

Facilitating Collaboration

The challenge

Facilitating collaboration is one of the main themes of the BCE programme, aiming to enhance collaboration and provision of service across and between institutions, through enabling systems and technology.

Although a very simple concept, the practicalities of effective virtual collaboration are often quite difficult.

Striving for reliable and secure IT systems, academic institutions sometimes implement strict procedures that can limit usage by, and collaboration with, external partners.

Some key challenges are in IT security, access management and intellectual property, plus the knowledge and awareness of what facilities such as online collaborative workspaces and social media can offer.

In seeking efficiency from standardised systems and tight access control, institutions may inadvertently push external collaborations to the fringes of centrally supported IT systems.

The results may be that such collaborations are provided through 'ad hoc' systems or rely on non-technology solutions that miss out on the wide opportunities available.

“
 Something quite interesting that came from a number of different projects was that it wasn't always the technology that was difficult to implement. The policies and other things that were in place turned out to be the real barriers for collaboration.
 ”

Andrew Stewart, Jisc Advance

Expected benefits

- Enhanced support for BCE practitioners, through: new technology solutions; tailored advice and guidance and more effective collaboration within and across institutions and departments
- Process and outputs of institutions' knowledge better packaged for external impact
- Reduced long-term system costs and enhanced opportunity for shared applications

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 Some of the requests and demands were not typical things that we provide and therefore it would be very easy to say no we can't do this. This project proved that if there's a common interest there and there's a problem that needs solving that requires multiple partners to work together then it can happen.
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Jed Woodhouse, IT Director, Northumbria University

A more open, flexible and responsive approach has the potential to offer considerable benefits across the range of activities within further and higher education.

The BCE programme explored how the learning experience could be enhanced through interacting with professionals in industry and using real-life work projects.

In research, access and input to live data by partners was seen to provide a significant benefit in the speed, reliability and relevance of the research outputs.

In an increasingly competitive environment where institutions strive for both capable and satisfied students and high quality research, the ability to collaborate effectively is highly valued.

Through the experience of these projects, IT departments and BCE practitioners found that by working more closely together they can better understand their respective challenges and identify effective processes and systems that support the institutional mission.

In addition to learning, teaching and research benefits, universities and colleges have found that making it easier to initiate and maintain partnerships with collaborators can lead to increased capacity to deliver outputs of institutions' knowledge, and savings in time and money.

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Addressing the challenge

As collaboration was identified as one of the key aims, the BCE programme set out to explore it from two different aspects - online collaborative tools and Virtual Research Environments (VREs).

Collaborative Tools

In 2008 Jisc provided funding for eight academic institutions to explore effective collaboration with external partners as well as funding three separate projects looking at how VREs could facilitate collaboration.

The Trialling of Collaborative Online Tools for BCE project was set up to enhance and empower BCE collaboration among practitioners, between institutions, and between institutions and external partners.

Through the testing and piloting of selected web technologies, tailored as appropriate, in specific BCE collaborative contexts, eight trials took place between 2008-2009.

The trial projects ranged from using online tools in health recruitment to better listening to the needs of small businesses.

All the project teams have produced several outputs for other institutions to make use of.

 www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/collaborative-tools/

OPEN-i links students to professionals

OPEN-i is a global virtual community of practice linking masters level students with established photographers, agencies, publications and educational institutions, currently involving almost 900 practitioners across the world.

Stephen Mayes, director of acclaimed photojournalism agency VII, described OPEN-i as a 'unique platform' that offers a 'completely new opportunity' to share information, expertise and experience with practitioners around the world.

Through OPEN-i, Stephen said he has been able to interact with new people with different perspectives and information that has allowed him to expand his thinking.

Created by the University of the Arts, the idea behind OPEN-i was to bring academics, students and professional practitioners together for debate and discussion to re-imagine the profession in a time of radical change.

The project has been extremely successful acting as both a knowledge transfer process from academia to industry as well as a direct 'feed' into the curriculum by providing the university's course with a high level of currency.

The projects

University of the Arts – OPEN-i

Explored how web 2.0 social networking tools can be used to build a community of practice linking academic and professional worlds in a multifaceted exchange.

Birmingham Metropolitan College – The Response Project

Demonstrated how online tools can be used to support collaboration between NHS employers, FE Colleges and HE Institutions.

University of Glamorgan – G-Blog

Created a 'listening zone' for feedback, ideas and partner-making, and acted as a marketplace for business referrals and contacts.

University of Huddersfield

Investigated the use of collaborative tools to facilitate more effective communication and networking across the West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (WYLLN).

Knowledge House

KHIS is a web-based collaborative project tool used by Knowledge House and five universities in the North East of England to manage Third Strand revenue generating projects.

University of Leeds

Increased the external social capital of the partner knowledge/technology transfer offices and increased the internal social capital of researchers in partner universities.

New College Swindon

Supported the monitoring and collaboration between businesses by using online conferencing tools, discussion forums and other technologies.

Northumbria University – Open ICT Tools

Examined the utility of various information communication technologies for enabling secured collaboration with community and industry partners.

