

# **Strategic Review of SchoolNet South Africa**



November 2011

**J Roberts Consulting Services**  
Research and Evaluation for Development

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## **1. Introduction and overview of the report**

J Roberts Consulting Services was requested to undertake a strategic review of the implementation of the 2009 Strategic Plan developed by SchoolNet South Africa (SchoolNet SA). The purpose of the review is to facilitate reflection on the organisation's performance over the last three years and to inform the process that will lead to the development of a new strategic plan that will cover the next three year period. It is the writer's intention that the report serve as a catalyst for internal discussion and organisational reflection, rather than a substitute for internal planning processes. The suggestions contained in the report are aimed at supporting and enhancing current levels of organisational performance, but are not intended to be read in a restrictive or prescriptive way.

As this report is written for an internal audience, i.e. SchoolNet SA staff members and board members, a great deal of organisational detail has been omitted and it is assumed that readers will be familiar with the nature of work undertaken by SchoolNet. As this report makes extensive reference to the planned activities contained in the 2009 Strategic Plan, it is recommended that it be read in conjunction with the Plan.

The Strategic Review report is divided into the following sections:

- Discussion of the approach adopted in conducting the Strategic Review and data collection methodology;
- Overview of organisational capacity and its probable effects on the ability of SchoolNet SA to implement its Strategic Plan;
- Review of the implementation of the 2009 Strategic Plan;
- Issues for consideration when developing 2012-2015 Strategic Plan; and
- Recommendations for strengthening the value of the Strategic Plan.

## **2. Approach and data collection methodology**

The Strategic Review was informed by Lusthaus<sup>1</sup> et al's work on assessing organisational effectiveness. The framework presented in their book "Enhancing Organisational Performance" identifies a number of domains that contribute to the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of an organisation. For the purpose of the Strategic Review, it was necessary to select only those elements of the framework which were relevant to SchoolNet SA's work and which aligned with the scope of the Review.

The adapted framework is presented below.

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<sup>1</sup>Lusthaus, C., AdrienM.H., Anderson, G. & Carden, F. (1999) *Enhancing Organizational Performance: A toolbox for self-assessment*. IDRC. Ottawa.

Figure 1: Organisational performance framework



One of the primary objectives of the Strategic Review was to determine whether the Strategic Plan had been implemented as designed and the success with which activities had been executed. This assessment is weighted towards assessing whether or not activities had been completed - this was a pragmatic decision based both on the scope of the review and on the fact that the wording of several objectives and activities in the Strategic Plan made it difficult to make nuanced judgements on the value, contribution or impact of different activities. Where possible, and appropriate, organisational and operational factors that could have contributed to the effectiveness with which activities were completed are discussed.

### **Data collection strategies**

The process of conducting the Strategic Review can be described as a process of “facilitated reflection”. This is a participatory approach to conducting evaluation research that allows for the joint identification of issues that form part of the review. The process of reflecting on performance, considering different approaches and examining situations from different perspectives forms part of the process of assessing performance. This approach was adopted in order to promote participation and engagement with the findings of the Review.

Discussions were held with senior staff members in order to better understand the organisation and the issues with which SchoolNet is grappling. This information was supplemented by more formal interviews with staff to review progress against the activities specified in the Strategic Plan, and reviews of relevant documents (including the SchoolNet website, annual reports prepared by the Executive Director, project progress reports, evaluation studies and information posted on various social networking sites).

Additional information on organisational performance was gathered using an electronic questionnaire that was completed by staff. The questionnaire examined perceptions of the efficiency and efficacy with which the organisation operates (some of the issues addressed in the questionnaire included human resource management, organisational structure and climate, work scheduling and understanding of the mission of the organisation). Initial feedback from staff members has indicated that the process of completing the questionnaire has sparked discussion and reflection – both as individuals and as a group.

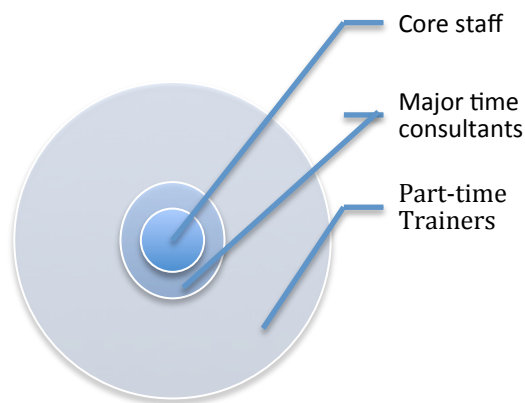
A second electronic questionnaire was circulated to all SchoolNet SA trainers, as the trainers are an important resource and, for many outsiders, are the public face of SchoolNet. The questionnaire collected information on the profile of trainers, their experience, level of activity within SchoolNet, satisfaction with their training to deliver courses and their satisfaction with the level of communication from the project managers (both in regard to their work and the work of SchoolNet<sup>2</sup> in general).

### 3. Organisational capacity

#### 3.1 Organisational structure and staffing profile

SchoolNet SA is staffed by a relatively small group of core staff, on full time contracts, who are supported by a few major-time consultants and volunteers<sup>3</sup>. This core group is supported by a large pool of part-time trainers who are responsible for delivering almost all of the training that SchoolNet is contracted to offer. This structure is represented below.

Figure 2: SchoolNet South Africa's organisational structure



The term “virtual organisation” was used to describe SchoolNet’s structure, as much of the organisation’s capacity rests with the large group of occasional trainers who are “contracted in” as required. The organisational structure adopted by SchoolNet is appropriate for an entity that is dependent on donor or project funding, and where levels of activity may

<sup>2</sup>In the interests of brevity, SchoolNet is used to instead of SchoolNet South Africa or SchoolNet SA.

<sup>3</sup> The term major-time consultant is used to refer to consultants who spend a considerable proportion of their working time with one organisation.

fluctuate dramatically from one month to the next. The existing arrangement allows SchoolNet to keep its permanent staff costs relatively low without compromising the organisation's ability to deliver core services. However, one of the limitations of this model is that those who are less close to the "organisational centre" do not have consistent access to information on organisational developments or its programmes. This can be a liability when these individuals are responsible for representing the organisation to the teachers, principals and officials they train. There is also a danger that these staff members may feel less loyalty to or affiliation with the organisation, which could lead to them "existing only in name" and not being fully committed to service delivery or to seeing themselves as SchoolNet's representatives.

The creation of an effective virtual organisation therefore requires fairly high levels of investment in managing and maintaining communication with those further from the centre in order to retain their interest in, and commitment to, the organisation.

SchoolNet SA's core group of staff is distributed across several locations, with most being based at SchoolNet's Johannesburg office, with the Executive Director and two project staff being based in KwaZulu Natal. Two staff members and a consultant are based in the Western Cape. The geographic dispersion of staff was reported not to present staff with any serious operational challenges, and staff felt that adequate systems were in place to ensure communication and to ensure that all staff felt part of the organisation.

