



RESPONSE FROM THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS TO THE BBC APPLICATION FOR NEW DIGITAL CURRICULUM SERVICE

Introduction

1. The National Union of Teachers welcomes this opportunity to respond to the BBC's new application to implement a Digital Curriculum.
2. The BBC has longstanding experience of providing high quality educational TV and radio programmes which are appreciated by teachers and pupils. These programmes represent a valuable public service for licence fee investment. The BBC's unique position as a public service broadcaster ensures that the BBC would be ideally placed to take a lead partnership role in the development of digital content to support teaching and learning.
3. The success of the BBC in provision of education programming to date should not, however, lead to assumptions being made about the needs of teachers and pupils in terms of an on-line curriculum. It is hoped, therefore, that teacher involvement is a founding principle integrated into both the process of development for the establishment of the digital curriculum and into the BBC's longer term planning.
4. There would be clear benefits to schools from the proposals to make available some of the BBC materials at no cost to schools and enable these materials to be adapted to meet the needs of individual pupils. The NUT does, however, continue to have serious concerns about equity for all schools in terms of accessing such materials. These concerns are echoed in the recent PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report on teacher workload *'In our fieldwork we identified a growing divide between those parts of the sector where ICT confidence and specification is high and developing further and those parts where the strategies for advance, or further advance, are substantially under-developed. We do not underestimate the relatively low starting point of many schools, both in terms of equipment and in terms of strategic vision and technical expertise.'* In terms of the criteria that the BBC's public services must 'be free at the point of use and universally accessible', it is essential that those concerns are addressed by Government before the implementation of the new digital curriculum service.

5. The NUT is concerned that the statement 'recognition by Government, educational bodies and media and software companies that Information and Communication Technologies have the capacity to transform teaching and raise educational standards' implies that ICT can be a substitute for teachers. While technology can enrich and enhance teaching it can never replace teachers. Direct interaction between teachers and pupils is at the centre of effective pedagogy. If anything, the NUT believes that effective digital learning will require more teachers with higher skill levels than ever before.

Access for All

6. The situation remains that there is not a 'level playing field' for all schools in terms of ICT resources. It is vital to the success of this initiative that all schools are fully resourced with hardware, software and network facilities, as well as ensuring that all staff are fully trained and have time to assimilate the digital curriculum resources into planning and teaching activities.
7. The proposed range of means of distribution acknowledges the current resources available to schools. While this flexibility is welcome it is essential that, as suggested, over time all schools would have access to online delivery.
8. It is crucial that all schools are connected to broadband services as soon as possible. The NUT is concerned that schools limited to 70% of content on narrowband will also experience difficulties in terms of speed of service, thereby rendering use of the digital curriculum ineffective.
9. There needs to be recognition that, in order to integrate innovative resources into teaching and learning and to make best use of the software, sufficient capacity and support within the school is vital. For example, it would be necessary for teachers to have the opportunity to pre-empt any problems that pupils may encounter for each programme, to plan for its use and to assess the advantages of using it.
10. The NUT agrees that the benefits of a high quality digital curriculum should be available to all pupils, and welcomes in particular the BBC's commitment that there should be:
 - Access to the curriculum for all children and their families, especially those belonging to minority groups including Travelers;

- Support for bilingual children and children with English as an additional language;
 - The inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools and support for the communication skills of children with severe learning difficulties as well as special schools and units.
11. Teachers and pupils that do not have access to ICT would be unfairly disadvantaged in comparison to those who have access to the digital curriculum at school and at home. Every effort should be made to avoid unfair distribution of the system, for example, ensuring that all after-school clubs, libraries and community centres are sufficiently resourced and made available to pupils and their families. The distribution plan which aims to reach 46% of homes within two years clearly requires significant further resource to ensure the service is not limited to a minority of homes.
 12. The NUT is concerned that the proposal to allocate free training sessions to the first schools that register for the service would be likely to benefit those schools with existing access to the system, to the detriment of school which are less well resourced. It is hoped that the Government would play a vital role in developing plans associated with the implementation of the digital curriculum which would ensure that all teachers have equal access to such professional development opportunities.
 13. It is hoped that, in order to meet the needs of all pupils, the service is not driven by Government initiatives but provides support to as diverse a range of activities as possible. Flexibility in the choice and use of materials would encourage greater engagement at a 'grass roots' level of use by both teachers and pupils.
 14. Further consideration should be given to the means by which the digital curriculum service would be monitored and evaluated. The NUT would suggest that the BBC should provide all users with the opportunity to feedback on their experience of the service so that a profile of use can be established.

