



Leading learning and skills

in partnership with **Becta** leading  
next generation  
learning

November 2008

# Exemplary Progress

A network to share best practice



# Foreword

The speed of change in technology continues apace and calls for closer co-operation than ever among all providers in order to encourage innovation, share best practice and respond to the range of new curriculum, management and staff development challenges.

When you told us you wanted help in meeting the new demands of rapidly changing information technology and its impact on the further education and skills service, Becta and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) got together to launch the Technology Exemplar Network last autumn.

Some of the most advanced institutions and others are now well down the road to creating new solutions. Already, in the short time they have been working, clusters of Exemplar and Developing colleges and other providers, working in partnership through mini-networks, have identified an enormous range of opportunities. From the sharing of research into e-learning and curriculum development to the creation of new e-management systems, they have shown that the range of possibilities is almost limitless.

There are real success stories – as this short report shows – of innovation, sharing best practice, improving skills and exchanging ideas. These providers are identifying new pathways and methods of meeting previously unforeseen challenges around ICT as we take stock of the wider demands on all teaching and support staff, managers and other agents in the education and skills service.

The achievements of these pioneering networks of providers will help us all identify and learn lessons about the best way forward, as we address the issues and take stock of social, economic and cultural changes, not only at home but globally.

By reviewing real examples of effective practice taking place elsewhere, and by sharing experience, learning providers can further develop their plans for future investment and implementation of technology for learning.

Jon Gamble



Director of Adult Learning,  
Learning and Skills Council

Jane Williams



Executive Director,  
Further Education,  
Regeneration and Delivery, Becta

## The story so far...

The Technology Exemplar Network is variously described by participants as a “swap shop” of techniques and solutions, a “mutual e-support service” and a test bed for innovation. It was created to support initiatives among the most advanced and e-mature providers who wish to help others, at earlier stages of progress, to develop their information learning technology. By offering peer support and sharing effective practice with other providers across the country, it was argued that the rest would learn rapidly from the best through a cascade of good research, development and practice.

In 2005 the Department for Education and Skills launched *Harnessing Technology*. This was its e-strategy to transform teaching and learning by using technology to:

- deliver high quality, personalised learning
- improve the availability of information to everyone involved in education and training
- enable professionals to share expertise
- increase efficiency and effectiveness.

Becta is the lead agency for working with partners to increase levels of e-maturity – which means organisations being able to take maximum advantage of ICT to improve the experience and outcomes for learners.

The LSC’s mission is to widen participation and raise attainment through high quality education and training which puts the learner first. Its vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England will have knowledge and productive skills matching the best in the world.

Jointly led by Becta and the LSC, the Technology Exemplar Network was developed as a direct result of provider feedback from research conducted in 2006–07. The feedback showed that for colleges and training providers to plan the implementation of sustainable technologies, they need evidence of what has worked to date. In February 2008, ten learning providers were awarded ‘exemplar status’ and were asked to lead the way in the effective use of technology for learning. They met crucial criteria such as having a good all-round approach to e-learning across the whole organisation, with inspirational stories to tell.

The challenges Becta and the LSC set for all participating learning providers were to proactively communicate across the network and share their aspirations, the issues raised, the learning gained and areas for development in an open and honest manner, and to positively contribute to the objectives of the network.

By May 2008, more than 50 learning providers, who are actively developing their strategy for embedding technology in learning were chosen as 'developing providers'. They teamed up in groups of around five with each exemplar college or organisation in mini-networks for specialist mentoring. By June, the groups were holding formal and informal gatherings in order get to know each other socially, develop trust and build relationships. This also gave everyone the opportunity to identify their needs and what they should do.

It was expected that developing providers would make use of the exemplars' knowledge and experience to improve the way technology was used to support student achievement. But in the event, early results have surpassed expectations and it has become clear that everyone has something to learn from the others, regardless of the state of progress of their own institutions. In the words of Rebecca Barrington, Continuing Professional Development and Blended Learning Manager at South Devon College: "We may be the most advanced, but all six developing colleges in our mini-network have shown they have something to teach us."

Both exemplar and developing providers are benefiting from a two-way exchange of ideas and expertise. Many developing colleges, while they may lack the embedded whole college approach of the exemplars, have often developed specialist expertise in niche areas, such as learning difficulties and disabilities.

