Stakeholder strategic updates

2021 Questions and answers

Introduction

Our stakeholder strategic updates provide members with an overview of our performance over the last year and a heads up on what we’re currently working on/towards. During the session it’s important we allow members time to ask questions, holding us to account. This document provides a record of the questions asked and our answers.

If you have any follow-up questions, please speak to your account manager.

Contents

Governance ..................................................................................................................................................2
Connectivity and cyber security ..................................................................................................................3
Procurement/negotiations ..........................................................................................................................4
Engagement/relationships ..........................................................................................................................5
On the horizon ...........................................................................................................................................6
Research.....................................................................................................................................................7
Governance

1. **What are you doing to ensure members’ subscription costs remain low?**
   We’re actively engaging with our funders to maintain core grants and we will continue to look at and drive down our operating costs.

2. **Are there likely to be any increases to members’ subscription next year?**
   We will aim to keep subscription increases as low as possible, certainly no higher than inflation. We’re awaiting confirmation of our core grant from funders before we can provide a definitive answer.

3. **Will members still have to pay VAT on our subscriptions given you were successful in getting VAT back from HRMC?**
   Unfortunately, VAT is payable on subscriptions under current HMRC rules and therefore we must charge it. What the ruling means is that we can reclaim more VAT on the costs of JANET which we couldn’t do before. We have discounted the total amount charged for subscriptions by just over £1m since 2018-19 for Higher Education and from 2019-20 for further education members in anticipation of this agreement being reached. Subject to our core funding remaining the same, we intend to keep this discount in place.

4. **How are you going to deliver new services or respond flexibly in accordance with external challenges, at pace?**
   It’s about being focused. We cover a lot of ground in Jisc and it’s vital that colleagues from across the business understand our key priorities. Once everyone is clear, it’s then about lining up the relevant resources to deliver against those priorities and having the correct internal governance in place for decision-making and sign-off.

5. **What are the biggest risks in the current climate?**
   We could explore many different risks if we had the time but the key ones for us include: the changing policy landscape for both further and higher education; the chip shortage is resulting in some long lead in times; wellbeing – people are tired after everything they’ve been through in recent years, along with continued uncertainty; and recruitment.

6. **Recruitment, especially IT, is a challenge for members. How are you overcoming the challenges around recruitment?**
   We’re looking at salary scales, location independence (hybrid working) is now our default, we’re investing in early career and graduate programmes to grow our own and we’re working hard to embed a culture that attracts new talent. We have to be seen as an organisation that people want to work for. We also endeavor to learn from those that do leave the company. We need to be there for our members too; we’re placing a greater focus on managed services which will offer support to members with capacity challenges.

7. **How are you helping members to reduce their carbon footprint?**
   Firstly, we’re looking at the carbon footprint of our own organisation and our services. We still have some work to do to understand our **Scope 3 emissions** so we can put a comprehensive plan in place to reduce our carbon impact. Secondly, we’re looking at bringing together guidance on the carbon footprint of technology, eg the use of video on conference calls or how much embedded carbon there is in laptops. Much of the guidance that already exists is focused on estates or travel; we want to provide members with a digital perspective. If you are aware of expertise in the sector that can help us, please let us know.
Connectivity and cyber security

10. Can you expand on the roadmap for your cyber security offer?

Our focus is on delivering managed Security Operations Centre (SOC) and managed firewall services for the start of the academic year 2022/23. We’ll also continue to provide outreach and guidance to members at all levels, from detailed in-depth briefings on ransomware defence to high-level policy guidance around strategic security risks. We’re investing over £2m in a national filtering service to block known and emerging threats – focusing on international requests coming into Janet, where members do not want to see that traffic and have no need to see that traffic. It will be an opt-in service, and we’re aiming to make that available early in the new year. We’re also investigating developments in analytics with cyber security.

