JoinIT – Our Story

Oxford University is a complex, collegiate University in which the component departments and colleges have a high degree of autonomy. Central educational technology (ET) provision such as the institutional VLE and single sign-on system is provided on an 'opt-in' basis.

As a result, in the Medical Sciences Division (MSD), ET which enhances the delivery and administration of teaching, learning and assessment is from a wide range of providers, including:

- Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS);
- MSD Learning Technologies (MSDLT);
- MSD WebTeam;
- IT officers in the various research-led departments which form the Division.
- MSD Information Management Services Unit (IMSU);

However, there has historically been limited coherence of ET provision which caused a number of problems:

- Staff do not always know who to ask for support with ET - the provider chosen may be simply the first person willing to do something, not necessarily the most appropriate;
- Staff may not know what already exists (leading to duplication of effort) or what it is possible to achieve with ET.

This makes identifying Divisional ET needs difficult. Related to this is the lack of a coherent Divisional decision-making structure for ET which causes problems with:

- Prioritizing Divisional IT resources - ensuring that more resources are given to projects with the greatest impact and widest support.
- Influencing the central University to ensure that it prioritizes Divisional needs

These problems made it difficult to achieve a number of the suggested strategic priorities and development goals in HEFCE's framework for Enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology[1] and the strategies for teaching and learning, and academic & student services in the University of Oxford's Strategic Plan[2].

Realising that there were problems, the previous head of MSDLT (Vivien Sieber) recognised that the DfLTEA presented an opportunity for expert external help that could provide a path to a solution and successfully made the case for the MSD to be a part of it.

Key messages
External input adds weight and persuades others to provide support and become involved.

Importance of the 'right' project team – influential, interested and innovative.

Defining the exact nature of the problem, the scope of what we could hope to tackle and the best approach to delivering a solution is something that we would have found very difficult without the support and process of DfLTEA. The 'kudos' of an HEA project and the support of a senior 'critical friend' and the UK Centre for Bioscience were also critical to winning the support of senior Divisional management and engaging

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[1] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_12/

[2] http://tinyurl.com/oxford-strategic-plan

the rest of the project team. As a result, we were able to recruit team members who were well-connected and respected by their colleagues and therefore influential, as well as being forward-thinking and having a strong interest in improving the education experience of our students.

The process began with an event for team leaders where our critical friend and subject centre supporter helped us to disentangle an ill-defined set of problems and formulate a series of questions that we could attempt to answer. Importantly, these were questions that would be meaningful to senior management:

- How can the Division make better use of technology in teaching and learning and the administration of learning?
- What sorts of structures are needed to make good decisions?
- Does the Division need an e-learning strategy?

We sought permission from senior management to proceed and the visit from our critical friend solidified our position by engaging management and team members, answering their questions and allaying fears. A paper was taken to and approved by the main MSD teaching committee. However, it was not until the three-day residential in Milton Keynes that the project team was really forced to move beyond the questions above and explicitly define what the project was about and how it would achieve its goals. Two aspects in particular were immensely useful:

1. Preparing a rich picture (Figure 1) of our project to present to another project team forced us to agree on and define the existing problem in detail.

Figure 1: JoinIT rich picture

2. The sessions working on our project plan with the help of our 'critical friend', John Hostler and Subject Centre Supporter, Terry McAndrew. These made us look long and hard at what was achievable and to take the decision to exclude technology for research and more general IT systems such as network infrastructure, administrative systems and IT support. This clarified our project scope as: *technology for the delivery and administration of teaching, learning and assessment.* These sessions also forced us to turn previous general discussions into a concrete action plan and to propose the formation of a group of stakeholders which would:

Key message
Ensure that project scope is very clearly defined to make sure goals are achievable.

