

Introduction

Glenaffric Ltd was commissioned in October 2005 to undertake an evaluation review of the Distributed e-Learning (DeL) Programme regional pilots and the HE Academy Subject Centre projects. An interim report was submitted in December 2005.

This report is based mainly on three sources of information:

- project update reports submitted at the end of January 2006
- telephone interviews with key contacts for each of the projects that took place in February 2006
- online gap analysis questionnaire that projects were asked to complete in early 2006.

The report is intended to highlight areas of interest arising from the programme to date and to inform discussion on the future development of distributed e-learning programme initiatives. It summarises the key successes and challenges of the projects, the key outputs and deliverables that are anticipated by the end of this phase of the pilots, and the areas for possible further development and collaboration that have been identified by the projects at this stage.

Successes

Collaboration

Collaboration was highlighted as a principal success by almost all of the projects. Teams had identified common cultural issues across different institutions and sectors and had developed common strategies for addressing these in the context of the projects. The management of multi-disciplinary teams and engagement of key stakeholders from different institutions, departments and divisions was emphasised as a particular success by a number of projects.

Some noted that they had been successful in overcoming difficult partnership issues, in some instances specifically by changing the project scope to accommodate a developing context in partner institutions.

Communication strategies for successful project collaboration included telephone conferencing and use of smart space as well as email and regular team meetings.

Significant levels of collaboration between different projects were also highlighted, and the contribution of projects to the development of communities of practice in key areas of shared interest and expertise. In some instances higher than anticipated levels of collaboration with other JISC projects had led to projects reaching a wider audience than had initially been planned (particularly the reference model projects).

Success in working with vendors, employers and other external agencies was also noted.

Regional awareness

Several projects commented that they had developed an enhanced regional awareness and sense of common understanding with partner institutions. Most expressed the intention to continue to build on these partnerships.

Links with Lifelong Learning Networks and regional career development services were identified as successes by a number of projects.

The projects had also served to develop an enhanced understanding and appreciation of different cultures and working arrangements in FE and HE. Several projects also highlighted positive relationships with the schools sector.

Tools and systems

Some projects highlighted their progress in developing and piloting usable tools, including applications for e-portfolio development, learning design and content packaging tools. The pilots had been successful in proving concepts, had taken forward the work of previous projects and established parameters for sustainable implementation. In particular, progress in working with real learners and practitioner-focused implementation were identified as key successes.

Projects felt they had contributed to raising awareness of the importance of interoperability standards and open source software, and understanding user needs in the community. One project noted particular success in raising awareness at a national level of interoperability supporting learner transition and cross-institutional collaboration.

Challenges

The main challenges identified in the project update reports fall into four broad categories:

Project implementation	Project management
Identifying customer requirements Participation and motivation for engagement with project activities, improving usage and uptake of systems and tools Developing practitioner skills, and a critical mass of users Embedding project outputs, mapping a clear development path Legal issues	Project management: Time (academic year) and workload (scoping project activities) Evaluation Dissemination Sustainability and future investment Communication (using discussion lists) Maintaining awareness of developments elsewhere (avoiding duplication)
Technical	Sectoral
Firewalls Authentication Web services integration Data protection Interoperability for mapping free text Immature or poorly sustained open source tools	Developing a culture of sharing between institutions Low levels of initial interest and uptake in project activities Identifying key business drivers (particularly in private sector)

Issues

Readiness of tools and systems

A significant issue for a number of projects was the state of readiness of the tools and systems for piloting. Several commented on a lack of robustness and stability in the products they were testing. This may have been due to some extent by inadequate scoping of the pilots at the outset, exacerbated in some cases by exaggerated claims that were made for the maturity of prototypes that were made available for piloting.

One common result of this lack of robustness and readiness was the amount of time and resource that projects then had to devote to the further development of tools before they could be sensibly piloted in an institutional or regional context. In some instances the lack of readiness led to inappropriate expectations on the part of practitioners and in the worst cases to the disillusionment and disaffection of project partners.

Project risk analyses at the outset tended to focus on internal issues such as project management, time, resources, capacity in the team, and fail to acknowledge potentially serious external risks such as the lack of readiness, developer engagement or suitability of the tool for piloting.

Technology and pedagogy

A number of projects commented that they had to address a bias in the scope of their projects for technology over pedagogy, for developing technical systems rather than exploring academic needs and interests, learner experiences and pedagogical design. One project noted that a gap between pedagogically- and technically-focused work in e-learning emerged early in the project activities. This was addressed by separating technical developments from the more pedagogically and people-focused trialling work, enabling both aspects of the project to continue in parallel and to be brought together at the end without any tensions.

Project scope

Several projects commented that with hindsight they would have set less ambitious targets and objectives. Most noted that there was some disjunction between the strategic vision and aims expressed in the project bid and the operational reality of project activities. In some cases entirely different people were involved in the planning and operation of projects. Bids had been prepared and submitted over a short time, some had not been adequately scoped, some partners were only nominally engaged with the project planning process and perhaps not fully aware of implications of their involvement. Institutional and regional readiness to adopt technologically-based systems seems to have been over-estimated in some instances, particularly with regard to approaches to PDP, and use of content repositories.

