

2014/34

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Pocket Watch – All about the technology

Introduction

It's been London Technology Week when London and the S.E has been showcasing talent and opportunities in equal measures: 200+ events, 30,000 visitors for an industry expected to generate 46,000 new jobs and £12bn of economic activity over the next decade. Yet it hasn't all been about this busy corner of England, there've been some interesting developments for the wider world of education as well with two important Reports, one for FE and one for schools on the importance of learning technology. The digital vision, as the Skills Minister indicated in a speech this week, is taking shape and potentially at an education institution near you.

This is what these two Reports had to say on the matter.

Learning Technology in FE

Over the last few months, a dedicated group, the FE Learning Technology Action Group (FELTAG,) has been working away at what's needed to strengthen the provision of learning technology in FE. In March the Group published a **Report** making a number of recommendations and this week, the Skills Minister published the Government's official **Response**. In a word, it gives a big thumbs-up and a little bit of capital investment to help turn the vision into reality.

Not that plenty isn't underway already particularly in the area of ESOL, English and maths where a further online learning and support pilot will be trialled with young jobseekers this autumn and where many providers are well advanced in offering online courses. But the strength of the Government's response: online trailblazers, a minimum online threshold for the delivery of course content, an increase in e-assessment and so on, let alone the added weight now of the Education and Training Foundation, all point to a quickening of the pace.

This is how things now look:

- *On Funding.* The Government will introduce an online only funding rate from 2015/16. To help sort out how this might work, the Skills Funding Agency will work with some 'online-only trailblazers' this year focused initially on vocational qualifications, looking at the funding and audit implications of online delivery. To enable a picture to be built up, a new field is being added to the ILR for 2014/15 to allow for the collection of data on online delivery across six bands
- *On Investment.* Some strengthening of broadband connections is already underway following the announcement at last year's AoC Conference and BIS is adding a further £5m to upgrade the JISC broadband network in 2014/15. It's also urging providers to use the FE Capital Investment Fund and Technology Strategy Board but the emphasis is very much on providers making their own sourcing decisions which may prove difficult for some
- *On Regulation.* Two points stand out here. First, BIS is keen to increase the amount of e-assessment available initially in voc qualifications but including Apprenticeship Trailblazer standards as well. However, it's mindful that not all learning and not all learners would be able to work in this way at present so is prepared to work closely with Ofqual, Awarding Organisations, employers and others and build slowly. The other point concerns inspections where Ofsted inspectors will be trained and given clearer guidance on how to recognise good practice in online learning.
- *On Learners.* From this Sept, the Ofsted Learner View will include an additional question about learning technology which learners will be encouraged to answer. The question will read: "I am enabled and empowered to use technology and online resources to support my learning"

- *On how much learning should be online.* A number of providers already deliver whole courses online and in its Report, FELTAG had been keen to set future thresholds of a 10% wholly online component (on publically funded programmes) from 2015/16 rising to 50% by 2017/18. The Dept is keen to encourage online learning where possible but again is wary of going too fast and excluding some courses and some learners, so is sticking with a 'steady as she goes' approach starting with the inclusion of a new minimum online threshold for new and revised qualifications in the SFA business rules from 2015/16
- *On what FE providers should do.* There are three points to note here. First, and crucially, is the importance of getting all staff up to speed, where the Dept is looking to the work of the ETF, particularly with its new professional standards and self-assessment tool, and other bodies such as the Tinder Foundation and the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, to help. Second, the Dept is looking for governors and senior managers to highlight the importance of learning technology in institutional strategic plans and third, providers themselves are encouraged to work with LEPs, local partnerships, JISC Regional Support Centres and others to build what they call '*digital capability.*' This now becomes another issue if not benchmark for FE providers

What about schools?

Online learning and the wider use of learning technology isn't only happening in FE let alone HE.

Earlier this year, the Government set up **ETAG** (the Education Technology Action Group) to help promote the use of digital technology across all sectors: schools, colleges and HE and as a Group, it has been earnestly seeking views on what the digital vision might look like in the next ten years. That consultation, which closes next week, has been collecting ideas under four headings: connected institutions; data and infrastructure; understanding and accrediting learning; and a catch-all wildcard of pretty much anything else. A report will no doubt follow later this year.

Separately, the Government has been showing an interest in MOOCs and how far these might have any application in schools. It's already highlighted that it might incorporate this form of online learning in future 16-19 accountability measures and just this week, published the outcomes of an initial research Report into the use of MOOCs amongst school-age groups.

The research has only been small scale at this stage, an eight week study including a survey of teachers and some primary interviews, and inevitably more research is called for but an embryonic SWOT model emerges. The strengths appear to be part carrot/part stick in the sense that some learning lends itself to this approach, the Report for example found evidence of five early dawn MOOC courses operating generally in maths, computing, engineering areas with a further 5-10 in the pipeline with the stick being a concern that if we don't, other countries will.

That said the Report highlights some 13 listed needs or challenges that need to be overcome broadly around resources, capacity, training, course suitability and accessibility. Although solutions are suggested in each case, the Report's conclusion is that "*provision is held back by uncertainty over demand and by a lack of clarity in respect of the commercial model.*"

On the positive side, suitable technology platforms are becoming more widespread in schools, staff and of course the young people themselves are becoming adept in their use of new technology and MOOCs are being used in teacher CPD. For many people, the next big step forward is the creation of a system of 'badges' that can be used to recognise or perhaps accredit when such learning has happened. Here too, therefore, a sense of momentum is building.

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)



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