Niche areas where many developing providers are leading the way include:

- e-portfolios
- e-skills audits
- specialist expertise.

While the Technology Exemplar Network programme is at an early stage, there is already enough evidence to show the benefits of a more co-operative and collaborative approach to the development of technology. Where such mutual support has existed before, it was usually between no more than two or three providers. Now, such expertise is already beginning to stretch beyond the confines of the single mini-networks.

# What the Exemplar providers have gained

There is a tendency among people in any one institution to think alike and focus on a common range of issues. Both the exemplar network and the mini-networks help people break out of that. Even if it is simply no more than 'getting out of the house' or visiting a neighbour – face-to-face or in a virtual environment – it proves liberating and, as the IT head of one exemplar college said "helps us shift our focus, change our frame of reference".

Also, despite the initial desire for freedom and flexibility and given the chance to shape their own destinies, colleges and training providers, whether exemplar or developing, said there was a tendency to "freeze in the headlights" and to fear failure when left to their own devices. The head of one work-based learning provider said: "Under those circumstances it is tempting to ask for clear guidelines." But guidelines developed through experience, with a light touch from central control work best, most people agree.



The list of benefits from the initiative for exemplar providers is considerable. Key gains reported by the providers include:

- faster research and development work – seeing where others have solved problems
- cost-cutting – seeing where others have worked more effectively
- farming-out technology problems to others better placed to solve them
- mutual benefits arising from having more than one perspective on an issue, challenge or task
- swapping expertise, snippets and ideas
- joint work on training videos and e-learning tools for curriculum and staff development
- sharing experiences that lead to more creative, critical and constructive questioning and analysis
- a more considered approach to structuring the time needed to stay in touch through the network
- generally finding new and more efficient and effective ways of working
- setting priorities more efficiently and effectively
- creating guidelines for good practice that really work on the ground
- better communications leading to improved methods of recording and disseminating best practice
- identifying new ways of working in collaboration. The initial hierarchical exemplar-developer relationship very soon gives way to 'flatter' structures where each provider takes the lead or follows according to their strengths and needs.

No matter how advanced or e-mature you are, there is always something you can learn from the less advanced providers – remain receptive and ready to learn.

# What the Developing providers have gained

Most of the institutions that applied to be 'developing' members of the network felt they were progressing well but had identified a range of needs they thought precluded them from exemplar status. However, in practice, many found they were further advanced than they had given themselves credit for. The majority also found there were niches where they were excellent and could offer things to the more advanced colleges. Key gains reported include:

- more self-confidence
- a clearer view of the way forward
- better understanding of strengths and weaknesses
- better view of how to overcome obstacles and hurdles
- creating a sounding board – someone on whom to test out ideas in the knowledge that you will not be unduly criticised
- having a test-bed of new approaches
- using the mini-networks to improve techniques when handling e-learning
- being part of a mutually supportive community – knowing that you are not on your own in facing problems or seeking solutions
- better able to set priorities and goals
- learning from other people's successes and failures
- developing a clearer view on the limits of what is possible
- being more realistic in setting targets
- knowing that there is not one Royal Road to e-maturity
- development is not a linear process but goes in many directions.

No matter how poorly developed you think you are, there is always something you can teach the more advanced institutions.

