



ALTSU 1998 CONFERENCE

Compiled by Denny Collie Associates Ltd on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Association of Licensed TAP Software Users

FOREWORD

By Denny Collie, Chair of ALTSU

Welcome to the report of the 1998 ALTSU Conference, which was held in Harrogate over the 10th and 11th June.

This document is a straightforward report of the proceedings and discussions at the Conference. If you were there, I hope it reflects your own recollections. If you were unable to attend, I hope it provides a flavour of what was a highly successful, informative and enjoyable event.

Please feel free to contact me or any of the ALTSU Executive if you have any questions about the report or about ALTSU itself.

Remember - ALTSU is the association for local and comprehensive education and training database services. "Supporting Those Informing Others" is our approach. This report is part of our commitment to that support.

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WELCOME BY DENNY COLLIE, Chair, ALTSU

Denny welcomed delegates to the conference and made some introductory comments on the theme of the afternoon's keynote speech. Practitioners gathered for the conference understand the nature of the information maze. There has recently been an explosion of interest in learning with the National Grid for Learning, University for Industry and a range of white papers and green papers emanating from government.

While Lifelong Learning is therefore very much on the agenda there appears to have been no similar explosion in the availability of funding. There is concern that TECs' work on information services could be undone. There is a growing emphasis on the access to and delivery of information at the expense of the collection and quality assurance of that same information. There is therefore a constant need to restate the obvious and to emphasise the importance of good quality data collection procedures.

As practitioners we must use whatever levers are available to us. Many of those present will be making applications under the ADAPT/UFi banner and it is to be hoped that these will be successful but there is great potential for those of us gathered at this conference to take the lead. University for Industry is flavour of the month and there are many laudable aims in the Pathfinder prospectus although it is not clear exactly what the UFI actually is. It is not a University and it is not solely for Industry but it is an important concept onto which there may be scope to impose our own definitions. Denny offered his own definition; **"UFI is the olive oil in the stirfry of learning."** In other words it would be something that makes other things happen and change. It is therefore essential that ALTSU members get involved in this new development.

In closing, Denny's advice to delegates is to be as proactive as possible in promoting quality, to take a lead on bids and proposals.

Denny introduced to the conference delegates, Alan Clarke of NIACE. In addition to being a key figure in NIACE, Alan is also an on-line tutor for the Open University and has written a number of books. He is currently working on a study of the open learning market for the DfEE's University for Industry team.

KEYNOTE SPEECH: Mapping the Maze: Learning Information for the 21st Century - the information agenda: Dr. Alan Clarke BSc (Hons) MIPD MEd PhD - National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

Alan began his speech by drawing an alternative analogy to that of a maze. He saw Lifelong Learning more of a mixing bowl of different foods - unrelated and with no cook associated. The stirring was going on by a variety of folk all grabbing the spoon! There is a degree of anarchy involved - a child chewing the spoon rather than the food. Accompanied by a number of presentation slides (to be found in the appendix), Alan's speech turned to the contents of this mixing bowl and not databases as such.

Alan discussed some of the current developments in the world of lifelong learning; the principal ones identified as:

- National Grid for Learning
- University for Industry
- Individual Learning Accounts
- University Initiatives
- Commercial Initiatives
- Technology

However, there are probably more, including libraries for example. Some of these developments have a power and drive behind them while others such as technology take on a life of their own.

Proposals for the national Grid for Learning have some bold statements of achievements attached although it does appear that references to adults were added on as a bolt on at the end rather than being an integral element from the start. Nevertheless, NGFL should have a dramatic effect in schools - all talking to each other, millions of children all emailing; all school leavers to have a good understanding of ICT (Information and Communication Technology).

The University for Industry (UfI) is the most bold of steps offering tremendous opportunity for everyone in the country. It is nebulous and indeed needs to be. The ADAPT bids should enable people to decide themselves what UFI should be; to push it and make it work. It must be based on customers knowing what they are buying, knowing what they want. The challenge for providers of opportunities is to match up to the customers' requirements.

The concept of Individual Learning Accounts shifts funding from institutions to individuals. The purchaser is now the individual wanting a course there and then - why wait? Individuals will have smartcards enabling them to carry around their entire education and training life history - again a tremendous effect on the melting pot of information.

Higher Education establishments are all trying to get involved in the provision of on-line courses. One example is in the Dearne Valley where there is however little take up so far. The OU has tens of thousands using email although the post will remain in use for a long time to come.

Similarly there is a massive drive in Further Education - they simply must get involved in technology based learning. There is a push to put more text into electronic format and distribute it down the wire.

In commerce there is a belief that all of this is inevitable and there are some very good initiatives around. ICT run a programme called Peritas which enables individuals and companies to sign up, download taster courses, send money and download the full course. This tends to be mainly IT training and at the more expensive end of the market. Scanning the Internet turns up a number of similar initiatives by MacMillan and the Virtual Training Library. Oracle have a product called the Learning Architecture - lots of packages that can be downloaded. Again this is the specialist high price IT market but it is clearly felt by commercial operators that this is a major world wide market.

Every large company is setting up an INTRANET to deliver training; irrespective of government initiatives - they just do it. The Ufi initiative may, however, drive these companies to open up their facilities to other users.

Another initiative is the Virtual University set up by BA in order to deliver training all over the globe.

Another example is Stockton-on-line where various agencies came together to wire up Stockton in order to deliver access to various modules of Adult Learning courses offered by different providers to 16 different centres.

Technology grows and moves with a life of its own. It is thought that technology doubles in power and halves in price every three years - this is the cutting edge, independent of us all. Technological progress is currently focused on Cable and Digital transmission and the potential to use electricity to transfer and distribute information rather than copper cable. Government initiative must react to these changes.

A number of predictions may be made

- The Internet will be delivered into the home via the television and a set top box.
- Prices of computers will fall and their power will increase.
- There will be an increase in 'virtual communities' to complement face-to-face learning
- It is likely that it will be the private sector that will lead the way; spending more money in this area simply because they believe it is the right thing to do. There will be a major increase in the use of WWW resources.
- There will be no fixed boundaries between different sectors of the economy - for example between Further and Higher Education establishments and other training providers.
- Similarly, fixed boundaries between jobs will disappear and individuals will change jobs more frequently and have several employers including self employment.

