

Landscape study for the e-Learning Research Observatory

A consultation undertaken
for the Higher Education Academy

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Glossary of Acronyms

AoC	Association of Colleges
ALT	Association for Learning Technology
BLE Pedagogy Group	Bloomsbury Learning Environment Pedagogy Group
CETL	Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
ECAR	Educause Centre for Applied Research
ELESIG	E-Learner Experiences Special Interest Group
EPSRC	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEDG	Heads of Educational Development Group
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NTFS	National Teaching Fellowship Scheme
OBHE	Observatory for Borderless Higher Education
OCSLD	Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development
RSC	Regional Support Centre
SEDA	Staff and Educational Development Association.
VOIP	Voice Over Internet Protocol

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Signed off by members of the Working Group, 13/05/08

Aims

The landscaping study was undertaken to inform the establishment of an e-learning research observatory function within the Higher Education Academy. The study was co-ordinated through the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD) at Oxford Brookes University.

Methodology

The landscaping study involved a highly focused consultation and a broader survey. The combination of these was designed to elicit the needs of a wide range of different potential users. The consultation has actively sought out the views of high level stakeholders in partner organisations, of research-active individuals with a commitment to sharing their outcomes more effectively, of intermediaries in networks and institutions charged with ensuring that e-learning research evidence is used to effect transformation, and of institutional policy makers.

The consultation consisted of:

- A questionnaire completed by 10 experts/producers of research attending the ALT conference in September 2007.
- Interviews with 11 high level stakeholders, defined as representatives of key stakeholder organisations.
- An online survey completed by 116 users of research in response to requests on relevant mailing lists.
- Interviews with 24 individuals with various combinations of roles related to e-learning including as intermediaries, researchers, practitioners and institutional policy makers.
- A desk review of six existing research observatories.

Outputs

An earlier, confidential report to the HE Academy summarised findings from the high level stakeholder interviews. These findings are occasionally referenced in this report, which contains all the other, public, outputs.

1. A summary of the findings from the survey, which provides an overview of the needs and priorities of staff in UK higher education who use e-learning research

Individuals who make up the audience for an e-learning research observatory have multiple roles. The impossibility of categorising respondents as users, producers, policy makers or intermediaries for research is in itself an important outcome, and has implications for the way the proposed observatory is organised and presented to the sector.

There is a clear demand for a single point of access to e-learning research and evidence (71%). Participants with complex and time-constrained professional roles want an efficient way of keeping up to date with research being produced in different formats, in different places, by different organisations.

Alongside this is a demand for the available research to be reviewed, evaluated and synthesized. Among survey respondents, 48% wanted regular digests and 53% wanted the observatory to identify gaps in the current research landscape.

Beyond these broad findings there is more diversity. Respondents expect to use observatory services in different ways, for different purposes. They have different expectations, value different kinds of output, and favour different modes of organisation.

2. A series of stories and scenarios derived from analysis of the interview data, which represent different possible outcomes of the observatory planning process

The stories and scenarios explore different beliefs and values about e-learning research and the role of an observatory. The stories highlight issues emerging from a significant number of interviews, while the scenarios bring to the fore divergent views and alternative perspectives, even where these are held by only one or two interviewees. The analysis is intended to help the Academy think through the impact of its decisions about how to operationalise the Observatory.

The stories highlight beliefs about the nature of research as persuasive evidence and its ability to influence practice. There are stories which explore perceptions about how research should be observed and the role of the Academy, subject disciplines, personal networks and personal technologies in that.

The scenarios represent many dimensions of opinion but *in general* these can be clustered along a single spectrum of possibility, from, on the one hand, a more authoritative, visible and centralised observatory, and on the other hand a more community-based, distributed, emergent observatory. The scenarios illustrate the role of an observatory as strong persuader vs neutral observer, as promoting academically credible research vs pragmatically useful evidence, as building authority vs democratising knowledge, and as organising and categorising evidence vs supporting the use of personal tools for knowledge-building.

3. A list of actions that could offer ‘early wins’ in terms of benefits to users in the early phases of an observatory, and a second list of ‘significant risks’ attendant on various courses of action

Throughout the consultation we noted wins, wish lists and risks as they were generated by the users. Stakeholders and working group members were explicitly consulted about these. Summaries are provided to support the Academy in undertaking a risk analysis and a cost-benefit analysis. We strongly advise that the observatory team undertake such analyses, using as starting points the alternative scenarios offered, and the risks and benefits identified in the following section. We also recommend making personal contact with key players at other observatories and observatory-type agencies to gather further information about the costs of different services and organisational models.

4. Examples of how other observatories are responding to some of the challenges identified in the landscaping study

Six observatories and observatory-type agencies, representing both UK and international interests across all education sectors, were selected for review. Their purposes, staffing, services and functions were examined, looking for examples of how they were: meeting the needs of different audiences, providing a one stop shop for access to e-learning research, helping staff keep up to date, providing an interpretative layer, supporting communities and supporting researchers and future research.

5. Clarification of the areas of activity for the Observatory, and implications of the landscaping study findings for each of these areas:

- Observing, recording and enabling access to e-learning research and evidence
- Editing, reviewing, summarising, and synthesising
- Developing a community engagement strategy which will combine pro-active communications with support for communities to engage with the observatory using customisable tools and services
- Capacity building and enabling change through identifying gaps in the research landscape and making available tools for gathering local institutional and learner related data.
- Costing and resourcing guidelines

Section 1: Scope of the landscaping study

1.1 Background

The landscaping study was undertaken to inform the establishment of a Research Observatory function within the Higher Education Academy. This will include a 'one-stop-shop' approach for identifying, collating, assessing and disseminating national and international e-learning research.

The landscaping study aimed to make recommendations on:

- Who are the key audiences for a research observatory and what are their different requirements for sharing research outcomes and evidence?
- What types of observatory are most likely to meet these audiences' needs, e.g. research repository, portal, community of practice?
- What observatory functions and services would these audiences prioritise?
- What are the key sources of e-learning research and evidence that is relevant to the needs of these audiences and the strategic priorities of HEFCE and the Government?
- How would these audiences be most likely to engage with observatory services in practice?
- How should an e-learning observatory relate to existing observatories, and to existing functions and processes within partner organisations?
- What should be the roles and responsibilities of observatory personnel e.g. collating, editing, facilitating, hosting?
- What would be the main benefits and success indicators for an e-learning research observatory?
- How should an observatory be staged (e.g. what functions should be undertaken in a pilot phase) to further the information-gathering process and to maximise success?

1.2 The team

The study was co-ordinated through the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD), at Oxford Brookes University and was conducted by:

Helen Beetham, e-learning consultant

Dr. Rhona Sharpe, OCSLD, Oxford Brookes University

Greg Benfield, OCSLD, Oxford Brookes University

1.3 The Working Group

In addition, an expert working group of representative stakeholders met twice:

- In November 2007 to advise on the development of consultation instruments.
- In March 2008 to comment on the findings and help draw up conclusions and recommendations.

Membership of the expert working group was:

Dr. Nick Hammond, Higher Education Academy (commented on work in progress but did not attend)

Sarah Porter, Joint Information Systems Committee (commented on work in progress but did not attend)

Seb Schmoller, ALT (commented on work in progress but did not attend)

Professor Norah Jones, University of Glamorgan

Dr. Harvey Mellor, Institute of Education

Dr. Barbara Newland, Bournemouth University

Dr. Martin Oliver, London Knowledge Lab

Mark Schofield, Edge Hill University

Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Overview of methodology

The landscaping study involved a highly focused consultation and a broader survey. The combination of these was designed to elicit the needs of a wide range of different potential users. The consultation has actively sought out the views of high level stakeholders in partner organisations, of research-active individuals with a commitment to sharing their outcomes more effectively, of intermediaries in networks and institutions charged with ensuring that e-learning research evidence is used to effect transformation, and of policy makers.

