

# Review of Learner Experiences of e-Learning: Strand A

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## **1. Author**

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## **2. Background**

Circular 05/06 'Learner Experiences of e-Learning' requested projects to develop further the community's understanding of how learners experience and participate in e-learning. This Programme builds on activities funded under the e-Learning and Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-Learning Programme. Specifically Phase One has already funded a scoping study, a support project to advise on methodologies and two short studies. Phase Two is informed by the outcomes and recommendations from phase one.

Total funding of up to £720,000 was available to fund proposals across three strands:

- A) one Learners' Journeys project (£120,000);
- B) up to six institutional projects on Learners' Experiences of Blended Environments (£80,000 each);
- C) one Support and Synthesis project (£120,000).

A total of 16 proposals under Strand A were received before the deadline. The selection panel agreed to fund the target number under each strand and noted that there were other fundable proposals within Strand A.

The large number of proposals received shows a high level of interest in the e-learning pedagogy strand in general, and in research around the learner experience in particular.

This study aims to identify the main weaknesses in bids received and suggest how bids can be strengthened in the future.

### **3. Methodology**

This study has been carried out using the following sources of information:

1. The call documentation:
  - a. JISC Circular 05/06: Learner Experiences of e-Learning;
  - b. Background to the JISC Circular 05/06: Learner experiences of e-learning.
2. Guidance to Markers of the Experiences of e-Learning bids;
3. Collated marks of the 16 bids received under Strand A, as used by the evaluation panel, and markers comments for all bids;
4. The 16 Strand A bids as submitted to the JISC;
5. The Minutes of the e-Learning Programme: Selection panel for Learner Experiences of e-Learning projects under circular 05/06, held on 25th January 2007.
6. The review of HE in FE bids by Mark Stiles (to ensure a consistent approach in providing feedback).

The process used has been as follows:

1. Analyse the markers' comments to define categories of problems with each bid.
2. For each bid, note which categories of criticism apply, referring to the actual bid to ensure a clear interpretation of markers' comments has been taken. These have been recorded against bid outcomes, average marks of each bid, and recommendation scores.
3. Review the bids for common areas where proposals were weak.
4. Review the bids for examples of good proposals or where proposals had addressed one particular criterion well.
5. Examine the call documentation in the light of this analysis to see if any potential causes of problems could be identified.

### **4. Analysis of the bids**

All bids were marked by one member of the JISC Executive and two members of the community. From the feedback and comments provided by the bid markers the following key problem areas have been identified.

## 5. Strand A Analysis (16 bids)

### 5.1 Issues related to the Quality of Proposal and Robustness of Workplan

Issue	Occurrence		
	Total	In successful bids	In unsuccessful bids
1. Learner engagement issues	8	0	8
2. It is not fully clear how it relates to the call or is out of scope	5	0	5
3. Lacks a detailed work plan	5	0	5
4. Not enough detail on methodology	4	0	4
5. Lacks detail on data analysis	4	0	4
6. Risk assessment missing or incomplete	3	0	3
7. Over ambitious	2	0	2
8. Research questions not listed	2	0	2
9. Not clear how much it builds on previous studies or methodologies	2	0	2
10. Ethical issues	1	0	1
11. Lack of supporting letters from the partner institutions	1	0	1

#### **Guidance for Markers used when assessing this criteria**

- Is the proposal in scope?
- Are the research questions in scope?
- Does the methodology address the research questions?
- If appropriate, is the bid innovative and sound?
- Does the bid clearly articulate its intentions?
- Are there clear deliverables?
- Is the methodology for meeting the deliverables sound and achievable?
- Is the scale of data analysis realistic in the timescales?
- Is the work plan robust in terms of project management arrangements?
- Does the bid include a well thought through initial assessment of risks?

## ***Feedback and advice on issues related to the Quality of Proposal and Robustness of Workplan***

### 1. Learner Engagement Issues

A number of bids were not explicit about the methodology they would use to recruit and support learners during their project. Appropriate consideration has to be given to student recruitment, retention and the support necessary if students are to participate effectively - including guidance on the project itself.

In cases where learners were being recruited from consortia, clarification of where they are to be recruited from and the size of cohorts is required. Care will need to be taken in selecting appropriate students and also in the interpretation of the final data, to prevent extrapolation from a limited number of individuals. Bids should take note of specified expectations relating to student recruitment, in this case expecting the involvement of not less than 30 learners.

**Advice to bidders:** With the focus of this call related to the Learner's Experience it was vital to detail the scope and focus related to Learner Engagement.