MSD LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

a. through consultation, help establish Divisional ET policies and priorities.
b. act as a project review panel to review proposals against criteria, including an awareness of Divisional priorities and available resources
c. represent the Division's technology needs coherently at the University level and externally
d. help provide a simplified interface between the various technology providers and staff and students within the Division

Fired up by the success of the residential event, we returned to Oxford to seek approval for the project plan from the Associate Heads of Division for Education and Capital, Finance and Infrastructure. They were very supportive and suggested consulting course committees to get their feedback on the remit and composition of our proposed stakeholder group. We sent a letter and attended a number of course committees. There was no negative feedback, some limited enthusiasm, and a useful comment about the importance of ensuring strong academic membership of the group. That we didn't get more feedback is probably because:

1. We were presenting quite a general plan with quite vague deliverables which made it difficult for committees to engage with the topic.
2. ET in general, and the management of ET in this case, is not currently seen as core to the business of these committees.

However, it was an important awareness-raising exercise and a necessary step that we felt gave us a green light to continue.

While the project team were planning the consultation exercise, we also came up with the idea of joining up the web presence of at least some of the myriad ET providers in the Division, which currently had their own disparate websites. The idea was that, through a combination of locally-produced material and links to both central University and external sites, we would create a 'one-stop-shop' website which would:

1. Guide users to the most appropriate source of help for ET problems and needs – be it within the MSD, Oxford or the wider HE community.
2. Give users an idea of what can be achieved with ET
3. Allow users to track progress with and comment on existing ET projects and begin the process of developing a new ET project (suggestion box)
4. Keep users up to date with emerging ET initiatives within the MSD, and University and the HE community.

At this stage we had only been working within the MSD. However, much of the ET used within the Division is run centrally – we would not be in a position to tackle issues such as duplication of effort and influencing the central University unless we looked beyond the MSD. So we met with the University's Director of IT. This was a very useful meeting for a number of reasons:

1. It turned out that the University had been thinking along very similar and complementary lines – they had just completed the Fostering Learning Exercise[3], which was looking at how to provide more coherent educational services, with an emphasis on educational technology, at a University rather than a Divisional level. The team formed a result of this exercise, the Educational Resources Team, was headed by the Director of the Oxford Learning Institute who subsequently made a very valuable contribution to our launch event (of which, more later).

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[3] http://tinyurl.com/oxford-fle

2. It highlighted the importance of a clear reporting line from our proposed group to an existing high-level committee – we subsequently agreed that the group would report to the Divisional Educational Policy and Standards Committee.
3. The Director of IT offered, and is now part of our stakeholder group, bringing with him a very important overview of the University's IT.

We now had the necessary support for the project, input from the Office of the Director of IT and the beginnings of a joined up web presence. What we needed was consultation with staff to help establish ET priorities and to form the proposed stakeholder group.

Consultation was through the JoinIT launch meeting on 4th Nov 2010. Nearly 50 academic, administrative and IT staff invited from across the Division joined guests from OUCS, the Libraries and other divisions to begin the process of:

1. sharing information and gathering the views of Divisional staff on ET projects both within the Division and elsewhere in the University
2. encouraging staff to generate and prioritise educational technology ideas.
3. raising the awareness of JoinIT

Presentations from Robert Wilkins (Project Team) and Damion Young (Project Leader), and the Director of the Oxford Learning Institute (Educational Resources Team) and the Head of Student Administration (Student records and timetabling) were followed by a workshop facilitated by our subject centre advisor – Terry McAndrew.

Key message
Get potential stakeholders together to raise awareness of what you are trying to do and to contribute ideas, giving them a sense of ownership of the project.

The pleasantly surprising turnout (including a number of high-profile figures) and enthusiasm of participants confirmed the desire among staff to address the problems that JoinIT had set out to tackle. By getting staff together to generate ideas in small groups, and prioritise them under administrative and educational categories, we identified a large number of ET needs which we know have the support of at least one workshop group, and in some cases, several groups.

Our stakeholder group is now called the Educational Technology Steering Group (ETSG) but putting it together has taken longer than we might have hoped. We agreed a list of potential invitees (five academic, five technology and administrative) who all gratifyingly agreed to participate after being contacted. We met for the first time on 19th April 2011 and had a very useful meeting tying down the remit (draft below) and processes of the group and agreeing to meet at the end of each term.

