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September 1997

Staff room

IT and Dearing



At the end of July, only days after the publication of the Dearing report the Computers in Teaching Initiative held a conference to examine the implications for information technology in higher education (HE). Inevitably there are implications for the schools sector too.

The Computers in Teaching Initiative, or CTI, runs a number of subject based centres to encourage the use of learning technology in the UK. The conference, "IT & Dearing: the implications for HE" provided an opportunity for members of the committee to elaborate on the report's recommendations and for representatives of the organisations affected to give their initial reactions and personal comment.

The conference was opened by Professor Diana Laurillard, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for technology development at the Open University and a member of the Dearing committee. She made it clear that the report represents an attempt to achieve the goals of increasing access and continuing the expansion of HE within tight funding constraints.

Dearing looks to technology, and particularly to improvements in the management of communications and information technology (C&IT) to cope with the increased student numbers. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), the body responsible for network connectivity between HE institutions is singled out as a success story. The message for other areas of learning technology is clear – experience must be shared to offset development costs.

What of multimedia courseware and interactive learning? Sir William Stubbs, also a member of the committee and now Rector of the London Institute summed up the feeling of many of the speakers: the benefits, if any, are not clear enough to justify a large scale change in teaching methods. If HE needs money to implement C&IT changes it will have to make it an internal priority.

It remains a topic of hot debate as to whether technology can be used to reduce teaching costs. Many studies suggest the opposite: C&IT makes for a better quality education but at an increased cost. Nice if you can get it.

The reaction to the report was cautious and at times critical. Dr Adrian Boucher of the NatWest Financial Literacy Centre described it as "lacking vision" and Dr Paul Clark of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council warned people not to expect too much of the new proposed Institute for Learning and Teaching (IL&T).

IT and Dearing

One thing which is set to continue though is competition between institutions for students. Many believe that this will conflict with the job of the IL&T which must encourage the sharing of technology if a future funding crisis is to be avoided.

Increased competition for students will affect schools and further education colleges too as these become the main market place in which the institutions compete. Universities are already taking out adverts on buses and billboards but "you ain't seen nothing yet".

Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI)

Dearing (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education)

Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)



Plus is part of the family of activities in the Millennium Mathematics Project, which also includes the NRICH and MOTIVATE sites.