### 2. It is not fully clear how it relates to the call or is out of scope

A number of bids did not clearly express 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. There were cases of bids submitting proposals that had been submitted to previous calls. These had been adapted to meet the current call without fulfilling the objectives given in the call Circular. Some bids concentrated on the development of technology that would benefit the institution(s) but had not fully articulated these developments with the requirements set out in the Circular. The Circular explicitly called for bids to investigate the role that technology plays in individual learners' journeys through further and/or higher education. It was not in the remit of the bid to fund large scale technological developments that could then be evaluated.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids must be explicit in how they meet the requirements of the call.

### 3. Lack of a detailed work plan

The requirements of the work plan were given in Para. 23 of the Circular and this includes the expectation that bids should include details on how the proposed methodology will address the key research questions and show innovation, as appropriate. Deliverables should have been identified and evidence provided of how these will be achieved, including an assessment of the risks. Other requirements were a description of the intended project plan, a timetable and deliverables.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to be explicit in detailing what they are trying to achieve, how they are going to achieve it and what the outputs will be.

4. Not enough detail on methodology

The Circular was explicit in the requirements for bids to develop a methodology for longitudinal research, drawing on established investigative methods (e.g. those used during Phase One projects), to include at least three iterations of data collection per learner during the timescale of the project, and ideally to include one method of continuous data collection. Bids were also required to identify strengths and weaknesses in the methodology chosen.

Some bids had not given enough detail on their methodology, had not aligned their methodology with the requirements in the Circular or had not identified the required strengths and weaknesses

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to be explicit in describing their methodology and to ensure it meets the requirements given in the Circular

5. Lacks detail on data analysis

In a number of bids there was a failure to connect the data collection and sampling methods with the research questions. It was necessary to detail how the analysis would be undertaken and how this would answer the research questions. In bids where this issue was noticeable the staffing details on data analysis were unclear. Given the variety of data capture methods proposed in some bids, more prominence should have been given to the role of data analysis, especially for bids involving a large consortia and a large numbers of learners.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to be explicit in their data analysis methodology and ensure that they have identified individual(s) with the requisite skills to undertake this work.

6. Risk assessment missing or incomplete

Some bids had not met the requirement given in the Circular to assess the risk related to achieving the declared deliverables. The Risk assessment needs to identify pertinent issues and detail actions that could be taken to mitigate them.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to provide a full risk assessment that identifies issues and corresponding mitigating actions.

7. Over ambitious

When preparing a bid the institution(s) need to ensure that the work proposed is achievable and can be resourced. Some bids attempted to address too many research questions, which resulted in a bid that had plenty of scope and a large list of deliverables but little depth to the work.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should be realistic in what they are attempting to achieve whilst ensuring that they meet all the requirements laid out in the circular.

8. Research questions not listed

The Circular encouraged bidders to address a small number of well focused research questions. It was advisable to list these research questions and link theme to relevant data collection and sampling methods.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to be explicit in detailing what they are trying to achieve and which research questions they are addressing.

9. Not clear how much the proposal builds on previous studies or methodologies

The Circular stated that this call was intended to build on the work of the JISC e-Learning Programme which has funded a series of scoping and research projects focusing on the learner's experience of e-learning (Phase1), under the Pedagogy strand.

It was therefore expected that bids under the current call would build on previous work, and where appropriate, provide evidence that previous work had been investigated.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids need to show how they build on previous work.

10. Ethical issues

Care needs to be taken regarding levels of intervention as learners need to be briefed on what their data is to be used for and how the data will be collected. An ethical approval process should be available via the host institution and this process should be stated and adhered to.

**Advice to bidders:** Ethical approval processes should have been stated to ensure participant confidentiality

11. Lack of supporting letters from the partner institutions

For collaborative bids there should be supporting letters from all partner institutions. These letters should be explicit in the benefit/value to the institution involved in the partnership.

**Advice to bidders:** Supporting letters should be explicit in the benefit/value to the institution and should illustrate the strengths of the partnership

## 5.2 Issues related to Impact

Issue	Occurrence		
	Total	In successful bids	In unsuccessful bids
1. Relationship to institutional strategies not defined	8	0	8
2. The project has a limited focus that would not offer a wide impact to the programme	8	0	8
3. Community-wide benefits not clearly defined	4	0	4

**Guidance for Markers used when assessing this criteria**

- Is the proposal a good idea?
- Does it address a technical or pedagogical area likely to be a great interest?
- Will the outputs be useful outside the institution(s) in the proposal?
- Does the proposal demonstrate that the project outputs will be available to the wider community?
- Is there evidence that the proposal has been developed in the context of relevant institutional strategies?

### ***Feedback and advice on issues related to Impact***

#### 1. Relationship to institutional strategies not defined

Bids should be explicit in how they relate to the institutional strategies of all partners detailed in the bid. These strategies can include eLearning, Learning and Teaching, and Research Strategies.

**Advice to bidders:** Articulation to institutional strategies can be reinforced via a supporting letter from partner institutions.

