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cc Heather Fry, Director (Education and Participation)

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Dear Kate,

**Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education**

1.  We are grateful to be invited to comment on your strategy statement *Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education*. Our comment stems from an exchange between ALT and HEFCE over the summer in which we offered to summarise briefly ALT's perspectives on "the effective utilisation of learning technologies" (the 5th learning and teaching objective in the strategy statement p8/para23) for consideration by HEFCE as it develops the longer term business plan[1].

2.  The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is a professional and scholarly membership based association. Our charitable object is "to advance education through increasing, exploring and disseminating knowledge in the field of learning technology for the benefit of the general public". We are the UK's leading membership organisation in the learning technology field. Our purpose is to ensure that use of learning technology is effective and efficient, informed by research and practice, and grounded in an understanding of the underlying technologies, their capabilities and the situations into which they are placed. We do this by improving practice, promoting research, and influencing policy, through bringing together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. We have over 200 organisational members including most of the UK's universities and many FE colleges including those delivering HE.

3.  We did not respond to the White Paper Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system[2], from which the HEFCE strategy statement flows because the White Paper was essentially devoted to finance and related issues. Subsequently most of the resulting discussion has been about how the financial system will work in detail and some possible consequences (intended and unintended) of implementation. There is little about how to achieve efficiency and

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[1] This document was written by Seb Schmoller and John Slater (of ALT), and was informally reviewed before submission by Martin Hall of the University of Salford and John Raftery of Oxford Brookes University. Responsibility for the contents of the document rests with ALT.

[2] http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/ (last accessed 1/9/2011)

effectiveness in the learning and teaching processes, possibly in part because that is viewed as the task of institutions rather than of government.

4. This is in contrast to the Schools sector where Michael Gove's address at the Royal Society about the National Curriculum included a significant section on using technology for successful delivery and especially in promoting access (in his case to "hard science")[3].

5. We argue that, as a result of the White Paper and of Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education, there are strategic additions that need to be made in the area of the use of Learning Technology (LT)[4], necessary as part of addressing the role of HEFCE as a "key player in promoting innovation" with consequent important contributions to "supporting widening participation" and "protecting vulnerable disciplines". There are also important consequences for HEFCE in its role as "lead regulator". In future for many English learners (as well as for other learners with English institutions), LT is likely to be crucial in offering opportunity and choice about where, what, how and when to study, as well as in helping to provide openness and objectivity.

6. Thus we see LT as having been worthy of more mention at the strategic policy level rather than principally as an enabling mechanism. The only reference to it in the strategy statement in the former strategic sense is in a general point about new technology (page 3/para 4th bullet)[5]. The contrast with the view taken over ten years ago in "Higher Education for the 21st Century", the Government's response to the Dearing National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education[6] is stark, not least because over the last decade the impact of ICT on the knowledge creation, acquisition, and distribution that lie at the heart of the work of universities and colleges has been more profound than most people in the HE policy world anticipated at that time. As a result the NUS (a body that has traditionally been relatively conservative with respect to technology) has developed a charter which shows an appreciation of the central issues involved. (See the NUS's recently published Charter on Technology in Higher Education[7].)

7. HEFCE's Online Learning Task Force (OLTF) produced its final report Collaborate to Compete - Seizing the opportunity of online learning for UK higher education in Jan 2011[8]. The absence of even a mention of OLTF seems symptomatic of seizure rather than seizing!

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[3] http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a00191729/michael-gove-speaks-to-the-royal-society-on-maths-and-science (last accessed 14/10/2011)

[4] ALT defines Learning Technology as the broad range of communication, information and related technologies that can be used to support learning, teaching, and assessment. See also http://www.alt.ac.uk/about-alt/what-learning-technology (last accessed 16/10/2011).

[5] There is also a later reference to the BIS Technology Strategy Board but this is an area where it has as yet nothing in train although maybe private HE providers may be able to tap into its mechanisms for HEI LT work.

[6] http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/dearing/index.htm (last accessed 14/10/2011)

[7] http://goo.gl/XMmXs (last accessed 14/10/2011)

[8] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_01/11_01.pdf (last accessed 14/10/2011)

8. The OLTF report discusses many of the ways in which LT should be used in: making information available to students, assisting with recruitment and retention, and serving as a cornerstone component for delivery and assessment. Its recommendations include:
   - Technology needs to enhance student choice and meet or exceed learners' expectations
   - More and better market intelligence about international demand and competition is required
   - Institutions need to take a strategic approach to realign structures and processes in order to embed online learning
   - Investment is needed for the development and exploitation of open educational resources to enhance efficiency and quality.

9. We believe that these recommendations remain highly relevant and apposite for a strategy statement where the theme of competition and collaboration is used if not acknowledged. New technology is seen as a "big challenge" but is not highlighted as a solution subsequently. It needs to be.

10. Similarly, HEFCE is silent in the statement about its own excellent investments in JISC, and in the services, activities, outputs and outcomes that have been funded by HEFCE through JISC. This gives the impression that these investments were unimportant, when in fact they contributed very greatly to the HE sector's leadership in this field internationally. Certainly if UK HE had relied on private investment the sector would now be far behind.

