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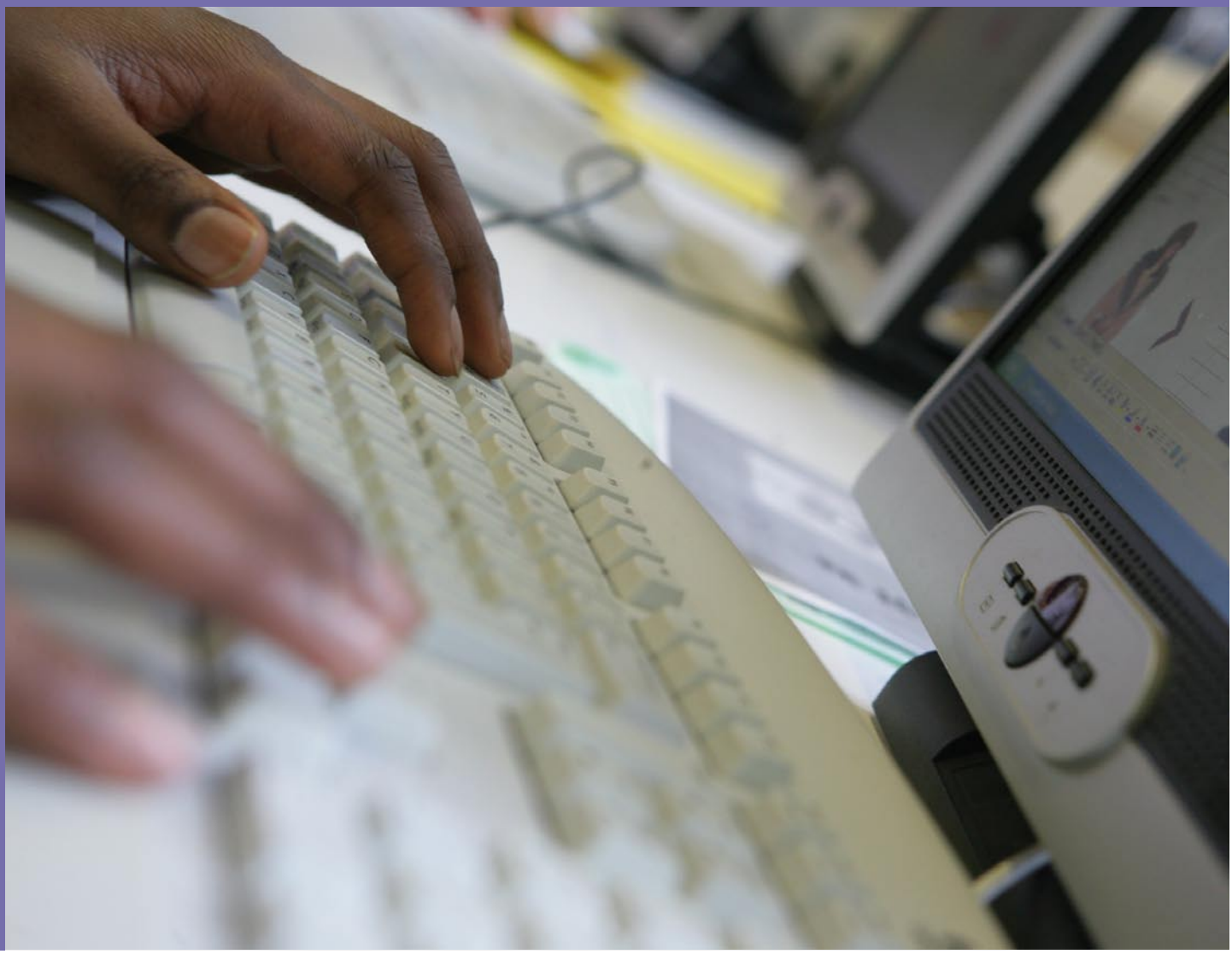
Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

An Evaluation of the Regional Support Centre for Adult and Community Learning



Research

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An Evaluation of the Regional Support Centre for Adult and Community Learning

Audience Advice and guidance organisations, Careers Wales, Colleges of Further Education, employers, training providers and DCELLS programme delivery, funding and planning departments.

Overview This evaluation report provides an assessment of a pilot exercise launched in 2006 to expand the remit of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Regional Support Centre into the adult and community learning sector. This Centre is part of a UK-wide network of 13 such Centres designed to support the development of e-learning and Information and Learning Technologies in a range of learning sectors. The RSC Wales, like other Centres, has largely focused its activities on supporting e-learning developments within the Further Education sector, and this Pilot seeks to broaden this remit.

Action required No action required.

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An Evaluation of the Regional Support Centre for Adult and Community Learning

CM International Proposal in association with LIFECYCLE Evaluation

Date: 5th September 2007

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Executive summary

Objectives

This evaluation report provides an assessment of a pilot exercise launched in 2006 to expand the remit of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Regional Support Centre (RSC) into the adult and community learning (ACL) sector. This Centre is part of a UK-wide network of 13 such Centres designed to support the development of e-learning and Information and Learning Technologies (ILT) in a range of learning sectors. The RSC Wales, like other Centres, has largely focused its activities on supporting e-learning developments within the Further Education (FE) sector, and this Pilot seeks to broaden this remit.

The formal objective of this report, as noted in the introduction, is to assess both effectiveness and impact of the ACL Pilot activity in providing strategic support to Voluntary and Community providers of learning and suggest recommendations for the future of the pilot[1]. These broad objectives were complemented by a number of specific requirements[2]:

Key features

The RSC Wales' ACL activity is a two year pilot project currently employing one member of staff. This post holder operates at a strategic level with learning organisations in the sector; in particular, working with existing networks to develop e-strategies to support learners. This work also includes support for the management and use of electronic resources for teaching and learning.