The internal structure was described by staff as being fairly "flat" with the Executive Director working closely with the Operations and Programmes Managers and the term "distributed leadership" being used to describe the dominant style of leadership and management. Project managers and project administrators work closely with these staff members who assume much of the responsibility for day-to-day task management.

The structure was reported to be functioning well - staff members indicated that they knew to whom they reported on different tasks and also that they felt confident in approaching senior staff for advice about their responsibilities. Staff felt that the structure encouraged interaction between different levels. The flat structure is also supported by regular staff meetings, in which all staff felt that they had the opportunity to be heard and listened to.

Based on the feedback from staff and the ability of the organisation to discharge the tasks for which it has been contracted, there are no recommendations that the structure of the organisation be changed.

### *Staffing profile*

Much of the capacity of an organisation to expand its areas of influence or to deliver more challenging projects is dependent on the human resources available to it. The following table provide an overview of the staff profile of the organisation.

The survey was sent out to 17 staff members, of whom 16 responded. Using the categories provided in the questionnaire, 10 described themselves as engaged in professional tasks, and 5 indicated that they are engaged in administrative or support functions. The following table provides a detailed profile of SchoolNet SA personnel.

*Table 1: Staff complement*

	<i>Professional</i>	<i>Administrative</i>	<i>Technical Support</i>
Full-time	7	6	
Consultant	1		
Other	1		1

*Table 2: Period employed at SchoolNet South Africa*

	<i>Full-time staff</i>	<i>Part-time staff/ consultants</i>
0-1 year	2	1
1-2 years	3	0
2-4 years	0	0
More than 4 years	7	3

This suggests a fairly high level of staff stability, with 10 respondents having more than 4 years experience in the organisation.

#### *SchoolNet South Africa trainers*

SchoolNet has over 250 trainers registered on its database. However, only 61 completed the survey that was mailed electronically. After taking into consideration the number of emails which bounced, it appears that valid email addresses exist for only 150 trainers.

*Table 3: Age distribution of trainers*

	<i>25-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
% respondents	5%	34%	32%	27%	2%

*Table 4: Period of service as a SchoolNet SA trainer*

	<i>Less than 1 year</i>	<i>1-2 years</i>	<i>3-5 years</i>	<i>More than 5 years</i>
% respondents	2%	11%	35%	53%

*Table 5: Level of activity as a SchoolNet SA trainer*

<i>Last time that respondent facilitated a course for SchoolNet SA</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Never facilitated a course	0%
Within the last month	26%
In the last 6 months	40%
In the last year	11%
More than a year ago	23%

Table 6: Number of courses facilitated over the last year

Number of courses facilitated over the last year	% of respondents
Zero	17%
One	8%
Two to three	25%
More than three	50%

The survey responses show that most of the trainers who responded to the survey have worked with SchoolNet for more than three years (88%) and have also been actively engaged in the delivery of training over the last year. A fairly small proportion indicated that they had not delivered training over the course of the last year; these respondents were drawn from the Western Cape (33%), Limpopo (25%), the Eastern Cape (17%), and with the remainder were being split evenly between the North West, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal.

#### **4. Analysis of the implementation of the Strategic Plan**

##### **Overview of the 2009-2011 Strategic Plan**

Towards the end of 2008, SchoolNet South Africa initiated a strategic planning process that which culminated in the production of the final version of the Strategic Plan for the period 2009 to 2011. The purpose of the Strategic Plan was to set out the organisation's vision for the three-year period and to identify operational priorities that would guide staff.

The Strategic Plan contained the following six strategic objectives:

1. Be the thought leaders for ICTs in school education
2. To empower and support departmental officials, schools, teachers and learners in the effective use of ICTs for teaching and learning
3. Boost our reputation for the excellent standard of ICT professional development materials
4. Grow excellence in training and project management
5. Develop stronger support and liaison with schools and provincial education structures
6. Increase volumes of teachers effectively trained in and implementing ICT integration<sup>4</sup>

In the assessment of the implementation of the Strategic Plan that follows, where two objectives are similar in their intent or shared similar activities, these objectives are discussed together.

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<sup>4</sup>SchoolNet South Africa Strategic Plan 2009-2011, page 4.

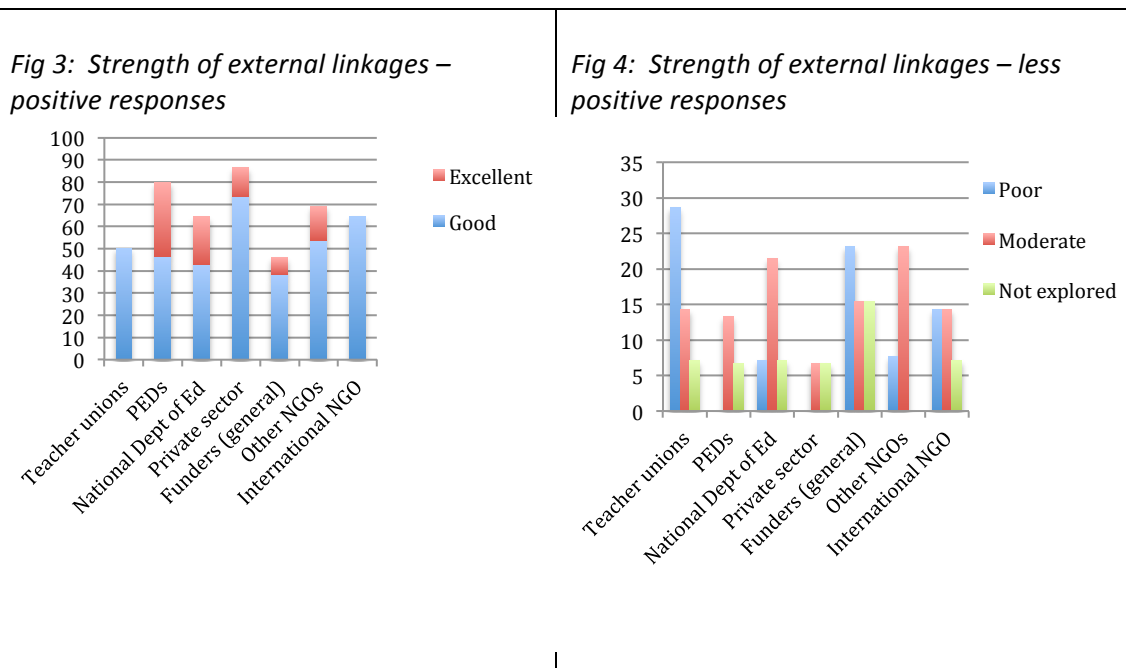
**Objective One:** Be the thought leaders for ICTs in school education and

**Objective Five:** Develop stronger support and liaison with schools and provincial education structures

Many of the activities discussed in relation to Objective One and Five are similar and address SchoolNet’s need to establish effective relationships with the national and provincial Departments of Education and the higher education institutions. One of the features of an effective organisation is the success with which it is able to establish and strengthen linkages with other organisations operating within the same sector and the extent to which it is able to respond to changes in its operating environment.