Draft ToR Educational Technology Steering Group – 28/04/2011
1. Remit is technology for the delivery and administration of teaching, learning and assessment (ET) within the Medical Sciences Division (MSD). IT needs within research and the wider management of Divisional IT (hardware, networking, support, etc) are excluded.
2. Identify and agree ET priorities for MSD through:
   a. Consulting course directors and other staff on ET needs using appropriate existing fora and arranging dedicated workshops.
   b. Developing and running a 'light-touch' project review process with proposals judged and prioritised against criteria:
      i. Educational benefit/impact vs 'cost';

MSD LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

3. Allocating existing resources and making a coherent case for any additional needs from the Division, the University and externally.
4. Co-ordinate with other groups and services within the University (e.g. OUCS, Student Systems) and externally to:
    a. learn what is going on elsewhere;
    b. inform them of MSD priorities;
    c. investigate opportunities to collaborate and maximise resource efficiency.
5. Regularly disseminate ET initiatives within the MSD (including progress with projects), in the wider University and in the HE community, and provide a coherent interface between staff, students and ET providers:
    a. through the eMSD website
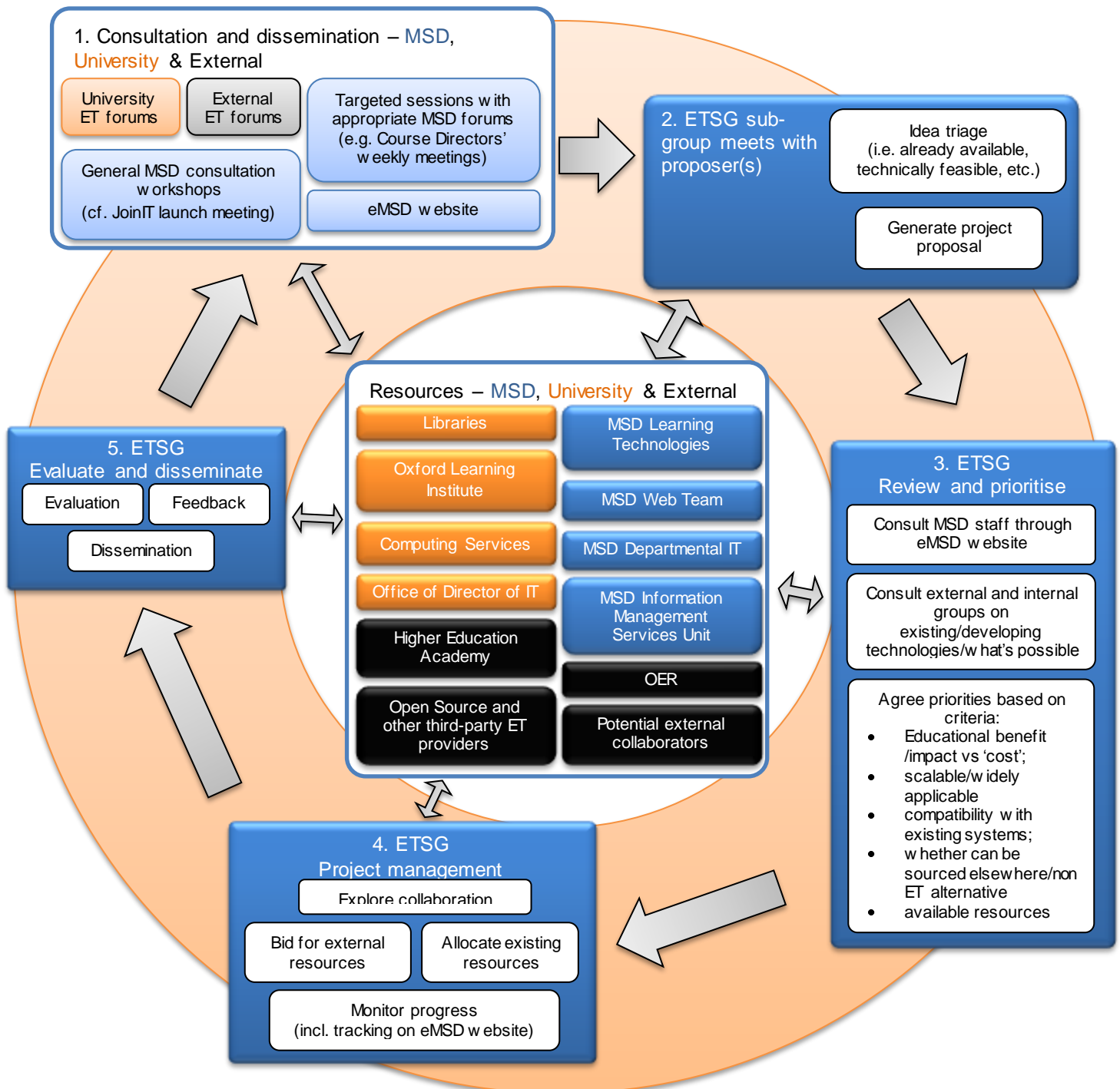   b. through appropriate existing fora and ongoing workshops