However, there are negative forces. A number of surveys have shown an alienation to ICT - people need convincing. Although 40% of homes have computers it is not known how many of these are simply used for games. Less than 10% have access to the Internet. Although people see ICT as important for the economic well being of the country they commonly do not see it as important to themselves as individuals

There is a major cultural difference between classroom based teaching and ICT delivery. In a classroom all hear the questions and answers and benefit accordingly; not so if communicating via email.

The design of screens is also a big problem. There will be very many new users and their needs must be accommodated.

There are however, encouraging signs. There is a growing interest in ICT among the over 65s and there is an annual growth of 30-40% in the take up of CLAIT courses.

A survey of who uses ICT shows that it tends to be the 'haves' and those who do not tend to be the 'have nots' but the trend again is encouraging - numbers of people having access to the Internet doubling in 18 months and there is a redressing of the gender imbalance with more growth among female users.

In closing, Alan stressed that the imbalance between those excluded and included needs to be addressed and that as an organisation it is the aim of NIACE to be a force for inclusion.

Following this speech Alan took a number of questions from delegates.

Q During the speech Alan had said that NIACE was a knowledge organisation. In what way is this so?

A Knowledge is very much in peoples' heads so NIACE aims to ensure that as much of this knowledge as possible is put onto a database for common access. Staff tend to stay with NIACE for many years and so knowledge increases.

Q How is it possible to predict what knowledge is likely to be required in 2-3 years time?

A There is a simple answer to this. It is not possible.

Q The way in which a database is made available varies but it tends to be via PCs, the Internet, Intranets etc. What can be done for those who are turned off by IT?

A The fear of computers is a key issue. We can make the interface as friendly and natural as possible but some people have a belief that computers are not for them. It is important to ensure that computers are situated in the most appropriate places. For example schools are very good sites for reaching mothers. It is also important to target particular events such as those organised by the University of the Third Age.

Q Given the explosion of on-line learning how much is genuinely innovative or is much of it a case of simply placing existing hard copy text in an electronic format?

A A great deal of this work really is innovative as much of it is research based. It is sometimes slow in developing because it is so innovative and expensive. Sometimes the quality of the materials may be poor but the technical achievement itself is very good. Design is difficult.

Following questions Denny thanked Alan for his attendance in a busy schedule. He praised the work of NIACE, stressing its relevance to those present and urged people to get involved.

LEARNING DIRECT

Introduction

In introducing this section of the conference John Allred stressed that we had been waiting a long time to have such a service available and it was a tribute to all present here that all the work done in areas such as standards and compatibility has led to this major national service. All who have been involved should take pride in an outstanding achievement. We now have a national set of standards and a national telephone line providing a uniform and fairly good service. John praised in particular the work of both Peter Bradbrook of NTICS and Denny Collie of DCA for their outstanding work in holding the ring over many years. John informed the conference that we would be hearing from both Peter and Denny on the LDDS initiative and from Lindsey Muir of Broadcasting Support Services on the Learning Direct Helpline service.

Database Services: NTICS, Peter Bradbrook and DCA, Denny Collie

Peter Bradbrook began this session by referring back to ALTSU's 10th anniversary conference in Scarborough in 1996. At that time there was much discussion on the National Database. NTICS were about to release the NLI-CD. It was top of the agenda then and now centre stage with the launch of Learning Direct. The Learning Direct Database Services contract had now been signed and this was to be the focus of this presentation.

"This session is designed to provide information on LDDS. In particular we wish to explain:-

- who is involved
- what is in the contract and what is in it for you
- when things will happen

Who is involved? - The Consortium

The bid to run the LDDS contract was put together by three key players in the field of national learning information delivery - National Training Information Central Support (NTICS), Denny Collie Associates (DCA) and Guildford Educational Services (GES). The three principal contractors have also identified a range of partners who all had extensive and relevant experience and skills to bring to Learning Direct. These are:

ECCTIS 2000
Choices in Childcare (CHIC)
Sanderson CBT
ADSET

What?

So, what's actually going to happen? Speaking to people over the last few months it is clear that there are a number of misconceptions surrounding LDDS - perhaps not helped by the delays in the contract details being finalised. We therefore thought it would be useful to outline precisely what is involved in the contract. The key components also provide the key to what benefits BSS, the TEC community and the TAP network could expect to see in return for their participation and support.

The first two components are concerned with the development of new standards to promote:-

- the consistency in the content and presentation of learning opportunities across the UK
- an enhanced classification system closely allied to the needs of database managers and users

There are a range of databases which we hope will emerge from this work including:

UK Learning Opportunities

Within the lifespan of this contract (3 years) we intend to produce a fully comprehensive and coherent UK Learning database - a hitherto unattainable goal for all of us. This will require a lot of patience. We do not underestimate the size and the scope of the task ahead and we know what the issues are:

- under-funded information services
- inconsistent data collection services across some of our regions
- varying quality of data
- incompatible databases and software
- geographic gaps in data provision
- the shifting policy framework etc

But if we work together on this we will reach our objective and it is worth emphasising that the ultimate beneficiaries will be our users - the public and employers.

Obviously, Learning Opportunities is the key database but there are also a number of other supporting databases:-

- **OFL -CD: the open and flexible learning materials database**
This was first published a year ago and is to be enhanced, updated and expanded for Learning Direct
- **Sources of Finance for Learners**
- **Guidance Services for Adults**
These latter two, it should be stressed, are signpost databases and will be designed to allow BSS helpline advisers to point people towards sources of help in these areas."

