Outcomes: UK EdTech at home and abroad

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Overview

In 2019 the Departments for Education and International Trade published strategies that will shape the UK's EdTech sector over the coming years.

The Department for International Trade's International Education Strategy pledged to boost exports in products and services so other countries can benefit from the UK education sector's world-leading expertise.

The Department for Education published the EdTech Strategy which made a number of commitments to assistive technology and inclusive practices in the classroom.

On Tuesday 14th January 2020 Policy Connect gathered parliamentarians, government officials and assistive technology organisations to discuss the role of the assistive technology sector in the delivery of these overlapping strategies. The meeting took place at an important time for the EdTech agenda, coinciding with implementation of the government's domestic plans and the updating of the International Education Strategy.

This briefing presents the main findings from the session.

Key findings

- Despite the vibrancy and global reach of the UK's assistive technology and EdTech sectors, English schools struggle to make the most of the available assistive products and services. In the absence of a centralised or regional procurement system for schools, companies face a highly fragmented market. At the same time, education professionals lack the time, resources and training required to meet the technological needs of their disabled students.

- The assistive technology sector welcomes the Department for Education's commitment to SEND issues in the EdTech Strategy. Within the sector there is strong consensus that the creation of a national body or network to help coordinate service provision, training and guidance to schools is key to meeting the inclusion goals of the EdTech Strategy. Attendees also recommended that the Department for Education undertake a mapping exercise to review assistive technology support services across the country.

- International trade and development are vital to the sustainability of the UK's assistive technology sector. There is growing demand around the world for the UK's expertise in assistive technology and SEND provision more broadly. Attendees recommended that the Department for International Trade form an assistive technology or SEND-wide working group to advise the government on how to expand the global reach of the sector.

Barriers to schools adopting assistive technologies

"Across all phases of education, we are committed to supporting both the education sector and the EdTech industry to build on existing good practice and drive further innovation." – From the EdTech Strategy (2019)

- There are many reasons schools and the technology sector find it hard to address each other.

  o Schools may not know where they should go for advice and support. While some are happy to interact directly with companies, others prefer to seek impartial guidance. The number of trade shows and specialist publications for schools has declined significantly.

  o The absence of a centralised or regional procurement system for English schools has caused the market to become fragmented between 20,000 individual institutions. This makes it harder for assistive technology companies to promote their products and services to potential buyers, which in turn drives up the costs for schools.

  o Schools can be 'hard to reach' as they have limited time and resources. They also have to plan their actions months in advance and cannot easily purchase equipment as and when the need arises.

Solutions to the under-diagnosis of disability among students

"There are certain parts of the world… [that] spend a lot of time and effort and money on universal design projects so that people are supported universally, therefore they do not need to diagnose people with e.g. dyslexia because that support is available universally across the board. These are concepts – for all the reasons we have outlined – we are just behind with in this country." – Rick Bell, Chair, BATA

- There are a number of good practices that can reduce the risk or effects of under-diagnosis:

  o Universal design of lessons and support can make diagnosis unnecessary as teaching methods automatically seek to accommodate individual needs.

  o Conducting pre-entry assessments allows schools and colleges to identify pupils' special educational needs as early as possible.

- Most schools do not have staff with the skills required to implement these practices. SENCOs are often overburdened and may not have capacity to address all their students' needs. Additional staff beyond the SENCO should be supported to engage with SEND issues to create a truly inclusive educational setting.

Reduced local authority support

"Since the abolition of local authority advisers there seems to have been a break up of localised advice into schools." – Scott Richardson, General Manager, Douglas Stewart Edu

- The reduction in the number of local authority advisors has left a vacuum in localised support that schools have been unable to fill.

  o There were hopes that schools might adapt to the abolition of local authority support roles by coordinating on assistive technology procurement. However, the requirements of schools often vary too much for collective buying to work in practice.

  o Similarly, local authorities sometimes might not take the lead in the bulk procurement of technology due to a perception that schools tend to have distinct requirements that are better served by purchasing goods independently.