A central feature of the pilot is its use of a ***cascade model***. This focuses on providing training and expertise to key people who have access to local and regional networks and groups, to support use of technology in teaching and learning for the ACL sector in Wales. As such this model aims to ensure ACL access to relevant existing RSC services (e.g. helpdesk forums) and contribute to those services where appropriate.

This post holder provides strategic and practical information, advice and training to key staff from the Adult, Community, Voluntary Learning sectors in the management and use of electronic resources for teaching and learning.

Effectiveness and impact

In the relatively short period of the Pilot's operation the evaluation research suggests that it has been effective in meeting its initial objectives. In this respect it has contributed towards general awareness raising of e-learning possibilities in Wales, as well as supporting e-learning through the provision of technical and pedagogic advice.

Four broad areas of outputs, with potential to progress to impacts over time are identified:

[1] Invitation to Quote for the Evaluation of Regional Support Centre for Adult Community Learning, 11th May 2007 - DCELLS

[2] A number of which were identified in the Inception Meeting and subsequent discussion.

- **Awareness**

The evaluation research found examples of awareness raised in a range of areas, including understanding the potential for new e-learning technologies, opportunities to input into strategy, approaches being undertaken elsewhere. Such impacts were greatest amongst those organisations with little previous experience in this area.

- **Networking**

Here the Post holder has played an important role in the Community Learning Wales (CLW) e-learning sub group, helping to disseminate information, and the exchange of experiences. This has been complemented by the Post holder's many presentations at events, and organising the electronic ACL JISC discussion list.

- **Strategic engagement**

A related area of output lies in strategic engagement. Here the Post holder's work has been important in helping the e-learning CLW sub group to contribute to e-learning strategy at the national level. This is the first time that the ACL sector has provided a consolidated input into such strategy processes.

- **e-learning adoption**

Outputs were also identified in the Post holder's role in contributing towards the decisions of several LEAs to purchase new e-learning equipment (for example, Mimio boards). Such decisions can be traced directly to awareness raising activities of the Post holder, and subsequent support decisions.

In reviewing the findings a note of caution is needed about these outputs / emerging impacts of the Pilot. Here, it should be recognised that the two-year Pilot has been in operation for less than a year. From this perspective the evaluation results are an indication of progress achieved to date, rather than a full end of term evaluation. This issue is highlighted further in the concluding section.

SWOT

Strengths

- Dynamism and skills set of the post holder
- Network activity and network building
- 'One stop shop' support provider role
- Considerable e-learning experience in FE context
- Strong links to English good practice

Weaknesses

- Limited human resources
- Neglect of voluntary sector
- Lack of N. Wales focus

Opportunities

- Employ additional staff
- Explore further cascading opportunities e.g. 'cascade within a cascade'

Threats

- Cascade failure
- Postholder inundation
- Narrow sector or geographical focus
- Capturing of lessons overshadowed by more urgent tasks

Recommendations

On the basis of the evaluation findings three main recommendations are made. Full details can be found in section 6 of the main report:

R1: Subject to further resources being made available to the Pilot, efforts should be made to ascertain the needs of the wider ACL sector, including those of North and West learning organisations.

R2: The Pilot should explore opportunities to maximise the impact of cascading.

R3: The RSC Wales ensures that it maintains a focus on documenting lessons, with a view to informing the post-Pilot ACL activities.

1. Introduction

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Regional Support Centre (RSC) is a UK-wide network of 13 Centres designed to support the development of e-learning and Information and Learning Technologies (ILT) in a range of sectors. The RSC Wales was established in 2000, based in Swansea, and has like other Centres focused its activities around supporting e-learning developments within the Further Education (FE) sector. Funding for these activities comes from a number of sources, including the Welsh Assembly Government.

This evaluation report provides an assessment of a pilot exercise launched in 2006 to expand the remit of the RSC to the adult and community learning (ACL) sector. The pilot draws on the findings of earlier research that argued for the need to provide strategic support to Voluntary and Community providers of learning to support e-learning developments.

The stated aim of this evaluation is to:

> 'evaluate the pilot project in the Regional Support Centre that has provided strategic support to Voluntary and Community providers of learning to support e-learning developments and suggest recommendations for the future of the pilot.'

Source: Invitation to Quote

Its recommendations aim to give particular focus to the potential for extending the ACL activities of RSC Wales to all post-16 learning providers in Wales. Recommendations are also provided on potential areas of future development in both content and structure of the Pilot.

In reviewing the findings a note of caution is needed about impacts of the Pilot. Here, it should be recognised that the two-year Pilot has been in operation for less than a year. From this perspective the evaluation results are an indication of progress achieved to date, rather than a full end of term evaluation. This issue is highlighted further in the concluding section.

The structure of the report is as follows. It begins by describing the methodology employed and the actions undertaken by the Consortium (Section 2). Section 3 then provides a context for the RSC pilot, describing the state of e-Learning in Wales, the processes used to implement the pilot project as well as the main actors. This is followed by an analysis of the pilot's current activity, based on the interviews conducted (section 4). Section 5 then audits the effectiveness and impact of the pilot project in the ACL and Voluntary sectors, drawing on both stakeholder perspectives. It also reviews the efficiency of the cascading model. The final section draws together the Consortium's conclusions and recommendations for the future deployment of RSC support to all post 16 learning providers in Wales (Section 6).

2. Research methodology

2.1 Scope of the research

The objective of this report, as noted in the introduction, is to assess both effectiveness and impact of the ACL Pilot activity in providing strategic support to Voluntary and Community providers of learning and suggest recommendations for the future of the pilot[3]. These broad objectives were complemented by a number of specific requirements[4]:

- Collect views from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Dysgu Cymru, Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) and Communities@one about the effectiveness of the pilot post;
- Corroborate that the RSC Wales ACL support model is achieving its aims, and explore the potential further development of the model;
- Discuss the relevance of RSC Wales as a host organisation for the role;
- Assess the Value for Money of the pilot project.

