

# Manifesto for Digitally Enabled Schooling in England

*Since education is a devolved matter, this Manifesto focuses on England.<sup>1</sup> Note that issues like AI and VAT are UK-wide as well as multi-sector.*

## Introduction

The landscape of all sectors of education in England has been undergoing a significant transformation driven by digital technologies, as documented in recent national and international reports from OECD and other agencies.

This manifesto uses these inputs including our own studies to propose key strategic initiatives necessary to harness the full potential of digital learning in England **at school level**.<sup>2</sup> Our goal is to ensure that every student, teacher, parent and school-level provider can benefit from the advancement of technology, thereby enhancing the quality and accessibility of school-level education across the nation.

## Headline Proposals – 12

Most of these proposals arose from the work the team did on the report *Trends and Issues of Digital Learning in the United Kingdom*,<sup>3</sup> delivered December 2023. An extended version and update of this will be available December 2024 but in view of recent political developments this policy intercept is appropriate now.

The proposals are designed to be realistic in the context of the current serious limitations on expenditure in the next couple of years. Additional expenditure has been kept to a minimum, some decisions will in fact generate savings and one source of additional income is identified.

1. Extend the remit and funding of Jisc to cover initially all Sixth Form Academies and ensure university-style systems (VLEs in particular) and networking. Move at pace towards digital exams at A level but ensure that handwriting of assignments in schools is not phased out until it is not required for high-stakes assessment.
2. Ensure equitable access to digital resources and support for all pupils, focussing on those eligible for Free School Meals and/or on an EHC Plan – with priority for laptop use for Sixth Form students, to better prepare pupils for employment, college or university.

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<sup>1</sup> However, we expect that similar manifestos could be developed for the other three home nations and our team is happy to assist in that process.

<sup>2</sup> Levels 1, 2 and 3 in the National Qualifications Framework – <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels> – note that this contains many vocational qualifications including but not only BTEC and T-levels.

<sup>3</sup> [http://openeducation.wiki/wiki/Trends\\_and\\_Issues\\_of\\_Digital\\_Learning\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](http://openeducation.wiki/wiki/Trends_and_Issues_of_Digital_Learning_in_the_United_Kingdom)

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3. Strengthen the existing DfE regional structure for managing schools, both in terms of procurement and for managing pupil numbers in situations of demographic decline (or local increase). Foster regional procurement consortia and a short list of key tools so that cost-effective purchase of integrated software is possible. Consider setting up a “Region 0” to cover those schools with a clear national role such as state online schools and special education providers (e.g. Royal National College for the Blind).
4. Introduce clear guidance on restricting smartphone use for under-16s, with an exceptions scheme for those with specific needs (e.g. a relevant entry on their EHC Plan, to include provisions for assistive technology or equipment that could involve the use of a smartphone or mobile device).
5. Implement robust policies and practices to protect the personal information of students and educators; and safeguarding policies and protocols to protect students from online risks (e.g. cyberbullying and inappropriate content).
6. Modernise Ofsted to ensure that judgements are made by an up-to-date inspectorate, relevant to the evolving digital nature of schools and developmental rather than judgemental (except in extreme cases).
7. Implement a **small set** of nationally accredited training courses, support and resources to help educators adapt to new technologies (including AI, VR and AR) and pedagogical approaches. Training must also cover pastoral and mental health aspects, accessibility and cybersecurity.
8. Set up at least two state-funded fully online schools. One such school should be a full-time online school; another should be a supplemental provider oriented to gap-filling in subjects (e.g. physics) where specialist teachers cannot currently be found.
9. Solve the recruitment and retention issue for specialist teachers. Introduce a child’s “right to be taught” for GCSE and A-level subjects, with schools required to deploy external services if a qualified teacher is not available.
10. Stabilise Oak National Academy when the ongoing review reports; assign Oak the priority role of rapidly creating online content for subjects where specialist teachers are in short supply (e.g. physics).
11. Conduct a consultation on a “homeschooling allowance” for all children not in schools, with a preference for a voucher for services (e.g. redeemable at a local authority or other provider) not cash payment.
12. Conduct a consultation on simplifying the VAT regime for education and training (at all levels) including looking at the impact on purchase and rental of IT equipment, software and services and in particular at the feasibility of a universal 5% VAT rate for education and training services.

