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Review of Post-16 Jisc Funding and Delivery Model in Wales



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Executive Summary

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Welsh Government

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Executive Summary

Review aims and objectives

OB3 Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an independent review of the post-16 Jisc funding and delivery model in Wales. The aim of the review was to examine whether the funding currently being provided by Welsh Government to Jisc to support the work of post-16 learning providers operating across further education (FE), work based learning (WBL) and adult learning (AL) is achieving the best value for money. The review also examined the extent to which Jisc's current 'offer' is meeting the needs of this sector in Wales. The specific objectives of the review were to consider:

- the current cost, value and benefit of Jisc services to Welsh Further Education (FE) institutions; identifying which services provided by Jisc are most used and most valued by the sector
- the current cost, value and benefit of Welsh Government funded services delivered by Jisc to other post-16 learning providers in Wales
- whether an alternative funding and/or delivery model would increase value for money and provide additional benefits to the post-16 sector in Wales
- the potential impact of any significant changes to the existing funding and/or delivery model
- how an efficient, timely and low cost 'feedback loop' could be implemented to ensure that learning provider feedback can effectively influence funding decisions by the Welsh Government.

Method

The review was undertaken between December 2018 and February 2019 and involved:

- an inception phase to include an initial meeting with the client to agree upon the methodology
- a desk based phase which included reviewing key documentation and data on the take up of services and resources
- preparing research instruments, to include a bilingual web survey, to inform the fieldwork
- interviewing a total of 18 stakeholders from Welsh Government, Jisc and other stakeholder organisations
- surveying learning providers and analysing responses from 21 respondents

- interviewing representatives from ten learning providers: four FE colleges, four WBL and two AL providers
- analysing the evidence and preparing a report.

Background

Jisc is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity which provides services and resources to the education, learning and research communities in the UK. Jisc offers a standard membership package and government-funded support to FE and HE institutions in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It receives Welsh Government funding to support digital infrastructure and delivery across the post-16 sector in Wales, including support for non-FE WBL and AL providers.

A total of £1.488 million¹ is currently invested into Jisc provision to support the post-16 learning sector (excluding HE) in Wales². During the current 2018/19 academic year a total of £1,246,000 grant funding has been awarded to Jisc by the Welsh Government, of which £1,046,000 is provided towards core activities and £200,000 towards discretionary funding to support particular priorities in Wales.

Core activities for supporting FE colleges include technical and connectivity services such as the provision of Janet network services, information and library resources, training and practical advice as well as research and development initiatives. Discretionary funding is used to support sector developments and includes provision for staff costs to support the development and implementation of the Digital 2030 strategic framework.

A further £242,077 in total is spent by 21 post-16 learning sector providers in Wales on optional, additional paid-for Jisc services (14 FE colleges, six WBL providers and one AL provider). The majority of this spend (£215,377 of the £242,077) relates to costs associated with the Janet Network and is passed on directly by Jisc to its suppliers.

¹ Welsh Government funding + payment by individual learning providers

² This includes grant funding to Jisc as well as other costs relating to the Public Service Broadband Aggregation and the Jisc liaison post based at the Office for Students.

Key Findings

The fieldwork revealed that in terms of engagement with Jisc and awareness of services and resources:

- 86 per cent of survey respondents felt that they were well informed about the Jisc offer. FE colleges were better informed than WBL and AL providers about Jisc's offer (though most FE participants were better informed about Jisc's technical and connectivity services than they were about Jisc's information and learning resources). WBL and AL providers would appreciate more clarity about what is available and relevant to them
- FE colleges reported more frequent engagement with Jisc than WBL and AL providers, particularly on a one to one basis via their Jisc Account Manager. Feedback on the work of Account Managers (where a relationship exists) was very positive with post holders regarded as approachable, professional and informative. Where a relationship was not in place, some contributors would welcome a more proactive approach by Jisc to develop one
- sector networks and meetings also offer a vital engagement channel for Jisc to meet with post-16 learning provider representatives.

In terms of services and resources taken up:

- the take up of services by individual FE colleges varied greatly. The services most commonly taken up and valued by FE colleges were domain registry, IP address assignment, Janet Network, certificate services (a fully paid for service), JiscMail (an open service) and Netsight. These services were taken up by all FE colleges
- the resources most utilised and valued by providers were E-books for FE and Jisc Collections
- some 18 services or resources made available by Jisc were only used by one or two colleges.

The review found that for FE colleges:

- contributors were broadly content with the existing offer provided by Jisc and considered many of their technical and connectivity services to be business critical ones which, if removed, would seriously undermine their capacity and ability to deliver further education provision
- the excellent reliability of these services often meant that services were being taken for granted and senior leaders felt there was little need to get involved
- levels of take up of library and learning resources varied extensively. There is scope to increase awareness of Jisc's learning resources across this sector.

The main findings in relation to WBL providers were:

- where WBL providers were actively engaged with Jisc, the feedback provided about their experiences was very positive
- some WBL providers, particularly UK-wide or international establishments, regarded Jisc's services and resources as being less relevant to them and were less interested in engaging with Jisc on an individual basis as they have access to in-house support and resources
- WBL providers would welcome greater clarity about the services which are available to them from Jisc and the frequency of contact they could expect to receive.

The main findings in relation to AL providers were:

- AL providers engage with Jisc primarily through sector networks and partnerships
- AL providers questioned whether the current provision made available by Jisc was suited to their needs, but would welcome wider availability of training (which they had historically received)
- AL providers expressed a strong desire to engage with Jisc and would welcome greater clarity about the services which they could access.