It should be acknowledged that the main focus of the evaluation is on the role, rather than on the post holder. A further issue to be noted concerns the 'clients' of the Pilot. Here, the focus of the pilot has been one of raising awareness and bringing about change within stakeholder or umbrella bodies. It has not been one of influencing learning providers or learners directly. This has been recognised in the evaluation design, with attention to identifying impacts through consultations with stakeholder groups (the primary contact point for the pilot).

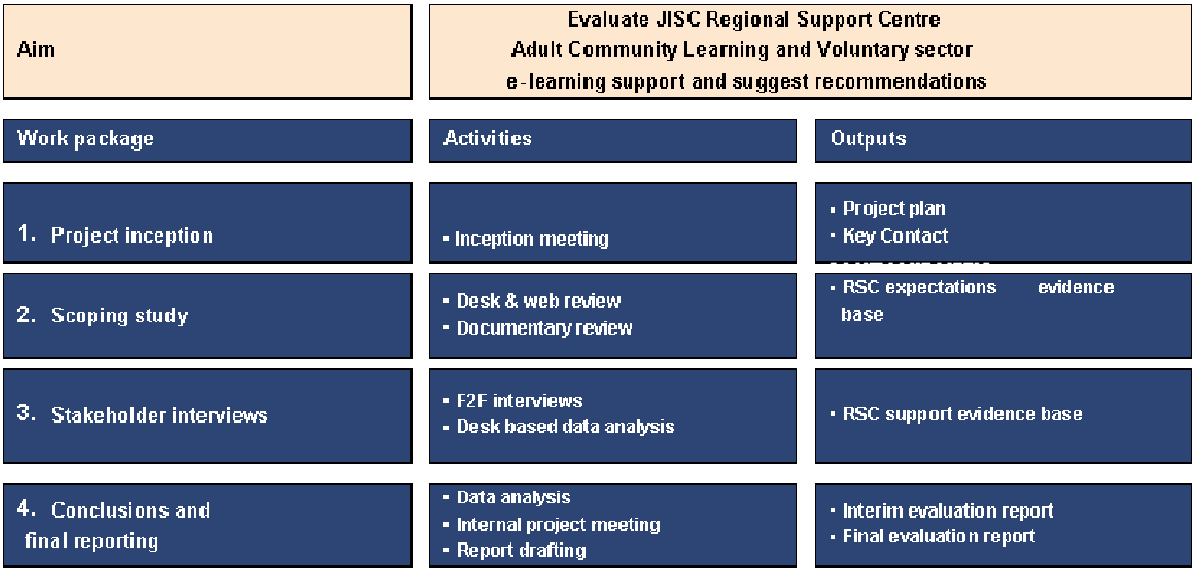
2.2 Methodology and steps taken

In responding to the Invitation to Quote, the CM International consortium has developed an evaluation methodology based around four work packages (see figure 1). The key features and issues addressed by these stages are described below.

[3] Invitation to Quote for the Evaluation of Regional Support Centre for Adult Community Learning, 11th May 2007 - DCELLS

[4] A number of which were identified in the Inception Meeting and subsequent discussion.

Figure 1. Summary of CM International Consortium approach



WP 1: Project Inception

The project began with an ***Inception meeting*** where methodological steps were agreed, key issues discussed and documentation sourced. A summary of the main action points was also agreed, and a note circulated to all parties.

WP 2: Scoping study

CMI then reviewed documentation supplied by DCELLS at the inception meeting, in addition to the JISC RSC website (http://www.rsc-wales.ac.uk/).

The objective of this review was to identify an evidence base of the rationale, objectives, delivery approach, intended outcomes and monitoring arrangements. An internal document describing the Operating Model of the RSC ACL support was produced as a result of this work package. Early discussions with the RSC were also used to identify the relevant stakeholder contacts.

WP 3: Stakeholder interviews

This work package was based on a series of face-to-face interviews with organisations identified during the scoping study. These included:

- Members of the Welsh Council Voluntary Action, NIACE Dysgu Cymru and Communities@One, identified in the pilot post holder's job description as main stakeholders
- Members of the Community Learning Wales sub-groups, including Torfaen and Ceredigion LEAs, Swansea and Cardiff County Councils, Merthyr Tydfil and Coleg Morgannwg
- OCN Wales (awarding body)
- Selected FE ACL activities

A full list of interviewees and the interview schedule[5] can be found in Annex I.

WP 4: Conclusions and recommendations

The final work package drew together the main fieldwork findings from the evaluation and subjected these to a structured process of internal brainstorming and development. This process also included a review of **Value for Money** and counterfactual issues. The draft results were then presented at an Interim Report meeting (20th July 2007). This was followed by the final meeting (17th August 2007), and subsequent production of an agreed report and recommendations.

3. Context and operation of the RSC ACL Pilot

3.1 Rationale for the Pilot

The rationale for the RSC Pilot draws on the challenges facing the ACL sector in relation to e-learning. These challenges have been identified in a number of recent reports. A recent WCVA report[6], for example, placed e-learning champions in each County Voluntary Councils across Wales, with a remit of action research over a one year period. This research highlighted the unawareness – and scarcity of practice – of e-learning in the voluntary sector, linked to both cultural reluctance and lack of equipment available. It also found that many voluntary sector organisations were aware of e-learning, however the majority had an inaccurate understanding and 16% had never experienced e-learning. These factors can be attributed to the lack of take up of e-learning in the sector.

The WCVA research also identified fear in relation to the concern that e-leaning was intended to replace tutors, or at least deeply alter their interaction with students. This, in part, was linked to the lack of computer skills and self-confidence evident in the sector. It was also found to be compounded by limitations in the sector's technology facilities and consistency in the funding for such equipment.

A key recommendation of the report was:

> 'Provide support for voluntary sector learning providers through the JISC regional support centre, to add to the support already available to FE colleges. This should be delivered in an appropriate way by employing people with knowledge and experience of the voluntary sector'

The Pilot project can therefore be seen to be responding to both clearly elaborated evidence base, and strategic recommendations.