The consultation consisted of:

- A questionnaire completed by 10 experts/producers of research attending the ALT conference in September 2007.
- Interviews with 11 high level stakeholders, defined as representatives of key stakeholder organisations.
- An online survey completed by 116 users of research in response to requests on relevant mailing lists.
- Interviews with 11 intermediaries, seven researchers, three practitioners and three institutional policy makers.
- A desk review of six existing research observatories.

The data collection tools are included in the appendices.

2.2 High level stakeholders

The aim of consulting with high level stakeholders was not to answer the research questions but to raise awareness of the consultation process, canvas opinions in a broad sense about the plans for the Research Observatory, and help to ensure that the consultation was focused on issues of importance to the key stakeholders.

High level stakeholders were identified at the outset by the Academy and to a lesser extent by a process of cascade from these initial contacts. The interviewees were representatives of HEFCE, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), The Higher Education Academy, the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), Becta, the former UK e-Learning Research Centre, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), and the Academy's Benchmarking/Pathfinder programme.

Stakeholders were interviewed by telephone, using an informal schedule of concerns about:

- the nature of e-learning research;
- the task of collating and communicating research;
- audiences and communication routes;
- the relationship with existing bodies and services.

Within this broad outline, interviewees were encouraged to direct discussion as they saw fit. Useful questions were 'What would a 'successful' e-L Research Observatory have achieved in 3-5 years time, in your view?' and 'What else is going on that covers some of the same functions?'

Interviews varied between 20 and 35 minutes in length. Detailed notes were taken, creating a rough transcript, which was checked and in some cases amended by the interviewees afterwards. Interviews were not audio recorded. Given the high level representation involved, interviewees understood that anonymity for their comments could not be assured.

A report summarising the feedback received from the consultation with high level stakeholders was submitted to the Higher Education Academy to support their planning for the Research Observatory. This report was also discussed in confidence by the Working Group, and has been drawn upon in developing the implications and decisions sections of this report. The report consists largely of verbatim quotes, as it was felt that the views of these particular stakeholders should be represented as fully as possible: for reasons of confidentiality it is not included in this final report.

2.3 Expert's questionnaire

The expert's questionnaire was designed to take initial soundings from active researchers and pilot a survey to be distributed more widely. Formative feedback on the questions to be asked was obtained from the ALT Research Committee.

The questionnaire was distributed in paper form to active researchers at the ALT conference in September 2007. It was completed by 11 people, 10 of whom agreed with the statements 1a and 1b: that they are actively involved in e-learning research and produce outcomes/evidence on the basis of their research.

The responses were summarised (see Appendix A) and discussed in detail at the first Working Group meeting. The following issues arising from this piloting were considered in preparing the online survey:

- inclusion of a statement of protected anonymity;
- inclusion of two further roles in Q 1 "Do you help others to access or make use of e-learning research evidence and outcomes?" and "Do you help inform policy decisions?";
- organisation of the questions around 4 main themes: producing research, using research outputs, communicating research and about the research observatory;
- questions that were producing very similar responses were merged or removed to reduce repetition;
- the frequent responses to some open questions were used to create closed questions in the online survey;
- respondents were asked to prioritise the possible services of the observatory.

Informed by these responses, a second version of the questionnaire was produced which subsequently became the Online Survey.

2.4 Online survey

The survey was made available online via Survey Monkey. It was launched on 13 December 2007 and was available until 23 February 2008. A copy of the survey is in Appendix B.

An invitation to complete the survey was distributed by email to ALT, EMERGE, HEA Pathfinders, e-learning Models Community, Scottish QAA Enhancement Themes, ELESIG, Learning Futures conference, HELF, SEDA, HEDG, BLE Pedagogy Group, NTFS and internal networks of practitioners at Oxford Brookes, Institute of Education, Bloomsbury Learning Environment and Centre for Distance Education at University of London.

A review of progress at end of January 2008 identified a possible sampling bias towards producers of research. The invitation to complete the survey was then additionally sent to contacts at Greenwich, Coventry, Surrey, Brighton, Hertfordshire, Keele, Oxford, Glasgow Caledonian, Open University and Lancaster for distribution through their networks of practitioners.

There were 206 recorded logins to read the introduction to the survey. Participants were given the option of completing the survey then or returning to the website later. In total there were 116 attempts at the survey and 106 people worked through to the end. Not everyone answered every question. Table 1 shows that the sample consisted of people who considered themselves to have multiple roles in relation to e-learning research. Nearly all of the sample use e-learning research and additionally help others to use it and/or produce research outputs themselves.

Q2 asked respondents to tell us about their role(s) in producing, sharing and/or using e-learning research	Number of responses
Do you use e-learning research yourself?	114 (98.3%)
Do you help others to access or make use of e-learning research evidence and outcomes (for example in a staff development or advisory role)?	106 (91.4%)
Do you produce e-learning research yourself (e.g. in form of research papers, project reports, conferences)?	104 (89.7%)
Do you help inform policy decisions?	88 (75.9%)

Table 1: Roles in producing, sharing or using e-learning research

2.5 Interviews

The final section of the Online Survey asked people to leave their name and contact details if they were willing to be interviewed. Of the 116 who took the survey, 59 left their contact details. This pool formed the basis of the sample for interviews. This meant that each individual's survey responses were available to the interviewer. The purpose of the interviews was initially to explore their responses in more detail.

The interview schedule was piloted at the Learning Futures conference in January 2008. Subsequently the schedule was simplified to give time for interviewees to answer the most productive questions (see Appendix C) and for the interviewer to explore some of the emerging themes. The same outline schedule was used for all interviews, with the sections relevant to researchers, intermediaries and practitioners weighted as appropriate. The interviews were conducted by phone or VOIP, over a period of two months, taking between 23 and 53 minutes to complete. They were transcribed live, allowing for detailed but not verbatim notes to be taken. The resulting transcripts were checked, and in some cases amended, by the interviewees afterwards. Interviews were not audio recorded.

The 'intermediaries' was the first group to be interviewed. After six or seven interviews had been conducted, it was clear that no new themes were emerging. The final interviews which had been booked for this group were completed as arranged, giving 11 interviews in total; however, this saturation point was noted. The next group, 'researchers', reached saturation at a similar point and interviews were concluded after seven interviews had been conducted.

It was extremely difficult to identify 'practitioners' (i.e. end-users of e-learning research with no active role as producers or intermediaries) from the sample who completed the survey.

All who left their contact details had identified themselves as users of research, but not one considered their role limited to that. From analysis of open responses, only one person seemed to fit the profile of ‘teaching practitioner as end-user’, and this person was included in the category of practitioners despite the fact that further contact revealed a significant policy-making role and a PhD in an e-learning related field. In the end, two further interviewees were added to this category. No significant differences were evident between this group of respondents and the intermediaries, though of course the sample size was extremely small.

After the first working group, an additional category of interviewees was added to the study – that of policy makers within institutions (in contrast to the ‘high level stakeholders’ as representatives of national organisations), and three interviews were conducted with this group. Again, no defining group characteristics were evident from their responses.

A grounded approach was taken to the analysis of the interview data, which allowed themes and stories to emerge from the interviewees’ responses to the survey and the loosely structured interview questions.

2.6 Desk review

The desk review examined how six other observatories are responding to the challenges identified in the landscaping study and highlighted examples of services and functions which could meet the needs of the Academy’s audiences.

The intention was for the observatories for review to be identified by the Expert’s Questionnaire and the Online Survey. The experts were asked about other observatory services they used (see Section 3.1) and named: AACE Digital Library (a bibliographic database of journals and conference proceedings in the field of computers in education), the Google web search engine, JISC, Observatory for Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) and ALT. Responses to the Online Survey (see Section 3.2) showed that the most popular observatories are JISC, HEA, ALT, EDUCAUSE, Becta, and OBHE.

