

Briefing paper 2:

## **Learning Technology: Key Implications for Learning Technology Staff**

### **Report of a career development study of learning technology staff in UK higher education (HE)**

A national study was commissioned by the JISC<sup>1</sup> to provide an in-depth audit and review of staff roles and activities associated with the embedding, development and support of learning technology in HE. The study team also investigated patterns of staff recruitment and deployment across the audited institutions, relating these to critical institutional factors. Recommendations for further study and strategic focus by the JISC and guidelines for institutions on staff recruitment, deployment and development for effective support of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for learning and teaching were also included. Whilst there are constant changes in emphasis within this fast-moving area and many institutions are now focussing on e-Learning or managed learning strategies, the findings and guidance resulting from this study are still very topical and will be relevant to all those who work with learning technology within HE.

This paper describes:

- Why this study is important to you and how you can make use of it
- The different elements of the study and details of key findings
- How opportunities afforded by learning technology are changing people's roles
- The emergence of *new specialists* – who they are, how they work and what they need
- The way in which learning technology staff fit into and are supported by institutions
- Key implications for learning technology staff
- Further information and support

#### **Why the study is important to you**

This study is about you and people like you throughout UK HE. Until now, staff employed in a learning technology context in UK HE have, to some extent, lacked visibility and this has led to a lack of interest and understanding of their roles and needs. As learning technology becomes pivotal in the pedagogical and strategic institutional changes facing HE, this lack of visibility is also changing. The study set out to investigate the staff behind the 'learning technologist' label and to identify common patterns of skills, distinct and emerging roles and the practices, values and needs of this community. It also set out to identify institutional factors affecting the working context and professional issues relating to learning technology staff.

Throughout this paper there are questions and issues for you to reflect on. These are designed to help you in turn to ask the right questions and identify who and what can help to move things forward for you and your institution.

#### **Five studies in one**

The study consisted of a number of distinct but overlapping studies, including studies that focused on individuals, designed to provide a rich picture of the diverse, multiple and emerging roles within this increasingly active area of learning and teaching, together with investigations into the institutional context of learning-technology work. These studies were:

- A role analysis of 35 diverse individuals
- A series of in-depth case studies with 17 individuals, chosen from four representative HE institutions (HEIs)

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The Career Development of Learning Technology Staff Scoping Study was carried out between June 2000 and January 2001. It was led by Helen Beetham and a team from the Universities of Plymouth, Bristol and Glamorgan. Since then, follow-up work has been undertaken to make both the findings and methodology more widely available to the HE community.

- An audit of 23 institutions, carried out in addition to the role analysis. Auditors were drawn from the local learning technology team
- An analysis of patterns of staff recruitment and deployment across the audited institutions, relating these to critical institutional factors
- Case studies and interviews at four institutions focusing on institutional managers – heads of personnel, staff development, educational development and learning and teaching

### Learning technology roles

The role analysis identified 11 distinct roles, though these did not correspond with actual divisions of labour among individuals, as many people were carrying out multiple roles. The case studies identified three categories of individuals with a distinctive range of roles for each type: 1. *new specialists*; 2. *academics and established professionals*; and 3. *learning support professionals*.

The *new specialists* included the roles of educational developer, educational researcher, technical researcher/developer, materials developer, project manager and general learning technologist: In practice these roles were rarely carried out in isolation, with most individuals having responsibilities across at least two different areas.

The table below summarises these key roles:

Role	Some typical tasks
Educational developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting staff in incorporating learning technology</li> <li>• Enabling the exchange of ideas and experience</li> </ul>
Educational researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research related to learning technology development and use</li> <li>• Contribute to learning technology related journals, books, Web sites</li> </ul>
Technical researcher/developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design/develop computer-based learning environments and Web-based applications for learning and teaching</li> <li>• Develop networks and network applications for learning and teaching</li> </ul>
Materials developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design/develop computer-based learning materials</li> <li>• Adapt and customise new and existing content and programmes</li> </ul>
Project manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage project resources, teams of learning technology researchers and developers</li> <li>• Manage learning technology research and development projects (internally/externally funded)</li> </ul>

*New specialists* tended to be:

- Multi-skilled and peripatetic, but with learning technology at the core of their professional identity
- Generally in their twenties or thirties
- On fixed-term contracts, often supported by external funding
- Typically in their current post less than two years and at their current institution less than four years
- Working at a strategic level in terms of building links across the institution
- Members of a range of working parties or committees (especially educational developers)
- Involved in delivering some form of staff development via workshops, accredited programmes and training courses or less formal modes of skill transfer

From our institutional audit we conclude that UK HEIs employ just less than 2,000 such staff with a specific remit for learning technology.