Figure 2: Cyclic nature of the proposed ETSG technology development process

We also planned a new consultation and ET awareness-raising exercise with Course Directors, using a number of less formal forums identified by steering group members. These will deal with the problems we faced in our earlier consultation with course committees by:

1. Presenting clearly what we are asking them for (ET priorities on their own courses);
2. Including a case study of the new Biomedical Sciences Course and the progress with ideas raised at the Nov 4th launch meeting;
3. Being more appropriate forums for the consideration of ET.

So, we now have all the components in place to transform the process of selecting and delivering technology which enhances teaching, learning and assessment within MSD. However, as of the date of writing, we have not had time to formally take an ET need through these new processes. While progress has been steady, it has not been rapid, largely because of competing pressures on project team members' time.

Luckily, while we were still trying to pull together the ETSG, we were working in parallel on ET for a new high-profile Biomedical Sciences course (BMS). This was ideally timed in that it has both been informed by, and is currently influencing, the ideas and processes being developed in JoinIT.

The Course Director for BMS wanted to create an online experience for students which would make them feel 'special'. In their second and third years (which comprise options from other, existing courses) he wanted ET to help make the course feel coherent. He proposed doing this in three ways:

1. Personalisation – the University's VLE should bring the right information at the right time to a 'portal' page for each student – this is not currently possible with our VLE.
2. Pre-arrival – to engage the students in exciting, thought-provoking collaborative thinking and problems before they arrive at Oxford using tools such as podcasting and social bookmarking.
3. Paperless – as far as possible, all course documentation and students' work will be written and stored online with online submission, marking and feedback.

The approach we took to the problem was:

1. A meeting between the Course Director, the Head of MSDLT, the Divisional IT Co-ordinator and the University's Director of IT at which we looked at the requirements and quickly 'triaged' them, identifying those for which we knew solutions already existed (internally or externally) or were under development. We then developed an outline project proposal. The success of this approach has meant that we have now included a similar pre-proposal meeting in our proposed ETSG process (Figure 2, box 2).
2. We made the case to the Associate Heads of Division that ET for BMS should be seen as a Divisional priority. In future, this process would be handled by the ETSG (Figure 2, box 3) with the recommended priorities ratified by the Division's top-level education committee.
3. This mobilised resources from the Educational Resources Team (OUCS, the Libraries and the Oxford Learning Institute) who then advised on how they could help. Communication with these non-MSD 'resources' will be a crucial part of the new project review process (Figure 2, box 3).
4. Development and other resource needs were identified and we are now putting together a bid for further Divisional funding to enable us to 'buy' further central resources and to collaborate with

A new round of consultation
Informed by lessons from the first round

Everything's ready
But it's too late for this case study

Biomedical Sciences
Informed by and informing JoinIT

MSD LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

others such as the central VLE team. Again, this process will be handled by ETSG in future (Figure 2, box 4).

