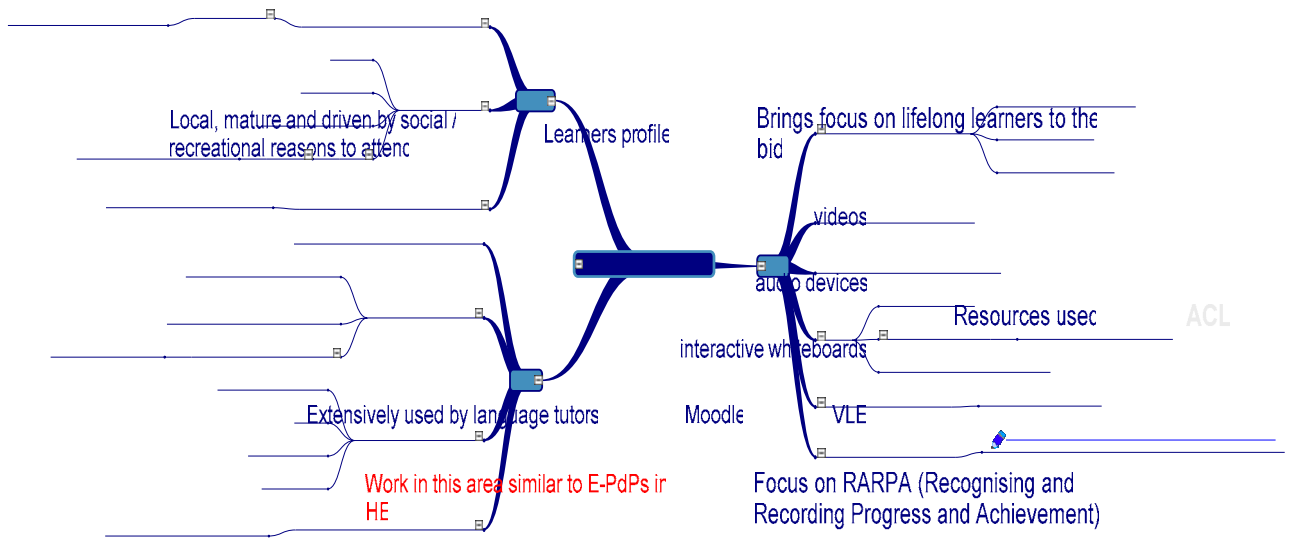
The lead organisation is The University of Northampton (UN). The partners include Northampton College (NC) and Northamptonshire Adult and Community Learning (ACL). UN and NC partners already collaborate on over 20 HE programmes ranging from HND Business to Foundation Degree Media, which involve over 300 FTE learners (partnership agreements are in the appendix). The lead partners at both NU and NC have experience of JISC projects such as TALENT and LSDA projects (£150,000 NLN Transformation Programme in 2005). UN is currently investigating the sharing of effective practice with ACL over the use of synchronous tools (e.g. video conferencing) to support students’ lifelong learning and expects to develop this further during 2007. Key information, relevant to the bid about the three institutions may be found in the following mindmap:

¹ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html

² <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/4884.htm>

³ <http://events.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=16197>

⁴ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_elidacamel.aspx



3) Brief outline of the nature of work to be undertaken

Deliver both FE and HE in FE modules

The study over a period of two years (Mar 07 to Feb 09) will look at a representative sample of learners on a number of modules (see table 1) which use a mix of technologies in order to address a number of specific research questions. Some students on modules will be tracked longitudinally in order to identify critical moments in their experience of technology and this will provide information on the student perspective of **interoperability** between institutions. The modules listed are a selection of those considered to use high levels of e-learning in their courses. It is possible that the benchmarking process, which completes in March 2007, will identify other modules which the JISC / e4L Steering group consider better serve the needs of the study.

