

Mind The Gap

The growing digital divide between schools

Why do some schools have an abundance of ICT equipment and services and others do not? There could be any number of reasons to explain why a school has not been able to provide a modern digital infrastructure and services for its students and the community that it serves. Likely factors may include the lack of sponsorship or leadership from the school's governing body or from the school's senior leadership team; inappropriate ICT budgets to finance any real change in the school's ICT estate; poor understanding of how ICT can empower and transform

teaching and learning; inadequate technical support to maintain and develop the school's IT infrastructure and services; the lack of support to manage and see through ICT projects; the lack of adequate and appropriate training to support all staff and students in the school and above all, the lack of a dynamic and forward thinking ICT vision that supports the educational aspirations of the school.



The digital divide question is more than just about 'the haves' and 'the have nots'. It is about management practices, norms and cultures, pedagogy and the day-to-day practices in the classroom which exacerbate the digital divide within the education sector. For instance, the basic interpretation of the digital divide fails to explain how tried and tested technologies can have a positive impact on teaching and learning in one educational establishment and have little or no impact on teaching and learning in another, even when the two establishments have like for like technologies and resources. It also fails to explain the digital divide between two educational establishments who have similar student numbers and annual budgets, where one has exemplary ICT resources and demonstrates best practice whilst its counterpart struggles to provide adequate and up-to-date ICT resources and where ICT is not embedded in the day-to-day life of the establishment.

Recent endeavours by British governments to invest in the country's education ICT infrastructure and to improve the availability of rich ICT resources and services in schools have inadvertently widened the digital gap between schools. In a growing number of cases one will discover two neighbouring schools that have drifted apart digitally because one has successfully managed to access additional government funding to improve its buildings and ICT whilst the other has had to cope with growing pressures on its budgets. The picture is propounded by the competitive market culture that now exists within the country's education system. In such a climate schools are reluctant to share their networked resources with other neighbouring schools who are perceived to be their competitors.

Nevertheless, primary schools have been the beneficiaries of this competitive market place. The desire for schools to fill student places has led secondary schools to offer shared networked services to their primary feeder schools. A growing number of secondary and primary schools have entered into a shared service agreement with one another; thereby enabling primary schools to benefit from improved connectivity, access to technologies and services that would previously have been beyond their reach, improved IT support and the financial benefits of belonging to a larger network of schools. However, if a secondary school does not possess a robust ICT infrastructure and if it has not carefully managed a long

term investment strategy in ICT neither it nor its primary feeder schools can benefit from shared networked services. In towns and cities across the country 'the haves' will continue to extend their digital advantage over those schools who have not been able to secure and build robust and reliable ICT environments.

Schools who secure the position of digital advantage compound the digital divide over the 'have nots' by extending and widening the curriculum choice that they offer to their students and to the community around them. The growing maturity of ICT services is enabling these schools to think more broadly when designing, developing and implementing new curriculum models and programmes of study. With careful planning these schools have recruited specialist staff, established partnerships with ICT partners and they have devised programmes of study that are attractive to their student bodies. This is enabling their students to have the opportunity to become economically engaged, to be qualified participants in the knowledge economy and to be actively involved in the wider society.

The continuing rise and pervasiveness of the knowledge economy and its demand for a workforce that is educated and trained in the use and application of new technologies has meant that those schools who have invested wisely in their ICT estates can develop and deliver exciting new curriculum models and courses in order to equip students to enter the knowledge economy. These schools are thinking more broadly and strategically about the role of ICT. In particular, the digitally advantaged schools are developing curriculum models that are aiding, supporting and fostering students to enter new and emerging job markets within the knowledge economy and the digital industries in particular.

The digitally advanced schools should be praised for the progress that they have made; especially if they are developing a curriculum that is broader, richer and which meets the needs of the knowledge economy. All is not lost for those schools that need to bridge the digital gap. With strategic management and planning any school or any group of schools can build an IT infrastructure that is robust and reliable, enable ubiquitous access to hardware and services; and more importantly to develop and foster an educational environment that enables all learners to become active participants in the knowledge economy.

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