Staff members were asked to rate the extent to which they felt that SchoolNet had successfully established relationships with a range of external stakeholders (93%). On the whole, it was felt that positive and beneficial relationships had been established with a range of different groups. Figures 3 and 4 below provide a graphic summary of responses. It is useful to examine both positive assessments of relationships with different groups (Figure 3) along with less positive assessments of these relationships (Figure 4), as these responses provide indications of groups with which stronger relationships should be built in future.

*Assessment of SchoolNet’s ability to build relationships with different stakeholder groups*



Based on the responses given above, SchoolNet may wish to examine its existing strategies for building relationships with teacher unions, funders (not tied to particular corporate social investment programmes) and international NGOs working in the field of ICT integration.

Over the past three years, SchoolNet has developed stronger relationships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The need to create stronger ties with universities (HEIs) was discussed in the Strategic Plan and was rooted in the fact that HEIs are responsible for

teacher training, and government policy requires that pre-service training programmes must ensure that all graduates are computer literate and have a basic understanding of how ICTs can be integrated in classroom based teaching. HEIs are also expected to create further qualifications (such as the Advanced Certificate in Education – ACE) in order to meet the teacher training targets reflected in government strategies for ICT integration. Many universities have struggled with this and have not developed their own courses: SchoolNet worked closely with the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal to develop an ACE programme, and Intel Teach modules have been adapted and incorporated into training courses offered at the University of Johannesburg. SchoolNet staff members serve as external examiners for ICT integration courses offered by a number of institutions, including the University of the Witwatersrand. Two workshops/seminars were held with Deans of Faculties/ Schools of Education in order to raise awareness about the need to train more ICT literate teachers and the role that ICT integration can play in enhancing educational quality.

The staff of SchoolNet indicated that the organisation was responsive to changes in the educational environment (100%). In spite of this, it was noted that none of the discussions with the writer or information presented on SchoolNet’s website makes reference to the Education Department’s Action Plan 2014 and Schooling 2025 which discuss the role of ICTs in education.

#### **What does it mean to be a “thought leader”?**

The term “thought leader” is used in Strategic Objective One – it is useful to consider how those within the organisation understood this term as well as examining some popular definitions of what it means to be an industry “thought leader”.

Discussions with SchoolNet staff revealed that one of their main desires was to be seen as the “go-to” organisation in the domain of ICT integration in education. This phrase can be interpreted in two ways: the first is that the organisation is viewed as a preferred provider of services (and is therefore people’s first choice when selecting a provider or implementation partner), the second interpretation is that SchoolNet’s is recognised for its ability to innovate, provide new solutions to development problems and communicate a vision for ICT integration in schools.

Being a “preferred provider” is difficult in a sector regulated by procurement policies which require competitive tendering and where “lowest cost” solutions often win out over better quality solutions. In spite of this environment, SchoolNet was able to identify occasions on which the organisation had appeared to be the preferred provider for a number of projects or had specifically been requested to submit a tender or proposal for a project. SchoolNet appears to have retained its position as Microsoft and Intel’s preferred partner for the implementation of a number of their programmes. SchoolNet is clearly seen as a desirable partner for programme design and delivery in their sector, as evidenced by requests from bodies outside South Africa for assistance and for SchoolNet to implement or lead activities in their countries (e.g. workshops conducted in Tanzania and other African countries).

It is perhaps more challenging to measure or report against the extent to which SchoolNet is perceived as an “innovator” or visionary within their area of expertise and operation. SchoolNet staff recalled various occasions on which they were approached to provide specialist input at different meetings (including the DBE’s roundtable discussion on “ICT to support teaching and learning in the classroom” where other organisations engaged in similar work were present but were not asked to make a formal address); SchoolNet has been approached by both the Commonwealth of Learning and local Higher Education Institutions to develop accredited qualifications in ICT integration in education. SchoolNet staff members are also requested to make presentations to professional/ specialist conferences on their work and to provide donors and other NGOs with advice on the implementation of ICT-related projects.

In current “management-speak”, being a thought leader involves the ability to demonstrate initiative, innovate, share of information, engage in advocacy – even when the message communicated contradicts established wisdom or “orthodox” thinking on an issue.

Interviews with staff members suggest that the organisation is grappling with the extent to which SchoolNet develop its own products and projects – and how much time and energy should be devoted to doing this. At present, the bulk of SchoolNet’s work relates to the delivery of training (often designed by others) on behalf of another organisation/ entity. SchoolNet has not been in a position to implement any projects that it has designed “from scratch”.

SchoolNet has a number of very interesting ideas on ICT integration, technology uptake and classroom-based utilisation of technology. These ideas (such as the need to use ICTs to enhance educational quality – and that the use of technology is not an end in itself) are not communicated overtly or explicitly on SchoolNet’s various electronic platforms. There is scope for SchoolNet to make a greater contribution to information on ICT integration and to engage with current debates on education in South Africa through its various social media platforms.

*Recommendations for future action:*

- Explore ways of disseminating information on the use of ICTs to raise the quality of education – acknowledging both the power and limitations of ICTs;
- Determine priority areas in which SchoolNet wishes to demonstrate innovation or innovative thinking over the next three years;
- Balance promotion of the organisation (to ensure business flow and sustainability) with information sharing and being a “thought leader” through the messages communicated on ICT integration.

**Objective Two:** To empower and support departmental officials, schools, teachers and learners in the effective use of ICTs for teaching and learning

**Objective Six:** Increase volumes of teachers effectively trained in and implementing ICT integration

Over the last three years, the number of projects being managed and implemented by SchoolNet South Africa has steadily increased, as has the number of teachers receiving training. The following tables show the year-on-year increase in the number of teachers and trainers who have received training through SNSA’s two largest programmes.

Table 7: Numbers trained through SchoolNet SA’s core projects

	FY 08	FY 09	FY 2010	FY 2011
<b>Microsoft courses</b>	15,498	3,708	4,459	5,099

	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Intel Teach Annual totals</b>	325	398	18,060	62,481

Note: The figures for the two programmes could not be combined as annual totals for the Microsoft project correspond with the programme’s financial year (July – June) while Intel figures correspond to calendar years.

In addition to these programmes SchoolNet SA has been involved in a number of other smaller-scale activities such as the *Sizanani* programme (for youth, school-leavers and adult community members) and the *New Futures* programme. These programmes reflect a slight departure from SchoolNet’s traditional focus on ICT integration in formal, school-based educational environments.

Over the years, SchoolNet has established a good reputation for the quality of programmes it offers and its ability to deliver training in different parts of South Africa. This is evidenced by its on-going relationship with both Microsoft and Intel, and its relationship with the Department of Education as a preferred provider of training.

