'LEVELLING-UP': THE EMERGING ROLE OF EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

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Al Kingsley, CEO at NetSupport, discusses the potential role of education technology in "levelling up" - especially for vulnerable communities.

With children finally back in the physical classroom after more than a year-and-a-half's worth of disruption, and the appointment of a new Secretary of State for Education, many in the sector feel cautiously optimistic as we slowly inch back to "normality".

Recent party conferences have also revealed a renewed emphasis on education across the political spectrum, with both Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer focusing on skills and in particular, digital skills, as key in "building back better" from the pandemic.

The **impact** of COVID-19 on educational outcomes and student progress has been well-documented, with a staggering 1.53 billion learners out of school globally, and 184 country-wide school closures affecting nearly 90 per cent of the world's total enrolled learners. Equally well-documented is the stratospheric uptake in EdTech (education technology), with 2020 marking something of a learning revolution as digital penetration rates **surged** from two to three per cent pre-pandemic to above **90% at the peak of the crisis.**

As teachers and learners scramble to catch up and address knowledge gaps, it is important to consider how EdTech, one of the foundational tenets of education provision throughout the pandemic, might play a role in achieving the "levelling up" agenda going forward.

Indeed, the Chartered Institute for IT **called** last year for digital, data and information technology to lie at the heart of the Government's approach to "building back better" – raising the question of how EdTech might help address some of the sector's most pressing concerns, such as attainment gaps, skills deficits and **educational equity**, whilst fitting into levelling up efforts.

The digital divide

Home-schooling often proved challenging even for families in secure homes with stable internet access and a wide variety of digital devices to hand, but for those less well-off families living in cramped or temporary accommodation with limited funds, remote learning was almost impossible. Throughout the pandemic, mobile phones acted as the lowest common denominator of technology, which many schools took advantage of to deliver learning content quite literally into the hands of pupils.

As **reported** by Ofcom, children in the most financially vulnerable households were more likely to have smartphone-only access due to lacking sufficient other digital resources. Although they're not the most traditional learning device, smartphones can unlock educational content for less privileged children – so it's vital that EdTech platforms can be sufficiently device agnostic to widen access for all.

It was **estimated** that as many as 700,000 disadvantaged children were unable to regularly access a computer or internet connection in lockdowns and, whilst COVID-19 has shone a light on the digital divide, it's now up to the Government and vendors/suppliers to prioritise digital inclusion moving forward. Initiatives could include larger companies providing free access or resources for schools and pupils in disadvantaged pockets of the country, to ensure that all children have the best chance at achieving a high-quality education, regardless of their background.

I'm delighted to be an ambassador for The Digital Poverty Alliance, a not-for-profit taskforce working to create a joined-up, sustainable framework to the digital divide and ensure equitable access for all. The Alliance identifies digital poverty as a key feature of the country's social mobility and levelling up agendas, and shares best practice and collaboration with UK-based and international organisations.

Ask the experts

We all witnessed the heroic efforts of teachers and school staff, who worked around the clock during lockdowns to frequently put pupils' needs above their own (it's no surprise that teachers are often **referred** to as the "fourth emergency service"). Indeed, England's "strictest headteacher" Katharine Birbalsingh was last month **appointed** head of the social mobility commission, a key role in helping disadvantaged children get ahead – and crucial in the Government's levelling up framework.

Given that teachers know their pupils better than any external company or developer, as well as bringing valuable insight into the local community's needs, savvy EdTech companies should engage in dialogue with them and take this knowledge into account. As the EdTech market becomes increasingly saturated and crowded, it is these truly connected developers who will produce the solutions that cut through the noise and make a real impact.

Above all else, the primary purpose of EdTech should be to improve the learning experience for students and streamline lesson delivery for teachers. In addition to helping tackle educational attainment and pupil progress scores, it can also start to address the mounting issue of teachers' unmanageable workloads and to-do lists.

A digital curriculum

Highlighted by Keir Starmer at the Labour Party Conference last month as part of his pledge to "write a curriculum for tomorrow", digital provision and skills are set to continue playing an essential role in not only modernising, but enhancing modern education. Starmer praised the "**retooling**" opportunities of classroom technology **platforms**, which afford teachers and learners more flexibility and continuity wherever they are accessing content – from school or home.

Moreover, Starmer argued that digital skills should be added to the three pillars of education (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) to equip young citizens for life beyond school and into the world of work. With the Learning & Work Institute **warning** earlier this year of a "catastrophic" digital skills shortage in the UK, it's never been more important to boost engagement in the area by embedding digital tools widely across the curriculum and school life.

Although "levelling up" as a policy has dealt with accusations of being too broad and ubiquitous, you would surely be hard-pressed to find many who would disagree with the **assertion** that: "levelling up education is the key to helping every child reach their full potential… so that, with a top-class education, our children can go on to become the world's future innovators, trail blazers and pioneers."

However, the Prime Minister has been under attack following the resignation of Education Recovery Tsar, Kevin Collins, with Starmer warning: "If you can't level up our children, you are not serious about levelling up at all."

The huge potential of digital technology to tap into and solve some of the country's most complex educational challenges cannot be underestimated, particularly as cross-party consensus agrees that education and learning loss must lie at the heart of any levelling up agenda. Politicians, vendors and schools have a unique opportunity to collaborate in a targeted approach to start undoing some of the damage of the pandemic, as well as preparing a digitally skilled cohort to, in turn, help play a formative role in levelling up for the future.