Beyond those, our primary focus is to help members achieve visibility of what’s going on in their digital environments. We want to help those with a responsibility for cyber security, to feel confident in raising the conversation with their executive leadership teams. It must be considered strategically with the appropriate policies in place to help your organisations respond to a growing and developing threat.

11. Cyber security is a big concern for everyone and it’s great to see all that you’re doing. Is there any more information you can give us on the national filtering service?

We provided an update at our security conference and there’ll be more information coming out soon. Our focus is on using GeoIP (Geographic IP) technology to block international requests where members don’t want to see that traffic. We’re taking steps to block that at a national level, which members can opt-into. The new service should be online early in the new year.

12. How can we keep pace with an evolving threat?

This question is partly covered under question 9, and our continued commitment to develop services and invest in cyber security. Security, across the board, is a fast-moving space – it’s a landscape that will continue to evolve and we must continue to stay one step ahead. No one organisation can cover everything, but that’s where we have an advantage.

We benefit from the collective knowledge of members and can share that knowledge in a timely fashion to help mitigate existing and future threats. Regarding the long-term, it’s about sustained investment for us, and members, and we must continue to collaborate – whether that’s sharing intelligence or coordinating responses.

13. Are there any plans to provide further guidance about Transport Layer Security (TLS)/Secure Socket Layer (SSL) inspection eg, pros and cons of boundary versus endpoint inspection, data protection considerations, user experience impact, etc?

As privacy concerns grow there is greater use of end-to-end encryption being deployed. As we deploy greater use of encryption it’s more difficult to inspect, leading to a point where you must be able to decrypt for regulatory compliance purposes. That leads towards putting certificates on end devices which becomes a certificate management problem. So, you’re trading one problem for another one. We’re watching this space very carefully, particularly how some of the big providers are responding, and we’ll aim to get some guidance out when we have some clarity.

14. How can you help with the challenge of building SOC capability and what would we get from a Jisc managed SOC that we don’t get from another provider?

We’re in a position where it can both a) act at the national level in terms of blocking cyber actors when they target individual members and b) help pool cyber intelligence from these attacks with other parties. In terms of capability the first steps are extending the “eyes on” coverage to 24/7 to combat the strategy of hackers attacking out of hours. We are also exploring cloud protection, particularly with respect to supply chain security.

15. Could you explain the thinking behind the 16 questions to determine your cyber posture?

When engaging with members, we use a standard set of questions around posture, the threat landscape, what they should be doing, where they should prioritise investment and where we see the landscape going. The questions are there to start a discussion/debate, helping members work through where they are in their own security journey and raise awareness of how members are responding to changes in tactics and strategies that organised crime are deploying.
In relation to research – we see a threat emerging in the supply chain eg, the TC Global issue resulting in the release of student data. We’re doing a lot of work to bring a coordinated response on supply chain threats. We’re also mindful, the focus of organised crime will shift to the supply chain as we all invest more in cyber security.

16. Can eduroam in a box be used to help maintain institutional communications during cyber incidents?

Yes, we have used it with a member under those circumstances.

17. Would eduroam in a box help some NHS Wales organisations that are struggling to link up to eduroam and have students on placement?

It should, anyone that has an eduroam account can use the eduroam in a box capability.

18. Can you provide an update on plans for the Janet link, spanning the Irish Sea?

The subsea link is a critical part of the Janet network. A recent contractual break point gave us the opportunity to review it and we’re pleased to say we will be renewing our existing arrangements for fibre connectivity and working to improve the resilience of connections in Northern Ireland – all in line with Janet access programme, seeing us through to 2028.

Procurement and negotiations

19. Have you made any progress allowing Northern Ireland (NI) members to easily use Jisc frameworks?

Further and higher education members in NI have stringent procurement rules making it difficult for them to use some of our services. We have and will continue to engage the Department of finance (NI), and Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) to work out how we can improve this situation. It’s unfortunate, because there are examples where we’re the most cost-effective provider but do not meet the procurement rules in place by the CPD.

