

Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy for Scotland

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to respond to the consultation on a 'Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy for Scotland'. As Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my role is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people across Scotland. My response therefore takes this as its main focus.

Question 1

Is the strategy founded on the right principles? Are there other principles that should be considered?

Not entirely

I fully support the aims of the strategy and I agree that education should be at the heart of any digital learning and teaching strategy. An education which develops 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' in line with article 29 UNCRC, should be the main objective and digital learning and teaching should be seen as an approach towards fulfilling this.

I believe that the principles set out in the strategy are worthy and important. They reflect both the opportunities and the challenges that the digital age brings with it as well as the potential for digital technologies to enhance and develop the 'digital experience' for learners and teachers alike. My view is that this could be enhanced by a children's rights perspective underpinning the overall strategy. Such an approach to digital learning and teaching can help to focus on the outcomes of such a strategy, rather than simply addressing the means of getting there.

In their report of the 2014 General Day of Discussion on 'Digital media and Children's Rights' the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child stressed that although the Convention on the Rights of the Child had been formulated in the pre-digital era, the rights enshrined therein remain as relevant as ever. The key rights identified were the right to protection from harm, the right to provision to meet needs and the right to participation as an agent or citizen. The Committee also emphasised that the rights of children and young people applied equally in all contexts, whether a child or young person is on or offline.

An important principle for this strategy therefore is that it should not champion digital learning for its own sake, but in order to further enhance learning (in its widest sense) and education. Currently, the outcomes of this strategy focus on the potential to improve digital learning, rather than to improve learning in any form.

There should be an acknowledgement from the outset that some learners might not easily engage with digital media. However, increasing digital provision for other learners may free up resources to create non-digital learning materials for these learners. By way of example, it should be possible for someone to use digital learning to create new print resources for young people on a wi-fi free island, having saved money on printed material elsewhere thanks to digital delivery. The medium may change, but the desired outcomes should not. In short, the relationship between digital and non-digital learning should be highlighted, particularly around the principle of opportunities for all learners.

I note that partnership working is identified as a principle and would urge the Scottish Government to recognise that children and young people should be seen as critical partners in

their own right. It is not clear whether the reference to 'stakeholders' under this principle reflects this. Education Scotland's recent report 'Building Society' highlights young people's experiences and outcomes in the technologies. It notes that whilst some children in early learning and childcare settings are clearly benefiting from high quality learning in the technologies, this was patchy and inconsistent.

Linked to this last point, if 'digital inclusion' is also considered to be about reducing disadvantage in society and addressing, through digital technology, this, then participation should feature strongly as a priority.

Question 2

Are the four key themes identified the right ones to focus on? Are there other themes that should be considered?

Not entirely

I would consider changing 'improving access to digital technology for all learners' (Theme 2) to 'improving access to education to all young people', in line with my answer to Q 1. My view is that the outcomes of this strategy should not be restricted to the use of digital technology. It may be that some learners have their right to education best realised through non-digital means, and that should be seen as equally valid.

There is also no mention of learners in the three of the themes identified, yet it is essential to consider the situation of the learner and the digital world/s they partake in. I agree that education leaders at local authority and establishment level have the biggest influence on the ethos, culture and direction of travel in our schools and that they need to understand how digital technology can support outcomes and help to deliver existing priorities. As such, empowering leaders of change is an important aim. However it is also important that they understand the world of the learner and the skills they have to ensure that digital teaching is appropriate. The idea of children being partners in the learning process and contributing to a digital learning culture suitable to their needs should to be explored more thoroughly.

Finally, I would also like to stress that this should not be seen purely in terms of improving 'access' to digital technology. Even if access is perfect, this does not necessarily mean that learners have access to online resources. Their online activity may be restricted by other barriers, including:

Costs

Increasingly, children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have mobile devices capable of accessing the Internet. What poorer children and young people lack is the money to purchase a data plan that allows them to browse the web freely, or have easy access to wifi. The result of this is that these children will have all the technology needed to access the web, but a lack of money to do so.

Intergenerational skills gaps

Levels of digital exclusion are particularly high for those facing multiple factors of deprivation e.g. low levels of education and unemployment. Recent research undertaken by the UK Carnegie Trust¹ suggests that digital exclusion may run across all families, with those parents

¹ <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=50915777-d807-4561-9527-b45aee5d5014>

who do not have access to the internet being at the same time less likely to access the internet themselves. It may be the case that a lack of knowledge and experience around digital skills in a child and young person's household puts them at a disadvantage when learning the basic skills needed to effectively learn on line. If this is not addressed, children and young people from digitally excluded families may also become excluded from education. It is therefore essential that specific provisions are put in place to support adult learners who have not developed digital literacy.

Further research

As far as I am aware, limited work has been done around how children and young people are accessing and using technology and this needs to be explored further. It would also be useful to gain an insight into why they are comfortable using certain digital learning tools and not others.

A further area worth consideration relates to socio - cultural issues, Materials should reflect and be sensitive to the needs, language and culture of minority groups

Question 3

Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'leaders' theme? Are there other actions that should be considered?