Resources

15. Teachers' use of and proficiency in ICT is dependent on a fully resourced infrastructure which provides time to learn and assimilate; easily accessible and appropriate hardware, software and network; and a variety of training opportunities to meet teachers' individual needs. Access to the system and development of the skills required to use the system are fundamental barriers which must be removed so that teachers can successfully implement the digital curriculum.

16. The NUT appreciates the ‘...wealth of experience within the BBC in creating highly valued online educational offerings...’. However, it should not be overlooked that the experience of teachers is most valuable in terms of developing teaching materials that are ‘intuitive’. It is important that teachers are involved in all stages of the BBC’s development process, in particular specifying, testing and reviewing resources so that the service enhances existing best practice and is not based on assumptions about the level of universality appropriate to the system. Teachers are best placed to interpret the pedagogical value of the digital curriculum in the classroom.
17. It is vital that the time required to successfully implement the service is fully explored. Teachers will be motivated to adopt this resource if it is evident that it is being properly resourced in terms of time provided to train and plan for its use. The introduction of the service must not be dependent on giving ‘...*teachers the incentive to invest time...*’: rather, time must be invested in teachers so that they can discover the value of this resource.
18. In light of the recent reports on teacher workload by PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC) and the School Teachers’ Review Board, it is essential that time is made available to teachers within the school day to enable them to both undertake any training necessary to access the new digital curriculum materials and to use them effectively. This might involve activities such as collaborative planning or the selection of new resources, all of which have significant implications in terms of teacher workload. The NUT would draw the BBC’s attention to the finding in the PwC report on teacher workload that ‘...*where ICT is introduced without a coherent strategy and where teachers are inadequately trained and supported, their workload can be increased without commensurate benefit*’.
19. Indeed, the Proof of Concept report quotes a secondary teacher from Northern Ireland who makes much the same point, ‘*The service will make new and different demands on many teachers and it will take time for it to be utilised to its full potential*’. The report concludes ‘*Some less computer literate teachers took some time to get used to the functionalities, an issue that could be addressed by further support*’.
20. The application document refers to a perceived nervousness on the part of teachers in using online services in the classroom and proposes mechanisms which would enable packages to be used offline. It would be beneficial if the cause of this perceived concern were addressed,

so that for instance, if the underlying problem was speed of service then this barrier would be prioritised.

21. The suggested provision of guidance, a reference manual, forums, bulletin boards and links to useful sites which promote best use of the service is a welcome basis on which to provide support. However, time and the necessary equipment to access these proposed facilities would be a prerequisite for teachers to be able to utilise these resources fully. There is particular concern that funding for guides which are to be marketed by the BBC may be limited, which could limit the potential use of the system by teachers.
22. The process of administration required to register schools and teachers should take account of workload implications, not only in terms of the initial registration but in terms of the on-going maintenance of up-to-date details.

Electronic Learning Credits

23. The NUT welcomes the funding being made available by Government for schools' ICT provision. However, there is concern that the implementation of a system of Electronic Learning Credits could add to the bureaucratic burden on schools. The process is not being piloted during the Proof of Concept exercise and, as a new initiative, would benefit from proper testing and piloting, as recommended in the recent STRB report on teacher workload.
24. The application document does not indicate on what basis the Electronic Learning Credits would be allocated. Schools will have different starting points in terms of existing resources and needs which should be taken into account when establishing funding levels.
25. It is hoped that there would be a long term financial commitment from Government to the service so that teachers and pupils can confidently engage with the service and build on its initial implementation. The duration of spend on the service is outlined in the Frame of Reference document; this economic perspective needs to be balanced with the educational needs that will be stimulated by the introduction of the service.