SchoolNet’s capacity to deliver high quality training depends to a great extent on the quality of the trainers that it appoints to deliver courses on its behalf. The Strategic Review revealed that the number of available trainers is smaller than SchoolNet’s records indicate – more than 50 of email addresses of trainers did not appear to be valid. Of the remaining 150 valid email addresses, 61 trainers responded to the survey. A response rate of 30% for a survey (particularly one which is mailed out to respondents) is acceptable and falls within expected response rates<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>Average or typical survey response rates vary depending on the medium used (telephone, mail, web-based) and whether an incentive is offered for completing the questionnaire. Several survey administration websites suggest that a response rate of 10-20% is typical while others report a higher average response rate. The *Query Group* report that for members of an organization, response rates range from 5-40%. <http://www.practicalsurveys.com/respondents/typicalresponserates.php>. The sample size and response rate for the survey of trainers is not sufficiently large to provide statistical reliability, however this is not particularly important as the survey was not intended for this purpose.

*Recommendation for future action:* Request all those currently on the database of SchoolNet trainers to complete an online application in order to maintain their current status as “active trainers”. During this process, trainers could be asked to update their contact information and indicate their availability to conduct training courses. SchoolNet may wish to explore the possibility of using a web-based portal to allow trainers to periodically update their contact details.

### *Preparation of trainers*

SchoolNet trainers participate in a “training of trainers” (ToT) programme before they are eligible to deliver training on behalf of SchoolNet. Eighty-four per cent (84%) of respondents indicated that they had participated in a ToT programme before becoming SchoolNet trainers (an additional 6% reported that they could not remember whether they had or had not participated in this programme).

On the whole, trainers were very satisfied with the quality of the ToT programme, reporting that after the programme they felt confident to train teachers and officials on the course content. Only 6% described the training as being “not bad”, with elements which could have been improved. The ToT course was also felt to be a good opportunity to meet other trainers and exchange ideas. Some of the most common recommendations made by trainers for improving the ToT course included:

- Conducting annual refresher courses (on-line or in person) for trainers;
- Extending the duration of the course so that the trainers’ preparation would be longer than the programme that they were expected to deliver to teachers;
- Holding more frequent training programmes for trainers;
- Creating more opportunities for exchange of ideas and experiences amongst trainers; and
- Developing trainers’ skills to solve common software and hardware problems (including how to respond on discovering that Open Source/ Unix-based software is used at the site where training is to be held).

### *Planning and organisation of training*

For the most part, trainers reported high levels of satisfaction with the organisation and co-ordination of training by SchoolNet’s head office. Several reported that they had found that training venues were not appropriate for the delivery of courses (either because they lacked levels of internet connectivity required for course delivery or because the software used at the training venue was unfamiliar). A number of trainers commented that rates for reimbursement of private vehicles and for the delivery of training had not been increased for several years.

Recommendations for future action:

- Consider revising the rates at which trainers are remunerated and reimbursed for using private vehicles to travel to training venues.
- Explore the creation of an on-line facility where trainers could interact and share ideas on a more regular basis.
- If an on-line facility for trainers is established, summaries of key content to be covered in each course could be posted which would serve as a reminder of essential course elements.

*Quality assurance practices*

In addition to the initial ToT course offered, trainers receive briefings from the Operations Manager before they deliver new courses. Most trainers reported that they had received periodic briefings before delivering courses, particularly new courses. Several trainers indicated that before delivering a training course, it would be useful to receive a short summary highlighting the essential content that needed to be covered during the training programme. SchoolNet uses a range of methods to quality assure the delivery of training in remote sites including reviews of portfolios or assignments submitted by trainees, reports on training submitted by both the trainer and trainees and, occasionally, conducting site visits to observe training, usually in response to concerns expressed by trainees. Methods for quality assuring training have not changed noticeably since the introduction of the Strategic Plan, which makes reference to the need to develop quality assurance systems. Staff members are satisfied with the current mechanisms for quality assurance and acknowledge the practical and cost limitations associated with conducting many site visits.

Recommendations for future action: Comments made by trainers indicate that many would appreciate more detailed feedback on their performance. SchoolNet may wish to consider ways in which this might be achieved without raising the costs of training.

**Objective Three:** *Boost our reputation for the excellent standard of ICT professional development materials*

Since the introduction of the Department of Education's *Guidelines for Teacher Training and Professional Development in ICT*, SchoolNet has worked to ensure that the courses it offers are aligned with these guidelines and the accompanying framework outlining different levels of competence. All new programmes introduced since the development of the Strategic Plan have been aligned to the DoE's 2008 framework.

SchoolNet has been responsible for "localising" the content of a number of Microsoft and Intel courses to ensure that they are relevant and applicable to the South African context. The suggested adaptations to these courses have, for the most part, been accepted by the funders and the amended course materials are currently being used in a number of other African countries. In addition, SchoolNet was requested by the Commonwealth of Learning

to develop a certificate course for teachers in ICT integration which is being implemented in various Commonwealth member states. SchoolNet has also been actively involved in the development of higher education courses for South African universities.

**Objective Four:** *Grow excellence in training and project management*

One of the activities discussed in the Strategic Plan in relation to this objective is the need to improve quality assurance methods— existing quality assurance methods are discussed in the preceding section. Based on the information provided, it would appear that quality assurance methods are adequate, taking into account the cost associated with introducing more complex methods, particularly site-based observations of training. Should the amount and scope of training increase in the future, it may be necessary to consider the introduction of other cost-efficient approaches to monitoring the quality of training delivery.

Recommendations for future action: If the scope of training increases in the future, it may be helpful to designate “senior trainers” in each province who are responsible for quality assuring training and conducting spot-checks on training delivery. If it is necessary to increase the number of trainers in order to manage greater training volumes, it may help to prioritise quality assurance of newer trainers in order to ensure that the standard of training remains consistent.

Another activity suggested in relation to achieving Objective Four is the need to “maintain a high standard of reporting to funders and provinces” (Strategic Plan, p. 5). In accordance with the Strategic Plan, reports to donors have been posted on the SchoolNet website.

Staff indicated that report writing is often treated as a low priority task, with tasks associated with direct implementation of programmes/ receiving higher priority. Report writing is recognised as being an important mechanism for communicating with donors and external stakeholders and where possible reports contain narrative descriptions of events, participation statistics and photographic evidence of activities. Project managers are in the process of developing the ability of project administrators to assist in the preparation of reports. The use of reporting templates differs from project manager to another and it was noted that there is a danger of reports becoming formulaic when templates are used (with narratives remaining consistent and participation figures being updated).

Recommendations for future action:

- Regular reporting to donors and stakeholders is a way of demonstrating organisational competence, adherence to donor agreements and drawing attention to issues within the ICT and education sub-sector. The quality of reports produced therefore serves as an important tool for demonstrating professional competence.
- Report preparation should be built into activity planning, particularly where regular, scheduled reports are requested by funders.
- Participation reports could be automated through the SchoolNet database.

- User- and reader-friendly templates could be developed to facilitate regular reporting. Templates provide a framework for ensuring consistency in the information reported and the format in which information is reported to external bodies. The use of templates can provide guidance to new or inexperienced project managers and reduce the reporting burden of more senior managers.