At this point Peter handed over to Denny Collie of DCA Ltd who addressed the LINX software

"Turning to the LINX software, I need to stress a couple of points:-

- a) LINX is a centralised helpline system
- b) it is not in itself a new database but a system that captures and displays other databases

LINX will provide:

- access via a common interface to all the databases mentioned above
- the ability to interrogate these databases direct, by by-passing any pre-existing enquiry interfaces, thus speeding up searching considerably
- automatic statistics collection across all data sets
- automatic client tracking and usage recording

Although not as yet part of the LDDS contract, I thought I should mention SCOTIA to you:-

SCOTIA 1 - in use in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Cumbria and Derby

SCOTIA 2 - the replacement for Espial

DCA is currently completing the SCOTIA 2 software and it is not envisaged that the conversion process will be too onerous. Initially we will be training the field testers and there is a proposal to train all other TECs/TAP Agencies over the latter part of 1998 and 1999. It is likely that there will be one free training place per TEC/TAP and there will be further communication on this issue soon."

Denny concluded with a detailed examination of the range of services that TECs and TAPs could expect to access freely through the Learning Direct initiative.

"The initiative will make available:-

- clearer usable standards and real help and support for their implementation at a local level
- central data collection, in particular for open learning and major national providers of training - this would enable database managers to rationalise their data collection activity; cutting down on data duplication and therefore maximising available resources
- an enhanced classification system based on Superclass II and central maintenance of authority files
- up to four free copies per TEC every six months of Learning Direct CD-ROM, which would incorporate all UK learning opportunities and the open and flexible (OFL) database
- new software - in commissioning DCA Ltd, under a separate agreement to develop SCOTIA 2 for England and Wales the DfEE would be able to provide TECs with a royalty free licence to use this database management software with both the needs of local information services and those of Learning Direct in mind.
- mechanisms for TECs' involvement in driving software and standards work forward

- a web site, within the Department's Lifelong Learning site, with up to the minute information on Learning Direct - a further development which offers the opportunity for real participation in the evolution of Learning Direct."

At this point Denny handed back to Peter

"When?

Turning to the question of WHEN, I would stress that this is a 3 year contract but there are key milestones which include:-

Contract signing: with a formal agreement in place, the system development work can now start in earnest. Of course, it should be pointed out that much preparatory work has already been completed.

- LINX Phase 1 (A) Database maintenance software for childcare, funding and guidance databases. This is expected to come on stream in about three months.
- LINX Phase 1 (B) All the principal data sets including the new learning opportunities database which will be simultaneously released on CD-ROM. This will happen towards the end of 1998.
- LINX Phase 2 - the final release version will be available to Learning Direct in the first few months of 1999."

Peter concluded by extending an invitation to delegates to get involved with the LDDS initiative

"Delegates may get involved:

- by feeding information and comments direct to us or via your regional groups or ALTSU representatives

- via User Group activity - the SCOTIA 2 User Group, the LINX Focus Group and, of course, existing User Groups for Standards and Classification."

At this point Peter handed over to Lindsey Muir of BSS in Manchester for her contribution to this section of the conference.

Helpline Services: Lindsey Muir, BSS

Lindsey began her presentation by explaining what BSS is not. It is not a service to assist with GCSE homework! Nor is it a provider of courses. It is, rather, an information service for adults. It offers free, impartial, confidential and national information on learning opportunities, funding issues and childcare provision. If guidance is required then callers are referred to such services at a local level. In practice every third caller requires guidance of some sort.

What does BSS do?

BSS was founded as an educational charity to support the BBC literacy campaign in which callers were encouraged to be paired with tutors. Services currently offered include:

- BBC Radio Helpline which is run 24 hours a day and based in Glasgow
- Temporary and long term helplines such as the Science Line funded by the Wellcome Foundation
- BSS despatches 1.5m items a year including leaflets advertised at the end of TV programmes
- Training and Consultancy
- Is a member of the Telephone Helpline Association

Why was BSS chosen to provide the Learning Direct helpline?

The organisation has a good track record; 22 years experience meeting the demand generated especially by television programmes which can run to several thousand at a time.

BSS has strong links with broadcasters; people who may not look to normal channels for information on education and training are easy to reach through television.

Integrity and professionalism. BSS is non-profit making. Any income from services goes towards the overall improvement of other services offered.

Where is Learning Direct located?

There are six centres including a dedicated centre for Scotland and four centres in Wales as well as Learning Direct Manchester. Although based in Manchester, many of the staff employed are from all over the country. There are 60 lines available and a call handling system keeps supervisors informed of the volume of calls coming in and how the advisors are dealing with them.

Advisors are trained in deaf awareness.

There is a paper based back up which incorporates a standard careers library. However, staff are increasingly making use of databases.

The Service Manager is Lisa Abbot. Among the support team is a Broadcast Liaison Executive who is responsible for forging links with broadcasters to promote Learning Direct via regional and

national, and networked TV programmes. There are three Helpline Co-ordinators and an Administrator. There are then a mix of full-time and sessional Helpline Advisors, currently 64 in total.

Most advisors are graduates with professional qualifications, most with guidance qualifications. The first intake will be expected to have NVQ 3 by Christmas. Some of the sessional staff have day jobs with careers Services. Staff have a wide range of backgrounds - some have worked in prisons, others in the voluntary sector. Some have taken early retirement from the Careers Service or adult education services..

All staff undergo a variety of training. There is a six week in-house training programme covering aims (this is particularly important and it is stressed that what is on offer is impartial advice, no matter what particular knowledge the advisor may have), quality standards (BSS adhere to NACCEG standards), research and library skills, electronic databases, telephone skills, textphone training.

To monitor the helpline performance we use a Customer Access Terminal (CAT). This tells supervisors what enquiries are coming in, where from, what percentage are being dealt with and how long individual advisors are taking in dealing with calls.

To further aid evaluation an A4 sheet is completed for each caller recording sex, age, status and the nature of enquiries. Detailed statistics are developed from this raw data and provided to the DfEE although it is hoped that this process will not always be paper based. Co-ordinators can listen in to any calls in order to monitor quality. The feedback from DfEE and customers has been encouraging. There have been few complaints and the positive feedback is particularly encouraging for advisors.

