

# Report of the LearnHigher Continuation Working Group January 2009

## Executive summary

In preparing this report, the CWG has considered carefully the aims and histories of both the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE)<sup>1</sup> and LearnHigher, and a variety of organisational and funding models used by comparable bodies. We recommend that:

- when HEFCE funding ceases in July 2010, responsibility for the maintenance of the LearnHigher brand, website and projects should be transferred to ALDinHE;
- within ALDinHE, LearnHigher should operate as the main body for research, development, evaluation and dissemination activities related to new and existing peer-reviewed LD resources.
- within ALDinHE, LearnHigher should be managed by a steering group to include representatives of the main ALDinHE Steering Group, and LD practitioners from LearnHigher HEI partners (defined as those willing to commit themselves to continued support of LearnHigher.)<sup>2</sup>
- ALDinHE and LearnHigher should continue to have distinct websites and graphic identities, though interconnection and harmonisation in terms of design and style will evolve to suit the agreed functions and purposes of the respective sites. Amendments will be needed to clarify the links between the two without losing the distinctive LearnHigher 'brand' and level of awareness of its achievements since 2005.
- LearnHigher should continue to bid for external funding for existing or new projects, but institutional responsibility for such bids would rest with one or more HEI partners, except where it is more appropriate for ALDinHE to act as the lead body.
- Part of the remaining LearnHigher funding should be used to support the transition to these new arrangements and to enable preparation of new funding bids.

The report was presented to the Steering Groups of LearnHigher (30<sup>th</sup> January, 2009) and ALDinHE (2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2009), and approved with minor amendments. The substantive proposals are now to be presented to the AGM of ALDinHE, to be held on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> The Association is a membership organisation funded by individual and institutional subscription - aims and constitution can be found at <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/aims.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The nature of the required commitment from - and benefits to - HEI partners is still to be decided; at a minimum, it should include agreement for an element (we suggest at least 0.1FTE) of staff time on LearnHigher work. Any new HEI partners will be entitled to join the LearnHigher Steering Group after memoranda of agreement have been approved.

## **Background**

The Continuation Working Group (CWG) was established following a meeting of the LearnHigher Steering Group (hereafter LHSG) on 6th November 2008, at which a proposal was agreed calling for a continuation strategy for LearnHigher which “should involve operation as part of ALDinHE, subject to their agreement, from July 2010 and that a joint working group be set up to address the detailed issues arising from this decision.”

The LHSG proposed that the joint working group should be constituted in equal numbers from LearnHigher and ALDinHE. The proposals were discussed at a meeting of the ALDinHE SG held on 1st December 2008 and broad agreement was achieved. Terms of reference and membership arrangements were then proposed by Ged Hall and John Hilsdon, and members were nominated by each of the two organisations as follows:

### **LearnHigher**

Ged Hall, Liverpool Hope University

Janet Strivens, University of Liverpool

Ann Barlow, University of Manchester

Peter Hartley, University of Bradford

### **Association for Learning Development in Higher Education**

John Hilsdon, University of Plymouth

Pauline Ridley, University of Brighton

Andy Hagyard, University of Lincoln

Caroline Cash, University College Falmouth

The group was established by 12th December 2008; it held two virtual meetings, on January 8th and January 22nd 2009, and has also discussed draft proposals by email. The topics covered by the CWG discussions ranged across all of the issues that both the ALDinHE and the LHSG had suggested, including the purpose and identity of LH beyond its HEFCE funded status; the nature of the proposed new relationship between LH and the Association; possible models for funding LH activities; future relationships with LH partners and other HEIs; and the LearnHigher 'brand' .

## **Introduction**

This report does not contain a detailed account of all the email correspondence and virtual conversations engaged in by the group. A wide range of issues and possibilities in relation to the potential future of LearnHigher was discussed, but it was decided that what should be included here is a summary of the points about which the members of the group were in agreement. These points are drawn from the proceedings of the two meetings and the email exchanges of members

## **The identity and status of LearnHigher**

The CWG agreed that the LearnHigher name and brand should be retained, but did not put forward a strong view about whether or not to continue using the phrase 'Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' and acronym CETL. It was felt that this decision could be left to a later date, and would be informed by national decisions by HEFCE, HEA and the CETL network as a whole.

