learning and skills

Becta
British Educational Communications
and Technology Agency

transforming learning
and teaching through ICT

guidance on using consultants

introduction

The climate for post-compulsory education and training has become more demanding and complex, involving culture change that can be both technically and organisationally demanding – often in short timeframes. Unfortunately, many organisations do not have access to resources capable of delivering this change and suffer as a result.

Becta – together with various public and private sector partners – has recently been evaluating the use of consultants to support post-16 institutions to review, develop and implement their ICT and e-learning strategies.

The Supported Strategy Implementation Service (SSIS) project evaluated a range of consultancy tools and approaches with two colleges and an Adult and Community Learning provider as well as exploring the collective experience of educational and ICT consultants in delivering e-learning consultancy.

One of the key findings of this project is that consultancy can be effective in delivering institutional transformation, and adds significant value to those organisations which engage appropriately and effectively with consultants. Based on this evaluation, it is recommended that institutions seeking to make e-learning transformation actively consider working with consultants at key stages to help achieve progress. To support this Becta has developed:

- a consultancy model to promote the improved definition, integration and implementation of e-learning in the post-16 sector. This model combines public-sector tools, advice and guidance supported by private-sector consultancy skills and experience.

- recommendations on the best ways to engage with consultants, ensuring delivery of successful projects and getting the best value for money.

This publication presents the main findings of this project, outlines the consultancy model and sets out guidelines on how to identify, procure and work with ICT consultants to deliver quantum change in e-learning.

key findings

The SSIS project evaluated the use of a variety of consultancy tools and approaches at two FE colleges and an inner-city adult and community learning provider. The case studies set out a synopsis of the work undertaken within each organisation.

Post-compulsory education and training is under pressure to change its culture and do so quickly. The provider community, and colleges in particular, have been given a range of generic advice about ICT and e-learning policy and strategy. However, recent research (*ICT and e-learning in Further Education*, Becta 2005 and earlier reports based on the Becta annual survey of college use of ICT and e-learning) shows that this has not been converted into practice at a pace to match changing demand. One of the reasons for this is that the resources and expertise needed to deliver such change are often not readily available within individual organisations. There are many reasons for this, including:
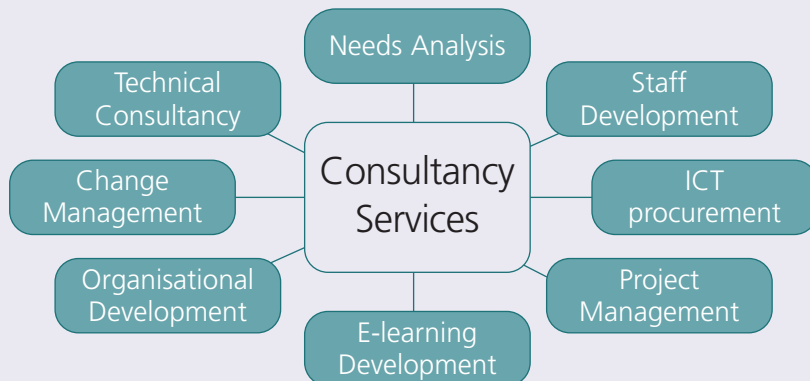
- the inability of organisations to release staff quickly from core activities
- limited staff skills, knowledge or experience on specific specialist issues
- lack of objectivity, subject knowledge or breadth of sector awareness
- lack of project management experience or expertise.

Even where internal staff resources have the necessary knowledge and skills, it is difficult to release them from their current role – and almost impossible to do so cost effectively.

Consultants can offer a readily accessible source of objective expertise across the complex web of pedagogical, technical and managerial disciplines that are necessary to support e-learning and the successful deployment of computing resources.

In addition, the consultancy resource can be engaged flexibly without affecting core activities. Consultancy offers a viable and sustainable alternative to in-house resources – and can provide a lower cost, value for money option when opportunity cost is taken into account.

Types of consultancy service

Needs Analysis

Technical Consultancy

Staff Development

Change Management

Consultancy Services

ICT procurement

Organisational Development

Project Management

E-learning Development

Another key benefit of using consultants is the capacity to generate momentum and maintain focus on projects. Many exciting and worthwhile projects start well, then fall by the wayside because of new initiatives taking priority – usually by default. Stakeholders frequently lose focus or the capacity to deliver owing to increased demands on their time. Again, consultancy is an effective way to maintain focus and momentum through the application of strong project management – which can deliver results quickly and effectively.

