AELP Brief for Lords' Debate on 7 September 2017: Digital skills in the United Kingdom

Publicly-funded basic digital skills training for adults needs more support

Summary of AELP's key points

1. AELP would encourage the Government to honour its commitment to ensure publicly-funded basic digital skills training is offered free of charge to adults in England who need it.
2. It is vital that the training infrastructure is properly funded to deliver learning of good digital skills and that there is support available to capacity-build where it is needed to ensure that an appropriate level of such provision is available.
3. Currently there are 13 developed apprenticeship standards for the digital industries and more in development. AELP believes all such apprenticeships should include a recognised qualification that helps apprentice completers switch jobs if they want to.
4. We ask why digital skills are not funded as part of all apprenticeships.
5. The new technical education standards under the Sainsbury reforms for 16 to 18 year olds should not diverge much at all from the equivalent apprenticeship standards.
6. There still are too many bureaucratic barriers and restrictions for training providers to develop and deploy a technological-led approach to learning which inhibits growth.
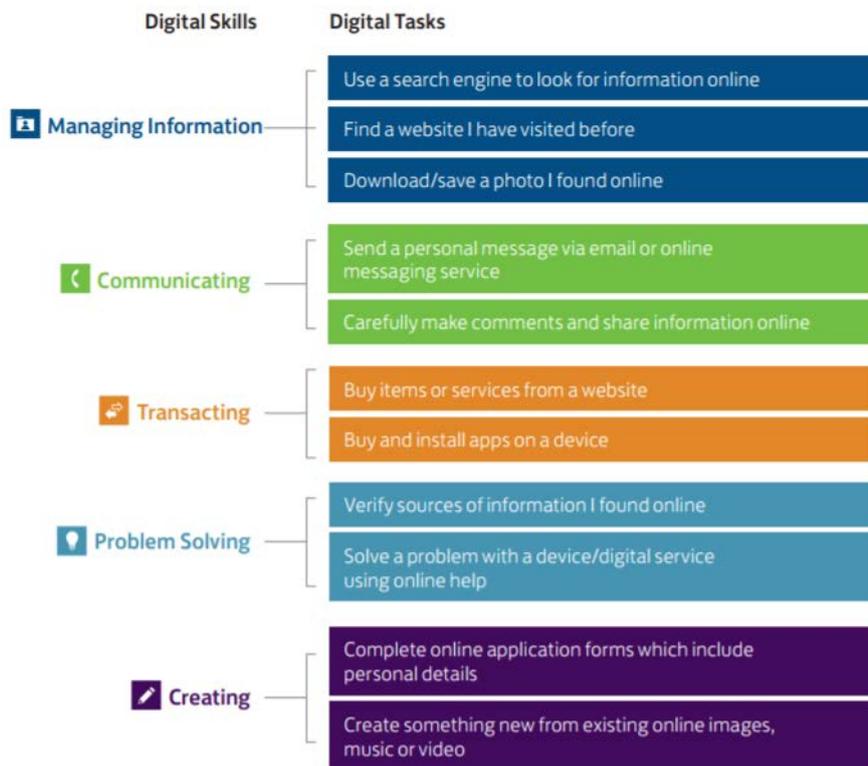
Background:

The Lords Library briefing has been prepared in advance of a debate scheduled to take place in the House of Lords on 7 September 2017 regarding the importance of digital understanding at all levels of society. It provides an overview of what is meant by 'digital skills' and surveys recent literature on access to, and use of, the internet across society. It then considers digital skills in relation to the economy and sets out key proposals contained in the Government's UK Digital Strategy 2017.

AELP Response:

- AELP welcomes the scheduled debate on digital skills in the United Kingdom and would like to bring the following comments to your attention. The current state of affairs with regards to basic digital skills puts 21 per cent (11.5m) of the UK as not having basic digital skills. When this data is broken down into demographics such as low income earners, vulnerable groups and older people, the figure is higher. To understand what basic digital skills entails, Figure 21 illustrates the framework which includes managing information, communication, transacting, problem solving and creating.

Figure 21: Basic Digital Skills framework

Digital Skills	Digital Tasks
Managing Information	Use a search engine to look for information online
	Find a website I have visited before
	Download/save a photo I found online
Communicating	Send a personal message via email or online messaging service
	Carefully make comments and share information online
Transacting	Buy items or services from a website
	Buy and install apps on a device
Problem Solving	Verify sources of information I found online
	Solve a problem with a device/digital service using online help
Creating	Complete online application forms which include personal details
	Create something new from existing online images, music or video

Source: The Tech Partnership

- The emergence of the need for good digital skills are vital to ensure the workforce remains aligned with the growing dependence on technology and also how to use it effectively to improve both lives and increase productivity in the UK economy. It is therefore vital that the training infrastructure is properly funded to deliver such learning, and that there is support available to capacity-build where it is needed to ensure that an appropriate level of such provision is available. The system of learning and funding for basic skills must also better acknowledge the concepts of "spiky profiles" and "skills atrophy" – the fact that learning levels are not consistent across all areas and can deteriorate over time. To do otherwise risks undermining the stepping stones for a skilled workforce through an unevidenced ideological preference for one mode of learning over another rather than considering what is best suited to achieve the ends required.