In the same way as the processes of consultation, and project review and management have been informed by the development of the BMS course, we expect the other ETSG processes, particularly evaluation and dissemination, to evolve as we embark on the next round of consultation with Course Directors in Trinity Term 2011.

Evaluation to date:

1. The attendance at the Nov 4th Launch Meeting was evidence of a strong interest in improving ET provision – the range of ideas generated confirmed the wide range of Divisional ET needs.

2. The Division and University are currently providing the right 'climate' for JoinIT with the FLE and the Division's own desire to review IT management. However, the DfLTEA project ensured that ET procurement reform was urgent as well as important. It has also highlighted ET as a primary concern rather than being an afterthought behind more traditional IT matters – hardware, support and infrastructure.

> "As the person with overall responsibility in Oxford's Medical Sciences Division for planning and resources, it had become very clear to me that the historical constellation of expertise, committees and budgets that had developed over many years was poorly adapted to the task of using information and communication technology effectively to support teaching, research and administration. The lack of coherence was putting our reputation for academic excellence at risk, but although it was apparent what some of the problems were, the scale and complexity of the issues made tackling them a daunting prospect. JoinIT has provided an excellent platform for analysing the issues, at least in relation to education, and has already made significant headway in putting in place pathways towards solutions. It is an excellent example of how relatively modest and well-targeted investment, together with a supportive framework, can make a real difference to the improvement of University organizational capital."
>
> MSD Associate Director - Capital, Finance and Infrastructure

3. JoinIT has undoubtedly raised the profile of MSDLT and its work, within the Division, across the wider Institution and externally. Leading the project and the DfLTEA process has given the team leader a much greater understanding of his own institution, improving his confidence in working at a higher level. Thinking about evaluation is now a part not just of this project and the ETSG but of all MSDLT's ET work.

Future evaluation:

1. eMSD website:

   a. While website statistics will give us a measure of use, we will investigate adding 'Did this answer your question' and/or comment functionality on pages to assess usefulness.

   b. We intend to make the project review process transparent on the website. This may include allowing users to comment on and possibly vote for others' proposals.

2. One of the best measures of success of the project will be continuing interest in ET solutions and the degree to which these are successfully found/delivered. Again we intend to track these transparently on the eMSD website. While difficult to quantify, we should be able to get a feel for whether the new processes are

MSD LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

working from whether we hear of ET needs being met, as some are at the moment, by the first person who says 'yes'.

3. We are discussing more formal evaluation methods such as structured interviews and online questionnaires. However, the most informative feedback is likely to come from those who have used the new process and adding a feedback 'requirement' to the process may be the most pragmatic way to achieve this – this will probably be a combination of an online form and structured interviews.

4. We will obviously continue our monitoring of the products of these new processes - the ET that helps students learn – in terms of the students' learning experience, through online and face-to-face feedback sessions.

Dissemination to date:

Future dissemination:

1. Our most important audience is within the Division and to this end, we will use the methods identified in Figure 2, box 1 i.e workshops, attending appropriate forums and the eMSD website.

2. The outcomes of JoinIT have some more widely applicable lessons for other areas of service provision where there is a tension between quite large demand and quite limited time. In times of real financial constraint we are forced to prioritise what we do within existing (or reduced) resources and make rational decisions about who does what. Therefore, in the MSD, we could usefully consider the kind of decision making structure that has been arrived at here, possibly during the Divisional review in Sept/October 2011. Central Administration and other divisions might also consider the output of the project.

3. We will attempt to make awareness of the eMSD website and stakeholder group part of Divisional staff induction

4. The ten members of the ETSG drawn from across the MSD are themselves invaluable ambassadors for spreading the message about ET.

5. We hope to make a follow-up presentation to the University's OxTALENT group which has membership from across the University.