It was not considered necessary to review the Academy’s own existing observatory functions. In response to the suggestions from the interviews and surveys that users of research also draw on local and/or regional networks, a smaller, local observatory was also chosen for review. The final list is shown in Table 2. It included a range of national and international observatories reviewing e-learning and other educational issues.

Observatory	Location	Sector(s)	Area of interest
Educause	USA	higher education	e-learning
Becta	UK	primary, secondary and further education and skills	e-learning
OBHE	Global	higher education	borderless education
ALT	UK	education & industry	e-learning
JISC	UK	further, higher education and skills	use of ICT to support education and research
Marchmont	South West UK	SME education and industry	lifelong learning

Table 2: List of research observatories included in the desk review.

The desk review initially collected information on the following from each organisation's websites:

- the research observatory services and functions offered by the organisation (i.e. we did not review all the work of the organisation)
- the intended audience(s) of the research observatory services
- the use of technology to support these services

As the analysis from the interviews progressed, the data captured for the desk review was used to identify examples of how these observatories were dealing with the challenges and issues raised in the analysis. In this draft report, the information presented in Section 3.6 only draws on publicly available information and has not been verified by the organisations concerned.

2.7 Focus groups

The original proposal was to include two focus groups at relevant e-learning events, asking much the same questions as the interviews. In practice these proved difficult to arrange, with conferences already having packed programmes. The first focus group was arranged at the Learning Futures conference in January 2008. As only one person turned up, the opportunity was taken to pilot the interview questions instead.

A focus group methodology was then used at the final work group meeting. The format made use of quotes from the interview data, which were selected to be representative of strongly-expressed and/or contradictory views, and were physically represented on separate pieces of paper. Working group members were encouraged to explore and annotate these ideas, and to group them around possible alternative scenarios for the Research Observatory. Following this activity, working group members were also asked to consider significant risks of different courses of action, and to identify ideas that could offer early or significant benefits to the community ('quick wins'). The outcomes of the first activity contributed to the 'alternative scenarios' section. The outcomes of the second activity are reported in the section on 'risks and wins' augmented with ideas from the various interviews.

Section 3: Findings

3.1 Summary of online survey responses

The intention was to analyse the online survey responses separately for the different groups of users of the Research Observatory who identified themselves as research producers, research users, intermediaries or policy makers in Question 2. As noted previously (Sections 2.4 and 2.5), all respondents selected more than one role, which meant that the analysis of the survey results was combined across all responses. For the analysis of open ended questions, all comments were coded separately as items, so that one response could result in several items coded. The coding was completed by one member of the study team. A summary of coded responses was discussed at the second Working Group meeting.

3.1.1 Producing research outputs

The first section of the survey asked about the types of research outputs produced, how they are shared with users and what could be done to make them more widely read, used or applied.

In the e-learning field, there appears to be a broad range of research outputs produced, with an emphasis on applied outputs as well as traditional research papers. The most frequently mentioned research outputs were research papers (22.6 % of the 278 items coded for Question 3), project reports (22.6 %), guidance materials (14.7 %) and conference papers/presentations (13.6 %). The remaining 26.5 % of responses covered a wide range: books and book chapters, research reviews, discussion papers, working papers, dissertation, theses, policy documents, strategy papers, briefing papers, websites, web resources, learning objects, workshops, training materials, teaching materials, newsletters, media interviews, datasets, demos/prototypes, design principles, models and patterns.

Publishing and presenting at conferences, as well as being research outputs in themselves, were seen as ways of sharing research outcomes with users, with conferences accounting for 22.9 % of the 262 items coded for Question 4, and publications accounting for 12.2 %. Again there is great variety in responses, with other popular opportunities for sharing being workshops/seminars/ staff development events (17.9 %) and web/wiki sites (13.7 %). It was noticeable how much of this sharing of outcomes was being conducted through existing institutional, local or regional audiences. For example, respondents referred to using their university intranet, subject networks, and internal newsletters. There was an emphasis on face to face interactions such as meetings, forums, committees, and one to one consultancy.

There were fewer responses to Question 5 asking for suggestions on how to make outcomes more widely, read, used or applied, with 97 respondents attempting to answer this question and only 87 individual items coded. The most frequent request was for a central point such as a repository, portal, hub, bank or database (22.9 %) to draw together existing evidence, as illustrated in the quote below:

“Learning and Teaching including online learning stuff ends up in a wide variety of unrelated journals and sources, having a way of drawing together material from across the pedagogy/technological divide will be very useful.” (Respondent 91)

Some respondents went on to give some detail about the characteristics they would expect in such a portal, such as that it would need to be public, managed, with strong searching and sorting tools, facilities for tagging and networking, aggregation of all forms of outputs (papers, wikis, blog entries and non peer reviewed work in progress). The second most

frequent group of responses after the portal concerned using technology to better effect (13.7 %). Suggestions were made for using blogs, wikis, podcasts, web publishing, online social networks and visual tools for identifying linkages and overlaps in research projects.

Third were responses grouped around a collation function (11.4 %). Outcomes would be more widely used if they were collated, by providing synthesis, overviews of recent research, emergent themes, a map of e-learning journals, or linking e-learning research and other higher education research.

3.1.2 Using research outputs

The second group of questions asked respondents what they used e-learning research for, how they accessed it and what could be done to make it easier to access.

Given the reasons for using e-learning research which had emerged from the expert’s questionnaire, 92.7 % of individuals selected the use of e-learning research to keep up to date. As shown in Figure 1, informing policy and helping tackle a problem also scored highly (73.6 % and 70.0 % respectively), with studying for a course being selected by 30.9 % of respondents.

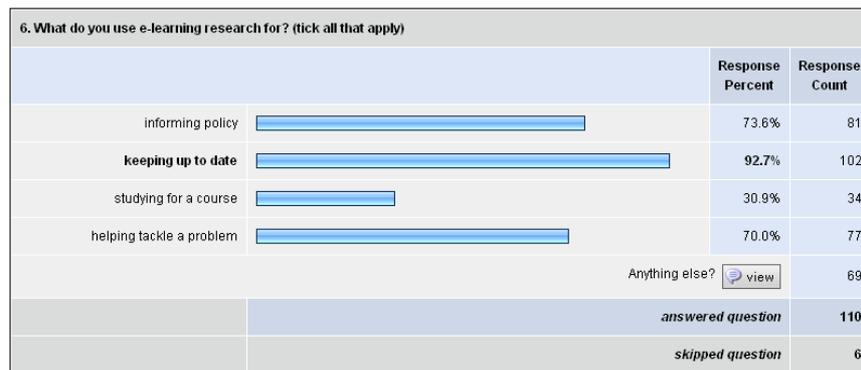


Fig 1: Reported uses of e-learning research

Other uses of research emerging from the open ended response option were using research to inform my own evidence based practice, informing my own research (especially help with seeking funding) and in staff development or training.

When asked about how they accessed e-learning research outcomes, again, people gave multiple responses, each individual giving on average three different ways, as shown in the quote below.

“1. Reading, 2. Making use of personal contacts with key people in the area I am researching, 3. Taking part in online thematic discussions (which are not always well moderated or attended) 4. Attending fully online webinars (especially from Canada) 5. Making use of JISC, ALT, etc to find out what they have been doing. (Respondent 53)

The different items mentioned fall into three main groups:

- technology mediated solutions including accessing e-learning research through web searches, databases, blogs, journal alerts, and online social networks (22.4 % of the 304 items coded);

- academic publications: books, and journals (20.4 %);
- accessing e-learning research through interactions with others, including colleagues, informal networking (19.4 %), conferences, seminars and workshops (17.4 %) and networks, forums, email lists, communities of practice (12.1 %).