Where colleges and other post-16 providers are faced with the need to develop their services or extend their role and mission, consultancy can be an effective means of capacity building without causing significant interruptions to the continuing work of the organisation. Consultancy can also help to identify staff and other resources that can be freed to build new provision or support significant changes in role or function for parts of the organisation.

Factors necessary for effective consultancy

The institution must...	The consultant must...	Partnership needs...
• recognise that e-learning is a solution that meets the needs of learners and the complexities of the business operations of learning providers • ensure that senior managers engage in shaping the strategic and operational environment for their organisation • demonstrate a genuine desire to change, using technology to prioritise learning outcomes	• offer flexible tools and services that are adaptable to the particular circumstances of each organisation • be prepared to drive the pace and process of change with their client	• mutual respect of the capabilities, and aspirations of the partners • effective and constructive communications • a proactive and open approach to sharing information and data • ownership of the consultancy by all partners – encouraging joint activity to achieve agreed outcomes

Case Study 1

A medium sized FE college

Involvement in this project was initiated following a recent move to a new site constructed under the Public Finance Initiative and specific follow-up to elements of the last inspection report. The purpose of the project was to audit both the organisational and technical capacity to meet the anticipated needs of the college and to identify ways forward for the use of ICT and e-learning. Following an initial exploration of the college's needs, three projects were initiated covering training needs, revision of the college's ICT and e-learning strategy and possible integration of data management.

Involvement of consultants has led to the appointment of a college 'ILT Champion' and the setting up of a team of mentors in each of the teaching areas to support individuals. A dedicated staff development room has also been set up to provide a training venue and opportunities for staff to practise with equipment and software, to gain confidence before using it with learners.

The college is now reviewing its ILT and e-learning strategy, having established its priorities and is developing more integrated business processes to serve learner, employer and staff needs.

Case Study 2

An inner-city Adult & Community Learning Provider

Having achieved a successful inspection, this provider was seeking to develop its facilities for learners and implement its newly devised e-learning strategy. Working with consultants, an audit of current technology and staff training needs was undertaken which identified key priorities for the service.

In the second phase, a detailed review of available options to develop a learning platform was conducted by the service managers and consultants, which established the detailed specifications for the service's needs and an appropriate product to meet those needs in the current circumstances. With help from the consultants, a successful bid for funding to establish the learning platform was made and staff are currently being trained to use the learning platform and add their own learning materials for use by their learners.

Case Study 3

A large provincial FE college

For this successful college, the initial phase of the consultancy established the need to develop a more coherent framework for the co-ordination and delivery of ICT services to learners and staff, and limitations on the capacity of the technical infrastructure.

In the second phase, three projects were initiated to provide a model for the review of the college strategies, review the technical infrastructure and service delivery and an e-learning assessment to determine how e-learning was embedded across the different sites and curriculum areas. The reports, produced by the consultants together with recommendations for future activity, have been used to support in-house developments, including the initiation of a major review of the computer operating system currently used by the college.

Drivers for Institutional Change

The learning and skills sector is required to respond to a wide range of national requirements which focus on the quality and effectiveness of provision.

- New inspection arrangements under the revised Common Inspection Framework place a greater emphasis on self-evaluation and planning. The capacity of colleges to implement change is now explicitly assessed and commented on by inspection teams and this requires greater accuracy in the self-assessment reporting process and a clearer understanding by staff of college strategies and their implementation.

- Inspection teams will have explicit guidance on inspection of e-learning through the *Handbook for Inspecting Colleges* produced by Ofsted. This uses a very broad definition of e-learning and the role this should play within the inspection process. The text is specific on those areas where inspectors will be expected to comment.

- In the context of ICT and e-learning, Government strategies such as *Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services* and the *Digital Strategy* set out clear priorities for development of both infrastructure and provision to meet the needs of learners and communities. These initiatives are also linked to related developments stemming from *Every Child Matters* and *Extended Schools*. For the Learning and Skills Council, changing circumstances place an emphasis, in their planning, on self-assessment and quality improvement through the Agenda for Change. All of these changes are leading to a greater personalisation of learning.