6. We will investigate appropriate national forums/publications to share our developing experience and processes.

Project Team

Anne Bowtell – MSD Webteam

John Hostler (*Critical Friend*) – ex. University of Manchester

Terry McAndrew (*Subject Centre Supporter*) – UK Centre for Bioscience

Philippa O'Connor – MSD Senior Assistant Registrar

David Popplewell – Divisional IT Coordinator

Vivien Sieber (*Team Leader to 06/10*) – Head of Learning and Research Support, University of Surrey

Robert Wilkins – Course Director Biomedical Sciences

Damion Young (*Team Leader from 06/10*) – Senior Educational Technologist

Dissemination

Project Team

Evaluation of the DfLTEA 2010-11 model

What has been gained by participating in DfLTEA 2009-10? What elements have been effective?

From a starting point where we were aware that we had a problem but were not quite sure what it was, DfLTEA has enabled us to get the right people together and 'on side' to define our problem, decide what aspects we can hope to address in the medium term, and to propose and implement a solution which we believe has a good chance of success.

Elements that have been particularly effective are:
1. Critical friend and Subject Centre support
   a. Along with the 'kudos' of an HEA project, helped convince senior management that the project was sound
   b. Enormous personal support for team leaders throughout all stages of the project
   c. Managed change of team leaders when Vivien Sieber left and a relatively inexperienced Damion Young took over.
   d. Valuable sounding boards with their wealth of experience in other institutions.
2. MK event
   a. Value of time away from e-mail, phones and meetings
   b. Value of having to explain Oxford project to others
   c. Value of seeing other institutional problems/projects – although this was more of a general interest, rather than specifically useful for this project
3. Team Leaders' events:
   a. Highlighting the importance of, and approaches to, evaluation at all stages of the project.

Have there been reciprocal visits, or shared activities? Should these be more directly managed?

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be a project with which we had much overlap so we weren't convinced there was much value (to this project) in a reciprocal visit. We didn't hold a CAMEL event ourselves for the same reason but also because we had only a very limited amount of Oxford academic time for our JoinIT launch meeting and were very cautious about introducing any activities which weren't tightly focused on our launch goals. We couldn't see how participants from other institutions could usefully take part in our launch meeting except as observers. However, invitations to, and attendance at our launch meeting included staff from other Divisions within the University, allowing us to share experiences within the wider institution.

Given that we have significant experience and expertise in running examinations on-line, Damion Young contributed a presentation on e-assessment and took part in a panel discussion at Bournemouth's CAMEL event (Developing transformational learning through multimedia and e-assessment – 5th Nov 2010). This was a very useful opportunity to discuss online assessment with colleagues from other UK institutions.

What are the lessons for the running of the Enhancement Academy in the future?

I think timing is the key issue here –the DfLTEA project took place at a time when the Medical Sciences Division was already reviewing more general IT management, coinciding with the University's Fostering Learning Exercise which was very complementary. However, despite this enabling environment and the fact that we have faced no real obstructions, progress has not been rapid. This is largely due to the project team needing to find sufficient time for the project combined with the complexity of what we have tried to achieve. As a result, although we have accomplished everything we have set out to so far, we have not had time to properly evaluate the embedding of our new Educational Technology Steering Group and eMSD website within the Division. The 18 month project length (start to report) is good in that it focused the mind, and provided sufficient deadlines and incentives to encourage progress. However, might two years not be a more realistic timeframe for more ambitious change projects like this? This might provide the HEA and the wider HE community with more complete case studies. To keep the momentum going, perhaps the introduction of a more focused one to one evaluation meeting at around

the 18 month mark would be helpful in focusing participants' minds on generating the sort of data which will be of most use to the community.

Other points from team members:

First residential

- Some parts of the first residential were perhaps overlong and a bit repetitive, on the second morning in particular.
- Could more have been made of the personality profiling?

MK residential

- 3 days away was heavy on team members' time, and we felt that two days would probably have been sufficient.
- It was difficult to see how some of the activities were of relevance to our project.
- Audibility of activities in large rooms, particularly for anyone using hearing aids, was a problem.
- The speakers were certainly inspirational but one has to question quite how much they contributed to the development of the projects.