It is clear from the responses that interacting through networks and groups offers additional value over publications:

“The e-pedagogy experts group has been invaluable - being part of the discussions has been more useful than the published outcomes because people speak openly but funded projects have to be presented equitably regardless of whether they are useful. For the rest I use the web to search for information.”
(Respondent 19)

When asked what would make accessing e-learning research easier, more productive, or more enjoyable, the most frequent response is the one stop shop (38.8 % of the 85 items coded). Typical responses were that this just does not exist at present and that it would reduce the necessity to trawl through a variety of other systems

“There seems to be no education/e-learning equivalent of Web of Science, which I use all the time for finding research results in other domains of expertise.” (Respondent 99)

As in the previous section, some respondents went on to give details of the characteristics that they would like to see in such a one stop shop: that it needs to unify existing research databases, that institutions need to be able to add links to projects they are working on, and that it needs to be searchable and meet people’s needs for themes/special interests:

The second theme is about the need for research to be reviewed, evaluated and synthesized (20.0 %). This could be through offering a better standard format for papers, to bring out the main points more clearly, academic ratings of how the papers are perceived by peers, being far more selective when it comes to vetting proposals for events. Respondents would find it more productive accessing e-learning research if there was

“More critique of foregoing work that helps the field to build knowledge rather than just accumulate it.” (Respondent 71)

3.1.3 Communicating research outputs

Initially targeted at intermediaries, the third set of questions asked about effective approaches to disseminating e-learning research outputs, both about how they can be communicated and how evidence can be made more valuable, and so have more impact.

The most dominant theme was that communication needs to take place face to face in small, practical events such as conferences, workshops, presentations, seminars/small group discussions or demonstrations (58.8% of the 163 times coded). The important features of such events were interactivity, with plenty of opportunity for collaboration and discussion and the involvement of practitioners. An additional 12.2 % of items mentioned informal networking and one to one contact. There was mention of written academic publications, reports and case studies (16.5 %). The important features of these written reports were the need to be clear and jargon free, digested and brief.

Respondents found it much harder to say how research outputs could be made more valuable and a number indicated that they didn’t understand what was being asked for in Question 10. Of the 71 items that could be coded, there were two themes: that e-learning research outputs

would have value where based on rigorous research and where relevance to practice was apparent.

The most dominant theme was that only rigorous research should be disseminated (42.2 %). There was a recognition that rigorous research would help e-learning research to be taken notice of, as shown in the quote below

“I get the feeling that L&T and e-learning are seen as lesser activities by many academics and institutions. In my experience academics really sit up and take notice of suggestions backed by research that they see as good and robust. So I see high quality research as key.” (Respondent 41)

Rigorous research appears to mean different things to different people. Some mentioned research that was large scale, others that it needed to be longitudinal, or demonstrating evidence of sustainable impact beyond the original researcher or empirical evidence of efficacy, and cross referencing findings to earlier studies or that the research methodologies underpinning the work and the methods used should be clearly presented.

There was a suggestion that much research currently being published would not meet such criteria and there was a need to improve quality by e.g. providing mentoring schemes and training in social science research methods. It was suggested that there was a need to develop new conceptual and theoretical models and diversify methodological approaches.

Methodology, methodology, methodology (= theory of methods). What I mean is: Strengthening/clarifying the methodological rationale for studies. This is a common weakness. Researchers try to bring to educational research (for that is what it is - NOT technology) pseudo-scientific, positivist methods that just don't work in., There is a huge need for training in a spectrum of education research methods”
(Respondents 87)

Various suggestions were made about how the observatory could help improve the quality of published research: by publishing explicit standards for inclusion, a code of practice, operating peer evaluation, and having a template for a basic set of data which is consistent across all studies.

The second theme was that research was valuable where its relevance to practice was apparent (26.7%). Respondents suggested that readers would value commentary to help them assess its relevance and aid their decisions about how to apply research findings to their context. They wanted to know how generalisable or transferable the research is and its impact on curriculum development. There were calls for meta-studies and assessments of the impact of research across the whole institution.

“There is too much show and tell, assumption and conjecture in many 'case' oriented public outputs. .. Distillation of learning/frameworks out of small case study approaches to inform evaluation and review as opposed to generalisable, leaps of faith and extrapolations.” (Respondant 17)

3.1.4 About the Research Observatory

The final set of questions asked respondents how they might use the Research Observatory in their work and the main benefits and drawbacks of using it. There were specific questions about the services and topics that the Research Observatory should prioritise.

As seen in answers to previous questions, there was little agreement between respondents. The most frequent coding was for keeping up to date, which accounted for only 22.3 % of

items coded. The numerous categories for ways of using an observatory were pulled into three themes: as a resource, for networking and making a contribution.

As a resource, people are looking for information/evidence to meet their own individual needs, whether that is to keep up to date, to inform their own practice and research, to find information to inform or engage colleagues, or to inform decision/policy making. The idea of the one stop shop was obvious again, with its benefits of saving time in searching and accessing research, being able to draw on a wider literature base, and confidence that no important material had been missed.

Once again, there were requests for the research to be synthesized in the form of reviews and summaries, to highlight authoritative research and to identify trends. The observatory could provide, not just reviews and summaries, but a gap analysis of what needed to be done in terms of themes and types of research and finding links between existing research.

The observatory is also a place to network, whether to identify those with common interests, or solve common problems, to discuss and debate research. A few explicitly wanted the observatory to act as a brokerage for forming research groups and, for a few, the social networking was key. The benefit of this would be to the support it offered to the research community, as illustrated in the quotes below:

“I would love to be part of a Community of Practice which was really active and in which I could network.” (Respondent 108)

“I think the development and evolution (nothing is static) of thematic "portfolios" of research would be interesting; an aid to discovering synergies between apparently unrelated research. Like Amazon: those who read this also read this and isn't THAT interesting. Drawing together researchers from different backgrounds in novel formations.” (Respondent 100)

Third, there was a group of items about being able to contribute to the observatory through publishing the findings from their own projects, research outputs and disseminating best practice.

Question 13 asked what would be the main drawbacks. This turned out to be an illuminative question, which 80 respondents contributed to. The responses form a useful risk assessment exercise for the Research Observatory and as such are presented in Table 3 with number of occurrences in brackets.

One of the most interesting responses summed up the complexity of meeting the varied needs which have been a feature of the survey responses.

“E Learning is a broad church, complex and contested, so inherent difficulty in finding a representation of issues which represent the sector needs and wants. A drawback may be an assumption led as opposed to a needs led provision. Will it reflect the potential multiple interests that exist?” (Respondent 16)

About the one stop shop:	About the content	About the community
<p>Relies on input, checking and maintenance, gathering and verifying content who will and how sustained? (5)</p> <p>Could duplicate work of e.g. JISC, (5)</p> <p>The field is crowded: another repository, another silo (4)</p> <p>Might not be complete so still requires more searching (4)</p> <p>Might contain too much irrelevant information or poor research (3)</p> <p>Could get out of date (3)</p> <p>May be used as the single point of knowledge (when isn't) (2)</p> <p>Metadata, problem matching different people's vocabularies (2)</p> <p>Could duplicate existing search engines</p> <p>Difficult to get websites/database user friendly</p> <p>Could be too technology focussed</p> <p>A searchable database does not equal accessible knowledge. Knowledge is not the same as learning or development</p>	<p>There is little consensus in e-learning research, there are many different conceptions and practices of e-learning, the observatory cannot include them all (3)</p> <p>Content is dependent on who is compiling it, could be single world view</p> <p>Bias towards ideas and people (2)</p> <p>Poor quality of analysis and synthesis (2)</p> <p>Become a policy driven centre which will only report from set - up success BUT not from real-life failures!' (respondent 52)</p> <p>'danger of trying to separate research from development when we are trying to 'embed' e-learning' (respondent 80)</p> <p>IP access from journal publishers?</p>	<p>It still creates more things to do and that needs time (6)</p> <p>Stakeholders need to be motivated to use it and get involved (3)</p> <p>Could over emphasize its own brand, exclusivity, a club (3)</p> <p>Needs to be marketed well to establish brand (2)</p> <p>Need to involve the community from the outset</p> <p>Could be used as a quick digest rather than ideas to critically engage with</p> <p>Needs to be distinctive to stand out from the rest</p> <p>Membership costs too high for freelancers</p> <p>We are competitors as well as collaborators</p>

Table 3: Coded responses to Q13. What do you think would be the main drawbacks (if any)?