The Strategic Plan acknowledges that the delivery of high quality training depends on developing excellence training delivery and that this is facilitated by having well-prepared trainers who also receive on-going development and are able to update their skills in response to developments within the sector and as SchoolNet introduces new courses. The initial training of trainers has been discussed earlier in the report, and it was noted that most trainers were very satisfied with the quality and depth of the ToT programme. In this section the issues of continuous development and of ensuring that trainers maintain and enhance their skills are considered.

Almost all trainers who completed the questionnaire indicated that they felt that they were successful in keeping their knowledge of ICTs in education up to date (98%). Most of the trainers (73%) reported that one of the ways in which they have done this is through attendance at SchoolNet's bi-annual conference. The conference was reported to have assisted trainers in the following ways by providing:

- exposure to new knowledge, skills, technologies – including international perspectives on ICTs in education;
- opportunities to observe how different technologies can be used in the classroom;
- platforms where schools could share their experiences; and
- occasions for networking with others who share a similar interest in ICT integration.

Several respondents commented that they had deepened their understanding of the use of ICTs in the classroom through their own professional practice, as well as through delivery of courses and responding to teachers' questions.

**Objective Five:**                    *Develop stronger support and liaison with schools and provincial education structures*

The creation of strong linkages with external entities (in particular the national and provincial Departments of Education and higher education institutions) is discussed in relation to Objective One.

SchoolNet has recognised the need to create stronger linkages with the schools in which it operates. Although there are over 20 000 teachers on the SchoolNet database, SchoolNet recognised that they had not had contact with many of these teachers for a long time and that in the interim many teachers' contact details had changed. In response to the need to create stronger ties with teachers interested in the integration of ICTs in the classroom, the Premium Membership Plan was launched. As part of the Strategic Review, trainers were asked to indicate their familiarity with the Plan, as they are responsible for promoting the

new membership plan with teachers. The results of the survey indicated that many trainers do not feel sufficiently comfortable to explain the programme to others. This suggests that SchoolNet will need to invest time and energy in explaining the programme and its benefits to its trainers.

Figure 5: Perceptions of how clearly trainers felt the Premium Membership Plan had been explained to them.

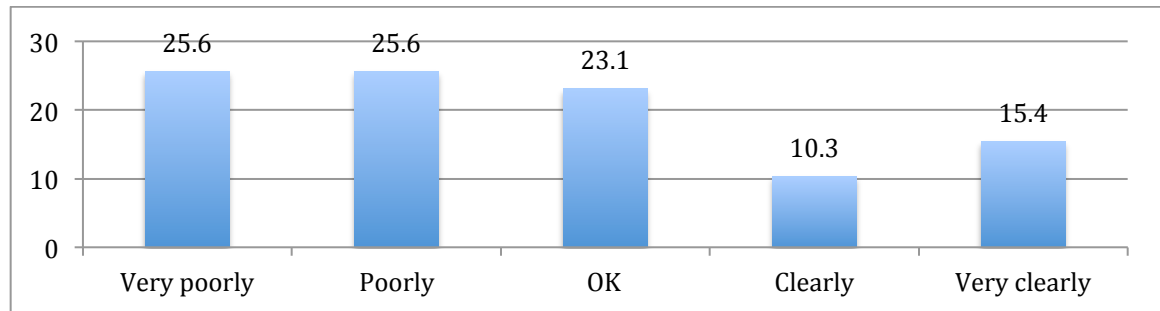
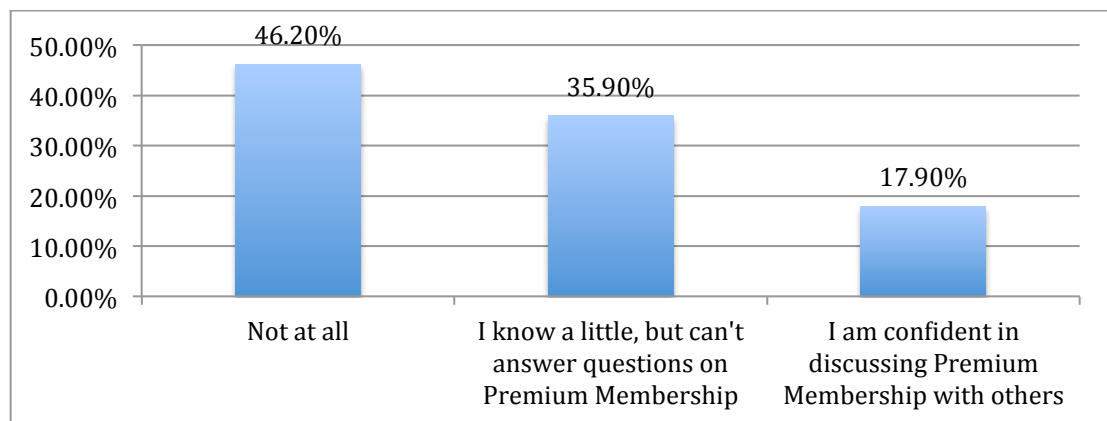


Figure 6: Trainers' levels of confidence in explaining the Premium Membership Plan to others



## 5. Marketing of SchoolNet South Africa

The Strategic Plan contains a section devoted to the marketing of SchoolNet South Africa and strategies for raising awareness of the organisation and its services. The issue of marketing is also closely related to Strategic Objective One (of being a thought-leader in ICT integration in education). The last three years have seen a dramatic rise in the use of social networking sites and these sites are being accepted as useful and mainstream vehicle for communication amongst professionals. Over the course of the last year, SchoolNet appointed a consultant to manage their presence on a number of social media sites that offer an opportunity for marketing the organisation and for sharing information with interested stakeholders, including teachers, SchoolNet trainers and others working in the sector.

In this section, a variety of different strategies used by SchoolNet to market and promote the organisation and its work are discussed.

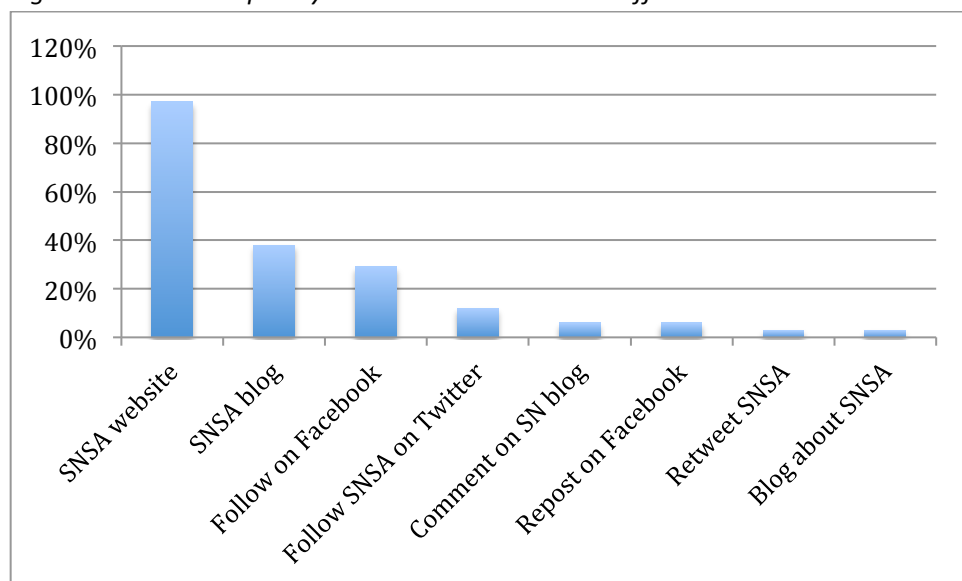
#### SchoolNet SA booklet on courses offered

SchoolNet SA produced a printed booklet on the various courses that it offers. This booklet served as one of the main vehicles for disseminating information on the organisation's main activities and was viewed, by staff, as having been a very successful marketing tool. The website also includes a link which allows users to download a copy.

