

Learning Technology: Key Implications for Managers of Learning Technology Staff and Heads of Personnel

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

A national study was commissioned by the JISC¹ 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 focusing 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 emergence of *new specialists* – who they are, how they work and what they need
- The ways in which learning technology staff need to be supported by institutions
- Key implications for people managing learning technology staff and personnel managers
- Further information and support

Why this study is important to you

Until now, staff employed in a learning technology context in UK HE have often lacked visibility and have been largely accommodated into other categories of staff and career structures. As the role of learning technology becomes increasingly pivotal in the pedagogical and strategic changes facing HE, this lack of visibility is also changing. This 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. This briefing paper aims to pinpoint the critical human resource and management issues that need to be addressed. It should be read in conjunction with the briefing paper prepared for learning technology staff (briefing paper no 2), which provides more detail on the study and its findings.

Throughout the 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
- 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

¹ 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

Learning technology roles

The study identified three categories of individuals with a distinctive range of roles for each type. These categories were: 1, *new specialists*; 2. *academics and established professionals*; and 3. *learning support professionals*.

New specialists included the role of learning technologist, but also those of educational developer, educational researcher, technical researcher/developer, materials developer and project manager. In practice these roles were rarely carried out in isolation, with most individuals having responsibilities across at least two different areas.

The study also demonstrated the changing roles of *learning support professionals* and *academics and established professionals* who are now taking on more responsibility for access to learning technology, and the large number of academics who are variously involved in the development and use of learning technology throughout the UK. These staff are both learning technology practitioners in their own right and a client group for the *new specialists* and learning support staff.

Activities and skills

The study identified 58 different activities in the coordination, development, use and support of learning technology. The most commonly identified task was 'To actively keep abreast of developments in learning technology'. However, the key findings included the following:

- 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

Job satisfaction

The main advantages of working with learning technology were seen as:	The main disadvantages were seen as:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The excitement of working in a new and changing field• Intellectual challenge• Helping students to learn more effectively• The rewards of working with academic staff• Personal enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of time and overwork• Lack of personal security• Lack of status and financial reward• A perceived lack of recognition from academic staff• Lack of obvious career progression• Keeping up with rapid development in several fields

Career development and progression

- The issue of career progression arose when examining the way in which learning technology staff are integrated within institutions. 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
- *Academic and established professionals* and *learning support professionals* were significantly more likely to be permanent than the *new specialists*
- Learning technology staff 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 the 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.

Key points to note were:

- *New specialists* were found to 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
- *New specialists* were keen for time to undertake further academic study (eg a PhD or Masters in a learning technology related subject) and/or to pursue their own research. A lack of academic legitimacy was widely seen as a problem for individuals and for the learning technology profession as a whole, limiting their ability to progress in the sector, and limiting their credibility with academics
- Learning technology staff would also value further development in project management skills including financial planning, building collaborations across institutions, and writing bids for funding.

Short-termism

- Learning technology staff tend to be identified with projects, initiatives and short-term issues
- Many learning technology staff feel they are caught up in a wave of restructuring and realignment, as new units are born or merged as a result of changing agendas
- Teaching fellowship and secondment schemes have also brought other members of staff into part-time or temporary learning technology roles
- There was little evidence of secure, long-term funding for *new specialists*
- Responses to this will need to be creative and cannot necessarily follow existing structures and management lines

Key implications for managers

- **Valuable but not valued?**

Institutional auditors, working as part of the research team, 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 these staff to become highly effective networkers and facilitators but tends to exclude them from long-term reward structures and career pathways. The report recommends that managers investigate credible incentives for learning technology staff who are often excluded from the rewards and incentive schemes available to academic staff.

What incentives currently exist for learning technology staff in your institution? How do these staff fit into the existing structures and pathways?

- **Consistent career frameworks**

Institutional managers saw recruitment and retention of learning technology staff as an area of current and growing concern. Both managers and learning technologists recognised that skills were being lost to other sectors faster than they were being replaced. Contracts and grading systems for learning technology posts were extremely varied, with little evidence of a systematic approach across or within an institution, and little apparent room for progression or mobility.

What strategies will be required to implement a consistent career structure for new specialists that would recognise their skills and allow them to progress within the institution?

- **Short-term contracts**

The *new specialists* linked their lack of career progression to the short-term nature of their contracts and a lack of stability and security. These staff are in a similar position to contract researchers whose recruitment and funding models are currently changing to meet similar concerns. However, in the study there was no evidence that institutions had defined a management responsibility for the continuing professional or career development of their learning technology staff.

How can management responsibility be defined and realised? How can short-term contracts be minimised?

- **Support for professional development and experimentation**

Learning technology staff need to undertake continuous professional development to remain competent in a rapidly changing area of expertise. Their most urgent requirements are:

- Time, especially for self-directed and peer learning, reflection, experimentation
- Opportunities to work in multi-role teams
- Opportunities to share expertise with colleagues in other institutions
- External training and development opportunities
- Encouragement in cascading these skills to others through their own involvement in staff development

How can managers foster a culture of continuous development and provide the necessary support? What mechanisms for ensuring protected time are likely to work? What innovative peer learning-structures could be developed and encouraged?

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 2: Learning Technology: Key Implications for Learning Technology Staff

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:

sue.timmis@bristol.ac.uk

