

3.9 Over the past 18 months, NHS has developed the concept of a “virtual campus”, an e-hub for NHSU advice and some learning activities as well as administration and management functions. Procurement of the campus (at an estimated contract value of £20-50m over 5 years) had reached invitation to negotiate stage with two bidders, but has recently been terminated. The termination coincides with receipt of findings of an independent study into the virtual campus concept and procurement commissioned at the NHSU Chief Executive’s request from Professor Keith Baker of Reading University. This stressed the need for improved stakeholder involvement, highlighted a lack of clarity of purpose of the campus and emphasised the need for better inter-operability with other systems eg. NPfIT. Clearly such steps should have been taken at or near the start of the procurement process.

3.10 There are a number of established providers of e-learning (including LearnDirect and the Open University) as well as e-based learner management systems. A number of those we have spoken to have expressed surprise that NHSU has tried to procure a bespoke solution rather than adapting an existing system, a number of which have already received a significant investment of public funds. We are unclear whether the option of adaptation was rigorously explored during the early stages of work on the virtual campus.

SETTING UP AND TESTING DELIVERY AND OPERATIONS PROCESSES

3.11 NHSU has work in hand to put in place a number of key business systems and processes to underpin its work.

3.12 It has set up a Learning Needs Observatory (LNO) to carry out an NHS-wide analysis of learning needs. The first LNO report has recently been completed. There is a strong case for an overview of NHS learning needs of this sort and as such the report has been welcomed by many in the service. Some SHAs consider that the report has insufficiently integrated local intelligence – in other words, what NHSU’s customers believe is needed. It has also been developed primarily to inform the development of NHSU’s offer, and only secondarily to serve the needs of all NHS commissioners and funders. Yet the latter role is a crucial one which could serve to enhance NHSU’s credibility with the service.

3.13 A common concern voiced to us has been that, several years on, NHSU lacks a business model. NHSU has spelt out its wish to operate through a combination of DH subsidy, others sources of funding (e.g. from the Learning Skills Council) and through charging for NHSU-badged courses.

3.14 Until recently there was no clarity over who would pay for NHSU-badged courses or what the charges would be. Nor was it clear what extent NHSU was operating on a pure commercial basis, marketing its provision to employers, as opposed to reaching up-front agreement with SHAs on courses to be developed and these SHAs then ensuring their use. During the course of this review, for the first time NHSU and SHAs have together made significant progress towards the agreement of a business model under which: