

## Stepping Up and Stepping Forward

### Learning Insight 10

There are many digital issues to be resolved; we need a regional strategy to unlock the benefits of technology-enabled learning



#### What do we know?

The impact of Covid-19 has been widely felt across education and the local and global labour markets. The pandemic has accelerated changes that were already underway, and new opportunities are opening up for learning and employment in areas such as: digitisation, robotics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality.

Government departments have invested significantly in providing digital equipment, learning platforms, digital resources and high-speed broadband to schools, further education colleges and other organisations. These resources are essential for learning, but not all learners can access them. Many learners with special educational needs, including the growing number of such learners in mainstream schools, are benefitting from appropriate adjustments including the use of suitable software and assistive technologies.

We know that when staff collaborate and share expertise, learners benefit. More opportunities are now being provided for staff to learn from one another; particularly in less formal situations and quite often through social media. Learners would undoubtedly benefit if we could work in a more joined-up way to share digital expertise across the sectors. Currently, we do not have a regional cross-sectoral digital strategy to meet the professional needs of staff and support the development of learners' digital literacy.

#### What have we learned?

Schools and other organisations have discussed with inspectors the various digital applications they are using, including the advantages and risks of applications used, such as security and safeguarding issues. They also reported the extensive work undertaken to upskill staff. It is widely recognised that during the Covid-19 lockdowns, practitioners developed both their ICT technical competences and their e-pedagogical skills in order to deliver effective remote learning. While it is accepted that remote learning was largely an emergency measure, practitioners continue to develop and embed more effective e-pedagogy to support home and remote learning, and as a contingency plan in order to address any future Covid-related disruption.



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ICT should permeate learning, teaching and assessment. It is embedded as a core cross-curricular skill in the Northern Ireland Curriculum and is crucial for learners' future employment opportunities, including accessing key every-day services. Despite this, the overall number of pupils taking appropriate software qualifications is low, particularly in non-selective post-primary schools.



It is disappointing that not enough females are choosing qualifications or careers in ICT. A low number of females are taking ICT/software qualifications across all sectors. In post-primary schools, from 2015-16 to 2019-20, there has been a reduction of approximately 64% of females taking the CCEA GCSE Digital Technology (from September 2016) in comparison to the previously offered ICT qualification. In further education colleges, over the same period, the number of females studying qualifications in ICT decreased by around 40%.

### What will help us move forward constructively?

It will be important that young people view ICT both as a crucial life skill and also as a discrete subject leading to very good employment and career prospects. More positive perceptions around ICT begin in the primary schools with a focus on digital audio, managing data, coding, communication and presentational skills. At post-primary level, consideration should be given to how schools support progression to higher level learning in ICT, including ways to encourage more females to study for software qualifications.

More opportunities need to be developed to allow more collaborative learning between ICT/software practitioners in early years, schools, further education, work-based learning and the community and voluntary sector, including professional learning to support skills development.

Given the increasing importance of learning through technology, the greater use of remote learning and employment opportunities in digital industries, learners require ready access to highly effective ICT provision. To support this, a cross-departmental and sector-wide digital strategy should be developed to inform digital skills, educational technology and applications provision across the early years, schools, further education, work-based learning and community and voluntary sectors, and the professional learning needs of our education workforce.