

Sir Alan Wilson, FBA, FRS
HEFCE
Northavon House
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9 November 2010

Dear Sir Alan

ALT is pleased to have been invited to respond to the review of JISC that you are conducting for the funding bodies.

ALT is a professional and scholarly 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”*. Our six aims are to:

- represent and support our members, and provide services for them;
- facilitate collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy makers;
- spread good practice in the use of learning technology;
- raise the profile of research in learning technology;
- support the professionalisation of learning technologists;
- contribute to the development of policy.

We have over 200 organisational members including most of the UK’s universities and many FE colleges. Most of our over 700 individual member work in UK HE and FE. We thus cover all the parts that make up the “JISC community”.

We enjoy excellent relations with JISC and have done so over the years; and ALT is an

Registered Charity No: 1063519

Central Executive Committee: *Liz Bennett, Haydn Blackey, John Cook, Linda Creanor, David Dyet, Carol Higginson, Liz Masterman, Dick Moore, Martin Oliver, Fred Pickering, Vanessa Pittard, Gilly Salmon Nicola Whitton.*

ALT Ambassadors*: *Dame Wendy Hall DBE FREng FRS, Professor of Computer Science at the University of Southampton; Terry Mayes, Emeritus Professor at Glasgow Caledonian University; John Taylor, past member of JISC and past Chair of the Becta Board.*

* Ambassadors provide informal advice to ALT on matters within their area of interest, and act as advocates for ALT.

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Associate Partner of JISC¹. JISC has occasionally supported some of our own activities financially in a small way² with very positive results³.

JISC provides infrastructure which is very highly regarded by colleagues outside the UK and elsewhere in the UK public sector. It has supported associated activities, sometimes alongside other funders, that have directly advanced our field⁴. It has a large set of dedicated people in a variety of locations and is ready to respond to changes of direction. It has been well led and managed. It has genuinely sought to reconcile fairly the interests of all its constituent funders. ALT believes that JISC's overall impact on our members and on the learning technology field has been extensive and profound, and that JISC deserves continuing support.

However it is important for JISC to stay fully in touch with the community it serves, and if a consequence of changes to the funding regime for HE and FE is that the funding councils are less able to "top-slice and distribute" (for example in the funding of technology related development work in the learning and teaching field) there is now particular merit in looking at approaches that build on the connections and networks that are already "out there" and in which ALT plays an important role. We develop this point further in our response to the specific questions posed.

Yours sincerely,



Seb Schmoller
Chief Executive

¹<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/aboutus/partnerships/alt.aspx> Last accessed 31/10/2010

² The average annual value of JISC support for ALT over the last 10 years has been less than £15k.

³ Examples include: supporting us in the establishment of our professional accreditation framework for learning technologists (CMALT), which has now gained real traction in UK HE and FE; contributing (with HEFCE and the Higher Education Academy) to the establishment of the now widely used organisational development approach known as Collaborative Approaches to the Management of E-Learning (CAMEL).

⁴ See for example the extensive references to JISC-supported work in this ALT/Technology and Technology Enhanced Learning Research Programme response to some evidence-seeking questions about technology in learning from the Department of Business Innovation and Skills: <http://repository.alt.ac.uk/839/>. Last accessed 7/11/2010.

1. What do you assess to be the priority ICT needs of HE/FE in the areas of:

1.1 learning and teaching (both teachers and students)?

