



Digital Britain Interim Report: A Response from UKOLN

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Summary

This document presents a brief response to the Digital Britain Interim Report published by DCMS and BERR in January 2009.

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1. About This Document

This document provides a formal response from UKOLN to the Digital Britain Interim Report published by DCMS and BERR in January 2009.

2. The Interim Report : scope and content

UKOLN welcomes the current focus on the digital agenda including digital networks, digital technologies, digital content, digital literacy and the overarching digital economy. The Interim Report is particularly strong in examining the national network landscape, the perceived consumer demand for high-speed bandwidth and digital broadcasting requirements. The reference to mobile wireless networks and the clear need for inclusivity of access and connectivity across the community is vital, to mitigate against any potential “digital divide”, to promote digital enterprise and to enhance learning, teaching and research.

The section on Digital Content is focussed heavily on the economic and legal aspects of content production and distribution. This is disappointing. The Report text carries a strong commercial, media and broadcast perspective with particular statistics on e-commerce and advertising quoted in the text. There is an extended section on rights and in particular, it deals with copyright, intellectual property and digital rights management. The BBC as a broadcaster is featured strongly and the relationship between broadcasters in the digital arena is examined. Whilst these aspects are of value, it is striking that there is little reference to the increasingly open content landscape which is most familiar to our sector, and where there is a very strong drive towards promoting open content, open standards and the increased sharing and re-use of digital data with much greater creativity and knowledge creation as a result. This aspect is returned to in the next section on “Gaps”.

The Report’s Section 5 on digital skills and competencies is particularly welcome. It currently addresses media literacy amongst children with particular emphasis on internet safety, which is clearly a major issue. Whilst the UKOLN workshop outputs and materials are largely aimed at the higher education and cultural communities, we are acutely aware of a continuing demand for guidance on best practice for Web-based standards, collaborative technologies and social networking tools amongst the young adult and mature adult population, and the rapid pace of ICT change and innovation is a key challenge for all sectors. Government investments to increase capacity and capability amongst students of all ages must be a key priority to ensure that the UK stays at the leading edge of ground-breaking research and high-quality learning.

3. Gaps

We would like to see the following items addressed in future work and reports from the Digital Britain study:

- **Open content and inclusivity**

There is a burgeoning wealth of user-generated content which is “open” in the sense that it is freely available on the Web for further adaptation and re-use. Advocacy for “open access” publication has been especially strong in the scholarly / higher education domains through mass digitisation programmes, the growth of blogs, wikis and other social tools, community data sites such as Flickr and YouTube and institutional repositories with a range of open educational content. Whilst there is clearly disciplinary variation in the degree to which communities have embraced the open paradigm, the groundswell is growing and new sites such as [Citizendium](#) which are highly inclusive and wholly open, are gathering momentum. There are issues around advocacy, enabling organisational cultural change, and recognition of the values and benefits of a more open digital world.

- **Digital content in the long term – preservation and sustainability**

There are major challenges in ensuring long term access to the plethora of rich and varied digital content which is constantly growing in scale, volume and complexity. Digital content forms an integral part of our daily lives from personal photos to email, from online shopping transactions to digital TV, from government statistics on UK health and disease to our census submissions. There are significant risks associated with the loss of parts or all of this data potentially resulting in a lost generation: incomplete and inaccessible archival records, obsolete hardware and software, low quality data, unreliable computations and missed knowledge transfer opportunities. There are also economic implications for the poor return on prior investments across many sectors.