There was little agreement and little of interest in response to the prompts to identify areas of e-learning for the Observatory to prioritize. However, there was a clear popular choice for the types of activities to prioritize. As shown in Figure 2, the most popular choice is for the one stop shop (71.3% of respondents made this selection), followed by regular digests of current work (48.5%), with all other choices falling some way behind. Despite the comments in response to Q9 about the need for events to communicate results, only 15% of the respondent here saw that as a primary activity for the Observatory.

In terms of functions and purposes, shown in Figure 3, the most popular choices are for keeping people up to date (62.4 % of people made this selection) and integrating outputs from a range of providers (60.4 %). Also important are identifying gaps in the research landscape (53.5 %) and quality assuring available research (46.5 %).

15. If the Research Observatory could only fund 3 of the following activities, which should they be?		
		Response Percent Response Count
Briefing papers		26.7% 27
Regular digests of current work		48.5% 49
Commissioned reviews on specific topics		33.7% 34
Facility to search across a wide range of outcomes		30.7% 31
Hosted online research community		28.7% 29
Face to face events		14.9% 15
Strategic funding for research and development projects		35.6% 36
A one stop shop for access to e-learning research		71.3% 72
Other (please specify)		12
answered question		101
skipped question		15

Fig 2: Preferences for research observatory activities

16. How important is it to you that the Research Observatory activities are designed to (tick up to 3):		
		Response Percent Response Count
keep people up to date		62.4% 63
quality assure available research		46.5% 47
integrate outputs from a range of public bodies (e.g. JISC, Academy, Becta, TLRP).		60.4% 61
evaluate the available evidence		40.6% 41
develop taxonomies and classification schemes for research		21.8% 22
identify gaps in the research landscape		53.5% 54
Other (please specify)		14
answered question		101
skipped question		15

Fig 3: Preferences for research observatory function and purposes

Respondents were asked what other observatory services they use. There organisations that were mentioned most frequently were:

- Joint Information Systems Committee (36)
- Higher Education Academy (28)
- Association for Learning Technology (16)
- EDUCAUSE (7)
- Becta (6)
- Observatory for Borderless Higher Education (6)
- Centre for Recording Achievement (5)

Some people relied only on a combination of sources and it is clear that there is an enormous amount of variety in other services accessed by respondents. Discounting the general responses (use of journals, conferences, discussion forums, blogs, newsfeeds and search engines), there were 31 other organisations named once or twice each. Many of these are

focussed on a discipline, profession, institution or region. They include UK and international organisations.

A few respondents suggested there was no need for anything else e.g.

“JISC provides an invaluable and wide range service - I am not clear what a new Research Observatory would add which could not be achieved by enhancing the work JISC does and linking it more effectively with other national and international bodies.” (Respondent 39)

Finally, in the space for open comments, the following issues appeared that had not been raised elsewhere in the survey. They are all around the community feel:

- ownership of the Research Observatory

“It needs to be owned and steered by members of the academic community, who are responsible to the wider community and have a clear set of aims and objectives, which it adheres to. It must also be INCLUSIVE and open.” (Respondent 74)

- a human dimension

“I hope there will be a human dimension to this 'observatory' - it sounds very remote, distant and scientific. I prefer the word 'collaboratorium' (Sheffield) because it implies that the resources are developed by peers, working together.” (Respondent 112)

- using web 2.0 to go beyond the ‘portal’ idea

“I think in this day and age a Web 2.0 approach could be used for the site so by inputting your profile any tags you use to describe your work automatically link you in with collaborators and research areas on the site and people who are working on that particular subject area could use a defined taxonomy or one created by the users. A platform that goes beyond being another portal to link to data to become one that can encourage online virtual collaboration.” (Respondent 89)

3.1.5 Summary of findings from the online survey

- a. People in this sample have multiple roles in relation to using e-learning research.
- b. E-learning researchers currently produce their outputs in a wide variety of formats, including applied (project report, guidance materials) as well as traditional research outputs. They share them in face to face contexts and local networks, although they would like to make more use of technology to better effect, particularly to provide a portal. They perceive that outcomes would be more likely used if they were collated and synthesized.
- c. Individuals report using e-learning research for multiple purposes, primarily for keeping up to date, and a range of other, individualized reasons. Individuals use a combination of ways of accessing e-learning research which includes both traditional publications, technology mediated solutions and interactions with colleagues.
- d. To improve access research, people would like to see a portal and a collation/synthesized function. These two themes came through clearly when asked both about the dissemination of their own research outputs and accessing others’ research.
- e. Some respondents were able to give lots of detail about what they wanted from a portal and the characteristics it should have. This theme was pulled out in the interviews.
- f. Effective communication needs to take place face to face in small, practical events such as conferences, workshops, presentations, seminars/small group discussions or demonstrations or informal networking.

- g. Research outputs are of value when they are based on rigorous research and where their relevance to practice is apparent.
- h. The respondents are aware of lots of things that could go wrong, and these form a useful risk analysis for the Academy.
- i. Respondents anticipate that they would use the Research Observatory to access information, to network with colleagues and to contribute their own outputs and ideas.
- j. Users of e-learning research would like the research observatory to prioritize the one stop shop idea and produce regular digests of current work to help them keep up to date, to integrate the findings from other bodies and to identify gaps in the research landscape.

3.2 Emerging stories from the interview data

The aim of the interviews was initially to explore findings from the survey in more detail. However, questions which followed the survey format, or probed for more information around survey responses, produced very little additional information. They were also very poor at eliciting differences among respondents. Therefore a decision was quickly taken to focus on those questions which elicited more personal responses, which dealt with individuals' practices and beliefs around e-learning research, and which helped to address the two questions:

- *Who are the key audiences for a research observatory and what are their different requirements for sharing research outcomes and evidence?*
- *How would these audiences be most likely to engage with observatory services in practice?*

The impossibility of categorising respondents as users, producers, policy makers or intermediaries for research (see Survey results above) is in itself an important outcome in relation to the first question. It confirms the findings of a previous study (Beetham et al, 2001) that staff with e-learning responsibilities in UK HE are typically 'carrying out multiple roles' and 'requir[ing] competence in an extraordinarily wide range of areas'. All our interviewees met these criteria. In addition, a significant number were in the process of starting new jobs or changing job specification at the time of interview, though none expressed particular anxieties about this.

There is some evidence from the interviews that individuals have different requirements of an e-learning research observatory depending on the role or role-aspect they are fulfilling at the time. So, for example, several participants described asking different questions of the research base depending on whether they were solving a practical problem in learning and teaching or pursuing a personal research interest. Different individuals also had distinctively different approaches to their use of e-learning evidence, different beliefs and values about the e-learning research community, and different views on whether and how an observatory might support them. The lack of clear roles does not mean a lack of different practices and values.

The rich data collected during the 24 interviews is presented here in three formats. This section (Section 3.2) presents some generalised stories about the working practices of the observatory's user group and their perceived need for and relationship with an e-learning research observatory. Not every story fits with every data set, but each represents a strong theme across a significant number of cases. In section 3.3, these stories are used to help re-define the three key terms: *e-learning*, *research*, and *observatory*.

The following section (Section 3.4) presents some alternative scenarios for the Research Observatory as an agency intending to support these practices and respond to these perceived needs. Where a range of views were expressed, the scenarios have been chosen to represent the extremes of the range; or where a small number of alternatives were suggested, they have been chosen to clarify the differences. In other words, each scenario may represent the strongly-held belief of only a small number of individuals. They are illustrative of different options, rather than representative of general opinion.