# Challenges for the future

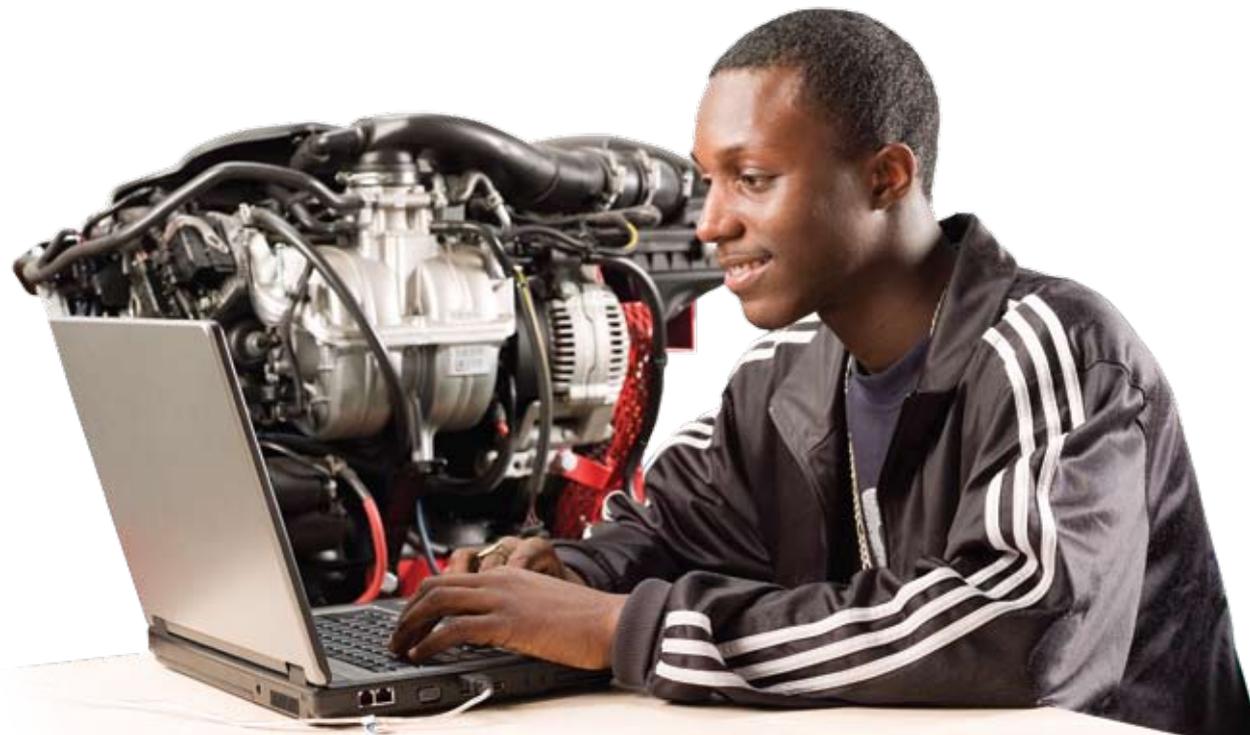
The networks have got off to a flying start, but the initiative must be maintained. The strengths of the programme are becoming clear, but the challenges for the future are also emerging.

## Strengths of the networks:

- Peer support and interaction is well liked.
- Visits were well hosted and well received.
- Organised contact gives insights into other people's methods.
- Peer activity validates your own work and gives recognition to good practice.

## Challenges:

- Flexibility for running mini-networks was welcomed, but is there a need to evolve the structure? How hierarchical – or flat – should it be?
- How can the lessons learned regarding the successful operation of the Network be shared?
- How can the good practice in e-learning and the effective use of technology be shared across a wider audience?
- How will the Network be sustainable in the future?



## What the pioneers say

Now that the first networks have been established and started their projects, the members can look back and see what has been learned. Here they describe their experiences so far.

### How did the networks get started?

Each mini-network began with the exemplar provider hosting an event so that people could meet and exchange ideas.

 *We hosted a session for a day and night over 24 hours which gave everyone the chance to socialise and to follow a programme – a virtual tour of the college – looking at among other things the e-salon, modern foreign languages and how the learning centres work. This way they had time to think about what they wanted to do, to compare places and opportunities.* 

**Sandra Partington, e-learning Manager, City and Islington College**



## What is an Exemplar provider?

The exemplars were chosen for their success and expertise in using technology to support learning. Their responsibility is to establish a network of developing providers who can learn from their experience.

*“It’s a big boon working together as exemplars because we were all chosen for slightly different reasons. We could swap stories and ideas on how to help the developer colleges we would be expected to lead.”*

**Sandra Partington**

*“Just being part of the network of ten exemplar colleges enables us to compare best practice with other colleges and learn from them. Hopefully, they have learned from us as well. We are all starting from a fairly high base but doing things quite differently, so we still have much to learn from each other and should never neglect the opportunity to do so.”*

*“Sharing leads to a swap-shop of ideas and products that benefit everyone. Some say you learn best from your mistakes and can’t learn from those of others. That’s nonsense. One of my bugbears is that there is so much reinventing the wheel right around the country. If this network becomes a campaign to stop reinventing the wheel and take short cuts, then so much the better.”*

*“When developer colleges came to us they were keen to know how we got to that point of development. One of the things our college is well known for is the use of Individual Learning Plans online, giving access to all students, staff and parents. We went through every possibility – Are there systems available? Do we create our own programs? How do we develop them? Now we offer developing providers one way of taking short-cuts and learning from us.”*

**Steve McCormack, Vice Principal, Alton College**

## What do Developing providers contribute?

Although the exemplars have their systems well established, they are not expected to have the solutions to everyone's problems. Developing providers have demonstrated their commitment to using ILT and often have expertise in very specific areas that they can pass on.