1. Learning and teaching benefit significantly from the extensive infrastructure supplied and maintained by JISC and its agents. Historically, JISC and its predecessors have kept the UK at the leading edge in providing good, usable, standard, quality infrastructure in support of all of an institution's activities. They still do and must be careful not to lose sight of this, relative to activities that may be less important (or replicated by others).
2. Specifically, our members see the core infrastructure they provide as including:
 - The Janet Network and its high bandwidth and service levels which are monitored and properly maintained.
 - Good resilient international connectivity.
 - Services provided over Janet such as VOIP and conferencing.
 - Authentication, authorisation and security services which ensure safety for users of the network.
 - Listserv and related services, which support a large amount of knowledge transfer.
 - Standards work of a wide variety of kinds.
 - Site licences and brokering (significantly now through Eduserv)
 - Large widely applicable datasets mounted on EDINA and MIMAS such as geospatial datasets and data from the Census.
 - Community wide licensing and some legal activities.
3. This has been effectively and efficiently delivered for over 25 years, negotiating major technical and political obstacles. The UK should be proud of this achievement, which exemplifies in several respects the procurement advice given to the current Government by Sir Phillip Green.
4. At the next level of usefulness come reports/best practice guides on such things as: improving the layout of physical learning spaces using technology (including Libraries); technology watch; practice based learning with technology research etc. All of these are useful, and there is a clear scope for more, for example on the practicalities of webcasting in learning and teaching, along with updates to materials already produced.
5. The work of JISC TechDis (with which we collaborate closely) on access through technology is exemplary, giving the UK a deserved lead here. This is an example of one important area where piecemeal work by individual institutions would waste public money. And there are others, perhaps best illustrated in the contribution made by various JISC Advance services including JISCInfoNet and Netskills.
6. The work of the JISC Regional Support Centres has had an important and beneficial impact on the development of learning and teaching using technology, especially in FE, although this statement does beg the question as to whether the same impact could have been achieved more efficiently had the provision been organised in different way. The RSCs have sought to facilitate best practice at a regional level and brought together participants from HE and FE in a wide range of themed events targeted at the needs of the regions. While senior institutional managers and IT specialists are generally aware of the national role of JISC, it is the RSCs which provide JISC's 'face' to many ordinary practitioners.
7. Learning and teaching has also benefited from a number of initiatives and experiments in the use of technology. Starting with the CTI (which was then joined by the UGC), significant sums

of money have gone into this, often in parallel with activity by other agencies and/or funding bodies.

8. Initiatives in general rarely produce the same benefits for a given level of expenditure as the very highly “geared” physical infrastructure mentioned above. The results are nevertheless often of use and they are carefully archived and preserved for the future. However, such activities are relatively costly for JISC to support with the necessary human infrastructure when compared with physical infrastructure. And whereas infrastructure like JANET can only sensibly be procured and run on aggregated large-scale basis (the same must also be said of JISCmail), second-level services (even though they can be viewed as a form of infrastructure) could conceivably be provided – possibly more cheaply – under different models with more of a community focus.
9. Evidence of the benefits for learning and teaching from digitisation, repositories and other similar activities is somewhat limited, given the amount of spending. We believe, for example, that there are issues with responsibility for the capture of metadata, and problems related to user interfaces, which may be idiosyncratic and designed primarily for research users, rather than a broad base of teacher and student users. Being faced with unfamiliar interfaces of indifferent quality (especially as compared to those that are commonplace on the Web more generally) makes wide adoption amongst staff and students the exception rather than the rule⁵.
10. Perhaps the least successful activities have been those without a sound pedagogical base. It is important, for instance, not to develop large numbers of tool sets before having identified real user interest in the product. Similarly it is important not to see learning and teaching as a bolt-on addition – for example, by developing a product in response to a “good ideas” call and then asking in a later call for the work to be adapted to make it usable for learning and teaching.
11. Finally we stress the beneficial impact of support for innovation activities that individual HEIs and FECs would rightly be too risk averse to self-fund⁶.

1.2 research?

12. Research benefits enormously from the extensive infrastructure supplied and maintained by JISC and its agents.
13. Specifically the core is:
 - The Janet Network and its high bandwidth and service levels which are monitored and properly maintained.
 - Good resilient international connectivity.
 - Services provided over Janet such as VOIP and conferencing.
 - Authentication, authorisation and security services which ensure safety for users of the network.
 - Listserv and related services, which support a large amount of knowledge transfer.
 - Standards work of a wide variety of kinds to support the community.
 - Site licences and brokering (partially now through Eduser), including for research journals.

