

Some (personal) remarks on the outline proposals

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95 proposals were received, 4 of which were deemed unacceptable by the ESRC and rejected. Of the 91 remaining, 62 were 'small' grant proposals (<£500k) and 29 were 'large' (<£1.5m). As a result of the shortlisting process in early October, 2007, 17 projects were invited to submit full proposals; of these, 9 are large and 8 are small. This figure of approximately 20% success, testifies that a significant number of proposals met the high standards invited in the call, and a non-trivial number of further proposals only narrowly failed to achieve the threshold. The next stage of the commissioning process has now begun, with feedback from assessors having now been sent to proposers, and a deadline for submission of the full proposals set for 13 December.

Despite a huge and welcome variation in the kinds of learning outcomes anticipated, sectoral focus, range of technologies to be developed, and variety of users addressed, there were a small range of issues that were recurrent in both successful and unsuccessful proposals, and which it may be helpful to elaborate. The following, therefore, consists of a non-exhaustive list of some of these issues, which may be useful to feed into the thinking both of those considering full proposals, and unsuccessful research teams who may now be considering directing their proposals in alternative directions.

Interdisciplinarity

The theme of interdisciplinarity, very clearly a major component of the call, is a difficult one. All the proposals claimed to be interdisciplinary: relatively few, however, came to grips with the complexities involved. Among these are:

- the ways in which different literatures necessitate individuals stepping outside of their range of expertise;
- an acknowledgement that interdisciplinarity is an evolving and uncomfortable state, not one that can be announced;
- that passing (or testing or evaluating) ideas between disciplines is, at best, *multi*-disciplinary, recognising that interdisciplinarity involves added value to all the participating disciplines.

Above all, perhaps there is a need for modesty, recognising that interdisciplinarity is more likely to be a research aim than an *a priori* accomplishment, and that the creation of interdisciplinary space to bounce around and create productive synergies between disciplines might well represent an initial part of the research work with appropriate specification and planning.

Design

One area in which the interplay between the social, cognitive and technological sciences exists productively is in the area of design. How design evolves, both in terms of activity structures and technological innovation is a key outcome of interdisciplinarity; it is through this interplay of different disciplines co-designing learning 'systems' that genuine innovation in TEL may be most fruitful. And it is this kind of design that has had difficulty attracting funding from existing single agencies.

Yet this area was largely under-elaborated in the proposals, and many failed to acknowledge the explicit call that proposals 'must develop concepts, infrastructures, and understandings of the co-evolution and social shaping of technologies and their potential application and use'. Many proposals sought to use (or test or evaluate) existing technologies in the service of learning without genuine technological innovation. Conversely, some sought to develop innovative technologies without rigorous engagement with learners' needs, or without leaving room for iterative design and testing with learners to shape the technologies.

One last point on design: it was surprising that a number of projects proposed a three-year time-span, yet did not address the possibilities inherent in iterative design over this substantial period; such proposals did not appear to commit to user engagement and partnership as co-designers throughout all stages of the research.

Awareness of the aims and objectives of the TLRP

Several proposals showed insufficient awareness of TLRP's core objectives. Learning outcomes were sometimes less than clearly elaborated, and some proposals tended to hand back the challenges of productivity, personalisation, inclusion and flexibility without a serious consideration of which of these were being addressed, or how they could and would impact on the direction of the research.

Similarly, some proposals stated their willingness to commit to active participation in the programme as a whole, but had yet to consider the implications of so doing, the possible synergies that might accrue, and the ways in which participation in the broader programme might actually be taken forward.

Research Design and Methods.

In an outline proposal, it is difficult to elaborate research design and methods. Yet not unreasonably, assessors were keen to discern some idea of how the research questions would be addressed, and sought sufficient detail that would allow the research to answer satisfactorily questions elaborated in the call, notably:

1. Does the proposal clearly and fully describe a research design and schedule appropriate for the achievement of the stated research objectives?
2. Are there rigorous methods for assessing learning outcomes (broadly conceived)?
3. Are there realistic proposals for data collection and data analysis?

I have chosen these three questions since they – and particularly 2 and 3 (1 is the most difficult to answer fully in a six-page document) – were the most commonly under-elaborated in the proposals, taken overall.

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As far as the shortlisted projects are concerned, I hope that there will be a productive dialogue between us on November 9, when almost all projects will be represented at a 'feedback seminar' in London, and proposers will have a chance to interact both collectively and one-to-one with myself.