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What's next for **EdTech in England?**

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// Covid Recovery

When the shelves are well stocked at supermarkets and there's even an abundance of toilet roll, the Covid-19 pandemic might seem like a thing of the past. In many respects, however, its impact is still being felt. From a positive point of view, the pandemic has certainly accelerated the use of Education Technology (EdTech) in classrooms across the country. According to the EdTech Survey 2020-21 by the Department for Education (DfE), 'almost all headteachers (primary 94%, secondary 97%) indicated that their school had introduced, increased or upgraded technology' during Covid-induced school closures . Teachers, parents and pupils have gained more

experience and understanding about the possibilities and pitfalls of digital technology. Indeed, during the pandemic, the Government set up a number of initiatives to support schools including 'Get Help with Technology' and the 'EdTech Demonstrator Programme'.

However, overall learning loss has undoubtedly been one of the negative consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Education Policy Institute research on learning loss, commissioned by the DfE, revealed that almost all children have fallen behind as a result of the pandemic . It also showed that the disadvantage gap has widened with the most underprivileged pupils falling even further behind. There are significant regional disparities with more learning loss in the North and the Midlands than in the South and London. "In addition, pupils have fallen behind more in maths than in reading. Likewise, one of the Education Select Committee's most recent reports painted a bleak picture - claiming that "the Government's multi-million-pound catch-up programme risks failing pupils who need it the most, leaving them facing an 'epidemic of educational inequality'" .

// The disadvantage gap

One of the Government's primary ambitions has been to reduce the gap between the poor and the rest of the population. This is associated with factors including social class, special educational needs and regional differences. While successive governments have been making some progress in improving social mobility and addressing underachievement, this positive trend stopped before the pandemic started and has got worse ever since. In these circumstances, there is a timely opportunity to deploy the right EdTech tools to significantly improve all pupils' opportunities and life chances.

// Wellbeing & mental health

The increased use of screens and devices during various lockdowns brought mental health and wellbeing issues into a sharper focus. A report on the impact of coronavirus on young people's mental health, published by Young Minds (a mental health charity for children), emphasised the

inconsistent mental health support available through schools and urged the Government to make wellbeing a priority in catch-up planning . At the same time, many students felt like they gained greater independence during the lockdowns and were able to use digital solutions at their own pace. These pupils might now also be negatively affected, although in a different way. More generally, schools are beginning to rethink how learning is organised and how mental health can be monitored in the UK with, in each case, increased use of digital tools.

// The Schools White Paper

Another priority area for the Government in 2022 will be the Schools White Paper, which has the potential to reshape the structure of England's education system. Ministers' bold vision appears to be that, in the future, all state schools should operate in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and would no longer be run by local authorities, although councils might retain a degree of oversight. According to Schoolsweek, the Government is expected to set a 2030 target for schools to become academies . Its vision is apparently of a system consisting of groups of schools doing similar things and using the same procurement processes - including more efficient purchasing, teacher training, and leadership development.

The implications for EdTech are twofold. Firstly, 'academisation' and the formation of MATs will often translate into changes in leadership. Many heads are retiring, and a new generation of leaders will emerge. For this reason, teacher training with a stronger emphasis on EdTech will be even more critical. Equally important, it will be essential that new school leaders use digital tools effectively. By doing that, EdTech can make schools more digitally productive. Secondly, the procurement of EdTech is likely to change. Big MATs tend to centralise their digital technology provisions, which might be a challenge for smaller suppliers without the capacity to expand. At the same time, it is an opportunity for new entrants to the sector, or businesses which want to expand their offering.

// The Levelling Up White Paper

The 'Levelling Up' White Paper committed the Government to the creation of a new "UK National Academy", which would provide access to common curriculum resources to schools across the country. This new digital education service correlates with the Government's ambition to support disadvantaged pupils; in particular, an online academy might be a useful tool in offering high-quality resources for teachers and pupils, as well as pre-recorded lessons. The proposed new service could also reduce teacher workload and provide flexibility for students to revisit lessons online. This could be particularly beneficial for smaller schools or trusts who could learn from each other. However, it is critical for the sector to engage with the relevant consultative process while the Government should recognise that schools differ enormously in terms of their digital strategies, the use of EdTech in classrooms, digital learning preferences, IT set-ups, IT infrastructures, access to devices and so on.

In light of these developments, we can see that digital solutions are becoming increasingly interwoven with education policy. It is imperative to ensure that, first, EdTech helps children who have fallen behind as a result of the Covid pandemic and, second, it narrows the disadvantage gap. Equally important, EdTech has a crucial role in allowing technology-enabled behavioural interventions to support mental health and wellbeing. However, EdTech's enormous potential will only be realised if teachers, schools and parents engage with it. For example, EdTech needs pedagogical insights, correct implementation, teacher expertise, and both student and parent feedback. If it is to thrive, Education Technology should be making teaching and learning better and easier - lifting standards for all pupils and reassuring parents that wider EdTech implementation can improve their children's prospects for the future.

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