⁵See for example the ALT conference paper “Electronic resource discovery systems: do they help or hinder in searching for academic material” by Hanna Stelmaszewska, William Wong, Balbir S. Barn, and Nazlin Bhimani. http://altc2010.alt.ac.uk/talk/download_attachment/11970 Last accessed 31/10/2010

⁶ This issue is addressed in “From inputs to impact: a study of the impact of JISC funding on universities”, a report published by the Million+ Group in 2009 that can be found at http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/file_download/20/JISC_REPORT_final+pdf.pdf. Last accessed 7/11/2010.

- Large widely applicable datasets hosted by EDINA and MIMAS such as geospatial datasets, data from the Census, alongside services such as COPAC.
 - Community wide licensing and some legal activities.
14. It is no accident that this top priority list is almost exactly the same as that for learning and teaching.
 15. In learning technology research, JISC has achieved a great deal over a long period through funding studies of the effects of technology based interventions. This has benefited the community substantially and taken forward research activities which have helped subsequent deployment. This has generated many useful reports and good practice guides, for example. However, there is much more that could be done - for example, linking with the results of the national student survey and institution-based studies might identify priority areas further to investigate. The critical challenge from now on, under a changed funding regime (in which - in this field at least - it may well be that it is institutions themselves that have the funds rather than national agencies) will be to find ways to ensure that UK HE and FE as an overall entity continues to undertake development, research and knowledge transfer activity of the kind that JISC has been so pre-eminently successful in supporting. The community, left entirely to its own devices, may prove ill-equipped or ill-motivated to ensure that challenges are identified and solutions found and, in particular, shared. But some lightweight support infrastructure provided through the membership organisations in the field (including ALT), and possibly involving non-membership organisations like the Higher Education Academy and LSIS (and counterparts in the devolved administrations), might prove effective, especially if coupled with a scaled back stream of development and research funding.
 16. There has, perhaps inevitably, been a tendency to fund small-scale, time limited "bright ideas" projects in learning technology research. This sometimes (but not always⁷) leads to "dead ends" where activity ends with funding - something which is common to much other research, and which may be a consequence of the way resources and priorities have been set by parent bodies. It is not clear that this is the right way to invest: instead a more steady managed strategic investment alongside other programmes such as ESRC/EPSRC Technology Enhanced Learning Research Programme might prove appropriate within the post CSR funding regime, especially if run alongside the community-based approach described in the preceding paragraph.
 17. There is also the exit strategy/sustainability issue, but this is a general problem that applies across all the funded programmes including research ones. JISC has tried without much success to get proposers to look to sustainability of projects. The track record, however, is that most sustainability models are based on being given more funding. Again this is not unique to JISC, but is a function of a lack of community involvement/commitment; and this is something that the approach outlined in paragraphs 15 and 16 would help address.
 18. Even if this area does not get as much attention in the current climate it is still important to identify appropriate key sub-areas for JISC (such as work on technical standards) where coordinated activities are needed, and to continue to ensure that the results of such work are made publicly available and kept up to date as far as possible. JISC also has a role in leading the creation of connections between work in the UK and wider learning technology research. The remit of most funding bodies is parochial (by country and by sector). Many problems are common between sectors, between training and education, and across countries. JISC has traditionally acted as a broker for overseas contacts; it has worked cross country and cross

⁷ See the previously mentioned "From inputs to impact: a study of the impact of JISC funding on universities", a report published by the Million+ Group in 2009. http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/file_download/20/JISC_REPORT_final+pdf.pdf. Last accessed 7/11/2010.

sector. It is uniquely placed to lead on the integration of UK HE and FE work with a wider framework, and uniquely so since the winding up of Becta.