## Guidance and research

We expect DfE to continue their approach since 2020 of issuing strategy and guidance documents at regular intervals and commissioning relevant research to support such documents.

The one caveat we would add is that the research commissioned should cover all aspects and modes of school-level education and take more account than has been evident recently of relevant practice in other home nations and advanced economies (in OECD and EU especially).

## Background

### Existing Progress in Digital Learning

Most of the points below are summarised from our existing published report.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1. Increased Connectivity and Infrastructure

- The DfE has committed to providing full-fibre internet connectivity to schools by 2025, ensuring that all have the necessary infrastructure to support digital learning.
- Cloud services and online training courses for teachers and leaders are being promoted to enhance digital competencies and facilitate remote learning.

#### 2. Adoption of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

- Virtual Learning Environments are becoming integral to the educational experience, with platforms like Moodle and Canvas being widely adopted across most educational sectors in UK and other countries. However, progress is much slower in schools in the UK (unlike universities and colleges; and unlike schools in US or Canada). This issue needs to be addressed.
- Several Sixth Form Colleges/Academies are leveraging VLEs to develop independent, critical thinking skills among students, recognizing the importance of flexible and accessible learning environments; and using digital tools to enhance vocational training, aligned with market needs.

#### 3. Digital Assessment and Evaluation

- The pandemic has accelerated the shift towards digital assessments, with Ofqual exploring the feasibility of fully digital exams and remote invigilation.
- There is a growing recognition of the need to upgrade school infrastructure and ensure home access to support digital assessments effectively.

#### 4. Integration of AI and Emerging Technologies

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including but not only CoPilot and ChatGPT, are being integrated into school-level education to enhance pedagogy and assessment practices. In time to come, AI tools will be able to adjust the pace, format, and difficulty level of content delivery and assessment based on the learner's individual need.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://openeducation.wiki/wiki/Trends\\_and\\_Issues\\_of\\_Digital\\_Learning\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](http://openeducation.wiki/wiki/Trends_and_Issues_of_Digital_Learning_in_the_United_Kingdom)

- The DfE has released initial guidance on the use of AI in education,<sup>5</sup> with further policy development informed by ongoing research and stakeholder feedback.
- Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Robotics are also entering use in schools, but the costs remain too high for widespread use at this stage.

### Challenges in Digital Learning

The 12 Headline Proposals were developed to meet the challenges – **Issues** – discussed below, by proposing **Actions**.

#### 1. Infrastructure and the Digital Divide

##### Issues:

- Despite efforts to improve connectivity, there remains a significant digital divide, with disparities in access to technology and internet connectivity among pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> Children and young people with SEND<sup>7</sup> – and in particular, EHC Plans – can face additional challenges when dealing with the digital divide.
- The provision at Sixth Form level is confused, with many Sixth Form Academies having changed from Sixth Form Colleges where they had FE funding and Jisc support into a school context with far less expertise available.

##### Actions:

1. Ensure equitable access to digital resources and support for all pupils, with a focus on laptop use for Sixth Form students, to prepare them better for employment, college or university.
2. Extend the remit and funding of Jisc to cover initially all Sixth Form Academies and ensure university-style systems (VLEs in particular) and networking – maybe later extending the Jisc remit to all schools with Sixth Forms.

#### 2. Teacher Training and Professional Development

**Issue:** Effective integration of digital technologies in education requires accredited comprehensive training and professional development for teachers in using digital tools. This is not happening.

**Action:** Implement accredited training courses, support and resources to help educators adapt to new technologies (including AI, VR and AR) and pedagogical

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/generative-artificial-intelligence-in-education/generative-artificial-intelligence-ai-in-education>

<sup>6</sup> Digital poverty impact report: <https://digitalpovertyalliance.org/digital-poverty-in-the-uk-a-socio-economic-assessment-of-the-implications-of-digital-poverty-in-the-uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs>

approaches. Training must also cover pastoral and mental health aspects, accessibility and cybersecurity.