- For adult and community learning providers, planning under the new financial arrangements for adult learners requires critical decisions to be made about the use of ICT and e-learning to support delivery and ensure the viability of provision.

- The Foster Review of Further Education sets out new roles for colleges emphasising greater responsiveness to employer needs, extension of partnerships to address the requirements noted in the preceding paragraphs and obligations to the 14–19 Strategy and the needs of those not in employment, education or training. A key recommendation is that colleges should support learners 'at home, at work and at college'.

the consultancy model

Based on the findings of the project, a simple model has been developed into which appropriate tools and consultancy services can be placed. The model follows a quality improvement cycle and relates the stage of the cycle to the scope of the consultancy and the appropriate tools and services that can be applied. The model clearly identifies four critical stages of development.

We recommend that institutions adopt this model, and seek consultancy support which clearly reflects their position within the cycle.

The following diagram identifies how the model relates to consultancy tools and consultancy projects. Specific supplier tools identified here reflect the work on the SSIS project – clearly others exist from other consultants.

The application of public-sector tools aligned to private-sector services is a powerful combination of proven techniques and activities with a large established user base.

The consultancy model cycle
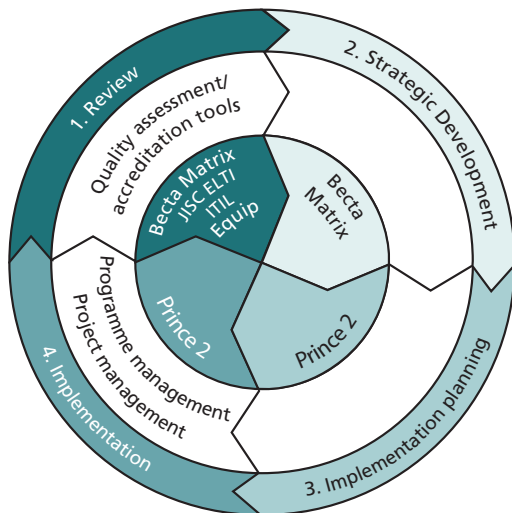
Key issues

Strategy & Policy
Leadership & Management
Staff Skills & CPD

Infrastructure
Equipment
Service Delivery
Resources

Learning & Teaching
Curriculum
Progression
Assessment

Communication
Information & Data

- The tools in the inner circle are self-assessment tools which can be used in the phases marked in the outer rim.

- At each of the phases in the cycle, managers and consultants will need to consider the issues identified to the right of the circle if they are to deal with ICT in an integrated manner at the organisational level. For each project, particular issues will be prioritised, but the implications for the overall functioning of the organisation and the functional and strategic linkages between all of these areas need to be considered.

- The tools or activities in the middle circle are used to move from analysis to achievement of targets and provide independent validation of activities e.g. the quality assessment/ accreditation tools are designed to assess progress and achievement against established industry or national criteria and provide objective evidence for the organisation of the success or otherwise of the project.

Stages in the Model –
What to expect

1. Review: Where are you now?

An objective and impartial review phase can identify those areas where the institution has strengths, weaknesses, barriers and opportunities for development in all aspects of ICT and e-learning. Understanding the potential impact of new Government strategies and the implications of quality improvement strategies is essential to inform any review. It is here that consultants may be particularly useful.

- The initial review stage must address all areas listed in the agreed scope of work. At present, not even the Self-Assessment Reporting requirements or the formal inspection report from Ofsted/ALI address these in any detail for ICT and e-learning. Scope must include people and process – not just technology.

- The initial review stage is critical for institutions, and must be undertaken accurately and objectively since it forms the foundation on which the development is based.

- Good consultants will use established models to give you a quantifiable benchmark measure – something against which improvement can be measured and reviewed. These models should be simple, understandable and reproducible.

This stage should give you a real understanding of your starting point. It will confirm some pre-conceptions, contradict others, and identify new strengths and weaknesses.

A good consultant will cut through the organisation's pre-conceptions to the reality below and they may identify information not currently available to senior managers – part of the challenge for the organisation is to be prepared to listen to these messages.