3.2.1 Story 1: Persuaders and problem-solvers

Despite their belief in the need for objective and rigorous academic research, all of our interviewees were looking for ‘evidence’ to affirm and validate what they do. They saw their role as persuasive: as ‘*influencing*’, ‘*convincing*’, ‘*winning over*’, ‘*hearts and minds*’. Both individuals and the units within which they worked had sometimes acquired a research remit as part of a strategy for enhancing the credibility of their work.

I need to have that data, the research that says ‘Facebook is a good thing, or a bad thing, or whatever’, as a back up when people start being snotty. Because there’s always somebody who will turn round and say – ‘my students aren’t interested...’ [Interviewee #5]

[my group] has a research mission which everyone can understand, but it also has a mission to help academics to deal with VLEs, to trial things, to inspire them, to get them enthusiastic, to pick them up when they get fed up, and to counter negative responses [Interviewee #2]

We aren’t in the luxurious position of enquiring for its own sake, it always has to have a purpose which would probably involve other people. I don’t just do it for my own interest any more. [Interviewee #22]

Potential users of the observatory are already very well-connected outside of their institutions, and good at sharing ideas within their different networks. They use a wide range of strategies and technologies to achieve this. They make canny use of evidence to support their case and to insist on the value of what they do, both to ‘reluctant’ academic staff and to managers. So, for example, they are adept at recognising whether local managers are more swayed by internal evidence (learner satisfaction, learner demand) or by what is happening at another institution which is seen as a potential competitor.

They are also relatively confident about ‘translating’ generic ideas into local contexts, and using the evidence base to solve local problems.

People generally come with quite specific needs and then you try to meet them either with your general systems or with specific help. You use the evidence and customise it for that particular need. [Interviewee #3]

However, it is in linking the generic with the disciplinary that many feel the strongest need for help and support (see Story 5). And the instrumental nature of their use of e-learning research evidence leads to some specific anxieties (see Story 2, next).

3.2.2 Story 2: Insecurities, anxieties and pressures

Potential users often described a research observatory as a kind of professional insurance policy to ensure they did not ‘miss something’ important on the e-learning grapevine, feeling that it was both essential and ‘impossible’ to keep up with such a broad area of research and development.

- *It's scary to find out that you missed something, it's not just professional credibility or personal satisfaction, it's because you realise there could be a lot more you are missing. [Interviewee #5]*
- *there have been times I've missed things completely and I've been surprised that I missed them [Interviewee #7]*
- *So much of our work is about influencing, and I'm always away from my desk [doing that], and I have very little time to spend looking and searching for things. (...) I can feel overwhelmed by the range and scale of work available when time is short [Interviewee #9]*
- *What I'm saying is that you come across these things by accident. It's serendipity. I'm in a privileged position because I work in a research university that has these networks and connections, but what about all those other people...? [Interviewee #18]*

These anxieties sometimes revealed more fundamental disquiet about the value of e-learning and of e-learning research, and about the identity of individuals involved – especially at the interface of research and practice.

- *The other issue we have is with the status of what you're doing and how that fits into RAE and cognate disciplines. (The same interviewee, in response to a later question) I've been a practitioner, now I'm a researcher, I'm nervous about my identity and how I communicate that. [Interviewee #18]*

3.2.3 Story 3: Research, examples and evidence

Here is a typical interview segment about research and the use of research as evidence to help influence practice. This is not a direct transcript but a summary of many similar exchanges.

I: What kind of research or evidence should a research observatory focus on?

P: Evidence that e-learning really works.

I: What would that evidence look like?

P: It would need to show real improvements to learning outcomes, across a large number of students. It would have to have credibility and rigour.

I: Can you think of an example of research evidence of that kind?

P: Not off the top of my head, no.

I: So does this research really exist?

P: No, the observatory would have to fund it. OR Yes, it is out there, the observatory will have to work really hard to find it.

I: OK, so can you think of a situation when evidence like this has really changed people's practice or understanding, in your experience?

P: Well, the cynics always ask for evidence that e-learning really works.

I: Do you think that evidence, if you had it, would lead them to change their minds?

P: No, they would find arguments against it from their own discipline perspective.

I: So what about people who are actually open to change?

P: They never ask for evidence. They ask for examples, especially from their own subject area, and practical ideas. They are really responsive to other people in their discipline who have tried something and made it work.

OR

(More policy-oriented) They ask for examples of what other universities are doing, especially universities that we bench-mark against. Or internal evidence such as student surveys.

I: So actually, research evidence isn't that useful unless it's highly discipline specific (practitioners) or highly relevant to the institution (policy-makers)?

P: I suppose not, no.

On research:

There is very little published research which is clear enough and definitive enough to overcome the problems of it being from a different institution, a different context
[Interviewee #16]

Despite significant progress, there are still major issues around reliability and generalisability of e-learning research. [The same interviewee in response to a later question] In a complex environment like FE and HE... proving the link between technology and achievement is very very difficult indeed. [Interviewee #8]

In terms of real evidence-based research there's not a tremendous amount out there - in terms of answering the kind of questions we want, demonstrating a real positive impact on the learning process. [Interviewee #11]

Senior managers have a long way to go to accept the value of pedagogical research
[Interviewee #13]

On examples and evidence:

The search for research evidence to prove it works is much less effective than the desire for good examples [Interviewee #4]

Local research can be more persuasive because their jobs are on the line.
[Interviewee #5]

We use local organisational research, but also external research, particularly stuff that's linked to practice. Where people have evaluated what they've done, does it work? [The same interviewee in response to a later question] For our senior managers, the key thing was 'what are our benchmark universities doing in this area?' [Interviewee #13]

So there is an espoused belief in rigorously-tested, generalisable research conclusions as the gold standard for informing practice, but immense disappointment in what research actually delivers. At the same time there is a belief-in-action that local examples, relevant experience and highly specific evidence (e.g. from local students or rival institutions) are valued and valuable. The evidence from these interviews supports the belief-in-action.

People don't directly use [theoretical] models... But... they've got the model for reference if they want it. It gives them the confidence that there would be a reliable source underpinning the practice even if they didn't use it.
[Interviewee #12]

3.2.4 Story 4: Everyone's a researcher now

A related confusion about research, evidence and examples arises from the fact that almost everybody we spoke to considered some aspect of what they did to be 'research', and valued that part of their role very highly.

In [my role as an intermediary] I'm looking for support in answering a particular question or dealing with real issue, within a timeline. In [my role as a researcher] I'm being more investigative, and I think for me they are two different types of thing. The second is much more fun because you don't quite know where you're going, whereas in the first you have to fill a box, close the lid and move on to something else. [Interviewee #6]

Colleagues from various departments see us doing research into pedagogic practices in a certain discipline, and they will engage with that much more confidently than if we were staff developers. [Interviewee #4]

This is an enormous resource for the observatory. There is good reason to believe that people will share and actively enable access to their own outcomes in the area of e-learning, particularly if prestige attaches to the association. But the same attitudes can lead to ambivalence about the use of other people's research.

To be honest, I'm slightly jaded about the whole field [of e-learning research] in that I think it's populated by failed academics... and maybe I'm one too [Interviewee #11]

There is a lot of stuff that is not properly peer reviewed and is just an opportunity for young researchers to share their wares without proper vetting. Valuable though this may be to those presenters, it is often a waste of time for a good part of the audience. The observatory should not make this mistake. [Interviewee #4]

And because of the greater value accorded to research over practice in the academic arena, some even admitted that they would prefer to research an area themselves than to find it well-researched and evidenced already.

