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Strategic Funds Review: Jisc Service Provision

Final Report for the Scottish Funding Council

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This summary provides an overview of the main findings from an independent evaluation of Jisc service provision to the tertiary education sector in Scotland. Jisc is the UK digital, data and technology agency focused on tertiary education, research, and innovation, and has for many years played a critical role in supporting universities and colleges across the UK.

The research was commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to better understand what has been delivered through its annual investment to Jisc between the years 2020-2021 and 2023-2024, the impacts and value placed on these services, and whether Jisc services are meeting the current and future needs of universities and colleges in Scotland.

The research comprised: a review of existing information and data provided by SFC and Jisc; remote interviews with more than 50 staff from 26 universities and colleges in Scotland; an online survey aimed at senior Information and Communications Technology (ICT) personnel within the tertiary education sector (12 responses[1]); and remote interviews with SFC, Jisc, and wider stakeholders (18 individuals from nine organisations).

Key findings

The SFC is one of a number of UK funders[2] of Jisc. The SFC provides circa £8 million annually to Jisc to provide a range of core services to the tertiary education sector in Scotland. As part of its subscription model, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland also contribute approximately £1.05 million (including VAT) to Jisc via member subscription fees[3].

In the last few years SFC funding to Jisc has been a flat-cash settlement, and it represents:

- 13.3% of Jisc's total grant funding.
- 10.97% of Jisc's total grant and subscription funding.

[1] A number of the intended survey respondents took part in the remote interviews undertaken with university and college representatives.
[2] This includes the Office for Students (OfS), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), UK Government Department for Education (DfE), SFC, NI Executive Department for the Economy, and Medr (Wales).
[3] The college sector in Scotland do not pay a subscription fee to Jisc, this is covered by SFC's annual funding to Jisc.

The UK funders, including SFC, have also provided some capital funding to Jisc. This has been on a more ad hoc basis for critical infrastructure investment. Over the review period, capital funding has been provided to Jisc to upgrade and improve the JANET network, the UK's National Research and Education Network (NREN) - a high-capacity, high-speed, resilient, and reliable internet connection with 18 million users, and carrying six petabytes of data every day. The SFC contribution to this work was circa £1.8 million.

Jisc's diverse range of services and support includes (but is not limited to): connectivity via the JANET network; procurement and management of Cloud services; cyber security services; negotiating digital licensing deals on behalf of the tertiary education sector; open research; content and discovery; verification services; and digital learning. Further, the tertiary education sector can pay for additional optional services (for example, data analytics) which do not form part of the core Jisc offer – uptake of optional services among universities and colleges varies considerably.

Our review concluded that Jisc has delivered a comprehensive and complex set of services to the tertiary education sector in Scotland. These services have been in line with annual outcome agreements agreed with SFC, with the SFC's strategic priorities, and with the shared priorities agreed with the other UK funders. While there is a clear alignment, this is not always direct or straightforward, and it is also challenging to establish the attribution of some of the Jisc services. Services related to ensuring a secure network would be a good example, albeit there can be no doubt that this infrastructure support makes a critical contribution.

More than half (circa 57%) of the SFC annual funding to Jisc has been on the provision of network connectivity via the JANET network and a range of associated connectivity services. This has typically been followed by expenditure related to high quality cyber security support and negotiating digital licensing deals on behalf of the sector.

The available reporting information suggests that Jisc's performance against its agreed outcomes has been good over the review period. This data and wider feedback from universities and colleges confirm that the Janet network and associated connectivity is reliable and secure and has been fundamental in supporting virtually all aspects of the work of universities and colleges in Scotland.

Further, in relation to library and open research services, Jisc has negotiated significant levels of access to journal and academic content on behalf of the sector and has helped to streamline administrative systems for research publication. This has been to the considerable benefit of the sector (including significant cost savings) and has supported learning and teaching, research, and student experience.

More recently, Jisc has been extensively engaged in supporting the sector in digital transformation, providing advice and support to institutions in areas such as*, inter alia,* virtual learning environments (VLE), the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital skills. These have again been well received by the sector.

The evidence for Jisc's core service provision being good value for money for the sector is clear and compelling. The package of core Jisc services that have been funded by SFC have been of fundamental importance to the successful operation of the tertiary education sector in Scotland and they continue to be so.

Sector feedback is that Jisc saves institutions money on the basis that alternative provision would be more expensive (if available at all to those located outwith the main population centres).

Further, Jisc is widely considered a trusted partner for the sector and adds value in a range of ways, including:

- Jisc's expertise and understanding of the digital needs of universities and colleges resulting in a more sector relevant and responsive service and approach.
- connectivity into the wide UK and international academic communities, enabling collaboration – particularly in research.
- Jisc's ability to represent, and negotiate on behalf of, the whole (UK) sector, giving it significant influence when dealing with commercial partners.
- connections into national security systems and organisations, providing often early warnings of significant cyber threats.
- the facilitation of valuable communities of practice to share knowledge and experience across the sector.

Sector feedback further confirms that the core services provided by Jisc will continue to be of critical importance to universities and colleges in the years ahead, and the case for ongoing support is strong.

Looking ahead, the sector's requirements around digital security will likely increase. Similarly, the rapid development and diffusion of AI raises significant challenges and questions for tertiary education (for example, for learning and teaching as well as for research). Together, these issues are likely to require investment and could start to exert pressure on the funding model for Jisc's services.

For the SFC it will be important to be clear about the needs of the sector in Scotland and how they should be reflected in the arrangements with Jisc. This may require SFC to play a greater part in consulting with the sector about these needs as part of its role as an intelligent customer of Jisc.

There is also a need in the future to clarify the roles of Jisc with respect to some of the other agencies acting in this space. SFC currently promotes Jisc as providing all things digital but there is evidence of some confusion over roles and responsibilities between Jisc and bodies such as the College Development Network (CDN), Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (USICA), Advanced Procurement for Universities and Colleges Limited (APUC), and Higher Education and Further Education Shared Technology and Information Services (HEFESTIS).

That is not to say that there is clear evidence of duplication, but rather a lack of clarity around responsibilities at times, creating the potential for overlap and duplication. This again is an area in which SFC might seek to bring greater clarity.

Similarly, as SFC's own digital transformation work develops in support of the sector, there will be questions to resolve about where SFC will be required to lead, and how that then relates to the services required of Jisc.

Recommendations

Six recommendations are presented for consideration by SFC, as follows:

- SFC should continue to provide funding support for the core services delivered by Jisc on the basis that they constitute essential national infrastructure and support for the tertiary education sector in Scotland.
- as part of its digital transformation work, SFC should take a greater leadership role in consulting with the sector on its future digital needs and in negotiating with Jisc on the evolution of the services required. This will also require close engagement and alignment with the UK partners.
- the requirements for investment will grow in future to meet the twin and connected challenges of cyber security and AI, and this should be factored into future negotiations with UK partners and with Jisc.
- SFC may wish to undertake more regular review and evaluation of Jisc to track expenditure and monitor the balance between funded and commercial (optional?) service provision.
- SFC should work with Jisc and partners to clarify roles and responsibilities and avoid the risk of duplication in areas such as digital skills, digital pedagogy, data and analytics and digital strategy.
- the issues above should be reflected in future revised outcome agreements with Jisc with, as far as possible, clear performance measures identified by SFC.