

BBC Digital Curriculum – New Service Approval Application

Consultation Response from Sparrowhawk & Heald Ltd.

Sparrowhawk & Heald is a small private limited company specialising in ICT and Education. Our clients are small companies and large corporates including; BBC, Channel 4, Nelson Thornes, Sherston Software and OUP. Our services include consultancy, project management, content development and education research.

This business puts us in a strong position of understanding the school and publishing markets.

In its recently published Digital Curriculum Proposal, the BBC stresses its philanthropic educational mission – to provide schools and individual learners of the 4 British nations with online material, freely accessible to all those who can have access to a computer and the Internet. BBC Digital Curriculum proposes to provide a Virtual Learning Environment, covering the range of the National Curriculum with 25% funds for core subjects, 35% of non-core subjects and 40% of other areas including SEN and Welsh versions of the materials. The material would be available even to the unfortunate schools that have yet to be Broadband connected by making the resources downloadable so that they can be used locally or on schools' networks.

The proposal is idyllic in every respect – free material, of the highest pedagogical and technological quality, flexible in its approach and content, concentrating resources on less covered subjects and allowing universal access. Unfortunately, it is a paternalistic vision of the educational online world as the BBC explicitly intends to dominate the market –“A coherent portfolio of materials would be accessible by all from one central internet site, and the BBC brand would encourage users to trust the resource. Accordingly, the service should achieve high penetration, being used at least in part by the majority of those teachers incorporating electronic learning into their lessons.”

The rest of the market will then be left to other content providers that will have to fill the uneven gaps left over by the generosity of the BBC towards its competitors via subscription sites. The BBC explains that “Once complete, the BBC’s service would only cover up to 50% of learning outcomes” (...) “thus providing a further requirement for additional resources.” This generosity goes further as the BBC intends to spend 50% of its content budget over 5 years with external suppliers “providing opportunities and stability for the smaller players”. What is not clearly expressed here is whether this commissioned content will be BBC branded. If this is the case – and it most surely is - the smaller players will indeed survive for a time, not as smaller players however, but as anonymous suppliers of the BBC.

As a result it is quite obvious that these other content providers are feeling threatened. How do you justify an annual fee to access material when so much is available elsewhere free? Again, the BBC Digital

Curriculum Proposal shows its concern for its less fortunate competitors by supporting the Government's e-Learning credits initiative, that will allow schools to acquire online material effectively without having to find extra cash to do so. In fact the BBC even urges to Government to repeat that initiative over a number of years so that schools will become more and more familiar with, and keen to use, online material.

But what will happen next, once the Government eventually stops pouring money into e-learning credits? Schools will have by then become accustomed to use online material as a teaching and learning resource and as the BBC emphasises, this will benefit all content providers by creating constant demand. However, what schools will have become accustomed to is free material - or entirely subsidised material which is effectively the same thing as far as schools are concerned. So, once e-learning credits dry out, the demand will be there and only the BBC will be able to supply it with free material.

Sparrowhawk and Heald therefore understand and support the concern of online content providers. If the proposal is accepted, BBC Digital Curriculum will dominate the market, maybe not immediately but in the near future, and regardless of the quality of the material produced by the BBC, this position of monopoly within the educational sector is a worrying threat to the whole sector.

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