So far there have been 230,000 callers since February although this is less than the target of 1000 per day. There is no typical enquiry. There is even parity between male and female callers. 60% are between 25-45 and have been out of education for 8-10 years. 30% are interested in FE/HE, 20% interested in training and 11% want careers advice.

Over the short history of the service a number of lessons have been learnt.

- It is important to have access to quick on-line information. callers do not want to be left hanging about and the average time of a call is under seven minutes.
- Shift patterns need to be flexible as some times are more popular with callers. Staff therefore need to be flexible.
- There is a need for campaign resource material.
- The lack of geographic knowledge has been a major problem initially but has been addressed with extra training for advisors.
- In addition advisors need to become proficient at dealing with a great deal of adult 'baggage'. Many people take advantage of the fact that this is a high profile free phone line.

- It has not always been possible to anticipate demand

Finally, it is important that BSS know what people think of the Helpline. It is after all funded from public money. Feedback is welcome and is acted on.

In thanking Lindsey for her presentation John Allred emphasised how important it was for practitioners to 'get it right' at a local level. He then invited questions from delegates to the three speakers.

Q Why do advisors need qualifications in careers guidance if they are not providing such guidance as part of the service? Why not an NVQ in advice instead?

A There was some debate over whether the NVQ level 3 or 4 should be required. In the end it was the DfEE which stipulated that the level 3 in Guidance was the most appropriate. It is important that the advisors recognise what guidance actually is so they then can refer callers to such services available at a local level. In addition it is conceivable that DfEE may at some point wish to introduce an element of guidance into the service.

Q Can BSS staff offer any guidance to software developers and those responsible for the development of data entry standards as to what search mechanism and fields are required?

A The problems for advisors is that enquirers rarely ask for a particular course in a particular area and therefore they need to look at more than one database and often need to have several open at any one time. A great deal of mental juggling is called for. What is required above all else is a single database with a powerful geographic search engine.

Q What provision will there be for the signposting databases being provided for Learning Direct to be linked with related databases being used at a local level?

A There are no plans to build electronic links between the centre and local resources but it is intended to hold information centrally on what is available at a local level. It is therefore important that delegates kept NTICS or the appropriate provider, such as CHIC, informed of locally available resources.

Q What provision, if any, was being made for LDDS to support and fund local data collection of learning opportunity information?

A Peter emphasised that no provision was being made in the contract for funding local data collection but noted that the existence of a sound local database network was integral to the success of Learning Direct. He reminded delegates that it had always been the expectation that Learning Direct would provide for a national and local information supply and delivery infrastructure. Systems for Database Services were still being developed with this in mind in spite of the postponement in 1997 of the original Local Information Network (LIN) initiative. In conclusion he urged delegates to exploit the possibilities afforded by the UFI/ADAPT funding to take forward ideas and partnerships developed for the previous year's LIN bids.

The ALTSU Agenda

Denny discussed the history of ALTSU. It was founded at a time when there was a perceived vacuum when TECs and LECs were first set up. They needed to be given some sort of steer with regard to TAP. At the time there was no contractual obligation to maintain training information databases. It was originally an organisation for licensed TAP software users but it has evolved as an organisation and now it services the needs of local and comprehensive data collection and information services. Because of this change, the name itself is an issue for discussion.

ALTSU has a number of aims:

- to promote good practice in the development and delivery of TAP type databases
- to act as a forum for the exchange of good practice
- to provide a lobbying role for members
- to promote the development of a national network

All the work is done by a volunteer group on the executive committee and therefore the work is restricted. The committee is very active but there is a need for greater regional representation. One suggestion is that subscriptions are increased to pay for an enhanced secretariat. There have been membership surveys in the past and now the ALTSU executive is carrying out a new one. The aim is to evaluate the membership's views on the scope of the organisation's activities.

Delegates were asked to complete the survey form in the delegate pack. These would help inform the future of ALTSU and would be considered along with the results of a wider survey of members at future executive meetings.

METROPOLITAN AREA NETWORKS AND WIDE AREA NETWORKS: Linda Tomos, Wales Information Network

"The growth of wide area networking to underpin information management has resulted in significant opportunities for extending the delivery of learning opportunities information. This is a complex area with both strategic and operational aspects, however the key issues can usefully be summarised as :-

- Connectivity
- Collaboration
- Coherence
- Content
- Competence

Wide area networks (WANs) and their high speed variant , metropolitan area networks (MANs) also represent significant challenges for information managers to design and sustain interactive systems which make a recognisable impact on the establishment of a learning 'culture'. These issues have widely discussed in Wales over recent years and considerable progress has been made in developing WANs and a MAN (in south Wales) to improve user access to learning, advice and guidance services.

The development of suitable infrastructure is crucial to the advancement of robust information systems. The deregulation of the telecommunication industry in the U.K. together with technological advances in digital communication has resulted in the widespread availability of high speed networks in many areas. BT has recently expanded the range of digital ISDN services, conventional analogue modems now reach speeds of 56kps and at the other extreme, fibre optic cable services form the backbone of MANs at speeds of 155mbps. Wireless and microwave technology also offer alternative delivery mechanisms where cable is unavailable. Digital broadcasting will play an increasingly important role in delivering interactive information services.

The other significant factor is the use of Internet technology as a de facto standard for communicating information across WANs and MANs. The availability of a common standard together with the attractive user interface provided by the world wide web has resulted in an explosion of content accessed via a local charge telephone call to an Internet service provider (ISP). In addition to the world wide global Internet, the same technology can be utilised to develop Intranets within organisations and extranets linking different organisations.

The consequences of such rapid advances include two significant challenges for information managers. Already the increasing sophistication of telecoms, hardware and software results in higher expectations from users. Multi media content is seen to be the norm although this requires reasonably high speed access. Such developments marginalise users living in remote rural areas, for example, where cable networks and even digital broadcasting may not ever be available due to high costs. Wireless and microwave technologies have not yet emerged as robust alternatives and the promising technology of Internet access via the electricity supply is in its infancy. The development of effective information access in areas of social deprivation similarly will rely on commitment from agencies to provide the infrastructure if users are not be excluded from engaging

with providers of learning opportunities on an equal basis with those connected to high speed WANs and MANs.