“ Developer providers are an interesting group; they are not in the wilderness as far as IT is concerned. In some areas they are very well advanced. Although they are learning from us in embedding IT, we are learning from them. It's a win-win situation – a good way of learning new knowledge and sharing good practice. ”

**Steve McCormack**



## Is it a hierarchy or a network?

It quickly became clear that while the exemplars might initiate the network, the developers would have their own areas where they could take the lead.

“It’s a network. The strength of the network will be in the sharing, not the six developing providers asking us all the time. It’s a peer network in which one of us is the facilitator. Its strength will be in what people put into it. Some will get more out of it than others. We can learn from a developing college. For example, Exeter has new build we can look at; new build is high on our agenda. Oaklands (in Hertfordshire) is a little further ahead than us in new build and in their e-mentor scheme.”

**Chris Frost, ILT Development Centre Manager, Bournemouth and Poole College**

“Exemplar colleges are in a clear position to take a lead but from then on things are not necessarily hierarchical. It was at our first hosted session when we got everyone together. But now we play to individual strengths.”

**Sheron Burton, Head of Learning Centres, City and Islington College**

“We may be the most advanced, but all six developing colleges in our mini-network have shown they have something to teach us.”

**Rebecca Barrington, Continuing Professional Development and Blended Learning Manager at South Devon College**

“There are the benefits of joining like-minded organisations striving to achieve similar developmental aims. Common themes are coming through, with the opportunity to take some time out to work with other people. It’s consultative and it does research. You have the feeling that you aren’t alone in sharing good practice.”

**Keith Bate, Principal, Halesowen College**

## What can different types of providers learn from each other?

The networks are not just for general FE colleges. They also include sixth form and specialist colleges, work-based learning providers and organisations involved in adult and community learning. Seeing an issue from another angle can help to solve problems.

*“ We’re hoping that we’ll learn from the Royal National College for the Blind on equality and diversity. They have expertise in areas where we don’t have enough students to develop expertise. ”*

**Chris Frost**

*“ It’s fantastic for us to work with mainstream colleges because we have to prepare our learners for mainstream education and for work and leisure. Ofsted are looking at how learners enjoy learning and in mainstream that’s usually about how the teacher has used ILT. We can work with mainstream colleges to see what you can do to include people or to put in an alternative learning experience. We’re taking on more of the mainstream multi-media, learning from what’s in mainstream and putting our expertise back in. We’re mixing the mainstream technology with the specialist technology and helping learners to enjoy it more. ”*

**Shirley Evans, Director of Business, Enterprise and Development,  
Royal National College for the Blind**

*“ As a training provider for hair and beauty, we applied for membership because we would be working with a large college which is totally different and has expertise we do not. We knew it would help us move forward much quicker than we would otherwise. Similarly, we are able to bring a totally different perspective to the college from the employer side. We would really like to work in permanent partnership with colleges. Everyone would benefit. ”*

**Brenda Allan, General Manager, HABIT (Hair and Beauty Industry Training Ltd)**

*“ We got involved as a developer provider, though obviously, as a work-based learning specialist IT course provider, we are ahead of the field and know exactly how it works. Colleges tell us they have problems getting people to use the network, since not all the learners are on IT courses. We can help. There are other areas they deal with where we are in our infancy. We all have a lot to gain. ”*

**Kirk Redhead, Business Development Manager, ITEC Learning Technologies**

## What kinds of problems are being tackled?

The members of each network decide for themselves which issues they wish to deal with. Keeping the increasing numbers of under-16s in colleges safe in cyberspace presents just one example of a network helping to solve problems.

“ Under-16s in college for 14-19 Diploma courses present a problem when handling sensitive material on the web.