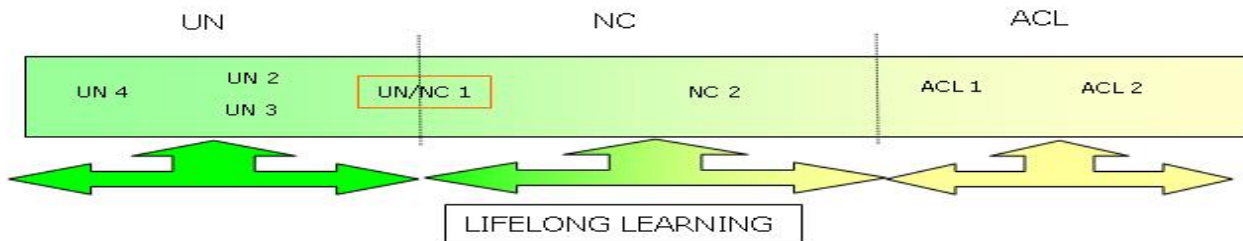
Table 1

Now used in 60 courses

In September - moved to Moodle

Modules to be used in study	Project Module Code	Types of technology in use
Information Systems Module INS1015	UN 2	Development of an assessed blog over a period of 10 weeks to demonstrate information skills. Extensive support from VLE.
English and French Modules (LIT1018/FRE4001)	UN 3	Assessed Blog; Online tasks for LIT1018; Use of streamed sound / downloadable MP3s; Video role plays of French native speakers
Information Systems Module INS2015	UN4	Continued use of Blog / VLE and downloads
HND Business	UN/NC1	Extensive use of VLE to support module / mobile learning
Catering	NC2	Video, E-assessments – use of VLE for downloads
Mandarin Chinese	ACL 1	Extensive use of VLE with sound downloads, quizzes and a social interaction area. Investigating use of videoconferencing.
French	ACL 2	MP3 available as download and also on the VLE. Links to podcasts (eg French news, talking books, verb casts), links to pen-friend sites and a forum for discussion in French.

The link between the modules is demonstrated from the diagram below where learners may potentially engage at any level and then move between levels as their needs change. The inclusion of the module (UN/NC1) spans the UN and NC infrastructure – students will study at NC in year 1 and then at UN in year 2. The VLE will remain consistent so attitudes and behaviours in year two will be as a result of the year one experience, changes to the students' personal life and changes in the environment. There will also be a transition between UN2 and UN4 as part of student progression within the same institution.



4) Research Focus and Methodology

Following the exceptionally comprehensive report of the methodology used in LEX, this will be used as the basis for this bid as it is consistent with the research aims to achieve insight into the ways of thinking, feeling and understanding the

learners experience. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and interview+ will be enhanced through the use of Laddering⁵ (which has already been used and tested by the research team). This method will enhance the questioning techniques to obtain a deeper understanding. In line with the basis of IPA and interview+, the research questions (RQs) are exploratory in nature rather than testing specific hypotheses.

“This method encourages a focus on understanding how the kind of e-learning to be explored acquires meaning in the context of the participant’s holistic life experience.” - Lex Methodology Report.

A number of assumptions (A) have been made in previous research which will be investigated under the work of this bid.

Assumption	Methodology
A1) Students are increasingly entering education with higher level skills in e-communication (eg Email, blogs, Skype). This study will identify the extent to which this is true for different types of learners.	Online exercise which will measure the ability of the student rather than rely on self-assessment.
A2) Those students who have experience of e-communication skills are able to engage more actively with courses utilising e-learning. This could increase the ‘digital divide’ between those capable of engaging and those who cannot	The results of the exercise in A1 will be used alongside the results of the focus groups to explore this assumption.
A3) Minority Learners (eg international / disabled) find the move from traditional learning styles to well designed blended learning enable better engagement on the course.	Purposeful sampling will be used to ensure that minority learners will be included in the research.

The link between the research questions and the methodology are shown below

Research Question	Methodology
RQ1) To explore which systems best support different learners needs and enable a positive learning experience. The range of environments included in this study will provide a broad base for the investigation of learner preferences.	IPA / Interview+ grouping students by module
RQ2) Explore the reasons for engaging on the course and whether this changes the way that learners expect and actually engage with e-learning on a course. This will enable us to better understand what choices learners are making in their study strategies and how this impacts on their experience of e-learning.	IPA / Interview+ grouping students by module
RQ3) To better understand the critical moments in learners’ experience of technology for learning and the impact of institutional systems and policies via longitudinal study both within and across institutions.	IPA / Interview+ grouping students by module – specific focus on those moving between modules
RQ4) Understand whether the use of blogs in assessment encourage a more active and critical relationships between the student and their information environment, encouraging a habit of higher –level thinking. Module UN2 (INS1015) is already the subject of initial investigations in this area.	IPA / Interview+ with specific focus on module UN2 (INS1015) – also utilise earlier research in this area.
RQ5) To find out if students use other tools in addition to those supplied in the module to better personalise their environment – will this be more typical of the highly skilled e-communicator and how can these students be better supported ?.	IPA / Interview+ grouping students by the results of the exercise in A1

5) Contribution to the theme

This bid contributes to the e-learning and Pedagogy programme’s two key themes:

Provide the post-16 and HE community with accurate, up-to-date, evidence and research-based information about effective practice in the use of e-learning tools.