[5] Note, separate schedules were developed for each interview, following the basic format set out in the annex.

[6] WCVA (2005)

3.2 Issues facing e-learning and the ACL sector

Although the findings reviewed in section 3.1 relate to the voluntary sector in Wales, similar issues have been raised in consultations with the ACL sector during this evaluation[7]. These confirm a number of the limitations noted in the WCVA study:

Funding: Here the ACL sector was perceived to be poorly funded relative to other learning sectors, resulting in the lack of investment in e-learning expertise (staff) and technical resources. This situation was compared unfavourably with the FE sector, where it was felt that there has been a:

> '…Total lack of capital investment over the years. ACL in general has received piecemeal investment in terms of e-learning often on the back of other projects. The college FE sector has received sustained investment in this area through the ILT champions.'

Diverse sector

The fundamental diversity of the sector was also acknowledged as a challenge. As one respondent put it: 'ACL is a very diverse sector, and groups together voluntary organisations, with adult and community learning activities provided by Councils, as well as those franchised out.' Such diversity is in part expressed in terms of variable levels of digital inclusion. It was also felt to present problems in developing common support mechanisms, as well as interacting in a strategic manner.

Awareness

Within the ACL sector the lack of funding and development is felt to have created a situation where e-learning potential is not widely appreciated. In this respect the ACL sector is perceived to require distinct support. As one respondent put it: 'I have been new to e-learning and hadn't really understood the scope of the task…we need to be more aware of what is available in terms of e-learning. In FE we have had the ILT champions but their focus has been on mainstream FE and not the ACL sector.'

Support

The lack of funding is felt to be indicative of the wider lack of strategic and operational support for the ACL sector relative to FE. This could be characterised by the lack of strategic engagement. In this respect the lack of a single sector voice has limited its contribution towards strategy exercises. As a result it is felt that '…there needs to be consistency across the board so that all areas are moving in the same direction, no one is left behind or working at a tangent, there has to be a national strategic approach to e-learning for ACL.'

3.3 Operation of the Pilot

The RSC Wales' ACL activity is a two year pilot project currently employing one member of staff. This post holder operates at a strategic level with learning

[7] It should be noted, however, that there will be some cross over between these groups.

organisations in the sector; in particular, working with existing networks to develop e-strategies to support learners. This work also includes support for the management and use of electronic resources for teaching and learning.

The ***Post holder's duties*** are expressed as follows[8]:

- Promote appropriate services, resources and events of RSC Wales and the JISC;
- Actively lead and promote peer support networks to encourage a 'self-help' philosophy within Wales;
- Raise awareness in Wales ACL sector of UK wide shared resources;
- Attend Regional and National events and meetings as required;
- Provide technical and pedagogy support to Voluntary and Community Learning providers;
- Contribute to the RSC Wales website, ensuring ready access to accurate, timely and relevant information;
- Contribute to other relevant activities of the Regional Support Centre as required and work co-operatively with other colleagues in the team.

An important function of the post holder has been to collaborate with WCVA, NIACE Dysgu Cymru and Communities@One.

A key feature of the pilot is its use of a ***cascade model***, providing training and expertise to key people who have access to local and regional networks and groups, to support use of technology in teaching and learning for the ACL sector in Wales. This model aims to ensure ACL access to relevant existing RSC services (e.g. helpdesk forums) and contribute to those services where appropriate.

This post holder provides strategic and practical information, advice and training to key staff from the Adult, Community, Voluntary Learning sectors in the management and use of electronic resources for teaching and learning.

4. Activity to date

The work of the pilot has evolved, based on the model that the RSC Wales has used in the FE sector. This initial phase has focused on both needs assessment, and strategic engagement, with activities falling under the following headings:

- Raising awareness of the potential of e-learning;
- Contacting stakeholders;
- Starting an e-learning network within the ACL sector;

[8] University of Wales Swansea 'Job Description'

- Establishing the needs of the ACL sector ;
- Establishing the needs of the Voluntary sector;

Interviews and email exchanges with the post holder identified clear evidence of the work undertaken in these key areas:

In terms of **raising awareness of the potential for e-learning** the post holder organised an 'E-learning Awareness Day' for OCN Wales (April 2007) covering the areas of Web 2.0, e-assessment, e-portfolios and assistive technology. This event was attended by ten members of staff. The OCN Curriculum Manager is now in negotiations to start a pilot project using technology for assessment. OCN Wales are interested in supporting the use of technology in assessment of community courses.

The post holder also organised an 'E-learning Awareness Day' for Community Learning Wales (CLW) (April 2007) covering the areas of Resources, assistive technology and RSC work with ACL in SE England. This event was attended by fifty heads of service and guests.

Contacts with key stakeholders have also been developed, including NIACE Dysgu Cymru, and Community Learning Wales (CLW) - which is made up of LEA heads of service from all unitary authorities in Wales who provide ACL. Contact has also been made with FE ACL providers at their network meeting in June 2007. Elsewhere, contacts have been made in the HE ACL sector, with Newport University and Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE) at Swansea University.

In addition, ***networking within the ACL sector*** has been facilitated via support for the creation of a CLW e-learning sub-group which first met in February 2007 and agreed to develop an e-learning strategy for the ACL sector to inform good practice and feed into the e-learning strategy for Wales. The post holder worked with the group presenting the seven categories that had been used to form the e–learning strategy for the ACL sector in England. The group were able to comment, collaborating on a WIKI to put forward their ideas on what they would like to see in an e-learning strategy for Wales.

More generally networking has also been supported 'online' through the establishment of a JISC mail list. Here the Post holder has produced a range of email bulletins with news and events which are disseminated fortnightly. The network is starting to use the Del.icio.us[9] site to share useful websites and links. Furthermore the post holder is also organising a Conference for the ACL e-learning Network to take place in 2008.

