The changing role of learned bodies and membership organisations: some UK experiences

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With the extensive changes to funding and employment security now underway worldwide, membership bodies and learned and professional associations are finding that their role is changing so as better to represent their members' views and respond to their needs. In the United Kingdom (UK), members show increasing interest in acquiring and retaining professional standing. As government selective funding decreases, activities are being displaced from the centre to within the community with the membership body taking an increased organisational and broker role. A new governmental focus on accountability and impact is changing members' priorities leading to revised activities by learned bodies. This paper discusses the changes necessary for professional bodies to continue to lead in the changing climate.

Keywords: funding, accreditation, ALT, professional bodies, impact, membership organisations.

Background

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is the UK's membership organisation in learning technology. It aims to ensure that use of learning technology is effective and efficient, informed by research and practice, and grounded in an understanding of the underlying technologies, their capabilities and the situations into which they are placed. It does this by improving practice, promoting research, and influencing policy (ALT, 2011). It is cross sectoral from schools to higher education and also attracts members from industry and government.

In the UK much central government expenditure has supported learning technology across higher and further education for a number of years (see (JISC, 2012) and links therefrom). Activities funded have involved: pure research; seedcorn activities; commissioned surveys; pilots of technologies, techniques and approaches; initiatives where significant sums (in three cases tens of millions of US$) are spent within institutions through bidding processes; and a full scale (and unsuccessful) online university (HEPI, 2005) costing over $100M.

Activities have also varied according to technology, pedagogy, degree of learner focus and style of government intervention. More technological examples include a Centre of Excellence for Reusable Learning Objects at London Metropolitan University (RLO-CETL, 2009) funded by the English Funding Council, work on Flexible Service Delivery and shared services (JISC advance, 2012) funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and work in developing European and other standards for exchanging learner information (Dempsey, 2010) also part funded by the JISC. Less technological are Higher Education Academy (HEA) and JISC work on Digital Literacies (JISC, 2011) and work on learner experiences (JISC, 2009).

All this has led to a considerable growth in the learning technology community and in its activities as institutions have evolved structures (research and practice), in part to respond to government funding opportunities. ALT members have been major recipients of funding with ALT occasionally acting as a communication channel with funders or as a broker bringing together groups of bidders.

With the contraction of the central funding base over the past 3 years, both individuals and units have tended to refocus on more institutional matters. More higher education money will now "follow the student" with English tuition fees increasing by a factor of about 3. A corollary is less money from central funders. JISC in particular has had a major review (HEFCE, 2010) by its main contributors leading to clear decisions that "Research and Development activity should focus on horizon-scanning and thought leadership" and that "services and projects should be rationalised with a view to significantly reducing their number".

Contraction is painful for central funding bodies which have previously provided control and support for their funded work. Funders have now instituted charges for events and services that had been free. They are also archiving significant quantities of completed work (JISCmail, 2009). Initiatives that remain such as the current Digital Literacies Programme are less fully funded and involve community bodies as participants, as brokers

and as disseminators. There is thus a growing need for self help and mutual support in the community, including in staff development. ALT's role is developing to provide efficient mechanisms for this to happen.

Institutional emphasis

Government and central funders have changing policy language from that of having their own policy objectives and priorities, reflecting their own beliefs and the advice of expert consultants, to that of helping institutions and individuals to meet their own objectives. The current JISC strategy (JISC 2010) has five strategic objectives of which three begin with "Help institutions to" and the other three stress value for money and cost effectiveness. More money is given directly to institutions and less retained in the centre. This results in changes in whence learning technology researchers and units within institutions seek funds - away from a concentration on specific outside funders towards more support within the institution for activities more closely aligned to the institutions stated objectives, and to diversifying appeals to external sources, including international and European ones.

This leads to a growing role for the professional association as a facilitator and broker. This is evidenced by the facts that the number of Special Interest Groups in ALT has trebled within a short period, demand for free development webinars has escalated, events providing advice on how to bid more widely have been repeatedly oversubscribed, and the wish to work as a community facilitated by the membership body, always present in the learning technology community, has taken a higher profile with increased electronic activity in diverse channels.

Institutions in the UK are subject to other pressures as a result of changes underway. One is responding to the needs of learners. For this and other reasons, as elsewhere, many now articulate the provision of learning supported by technology as a clear part of future offerings (Purcell, Beer, Southern & Chipperfield, 2011). Most include some reference to it in institutional strategy documents. Some articulate that the way to achieve this is to do away with specialised units and expect every teacher and learner to "just do it". Others expect units to remain involved but with a more delivery oriented and support focus. Yet others expect central pedagogic and technology leadership. All anticipate a lot of staff development and seek options for its provision.

Such pressures are neither unique to learning technologists within education nor to education as a whole. They are certainly not unique to the UK. Major changes in job security, expected role, funding sources and the perceived need to take control of one's own development occur more widely, including in Australasia.

