

## Lars Hyland asks whether the government's plans for Digital Britain go far enough

**T**he *Digital Britain* interim report published earlier this year attempts to lay out an agenda for driving forward the UK's digital economy through investment in a high-speed network infrastructure and policy to build nationwide competitive advantage.

It's an ambitious plan but reactions to date report it does not go far enough. By setting a base level of 2Mb/s broadband Internet access speeds, many believe that this will continue to leave us woefully trailing other countries. Japan and South Korea are often cited as leading the field with near universal availability of 50-100Mb/s download speeds. Indeed, South Korea is already planning 1 gigabyte networks (1,000 Mb/s).

Let's also not forget that China has announced plans for a nationwide 100 Mb/s network. These speeds enable real-time collaboration, high-definition video conferencing and the use of highly sophisticated applications that run purely online.

Put in this context, Britain's ambitions may be limited from the outset.

### Universal access can transform learning

That said, it is laudable that the report starts to tackle how an improved network infrastructure can have an impact on education and skills. This is primarily targeted at ensuring we provide our population with digital life skills (needed by all), digital work skills (needed by most of us) and digital economy skills (needed by an increasing minority) to operate effectively in a knowledge economy.

More than 22m people in the UK use computers for tasks of varying complexity. More than 2m work directly in creating, providing, and supporting the hardware, software and digital content that underpin the online services we increasingly rely on.

More importantly, perhaps, is the imminent transformation of our mobile phones, which we ALL carry in our pockets. These devices are fast becoming Internet access gateways and will have a profound impact on how we communicate, collaborate and learn in the future.

With 20 per cent of consumers already 'cutting the wire' and dropping their use of fixed line telephony, mobile network access is a critical area for investment. Here the report alludes to next generation broadband mobile networks offering speeds of up to 100Mb/s. It may, therefore, be more prudent to focus hard-

to-find public funding on accelerating universal mobile access rather than arguing over the 'last mile' for fixed networks.

### Digital learning for life and work skills

But infrastructure is nothing without smarter methods of application. This is where we need to look more fundamentally at the way in which we teach children and train adults. It would be a huge mistake to simply replicate current 'offline' models, as has been attempted in the past with very limited success.

Digital learning (or e-learning as it is more commonly known) methods demand a re-think of instructional approaches. Digital learning enables more fluid, more experiential, more interactive and more collaborative learning. It's more about supporting the learner than the teacher/trainer. Digital learning is also more performance-focused and less about artificial testing and assessment.

Digital and e-learning is a constantly evolving field, but should be brought centre-stage with appropriate funding to accelerate practical research and effective use. For example, sector skills councils have yet to put digital learning at the heart of their offer. Were they to do so, employers and employees would have a relevant and contextualised environment in which to utilise and develop digital life and work skills.

Currently, there is still too much traditional training being delivered in ineffective ways with little practical impact in the workplace.

### Appetite for digital: training needs to catch up

Education is also struggling to harness the benefits of digital learning. We are still largely operating within the four walls of the classroom and not looking outside the box towards distributive learning models that a networked society offers. The disconnect between the social use of technology, through network and resources such as Facebook and Wikipedia, and a typical formal school or corporate training experience is growing rather than shrinking.

As learners become increasingly empowered through access to the wealth of interactive and collaborative resources available to them on the Internet, further pressure will be applied for our institutions to re-think their own offer. ■

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