The task of ***establishing the needs of the ACL sector*** is ongoing and being achieved through contacts and networking activities. The majority of the work the post holder has undertaken to date has focused on the ACL sector. The post holder's background is in this sector, there are a clear set of networks to tap into, and the

[9] Del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us/) is a social bookmarking web service for storing, sharing, and discovering web bookmarks. It is a non-hierarchical keyword categorization system that allows users to tag each of their bookmarks with a number of freely chosen keywords.

RSC has existing links in colleges which are being used to access the FE based ACL providers.

Initial links have been forged with the voluntary sector. This, however, is an area identified by the post holder and the RSC Wales manager as an area needing further work.

A further area identified as needing work are links with the ACL and voluntary sectors in North Wales. This in part, is linked to the Post holder's location (south Wales). It is also related to the composition of the strategic networks that the post holder has been engaging with – which tend to have an 'M4 corridor' bias.

5. Effectiveness and impact

In assessing effectiveness and impact of the Pilot the views of a wide range of stakeholders (recipients and non recipients) were taken. The broad thrust of these findings suggest that in the relatively short time of operation **the Post holder's work has proved to be highly effective in raising awareness of the potential for e-learning, and also encouraging stakeholders to act on this information and implement new e-learning strategies and activities**. These impacts are discussed in detail below, with reference to evidence collected from stakeholders.

5.1 Changes in attitudes

The increased awareness of the potential of e-learning for the ACL sector was clear in the interviews that were conducted. This, in part, reflects the low base of awareness evident in the sector prior to the Pilot. It also reflects the vigour by which the post holder has addressed this issue. The improvements in understanding and awareness has ranged from a better understanding of the strategic development process (cf. the Wales e-learning strategy Wiki discussed below), equipment opportunities (e.g. Mimio boards), and virtual learning environments. The impact of such awareness raising was clearly highlighted by the comments of the majority of respondents. For example:

> 'The RSC has been raising awareness of what e-learning can be used within the ACL sector. I've certainly become more aware of what can be used.' [Cardiff, LEA]

While awareness raising is perhaps the most common output from the post holder's work to date, such awareness has in many cases been translated into specific actions taken. These are discussed in more detail below.

5.2 Actions undertaken as a result of the pilot

The stakeholders that have been interviewed (see Annex) are very positive about the pilot project and the work that the post holder has undertaken. A key area in which awareness has been translated into practical action concerns the **implementation of new e-learning technologies**. Here, several interviewees noted that attendance at one of the Post holder's awareness events had resulted in them actively exploring or

introducing a Moodle[10]. The interview with the Curriculum Development Officer (OCN Wales) highlighted that this day had a significant impact on practice:

> 'We are now very interested in accessing the RSC's help to connect OCN to a Moodle. We are keen to create online resource packs to support our units. A meeting is being arranged for more senior managers within OCN …. We want to link with the networks that are already available. [The post holder] has clearly shown us what is possible. We are now taking steps to put it into practice'. [OCN]

The post holder has also been able to draw on the expertise of the RSC to inform stakeholders of e-learning resources that are most suitable for the sector, for example Mimio boards and assistive technology.

> '…the LEA has looked enviously at interactive white boards, but was unable to afford them. [the post holder] introduced them to the lower cost alternatives such as Mimio boards and they are actively considering implementation'. [Ceredigion, LEA]

> '…The RSC have given me advice on assistive technology for DART (Disability Awareness Raising Team). This was something I was planning to do anyway but they have certainly helped with advice and contributed toward the bid'. [Cardiff, LEA]

The advice and support provided by the post holder and the RSC has had a direct impact on the purchase of new equipment in some authorities.

> 'They [RSC] have also run a workshop on e-learning tools for ACL. I was invited [post holder] to meet mangers at the college. They were very inspired and motivated and as a consequence we have invested the remainder of this years budget on e-learning resource e.g. Mimio boards, voting systems, gyroscopes (hand held tools that link into laptop). We have invested in these tools based on the advice of [the post holder] and the RSC. We have asked [the post holder] to come and demonstrate the tools to our Co-ordinating Group, which involves tutors. We will also be able to allocate some money in our next budget. We are committed to e-learning and determined to enhance the way we deliver our courses.' [Coleg Morgannwg, FE]

A further area of emerging impact is the Post holder role in **network facilitation** within the sector. In this respect the Post holder's work with the CLW e-learning sub group has been important. In this respect, the majority of stakeholders interviewed mentioned that the CLW e-learning subgroup has enabled representatives from the sector to focus on e-learning.

A key network activity has been the Post holder's work in encouraging members to ***engage with the emerging e-learning strategy process*** through a WIKI[11]. This

[10] Moodle (http://moodle.org/) is an open source software e-learning platform *(*also known as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)*)*. It allows the creation of interactive online courses, and has a modular design, enabling the develop additional functionality.

represents one of the first examples of the sector working together to input into such a strategy. In several cases it has also had the benefit of influencing policy at the local level. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders interviewed did not have an existing e-learning strategy specifically for the ACL sector. However, they were now using the national strategy developed by the e-learning sub group and tailoring it for their local needs. Having a strategic voice at the national level has enabled stakeholders to heighten awareness of the importance of e-learning at a local level.

In addition to helping the sector to input into strategy, the Post holder's sub group work has also facilitated **sharing experiences of e-learning**. Several stakeholders mentioned that they had started e-learning initiatives prior to the pilot project; however they had felt very isolated in this work. Each authority was working in isolation and they were not aware of what other authorities were doing. The e-learning sub group and the e-learning network have enabled the stakeholders to find out what e-learning initiatives other ACL providers are piloting. This is illustrated by the following quotations from interviews with this Group:

> '…. We have been working in this area for a while but were not sure if we were in line with what others were doing, we felt we were working in isolation really. [The post holder] is bringing groups together so that we are aware of what other authorities are doing. The post has been vital for transferring information'. [Blaenau Gwent, LEA]

> '…We were working alone on e-learning, we felt isolated and weren't aware of what other authorities were doing in this area. Now we have a network we can get advice and training. [The post holder] is organising an e-learning conference for the sector so we can share good practice'. [Torfaen, LEA]

Placing the post in the RSC has also opened the resources and expertise of the Centre to the ACL sector. This benefit was highlighted by many of the stakeholders:

> '... The post has provided access to expertise and resources through the RSC. …having the post has provided the knowledge and enabled us to focus on the task [Torfaen, LEA]

The RSC's experience of working with the FE sector was valued by stakeholders. Here many felt that this experience could be transferred over to the ACL sector. Members of the RSC team also attended the awareness raising day for the ACL sector and were available to answer questions. Another benefit of the pilot being based at the RSC is the opportunity it provides to try out e-learning resources.