*Academics and established professionals* were:

- Academic staff working with new technology (academic innovators)
- Academic managers with secure positions in the institutional infrastructure
- About 10% (8,000 UK-wide) of all academic staff in departments could be classed as innovators, and this percentage was remarkably consistent across institutions
- Established professionals are a much smaller group, around 1,000 UK-wide

We conclude that there are around 9,000 such individuals in UK HE – that is *academics and established professionals* who are working to embed learning technology into their professional activities and into the everyday practices of their institutions. They are an essential resource for their institutions, but they also form a client group for the services of staff in the other two categories.

The *learning support professionals* were staff in non-academic roles, specifically technical support professionals, library/resource professionals and ICT skills professionals, who were taking on more responsibility for supporting access to learning technology. Some learning skills support staff were also included in this category.

We estimate that there are currently around 4,500 individuals employed across UK HE, but their numbers are rising as learning technology becomes an increasingly significant aspect of the learning environment.

### **Activities and skills**

The role analysis identified 58 different activities in the coordination, development, use and support of learning technology. On average, participants carried out at least 20 activities as 'core' or 'central' to their role, and a further 20 'regularly' or 'occasionally', indicating competence in an extraordinarily wide range of areas. The following are the five most commonly identified areas, in descending order of importance. Case study participants also confirmed these findings.

#### **Key Activities**

1. Actively seek to keep abreast of developments in learning technology
2. Facilitate access to learning technology expertise and services
3. Liaise and collaborate with other units in the university having related interests and objectives
4. Act as consultant, mentor or change agent for other staff
5. Advise and assist with introduction of new technology into learning and teaching programmes

The following points summarise the findings on activities and skills:

- All participants prioritised interpersonal and pedagogical skills over technical skills which are often acquired 'on the job'
- Institutional managers also reported that technical skills were less important – or easier to recruit and develop – than an awareness of pedagogical issues and an ability to work effectively in an academic culture
- Other skills which were important for *new specialists* and *established professionals* included:
  - Management, project management, information management and in particular online information skills
  - Strategic organisational and networking skills
  - An ability to develop other people

- *New specialists*, to a lesser extent, also required 'traditional' academic skills, such as research, publication, course design and teaching

### **Career development and progression**

*New specialists* were found to be concerned with issues of security, legitimacy and professional identity. Key findings that are relevant to this area are:

- Two-thirds of *new specialists* were found to be employed on permanent contracts; however, this figure may have been biased by the greater ease with which permanent staff were recognised and audited
- *Academics and established professionals* and *learning support professionals* were significantly more likely to be permanent than the *new specialists*
- *New specialists* generally did not feel that there were career progression opportunities within their current institutions and professional contexts. They expected to progress either by changing institutions or moving sideways into more managerial (or alternatively more mainstream academic) roles
- Many managers recognised that the skills of learning technology staff were crucial to the achievement of institutional goals, but few felt that these skills were being deployed or developed in a strategic fashion
- The existing reward systems did not extend to non-teaching staff working in the area of learning technology or learning and teaching development, and no alternatives were being considered by the institutions in this study
- Contracts and grading systems for learning technology posts were extremely varied, with little evidence of a systematic approach across or within institution and little apparent room for progression or mobility

### **Professional development needs**

Staff in the study were identified as classic 'lifelong learners' who needed to undertake continuous professional development to remain competent in a rapidly changing area of expertise. In addition it was found that:

- *New specialists* have few or no formal opportunities for professional development
- The most significant need expressed by these staff was for 'time' to undertake informal professional development, particularly for the exploration of new technology (both to find out 'how it works' and to 'gain a vision of what it can achieve [in learning and teaching]')
- *New specialists* placed a very high value on collaborative learning and the exchange of ideas
- Useful modes of peer learning included conferences, seminars, think-tanks, peer discussions, skill-sharing sessions, email discussion lists, co-mentoring and collaborative problem-solving in multi-role development teams