### 3. Parental Involvement and Home Learning

**Issue:** The specific role of parents in supporting digital learning at home is unclear. This particularly affects homeschooling and the supply of appropriate digital devices for learning.

**Action:** Conduct a consultation on a “homeschooling allowance” as found in some other jurisdictions (e.g. British Columbia)<sup>8</sup>, with the preferred option being a voucher for a set of services (e.g. redeemable at a content provider and/or tutoring provider – including local authorities or online schools).

### 4. Data Privacy and Security

**Issue:** The increased use of digital tools and platforms raises concerns about data privacy and security.

**Action:**

1. Implement robust policies and practices to protect the personal information of students and educators.
2. Implement digital safety measures – robust safeguarding policies and protocols – to protect students from online risks (e.g. cyberbullying and inappropriate content).

### 5. Disorganisation in the school sector, now made worse by demographic decline at primary level

**Issues:**

- The decay of local authorities’ role in managing schools and the growth in academies has led to a fragmentation of the school system.
- Demographic decline in primary education puts further pressure on an inadequate sectoral planning system.
- The focus on individual schools for ICT strategy and procurement leads to schools unable to get the best prices for equipment, software and services, and often enduring a set of minimally functional non-integrated systems.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/homeschooling>

## Actions:

1. Strengthen the DfE regional structure<sup>9</sup> (based on the nine geographic English regions) for managing schools, in terms of procurement of systems and managing numbers in situations of demographic decline – or local increase.<sup>10</sup>
2. Learn lessons from the university and college sector (and Jisc in particular) on how to manage regional procurements for hardware, software and services.
3. Consider setting up a non-geographic “Region 0” to cover those schools with a clear national role such as state online schools, Royal School for the Deaf, and Royal National College for the Blind.

## 6. Teacher shortages

**Issue:** There is a chronic shortage of teachers in certain subjects (e.g. physics)<sup>11</sup> and attempts to overcome this have not been successful. This is a particular problem for GCSE and A-level study.

### Actions:

1. Implement recruitment incentives, retraining courses, and mid-career retainer initiatives.
2. Since these will take time to work, in the interim focus on developing online content for such subjects to alleviate the issue of non-specialists taking such classes.
3. Introduce a child’s “right to be taught” for GCSE and A-level subjects, with secondary schools required to deploy outside help if a subject-qualified teacher is not available – good practice can be learned from the widespread use of supplemental virtual schools for such purposes in the US.

## 7. Backlash against device use

**Issue:** The backlash against mobile phone use by children is not being professionally managed. It is in danger of spilling over into a backlash against digital learning more generally, with consequential effects on digital literacy for post-secondary study and employment, vital to growing the economy.

### Actions:

1. Introduce clear guidance on restricting full smartphone use for under-16s, with of course an exceptions process for those with specific needs (e.g. but not only a relevant entry on EHC Plan, to include provisions for assistive technology or equipment that could involve the use of a smartphone or mobile device).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/regional-department-for-education-dfe-directors/about>

<sup>10</sup> Such as decline of independent school enrolments or regional population shifts to employment hot spots like Cambridge.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.iop.org/about/news/state-schools-losing-out-physics-teacher-shortage>

2. However, ensure that handwriting of assignments is not phased out as long as it is required for high-stakes assessment. Full-time transition from handwritten to onscreen exams is likely to take several years.<sup>12</sup>

## 8. Problems with Oak National Academy

**Issue:** Substantial progress has been made in creating free resources for school-level education (making England now a global exemplar in this area). However, the Oak initiative is in danger of being blown off-course by legal disputes and lobbying.

**Action:** DfE to resolve these problems, analysing them via the Review now set up,<sup>13</sup> then adjusting (if necessary) funding, governance and procurement functions of Oak to provide a long-term stable service.

## 9. Problems with Ofsted

**Issue:** Several high-profile cases have contributed to schools and experts losing confidence in the inspection system. The time-lag between schools' use of digital tools and inspectors' knowledge of best use of such developments is also a concern.