#### **Electronic footprint**

SchoolNet maintains an electronic presence on a number of sites and has been working actively to increase its electronic footprint over the last year. The following graph shows the frequency with which trainers interact with SchoolNet using different types of electronic and social media<sup>6</sup>:

Figure 7: Frequency with which trainers use different social media sites



#### **SchoolNet SA website**

The SchoolNet SA website is the most frequently visited site on which the organisation profiles its work. The website contains a wealth of information including project reports and evaluations, descriptions of training courses, relevant policy documents, materials on the integration of ICTs in education and information on the organisation itself. However, the presentation of project and course descriptions is not presented in a consistent way and the writer found the website a little difficult to navigate. A number of pages are fairly cluttered and the reader has to sift through a number of links to find what is sought.

<sup>6</sup>Although not entirely accurate, in the interests of brevity and clarity, the website has been grouped under social media sites.

#### Recommendations for future action

- Redesign and update the SchoolNet website. A number of suggestions as to how this could be achieved are listed below:

#### Issues for consideration:

- Incorporate contemporary design features that highlight information and provide opportunities for interaction (e.g. sidebar with Twitter stream);
- Promote and integrate social media sites through which SchoolNet communicates with interested stakeholders; and
- Organise material so that it is easier to navigate the site, with information being “filed” in a consistent and logical manner (one example of this would be to locate project evaluations and progress reports about specific projects with project descriptions).

#### **SchoolNet SA blog**

In June 2011, SchoolNet created a blog about ICT integration in education and the work of SchoolNet SA. The following tables provide a short analysis of the frequency and content of entries.

Table 8: *Number of blog entries (June 2011 – October 2011)*

<b>Total number of blog entries</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Monthly entries:</b>	
October	7
September	11
August	18
July	5
June	1

Table 9: *Analysis of blog content*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of entries</b>
Use of applications/ general ICT skills	13
Events hosted by SchoolNet SA	10
ICT related projects/ competitions	5
Projects implemented by SchoolNet SA	3
Subject specific content (predominantly language related)	3
Case studies of ICT integration in South African schools	3
General education issues	1
Review of a website of interest	1

Unfortunately, the blog has not been well publicised – a number of the trainers appeared unaware of its existence (with several suggesting that SchoolNet create a blog). The SchoolNet SA website does not currently include any references or links to the blog; the only link that the writer could locate was on the Facebook “information” page.

The lack of prominence given to the blog is unfortunate as the site is interesting, bright and engaging. The site has a modern feel and the presentation and layout is reader-friendly.

***Recommendations for future action:***

- Improve the marketing of the blog by placing links to it on the SchoolNet website and Twitter profile.
- Give greater prominence to SchoolNet activities on the blog.
- Harmonise Facebook and blog feeds. Most blog sites can be set to automatically cross post blog entries to the user’s Facebook site.

**Facebook**

As of 25 October 2011, 165 people had “liked” the Facebook page and will automatically receive updates from SchoolNet in their personal newsfeeds.

*Table 10: Analysis of the content of the SchoolNet SA Facebook page (1 Sept – October 2011)*

	Number
Sharing of useful links (applications, software)	47
Information about SchoolNet SA activities or projects	5

It is recommended that SchoolNet increase the number of posts dealing with SchoolNet activities.

*Table 11: Analysis of user activity on the Facebook page*

	Number
Number of contributors	3
Highest number of comments on a thread	4
Topic having the highest number of comments	TeachMeet
Number of posts “liked”	16
Number of posts “shared” on subscribers’ personal pages	2
General discussion/ questions to followers	1

Very few subscribers comment on or forward/ share posts made by SchoolNet SA. One way of promoting greater interaction with users would be to ask for comments or feedback on specific issues (as was done following the TeachMeet).

**Twitter**

*Table 12: Twitter usage statistics*

Number of followers	185
Number of tweets (total)	585

Twitter is a micro-blogging site that is useful for sharing interesting articles or discussing current events as they are taking place. It was noted that SchoolNet does not include links

to their Facebook page or blog on their Twitter profile. It is also possible to link Twitter updates to SchoolNet’s Facebook page.

*Recommendations for future action:*

- Harmonise different forms of social media (website, Twitter, Facebook, blog) by utilising in-built features that allow for automatic updating across different platforms.
- Include links to the SchoolNet website, Facebook page and Twitter stream on all sites.
- Harmonise the layout and design of different sites to communicate a single corporate image.
- Update the SchoolNet website to give it a more dynamic, contemporary feel.

## 6. Organisational effectiveness

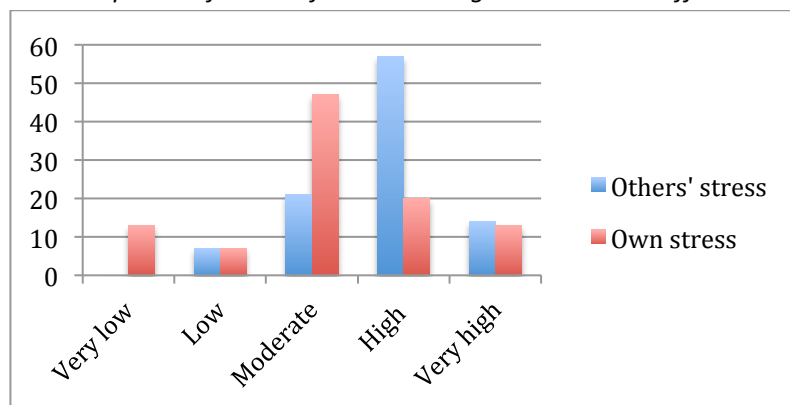
The following section of the report considers issues related to the internal operation of SchoolNet South Africa. The operational domains highlighted in this section are indicators of the health of an organisation; in general, the healthier an organisation, the greater the likelihood that staff will work efficiently to deliver the organisation’s core services.

*Organisational climate:*

One of the indicators of staff satisfaction and motivation is the level of absenteeism – where staff are stressed, anxious, disaffected or angry, levels of absenteeism tend to be higher. Most staff indicated that they felt that absenteeism was either “very low” or “low” (n=13). This is a very positive finding for the organisation.