“ If we have an open environment policy on access to social networking in our college, how do we manage this when there are young people who should actually be prevented from accessing this material?

“ After all, we have a duty of care and, while we want to access fascinating stuff for their coursework, for example, on the US presidential elections, we have to accept that some other material is off limits. In the past we just blocked access to social sites, but as syllabuses demand it, we have to work out how to use it in an open environment.

“ We saved months of costly and time-consuming research into the management of social networking systems like Facebook and YouTube, by asking an information technology training provider in our mini-network to look at the problem.”

**Sheron Burton**



## How do the networks keep in touch?

Face-to-face meetings are a good way to get the network started, but maintaining it means using technology. There is no standard way of doing this and each network works out its own methods.

“ Channels of communications should always be open and meetings should be used to set milestones for what you are all trying to achieve. That way, you give people something to aim for, to believe in. ”

**Sheron Burton**

“ For communications we’re looking at Microsoft SharePoint. We’re also using Huddle to talk to each other, to pose questions and develop the agenda. It provides a mechanism to put up Word documents and share, edit and track, it’s like a VLE. The beauty of Huddle is that all developing providers share it so you can see what everyone else is doing. It’s not been used extensively, but that could be just because it’s a new system. We could also just set up an e-mail group or a blog. ”



## What are the challenges?

Networks that stretch across the country can be difficult to maintain, especially when there are so many demands on providers' time and resources. Becta will have a role here in supporting the networks' continued development.

“ The key thing to do next is to re-invigorate the network after the holiday in the new academic year. It was a significant highlight at the end of last year. We need something now to get back to where we were. This will be the testing time. ”

**Chris Frost**

“ The exemplar provider needs to keep up the momentum. Our group had little contact for a time, but when I said we will arrange an event by the end of the year then it all started up again. It's hard to do that at certain times of the year, with all the other priorities like recruitment and induction. But after that it's a good time to rekindle things and bring partners together. ”

**Sheron Burton**

“ We can pop down to Exeter [from Bournemouth], have a useful day there and get back in one day, but you can't do that to Doncaster, it needs at least two days. If the network continues for more than this year, we could take turns to go to each other's establishments. We're looking at having a future event at a developing college, it makes sense geographically. ”

**Chris Frost**

“ There are questions about whether we have sufficient guidance. But this is a new way of working and I say rather than formalise it they should pull it together in a way that offers both flexibility and structure. You can lose touch with people because you are always so busy. This scheme forces us to connect with people. ”

**Sandra Partington**

“ The challenge for the network is to carry on, there needs to be a purpose and direction behind it. There needs to be some incentive behind it and some technical expert input, we need to buy that in. ”

**Keith Bate**

# Annexe 1

## Exemplar and Developing providers

### Exemplar providers

- Alton College
- The Bournemouth and Poole College
- Brockenhurst College
- City and Islington College
- ISIS Training
- National Star College
- North Devon College
- South Devon College
- The Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education
- Xaverian Sixth Form College

### Developing providers

- Academy of Training
- Exeter College
- Gloucestershire College
- Royal Forest of Dean College
- Strode College
- The Arts Institute at Bournemouth
- Weston College
- Yeovil College
- Friends Centre
- Highbury College Portsmouth
- Kingston College
- Varndean College
- College of North West London
- The College of North East London
- Westminster Adult Education Service
- Barking College
- ITEC Learning Technologies Ltd
- Oaklands College
- The College of West Anglia
- Derwen College

- Fircroft College
- Halesowen College
- North Warwickshire and Hinckley College
- Nuneaton Training Centre
- Stoke on Trent College
- Stourbridge College
- The Royal National College for the Blind
- Ceemac Projects Ltd
- Linkage College
- North Lindsey College
- South Leicestershire College
- Beaumont College
- Birkenhead 6th Form College
- Blackburn College
- Carmel College
- Eccles College
- Lancaster Training Services Limited
- Priestley College
- The Oldham College
- Doncaster College
- Intuitions Ltd
- John Leggott College
- Northern College
- Park Lane College
- BL Hairdressing Training
- Darlington College
- HABIT  
(Hair and Beauty Industry Training Ltd)
- Middlesbrough Council  
Adult Education Service
- NETA Training Group (NETA)
- Newcastle College
- Stockton Riverside College
- I-SA Assessment & Training Limited

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