20. Is it possible to extend the scope of Jisc complimentary services to include "connectivity" which is “top-sliced” by the department before the college block allocation? (NI specific – in relation to procurement issues outlined in 18)

We carried out a review of what should be included in the core subscription a couple of years ago – with agreement from all four UK nations. This could prove difficult, however, if you’re interested in expanding the core subscription let us know and we can coordinate interest before discussing further with the funders.

21. We’re appreciative of all your efforts negotiating read/publish deals with the major publishers but can you tell us more about any plans to switch focus to smaller or native open access (OA) publishers?

We have over 50 open access agreements with publishers, the vast majority of which are with smaller or pure gold OA publishers. As part of our funding agreement with Research England we’re mandated to look at agreements with smaller and the learned societies.

We’re also working with open access Monograph publishers on a variety of diamond open access arrangements, looking at the state of the marketplace and requirements – working with colleagues across Europe. We recognise the importance of the big deals, but we also want to make sure we are supporting a diverse publishing ecosystem and that we’re mindful of any unintended consequences of our actions with bigger publishers.

22. Have you any plans to strengthen your role in procurement on behalf of the sector? Can you get involved with some of the reshaping of the major procurement groups that is currently happening, to provide digital expertise?

This topic was raised recently with the Jisc Board and in discussions with BUFDG. We continuously keep an eye on the landscape to identify key digital players and technologies such as Adobe and student record systems. We need to ensure we influence the right parties in the right ways. This will be achieved through more strategic engagement with some of the major sellers like Google and Microsoft. We are and will continue to liaise with UK purchasing consortia and are aware of reform in this space.
23. It would be helpful to hear more about your thinking for future work around open textbooks

We’re concerned about approaches to pricing (eg Pearson) which gives cause for members to negotiate further, whilst investigating alternative approaches to provision.

We are part of a year-long project in the FE sector, partnering with Ufi VocTech Trust and the Open University, to deliver a content platform that will help with the discovery of open source resources based on practitioner recommendations.

Engagement and relationships

24. What is your relationship with the Department for the Economy (DfE) in shaping digital policy and strategy?

Our relationship with the DfE is strong, however, we are establishing new relationships with key roles following personnel changes within the DfE. We view it as a tripartite relationship between ourselves, members and the department – working collaboratively to formulate a strategy and guidance on how we implement it.

Robin Ghurburun (managing director, further education and skills) will be visiting Northern Ireland (NI) members in the spring and will lead a discussion on the announcement to step down the Technology enhance learning (TEL) working group – focusing on how, together, we fill that gap.

25. Can you provide independent assurances on strategies we put to executive leadership teams? (FE specific)

We’re committed to helping members engage executive leaders, however, our level of engagement will depend on capacity. Every member has an account manager who can support you in those conversations, supported by Nation/Sector leads and Jisc experts where appropriate. Our infrastructure review service is a good starting point. If you require specific advice that will take a significant amount of time, we can offer consultancy as a service eg, helping you use the cloud to achieve wider digital goals.

26. Is work underway with Scottish Government to match the UK legislation on banning essay mills?

We are part of the cross-sector academic integrity advisory group, working with representatives from devolved administrations to see what we can do to take the legislation UK-wide. Jack Ford from Scottish Government is the observer on the group. We also have Claire Jamieson from Scottish Government, Kathryn Loan and Derek Horsborough from the Scottish Funding Council, and Helen Butcher from the University of Glasgow.

27. Are you aware of CAUDIT HE Capability model? Could it be a useful visual framework for you to map your activities against, so it’s easier for members to have full sight of the breadth of the things it does?

Yes, we’re aware of it, have discussed this with ucisa and we’ll be investigating how we can use it most effectively. The model maps out a huge range of activities and will be useful to visualise how we can collaborate with the sector to standardise approaches/identify gaps. However, we must remain focused on those areas we can add the most value to, ensuring any intervention has a positive impact for the whole sector. We’re also looking at how we might bring existing intelligence together to provide a deeper and richer view of our members existing IT infrastructure and are liaising with ucisa on this. It wouldn’t form the basis of a consultancy offer, but instead – something we can share with members, so they can see how they compare with others and, where appropriate, what good looks like.