> 'We have been able to borrow resources from the RSC to try out. For example, I currently have a dyslexia pen which students are trialling. This is really good as normally the only way to try something out is to buy it, so you have to commit the resource before you know if it is what you really need. You might buy it and find out it doesn't do what your students want and that money is wasted. Being able to borrow and try resources from the RSC is fantastic.' [Torfaen, LEA]

[11] A WIKI is a collaborative website which can be directly edited by anyone with access to it. Wikipedia is one of the best known examples of a WIKI.

In many respects the impacts noted above are emerging. In this respect the true impacts of the pilot can only be determined after its conclusion. The success of these impacts being cascaded down to the learning provider community will also be important. This is discussed in more detail below.

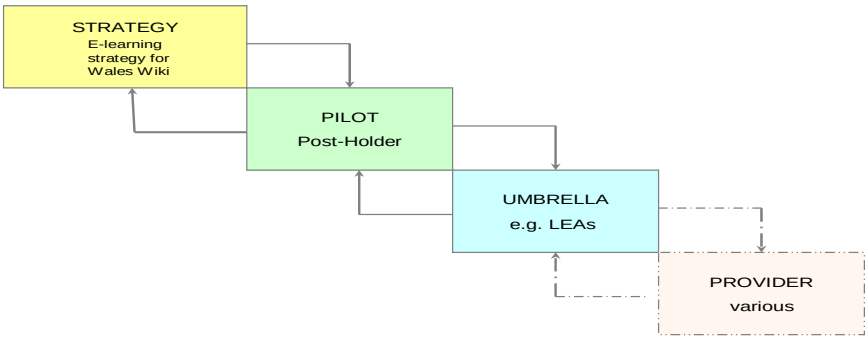
5.3 The cascading process

All the stakeholders interviewed felt that the cascade model was working well in their organisation. A summary of the processes described in previous sections is set out below. This highlights the multidimensional nature of the cascade, moving upwards to inform strategy making, but equally importantly moving downwards to raise awareness and bring about change within the organisations responsible for a range of learning providers (so called multiples, or umbrella organisations). The upward nature of cascading was also evident further down the cascade. Here, several respondents referred to this process:

> 'It is working here, [the post holder] passes information and useful sites to me and I pass them on to my tutors. It is also working the other way tutors are passing interesting resources they have come across to me, I can then pass to other tutors or beyond as examples of good practice.' [Merthyr Tydfil, LEA]

Others respondents described a 'sideways' cascading process. Such cascading was seen in terms of colleagues within their own organisation (in related teams). While the diversity of cascading was evident from the research, it should be noted that this evaluation has not been able to test out the full depth of the cascading impacts – particularly at the practitioner level. The evidence from interviews, however, suggests that it is too early to see significant impacts at this level.

Figure 2. Cascading in practice



However they all stressed that it was critical to have enthusiastic people at the top of the cascade with the determination to pass the information on down the cascade. Many of the stakeholders emphasised that it was not a straight forward one way

cascade of information from the post holder down. At the top level several mentioned that they had to filter the information to send it to the specific people in their organisation. This can be a time consuming process in this diverse sector where some tutors may only teach in a village hall twice a week. The filtering process may involve printing out the information and pinning it on a notice board for tutors to see, or putting it in the tutors register for the week.

Because of the diverse nature of the sector many of the stakeholders felt that the cascade model was the only model that could work within the ACL sector.

> 'I think this is the only way to do it with such a diverse sector. We have tutors who are only here for a limited time each week. It would be impossible to get all tutors together for a training session. So I am training a group of tutors and they will then train more tutors. It will probably take a few years to engage all tutors but it is the only way we can work. Mine is a management role so the time I have for development is limited. If I train a group then the training will cascade down.' [Cardiff, LEA]

Several stakeholders stressed that the cascade approach worked best when there was a dedicated e-learning or IT person within their organisation who could also receive the information and had responsibility for taking things forward.

> 'It certainly helps that we have ******, this is a direct link the RSC have been able to work with. This dedicated person helps things move more quickly. It would take longer to embed e-learning without this dedicated post.' [Swansea, LEA]

All stakeholders highlighted the importance of the post holder as a point of reference in the cascade whom they can always ask for clarification or further information. And critically they did not have to research the information themselves.

> '[The post holder's] role is to find out the latest information and pass it on to us. My time is so limited I do not have the scope to research new areas of e-learning. Having this information provided takes the burden off me.' [Torfaen, LEA]

The post holder as a point of reference is important for the success of the cascade, many stakeholders emphasised that as more ACL providers become involved the post holder will not be able to respond as quickly to questions and that the momentum in the cascade would suffer.

> '[the post holder] can only be a catalyst for change, she is very enthusiastic but she can only do so much. I think my organisation is lucky to have got involved early we have benefited from the post holder's time. As more organisations get involved her time will be stretched. If she is not able to respond quickly to peoples' questions they may lose their enthusiasm and momentum'. [Coleg Morgannwg, FE]

5.4 Value for money

The question of value for money is a difficult issue to assess at this early stage of the Pilot. It is clear, however, that costs have been incurred by the public sector, and outputs and impacts have begun to emerge. Here, the cost of the Pilot falls into two areas: salary and travel - amounting to some £50,000 per annum. Balanced against the significant change in both attitudes and action within the ACL sector noted above, this would suggest positive value for money. In particular, the value of supporting the pilot through the RSC also contributes towards the conclusion. Here, the post holder has access to all the services of the RSC, and is able to liaise with colleagues in England, who have been in post to support Voluntary and Community sector for the last 2 years.