19. In other research areas focused datasets have proved of use. Experiments with specialised hardware such as high performance computing on the other hand have become a smaller part of the JISC portfolio over the years and this seems to be correct in the light of cost trends. The provision of “crest of the wave” computing supporting those needing the “biggest and best, whatever it is” in order to compete internationally is now (correctly) firmly with the remit of research councils and individual institutions.
20. The role of JISC in site licenses for journals, software and other artifacts has been a considerable success, both acting on its own and alongside parent bodies. It should continue. It is essentially already subscription based with JISC only funding small parts of the central infrastructure.
21. Many research workers share the problems with digitised resources and collections outlined in the response for learning and teaching. The digitisation and related work could be viewed more as a “public good” archival activity, its success judged on that basis, and its funding seen as the responsibility of national government.
22. Work with new paradigms for research collaboration often require infrastructure and careful evaluation and piloting. Grid and Cloud computing are obvious examples. JISC is in a position to provide human and other infrastructure to analyse and identify best practice and to support uptake and effective use. This role will always be needed at least at a modest level.

1.3 business and community engagement?

23. ALT is not strongly placed to have a view in this area. Infrastructure, connectivity and global knowledge are again clearly necessary to support institutions in these activities but whether JISC should take a lead in what are often directly competitive activities between HEIs/FECs (other than in providing infrastructure) is not clear.
24. In order to support some community engagement activities, specialised collaborative infrastructure may be required. It may also be necessary to integrate further commercial products such as software in the infrastructure framework.
25. JISC has been successful in animating the community engagement and business agenda when it has focused on supporting cross-institutional initiatives which have lead to sustainable support for communities and businesses after the end of the project. This work would not have been funded institutionally because of the potential costs, but has allowed effective collaboration to serve the business and the third sector in a number of regional initiatives.

1.4 administration?

26. The infrastructure products required for learning and teaching and for research are also essential for administration. A pan-UK body such as JISC is needed to broker software deals. It is also needed to represent the UK in European and other circles, discussing for instance transfer formats for student data and precise definitions and interpretations of terms in the Bologna output. This role requires JISC to coordinate, represent, analyse, feedback, and plan development of appropriate shared activities and services.

27. Again it is important to keep the work coordinated and connected outside the UK and to focus on “big picture” activities rather than ongoing responsive call “initiatives” of short duration and relatively uncertain and possibly low long-term value.
28. One area where coordination is important is in bringing together institutions to tackle common problems in a standard way. In general the work on standards is especially valuable. However, some of this could perhaps be undertaken by the community (through institutions, UCISA and the Association of Colleges, for example), determining priorities by discussion and negotiation rather than by bidding.

2. To what extent are these needs currently being met by providers other than JISC?

29. In the case of core work, little, if any. No-one else is really providing the UK wide infrastructure. The main lists in the first two sections above are the core JISC activities, with the “Joint” in JISC being absolutely key. Outsiders such as potential overseas students do not always appreciate the finer points of the UK political or educational systems when communicating electronically and expect some uniformity which JISC helps to provide. Similarly the commonality of infrastructure between HE and FE makes life easier for those in transition (students as well as staff).
30. Indeed, some aspects of JISC’s work have become unbalanced as a result of differing degrees of commitment from the different funding bodies⁸. Ideally JISC should operate with a common offering across the whole of the UK, though to achieve this would require commitment in each devolved administration as well as from the individual funding bodies.
31. Some of the learning technology research and practice resource collections might conceivably be held in part by others groups (e.g. the OU which is the unique public UK wide HEI, or even by ALT). Similarly, funding for researching and developing learning, teaching and the student experience has also come from Becta, LSIS, and the Higher Education Academy (although in the latter case relatively little since the Benchmarking/Pathfinder work; this funding is also not cross sector) and occasionally from funding councils (e.g. from HEFCE for the CETLs).
32. Membership organisations in the community such as ALT and UCISA have an increasingly important role in “gluing together” activity. Their role is to support practitioners and other groups with a common interest, bringing them together to mutual advantage. In the past, JISC has done that itself, but in a top down fashion and with a growing staff base (as have, for instance, HEA, LSIS, Becta and to some extent the funding bodies). In all cases there has been something of a tendency to “distort the market”, with funding leading interest rather than vice versa. To some extent this has resulted in a dependency culture.
33. As we argue in paragraphs 15 and 16 above, a different long term model for developing cohesive activity (which may be more appropriate given current financial constraints and the general trajectory of policy) is to expect the community to lead on identifying needs, and use modest residual funds to support community bodies such as membership organisations and learned groupings which can add value through the largely or entirely *pro bono* work that their individual members undertake.