The sample of learners used in the study provide a broad coverage of the post-16 and HE community and is purely focused on the learners experience of studying in an e-learning environment. The assumption is that the learners are now making more use of social software tools such as Blogs but it is not yet clear how this contributes to skills such as information literacy.

“.....a lot of research has shown that despite the fact that learners are now IT-literate (and have experience of using technologies in their daily lives.) they are not academically e-literate and still lack the necessary skills to make appropriate critical use of information.” - JISC LXP (2006)

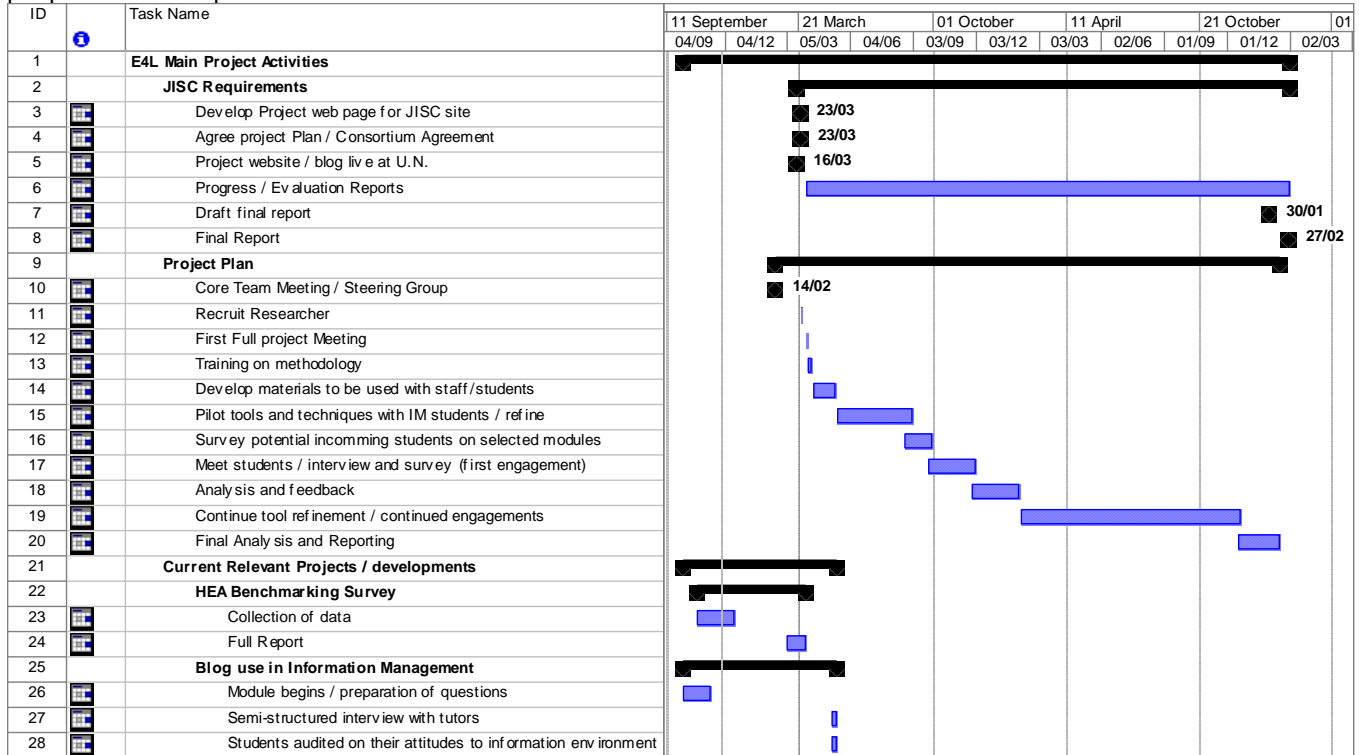
Promote the application and development of e-learning tools and standards to better support effective practice

The outcome of this research will be to feedback information to the community to better support the learner considering their changing needs and expectations. This will lead to better support via institutional systems and processes.