Value for money, however, can only be assessed with comparators in mind. Here, stakeholders were clear that RSC Wales is a highly credible organisation, with respect to its e-learning expertise in the FE sector, as well as access to English good practice (as above). From this respect there no obvious alternative to the RSC. A number of possible options, however, have been considered in this research with respect to leadership potential. These options, and our analysis of their positive (+) and negative (-) features is set out in the table below:

- **An ACL umbrella organisation**

+ Good understanding of the ACL sector, potential for good credibility within the sector.

- Limited e-learning expertise and experience. Lack of overview of the whole ACL and voluntary sector.

- **A private consultancy**

+ Specialist e-learning expertise could be procured.

- Cost likely to be much higher for full time support capability. Credibility may be uncertain in ACL sector.

This analysis suggests that there are significant issues associated with each option. The option for an ACL umbrella organisation to take responsibility is not realistic, given the lack of expertise. There is also no other organisation that has both a technical and pedagogic e-learning agenda, and commands credibility across the whole community and voluntary sector.

Through a private consultancy approach it is feasible that an organisation would come forward with the necessary technical and pedagogic support (a consortium of consultants, for example). The key issue, however, would be one of cost. In this respect a full-time consultancy support could cost anywhere between £400 and £700 per day (for a sufficiently experienced consultant). It should be possible to obtain a significant discount on this cost if the service is procured for an annual (40 week) period. This, however, would still be significantly higher than the current annual cost of the Pilot - £50,000. It may also be difficult to find a consortium that commands respect across the whole Welsh ACL sector.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion the results of this evaluation suggest that **the Pilot project, despite being in its early stages, has been effective in meeting the initial objectives of raising awareness of e-learning possibilities in Wales, and supporting strategy, networking and the provision of technical and pedagogic advice.** In the relatively short period of the Pilot's operation the evaluation research identified strong progress in each of these areas. Much of this has been achieved in a context in which e-learning progress has lagged behind other sectors such as FE. This, however, should not underestimate or overshadow the challenges of working with a highly diverse sector.

Four broad areas of emerging impact are identified:

- **Awareness**

The evaluation research found examples of awareness raised in a range of areas, including understanding the potential for new e-learning technologies, opportunities to input into strategy, approaches being undertaken elsewhere. Such impacts were greatest amongst those organisations with little previous experience in this area. In cases where organisations were already engaged in e-learning, the work of the Post holder was, however, still felt to be important in supporting and giving confidence to such activities.

- **Networking**

Here a key activity of the Pilot has been to facilitate e-learning networking across Wales. The Post holder has, for example, played an important role in the CLW e-learning sub group, helping to disseminate information, and the exchange of experiences. This has been complemented by the Post holder's many presentations at events, to promote the pilot and support available. Networking has also been facilitated online through the hosting of a JISC discussion list.

- **Strategic engagement**

A related area of emerging impact lies in strategic engagement. Here the Post holder's work has been important in helping the CLW e-learning sub group to contribute to e-learning strategy at the national level. This is the first time that the ACL sector has provided a consolidated input into such strategy processes. The evaluation research also found that several LEAs are using this strategic input to develop their own 'local' e-learning strategy.

- **e-learning adoption**

Emerging impacts were also identified in the decisions taken by a number of LEAs to purchase new e-learning equipment (for example, Mimio boards). Such decisions can be traced directly to awareness raising activities of the Post holder, and subsequent support decisions.

6.1 SWOT assessment

The main conclusions from this research are presented in more detail using the SWOT format (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats).

Strengths

Although care has been taken to ensure that the post of ACL coordinator has been the primary focus of the evaluation, a key strength of the Pilot has undoubtedly been the ***dynamism and skills set of the post holder***. These attributes have been highly praised by the stakeholders concerned.

In many ways the dynamism is helping to make a success of the Pilot's cascade model. In this respect such dynamism provides the impetus for the important task of ***network activity and network building***. A clear example of how such networking activity is helping to meet the aims of the Pilot is given by the Post holder's facilitation of strategic input into the e-learning strategy.

A further strength of the pilot is the concentration of a range of support activities within the Pilot. In this respect the post holder is akin to a **'one stop shop'** provider of support. That is, in many cases the Post holder has the expertise necessary to address various forms of technical and pedagogic e-learning query. In others, however, the network connections noted above are helping to identify more suitable forms of support – where appropriate.

One important source of knowledge that the Post holder can 'tap into' is that of the ***RSC Wales' considerable experience in relation to supporting e-learning in the FE context***. Similar comments, here, were made in relation to RSC Wales' strong links into good practice evident in England. Such expertise was seen as a significant strength by the stakeholder community.

Weaknesses

In many respects it is too early to specify weaknesses within the Pilot at this stage of its development. As a result the weaknesses identified below are better considered as areas for development.

One of the key weaknesses evident in the model at present is that of ***human resources***. The post holder currently has a significant task in covering an extremely large and diverse sector, on an all Wales basis. A number of stakeholders, in this respect, have noted that there is potential for the Post holder to become inundated. Indeed, one stakeholder suggested that Post holder's response times to queries were felt to be increasing over time.

The size and diversity of the sector are issues which the Post holder identifies as current weaknesses in the pilot. In this respect the Pilot has tended to focus on the community sector, and not the ***voluntary sector***. This reflects the difficulty of covering the sector. It also reflects the Post holder's background in the ACL sector, and lack of previous exposure to the voluntary sector.

In light of the all Wales focus of the Pilot the current ***lack of North Wales focus*** suggests an area for development. This is largely linked to the South Wales focus of

the existing CLW sub group, and other stakeholder groups. It is also related to the current demand on the Post holder's time as a result of ACL activity and enquiry.