- The Department for Education is working to address these issues by:

  o Creating frameworks and deals with suppliers to help bring prices down

  o Developing a product catalogue

  o Working with BESA to offer a technology lending library[1]

  o Organising regional events to improve access to assistive technology products, services and expertise around the country

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[1] LendED: https://www.lended.org.uk/

Establishing a national educational assistive technology network

"There is a need for people to be systemically, structurally trained in assistive technology assessment, provision and ongoing support. I would define that as an Educational Assistive Technologist." – Rohan Slaughter, Subject Specialist, Jisc

- A national body or network that can act as a point of contact for schools and companies and help build capacity in the sector would be welcome. Its key objectives should be to:

    o Establish a national network of assistive technology trainers to work regionally and locally with schools, colleges and other services to help education professionals develop relevant skills

    o Advise government and other national stakeholders on the state of assistive technology provision by highlighting the strengths and weakness of services

    o Work with local authorities to develop a regional assistive technologist role whose purpose would be to coordinate with the national team and local services

- The role of assistive technology should be professionalised through formal training and accreditation. This should prepare practitioners to deliver assessments, provision and ongoing support to people across the spectrum of disability.

- Some organisations already offer training in some of these competencies. These include Call Scotland, Jisc, Communication Matters, The Ace Centre and NHS Barnsley.

Mapping assistive technology resources

"A map of existing key service areas would probably help give a sense of where the main gaps are." – Seema Malhotra, MP for Feltham & Heston

- The Department for Education should conduct research to map the current service landscape in England. The national mapping exercise should be undertaken with a view to:

    o Evaluating the quality of existing national, regional and local assistive technology provision and support services

    o Assessing the country's assistive technology expertise across the public, private and third sectors

    o Identifying existing and potential routes to market for suppliers

- The Department should learn from service models abroad such as Sweden and the United States.

International trade is vital to the UK's assistive technology sector

"With low-incidence disabilities, even the United States is not a big enough market to cover the development of resources that particular children need. So, companies in this country, and

we're very good at it, need to search the whole world to find resources." – Martin Littler, Executive Chairman, Inclusive Technology

- The assistive technology sector relies on international markets for its sustainability, particularly to serve people with lower-incidence disabilities.

- International development represents an important and growing market.

- The UK assistive technology sector has been helping to establish the European Industry Association for Digital Assistive Technology, which is due to meet in Amsterdam on 20th March 2020.

- Jisc is collaborating with the University of Dundee to develop an Msc in Educational Assistive Technology that will be taught internationally as well as domestically.

Boosting the global reach of the UK's assistive technology sector

"We work with UK education sector providers, UK global industry, and governments around the globe to meet the multiple opportunities and challenges of the modern world by sharing knowledge, skills and innovation." – From the International Education Strategy (2019)

- The Department for International Trade builds relationships with industry by:

  o Working with representative bodies such as Universities UK and BESA

  o Establishing small working groups for particular sectors comprising representative stakeholders

- The Department is looking to forge closer ties with donor organisations and development banks with a view to opening up emerging markets.

- The Department will be appointing an international education champion to promote UK products and services around the world.

  The Department aims to help British companies access foreign markets where there are economies of scale and where government can add the most value such as in the Middle East and South East Asia.

  o Government recognises the need to support small and medium-sized enterprises that might not have the budgets necessary to access global markets.

  o The Department has recently been asked to help businesses operate in developed economies such as Australia.

  o Some US school districts have rules about only buying American goods.

- The Department for International Development has embarked on a large research and evaluation programme of EdTech provision in foreign aid initiatives which includes assistive technology.

Appendix: roundtable participants

Seema Malhotra MP, Member for Feltham and Heston, **(Labour and Coop)**

Lord Low of Dalston CBE (Crossbench)

Baroness Uddin (Non-Affiliated)

Robert Rodney, EdTech Team, **Department for Education**

Geoff Gladding, Education Team Lead, **Department for International Trade**

Benjamin Hilton, Education Team, **Department for International Trade Scott**

Scott Richardson, General Manager, **Douglas Stewart Edu**

David Crockford, Product Specialist, **Possum**

Noel Duffy, Managing Director, **Dolphin Computer Access**

Helen Whittle, Chair, **Communication Matters**

Ed Hill, Head of Global Business Development, **Scanning Pens**

Jeremy Brassington, Managing Director, **Note Taking Express**

Martin Littler, Executive Chairman, **Inclusive Technology**

Danielle Foakes, Clinical Implementation Lead, **Smartbox**

Rohan Slaughter, Subject Specialist, **Jisc**

Rob Gregory, UK Sales Manager, **Tobii Dynavox**

Rick Bell, Chair, **BATA**

Adam Tweed, Service Development Manager, **AbilityNet**

Sarah Todd, Service Delivery Director**, Brain in Hand**

Robert McLaren, Head of Industry, Technology and Innovation, **Policy Connect**

Clive Gilbert, Policy Manager for Assistive Technology, **Policy Connect**

Geena Vabulas, Policy Manager for Assistive Technology, **Policy Connect**