⁵ Rugg (2002), Eliciting information about organizational culture via laddering in Information Systems Journal Volume 12 Page 215 - July 2002

6) Intended Project Plan

Whilst members of the project team have experience of PRINCE2 and access to a PRINCE practitioner, it is anticipated that the JISC Infokit approach⁶ will be appropriate for general management of the bid as it balances documentation with people oriented aspects.



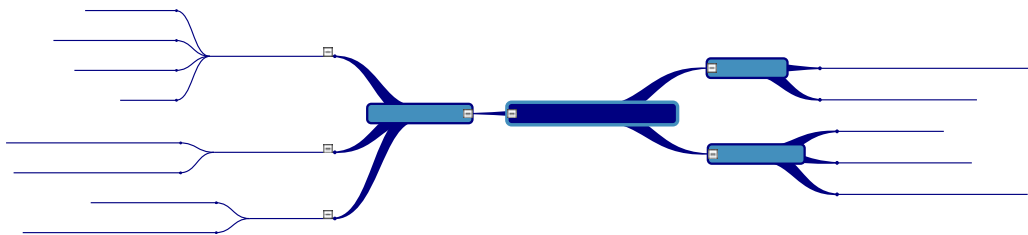
As part of the project planning stage a full risk management strategy will be developed. Risks will be mitigated through the use of efficient project planning based under the JISC Infokit including: Risk Management, Quality Management and Change Control.

The following table shows a preliminary risk assessment:

Risks	Impact	Probability	Action
A key member of staff leaves	Medium	Low	Replacement member of staff will be seconded for the remaining period
Work in one area will take more time than originally accounted	Medium	Medium	Flexibility built into the planning cycle. The project manager may be required to alter the schedule of tasks.
Project staff not skilled in interview techniques	High	Low	Training conducted at the outset of the project with experienced staff
Students not engaging in the project work	High	Medium	Follow the experiences of LEX to encourage student participation. Some funding made available to reward students for contribution.

7) Evaluation Strategy

Evaluation will be embedded throughout the project and is a central element of the project action plan. Whilst the evaluation strategy is extensive, the key elements may be represented in the MindMap below:



⁶ <http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/InfoKits/project-management/pm-intro-1.5>

8) Sustainability and link to strategy

The work of the project is already consistent with the Learning and Teaching Strategy for UN 2005 to 2010⁷. Specifically the UN strategy notes in section 4 that it will develop independent reflective learners; provide students with a learning experience that prepares them for their future career and life; provide an effective, flexible teaching environment; and provide an innovative, flexible and dynamic culture which recognizes the diverse needs of the academic community. The outcomes will be sustained by embedding the findings into staff development to further support the University mission.

The NC Vision Statement, Corporate Strategy 2004-7 indicates:

- Maintain our status as a broad based General Further Education College with clearly identified key strands of provision;
- Be a model of inclusiveness reflecting the diversity of our local communities;
- Employ new learning technologies to underpin the learning experience;
- Work closely with employers and others in meeting the needs of the local economy;
- Work through local communities in order to widen participation in learning;
- Actively promote partnerships that deliver responsive and coherent learning provision.

The ACL e-learning strategy 2006-07 notes that 'E-learning is to be embedded in all delivery of NALS content and the electronic management of courses. Learners will have the option of F2F fixed time classes and also Learner Centred module that they can access at their leisure. UN is currently working with ACL and with NC (HE in FE) to further improve the learners experience and the outcomes of the project will be of use to this in addition to being valuable in the respective sectors.

NC, UN and ACL recognise that all IPR associated with this project is retained by their institutions and will make amendments to existing contracts as necessary. However, the institutions accept that funding for this initiative has been made available for the benefit of all within the UK HE community and will therefore agree to make all project outputs available inline with the dissemination strategy.

9) Dissemination Strategy

Dissemination is fundamental to the success of the project to ensure that the outcomes have an impact across the sector. Sharing of good practice within the HE, FE and ACL communities will be important. The core team will ensure that dissemination will commence from the initial stage of the project in order to make colleagues in the sector aware of the aims and objectives. The JISC will play an important role in the dissemination process.