However such a commitment places a significant financial burden on the relevant agencies, TECs, LECs, local authorities, development agencies, Business Links, Business Connect and others. The current pricing structure for dedicated telecom links is a constraint to the development of sustainable WANs, particularly in rural areas where the benefits of competition are not available.

A positive strategy to address this difficult issue is that of collaboration. It is far more efficient financially to share expensive infrastructure than to maintain separate networks. In Wales an ambitious project, the Rural Wales Network is being built to connect 11 local authorities, TECs, development agencies and other public sector organisations to provide extranet links with a connection to the Internet. This network will therefore be able to link to JANET (the HE network) and FE-NET (linking all Welsh FE institutions). In south Wales the MAN which form part of the SuperJANET HE network links all HE institutions at 155Mb. This cable network will be opened up to other public sector agencies. On a U.K. basis there will be opportunities under the Public Library Networking Plan to exploit the proposed backbone network linking all public libraries. In order to make effective use of collaborative networks it will be necessary to tackle the difficult issues of ownership, technical compatibility and resilience. Crucially, there needs to be a shared vision of the use of the WAN and its added value to the individual organisation.

The obvious challenge from the user perspective is to provide coherent information access via the WAN. The global Internet is a chaotic environment. Sheer size is a formidable barrier to locating relevant information. Collaborative information management strategies can be very effective in meeting user needs. The All Wales Adult Guidance Network (AWAGN) information strategy, for example, includes a commitment to disseminate information via a www site and to link users to partner bodies. A private web space enables members of AWAGN to effectively communicate activities, developments and updates via a bulletin board and e-mail. In North Wales, CELTEC has piloted direct information collection from learning opportunity providers which will be disseminated to 80 host sites via the Internet following conversion to SCOTIA 2 software. Discussions are continuing to provide more effective delivery of the Wales Child Care database and an integrated Wales Adult Guidance Services Directory. There are still, however, many 'parallel universes' in the sector which inhibit the delivery of effective information from the user's perspective. It will be crucial to influence the development agenda of high profile initiatives such as Ufi and NGfL to enable coherent, user-centred policies to be adopted for information, advice and guidance services delivered via WANs and MANs.

These new frameworks require both a *strategic* information planning approach and *effective* information management methodologies. In Wales, the Wales Information Society action plan will be produced under the EU Regional Information Society Initiative (RISI) by the end of 1998 co-ordinated by the Welsh Development Agency. This plan is the result of a broad ranging consultation to map existing provision and identify key development areas. It is anticipated that it will provide a clear framework within which organisations can identify their role in knowledge management across electronic networks.

The management of content disguises many complex issues to the user. The WAN and MAN offers tremendous opportunities to engage with large global audiences. Digital broadcasting will enhance that ability still further. The key issue for the information manager is to ensure that the information relating to learning opportunities can be accredited and validated in an open environment where the

user's web browser will dictate the presentation of the information not the information provider. A quality brand for information content is essential in a networked environment where independent validation is difficult to enforce and rogue providers difficult to exclude. Information managers need to be proactive not only in developing quality systems for content which could be adopted by Ufi but also in identifying the enhanced role that current staff will need to adopt if electronic data collection from providers becomes the norm.

Another key issue for content management will be develop effective strategies to manage interaction between the user, provider of learning and facilitator. The WAN and MAN enable the user to engage directly with both providers and advisor agencies via Internet technology. World wide web sites and e-mail are tools to encourage the user to act upon the information provided. Electronic usergroups can provide a supportive environment for the learner and video conferencing can facilitate a more personal approach, particularly in remote areas which do not necessarily need to be rural. Poor public transport or lack of money on an urban housing estate can be equally isolating factors in maintaining barriers to learning. Digital broadcasting will be particularly useful in this context although this will be dependent on adequate affordable, infrastructure.

The assumption that a professional approach to the development of strategies for infrastructure, collaboration and content will deliver the required service to users would be based on an incomplete premise. Competence is required both from information managers and users. Many roles can be identified in the delivery of electronic networked information services. These do not all necessarily expect a high level of technical knowledge. However I suggest that they do require an understanding of the role of the WAN or MAN in managing the information. This can be both at a strategic and operational level. Staff need to be comfortable with their role in information management and to clearly understand the usefulness of the approach. This is particularly important for front line staff in contact with users. Confidence in the technology is central to the user perception of the service and staff need to reinforce the message through their own response. The issue of user confidence is also key. Many of the target audience may be 'naive' users suspicious or lacking in confidence of their ability to use technology themselves. In addition, many will be unaware of the whole range of services which will be available via the WAN. Users and potential users need to be 'educated' via promotional campaigns and hands on experience for example via the BBC Computers Don't Bite initiative.

In conclusion, there are many exciting opportunities to be grasped in utilising WANs and MANs for the electronic information management of learning opportunities. There are, in consequence, several important challenges for information managers in developing effective networked services which will require commitment and a proactive approach to successfully meet user needs."

At the conclusion of her presentation Linda invited questions from delegates.

Q What are the timescales for the expansion of MANs and what are the main funding issues?

A They are likely to develop sooner than we may think. There is great momentum and our role is to be proactive now. Funding is a big question. It is important that the required resources are put in now. It may be that the resources are available but are being misspent. If the investment is made now then there will be a big pay off later.

Q What are the implications for using electricity to transfer information?

- A Trials have not been satisfactory; there is a potential problem with lampposts interfering with signals! Such a means of transferring data could solve infrastructure problems but it is likely to be priced to the equivalent of Local Area Networks. Pressure needs to be put on BT with regard to cost.

UNIVERSITY FOR INDUSTRY: Adrian Clohessy, University for Industry Division, DfEE

Adrian began his presentation by referring to the Pathfinder prospectus which some delegates may have seen. This followed on from the Green paper, the Learning Age. The impetus for these developments is the recognition that IT skills have a shelf-life of just two years before being turned over. It is therefore important to have the University for Industry to enhance continued learning. Basic skills for example are a problem for one fifth of the workforce.