After discussion about whether or not it would be appropriate to pursue charitable or limited company status, it was agreed that sustainability of LH, at least in the early stages, depends upon having a structure which represents the partners, is as uncomplicated as possible, and which does not imply complex legal or financial responsibilities, such as the need to act as an employer. These discussions drew upon models, advice and information drawn from conversations with colleagues in broadly comparable organisations including SEDA, SRHE, ALT and the CRA.

Reflecting the origins of the LearnHigher initiative in the wider learning development practitioner community, it was felt that it would be better not to have one 'lead' HEI in future, but that LearnHigher should be constituted as a learning-resource development network within ALDinHE, maintaining its own steering group. LH would then be defined as the activities and projects associated with the LearnHigher brand, the LH website and the network of LH partners. These activities include: the development, evaluation and dissemination of learning development materials and resources produced collaboratively for the HE sector by LH partners; and the research, development, publication and promotional activities associated with these LH resources.

In addition to being the dissemination channel for peer-reviewed LD resources, LearnHigher is also likely to generate scholarship and experience which will yield material for publication in the Association's Journal (JLDHE), and projects likely to be of interest for conferences such as the LDHEN Symposium. Each of these 'dissemination outlets' for LD activity will have its own distinct focus, priorities, audiences and management arrangements, but each will be supported by ALDinHE and will report to the membership via the main Steering Group.

## **Essential LearnHigher activities to be maintained**

The minimum level of activities needed to sustain the LH brand within ALDinHE would be the maintenance of the website and its use by the LD community. This will be sustained through an increase of institutional subscription to the Association. The actual cost of hosting the LH website is minimal (c£600) but maintaining and developing it will have greater costs (c£6000). An amount of

£10 000 from the existing LH Development Project fund is to be reserved to meet transitional expenses in ensuring the website is maintained.

Existing partners are likely to want to continue to improve upon and disseminate LearnHigher resources to the HE sector even if a formal partnership arrangement ceases to exist beyond CETL funding. It is hoped, however, that in the longer term, the activities that make the website a leading hub for innovative resources would be able to continue through a variety of mechanisms such as networking agreements.

### **Possible Development of LearnHigher within ALDinHE through HEI partnerships**

The minimal model outlined above would allow core LH activities to continue. A revised process for agreeing future partnership arrangements with HEIs will need to be established. It is recognised that some existing partners may not wish to continue, and that new ones may seek to join LearnHigher. It is also recognised that the focus on 'learning areas' with responsibility for one area located in one HEI is not necessarily a model we will continue. In future, the focus is likely to be around particular development projects which may be undertaken by one or more LH partners collectively. Where partners seek to develop and support new projects (e.g. through successful joint funding bids) whose aims and objectives are agreed by LH collectively, they would be able to make use of the LearnHigher brand, website and dissemination networks. The specific staffing and administrative arrangements of such activities would be undertaken within the relevant HEI partners. There could then be a reporting procedure from all LH projects through the overall LHSG, to the SG of ALDinHE, and ultimately to the membership of the Association.

Having been approved in principle by the LH and ALDinHE Steering Groups in January and February 2009 respectively, the arrangements for sustaining LearnHigher beyond 2010, as an arm of the Association, are to be presented to the ALDinHE membership for approval at the Annual General Meeting to be held at the University of Bournemouth on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2009. If approved, planning can then begin for the framework of new partnership agreements. The existing partner HEIs will be approached to encourage their continued involvement in and support for LH, and proposals will be invited from new potential partners. This will involve drafting of new memoranda of agreement to outline the level of support HEI partners agree to undertake. In arguing for continued support, and ideally for funding, for LH activities from partner HEIs, it will be important to articulate the case in terms of the value to HEIs of being represented within a sector-wide initiative promoting scholarship, capacity building and staff development in an area that is vital to the future of Higher Education. It is suggested that, in addition to the esteem arising from involvement in it, further incentives could be offered, such as the facility to co-badge LH resources where appropriate and to acknowledge contributions from HEI partners on the LH website by use of their logos or other promotional material. Additionally, it may be possible to give preferential treatment to contributing HEIs via embedded links to the LH website.

