

Speech: Robert Halfon: BETT 2017

speech

On behalf of myself and the Secretary of State for Education, it's a real pleasure for me to welcome you all to the Bett Show 2017. And in doing so I also welcome the foreign ministers and delegations who are here for the closing of the Education World Forum.

Thank you all for coming to London to see the great range of companies and innovations on display here this week.

Many of you will have seen that on Monday our Prime Minister, Theresa May, launched a consultation on Britain's Industrial Strategy.

The UK government is determined that all people in this country should be able to obtain the skills they need to be successful in life. At the same time we recognise how important this is for our economy – particularly as we prepare to leave the European Union – so that we can make the most of our people capital.

In a modern, globalised economy that increasingly relies on technology, digital skills are key to staying competitive. They are fast becoming as important as numeracy and literacy.

So we have to make sure all our people have the opportunity to gain digital skills, whether that's at school, or accessing them later in order to catch up.

Technology can open up a world of opportunities so it's crucial we harness it properly to get the best educational outcomes possible for all people – so that, whatever their individual talents, they get the opportunity to reach their full potential.

I'm so impressed by the fantastic range of products on offer here today and how the ed tech sector has grown in recent years.

I don't want government's role to be to intervene in this space. However, I know that we need to be enabling all schools, colleges and other education providers to take advantage of the opportunities that technology presents.

I want my department to facilitate the education system in being able to impart the skills our people need and get the most out of the ed tech sector in order to raise educational outcomes.

Today I want to set out some of my thinking on how we do that.

Digital skills

So firstly, we need to focus on digital skills. We should be making sure that

our young people enter the jobs market with relevant skills and that's why we are introducing a number of actions in this area. We have to be mindful of where skills gaps exist for all young people, and those people who have left school and are already in the labour market.

The reality is that more than 10 million people in this country lack the basic digital skills required by modern jobs.

We have to take steps to address that gap.

We recently announced that we are reforming technical education to match the best international systems, and are introducing 15 new routes to skilled employment. One of these routes will be in 'digital' and it will be designed to meet the needs of relevant employers. All other routes will also contain some digital content, as it is crucial for all occupations in the modern workplace.

Last year I was fortunate enough to open [ADA, the National College for Digital Skills](#). This is just one example of where young people can join a cutting edge community of digital thinkers and leading tech companies to develop their digital skills.

But digital skills aren't just for the young. Where specified basic digital skills qualifications are made available by providers as part of the publicly-funded adult education offer, we will ensure that they are free of charge to adults who need them.

The [Digital Economy Bill](#), currently making its way through Parliament, will introduce a statutory duty to honour this commitment.

Broadband

Delivering all this on digital skills means we need to have the right, cutting-edge infrastructure in place. High-quality broadband connectivity is a crucial part of that – no modern digital economy can survive without it.

It supports business growth and job creation, particularly in rural areas. That's why the government has placed such an emphasis on making sure the provision of high-speed broadband is as widespread as possible.

Alongside our colleagues at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, we are looking at delivering a full-fibre broadband pilot, as part of the fibre rollout programme announced at the [autumn statement](#).

Our aim is to connect a small number of schools that currently only have poor quality broadband, to test how best to maximise coverage in local areas.

At the budget the Chancellor will set out further detail about the wider coverage plans, on which the Culture Secretary is currently seeking evidence.

Enabling schools to be better buyers

Secondly, schools tell us that they often lack the relationships and skills to be really savvy when it comes to buying valuable education technology – which can be a complex process – so we need to help.

That's why we are working with partner organisations to make sure proper procurement advice is available. But we want to go further and we're determined to support schools to maximise their budgets and specifically their investment in technology, with products that are really right for their students.

My department is going to roll out a [programme to buy tablets, laptops and desktop devices](#) – allowing schools to purchase them cheaper by going through my department.

We've already run 2 successful buying pilots, working with suppliers and 100 schools – which led to tens of thousands of pounds worth of savings.

The full rollout of the programme will allow schools to make the most of the technology on offer, whilst continuing to safe guard their financial resources.

Knowing what works in ed tech

Another challenge for schools and colleges is knowing what works in education technology.

Building the evidence base so that teachers can make informed decisions about technology is vitally important in this growing sector. There are so many exciting products and services out there now, but leaders in education have told us that they often find it difficult to navigate the market and decide what is best for their schools. I encourage all those building the evidence base around what works to continue with this so that educators can understand the impact of tech.

I know the sector is stepping up to this challenge.

Today I welcome the EDUCATE initiative led by UCL which will bring together educators, researchers and the ed tech industry in order to develop and use the best research informed ed tech.

EDUCATE will create a 'golden triangle' between teachers and learners, educational technology companies and educational technology researchers. This is centred around evidence and effectiveness to ensure that the UK produces the products and services that have the greatest impact on learning.

EDUCATE will translate research into new and better educational products, and will stimulate demand for new and improved ones. This type of initiative is hugely valuable in ensuring the ed tech sector can grow sustainably and respond in the way that education leaders want.

Data sharing for the benefit of everyone

How we drive standards in schools and colleges relies heavily on access to quality data. If we can easily input, collect and share data throughout someone's education, this will inform policy, encourage early intervention where required and allow the continued development of ed tech.

But we know that, whilst we have some of the best data sets in the world, how we input, collect, store and make accessible that data must first radically improve. Data collection is currently seen as a burden rather than being embraced for providing the wealth of information to drive education standards.

We announced last year that we will be prototyping new systems for data collection through our Data Exchange programme. Teams have been working with the education sector and I am pleased that considerable progress is being made to address these issues.

Whilst the sector is making huge leaps in taking on the policy challenges of the day, there are plenty of opportunities for tech designers and developers to create impactful tools for teachers, leaders, students, and their families.

We know that the way we use technology will be one of the determining factors in our future success as a nation – so we need to get it right.

The Secretary of State and I are really excited about the impact technology can have on education in this country and how it can allow us to get the very best out of our people capital – both for their sake and for UK plc. But we need to give it the proper emphasis if it's really going to make a difference.

That means we need to make sure we:

- equip young people – and those already in the workplace – with the digital skills they need to get ahead in the labour market, while at the same time making sure our economy gets the skills it needs too
- build the evidence base on what works in education technology and support schools and colleges to harness it properly, while at the same time making sure they can access technology at good value for money

I'm also incredibly excited about education technology as a British export – you only need to look around this hall to see the depth of innovation on offer and the amount of enthusiasm for what it can achieve.

I fully intend to support the sector as it continues to go from strength to strength both here and abroad.