It is recognised that there are a number of barriers to learning. It is not always possible to have access to a learning opportunity at the right time and place. The costs may be prohibitive. Of importance to delegates at the conference there are concerns over the quality and reliability of information.

These barriers must be overcome by encouraging more flexibility in the delivery of learning by more imaginative use of ICT. New markets for learning must be stimulated through building new partnerships. Information and advice services must become more reliable and accessible. Although the idea of the Local Information Networks would have made a contribution to this process it is important to note that the LINs are 'on hold' pending a Department review. The results of this review are likely in July and there is cause for hope that the idea may be resurrected.

The vision of the University for Industry will be a new kind of partnership between the public and private sector. It will have the aim of boosting the productivity and competitiveness of business while at the same time enabling individuals to gain knowledge and skills to enhance their employability.

In the early stages the Ufi initiative will have some key priorities. There will be a focus on basic skills and information and communications technologies. There are specific sectors of the economy which will be the focus of attention - automotive components, multimedia, environmental technology and services and distributive and retail trades.

In terms of actual activity and early task will be to analyse the needs of the market and the potential market. There needs to be an honest appraisal, by government and employers, of the market to determine the potential for the future. There will be a concerted effort to drive up the demand for learning through mass marketing and promotion. Another area of activity of interest to ALTSU delegates will be the provision of information, advice and guidance.

In all these activities there will be a stress on the quality of provision. In the past there has been an emphasis on comprehensiveness; in the future there will be an equal stress put on the quality of provision. Ufi will be developing standards to assist with this.

Work is well under way. There is in place a Transitional Board for the Ufi, headed by David Sainsbury. This transitional team is looking at marketing, local operations, national operations, finance, quality and intellectual property issues. The target date for the launch of Ufi is very early in the year 2000 and a detailed workplan will be available by November of this year.

Adrian completed his presentation by highlighting two key areas of interest for ALTSU. One area is the development of on-line access to enquiry, information and registration systems. A second is the development of websites and bulletin boards giving individuals and businesses direct access to

information and allied to this, an option allowing providers themselves to input information directly.

At the conclusion of his presentation Adrian invited questions from delegates.

Q Although on-line access is important for providers, what becomes of the role of current practitioners? Given the potential problems associated with provider input would there remain a quality control role for TECs/TAP Agencies?

A That is right. Ufi is a big driver for a lot of things; one of which is the way in which Providers are incentivised. This could be a lengthy process but it is the way things will go.

Q What links are there between Ufi and the Skills Taskforce?

A The two initiatives are housed under the same Directorate in the DfEE under Nick Stewart. They do work closely and intend to learn any lessons from the past.

Q The costs of telecommunications is very high. Are the various boards and task teams addressing this? Secondly, telecomms is not given the centrality it deserves in the APAPT prospectus.

A Telecomms experts will produce papers to describe how the costs for these services can be brought down. It is certainly a big issue given the lack of access to computers. It does need to be addressed in such a way that costs are not heaped onto the individual.

Q Which way does money flow? Who pays what to whom?

A This is still an open issue; it depends on how Ufi finally looks. Money will go to the structure to link different elements together and to providers who are part of the Ufi network.

KEYNOTE SPEECH: New Library - Implementing the Vision: Speech by John Dolan, Birmingham City Libraries

John Dolan discussed the background to Library and Information Commission's report, 'New Library: The People's Network'. The Commission was asked to come up with a vision of libraries in the future. The new government wanted to encourage new thinking and has responded positively to the report.

The report was informed by research all around the country asking what should libraries be. Libraries would need to re-equip and re-skill its workforce. The librarian's traditional role would need to be further developed to help people evaluate resources - especially material on the web. The librarian should now be seen as an intermediary or gateway, providing support to people.

Not only did the government respond positively to the content of the report there was also money attached and libraries are to play a key role in the National Grid for Learning/UfI initiative. There is to be a 6th good cause funded from the National Lottery, the "New Opportunities Fund" which will release money for libraries.

Libraries clearly must play a key role in the delivery of lifelong learning. At one time people would complete their education and enter the world of work until retirement. Now, learning is much more of an ongoing process and libraries have a lot to offer.

The 'new library' will also provide access to information, guidance and support. Libraries are seen as open and central places; they offer a welcoming, supportive environment. However, there will be a shift from a library being a place where things are 'held' to a place where information, learning and knowledge are 'accessed'.

In his closing remarks, John advised any delegates interested that the report, 'The People's Network' that it could be viewed or downloaded from the Internet; the url address is <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/lic/newlibrary>

WORKSHOPS

Five workshops were held over the course of the conference and below is a brief summary of the content of each and the key points raised.

INFORMATION BROKERING OR DIY

Chair: John Allred, Information for Learning

Speakers: Philippa Dobson, Head of Information Services, Information for Business and Anne Day, Information for Business, Leeds Library and Information Services.

The two speakers presented two arguments for discussion: should individuals be helped to find the information they require/want or should they find it themselves.

The national scene was set by Philippa Dobson where important issues for information brokering have been raised by the proposals in the New Library: the People's Network, the National Grid for Learning, the University for Industry, The Learning Age green paper, and Learning Direct. Collaboration, rather than the creation of parallel universes, is likely to be the order of the day but, as Leeds Libraries have discovered, we cannot always refer people to other sources of information with confidence. It is easier to broker at local than at national level. Leeds 'RIDING' Metropolitan Area Network, part of the Yorkshire and Humberside 'clump', is hoping to develop access to Superjanet.

As well as the politics of national, regional and local collaboration there are concerns about serving users who may be the last in a chain and distant from the original information providers. How much do the providers know about the users? Who is looking after the content as well as the presentation? Funding, contracting, selling services and charging the users are difficult transactions to manage in the information world where so much of the intellectual property law in our area is untested. Collaboration and partnership must make learning for life a reality:

"Even the most misfitting child
Who's chanced upon the library's worth
Sits with the genius of the Earth
And turns the key to the whole world."