Opportunities

A number of opportunities flow directly from the weaknesses identified above. It will be important that these are addressed in the remaining part of the Pilot. Further details can also be found in the recommendations (see section 6.2 in below).

The scale and diversity of the ACL sector suggests that one position will not be sufficient to meet needs. A key opportunity, therefore, will be to ***employ additional staff*** to enable a much greater focus on the current sector and geographical weaknesses. It will also offer the potential to give greater attention to capturing the lessons from the Pilot phase. This will help to inform future roll out of the Pilot.

A further opportunity lies in exploring further cascading opportunities. Here a number of stakeholders have expressed concern that they alone may not be able to cascade sufficiently widely within their own organisation related partners. This was described as an opportunity of generating ***'a cascade within a cascade'***. If achieved successfully this will help to maximise the impact of the Pilot in the remaining period.

Threats

The evaluation has also identified threats to the further development of the Pilot. Again it should be reiterated that these are potential threats in the sense that there is still sufficient time to either address or guard against such issues:

The first potential threat is that of ***cascade failure***. This is possible in the sense that the process relies heavily on identifying enthusiastic individuals who are capable of cascading within their organisation. Indeed, the real danger here is that the Post holder has limited control of the extent to which information is (or is not) cascaded further down the organisation 'chain'. A further cascade issue noted is that of the general lack of sustainable funding for e-learning within the ACL sector. This was felt, by stakeholders, to represent a potential blockage within the cascade 'chain'.

A further threat lies in the potential for ***post holder inundation***. This relates directly to the limited number staff within the Pilot (one), and the ever growing number of stakeholders. This presents a challenging situation, whereby the more successful the Post holder is, the less time she will have to meet the needs of stakeholders. This will require careful attention to the level of demand from stakeholders, and the available resources.

The potential for the pilot to adopt an overly ***narrow sector or geographical focus*** was highlighted above. This is most likely to be an issue if the Post holder becomes inundated with enquiries. The threat, in this respect, would be that the Pilot fails to meet its stated aim of providing all Wales, and community and voluntary sector support.

A final potential threat to the pilot is the danger that the Post holder becomes inundated, and the strong focus on delivering the Pilot overshadows the need to **capture lessons**. While this evaluation report is a useful stage in capturing lessons,

this task should be one that is ongoing – particularly if the Pilot is to be mainstreamed at the end of the two year period.

6.2 Recommendations

A number of areas of recommendation flow from the preceding analysis. These are discussed in turn:

R1: Subject to further resources being made available to the Pilot, efforts should be made to ascertain the needs of the wider ACL sector, including those of North Wales learning organisations.

The findings from this evaluation research suggest that the current sector and geographical coverage of the Pilot is limited. That is, the Pilot has a South Wales community focus, with gaps in relation to North Wales and the voluntary sector. This is clearly not consistent with the all Wales ACL focus.

R2: The Pilot should explore opportunities to maximise the impact of cascading.

The possibility of ensuring the success of the cascading model was noted in the research. Here, the main suggestion made by several stakeholders was that greater support for cascading within cascades was explored. That is, stakeholders would value input from the RSC Wales to help them maximise their cascading efforts, both to immediate colleagues within their organisation, but also to closely related partners. It is recognised, however, that this will depend on sufficient staff resources within the Pilot.

R3: The RSC Wales ensures that it maintains a focus on documenting lessons, with a view to informing the post-Pilot ACL activities.

A central focus of the Pilot is delivering against the targets of raising awareness, promoting awareness and providing technical and pedagogic advice. Alongside this it is vitally important for any pilot to consider what lessons emerge from its implementation. This is the fundamental mechanism by which such pilots can inform subsequent activity.

Annex

I. Research tools (interview schedules)

Semi Structured Interview Schedule

Stakeholders who have been in contact with RSC

The aim of this interview is to:

- establish context
- collect evidence of expectations
- collect evidence of tasks/activities the post holder has undertaken
- reflections on the cascade model – is it working in their organisation?
- what they would like to see in the future

1) What do you feel are the needs of the ACL sector in terms of e-learning?

2) Can you provide a broad overview from your perspective of how is the pilot project is providing support?

3) What impact has the pilot had on your organisation in terms of e-learning strategy / practice?

4) Can I ask you to reflect on the cascade model, can you describe how it is working in your organisation?

5) Can you describe the strengths and identify any weaknesses in the cascade model approach?

6) Can you think of any opportunities for enhancing the model?

7) Can you describe how you would see the pilot phase moving forward? What additional support would you like to see for the ACL sector in terms of e-learning?

II. RSC Stakeholder Interviews

Organisation	Interview date
JISC RSC	
Esther Barrett – Post holder	4th July
Peter Scott – RSC Manager	4th July
E-learning sub group of CLW	
Denise Owen - Quality Coordinator - Ceredigion	17th July
Jen Connolly - Head of service - Merthyr.	16thJuly
Andy Latimer - IT Manager - Swansea	17th July
Richard Clement - IT Manager - Cardiff	18th July
Mike Hughes – Head of Service - Swansea	20th July
Karen Padfield - Head of service - Torfaen	23rd July
Gabi Taylor - Head of Service - Cardiff	30th July
Jean Gaywood – IT Manager - Torfaen	6th August
LEA/FE	
Helen Saunders – Outreach manager Coleg Morgannwg	2nd August
Byron Jones – Head of Service - Blaenau-Gwent- LEA	7th August
Lyn Travis – Head of Service- Caerphilly LEA	9th August
Carol Clammer – Head of Service, Monmouthshire LEA	10th August
Paul Richardson – ILT Champion – Coleg Harlech	10th August
NIACE DC	
Cerys Furlong	18th July
Research Team	16th August
Communities@one	
Alun Burge.	30th July
WCVA	
Kate Thomas	31st July
Awarding Bodies	
OCN Alison Creed	31st July