#### 2. The project has a limited focus that would not offer a wide impact to the programme

The Circular was explicit in stating that Outputs will be used to assist those involved in the support of student learning (including practitioners, support staff and institutional managers). The aim is to provide more effective environments for learning, and to inform the further development of the JISC e-Learning Programme. The scope of many bids was too narrow to have a wide impact on the programme.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should address the issues in the Circular based on suitable research questions to ensure the bid is able to offer an impact to the programme.

3. Community-wide benefits not clearly defined

Some bids were “locally focused” i.e. focused mainly on bringing benefits to the institutions involved, to such an extent that the deliverables of the project, or even the lessons that might be learned, were of debatable value to the wider community.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should clearly identify the benefits to the Community.

**5.3 Issues related to Partnership and Dissemination**

Issue	Occurrence		
	Total	In successful bids	In unsuccessful bids
1. Need to consider how project would work in partnership with the JISC and other organisations	10	0	10
2. Evaluation plan incomplete or missing.	10	1	9
3. Dissemination plan incomplete or missing.	9	0	9
4. There is no identifiable linkage with the Support and Synthesis project.	3	0	3

**Guidance for Markers used when assessing this criteria**

- Does the bid indicate the intent to work with JISC in planning?
- Does the bid propose an appropriate dissemination approach?
- Does it have an appropriate evaluation approach, e.g. talking to users?
- Does the bid demonstrate willingness to work in partnership with JISC in the dissemination and evaluation activities?

***Feedback and advice on issues related to Partnership and Dissemination***

1. Need to consider how project would work in partnership with the JISC and other organisations

The circular clearly states that bids should demonstrate an openness and willingness to work in partnership with related projects and the JISC in forward planning, dissemination and evaluation. This requirement was overlooked in many of the bids.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should clearly demonstrate a willingness to work in partnership with related projects and the JISC through their project work plans, dissemination plans and budget.

2. Evaluation plan incomplete or missing.

Project level evaluation is specifically mentioned in the Circular and states that an evaluation process will be required in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the chosen methodology.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should evaluate all project activities and the methodology used, as opposed to just evaluating project outputs.

3. Dissemination plan incomplete or missing.

Dissemination is highlighted in both the Circular and in the Budget template. Whilst it appeared as an activity in the Budget there was little detail given in terms of deliverables or activities. It is expected that all projects will undertake both internal and external dissemination activities.

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

4. There is no identifiable linkage with the Support and Synthesis project.

The Circular stated that projects will work closely with the Support and Synthesis project in developing appropriate methodologies and sharing ongoing findings. In a number of the bids there was no reference to the Support and Synthesis project or how these linkages had been planned. The funded projects will be expected to share process and product with each other and the support project, rather than work in isolation for two years.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids must clearly link to the Support and Synthesis project and recognise the need to engage with the programme.

#### 5.4 Issues related to Value for Money

Issue	Occurrence		
	Total	In successful bids	In unsuccessful bids
1. Missing or incomplete budget information	10	0	10
2. Institutional Contribution is low.	6	0	6
3. Concerns whether the staffing resource proposed is adequate.	4	0	4
4. Travel and Subsistence budget issues	3	0	3
5. Short project timescale	2	0	2

**Guidance for Markers used when assessing this criteria**

- When considering value for money, refer to your assessment under quality and impact and compare this with the cost requested from JISC?
- Does the bid discuss the quantitative and qualitative benefits to the project partners of undertaking the work?
- Given the benefits, are the institutional contributions appropriate?

#### ***Feedback and advice on issues related to Value for Money***

##### 1. Missing or incomplete budget information

The Circular included an Example Budget that should have been used as a template for providing the required budget information. Bids appeared to have had problems working with Full Economic Costing in order to calculate 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, internal evaluation and partnerships.

**Advice to bidders:** Full budgetary information must be provided using the FEC where appropriate. A guide to preparing bids for full economic costing will be made available soon.

##### 2. Institutional Contribution is low.

The focus of a number of bids was on developing projects that would greatly benefit an institution or partnership. These bids had a low Institutional Contribution. It is expected that the institution(s) would make a more significant financial contribution where they would be deriving a substantial benefit from the project.

**Advice to bidders:** The Institutional Contribution should be realistic and commensurate with the benefit gained from the project.

3. Concerns whether the staffing resource proposed is adequate.

A number of bids listed senior members of staff who would be involved in the project for a small percentage of their workload. It was not always clear how they would be involved in the project and how they might be released from existing commitments and what they would be contributing. Given the need for data analysis and project management it is recommended that projects identify the individuals responsible for these roles, and explain how their commitment will be planned in terms of time-management.

**Advice to bidders:** Staffing levels should be realistic and quantified in the terms of FTEs and their roles linked to the work plan activities.