Another indicator of organisational climate and the general wellbeing of staff is their perception of their own level of stress and the level of stress that their colleagues are experiencing. Over two thirds of respondents (n = 10) felt that their colleagues were experiencing either “high” or “very high” levels of stress. The following graphs compare respondents’ perceptions of their colleagues and their own stress levels.

Figure 8: Perceptions of levels of stress amongst SchoolNet staff members



It is unusual that people rated their own levels of stress as being lower than those of their colleagues. This can be interpreted positively as an expression of concern for their colleagues and the levels of stress that they exhibit; a less positive interpretation is that many people are clearly exhibiting signs of stress that are visible to others. Stress levels are often high in the NGO sector as people are stretched to deliver on a number of projects simultaneously while also looking for new work to ensure organisational sustainability.

Team-work, camaraderie and a sense of being supported in the tasks that are being performed are also positive signs of organisational culture. Responses revealed that the overwhelming majority of staff feel that the SchoolNet staff work well as a team and that they did not feel isolated when working on projects. Some dissenting views were expressed by a consultant; however this is not entirely surprising if the person in question operates outside the normal group environment, but it is an indicator of the need to ensure that major-time consultants see themselves as part of a larger team and that there are opportunities for support and interaction. Over 80% of respondents agreed that managers and administrative staff were both approachable when assistance was needed. Just under 90% (87%) felt that managers were helpful in solving problems.

Another factor that can affect morale is the extent to which staff members feel empowered to take decisions and, when they do not have the authority to make a particular decision, their work does not stall while waiting for another to make a decision. Eighty per cent (80%) felt that they were able to take decisions and most felt that decisions (made by others) were taken in a timely fashion. It is interesting that consultants felt less positive – or less definite – about their ability to take decisions, with two selecting a neutral response to this question.

Conflict within the organisation was, in general, felt to be low (a few respondents selected a neutral response and no-one selected a rating higher than “low”). On occasions when conflict had occurred, most respondents felt that it had been dealt with effectively.

#### *Human resource management*

SchoolNet SA scored highly on each of the following indicators of having effective systems for human resource management:

- Staff clarity on their job descriptions;
- Alignment of tasks with job descriptions;
- Regular, meaningful performance appraisals; and
- Provision of opportunities for staff to develop new skills and experience professional growth.

It is a positive finding that staff felt that they were given the opportunity to grow into new skills and assume new roles and that people are currently being “used” to their full potential.

The majority of staff mentioned that they had received performance appraisals during the course of the last year. Appraisals are valuable when they provide meaningful feedback on performance, identify opportunities for growth and when staff believe that appraisal may

have positive and negative consequences. SchoolNet staff members indicated that they receive regular feedback on their performance, and that this feedback is constructive and includes suggestions on how to improve performance levels.

*Recommendations for future action:*

- Identify ways of utilising staff skills more effectively or extending the range of tasks that staff members are given. Over a third of staff members who completed the questionnaire indicated that they feel that they “could do more” if given the opportunity.
- Explore ways of providing staff with more regular feedback on performance, even if these discussions do not have the status of formal performance appraisals.

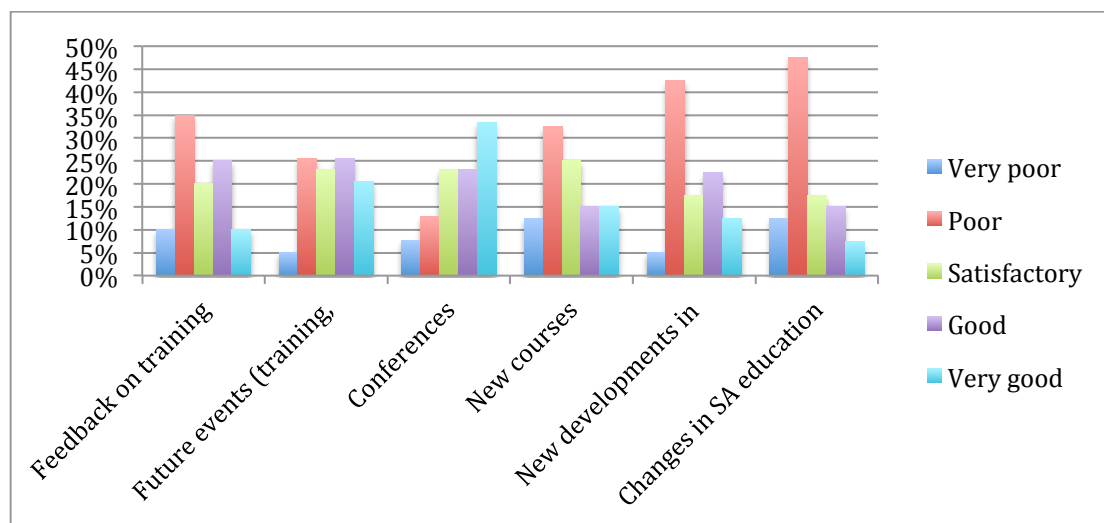
*Internal communication*

Effective, clear and regular communication plays an important role in the effective functioning of any organisation, but becomes even more vital in ensuring the “health” of an organisation whose personnel are based in different locations, often working alone. The following section considers the perceptions of full-time and major-time staff members of the quality of internal communication, as well as those of part-time trainers who have far less frequent contact with SchoolNet.

Staff members felt that the organisation had effective systems for communicating with staff members who were not located in the Johannesburg office (94% of respondents in agreement). Most felt that information was circulated formally (63%). It is positive that staff reported that they feel that they are listened to when speaking in staff meetings and that all opinions are respected during these meetings.

A number of staff members (23%) indicated that they did not feel that communication with trainers is effective. Responses from trainers echoed these concerns, with a third of trainers reporting that they receive information from SchoolNet less frequently than once a month. While it is not unexpected that SchoolNet communicate more frequently with trainers who are engaged more regularly, the low level of satisfaction expressed with the frequency and focus of training is nevertheless an issue of concern. The following graph summarises trainers’ levels of satisfaction with SchoolNet’s communication on a range of issues.

Figure 9: Trainers' satisfaction with communication on different issues



There are a number of issues on which trainers feel that communication can be improved, particularly:

- Changes in South African education policy, as it relates to the integration of ICTs in education;
- New developments in the field of integrating ICTs in education and emerging or new technologies;
- Feedback on training delivered; and
- New courses developed and offered by SchoolNet South Africa.

**Recommendations for future action:**

- Consider ways of improving internal communication. Possible strategies include a regular weekly or bi-weekly update from the Executive Director on issues affecting the organisation (including staff announcements, new projects, submission or status of funding proposals etc).
- Create mechanisms for regular communication with trainers. Requests for additional resources on the integration of ICTs could be addressed through the promotion of SchoolNet's social media sites.

**Planning and scheduling of tasks**

Planning and scheduling tasks is not easy in the NGO environment as new projects arise suddenly and there are often unexpected crises that arise or calls for tenders are issued with little notice. In addition, NGOs often function as service providers and are dependent on the implementation programmes of their clients, which can change at short notice.