2. Strategic Development: Where do you want to get to?

The objective of this stage is to determine clearly the state that you want to reach. This should start from your overall educational objectives. What sort of institution are you striving to become? How do you expect to see teaching and learning change? What will the learner's experience be in three years' time?

Map out this vision, and then work out how and where you expect e-learning and ICT to underpin this changed institution. Then work from your initial review to understand the journey of change in all its aspects.

Consultants should offer simple, flexible models to capture this – models which enable you to communicate the aspirations widely. These models must reflect the 'soft side' of e-learning – the people, processes and culture

within the organisation which are critical to the success of any development as well as the equipment, training and infrastructure.

3. Planning: How will you get there?

This process should culminate in a simple, clear roadmap from your starting point to the vision. This should encompass everything which needs to change within the institution and its stakeholders to achieve your strategic objectives.

There are well established techniques which should be used to support this process. The process needs to be rigorous in working out what is needed to effect each of the changes – so 'building staff motivation' will need to address how, who and when.

This planning process must identify who is accountable for each step of the process and for each strand, and crucially, who will 'own' the overall journey. It must also identify clearly the costs of each stage.

Consultants should bring clearly established processes and tools to this stage. They should demonstrate experience of planning in all the areas of change you wish to make, or you could restrict their role to some aspects and plan others internally. Either way, the use of consistent tools, terminology and process across the projects will be essential.

4. Implementation: Managing the journey

This phase is about strong project and programme management. You must identify who is accountable for the overall programme of change, and who is responsible for each of the components within it.

You'll need to develop a clear management process to monitor and review progress and to support the project and programme managers in meeting their targets. This overall management will also need to ensure that changes to the programme are sustained, that contingencies are accounted for, and that 'blockages' are cleared.

Of the four stages, this is the one that is likely to be best managed by the institution. The advantage of running this phase internally is that staff will feel they have 'done the job' rather than 'having it done to them'. This ensures ownership and staff buy-in.

Consultancy can provide valuable input and help maintain focus and momentum. This may be through formal Programme or Project Management, support to a steering group, or more informally as a critical friend or sounding board.