4. Travel and Subsistence budget issues

A number of bids had either very small or very large Travel and Subsistence budgets. These budgets had not been fully justified. The travel and subsistence budget needs to be sufficient to cover participation in programme level activities as well as project activities.

**Advice to bidders:** Travel and Subsistence budgets should be realistic and a breakdown of costs provided.

5. Short project timescale

The Circular stated projects are expected to last between 18 months and 24 months. It was noted that projects stating they would last for 18 months were often ambitious in what they were looking to achieve in their proposals and it was felt they should have extended their project to take advantage of the full 24 month timescale.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should be realistic in the timescale of their project.

## 5.5 Issues related to Previous Experience

Issue	Occurrence		
	Total	In successful bids	In unsuccessful bids
1. Limited evidence shown of running externally funded projects.	7	0	7
2. Missing or incomplete information related to management structure, governance, decision-making and funding arrangements.	6	0	6
3. Individual roles are not clear	4	0	4
4. Missing or incomplete CVs	3	0	3
5. Reliance on a new member of staff is a concern	2	1	1
6. Limited size of team.	1	0	1

**Guidance for Markers used when assessing this criteria**

- Does the bid demonstrate a realistic understanding of the scale of the task, both in terms of research and management issues?
- Does the bid demonstrate previous successful delivery and management of projects?
- Does the bid link the expertise of the team with the roles to be undertaken?
- If the bid is from a consortium:
  - have the partners provided evidence of their commitment in the form of supporting letters?
  - have the partners demonstrated how the work aligns with their objectives and priorities?
  - is it clear what the role of each partner is and how the management structure, governance, decision-making and funding arrangements will function?

### ***Feedback and advice on issues related to Previous Experience***

#### 1. Limited evidence shown of running externally funded projects.

It was not obvious from some bids whether the key members of the team had previous experience of running externally funded projects. This is a pertinent issue as the bids need to illustrate that project management skills are present.

**Advice to bidders:** Detailed CVs can be included as an Appendix allowing previous experience to be listed

2. Missing or incomplete information related to management structure, governance, decision-making and funding arrangements.

With the prevalence of consortia or partnerships it is necessary that clear management structures, governance (e.g. project steering group) and internal decision making and reporting mechanisms are detailed.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should include Project management and governance details.

3. Individual roles are not clear

A number of bids listed personnel involved in the project but did not provide details of an individual's role or responsibility in relation to the work plan and activities.

**Advice to bidders:** Bids should include clearly identified roles and responsibilities for the team members.

4. Missing or incomplete CVs

Some bids listed personnel but did not provide details or a CV. In some cases CVs contained extensive information that was not relevant to the role and therefore provided no evidence of their ability to undertake that role.

**Advice to bidders:** Detailed CVs can be included as an Appendix allowing previous relevant experience to be listed.

5. Reliance on a new member of staff is a concern

A number of bids showed lack of awareness of the implications of the need to recruit and some projects are highly reliant on staff not in post. In a number of bids the data collection and analysis was left to an unnamed researcher, still to be appointed.

**Advice to bidders:** Bidders need to be aware of the long lead time it can take to appoint new staff and to ensure that the right skills are available to successfully complete the project. These issues should be included in the Risk Analysis

6. Limited size of team

Given the complexity of the work proposed in the bids it was surprising to find some projects would be run by a small team of 2 or 3 people.

**Advice to bidders:** Staffing levels should be commensurate with the level and complexity of the project.

## 6. Conclusions

The issues raised from reviewing the bids for Strand A show that for a bid to be successful it needs to demonstrate the following characteristic features:

- be clear how it relates to the call;
- demonstrate it is in scope, for example, show that it is evaluating the learner experience rather than developing courses/technology;
- to include:
  - a full risk assessment;
  - a detailed work plan;
  - clearly defined outcomes and deliverables including a number of case studies;
  - a complete dissemination plan;
  - a complete evaluation plan, including a project review;
  - details of methodology to be adopted including sample size and the sampling method;
  - details of the data collection methodology;
  - focussed research questions;
  - details on data analysis.
- ensure the proposal is within the page requirement;
- be clear that outputs will be freely available to the community;
- demonstrate that staffing requirements are realistic and the project has access to staff with the correct expertise and previous experience;
- illustrate the staff experience by providing CVs;
- contain sufficient information related to management structure, governance, decision-making and funding arrangements;
- include partnership agreements where appropriate;
- contains letter of commitment from all partners;
- take into account previous work and the opportunity to work with the Support and Synthesis project;
- define the relationship to institutional strategies;
- define the benefits to the wider JISC community;
- demonstrate willingness and plans to work in partnership with JISC for areas such as planning and dissemination;
- provide full budget information including a realistic Institutional Contribution.