Staff were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with work planning and scheduling in SchoolNet.

*Table 13: Staff perceptions of the efficiency of planning and work scheduling processes*

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Agree strongly</b>
There is a clear plan of work for the next 12 months.	0.0%	<b>46.7%</b>	13.3%	20.0%	20.0%
As far as possible, work is planned and scheduled effectively.	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	<b>53.3%</b>	40.0%
Current work suffers at the expense of looking for new work.	15.4%	<b>46.2%</b>	15.4%	15.4%	7.7%
There is a clear plan for each project that I work on.	0.0%	7.1%	<b>35.7%</b>	<b>35.7%</b>	21.4%
I know how my project plan relates to projects that others are managing.	0.0%	7.1%	<b>50.0%</b>	28.6%	14.3%
I am aware of when events are taking place in other projects.	7.1%	14.3%	21.4%	<b>35.7%</b>	21.4%
The work that SchoolNet does makes planning very difficult.	0.0%	<b>53.8%</b>	23.1%	23.1%	0.0%
There are standard systems for planning and managing projects.	0.0%	7.1%	<b>42.9%</b>	35.7%	14.3%

Based on the responses provided, a number of recommendations are presented below.

*Recommendations for future action:*

- It might be useful to develop an annual workplan showing all planned activities for the coming 12 months. Such a workplan could be reviewed and updated at staff meetings. Having a organisation-wide workplan may assist in identifying periods of peak activity in advance and allocating tasks in a way that guards against staff burn-out.
- An organisation-wide plan will also help staff members see how their work fits in with other activities being implemented by SchoolNet.
- Standard systems for planning and managing projects will provide a framework to be used by less experienced staff members.

## **7. Summary of findings of the Strategic Review**

The period 2005-2009 was a difficult one in SchoolNet’s history as the organisation went through a period of adjustment and repositioning itself after a period of uncertainty about the organisation’s continued existence. Between 2009 and 2011, the organisation built its professional profile, expanded its range of programme offerings and built up financial reserves. SchoolNet has established itself as a leading entity in the field of ICT integration in education and is clearly well regarded by donors and government alike. The scope and reach of the organisation has also expanded over the last 3 years, with SchoolNet demonstrating its capacity to deliver good quality training that meets a range of different needs.

When planning for the next three years, SchoolNet is faced with a number of strategic choices which are discussed in the section that follows.

SchoolNet has completed many of the activities outlined in its 2009-2011 Strategic Plan and has also taken on a number of new projects that extend beyond those described in the Plan. This is an achievement, particularly when considered in relation to the difficulties that SchoolNet had been facing in the preceding period.

In terms of organisational performance the Strategic Review has found that, for the most part, the organisation is functioning fairly effectively. There are a few areas in which performance could be enhanced – such as internal and external communication, work planning and performance management. The organisational culture appears to be “healthy” with low levels of conflict, staff members showing concern for one another’s well-being and levels of stress, and effective and supportive professional relationships between staff members. Individuals’ workloads and the demands placed on staff should be monitored in order to ensure that staff do not run the risk of burn-out.

## **8. Suggestions and recommendations for the formulation of the next strategic plan**

### *Content and strategic issues to be considered by SchoolNet South Africa*

The Strategic Review has drawn attention to the following issues that the staff, Board and other stakeholders may wish to discuss in more depth when preparing the Strategic Plan for the next three years:

- What role would SchoolNet SA like to play in promoting the integration of ICTs in education to support better quality delivery of the curriculum?
- What should the focus of SchoolNet SA’s activities be? Should SchoolNet SA broaden its focus and deliver programmes that promote youth employability and skills development? Should SchoolNet SA focus more narrowly on school-based curriculum delivery and teacher training?
- Does SchoolNet wish to develop its reputation for the delivery of high quality training on behalf of others, or does it wish to begin developing and implementing its own training programmes and projects? Should SchoolNet wish to explore the second option, what would be required?
- How can SchoolNet more effectively communicate its views/ opinions on the following issues?
  - Use of ICTs to support better quality teaching and learning
  - Distinctions between computer literacy and effective use of ICTs for learning
  - Features of effective use of ICTs in support of quality learning

- Innovative approaches to integrating ICTs in under-resourced schools

*Practical issues for consideration when formulating the next Strategic Plan*

The following set of recommendations addresses the technical process of preparing and drafting a Strategic Plan for SchoolNet SA.

- i. Formulation of objectives to facilitate the measurement of progress towards these objectives.*

The objectives in the current Strategic Plan are formulated in fairly broad and general language (e.g. “grow excellence in training and project management” or “be thought leaders for ICTs in education”). One of the challenges of conducting this Strategic Review of the implementation of the Strategic Plan was in determining exactly what objectives meant in practice and what sort of indicators would be appropriate to determine whether they had been achieved.

Goals and high-level objectives are often formulated fairly loosely (and usually quite ambitiously) as the organisation is not expected to achieve these targets or objectives within one strategic planning cycle. High-level goals provide a sense of general strategic direction, but are often less useful in shaping day-to-day or year-on-year planning as they are not tied to specific targets.

For this reason it is recommended that the Strategic Plan include objectives that are more tightly worded and which can be linked to measurable outcomes. This may help to ensure that the Strategic Plan can be linked more closely with activities that can in turn facilitate measurement of progress towards the attainment of the outcomes.

- ii. Consider using planning tools, such as log-frames, that highlight the relationship between different inputs, processes and outcomes.*

In the 2009 Strategic Plan there are a number of complementary outcomes (such as “empower and support ...teachers ....in the integration of ICTs” and “increase volumes of teachers trained”). There are a number of other areas in the Strategic Plan where the activities outlined under one objective are very similar to activities listed in relation to another objective. This is understandable given the complementary nature of the various activities undertaken by SchoolNet. However for planning purposes, it may be useful to consider using planning tools like such as log-frames to make linkages between objectives, activities and outcomes more explicit.

- iii. Include indicators that will assist in setting targets and measuring progress.*

At each level of the log-frame it is possible to include indicators of success (along with means of verification), however for practical purposes, it is often most useful to set indicators related to outcomes. It also forces those involved in planning to be very clear about what

they are setting out to achieve, and whether what is being achieved is truly in line with the organisation's vision for ICT integration in support of better quality education.

iv. *Consider streamlining the number of activities associated with each objective*

In the course of conducting the Strategic Review of the Strategic Plan, it became clear that the Plan contained a wide range of different activities, which however had not been linked to timeframes or assigned priorities to facilitate sequencing different tasks. Discussions with staff have revealed that all SchoolNet staff are extremely busy, spending so much time doing and implementing that there is very little time left for reflection, innovation, communicating successes with external stakeholders or maintaining non-essential communication with trainers and consultants. The level of busyness in the organisation is a positive sign that SchoolNet has work, however there is a danger of staff burnout. If staff experience burn out, it would pose a serious threat to the organisation, particularly as the current team have worked hard to raise the profile of the organisation and turn it into a viable organisation once more.

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