- We welcome the acknowledgement of specialist digital routes in apprenticeships and technical education. Currently there are 13 developed apprenticeship standards and more in development. Moreover, AELP believes all such apprenticeships should include a recognised qualification that helps apprentice completers switch jobs if they want to.

  Furthermore, Deloitte has reported an estimated 35% of all jobs are likely to become automated in the next 20 years, with 90% of jobs requiring some level of digital skills, therefore AELP wishes to put forward the question as to why digital skills are not funded as part of all apprenticeships? The importance of digital skills has been identified by employers and the SFA itself (now the Education and Skills Funding Agency), and AELP would encourage action to be taken to ensure we do not play catch up.

- Last year, the Government committed to prioritising basic digital skills by mirroring the approach taken for adult literacy and numeracy through publicly-funded adult education. However, this has not yet materialised and AELP would encourage the Government to honour its commitment to ensure publicly-funded basic digital skills training is offered free of charge to adults in England who need it.

- The **Conservative [manifesto](#)** committed to equip people with the digital skills they need now, and in the future, by introducing a right to lifelong learning in digital skills, just as it has been done for literacy and numeracy. AELP believes in the absolute importance and need of good applied English, maths and digital skills across learners of all ages. Furthermore, like maths and English, digital skills should be funded separately, i.e. not out of the apprenticeship levy pot.

- **Government [white paper](#) on industrial strategy**- At the core of the industrial strategy is of course a need for the UK workforce to be agile and responsive, not necessarily fixed into occupational silos by its system of learning provision – transferability of skills should be at the heart of system and one of its key underpinning principles. The white paper highlights that there remain significant problems with basic skills. Within the next two decades, 90 per cent of jobs will require some digital proficiency, yet 23 per cent of adults lack basic digital skills. It is paramount that steps are taken to ensure the UK has the skilled workforce needed in an increasingly digital world.

  The paper sets out that the Government will also work to improve digital skills among those still in education- working with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to determine what digital content will be included in the new technical education routes. We believe the new technical education standards under the Sainsbury reforms should not diverge much at all from the equivalent apprenticeship standards including fully-funded maths, English and digital skills.

- AELP are concerned that digital skills were not a stated priority for the latest Adult Education Budget tender which will need funding. The [AEB funding rules](#) for 2017-18 has no mention of digital skills whatsoever. We believe good digital skills are vital to ensure the workforce remains aligned with the growing dependence on technology therefore it must be mandatory for everyone like maths and English. This measure is vital in the government's objective to tackle the root causes of digital exclusion.

- Previously, AELP have spearheaded events such as **[Improving the Use of Digital Technologies in Customer Service/Retail](#)** whereby strong ICT skills can unlock a world of employment opportunities to learners and by developing the personal skills of teachers we can enable them to model and develop functional ICT skills amongst their learners. The impact of such an event is innumerable as it gave individuals the opportunity to be trained to become Professional Development Leads, providing them with the resources and tools necessary to deliver a workshop within their own organisation.

  We believe it is important for tutors, staff and assessors to have the appropriate digital skills to ensure they can excel in their roles, thus enhancing the learner experience. The Digital Skills Enhancement Programme is an Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned project and AELP is working in partnership with Creative Education. It is part of a wider project on the development of workshops and online courses to support providers to enhance their digital skills within their training and assessment.

  http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/support-practitioners/digital-skills-support/

  The longer term aims of this project is to ensure:

  - Sector teachers have a firm digital skills foundation upon which to build innovative teaching techniques

  - Digital technologies are used increasingly effectively in the sector

  - Existing digital assets (such as VLEs) are better used with more effective content and better integrated as part of teaching and learning

  - Increase in sector to sector and collaboration both in digital skills development and more generally

  - Managers see the benefits of digital skills enhancement and priorities those in their development planning

- Knowledge and use of the Foundations digital skills enhancement training and take-up on other Foundation CPD Programmes

We have delivered a series of pilot workshops covering 4 vocational areas and a 'train the trainer' workshop to train others to deliver the workshop. We are looking to run 8 further workshops in September and October and the facilitators will be providing a case study on the impact of this training on the staff who attend.

However, there still are too many bureaucratic barriers and restrictions for training providers to develop and deploy a technological-led approach to learning which inhibits growth. An example of this is the lack of flexibility for providers to develop high quality online learning programmes to form a valuable part of a high quality blended learning programme. Current funding rules are rigid and are relatively unsupportive of enabling providers to develop this route. These kinds of shackles are both perverse and restrictive in what we all ultimately are striving to achieve.

- Previously, CLAIT (a qualification in IT) had proven popular and successful in equipping learners with much need IT skills. What contributed to its success was its availability for all learners in all environments- unitised so could be delivered flexibly to all learners no matter what prior knowledge. We believe in the need for something similar for digital skills that can be applied in all situations.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers
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