



## **Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits**

### **Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits**

**by Mike Taylor, Director eLearning Systems, Equinet**

We are all well acquainted with the government's many schemes to fund the development of ICT in our schools. A raft of centrally funded projects and initiatives not always organised in the most logical sequence has seen hundreds of computers going into schools, followed by laptops for teachers, ICT training, broadband internet and, more recently, interactive whiteboards and video conferencing

Secondary schools were the first beneficiaries of the dedicated DfES funding aimed at providing every school in England with a broadband connection. All secondary schools were expected to be connected to a broadband link of at least 2Mb by March 2002 and to help achieve it, the government set up and funded 10 regional broadband consortia (RBCs). Like all regional initiatives there has been the usual success and failure stories linked to these organisations, and some LEAs have chosen to opt out and run things on their own.

One scheme that has caused controversy and argument since it was announced is aimed at providing funding for the purchase of digital content and software. The Electronic Learning Credits (ELC) scheme was created to encourage teachers to buy software and online content to widen the use of ICT across the school curriculum. This initiative was prompted to some extent by the announcement that the BBC was going to invest £150 million of licence income to develop "The Digital Curriculum": a wide ranging online resource covering the school curriculum at both primary and secondary key stages. The education software industry responded by threatening legal action against the BBC and seeking EU intervention on unfair competition grounds. The battle subsided in



## Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits

January 2003 with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) giving the BBC the green light but subjecting the service to 18 strict conditions to ensure it was distinctive and complimentary to commercial services. It did however result in the resignation of Michael Stevenson - the man the BBC has selected to get approval for the new service.

To ensure fair play and to encourage the commercial sector to continue its investment in schools, the government launched the ELC scheme in 2002 with a £30 million fund. Later they announced another £300 million spread over 3 further years. Schools have access to £100 million per year until April 2005. All schools receive £1000, plus nearly £10 per pupil, meaning that an average sized secondary school will be about £10,000 per year better off.

The money can only be spent on approved software. To help regulate this, another massive DfES investment went into developing Curriculum Online – a complex web resource which would allow teachers to search a specially developed database of curriculum relevant products. Further plans to use the portal for the procurement process as well have been postponed indefinitely.

The funding programme is well under way, and it is interesting to see how it has evolved. What have secondary schools made of it and how have they benefited?

The response to this large pot of money has been rather interesting when compared to other funding initiatives like the literacy and numeracy programmes. Schools have not behaved with their usual avarice to the government handout – instead, the DfES has found itself organising expensive publicity campaigns to encourage schools to spend their ELC money. LEAs have been encouraged to organise events and conferences featuring the ELC Roadshow. This summer, in the run up to August 31<sup>st</sup> when the current tranche of funding was due to end,



## Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits

there were serious concerns about the large amount of money (50%) not yet spent.

Secondary schools in England collect around £43 million from the scheme each year. The rest goes to primary, special and nursery schools. So what is going wrong? Is it the scheme, the software on offer or some deeper issues in school around whether teachers are responding to the challenges of endorsing ICT as a resource to support teaching and learning? Other issues could well include:

- In many schools teachers have had little opportunity for discussion about how this money can be planned into departmental budgets, given that over the four years of the scheme some £40 – 50,000 may be involved.
- Surveys of the amount of time ICT suites are available reveal that most time is still taken by the ICT curriculum and that very little remains for other subjects. This alone could account for a lack of demand for subject software.
- Teachers have experienced real problems when using the Curriculum Online site to search for resources. It was revamped and re-launched after just one year in an effort to encourage teachers back to it, but publishers' websites, catalogues and distributors like AVP and REM remain the most frequently used point of information and purchasing.
- Schools complain that some of the software they need requires specialist hardware to use it – data loggers, control technology devices and cache servers are typical examples. These are not certified items under the scheme and are not supposed to be purchased with the funding.



## Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits

- There is little accountability at school level for reporting how the funding has been used. This has allowed schools to absorb the funding into other areas of need. At present only the suppliers are required to provide monthly returns from which the DfES estimates the level of spending.

Schools have taken advantage of the broad base of products that have passed the Curriculum Online vetting process to identify those that offer a whole school solution. A look through the “School Wide Resources” sections reveals a whole host of products loosely connected with search terms like “Assessment; Cross Curricular Coverage; Reference and Tools; and Applications”. Resources school have invested include electronic assessment packages; report writing software; library databases; lesson planning tools; memory training and project management packages; and interactive whiteboard upgrade applications.

An indicator of how the product vetting process need to be radically improved is demonstrated when some resources appear in all four these categories under Key stage 3 or 4 but are clearly a single subject resource. Suppliers have cleverly overcome the fact that the database always displays resources in a different random order with every new search, by submitting their one product several times making small changes to the age group eg: 9-13 becomes 11-13, thus ensuring their product appears more than once. This results in searches that reveal some 200 different entries which really only offer 50 to 60 different resources and highlights the fact that content tagging needs a lot of thought and more development.

Becta, the government technology in education agency is administering the scheme for the DfES. It recently contacted suppliers whose products appear as part of an integrated hardware and software package, helping schools get



## Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits

round some of the problem of being able to buy software but not having the hardware to use it on. They are keen to see that these packages do not breach the 80:20 rule, which states that 80% of the value of a package must be in digital content. The rule created to avoid publishers cashing in on the funding by selling text books with a bit of software is not entirely appropriate in the case of a software and hardware package. Ironically, these have been among the most popular items purchased with ELC funding.

This year's funding, available from April, runs until August 2005. Next April the last £100 million is released and runs until August 2006. There is no information yet regarding the extension of the scheme, but strong rumours circulate the market that the EU expects the government to continue with some kind of funding to support the commercial sector, whilst the BBC develops and delivers the Digital Curriculum package. At present, Becta and the DfES are looking hard at the issues, but a different presentation of any funding looks likely

Steps to improve the ELC and Curriculum Online system include:

- Greater scrutiny of the products being self certified for Curriculum Online.
- A separation of free and priced resources.
- Stopping multiple entries of products.
- Re-defining the 80:20 rule for hardware and software packages.
- Allowing key small hardware items to be included in the approved products list.
- More accountability of ELC spending by schools and LEAs – the only way to see whether the scheme is working.



## Secondary Schools and eLearning Credits

- Becta to evaluate the success of the scheme and to investigate why school have been slow to spend money.
- Responding with action plans to Ofsted reports highlighting the poor use of ICT across the curriculum.

So whilst the scheme could no doubt be improved there may be more important underlying issues that need to be investigated. Ofsted's recent report highlighted their concerns on the issue. It would be sad, but no surprise, to see this scheme hailed as a failure for the wrong reasons. Then when the infrastructure, staff capabilities and environment in schools improves enough to support a broader use of ICT in curriculum, - perhaps because it becomes embedded in exam syllabi and there is a real need for good learning resources – there will be no funding to support it.

Déjà vu, I hear you say!