⁸ For example the withdrawal of the LSC as a full funder of JISC in 2005 was a retrograde step which resulted in an unhelpful divergence of approach between the English HE and English FE.

3. In which areas does JISC provide essential services and strategic leadership to your sector?

34. ALT is UK-wide, and cross-sectoral in its membership, focus, and ambitions. In our view JISC is uniquely in a position to provide and enhance the essential services that comprise the infrastructure detailed above. It is uniquely in a position to “make things work” across the funding partners. It is uniquely placed to extend its remit in these areas on a wider basis, for example into other areas of the public sector, in line with the recommendations of Sir Philip Green.
35. TechDis is a particularly crucial service for those dealing with the accessibility of technology mediated services and with the role of technology in supporting inclusion.
36. JISC has provided ground breaking research publications, reports and best practice guides in areas such as the student experience and digital literacies.
37. JISC and its subcommittees have seen a shift in membership over the years away from internationally leading technical experts and towards institutional managers and/or those whose work role makes them part of the JISC ecosystem. This has however allowed easier connection with institutions. This change has taken place alongside an increase in the number of professional coordinators, managers and advisers within JISC and its agencies - previously, these were situated in and drawn from the community. This has sometimes led to concerns about disconnection from community objectives, or even to JISC substituting itself for the community when deciding what institutional priorities and needs actually are.
38. To provide strategic leadership one needs to have extensive involvement and understanding of that which one is leading. This can never really be the case for JISC outside the management and managerial support areas (which are nevertheless very important) in which JISC is itself directly involved in its own right. Community involvement is key to countering this problem, and in the future it should take a higher profile in determining activities. Membership organisations (like AoC, Scotland’s Colleges, ALT, SCOUNL and UCISA) can help here.

4. If JISC’s funders were unable to support fully even high priority areas, to which of JISC’s activities should your sector consider subscribing?

39. The short answer must be “Those for which the cost of getting the service by subscription was less than that of providing it by oneself”.
40. This superficially simple statement needs some clarification. Sometimes organisations are prepared to pay more than the going rate in order to meet higher level objectives. Some sectors or individual institutions may be prepared to spend more money to use a service with a national, sectoral or institutional badge.
41. There is little doubt that ALT members would normally expect their institutions to pay a subscription for the core set of infrastructure products and services identified above, either directly or through a top slice.
42. Some JISC Advance Services may also fall into the category for which a subscription would be paid. However the real challenge is for JISC services to convince institutions that their offer is more valuable than that of others - for example, than in house activities. Vested interests within institutions will make such a pitch very difficult to succeed.
43. There is a further problem. The more optional some services become the less valuable they are to those remaining in them and the less viable they become as a national service. The

withdrawal of some sectors or parts of the UK in a piecemeal fashion weakens the coherence of the infrastructure. (This became apparent when, regrettably, the then Learning and Skills Council ceased to be a full funder of JISC.) This was all well rehearsed in previous reviews of JISC and its predecessors in the period 1987-1993 when the Computer Board became ISC and thereafter JISC. Extensive opting out not only carries the overhead of organisation but also leads to wasted public money. The core JISC infrastructure package needs to be universal and coherent to be worthwhile. It is not wise to offer it at any finer granularity - for instance SE England could provide/rent its own Janet hardware and international capabilities much more cost effectively if it does not have to be involved in providing connectivity elsewhere in the UK, but this would not be in the UK's best interest. Therefore such infrastructure should remain a single package.

44. The non-infrastructure services could conceivably be organised under other models, including through collaboration with partner membership organisations as we outline above. ALT would be very happy to meet with funding body, Government, and/or JISC colleagues to discuss how this might be made to work in relation to the technology in learning area that is our major concern.

Association for Learning Technology (ALT)
9 November 2010