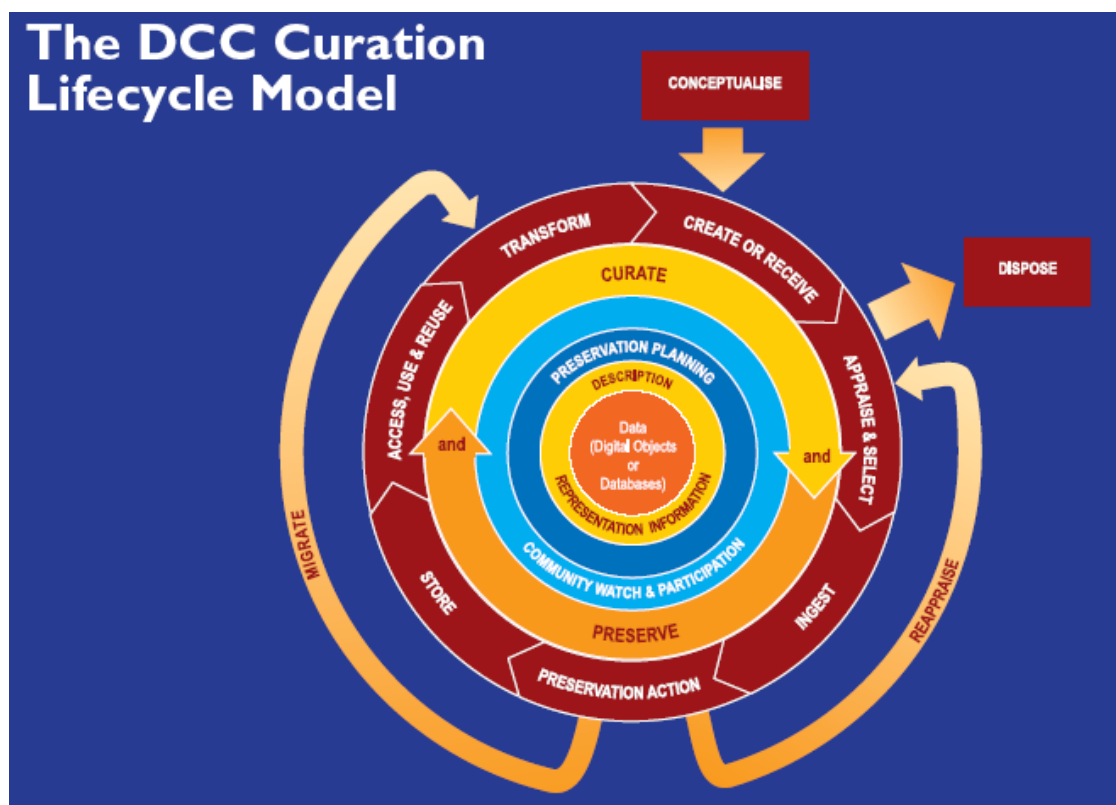
UKOLN is a partner in the UK [Digital Curation Centre](#) (DCC) funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee of HEFCE, and which is a pioneering initiative to try to raise awareness and enhance the sector response to these critical preservation challenges, focussing on the higher education community and on science data in particular. In addition to coalface / practitioner requirements for technical standards, best practice advice and guidance and curation training, (all of which are being addressed by the DCC but subject to funding limitations), there is an urgent requirement for a more joined-up approach to digital preservation and curation in this context. Australia, Canada and the US are all pressing ahead with co-ordinated strategies for data curation: UK higher education remains divided by the dual support system where infrastructure development and research activity remain segregated. The UKOLN *Dealing with Data Report*¹ stated that “Research funding organisations should jointly develop a co-ordinated Data Curation and Preservation Strategy to address critical data issues over the longer term”. (Recommendation 2). A high-level role of “data supremo” to provide strategic leadership, co-ordination and to act as an “honest and impartial broker” is urgently required. The value of

¹ Lyon, Liz, *Dealing with Data: Roles, Rights, Responsibilities and Relationships* (2007). Consultancy Report, UKOLN, University of Bath, UK.
http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/ukoln/staff/e.j.lyon/reports/dealing_with_data_report-final.pdf

such an integrated and co-ordinated approach to digital preservation and curation is self-evident and is potentially of benefit to other sectors with which we interact, such as the cultural heritage community. In this context, the MLA has adopted a *Statement of Digital Values and Principles* which include reference to sustainable digital content.

- **Data management skills**

Finally, there is scope for a greater emphasis on promoting particular digital literacy skills associated with data management, data handling, data curation and preservation. The DCC has developed a Curation Lifecycle Model² below which outlines the stages in the creation use, re-use and preservation of digital data and has formed the basis for the curation training delivered to the community. There is great potential for these types of skills and competencies to be better-integrated within the student curriculum, beginning at an early stage at school and leading to significant up-skilling as students (undergraduates and postgraduates). If Digital Britain is to become a reality with enhanced capacity and capability together with resilient and robust data collections for recombination and computation, then a significant investment in digital literacy in these specific areas is required.



² DCC Curation Lifecycle Model <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/docs/publications/DCCLifecycle.pdf>

4. Summary

UKOLN welcomes the Interim Report from the Digital Britain initiative but notes the failure of the Interim Report to adequately address particular aspects which are both relevant and important in the digital context. To some extent these omissions undermine the credibility of the initiative and we seek to highlight areas where the current Report should be strengthened. These areas include: Open content and inclusivity, Digital content in the long term – preservation and sustainability and Data management skills. We look forward to further commentary in these contexts and to the Final Report in due course.

5. About UKOLN

UKOLN is a national centre for excellence in digital information management based at the University of Bath. UKOLN is core funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), and serves the higher and further education communities and the cultural heritage sector.

More information is available at www.ukoln.ac.uk.