#### **Typical comments on professional development needs:**

*"I was told when I turned up here that I had a half day a week personal development time, which kind of gets spread out to five minutes here and there. There's an ongoing learning role..."*

*"Well, we actually meet down the pub and chuck some ideas around, but that has resulted in ... putting in bids."*

*"[In my team] we learn from each other really fast and we'll ask each other... 'how can we cut through this?' because we don't have time [for formal training]"*

*"There aren't standard courses available. So what you do is, it's learning on the job, contact with others working in the field. There are no manuals, there are no courses, so the most important is communication with others."*

## Where are the *new specialists* located?

In every institution audited, an average of about eight *new specialists* were found in at least four different central locations (ie excluding staff located in departments, schools etc). All auditors remarked on this as an obstacle to accurate data collection, but many also saw it as an obstacle to effective working. The locations most commonly associated with *new specialists* were:

- Library/learning resources unit
- Learning and teaching/educational development unit
- Computing/Information services

Specialist units do not appear in the list of most common locations. Exactly 50% of the universities audited appeared to have a specialist learning technology unit but, rather than bringing staff together under one roof, this seemed to foster a proliferation of learning technology roles in other areas of the institution and helped promote a learning technology culture.

## Key implications for *new specialists*

- **Merging roles**

*New specialists* were perceived by all the groups involved in the study as the 'true' learning technologists: multi-skilled and peripatetic but with learning technology work at the core of their professional identity. Focus groups described the archetypal learning technologist as 'an educational developer with a learning technology specialism'. Senior managers, along with focus groups, confirmed that educational development or 'embedding learning technology into the curriculum' was seen as the primary task for most institutions.

*How does this relate to your own experience? What steps would be required for you to take on an educational developer or 'change agent' role? How do you feel about this role convergence?*

- **Teams and networks**

Institutional auditors tended to identify learning technology staff with projects or short-term initiatives rather than specific locations, often working across institutional boundaries. Because of the wide ramifications of their work, learning technology staff have highly effective networks of contacts across different parts of their institution. This allows them to become highly effective networkers and facilitators.

*How do you work across your institution? Are you making the most of the existing networks within and beyond the institution?*

- **Academic legitimacy**

This was particularly an issue for educational developers, researchers and general learning technologists in our study, several of whom felt that learning technology needed to establish itself as an academic discipline or sub-discipline if their work was to achieve credibility.

*How should this be supported both institutionally and nationally? What other routes should be explored to offer legitimacy to staff who do not wish to pursue academic recognition?*

- **Professional support**

The study has clearly identified the professional development needs of learning technology staff in particular, time to update learning technology skills, acquiring project management expertise, developing academic credibility and investigating learning and teaching related issues. It has also highlighted the poor provision of support for learning technology staff across the sector. The findings of this study can help *new specialists* or

general learning technology staff to recognise for themselves the key role they now play within institutions, to identify with others through institutional and national networks and to contribute to the debate about the career structures and incentives that should be put in place.

*Are you getting the support that you need? How should learning technology staff seek to influence these issues? Who else in your institution should be made aware of this study and its findings?*

### **Read on...**

This briefing paper can only serve as an introduction to the study, which is large and wide-ranging. A series of briefing papers has been prepared to present the most relevant findings to different audiences. It is recommended that you obtain all the briefing papers in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of the impact of the study and its findings.

### **Other briefing papers available**

Briefing paper 1: Learning Technology: Key Implications for Educational Developers

Briefing paper 3: Learning Technology: Key Implications for Managers of Learning Technology Specialists and Heads of Personnel

Briefing paper 4: Learning Technology: Key Implications for IT Services Staff

Briefing paper 5: Learning Technology: Key Implications for Library Staff

Briefing paper 6: Learning Technology: Key Implications for Academic Staff

Briefing paper 7: Embedding Learning Technology Institutionally (ELTI): Using the ELTI Audit Tools

Senior Management Briefing Paper: Embedding Learning Technology Institutionally

### **Institutional audit tools**

In addition to the briefing papers, the original audit tools used in the career development study with a full training pack and comprehensive guidance notes are available.

Copies of the full report, briefing papers and audit tools are available from:

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/careers>

### **Further information and support**

For further information and details of institutional support for undertaking an audit, please contact Sue Timmis at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology, University of Bristol at:

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