I'm glad the guidance wasn't there because that's what triggered my doctoral research. [Interviewee #2]

the fact that there's a dearth of information has actually worked well as we've now got colleagues interested in researching that. [Interviewee #7]

3.2.5 Story 5: About the Academy and the Subject Centres

People don't necessarily feel that the Academy has the track record or the credibility with practitioners to run a successful research observatory.

I can't think of anyone worse to be running it. [Interviewee #11]

I just think the Academy web site is the most unsearchable and unfriendly and... this is just by way of background to saying I can't imagine how a national network could help. Whatever is completely different from that would have to be better. [Interviewee #22]

The trouble I have, if we're being completely honest, is that in my dealings with the HE Academy their organisational ability is diabolical. [Interviewee #1]

But participants often mentioned working effectively with the Subject Centres and some wondered whether this would be a more effective route for communicating about e-learning research. This tended to confirm a point made by one of the high level stakeholders that 'teachers in HE institutions, if they relate to anything that the Academy does, relate to their subject centre':

I trust the subject centres because they are practice based. Their research methods might not necessarily be 100 per cent but ... it's useful when I do staff development to talk about what people in similar subject areas have found.

[Interviewee #1]

Is such an observatory genuinely going to communicate with ordinary practitioners on the ground, or should that be going on through existing intermediaries and structures such as Subject Centres, Centres of Excellence, Learning and Teaching units within universities etc? They are all working very closely with practitioners on the ground already, across a much broader remit than e-learning. [Interviewee #13]

However, there are problems both in terms of the 'variation in their practice' [interviewee #1] and in terms of a lack of generic overview, including quite basic issues of information sharing.

I've discovered there's some fantastic stuff going on with the subject centres and nobody puts it all together. I've been to about half the subject centres now to see if they've got e-bulletins. It's a hell of an effort, because you have to go to every website, not all of them have e-bulletins, some you can join their e-groups but that's just a JISCmail type thing... They don't talk to each other it seems to me. There's no round-up, nobody advertises what somebody else was doing.

[Interviewee #5]

So, when pressed, participants did not feel that academic staff should be allowed to remain within their tribal enclaves, and saw a clear role for an observatory in supporting interdisciplinary learning, but they wanted evidence of joined-up thinking across the subject centres to support that.

It's not so much that resources should be generic, but that there needs to be a forum to get people to stand outside of their discipline boundaries and work collaboratively across them, particularly in the more exciting areas of development which often involve people working out of the box, cutting across boundaries. [Interviewee #13]

I think a national portal could have a huge role. Because the thing that's missing is that the research is all subject specific... [Interviewee #5]

3.2.6 Story 6: About trust

The issue of trust came up in many different contexts but three ideas were particularly pervasive.

1. I'm not sure I would *trust* the Academy to run this (effectively, strategically, impartially) – and/or the Academy does not have the *trust* of academic staff.
2. How do I know I can *trust* the research being communicated by the Observatory? It would have to have authority (for example from transparent and rigorously applied quality criteria).

What it is I suppose is having somewhere ... in terms of authoritative information. You might be pulling in feeds, but it's always useful to know that it's been peer reviewed, that there has been sound work behind it.

[Interviewee #11]

When I'm going out and trying to convince people it's having information that comes from a credible source. [Interviewee #9]

and/or

I would need to *trust* the individuals producing the reviews, syntheses, briefings etc, either because they were in ‘*a similar role to me*’, or because they were ‘*big names*’ in e-learning whose reputation was widely respected.

You do recognise key names. Maybe that sounds snobbish but I do think if so-and-so is recommending a paper I will look at that. There is some sort of authority there. [Interviewee #9]

I would be... more inclined to go to the individuals I trust because they have a similar world view or they’ve published stuff in the past or I know about the project they’re delivering on. [Interviewee #10]

However there was a counter-argument to this along the lines that too much credence (and money) was given to a small number of well-known or even ‘*self-appointed*’ experts, and that the work of reviewing etc should be allocated to people more representative of specific user needs.

And/or therefore:

3. The community of users would need to *trust* other users/contributors on the basis of some shared knowledge or role or experience, or a process of building trust through peer review.

It should be more than just a set of individuals who have some kind of interest in e-learning. Far more than that. In other words there has to be trust. [Same interviewee in response to an earlier question] If the observatory is to cater for needs of [eLearning specialist] academics then I’d be happy with formal peer review process, probably quicker than the process used by journals.
[Interviewee #4]

There are ways of building trust and of making it operate. Badgering people and having people who are committed to high standards and aren’t afraid of being critical. [Interviewee #6]

The observatory will have to address issues of trust at all three levels – organisation, content and community – and recognise that they are closely linked.

3.2.7 Story 7. ‘The people thing’

Everyone we spoke to valued networking and personal contacts.

If you don’t network you’re dead. You just don’t know what’s going on.
[Interviewee #18]

Many examples were given of how networks have supported sharing of ideas, and how personal contact has enabled change at the levels of practice and policy.

So to be able to go onto a JISCmail list and ask if anyone has done anything in this area, you will quickly get something back that you can use as a starting point. That’s just a very quick way of using someone else’s filtering they have already done, and benefiting from their expertise rather than starting from scratch.
[Interviewee #9]

You have to go and look at somebody who leads you to somebody else
[Interviewee #16]

One of the anxieties expressed by interviewees was the extent to which they found out about new ideas through serendipitous or accidental contact with others. There were several requests for an online directory of expertise, ‘*even if the expertise of individuals is quite narrow*’, to try

and maximise or formalise these opportunities. Another anxiety was that the observatory would fail because it would not pay enough attention to these serendipitous and human aspects of research: *'I can't quite see how the people thing would work actually'*. Face-to-face events emerged clearly as the favoured opportunities both for communicating research and for effecting changes in policy and practice. Several interviewees acknowledged that there was an irony in this.

3.2.8 Story 8: 'My observatory'

While valuing personal contact, many people we spoke to were using technologies in sophisticated ways to manage their use of e-learning research and information. Because they wear so many hats – often using research tools, teaching tools, communication tools and content management tools as well as email, blogs, wikis etc in the course of their day – e-learning experts have evolved personal strategies for combining technologies, or using one technology to do the work of several (e.g. VLEs being used as personal repositories and planning tools).

In one way these personal technologies and practices are a challenge to the success of a research observatory. A general agency serving many users cannot hope to be as responsive to individual requirements as a set of personal repository tools – a 'my observatory' on a personal or team laptop. However, an observatory could turn these practices to advantage if it could find ways of acknowledging, supporting and enhancing them. An observatory could also replicate some of the tools and services that are most valued by researchers and research users, as detailed below.

Tools and approaches currently being used to manage research evidence at a personal level:

Endnote (many mentions): *'It would be very very helpful to have a resource that could go straight into Endnote without my having to type it all in again.'* [Interviewee #8]

Document management tools e.g. GoogleDocs, the new search facilities in Vista, Yojimbo, or just 'my desktop'. Participants identify very strongly with the categories and tags they use to manage documents: they are a part of their identity as researchers.

In my filing system you'd see a map of my main areas, the strategic process stuff, and then the threads of ideas that are more exploratory. [Interviewee #6]

There was much talk about the definitive indexing or tagging system, but recognition that participants would only buy into such a system if it had been designed by somebody *in a similar role – because they would understand what I needed. It's that empathy isn't it?* [Interviewee #7]. Interviewees who had reflected on or done development work in this area were more in favour of folksonomies, social tagging, and other social approaches such as bookmarking, favourites, commenting and recommendations, which leads on to:

Social tagging: del.icio.us (several mentions)

Social networking tools in general: Ning, Facebook

Because research is very individual, you have your topic and focus which is personal to you... you go with other individuals who happen to share in your interests. You can do that more easily in web 2.0 and using social networking tools. [Interviewee #18]

It's about that more read-write web or web 2.0 approach to sharing content and information and knowledge management, and building up and evaluating knowledge over time in a teamly way. [My team] have grasped the tagging thing quite well [Interviewee #10]

The nearest I can imagine is something like the Amazon bot that rummages around and recommends things – you know, ‘if you like this then try that’. [Interviewee #22]

Having a tag cloud would be very interesting i.e. what are the things people are searching for at the moment? [Interviewee #15]

Collaboration tools:

Some of the new opportunities around research have only become possible because of the technology – new ways of collaborating with other researchers and the internet as a research tool. [Interviewee #18]

Everything from Second Life to file sharing using common applications such as MS Office were being used for collaboration on research and evidence-sharing.