getting the best from consultants

Choosing the right consultant is critical to the success of the project. So how do you mitigate this risk and ensure that you select someone with the requisite knowledge who will be a good fit with your organisation?
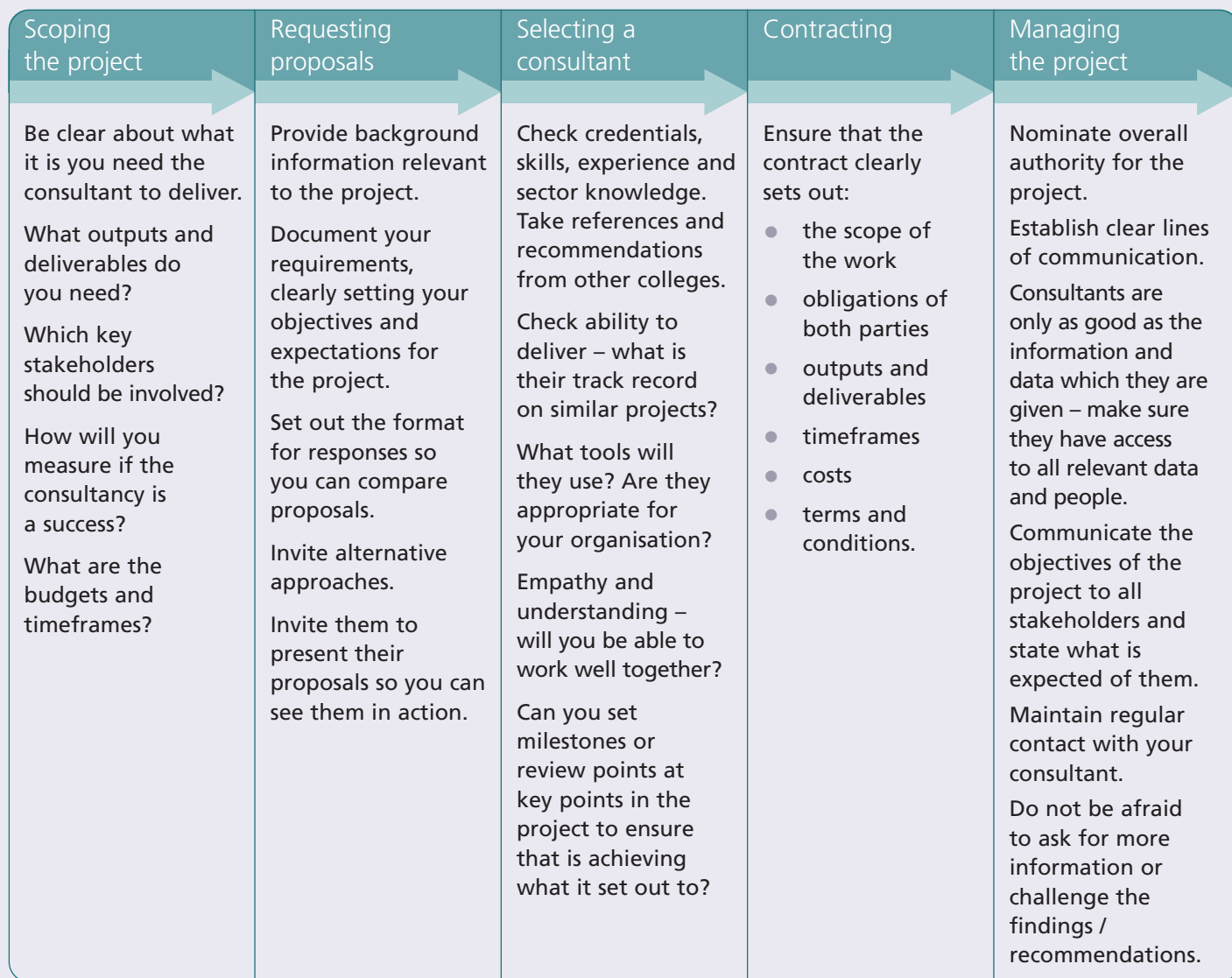
Using consultants can deliver value for money and significant benefits in defining and implementing ICT strategies. However, it is important to recognise that they are only as good as their initial brief and the information and data with which they are provided.

Time spent defining the project and identifying who you want to work with is a wise investment.

- Meet them first – is there a good fit between them and your organisation? Are you and your staff comfortable with their ways of working?

- Ask who will actually deliver the work – how experienced are they?

- Test them on their sector knowledge and ask them about projects they have undertaken elsewhere – follow up references.

- A good consultant will identify during the project, areas which need more or less work, and changes in scope and emphasis. This should work to your advantage in focusing on the real issues rather than the perceived issues – you need to be flexible to take advantage of this and record these changed assumptions formally.

- The consultants should guide you through the process and make working together straightforward.

The following diagram outlines some of the issues to be considered when selecting which consultant to use and whilst working with them.

Scoping the project	Requesting proposals	Selecting a consultant	Contracting	Managing the project
Be clear about what it is you need the consultant to deliver. What outputs and deliverables do you need? Which key stakeholders should be involved? How will you measure if the consultancy is a success? What are the budgets and timeframes?	Provide background information relevant to the project. Document your requirements, clearly setting your objectives and expectations for the project. Set out the format for responses so you can compare proposals. Invite alternative approaches. Invite them to present their proposals so you can see them in action.	Check credentials, skills, experience and sector knowledge. Take references and recommendations from other colleges. Check ability to deliver – what is their track record on similar projects? What tools will they use? Are they appropriate for your organisation? Empathy and understanding – will you be able to work well together? Can you set milestones or review points at key points in the project to ensure that is achieving what it set out to?	Ensure that the contract clearly sets out: • the scope of the work • obligations of both parties • outputs and deliverables • timeframes • costs • terms and conditions.	Nominate overall authority for the project. Establish clear lines of communication. Consultants are only as good as the information and data which they are given – make sure they have access to all relevant data and people. Communicate the objectives of the project to all stakeholders and state what is expected of them. Maintain regular contact with your consultant. Do not be afraid to ask for more information or challenge the findings / recommendations.

Value for Money

Consultancy is not cheap, and even the most objective and independent consultant will be working to his or her own agenda – chiefly, to sell more consultancy. In order to measure value for money, set clear 'success criteria' for the project and assign a monetary value to these – what is it really worth to you?