In actively seeking to involve new partner HEIs and calling for wider involvement in LH projects, it is implied that the existing approach to 'learning areas' will be revised. In future, learning development

themes and topics involving project groups spanning more than one HEI are likely to emerge. Opening up the 'learning areas' to participation by groups from more than one partner will help LH to respond effectively by drawing upon expertise, innovative ideas and good practice from wherever it is located. This reconfiguration around themes, issues and topics will facilitate new partnerships and enable a more flexible model for project development. The composition of the LHSG will continue to reflect the partnership; each partner HEI will be entitled to send one voting representative to meetings and their membership will remain valid as long as their memorandum of agreement is in force.

In addition, to enhance the status and underpin the validity of LearnHigher it is suggested that representatives of other key stakeholders from the HE sector – e.g. the HEA – may be invited to join the Steering Group.

### **Funding considerations**

Although it was agreed that we will actively seek additional funding wherever possible for the work of LH beyond 2010, our working assumption is that its continuation cannot be dependent upon gaining such funding and that we must therefore keep essential costs to a minimum.

Once the LH funding reserved for this purpose has been used, the future costs of maintaining and developing LH (e.g. hosting and maintaining the website) will be borne by ALDinHE and funded through its institutional membership subscription. ALDinHE currently contracts the hosting of its own website, and operation of the Open Journal Systems software for the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, to a private company (ICO3). This and other companies would be asked to tender to take over the LearnHigher website and online activities. We anticipate that first year costs would be considerably higher than subsequent years, to cover any additional development work needed to align the ALDinHE and LearnHigher sites while preserving their individual identities, and to ensure the LH site is configured in such a way as to enable participation in national initiatives such as JISC-funded projects. Estimated costs are included below.

We would plan to contract out to contributing partner HEIs all other management, development and administrative functions associated with LH activities. Initially this would be mainly a question of maintaining currency of resources in the relevant learning area(s), at whatever level is permitted within their core staff contribution to LH, but would also apply to externally funded developments projects and future collaborations.

The CWG is clear that the minimalist model outlined above could easily be revised to allow for an expanded operation of LH, depending upon the amounts raised through any successful bids for funding LH as a whole beyond 2010. However, we feel it is important to have a workable basic model. It is also worth noting that the CRA (one of the comparable organisations we looked at) has a core staffing of 1.5 FTE, undertaken through long-term secondments in which the CRA pays the costs to the HEIs, thus avoiding direct employment responsibilities. This might be a way to manage any staffing funded by ALDinHE directly in future.

Potential income-generating activities for LearnHigher (as distinct from ways to increase ALDinHE's main income stream) that have been briefly discussed by the group include:

- Events and workshops using LH resources
- Consultancy
- Publications (DVD or paper-based) such as the Academic Year Planner which has already generated interest from non-LH institutions
- Targeted bids for research or development; these would be led by one or more partner HEIs

### **Transition arrangements**

The CWG envisages that the existing LH CETL will be able to do a considerable amount between now and April 2010 to prepare for life beyond current funding, building on what we've already achieved. Topics for further discussion might include:

- the structure, functioning and org of the LH website
- LH dissemination pre- and post 2010
- future income streams
- LearnHigher events
- opening up the learning areas to involvement from 'interest groups' after 2010, and the constitution and organisation of such groups
- ways to develop resources in learning areas which draws upon best practice and research internationally
- government agendas, particularly the move from TQEF to TESS

### **Conclusion**

The CWG recommends that, after the period of HEFCE funding to LearnHigher as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is over, LH be adopted by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education. The work of LearnHigher, its brand, website and projects should then be supported jointly by ALDinHE and the LH HEI partners, overseen by a steering group representing the LH partners and the Association's Steering Group.

February 2009