Dissemination Activity	Target Audience	Purpose	Lead Agent	Evaluation of impact
Website	HE / FE and ACL	Awareness	UN	Feedback form on site / track site usage
Project Weblog	HE / FE and ACL	Awareness/ information	UN/NC/ACL	Feedback on the blog
A series of rich interactive case studies	HE / FE and ACL	Information /implementation	UN/NC/ACL via JISC (RSC), BECTA, HEA, ALT 2008.	Feedback on the blogs attached to the case studies / oral feedback
Summary Report	HE / FE and ACL	Information	UN	Feedback on the project blog / oral feedback
Methodological Report	Mostly HE – via JISC	information	UN	Feedback on the project blog / oral feedback
Critique of methodology	Mostly HE	Information/ implementation	UN – via JISC	Feedback on the project blog / oral feedback
Recommendations and guidance for all stakeholders	HE / FE and ACL	Implementation	UN/NC/ACL via - JISC (RSC), BECTA, HEA, ALT 2008.	Feedback on the project blog / oral feedback

10) Budget

Directly Incurred Staff	March – July 07	August 07 – July 08	August 08 – July 09	TOTAL £
Researcher (RB5) 100%FTE	£12,236.96	£30,543.46	£18,529.70	£61310.12

⁷ http://almond.admin.nene.ac.uk:7777/portal/page?_pageid=833,771677&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Snr lecturer time (SL) 80 hours	£617.35	£2247.15	£333.86	£3198.36
NC and ACL tutors 125 hours	£750	£2703.75	£405.60	£3859.35
Total Directly Incurred Staff (A)	£13604.31	£35494.36	£19269.16	£68367.83
Non-Staff	March – July 07	August 07 – July 08	August 08 – July 09	TOTAL £
Travel and expenses	£300	£1400	£300	£2000
Hardware/software	£2000	£0	£0	£2000
Dissemination	£0	£900	£2100	£3000
Evaluation	£0	£2000	£2000	£4000
Recruitment	£2500	£0	£0	£2500
Incentives for student participation	£200	£600	£0	£800
Total Directly Incurred Non-Staff (B)	£5,000	£4,900	£4,400	£14,300
Directly Incurred Total (A+B=C) (C)	£18,604	£40,394	£23,669	£82,668
Directly Allocated	March – July 07	August 07 – July 08	August 08 – July 09	TOTAL £
Estates Labour Costs	£1656.79	£4152.39	£2412.91	£8222.09
Estates Other Costs	£1072.45	£2687.86	£1561.88	£5322.19
Directly Allocated Total (D)	£2,729.24	£6,840.25	£3,974.79	£13,544.28
Indirect Costs (E)	£15197.31	£38088.72	£22132.93	£75418.95
Total Project Cost (C+D+E)	£36,530.86	£85,323.33	£49,776.88	£171,631.06
Amount Requested from JISC	£17000	£40000	£23000	£80000
Institutional Contributions	£19,530.86	£45,323.33	£26,776.88	£91,631.06
Percentage Contributions over the life of the project		JISC 46.6%	Partners 53.4%	Total 100%

11) Key Personnel

Rob Howe (UN) - has recently been awarded a UN Teaching and Learning Enhancement Award (Group) and is active on many institutional E-learning projects – in addition to working on the JISC TALENT project in the 2000. He has a degree in Social Psychology and is familiar with interview methodologies and techniques.

Tony Jewson (NC) - e learning manager at Northampton college has expertise in project management gained from the NLN transformation project in addition to experience in supporting academic staff in the effective use of ILT

Jim Woolley (ACL) - is the e-learning Manager for Northamptonshire Adult Learning Service, responsible for introducing and supporting all aspects of e-learning within the service, across the teaching and learning curriculum.

Rachel Fitzgerald (UN) - is a Learning Technology Officer and has expertise in supporting course development in addition to research work and interview methodology. She has experience of laddering in M-level courses.

Chris Powis (UN) - is a National Teaching Fellow, lecturer on module UN2 and has expertise in using laddering methodology in research.

Philip Leeson (UN) – e learning advisor, has a masters degree in education and experience in staff interviewing, project support and report collation and production from the NLN transformation project.

Dr Paul Brett (CELT – Wolverhampton) – External Evaluator – is chair of the Heads of E-learning forum – see <http://home.wlv.ac.uk/~le1969/> for full CV.

Project Researcher (UN) – to be recruited. Following discussion with UN Director of Research, we would advertise in Guardian and in jobs.ac.uk. This has been budgeted for. It is possible that a secondment may be available when this project is due to commence.

The Steering group will be chaired by UN senior management and include representatives from the academic modules included in the study in addition to members of Information Services and the Office of Learning and Teaching.