11. Using LT effectively will be a central part of the future for English HE provision. It is a key element in allowing flexibility in delivery as to timing, mode, place and cost. It will allow English HE to remain competitive internationally as markets become more crowded. With moves in hand to give private and external providers access to the English HE market, it is pertinent to look at the steps that Stanford University is taking, following others such as MIT. Peter Norvig and Sebastian Thrun (leading figures in the Artificial Intelligence branch of Computer Science) are offering a version of the Stanford Introduction to Artificial Intelligence course on line and (in this first iteration) free of charge[9]. Currently over 100,000 learners are enrolled to the course, from over 150 countries. In a parallel development, Stanford is offering, free of charge, online versions of its Introduction to Databases[10] and its Introduction to Machine Learning[11], in each case with over 50,000 students enrolled.[12]

12. The OU foundation course T171 (Your Computer, the Internet and You) saw record enrolment for the UK at its inception in the late 1990s (over 30,000 students). It was also based on novel use (at the time) of LT (the assignments involved website construction – then a ground breaking idea worldwide).

13. The message overall is clear - learners, and not just adult and flexible learners, are looking for innovative technology based learning opportunities, well managed and well executed.

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[9] http://www.webcitation.org/62QrF0F0h (last acessed 14/10/2011)
[10] http://www.webcitation.org/62QrI5uX5 (last accessed 14/10/2011)
[11] http://www.webcitation.org/62QrKliSG (last accessed 14/10/2011)
[12] Naturally it is too early to know the proportion of these enrolments that are from committed students with the tenacity to complete these demanding courses, but an indication is given by the fact that over 46,000 students submitting the first assignment in the Introduction to Artificial Intelligence course.

14. Once a sensible accreditation environment is in place, the brands now involved in US remote delivery are such as to command considerable respect. There is a danger of the English market being cherry-picked – not by the medium cost private lowish brand providers frequently predicted, but by high brand low cost offerings from outside England. To combat this and be sustainable, we need to do all the things set out in the table in para 23 of the strategy statement, but to so do sufficiently efficiently, through collaboration and technology, as to be able to withstand the threats. HEFCE has a clear role in supporting the infrastructure that helps its institutions to survive. LT is a key part of this, and the strategy needs to make this point with clarity.

15. Accordingly investing in infrastructure and encouragement for collaboration, to provide opportunities for all and ensure openness and fairness belongs firmly in the section paras 36-38. A mention of JISC and its activities and its activities in a new model would be wholly appropriate at this point in the document.

16. Subjects which are high cost because of their small scale may be best protected by a scheme which *inter alia* involves creation and/or maintenance of distributed critical mass, allowing universities with small student numbers in key subjects to offset costs on a shared service basis, supported by LT, rather than by what might with hindsight be viewed as unsustainable support from the centre.

17. In addition, the LT work of HE, often in collaboration and supported centrally, is itself a strength of HE in England (and in the UK as a whole) and has helped with international recruitment. Specifically:
    • LT enhances the student experience and skill sets.
    • LT will be a key support for building collaboration between providers while retaining competition and is essential in supporting education partnerships in the UK and with those elsewhere, often in fast-developing countries.
    • There are many examples of LT helping with improving opportunity and choice, especially for learners from non standard backgrounds (see, for example, the case studies commissioned to inform the work of the Online Learning Task Force[13]).

18. The open agenda is only briefly mentioned in the bullet point 5 of the para 23/page 8 table and refers only to open educational resources (OERs). This is a much larger area for policy. Much software is open. Repositories of documents are more openly available and supported by open software that makes them easier to use and link. Journals are increasingly used as part of undergraduate study and the increasing moves to new models of academic publishing will have a profound effect on finance and on methods of academic working. While traditional publishers will continue to make a case for their continued existence and lobby policy makers etc., a future that involves their disintermediation is clear; and the sooner this is brought about the less public monies will be wasted in the interim.

19. Worthy of special note are the access opportunities that LT affords through the ability to personalise and address characteristics of an individual. Personalisation of education is another theme missing from the current strategy. Using technology in learning and teaching is one of the ways in which the disadvantaged of all types can access learning without significant

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[13] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/enhance/case/ (last accessed 14/10/2011)

penalty. This varies from the person who has difficulty keeping a steady hand being able to use technology to replace conventional microscopes to demonstrate achieving outcomes in recognising specimens, through allowing those with childcare problems to learn when they can, through to the administrative advantages of having more accurate information on such things as learning activities, contact hours and characteristics of the input cohort, which can then be shared with the public and applicants. A rich dataset could result which could in course also be available to HEFCE to use as part of its regulatory function. For instance data on feedback volumes and timings, which seem to concern many learners, could be available routinely.

20. To summarise: LT (and other infrastructure) has a major role to play in helping HEFCE achieve many key aspects of the strategy in the statement. It is currently given insufficient emphasis in *Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education*. This needs to be addressed at the next stage.

ALT would be happy to contribute to HEFCE's work to develop its policy on these issues.

Seb Schmoller
Chief Executive