No

Focusing the priorities purely on technology is possibly limiting. From discussions I have had with teachers regarding barriers to digital education, the real issue is often the limits on data plans. For example, outside of school, pupils often have devices that can connect to the internet, but not enough money to actually do this in areas without free wi-fi. It is therefore not obvious that the best way to address this issue would be exclusively technological in nature.

In my view, it would be better to consider how digital tools might help to realise children and young people's rights to information and education. In this way, the outcome for the learner is placed firmly at the centre, rather than focusing on the tools that may be used to achieve this.

In terms of the four proposed priorities for action, the last bullet point focuses on school improvement guidance and the approach to school inspections in Scotland, I would also like to ensure the perspective of learners is featured within this priority. This would recognise the importance of empowering learners and engaging and supporting them to take responsibility for their own learning

Question 4

Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'access' theme? Are there other actions that should be considered?

The first priority refers to collaboration with partners, including local authority education and corporate services, to develop standards and guidance around learner access. My view is that 'learners' should be added to this group.

Access to technology is not always available at home for many children and young people. This needs to be taken into account, as it could easily impact on their education and learning at school. Related to this, I also note the absence to any reference to poverty under this theme which concerns me. I feel that this should be made explicit. Poverty overlaps significantly with lack of digital access in a way that is not solely concerned with access to technology, but also with financial implications of heavy internet use.

The focus on 'technology' is also limiting for related reasons. It might be better to merely state 'improve digital access' so that non-technological barriers can also be covered under the theme.

Given that high speed broadband is noted as a priority for action. I am aware that this is one of major barriers in terms of access in rural areas, so I welcome this. However, given my point before, it may also be worth explicitly stating improved access to free wi-fi.

Question 5

Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'curriculum and assessment' theme? Are there other actions that should be considered?

Technology is fast evolving and changing, as are the skills needed to adapt to these changes. A commitment from education bodies such as Education Scotland and the SQA as well as education authorities is required to ensure that the curriculum can adapt to these changes and at all stages of the educational process. Assessment will be key to this and I very much support the approach taken in the strategy which highlights the need to work with SQA and other key partners to support, develop and embed approaches to assessment that make full use of digital technology. I see children and young people as being important stakeholders in this regard.

Question 6

Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'teachers' theme? Are there other actions that should be considered?

Teachers are central to improving the outcomes of learners within Curriculum for Excellence and this is clearly highlighted in Education Scotland's report *Building Society, Young people's experiences and outcomes in the technologies*. One recommendation from this report relates to how to improve learning outcomes and suggests that transferable skills, professional development and pedagogy may have to be revisited, to further embed ICT and business elements. I support this view. I would however go further and suggest that the focus on teachers could be extended to include people involved in education, such as those in the wider public sector (e.g. community learning and library services) and those in the third sector.

The sole focus on teachers could be viewed as excluding others who impart learning i.e. educators working in non formal contexts such as youth workers and libraries. The People's Network provides free access to ICT and the Internet and is available in all public libraries in Scotland. I would like to see this priority broadened out to reflect this, notwithstanding the impact of proposed cuts to both facilities and access availability.

Question 7

Would you be willing to share your experiences of digital learning and teaching with us?

My office has had considerable experience in the area of digital learning and teaching and has also been involved in GLOW activities. I am happy to offer a number of observations from our experience in this.

Ms Amal Salman Aldoseri, Vice Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, came to Scotland in September 2015 to meet with children and young people as part of the UNCRC's periodic review of the UK Government. We asked schools (and other sectors) to promote the hashtag #TellTheUN to learners, so that young people under the age of 18 could use this to highlight their experiences – good and bad – in Scotland. We also asked children and young people to email any questions or comments for her in advance of her visit, and a live GLOW 'meet' was scheduled with learners in schools, to enable her to answer these in person.

There were a wide range of questions then posed by learners from their schools in different areas of Scotland at the live GLOW session, so this GLOW facilitated engagement was successful. However, most of the responses actually came to the office over email and social media rather than through the GLOW platform, indicating that schools were not solely engaging through GLOW with promoting the #TellTheUN.

This suggests to us that if educators do not find all the functions of a Scottish Government prescribed tool such as GLOW best suited for the job, they will use other services instead of GLOW or alongside it. Because of this, I feel that it is important to temper Government ambitions for their own home –grown services against the reality of a world of popular and intuitive private alternatives.

Question 8

Is there anything else you wish to add about the strategy?

I would like to offer two points:

- One of the major barriers to improving the digital experience for children and young people is the different approaches taken by local authorities (both within the authority itself) and across Scotland as a whole. Local authorities have responsibilities for child protection and internet safety and this can result in a risk averse approach to internet filtering policies. Risk averse and restrictive policies can limit what teachers and students can do and can often lead to frustrations in schools – and with pupils. A further and related issue is how school hardware is funded, which can also be inconsistent across Scotland
- It is also often the case that many young people will be using and visiting digital technologies and spaces/places which is much more advanced than what is available in their schools. Technologies are evolving so quickly that even student teachers will be some way behind 'youth culture use'. This highlights how important it is to involve children and young people in the process in a meaningful way. (see answer to Q 5)

Should you require any further information regarding the content of this response, please contact Maire McCormack Head of Policy at maire.mccormack@cypcs.org.uk.