The main findings in relation to how Jisc is funded were:

- there was no appetite for changing the model for funding Jisc in Wales, as the disadvantages of adopting a mixed-funding model were considered to outweigh the potential advantages
- the current level of funding, provided by the Welsh Government, and the split between core and discretionary funds, was considered appropriate and adequate.

Conclusions

The review concludes that, based on data provided by Jisc, the financial savings and cost savings for FE colleges from utilising Jisc services and resources offer a positive return on investment. Overall, Jisc reports that the overall annual value, savings and efficiencies experienced by Welsh FE colleges amounts to over £3.4 million. The scale of savings can be expected to vary from one provider to another, depending upon the level of their take up of Jisc provision. Jisc commissioned studies suggest that the majority of financial spend and savings are associated with the technical services offered by the Janet network and cyber security provision and, based on the fieldwork feedback, it would not be unexpected for this to be the case across Welsh FE colleges too.

It was not possible to quantify how much Welsh Government funding was allocated to supporting non-FE post-16 providers in Wales (i.e. WBL and AL providers), as this provision is not ring-fenced and Jisc does not have specific targets to achieve across this area of work.

The review found that overall, WBL and AL providers considered Jisc services to be less relevant to them and a mixed view was conveyed about Jisc's future role: some providers were eager to get more involved whilst others preferred the current hands-off approach. The review concluded that Jisc's remit and possibly the level of resources that should be allocated to support the work of WBL and AL sectors in Wales could be better defined, so that providers are more informed about what they should expect to receive from Jisc.

Having considered the views of contributors who expressed a lack of appetite for changing the current funding model for Jisc, and the level of risks associated with adopting a mixed-model funding approach, the review concludes that the Welsh Government should continue to fund Jisc using the existing grant funding model including core and discretionary funds. The disadvantages of adopting a subscription-based funding model at provider level similar to that being introduced in England, which could potentially result in creating a more fragmented and less strategic approach in Wales, outweigh the potential advantage associated with increasing commitment from providers at a senior level. A change would also serve to impact upon Jisc's capacity and resources to meet the needs of Welsh providers during the short-term period of change, as was thought to have happened in England.

The review concludes that the FE college sector secures good value for money from the current level of Welsh Government and sector based investment into Jisc. The review found that the take up of provision across Welsh FE colleges compares positively with those from other home nations and that FE colleges who were actively engaged with Jisc provided positive feedback about the services received. The review further concludes that the WBL and AL sectors do not experience the same

level of widespread value from the services provided by Jisc. The WBL providers who secured more value from Jisc were providers actively engaged and receive tailored support activities from Jisc.

There is scope for the Welsh Government to secure further better value for money from its funding agreement with Jisc in future, if a greater focus on long term planning and ensuring that the sector maximises usage of the provision available to it is adopted. The Digital 2030 strategic framework offers the ideal mechanism for achieving this and Jisc will have a critical role to play in contributing to its implementation and supporting the sector. It is important that this work includes a longer-term planning approach to support the WBL and AL sectors. In addition, other steps could be taken to achieve better value for money by reviewing current administrative practices for Welsh Government grant funding (including streamlining the discretionary funding application process when the current new process has had time to become embedded; simplifying and reducing the volume of reporting currently provided to the Welsh Government as well as opportunities to learn from the simpler payment practices adopted by other core funders).

Finally, the review concludes that Jisc representatives are already actively contributing to a number of existing networks across the FE, WBL and AL sectors and in some cases, facilitate the meetings directly. These networks offer ideal opportunities for the sector and Jisc to liaise on common issues and these types of discussions already take place. In many cases the conversations are influencing and contributing to Jisc's provision for that sector but more formal mechanisms could be considered to ensure these discussions feed into the use of discretionary funding.

Recommendations

At a strategic level the review recommends that:

- 1) The Welsh Government continues to fund Jisc via its current annual funding agreement model
- 2) The Welsh Government, in collaboration with the sectors and Jisc, clarifies what WBL and AL providers should expect to receive from Jisc on an annual basis and for this to be set out within the Welsh Government's funding agreement to Jisc
- 3) A more long-term approach be adopted to inform Jisc's work with the WBL and AL sectors in particular and that this includes exploring the training needs of these sectors
- 4) Jisc commits to undertaking a similar return on investment exercise as it has done in Scotland and England, to provide a robust example of financial savings and costs avoidance achieved in a Welsh institution
- 5) The Welsh Government collaborates with Jisc to streamline the process of agreeing upon the use of discretionary funded provision, ideally in advance of the academic year, and for this provision to be better informed by sector-based evidence of need.

At an operational level the review recommends that:

- 6) Jisc continues its effort to raise awareness of the resources available to FE colleges and ensures that this communication is targeted appropriately
- 7) The FE sector, in conjunction with the Welsh Government, considers whether it would be feasible to establish a network of information and library service staff to allow for improved communication and to identify any future resource needs for the sector
- 8) The role of three of the existing fora, each covering the FE, WBL and AL sectors (such as the Digital Vision Group), is formalised to include having a role in providing feedback about the appropriateness and value of Jisc's work and informing future funded provision and that this be set out within their respective Terms of References
- 9) A digital sector champion be identified for each of the FE, WBL and AL sectors to lead on providing feedback on the work of Jisc and to inform future sector needs
- 10) Jisc continues to engage with Colegau Cymru's FE Colleges Principal's Group to increase awareness across a senior level about the value of Jisc provision to the sector
- 11) Jisc prepares briefer progress reports to the Welsh Government which serve to complement the information that can be accessed via Jisc's dashboard and that the Welsh Government considers adopting monthly or bi-monthly automatic financial claims payment procedures.