The changing financial model for professional bodies

Learned bodies need to remain solvent. Traditionally there was a simple activity and financial model outside certain "license to practice" disciplines such as medicine or engineering where the audience is captive and so fees are high. The traditional sources of income are membership (individual and organisational), events, publications, and occasionally grants. For ALT (and others) the largest contributor to central running costs has been an annual conference. With most funding bodies using their own staff for community activities, direct awards to ALT were small and usually restricted to those areas where ALT could act as a broker/aggregator. An example of this was the wiki on "What research has to say for practice" (ALT, 2010) where leading researchers were financed to produce guides and ALT took funding from three sponsors and distributed to the researchers.

More recently attitudes have changed, with the help of a not inconsiderable push from a government which is more widely seeking charitable bodies to take over the provision of services to save money (Cabinet Office, 2012). Thus for ALT the number of funded dissemination and brokerage activities has increased (from perhaps 1 a year in the period 2006-2009 to 4+ a year in 2010-2012). The new roles include putting together a reviewing structure for products produced under initiatives, organising user involvement in trials of service sharing projects, organising the production of a MOOC, and taking a significant role in dissemination. This last partly results from the realisation by funders that, by consistently relying on their own support and dissemination mechanisms, they may largely be disseminating to their own perhaps small and closed "supporters club".

ALT represents a wider community, solidly based within institutions and "is its members". This has been brought about by a culture of openness and community building. As a result, overall income has held up despite rapidly moving to an open access journal, changing the membership structure and remodelling the conference and other events to be more online as attendance budgets are threatened. ALT has also been gifted money.

Increasingly ALT has been contacted by funders and national bodies who are anxious to be seen to be consulting the communities for which it is a, hopefully faithful, proxy. Previously, ALT views were interposed

opportunistically. This has led to some nominating rights to national bodies which in turn leads to more interest in membership and a virtuous circle.

Increased emphasis on professionalism and membership

As job security diminishes, individuals are keener to be seen as professionals who keep up to date with practice, and have their professionalism recognised. One way of doing that is to engage with a professional and learned body. Another is to sign up within that to a professional development scheme within that body. Even though Learning Technology is not a "license to practice discipline", it is nevertheless one in which a need for continuous updating is recognised. The Certified Membership of the Association for Learning Technology Scheme CMALT (ALT 2012) recognises this and provides peer-based professional recognition embracing the all practice in the context of Learning Technology. It is widely applicable and is not specifically UK oriented.

CMALT is a portfolio-based professional accreditation scheme developed by ALT to enable people whose work involves learning technology not only to have their experience and capabilities certified by peers but also to demonstrate that they are taking a committed and serious approach to their professional development. It has developed into a community drawn from across educational and commercial sectors, committed to professional and personal development. Participation in the scheme has steadily increased over the past years, with many members achieving accreditation and continuing their involvement with the scheme as assessors (See Table 1).

Table 1: ALT Membership numbers.

Year	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/2
All Individual Members	496	433	474	661	926	1195
Those Involved in CMALT	18	18	56	165	332	422

The upward trends have continued into 2012/3. While some of the overall membership is undoubtedly to do with identifying a better set of membership benefits and taking on new and less expensive classes of member, the overall membership increase is considerable. Churn in individual membership has decreased since the early noughties. A new research strand in CMALT is under design after an initial primarily practitioner focus.

A further CMALT driver has been a UK move for institutions to provide comparable Key Information Sets (KIS) for potential students and the public, following a US model and some previous attempts such as the Teaching Quality Information and UNISTATS (for the current version see (UK Government, 2012)). Statistical information on the professional standing of all those involved in teaching and supporting learners is required in many accreditation processes and may be added to the KIS.

A further major shift is in recognising the role and importance of learners in quality processes. The introduction of the National Student Survey in 2005, (Richardson, Slater & Wilson, 2007), modelled in part on Australian instruments, has led to changed behaviour by institutions, for instance in the area of assessment and feedback which was perceived as weak in many institutions (Williams, Kane, Satya & Smith, 2008). There is increased enthusiasm for obtaining the considered views of learners. However, data still suggests that many students can be single minded in seeking to maximise face to face one on one contact with lecturers (Shift Learning, 2012). ALT is working with the National Union of Students (NUS) on attitudes, surveys and codes of practice and regularly has NUS officials on its committees and as invited speakers at its events. While student politics can sometimes be treacherous to navigate, we have successfully worked jointly on several activities. Having such relationships is especially desirable at a time when learner control is seen as increasingly important.

Conclusion

In times of austerity with contraction of the opportunities from central government, the role of the professional membership body has changed and increased. This is happening across the developed world. Bodies need to represent their members with government, institutions and funders, support them fully in their drive for professionalism, and take over evaluation and dissemination activities from government in a more cost effective fashion. They need to act as aggregators and as brokers between policy makers, learners, practitioners and researchers. Sustainability follows if a body leads appropriately for its community of members and remains respected as representing them. It is possible to do this successfully.

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