28. Why have you decided to revisit paying for Digifest?

We withdrew charging for Digifest last year as we adjusted to deliver an online version. At present, we are working on the assumption it will be delivered face to face. We have introduced a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) element for participants which has been very well received. We therefore plan to return to charging for our key events from 2022 on the assumption they will be held face to face.

29. Can you work with others to ensure there are no, or reduced, conflicts with sector events?

Yes, we always try and ensure clashes with key sector events are avoided. It isn’t always possible due to the limited availability of some of the larger venues, but we certainly aim to avoid this.
30. How will you cater for members that struggle with travel to/from events and/or those that prefer to access content online?

We plan to provide online elements for all our priority events.

31. Thank you for your help in dealing with uncooperative behaviours of vendors. I expect the next five years to be just as bumpy and those behaviours to continue. The coordinated approach between Jisc and ucisa will be key to ensure we get the best out of our vendors.

We’re seeking to ensure we address issues on the software side as vehemently as we do on the content side, we’re working more closely with ucisa than we ever have before and will do our best to support members in this space.

On the horizon

32. What do you think will have the biggest impact on education over the next 5 years?

We expect Artificial Intelligence will start to impact education over the next 5 years. Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality is becoming embedded in the curriculum, especially following a move to a hybrid model, and will continue to gain traction. The network won’t be any less important – with increasingly high volumes of traffic. Finally but not least, government policy and what happens with funding – especially in the different nations.

33. Regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI), could you say anything about plans for leadership in the debate about ethical uses of data in the sector eg how it relates to recent public sector transparency guidelines, Jisc services, Turing Institute, etc.

We recently published a guide that suggests a pathway towards responsible, ethical AI. It includes a series of questions, helping you to assess ideas and their fit for your organisation. Asking simpler questions first may show that a proposal or product isn’t a good fit for your organisation, but if it is, the answers to those questions, and the process of obtaining them, should clarify the ethics, too.

We will continue to engage with key stakeholders on the topic of AI and will be piloting a series of promising AI products through our National centre for AI in tertiary education. As part of the piloting process, we will establish the measures needed to ensure such products are designed and deployed responsibly.

34. How are you supporting eSports?

There’s more to come from us in this area but we are in discussion with British eSports who have updated their guidelines for colleges as a result. They are going to run a forum in Jan/Feb which we will support. They have asked members about their existing setup, are looking for case studies and keen to share good practice. We’re also working closely with the AoC on this. Security is a particular concern for us and it’s an area we’ve been closely monitoring, whilst keeping British eSports informed of what we’re seeing.

35. Could you expand on the proposal for a National digital consultancy service in Scotland?

We’re yet to sit down and shape that with the SFC. But our feeling is that we build on the current offer that we provide FE and HE around digital vision and digital leadership – mapping that to the challenges our members experience eg economic drivers, the transition between FE and HE, and what it means to provide a digital ecosystem to facilitate that. So, for example, the adoption of effective data, how that drives decision-making and leadership, but also thinking about investment propositions – balancing financial investment with operational delivery of things like learning and teaching, assessment, and transition into the workplace. We’ll look to scope that work, with peers and colleagues in Scotland, early in the new year.

36. What do you think are the priorities for the next 12 months?

We need to:

- signpost effective digital pedagogy – whether that’s online, remote, or blended learning
- facilitate collaboration across the sector, helping members to share knowledge, avoid duplication of effort and/or known pitfalls
- help members invest, appropriately, in their virtual estate eg, spaces that support simulation and augmentation
- work with key stakeholders to realise the benefits of secure remote assessment
- protect our members from cyber threats
- continue to negotiate on behalf of our members (eg, open access agreements), with a greater focus on software licenses

37. **What’s your role in supporting the sector with online assessment?**

We continue to publish content on assessment eg, the future of assessment; assessment rebooted; and more recently digital assessment in higher education. We’re now engaged with Ofqual – looking to release guidance for FE in the new year, as well as running online events with City and Guilds. We’ll follow-up with key stakeholders in each nation because the guidance should be applicable to others, whilst pointing out regional subtleties.

