Frequently asked questions:

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What curriculum areas are supported?

There are teams developing materials specifically for Science and Modern Languages. Activities with SoL students will involve these curriculum areas in the main. However the team of annotators are developing a range of pages covering Media, Music, Special Education, Gender, Social Implications of Computers, Modelling and more. The pages about the finance industry from M&G will appeal to students of Economics or with an interest in careers.

What will students actually do?

In the curriculum areas of Science and Modern Languages there are activities (like data capture across the UK) to involve students directly but even the annotators pages are intended to stimulate active debate "*before you visit this link consider…*" and "*now you have visited the link think about this…*". We are developing extra functionality in our pages to allow students to be an active part of the project; for example many of the pages already have automatic commenting as a standard feature.

60 schools x 1000 students = 60,000 students.
Will they all have access from 1 computer per school?

They would have to queue for a long time!

In each school there are two levels of access. Where a web terminal is sited in a library or other resource area we hope the annotations will be useful for the independent learner. However, in each school a smaller (around 15) number of students with their own E.Mail addresses will be able to engage in some of the Science and Modern Languages projects. At the time of launching (29th September) those students have not been identified and e.mail addresses are yet to be allocated.

We are very conscious of the number of students who have home access too and hope that the project will make great strides in closing the gap between home and school learning. Specific materials for supporting parents will be on line too, later in the project.

Who are these annotators we keep hearing about?

With books, films and much else in our lives we rely on the selection and critical observations of others to help us make choices; we listen to film critics, teachers, friends before making our own selection. Great content is necessary but not sufficient for good learning to take place and good teachers play a key role in helping our exploration of information. Our annotators have a passion for their subject and in a straightforward way are offering links and annotations: places to visit, thoughts to challenge students before they 'go' and further thoughts to stimulate them when they return. Simple but, we hope, useful.

I heard that a lot of the Web is US based content;
is this appropriate for UK schools?

The World Wide Web is rich with content from all round the world. Sometimes the richness of this resource is valuable in itself, sometimes it tells us much about the culture of other countries and others lives. Schools On Line is developing UK curriculum specific materials in Science and Modern Language. But our annotators are themselves drawn from around the world and they combine this experience with an understanding of the needs of the UK curriculum.

What about pornography and other undesirable information?

Like any other publishing medium the Web carries undesirable material. For our participating schools there are software solutions on offer (SurfWatch, Net Nanny) BUT it is our clear view that teachers and parents working together with students to develop good usage habits offers the best protection of young students.

In particular we recommend that Net stations be situated in social and fairly public places, ideally with the monitor easily viewed by others. For parents this equates to "keep the computer out of the bedroom" and for schools it means careful examination of the line of sight to monitors. More detailed advice is being offered direct to the projects schools and parents.

There's plenty of content on the Web, why create more?

Schools OnLine seeks to make the most of the wealth of existing content, particularly through the annotators pages, but we also want to create content that encourages participation and collaboration amongst School OnLine students. We see the Web evolving from a dissemination to a communications network and are keen to be at the forefront of developing content and functionality that promotes ACTIVE learning.

What do the commercial sponsors do, just give money?

No! The sponsors are a key element in several ways. Firstly they offer a first line support for getting the schools actually on line: through their own gateways, by paying for connection to a service provider, or whatever. In many cases computers have been provided or upgraded too.

By concentrating this support at the local level, with the personal relationships that develop naturally, the project is establishing a scalable model that can extend to schools across the country.

How long will Schools OnLine go on for?

What has started now is Phase 1 of the project. This is a pilot scheme with the 60 participating schools. The pilot started last month and will continue until Easter '96. ULTRALAB have given a commitment that they will continue to make the Schools OnLine facility available (ie the Webserver, its pages and their developmental work) for the schools to access until September '96. The project will only continue in its present form if evaluation suggests that it is worthwhile.

What happens after the pilot?

DTI and FEI are both keen that the project should be extended in an appropriate way, indeed DTI have already committed to this. As outlined above, the pilot schools will be able to continue accessing the facility at least until the end of the academic year.

The sponsoring companies are not formally committed beyond Easter, but it is felt unlikely that many will wish to break the relationship that they have built with their schools. Much will depend on how successful, in terms of benefit to the schools, the pilot has been. A third party evaluation has been established as part of the pilot, but in the end it will be the voice of the schools - teachers and pupils in particular - that will have most impact on what we do next.

In March, when Schools OnLine was first announced there was a statement about connecting up all secondary schools. How is this going to come about? When? Who is going to pay for it?

Schools across the country are already connecting to Internet in ever increasing numbers, through conventional service providers. This project is setting out to research what is of value to the schools, ie what works and what doesn't ; we intend to publish findings for all schools and interested parties, so that all schools can benefit from the experience. We are all working

together on the project to help define what else is needed and of course there are many questions at this stage. We have however evaluated the potential cost of connecting all secondary schools.

Why is the DTI doing this and not the DfEE?

The DTI's mission is to help UK companies win in world markets. It helped establish the UKNII Task Force with this in mind. Schools OnLine is a suitable vehicle to help these UK based companies assess this important market sector. The DTI also sees value in (and has a long record of supporting) closer relationships between education and industry. In a climate of scarce resources the enthusiasm and commitment of UK industry have made this ambitious project possible and unique. However, from the outset the DTI and the project group have been in consultation with the DfEE and listened to their advice.

Why are the companies doing this?

There are numerous reasons including the personal commitment of individuals, but our particular companies have a vested interest in market development in this area. With so many embracing total quality management, social responsibility is an important goal for them too.

Many of the companies are already working alongside schools with a real desire to help. Today's students are tomorrow's employees.

How will you know it has been a success - or not?

If we learn from Schools OnLine it will be on the way to being a success. We have worked hard to be certain that we do learn from it: there is independent evaluation, online feedback, a policy of constant review and revision. Most important of all we intend to listen to the view of school students, their teachers and parents.

There is much to learn about and we are not claiming to know all the questions, let alone all the answers, at this stage.

Will the server look and function as it does throughout the project?

The team at ULTRALAB are planning a steady development of the system throughout the project with an evolving design and function. For example they are working currently on better learner support for visually impaired and dyslexic students. The Modern Language and Science teams will similarly move forward a long way from where they start over the lifetime of the project.

How much is it costing? Who is paying?

£1m for the Pilot. The DTI are providing £400,000 the companies around £600,000. This is a significant project with significant support.

How is this different to what the Labour Party and BT are talking about?

What is important is that this project is happening now, using the best of current technology and answering questions for the future. Labour's and BT's proposals envisage every school with a permanent connection to a broadband network at some point in the future. Schools OnLine offers an Internet connection via the telephone service now. Clearly the questions and answers identified through Schools OnLine as significant will be useful to governments seeking to harness future technology, whichever party is in government.

It is hard to imagine the success of future projects without the research we are doing through Schools OnLine today.

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