Collaborative tools project bridges the gap between academics and IT staff

Opening up strict institutional ICT to better serve the needs of external collaboration was at the heart of a BCE project at Northumbria University.

The success has been felt across the whole institution with other academics inspired to investigate incorporating cross-institutional business focused learning activity into their programmes.

The project was led by Dr Erik Bohemia from the School of Design together with developer Ben Lovatt from the University's Learning Technologies team.

The funding from Jisc enabled Erik and Ben to explore the use of open source web 2.0 applications and two years later both Skype and Wordpress have been rolled out across campus enabling much more versatile communication with external partners across the globe.

Significantly enhanced student learning experience and

gaining more flexibility were the key benefits of the project but it has also had a significant impact on dispelling some of the preconceptions about academics and IT staff.

"The project contributed to enhancing the relationship between IT Services and LTech", Erik said. "This is important as it has led to increased collaboration between these two services."

"Having the IT Services Director on board was paramount to the success of this project."



Virtual Research Environments

Collaboration in itself can be challenging, but when you add complex, and potentially commercially sensitive, research data it gets much more difficult.

Some of the key challenges include careful control of access, special data storage arrangements for large data and interoperability to make sure different systems work with one another and avoid duplication of data.

One way some of these challenges are being addressed is through the development and piloting of Virtual Research Environments (VREs).

The BCE programme funded three VRE projects as part of its Organisational Capability & Efficiency strand.

 www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/vre.aspx

The projects

OpenImpacts - University of Southampton

Used a VRE to collect stories and evidence of the impact of research on the economy and society.

Embrace - University of Manchester

Investigated the challenges of embedding repositories of digital assets in institutional strategy.

MILARQ - University of Oxford

Improving access to information about classical art objects, to make them available to other academics and students but also members of the public.

Research expertise multiplied in a VRE

A VRE comprises a set of online tools and other network resources and technologies interoperating with each other to support or enhance the processes of a wide range of research practitioners within and across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

A key characteristic of a VRE is that it facilitates collaboration amongst researchers and research teams providing them with more effective means of collaboratively collecting, manipulating and managing data, as well as collaborative knowledge creation.

The Department of Zoology, at the University of Oxford, set about improving access to information about classical art objects, to make them available to other academics and students but also members of the public.

Drawing data from multiple research databases, they developed a flexible interface including visualisation of outputs – for example a side by side comparison of geographical distributions for a given style of vase from different time periods.

The School of Electronics and Computer Science, University of Southampton used a VRE to collect stories and evidence of the impact of research on the economy and society, in order to demonstrate the value of the research funding and contribute to new methods for assessing and recording research.

Part of this project involved developing "timelines" of press releases and research case studies.

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Benefits and impact

In most institutions participating in Trialling Collaborative Tools for BCE, projects appear to have had a profound impact on strategic direction and the approaches developed are, in most cases being further supported internally.

Projects have demonstrated how impact on one individual can influence other key individuals to bring about a significant shift in thinking and practice. In one institution, the senior manager for IT became a strong advocate for BCE.

This had the added value of changing perceptions of IT internally. Departments with engagement initiatives felt that the IT Services were more open to what they needed to do and were therefore more inclined to talk to them about their plans rather than try to fit into, or work around, a locked down system.

Enhancing learning and teaching

Engaging with external partners has brought advantages to student perspectives, including access to international businesses and fellow students. Student surveys at Northumbria University showed the learning experience had been enhanced.

“I have developed new approaches to teaching design projects, and an increased appreciation for the value of ‘presentation’ as a learning activity. The cross-school and cross-institutional collaboration has enabled the intersection of various pedagogical and disciplinary approaches!”

- Northumbria University, Open ICT Tools project

“After training in using collaborative online tools 30% of the clients had gained sufficient confidence to continue with formal study”

- LetMEbeFrank project at New College Swindon

Informing research and practice

Bringing together researchers and professional practitioners through new media, such as webinars, has brought benefits of new learning to both academia and external practice.

“OPEN-i brings together a community around shared concerns and breaks down the barriers between theory and practice. Being able to participate in webinars, access material online and benefit from the network’s support for our investigations, has helped advance my work. It has introduced me to new people with different perspectives and information that has allowed me to expand my thinking. OPEN-i is a terrific resource”

- Stephen Mayes, Managing Director, VII

“I demonstrated the Timeline work to the University’s Research and Innovation office today; they were so excited by its possibility that they dragged the DVC for Research out of his office and showed him. Now he wants me to demonstrate it to all the School Heads of Research. It just emphasises the impact that a well chosen (tiny) piece of technological innovation can have!”

- OpenImpacts Project Blog, Southampton University

Efficiency and effectiveness

Use of online collaborative tools has brought wide ranging benefits, from better access to and sharing of information, improved responsiveness to partners, and savings in time and money.

“A cost analysis of the savings achieved by the partners using online tools was undertaken. On average each participant saved their organisation £27 per session. This cost analysis took into account salary costs travelling, mileage allowance and parking charges.”

- Birmingham Metropolitan College

“60% uplift in licensing revenue and moving from 0 to 100% success rate in Yorkshire Concept proof of concept funding.”

- Leeds Innovation Network project, University of Leeds