General

26. Application of the BBC's high standards and editorial values to externally produced content provides a basis for quality assurance. However, more detail is required on how decisions regarding this

content will be managed, in particular, arrangements for external evaluation.

27. The application does not detail the process by which it would be decided which elements of the digital curriculum's content would be developed by the BBC and which would be provided by other contractors. It is not clear whether such a decision would be under the control of the BBC or Government, nor how this would be managed. Transparent objectives would ensure fair apportioning on an agreed basis.
28. While there is reference in the application document to development of individual subject areas, there is concern that such division of content development would not be conducive to cross-curricular use of the digital curriculum and take into account recent educational developments, for example, the integration of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies within the National Curriculum for Key Stages 1-3. Further emphasis on cross curricular use of the digital curriculum should be developed, in close consultation with teachers.
29. The proposal to update one-eighth of the portfolio each year may not be sufficient to keep pace with the speed of change within education. It is possible that the relevance of materials that have been in place for eight years would have diminished significantly. The process should facilitate updates as and when required to optimise the service at all times.
30. It is crucial that the speed of service offered by the call centre meets the needs of teachers and pupils in terms of problem solving. Further details of service level agreements which realistically reflect the needs of schools would be helpful.
31. It is also important to establish how the data collected by the call centre would be used, for instance in profiling problems, the implications for change resulting from the problems and profiles of users reporting problems.

Proof of Concept

32. The NUT welcomes the Proof of Concept exercise as an opportunity to test the functionality of the service in terms of the end users. Consultation should continue in terms of plans to address the issues raised during this trial. There is also concern regarding the short time scale of the trial: a means of testing, piloting and reviewing over a longer time frame and over a wider scale should be established.

33. Further analysis of the 'poor' ratings for each element of the trial would be useful in terms of establishing the broadest possible view of teachers' and pupils' experiences of the system. Perspectives on the effect of variables such as type of hardware, type of network etc. would provide essential data for future strategies. The opportunity to meet the needs of all teachers and pupils by further analysis at this early stage should not be lost.
34. Further details of the process of familiarisation would be useful in terms of the time spent by teachers on this, whether this was provided by the school or carried out in teachers' own time and the total length of time spent on this. Such information would be useful in establishing programmes of familiarisation and in planning training.
35. Research into the effect of the digital curriculum on classroom dynamics should be planned, in particular, in terms of the sustained effects on independent learning, pupil behaviour, and changes in teaching methods, so that its effect can be identified and evaluated at an early stage.
36. The response of the teachers to the helpdesk support provided throughout the trial was generally positive. It is essential that the level of support provided for this exercise is maintained once the system is fully implemented.
37. The NUT is concerned that the evaluation of the BBC Digital Curriculum carried out by University of Durham found that significant technical difficulties were experienced by pupils, including with the speed of service and computer failure. The benefits of the service would clearly be lost if this issue was not resolved, as such problems disadvantage all those involved in the service by seriously undermining its use.
38. The evaluation found that the quality of the learning experience depended on the way the resource was used and that a range of levels of pupil engagement was observed. This illustrates the need for training which optimises use of the system and provides clear illustrations of best practice. This would provide all teachers with a confident base on which to develop their professional judgment when using these resources.

Conclusion

39. There are several references to coherence throughout the application, which are welcome. However the scope of the project is such that there should be particular vigilance to ensure that levels of access and

resources align with the development of the project. There should be coherence at both a strategic and practical level.

40. The application clearly endeavors to facilitate flexibility that supports pedagogical effectiveness which is welcome in terms of facilitating teachers' professional judgment. The NUT believes that this approach is best maintained through ongoing consultation with teachers.
41. Whilst supporting many of the aspirations of the BBC's application to implement a new digital curriculum service, the NUT believes that greater recognition is required of the practicalities of implementation, in particular, the time and other resources necessary for all teachers to be able to access it fully. The BBC's application is a positive first step and has potential to make a significant contribution to the provision of high quality ICT learning support materials.
42. The potential of this initiative is enormously exciting. The NUT hopes that the BBC will give serious consideration to the issues raised in this response in order to ensure that appropriate foundations are established for the development of digital curriculum content.