Compare the cost of using an external consultant against using in-house resources – but be clear about the true cost of using in-house staff. Take salary plus on-costs into account and factor in any lost opportunity costs – is there something else you will not be able to do as a result of redeploying internal staff?

Consultancy Costs

A survey by the partners identified that the following daily rates were commonly charged for work in the sector at the time of writing.

Day rates

- £350–600 per day for individuals and small consultancies.
- £750–£1,400 per day for large corporations / management consultants with highly specialised expertise.

Day rates for the consultancy suppliers on the Becta Consultancy Services Framework are openly available on our website – see further information.

Fee structures

- Try to negotiate a fixed price contract wherever possible so you know exactly what your outlay will be.
- Ensure you know whether expenses are included or on top. Ask the consultant to quantify the likely extent of any expenses in advance.
- Avoid entering into open-ended contracts – always specify a ceiling figure which cannot be exceeded without written authorisation.

conclusions

Consultancy is effective in initiating, implementing and sustaining organisational change.

- The consultancy supported model can clearly help institutions in developing and delivering robust and effective e-learning and ICT strategies.

- Consultancy works when and if, and only if, the institutions want to change. Principals, senior managers and key stakeholders within the institutions need to be prepared to engage with the consultants and be committed to implementing the recommendations. This is evidenced by identifying the change as a priority and investing resources, time and effort to make the change a reality.

- Consultancy support is different from supporting tools and processes. There is a strong reliance on the skills and experience of the consultant to define the right approach and process for each institution and engagement.

- The application of public-sector tools aligned to private-sector services is a powerful combination of proven techniques and activities with a large established user base.

- Control risk in using consultants by investing time in the planning stage in selecting who to work with and what you really want them to do.

further information

All enquiries about the project should be addressed to **consultancy@becta.org.uk**

Useful references and tools

Becta Consultancy Services Framework
http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/consultancy
Becta has set up a Consultancy Services Framework Agreement to provide educational institutions in both the schools and the post-16 sector with access to high-calibre monitored ICT consultancy.

Becta's Matrix tool – Learning and Skills
http://matrix.becta.org.uk
Click on Learning and Skills

RM's Q-Mark – Service Quality Review
http://www.rm.com/FE/Products/Story. asp?cref=PS394383&Srcurl=la1

Ferl – Policies and Strategies pages
http://ferl.becta.org.uk/policies

The Community Learning Resource
http://www.aclearn.net

Related materials

Becta has recently launched a Self-Review Framework for schools which supports their development of policy and practice relating to ICT and e-learning. While this framework is designed for schools, many elements are relevant for the post-16 sector, so you may find the framework helpful in your own self-assessment activities.

http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/ selfreviewframework

The Supported Strategy Implementation Service (SSIS) project has been jointly managed by a partnership involving:

- Becta
- RM
- Microsoft
- AoC Nilta
- JISC

Throughout the project, there were regular meetings of the project steering group where the issues raised by the project team were reviewed in detail. As a result, all partners have been active in managing the project and exploring the implications of combining private and public sector perspectives from their distinctive points of view.

Staff from Becta, RM and Microsoft worked on the needs analysis and consultancy for Phase 1. RM and Becta provided the consultancies for Phase 2. From the outset, the project tested the value of combining private sector methods and experience with public sector tools and practice.

The principal gain from the project has been the testing of new forms of collaboration, which confirm the value of combining public and private sector resources to meet the needs of post-16

providers. The project has developed new ways of working for the providers and a collaborative model of project management for the partners.

A note on project evaluation

To ensure impartiality in evaluation, this was carried out for the project by staff from Nottingham Trent University who worked with the participating organisations and the project consultants to provide a comprehensive analysis of process and outcomes using interviews and detailed scrutiny of project documentation. The evaluation was given open access to all project documents. The conclusions reached by the evaluation endorse the approach to consultancy adopted, the findings of the project team and the outcomes for the participant organisations.

RM plc
http://www.rm.com

AoC Nilta
http://www.aoc.co.uk/aoc/aocnilta

Microsoft
http://www.microsoft.com/uk

JISC
http://www.jisc.ac.uk