It was noted by many that staff development and communication were more of an issue for the success of projects than technical development.

Shibboleth was highlighted as a major distraction for some projects at the start. One project commented that they had underestimated the time and capacity required to develop use cases and the staff development provision needed to develop project team expertise to implement the project technology.

All of the projects identified time as a key issue, not just for managing the project, but also in terms of the need to synchronise project activities with the requirements of the academic year. Many of the DeL pilots struggled with their timescales and most will require at least a further six months' extension to complete the activities that were scoped for the projects at the outset.

One project noted that facilitating 'learner as designer' activities within the project timescale was unrealistic, and adapted the project scope to develop practitioner-learner focused activities with teachers to design learning sequences for their students and disseminate these within the institutions.

Right people

An identified issue common with many other JISC development programmes is the need to identify and maintain contact with the right people at the right level in partner institutions. Projects highlighted the need to target institutional decision-makers at the outset, and engage them in plans for embedding activities and outputs. Getting technical staff on board across all partner institutions was seen as critical to project success.

This need to engage the right people at the right level and maintain a shared vision of the project aims and longer term vision also applies to employers, system vendors and other external organisations.

Regionality

The regional agenda was felt to have been of little importance to some projects and of great significance to others. Many projects were building on existing relationships and partnerships while others had developed new relationships. In some instances the DeL pilots have helped to clarify a sub-regional context for cross-institutional developments. Most HEIs have identified FE colleges with which they collaborate, and many have developed specific recruiting relationships with local schools. These links constitute 'known boundaries' for regional collaboration without treading unnecessarily on the collaborative or recruitment relationships of other HEIs.

Understanding and overcoming differences between schools, colleges and universities, not just in the availability of staff time and institutional resources but also in language, discourse and organisational culture was a significant issue for some projects.

Formal recognition of the projects as 'regional pilots' facilitated the establishment of relationships on a regional level with local education authorities and regional development agencies, and employers.

Programme management and support

Projects generally expressed appreciation of the level and quality of support they received from the programme manager, highlighting the balance of direction, advice and guidance, and pragmatic insight into the challenges being addressed.

One common issue raised by many projects was the lack of awareness of a coherent picture in which to locate their developments, and the need for wider awareness raising and understanding of the significance of specific initiatives in their wider developmental context.

There is a potential tension between the 'let 1000 flowers bloom' ethos for encouraging development in general, and crystallising development effort around a small number of specific products or systems.

Joint programme meetings offering a broad insight into other developments need to be balanced with more targeted workshops based on a specific support needs analysis.

Programme meetings need to have clearly articulated objectives and agendas to ensure transparent relevance to the needs of individual projects. It was suggested that JISC could provide iterative face to face support for individual projects from a qualified quality-assured consultant as a cost-effective means of providing dedicated support, less risky than projects organising their own external support provision.

Anticipated outputs

Projects have identified the following anticipated tangible outputs:

- Project documentation
 - Reports – issues, evaluation, technical, sustainability
 - Case studies
 - Posters, websites
- Conference papers, journal articles
- Guidelines, good practice guides, workbooks
- Evaluation methodology
- Business model
- Technical outputs
 - Test data, user statistics
 - Mapping against IMS specifications
 - Better tools, applications, software
 - Toolkits
 - PLE prototype
- Portals
 - Collection of services
 - Demonstration of PDP specification
- Content for implementation in practice
 - Study skills sequences
 - Materials with contextual metadata
 - Framework of resources, lesson plans
- Articulation of progression and planning in region

Areas for further development

Projects have indicated interest in further development and collaboration with other projects in the following areas:

- **Pedagogical approaches** – integration of learning design tools (LAMS), personalised learning environments (PLEs), study skills for effective independent lifelong learning, user-centred approaches to design, different perceptions about PDP processes between students and academic staff, need to engage with practitioners
- **e-portfolio and PDP** – use to support transition, application in different contexts and sectors, integration with existing systems, opportunities for addressing isolation, embedding in academic programmes, incorporation of generic PDP output into the UK LEAP specification, legal issues of data ownership and transfer
- **Repository development** – regional use and uptake, metadata training, systems for easy unpacking of content packages, context-dependent metadata, IPR, longer-term repository of materials, links and resources for study skills
- **Technical developments** – standards for content sharing and use of repositories, storing contextual metadata, web service development, IPR, user-centred development models, interoperability with OSPI, work to make Shibboleth suitable for wide-scale implementation (develop expertise)
- **Sector strategic issues** – managing cultural/transformational change, transition and transferability between sectors, common models for achievement/credit/competency, contribution to the further development of regional priorities
- **Support for administration staff** – creating curriculum documents, validation requirements, cataloguing programmes
- **Working with SMEs** – work-based learning, developing employer links, models for matching learning programmes, business needs and sector-based drivers