Dear Sir Alan

HEFCE’s Review of JISC

Thank you for your kind invitation to contribute to HEFCE’s Review of the Joint Information Systems Committee. You asked SCONUL to address a number of areas of JISC’s work as identified in the remit for the Review, and to respond to a number of specific questions. The latter are addressed as part of the broader comments made under each remit area below.

JISC’s activities and evidence about their appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and added value

Over the last 10 years, JISC has engaged in activities and delivered services that are appropriate, effective and efficient from the perspective of the HE and FE community. For SCONUL and its members, particularly important have been the provision of a reliable and robust network, the provision of high quality online academic and scholarly digital content (through digitisation, licensing and open source materials), support for the development of institutional repositories, and support for institutions and service providers in their transition to Federated Access Management. As institutional budgets come under great pressure in the next few years, JISC will need to concentrate its efforts on activities and services that help institutions to deliver efficiencies whilst protecting the student experience. These will continue to include the provision of a reliable and robust network and access to high quality digital content, as well as a growing emphasis on shared infrastructure and resources, including library systems. Conversely, in the future JISC is unlikely to be able to support as many activities that are largely speculative or very specialist. A number of projects supported in a recent years have had questionable added value for more than a small number of institutions and a number of calls have included strands that could have been more appropriately managed by partner institutions such as ALT and SCONUL.
Further work also needs to take place on the communication of JISC developments and the embedding and take up of the outputs of projects. Although the JISC website is now a more effective tool and developments such as podcasts have helped to disseminate information on initiatives in more effective ways, there is still work to do to communicate effectively and in appropriate jargon-free language to different stakeholders. To be effective, this will need to involve working with partners in appropriate areas and SCONUL is keen to play an active role. SCONUL and JISC have worked closely together in disseminating work in areas such as access management and the digitisation programme and this collaboration will need to continue. Organisations such as SCONUL could also play an important role in helping to identify the needs of the community.

The effectiveness of how JISC delivers its core functions

JISC has set up a number of related bodies/companies to deliver particular services, most notably JANET (UK), which manages the operation and development of JANET on behalf of JISC, and JISC Collections, which is a membership organisation supporting the procurement of digital content for education and research in the UK. Although the rationale for setting up these companies is understood and the services delivered are generally well regarded by the community, there are some dangers in this model of operation, particularly at a time of major financial constraints. There are dangers of communication and decision making between the bodies becoming fractured and disjointed and of the aims and objectives of the various bodies becoming non-aligned. Interestingly, JANET (UK) and JISC Collections have responsibility for what most institutions would consider the two highest priority activities – the network and content – and we would have some concern that financial pressures might lead these two bodies to have to pursue different funding models and different markets (particularly in the case of JISC Collections) in order to meet company budget targets, potentially to the detriment of the HE and FE communities. Many institutions are likely to favour protecting the budgets of these two bodies even if this means cutting other areas of JISC activity.

For many in the HE and FE communities who have not been involved in JISC activities, JISC structures and processes can be seen to be opaque and sometimes impenetrable. Even for those who have experience, ‘JISC-speak’ and jargon, even in press releases, can make calls for funding, initiatives and developments difficult to follow. Although the processes for nominations to JISC committees are more transparent than they used to be, the view persists in some quarters that there is an ‘old boys’ network’ which it is difficult to break into. There is also sometimes a view, not always justified, that the same institutions always tend to receive project funding. Anything that JISC could do to improve communications in plain language (‘JISC for dummies’) and to spread involvement in activities (real and perceived) would be welcome.

Although JISC is primarily funded via HEFCE, there are important contributions from HEFCW, SFC etc. In recent years SFC and HEFCW have not provided funding for particular initiatives with the result that some funding calls have been for English institutions only, either exclusively or as lead bodies. JISC needs to guard against the dangers of either being perceived as or becoming an English only institution leading
to the loss of some of the opportunities for collaboration across national boundaries.

The use of programme funds is likely to need to be rethought. The economic downturn, major budget cuts and loss of staff are likely to lead to institutions having less time to devote to activities that could be perceived as non-core. Most universities will want to pursue funding in areas that align with university objectives, but time to develop bids will be at a premium. Current JISC project funding documents and processes are often lengthy and complex. Shorter documents, simpler processes (along the lines of the recent expressions of interest process) and longer time frames for bidding would be helpful. SCONUL also supports the approach of reducing the number of speculative projects and supporting and funding large scale projects rather than a large number of smaller projects.

How effectively and efficiently JISC meets the needs and works in partnership with the FE and HE communities, UK government agencies and other key stakeholders

In recent years, JISC has recognised the need to work with a range of different stakeholders. For example, for many universities involved in medicine or nursing there is an increasing need to work across sectoral boundaries in areas such as infrastructure, content procurement and access management. The work of initiatives such as the Strategic Content Alliance will be particularly important in developing effective collaborative approaches.

SCONUL has welcomed the implementation of a Memorandum of Understanding with JISC, but to be effective, further work needs to take place to ensure that collaboration is implemented fully and appropriately. In working with stakeholders, JISC needs to take a realistic view on the nature of its involvement with its partners. In some areas, JISC will take a lead role, in others it will be appropriate for JISC to support the leadership of others. SCONUL would welcome close working with JISC in areas such as library systems shared services work, digital literacy, content provision and learning spaces. In some of these joint initiatives it will be appropriate for SCONUL to take a lead role.

Yours sincerely

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