38. **Student information systems – how do we ensure those are fit for purpose in the future?**

A lot of members are deeply unimpressed by the services they use and the suppliers they work with. We’re looking at starting a deep dive into this space. In Wales, we’re about to start work on learning analytics, working with 5/6 colleges. The output of that work should be relevant to other nations – looking at which systems are being used, ensuring standard approaches are used and sharing knowledge to support a move from descriptive to predictive analytics. We should have a set of recommendations by Spring that can then inform the next stage.

39. **What’s your role in working with government to ensure digital poverty becomes a thing of the past?**

We’re feeding into the newly formed all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on data poverty. Chaired by Darren Jones MP, the group will host several meetings throughout 2022, culminating in research and policy recommendations for the government to adopt.

We’ve long been encouraging local authorities to provide free internet access to students and staff in thousands of public spaces across the country, including libraries, community centres and public halls, through eduroam – available to all councils on the govroam network.

edubox – a portable box allowing for the eduroam network to be reached in ‘hard to reach’ areas – is another innovative solution helping to address the lack of access to education. Along with our service partner, Cradlepoint, we set up edubox for the University of Gloucestershire that immediately delivered an internet service for staff during construction work as part of a major project to build a city campus that will rejuvenate a struggling area.

In Wales, we carried out research into digital poverty that resulted in increased investment from Welsh Government. It’s safe to say this level of investment is unsustainable so we’re now looking at sustainable investment practices in IT, with the outcome of that due March/April. We’ll be exploring what good practice looks like and providing guidance on how others can move forward.

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**Research**

40. **We’re seeing a continuous drive for and increases in the volumes of open research data and the need to move that around the country. How do you fit into this picture and how can you help us work towards a common set of standards?**

On top of the network, which allows members to move data securely, we’re considering how we can build on the OCRE framework from a cloud perspective to provide more members with the opportunity to take advantage of High Performance Computing capabilities as well as preservation.

We’re heavily involved in discussions around standards and our research repository helps your institution play its part in national and international initiatives that promote open scholarship such as Plan S and the FAIR principles, building its reputation and extending the impact of its research. It even has a “FAIR checker to make sure your research data is findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable – according to FAIR principles.

We’re mindful the movement and preservation of data could have a negative impact on our carbon footprint and so we have an important part to play regarding the access and management of data – do we always want to be moving/duplicating data? We’re also mindful members use a plethora of vendors in this space eg, AWS, Azure and Google. We are in a strong position to support different use cases because of the agreements we now have in place with all the big providers. We’ll look to build on this question through our PVC-R forum and look at how we flesh out the role we could play at the institutional and sector level.
41. How are you engaging with researchers about how Octopus can support them to change their publishing practice?

We have established an open community of Octopus ambassadors which includes researchers from across all career stages, disciplines and other stakeholders covering different aspects of the scholarly communication and research lifecycle. So, it’s different from an editorial board because Octopus doesn’t have that hierarchical frame of reference, but it does encourage an ethos of inclusiveness, openness, and meritocracy.

Alongside that we’re partnering with the UK reproducibility network (UKRN) and Octopus can draw upon existing UKRN networks. We’ve already run several workshops alongside the UKRNs with researchers representing 15 institutions. We’re working with the UKRI, and through their open science communities and existing Octopus supporters we have a plan around outreach – advertising it at scientific events and conferences around the UK and worldwide. We’ll also be promoting it through our existing networks and channels, using our social media profiles to promote what we’re doing. We have been engaging with researchers at all stages of the process, a critical aspect of the programme of work funded by Research England.