### **Actions:**

1. Ensure by means of a study of similar countries and propagation of the results of that study that inspection of schools is accepted as a standard approach to ensure quality of schools in advanced countries such as England.
2. Update Ofsted to ensure that judgements are professionally researched by an up-to-date inspectorate, and developmental rather than judgemental (except in extreme cases).
3. Also update Ofsted approaches to be relevant to the evolving digital nature of schools. Build on the Online Education Accreditation Scheme<sup>14</sup> and learn lessons from how quality assurance in the digital era was managed by QAA<sup>15</sup> for universities in UK until recently and is currently managed for schools in other countries (such as US and Canada).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd361b7e90e0766326f7f6e/Barriers\\_to\\_online\\_1112\\_20.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd361b7e90e0766326f7f6e/Barriers_to_online_1112_20.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/oak-national-academy-independent-review-terms-of-reference/independent-review-of-oak-national-academy-review-process>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/accreditation-for-online-education-providers/accreditation-for-online-education-providers>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-impact-of-good-practice-in-digital-delivery-on-student-engagement-progression-and-achievement.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nsqol.org/>

## 10. Lack of a holistic approach

### Issues:

- There is a lack of a holistic approach to the school system, and particularly a lack of grasp of the wide range of providers (state and private) who need to cooperate to deliver school-level education to diverse constituencies.
- The school system still has a clear bias to education rather than vocational training, including financial skews.
- Intense debates rage round independent schools but the issues around homeschooling and Special Needs are little discussed and even less acted on.
- The growth of online schools is continuing apace and their relevance for homeschooling and Special Needs is becoming clear but warrants more expeditious exploration and adoption into mainstream provision.
- Declining school attendance is being viewed as a problem rather than a cry for help from distressed pupils and their parents in a growing context of flexible attendance by adults at workplaces. This creates a danger that innovative solutions such as hybrid schools (e.g. 2 days in school, 3 days online)<sup>17</sup> would be regarded as exacerbating an attendance issue, not a valid solution to it.
- The issue of “second chance” schooling is not taken seriously – the system encourages adult learners without sufficient A level qualifications to be accepted by universities without adequate knowledge and skills, thereby in reality adding to the costs of university teaching.<sup>18</sup> This is despite a set of well-established providers of A level education for adults.<sup>19</sup>
- Even a brief read of the complex UK VAT regulations on education and training<sup>20</sup> makes it clear that there is no systematic approach and a raft of exceptions with much scope for legal cases – with disputes, especially for online services, in some cases going up to the European Court of Justice.<sup>21</sup> The VAT issue and its complexities affect the whole education and training system not just schools.

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<sup>17</sup> One of many emerging providers is <https://www.portland-place.co.uk/online/>

<sup>18</sup> There are wider issues, out of scope for this document, of: 1) subjects (e.g. some Modern Foreign Languages) which are school level being taught at university at university cost levels, not school cost levels; and 2) the lack of articulation between school and university first-year in many subjects, leading to duplication of teaching and thus waste of government funding.

<sup>19</sup> Such as <https://wolseyhalloxford.org.uk/adult-learning/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/vat-on-education-and-vocational-training-notice-70130>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/vat-education-manual/vatedu36800>



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**Actions:** Two eye-catching initiatives are required.

1. Set up at least two state-funded fully online schools. (At least two free school bids for that type of provider have been submitted in recent years – but they were never approved.) At least one should be a full-time online school (and thus subject to OEAS);<sup>22</sup> another should be a supplemental provider oriented to gap-filling in subjects where specialist teachers cannot be found.
2. Conduct a consultation on simplifying the VAT regime for education and training (at all levels) including looking at the impact on purchase and rental of IT equipment, software and services. In particular, review the economic value, sector impact and legal feasibility of a sector-wide 5% VAT rate for education and training for school-level provision.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/accreditation-for-online-education-providers/accreditation-for-online-education-providers>

<sup>23</sup> It is out of scope for this manifesto but any changes in VAT regulations for education might wish to reconsider the VAT treatment of educational services offered at fees beyond the undergraduate fee cap (such as master's level) and for international students in particular.