By Ted Hughes from his poem 'Hear it again' written for the report 'New library: the people's network' 1997

Anne Day continued by showing how, at local level, libraries had adapted to the vast range of information available by entering into partnerships. Leeds has partners with the TAP database, Leeds Careers Service, Business Link Leeds, LINX (Leeds Information Exchange), ON LINE @ LEEDS (an SRB project with the Education Department with specially appointed Learning Librarians) and with the BBC.

The discussion which followed considered the implications for users. It is always important to give them a choice between mediated help, or DIY. Independence in users is a valued achievement but requires training in information skills. How effectively do schools do this? It is an essential component in a culture of rights to information.

Even if people have the skills to retrieve information are our systems up to it? Do they really allow "exploration in high rewarding environments"? Scotia is available for use as a stand-alone service which makes the user interface critical. Libraries are in a good position to offer direct help to the users as appropriate, and to direct them to further help as needed. Our databases are gradually appearing on systems developed by others such as libraries. Are we moving to a state where there will be one distribution system for public access information. That has advantages in requiring users to learn only one system but puts a high premium on consistency in the data.

LEARNING ON THE INTERNET

Chair: Chris Simpson

Speaker: Neil Chidwick, Telford College

This workshop looked at the issues surrounding students studying from home, not simply by using open learning packages but having electronic links to the tutor, the college, its facilities and other useful documentation. The workshop gave the group the opportunity to find out what is going on in this area at Telford College.

Scotland's Virtual College

An initial pilot began in September 1997 and is still running. SVC is available globally and has been used with HMForces.

There are two strands to the project; the learner can either follow courses on the WWW with information sent through the post or delivered electronically - and email assignments to tutors.

Alternatively, participating using dedicated PCs in 6 public libraries across Scotland. This element of the project is funded by Scottish Enterprise.

Edinburgh's Telford College offers approximately 500 paper based open learning courses and SVC blends with this offering the following small range of courses chosen from across the curriculum:

- Introduction to the microcomputer
- Developing and Using Learning Skills
- Computer Applications: Database (Microsoft Access)
- Computer Applications: Word Processing (Microsoft Word)
- Open Learning in Public Libraries
- Introduction to C++ Programming
- HN unit in European Institutions
- Financial Record Keeping SCOTVEC 3

Implications for learners

- They can apply on-line
- They can use the Internet to contact their tutor, virtual classmates and other students at SVC

- They can read course notes and assignments and then return assessments
- Conference - user groups and supergroups
- Services provided can be replicated on-line e.g. guidance

Cost

SVC is free in year 1 for public library sites.

SVC is charged as per standard distance learning fee outwith libraries.

Issues

Training & support was required for library staff to help end users. SVC developed a core training unit

Difficulty in delivering some courses on-line i.e. catering

Use of multimedia could be beyond the boundaries of public networks

Need to bring in broad cross sectoral teaching staff and provide IT Training as course conversion of open learning packages convert to HTML format for WWW access. Staff need to feel comfortable with the medium to provide effective support to learners.

Issues for TAP/LIS Agents

Need to examine how we represent learning opportunities such as cyberspace and teleflex on datasets.

Issues of support and training for site staff - perhaps a standardised core module should be made available to all UK Agents to ensure consistency of standards.

LOCAL IT NETWORKS

Chair: Peter Bradbrook

Speaker: David Jennings, DJ Associates

David Jennings was speaking at this event as a member of the Technologies for Training (TfT) consortium. TfT is a national DfEE funded initiative which delivers advice and information through a network of more than 100 local centres across England and Wales. David is responsible for the TfT web site and all on-line communications.

David also runs his own business, DJ Associates, and has led the development of Internet-based "discussion forums" for business and community sectors in Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

In 1997 DJ Associates completed an evaluation for the TECs of Yorkshire & Humberside of their DfEE funded Regional Lifelong Learning project.

The Tft web site is at www.tft.co.uk.

David can be contacted personally on 0114 249 3435 or emailed at dj@djassociates.com. He has his own web site at www.djassociates.com

David introduced the workshop with an overview of the Technologies for Training initiative before broadening the agenda with an examination of IT Networks under three headings:

- Local/Regional/National Interface
- Partnerships & Integration
- Working with the Users

Delegates were then invited to share their own ideas and experiences, focusing in particular on Environments, Drivers and Challenges.

In a wide-ranging discussion a number of points and issues were raised:

A central conflict was acknowledged between the need to establish sustainable partnerships when so many of the developments associated with ICT and network building were funded through short term project-based initiatives.

There were also conflicts to be seen in funding arrangements: often it was a choice between infrastructure and content: why did it always have to be an either/or situation where resourcing was concerned

Turning to partnerships, the differing agendas of local partners and information providers was noted and the question posed, was it always sensible to involve all the potential players from the beginning?

Linda Tomos, speaking to the main Conference on Thursday morning, had challenged delegates to be proactive in developing networking initiatives. Workshop participants considered some of the barriers that made it difficult for certain individuals and organisations to lead:

- finance, of course
- influence within an organisation
- partiality

There were many exchanges concerning how to break out of the "deadlock" in getting local IT networks started and off the ground. Funding is not the only issue. There are an increasing number of local "Community Information Networks" that have been started from grassroots activity by people with little access to mainstream resources and power. The challenge is to integrate mainstream provision with such initiatives, without swamping them and dampening their energy.

Different players in partnerships have different "assets" which they can use to gain influence and play a lead. Such assets include:

- established relationships with communities of customers
- understanding of customers' information and communication needs

- access and ownership of useful information content

All of these can be used for leverage or as a catalyst to get things moving.

A number of delegates suggested the need for some *Rules of Engagement* with a call for:

- Guidelines
- Possibly some sort of *steer* from the DfEE
- Audits
- Network communications within the ALTSU community for the sharing of ideas and information about work in progress or under consideration

Where users are concerned, it was acknowledged that the supply side was easy to deliver: making a service demand driven was rather more difficult and there was a need to assess user needs and requirements on an ongoing basis. One useful and important way to do this is by sketching out *scenarios* where different kinds of users interact with the IT network material as a means to meeting their work or learning goals.