Aggregators (RSS feeds, search tools) e.g. Copernic, netvibes, Google Reader for aggregating blogs, Zetoc alerts

Contacts management tools

Research tools: SPSS, NVIVO, Survey Crafter, data recorders, mapping tools

Virtual learning environments: Moodle, Blackboard, WebCT, Sakai, home-grown systems

It was interesting that several respondents taught modules on e-learning and used the space on the local VLE to organise their own links to e-learning research and evidence.

I teach a module called learning and development, and I shamelessly use our VLE in that module... to put in nuggets and links to those nuggets, so I can remind myself where they are. [Interviewee #2]

Blogging: Several interviewees used their own blogs, like the VLE spaces above, as a way of ‘remembering’ interesting links and ideas while at the same time enabling access by the people they were supporting. ‘We’ve got a pathfinder blog we use as well for external and internal management of certain research findings or position pieces’. [Interviewee #10]

Pebblepad (a blog-based e-portfolio) was mentioned once.

George Siemens’ blog was very widely cited, both as a useful resource and as an aspiration for people’s own blogs.

I often think I should make my blog more like Siemens’, and other people I know have tried to do that too, but there is just a limit to how many things you can track. [Same interviewer in response to a later question] If [the Observatory’s own bloggers] had credibility and included some good people then it would be worth checking, yes. [Interviewee #2]

Peer to peer networks are seen as the gold standard for supporting development and sharing ideas. There would be quick wins for the observatory in supporting such networks through its web services, but there would be significant risks if this was seen as an attempt to ‘annexe’ communities that are already working well, or worse to set up competing networks.

I do find that a lot of us who are involved in blogging and moderating communities have huge limits to the time we’ve got to go into other communities... Although I am passionate about the idea of online community discussions – they are brilliant – but I know how much effort they take... People would have to see it as essential. [Interviewee #12]

3.3 Towards a redefinition of terms

We have also used the interview data to help the e-Learning Research Observatory team think about how they define and work within the three key terms in their remit. All three terms proved problematic in interviews. This may simply be because the Observatory does not exist as yet. However, it may be valuable at the outset to consider what the terms mean in the context of the proposed Observatory and its core activities.

Several of the quotes here are from the high level stakeholder (HLS) interviews, whose participants had perhaps spent more time considering the impact of the terms to be used.

3.3.1 E-learning

The term is perceived by some to have a finite life-span, and/or to create unhelpful divisions within the field of educational research and innovation: there are arguably diminishing returns to focusing on technology in learning per se in an environment where so much relevant technology is personally owned and/or privately accessed.

Many valuable lessons have been gathered under the rubric of 'e-learning' that risk being lost [if the term is not used] [HLS]

I think the term e-learning should evaporate. There is a decreasing return on differentiating it from learning using the technologies that citizens and students in HE in particular already have access to. [HLS]

I think really if we're heading in the direction I'd like to be heading, e-learning is just part of the whole teaching and learning landscape. But I still feel as though we're so slow in some areas – I'm quite an impatient person – it needs addressing separately at the moment just for impact, but probably not in the longer term. [Interviewee #7]

I think e-learning is a priority because it's such a strong issue and has taken off hugely, and it engages many academics in learning and teaching, so it has massive strategic importance. So I think it should be one of the first up there but integrated with other kinds of observatory in the end. [Interviewee #19]

[We should not be] trying to compartmentalise education into the agreed age phases... for christ's sake this is the 21st century, and we have to break down the artificial barriers between sectors... primary schools and universities have a lot to learn from one another about things that work. And in any case the learners move across those sectors sequentially, so there is something bizarre about not having things to do with how people learn dealt with sector-neutrally [HSL]

In responding to these concerns, the Observatory might:

- Clarify in its mission statement how the term e-learning is understood and why it is an important focus of evidence gathering and communication
- Show how the e-Learning Research Observatory complements the other two proposed Research Observatories and how it fits within the HE Academy's general mission for linking educational evidence and practice.
- Structure its collation and communication strategies around general educational issues, focusing on the role that e-learning technologies and approaches can play.

3.3.2 Research

The contested nature of research in education generally was touched on in the previous section. The claim by one participant that *'there's no such thing as a discipline of e-learning'*

research’ demonstrates that there is added complexity to the e-learning landscape. There were widespread concerns about the ‘quality’ of current research, suggesting that the Observatory should be very selective about the research it promoted.

Go to an ALT conference, or other conferences. A lot of what’s there wouldn’t pass muster at a serious journal. I know that happens to some extent in other fields... but I think that’s more true of our field than of others. [Interviewee #6]

You get the cynics saying ‘where’s the evidence it’s better to do this with e-learning?’ and that’s a difficult thing to prove. There isn’t a lot of research out there. [Interviewee #1]

If we don’t have a model of how learning takes place, how can we have any evidence that we’re actually improving the learning process? [Interviewee #11]

Over the 3 year period I began to have a kind of strange parallel set of issues emerge. I began to see how important it was to acquire evidence to support practice change, and almost at exactly the same time I became less and less sure that there was any. [Interviewee #8]

At the same time, participants emphasised the valuable information to be gleaned from non-quality-assured sources such as action research, exemplary practice, project reports, data relating to learners and institutions, and so on. Terms suggested for these sources included ‘evidence’, but also ‘findings’, ‘expertise’ and ‘understanding’.

Evidence, understanding, investigation may be better terms than research. For example, strategies form part of the evidence base and context within which other research is understood. [HLS]

Rather than funding people to do the research, funding some people to go out and find it. You’d get different things then, the more low key work that’s not earth shattering and worthy of great research, it’s just what people do and what works. [Interviewee #16]

In responding to these concerns, the Observatory might:

- Review a range of source materials, making clear in its records what type of material is under review, e.g. peer-reviewed publication, presentation, evaluation report, theoretical model, statistical data.
- Offer a range of outcomes, from scholarly research reviews through to toolkits to support practice in specific areas.
- Draw on existing evidence about *how* research, theory, and other kinds of evidence impact on practice at both learning and teaching and policy levels. Continue to investigate these issues as central to the Observatory’s concerns.

We still have this problem about the link between theory and practice. We have the theory and the practice, and the two aren’t connecting enough. We also have the policy and the practice. A lot of the problems we have are between the expectations that have arisen because of policy and what actually happens in practice, and the two don’t meet. [Interviewee #18]

3.3.3 Observatory

There is no one definition of or model for an observatory but provisionally we have defined it as ‘an agency with a focus on collating, aggregating and communicating research findings and evidence’

Participant: At the moment I hardly ever use observatories, as I said. Probably because they don't observe enough.

Interviewer: What would 'observing enough' look like?

Participant: Observing enough would be demonstrating an ability to capture and distil the grain from the hay. [Interviewee #4]

I'd like to see some systematic review... I think practitioners really want that – they want clear evidence and systematic reviews could provide that. [Interviewee #12]

In responding to these concerns, the Observatory might:

- Continue to consult with potential users about the activities they value
- Consider carefully where the Observatory can add value to ongoing activities of other agencies, and where it needs to take responsibility or leadership of an activity in its own right.

[Added later by email] An Observatory might provide:

A single gateway

Support for communities of practice

Review articles on specific subjects/areas designed to bring a variety of 'research' together

Horizon scanning

Technical support

[Interviewee #15]