The session concluded with a summary of the challenges faced with delegates identifying the need to be proactive and stay on top of development in ICT. New partnerships had to be forged and broadcasters in particular were identified as key players for the future. Quality content had to be secured and, in the midst of all this, security requirements could not be overlooked - security of information, of client records and of the hardware itself.

In building partnerships it is important to identify existing users; there may already be existing communities of interest. These people should be involved and there needs to be discussions with them on matters such as information content.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND LABELLING

Chair: Anne Bundell

This workshop discussed what a database label should be - a clear specification of the scope, use and quality of a database. The workshop debated what a label should look like and how it could be used. Should there be some kitemark of quality? The members of the workshop split into three groups and worked through a pro-forma label for a TAP database to stimulate discussion

Anne informed the group that at the last meeting of the ALTSU executive there had been a discussion on the work of the Centre for Information Quality Management, an organisation with origins in the Library Association and the United Kingdom On-line User Group. Their function is to create a system for the assurance of the quality of on-line databases and provide a system for feedback. They decided on the idea of a database 'label'. The issue is: do we, as training database practitioners need some sort of quality kitemark to give our databases increased credibility?

A label was defined as a set of statements - a snapshot of a database allowing for QA and feedback from users. The questions up for discussion are:

- Do we need an external QA kitemark along the lines of a BSI standard?

- Should there be different levels of kitemark?
- Should the DfEE exclude non-qualifying databases?
- How should the label be published? On the web?
- Do users want to complain about the database and if so, how can they?

Anne emphasised that the group discussion should focus on the service standard and not data management.

There was general consensus that a quality label is a desirable aim particularly if the database is to be made available on the Internet.

It was felt that the label should state what software is used, what database standards are applied and possibly what frontend system is deployed.

There was much discussion as to who the beneficiary of the label actually should be. Should it be for the benefit of the end user or to satisfy the funding bodies. Many in the group felt that a label could not meet the needs of both although there was strong argument to the contrary. There was no reason why the label could not impart valuable information the end user and at the same time offer a means of database evaluation that would be meaningful to the funding body.

For the end user the label must provide a clear description of the content of the database including the range of data included and the geographic area covered. By range it was felt that this could include the 'type' of providers collected (possibly as defined by the ULI provider type codes) and the type of provision (possibly as defined by the ULI qualification aims codes). However, it was not felt that numbers were important. It would be important to ensure that the label described the general range of provision - full time, part time etc).

There was some debate as to where this label should be displayed. It was felt by some that this could be a problem if, as suggested by the CIQM, the label should be displayed at every outlet. Could this mean that a label could be out of date and therefore misleading if a particular site was not updated in line with the allocated schedule? After discussion this was not felt to be a major problem.

Although not all the issues arising from the pro-forma were discussed in detail it was felt that qualifying for the CIQM kitemark may not be the appropriate route for TAP databases. However, it may be appropriate for some other, external body such as ALTSU to define the contents of a label and the criteria for awarding it. It may also be appropriate for the awarding of the kitemark to be the criteria for inclusion of a database in any national information service.

INFORMATION IS POWER

Chair: Adrian Clohessy

Speaker: Debra Archer, Southern Derbyshire TEC

This workshop looked at the issues surrounding how an information service can reach the target audience. Debra provided practical examples of good practice and this was followed by a general discussion and a sharing of experiences.

The session was introduced by Adrian Clohessy who set the scene for the presentation by discussing what a marketing communication strategy might be and why information is such a powerful tool. Debra discussed the issues involved in the light of her experience with South Derbyshire TAP. There had been a history of TAP underachieving in the eyes of the local Chamber of Commerce and it faced an uncertain future. Against this background there were inherent difficulties in selling TAP - an outmoded DOS product, low visibility etc. It was felt essential that the branding of TAP needed changing, that the product be upgraded to WINDOWS and that it should be more aggressively marketed.

Debra discussed how she set about a strategy for promoting awareness of the TAP. There was an analysis of the current situation - what the current perceptions of TAP actually were. TAP was valued by host sites but there were a number of complaints about the hardware rather than the database itself. A SWOT analysis was carried out in order to help focus on objectives. It was felt that *strengths* included the quality of the information and the fact that there were plenty of outlets. However, *weaknesses* were felt to be the DOS-based software, old hardware and little awareness. The *opportunities* were that there was a growing emphasis on the need for information on learning and that many outlets saw TAP as enhancing their service. Unfortunately, threats included the lack of money, little prospect of new hardware and ongoing software problems. The background to all this was the development of the Learning Line, the upcoming Adult learners Week and the knowledge that in other areas of the country TAP was well funded and thriving.

It was decided to use Adult Learners Week as a focus on a range of promotional activities which would aim to increase the accesses to the TAP database by 10%. The marketing campaign was based on the 4 'p'. PRODUCT - promotion was essential both to re-launch TAP and maintain brand loyalty to the service. PRICING - a major feature of the campaign was the emphasis placed on the fact that the service is free to use. PLACE - the TAP sites were reviewed, placed in Libraries, Job Centres, Careers Offices etc. PROMOTION - it was felt necessary to develop an integrated set of promotional activities, putting to best use the tools which were affordable for a successful communications strategy.

A number of objectives were set:

- bring database up to date by a set time
- commission a design agency to provide a new identity
- the placement of local adverts to coincide with Adult Learners Week
- produce promotional materials - leaflets, mugs, posters etc
- PR events

These objectives fit into the AIDA process - that is creating AWARENESS by advertising and re-branding, creating INTEREST by using public and media relations, promoting DESIRE through a sales drive and generating ACTION through personal and interactive selling.

Evaluation showed the project to be a success. Access to the database increased by 12% and the Library Service began to show a keen interest in becoming more involved. The Chamber showed increased support for TAP activities to the extent of funding new staff, new equipment and the conversion to SCOTIA to provide a more dynamic user interface. The situation is such that now TAP is seen as an integral part of the Chamber's UFI and ILA strategies.