The place of technology in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat education agenda: an ambition of absence?

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The place of technology in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat education agenda: an ambition of absence?

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Schools’ use of digital technology has so far proved to be a peripheral feature of the Conservative-Liberal education agenda. Through a series of reductions to previously extensive bureaucratic and funding structures, the Coalition administration has presided over a swift but sustained withdrawal of state support for digital technology use in schools. Many commentators have been quick to decry these actions as signalling an ill-informed “absence of ambition” for what could be seen as an integral area of twenty-first century educational provision. However, this paper contends that the Coalition’s apparent technological indifference instead marks a deliberate “ambition of absence”. Thus as well as contributing to immediate reductions in central government spending, the apparent shunning of educational technology policy-making has been driven by the Coalition’s long-term ambitions for localised and largely privatised forms of public sector governance. With this in mind, the paper considers the intended influence of the Coalition’s policy reversals on the future use of digital technology in UK schools. It is suggested that rather than constituting an irreversible crisis, the current withdrawal of state support is perhaps best understood as a continuation of the fluctuating cycle of government (dis)interest in educational technology over the past 30 years.

Keywords: education policy; privatisation; ICT; technology; digital

Introduction

Those observers who feared that the UK’s first hung parliament since 1974 would result in a hamstrung era of bland “consensus” politics have been so far proven wrong. Indeed, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government formed in May 2010 has moved quickly to establish a decisive air of collective ambition and authority. Rather than basking in a post-election “honeymoon” period, the first 12 months of the Coalition administration saw a sustained agenda of policy reforms and policy reversals across all government departments. While these actions centred on a number of aims, they were underpinned by the perceived need for substantial reductions in government expenditure, with all newly appointed ministers expected to find cuts of up to 30% in their departmental budgets. Alongside this concerted drive to reduce state spending, the Coalition’s ideological distance from the preceding 13 years of New Labour rule began to be expressed through the promotion of concepts such as “Big Society”, the “post-bureaucratic age” and the attendant lessening of “Big State Power”. Such crude sloganeering reflected a determination...
to diminish centralised state involvement in public services in favour of a “localist”
devolution of power to individual citizens and civic society, alongside increased pri-
ivate sector involvement.

As part of these abrupt political changes, compulsory and post-compulsory edu-
cation have been subject to a succession of substantial and far-reaching policy
adjustments and reforms since the summer of 2010. It is therefore time that aca-
demic commentators begin to scrutinise the emerging educational intentions of the
Coalition administration – asking how, why and with what likely outcomes these
redirections of policy are taking shape. In this spirit the present paper examines the
Coalition’s approach towards one of the most highly-funded and publicised areas of
educational policy-making under the previous New Labour government – i.e. the
area of digital technology [or as it came to be known during New Labour’s time in
office “Information and Communication Technology” (ICT)]. As such the paper
addresses a number of salient questions and issues. For example, just why has the
use of digital technology in schools proved to be such a marginal feature of the
Conservative-Liberal Democrat educational brief? Just why has the brief history of
Coalition government already seen the systematic dismantling of much of New
Labour’s 13 year programme to support the use of “ICT” use in UK schools – not
least the extensive bureaucratic and funding structures that grew up between 1997
and 2010? What motivations and agendas – if any – lie behind the Coalition
administration’s apparent coordination of a sustained withdrawal of state support for
digital technology use in schools?

Educational policy-making and digital technology – a pre-Coalition history

To make sense of the current nature and form of Coalition educational technology
policy-making, we need to first consider the development of the policy field prior
to the 2010 election. The starting-point for sustained government involvement in
educational technology is usually seen as 1980 or thereabouts. Indeed, the UK
school system at the end of the 1970s was largely bereft of digital technology –
save for the sporadic use of “micro-computing” technology by a minority of enthu-
siastic teachers. As one commentator observed at the turn of the decade, “some
schools in England have already made a start, albeit in scattered and isolated areas
throughout the country but with no coordination of effort and experience” (Jones
1980, 153). This situation was soon addressed during the first years of the Conser-
vative government under Margaret Thatcher through a series of substantial national
policies that sought to take “a great step forward to put microcomputers in every
school ... so that our young people are skilled at an early age” (Thatcher 1983). A
succession of government programmes and initiatives throughout the 1980s stimu-
lated the in-school use of microcomputers and established the general notion of
“information technology (IT)” throughout UK education. These policies provided
schools with computer hardware and software, offered standardised teacher training
and support, positioned “IT” as a central element of the newly formed National
Curriculum and even supported rudimentary forms of electronic networking via
modems.

One of the most significant elements of this centrally-funded policy activity was
the 1981 Micros in Schools scheme – offering to fund 50% of the cost of one
microcomputer to every computerless school in the country. Although restricting
schools’ choice to one of two British-made machines, over 4000 secondary schools
had ordered microcomputers by 1982. This impetus was further reinforced by the attendant *Microelectronics in Education Programme* (MEP) with its dual brief to promote the use of microcomputers in schools and to develop the teaching of IT. This emerging state focus on schools’ use of technology continued into the mid-1980s with the formation of the *National Council for Educational Technology* and the sustained funding of school IT equipment purchases through the *Software in Schools* and *Modems in Schools* programmes, as well as the subsequent *New Technology for Better Schools* programme. Then, at the end of the 1980s, came a commitment to place “basic IT skills at the heart” of the new “National Curriculum” (Dearing 1993, 28). Politically, at least, the notion of the “educational” computer had been affirmed in UK schools (see Selwyn 2002).

Yet while overseeing a number of subsequent policies such as the *Education Department Superhighways Initiative*, the approach to education technology under the John Major administration was largely piecemeal and non-committal – reflecting a noticeable waning of government interest and commitment. As such the incoming New Labour government of 1997 under Tony Blair was faced with little or no substantial form of educational technology settlement from the outgoing Conservative administration. As was observed at the time:

> By the end of the Conservative Government’s period of office it was obvious that there was no question of a national [educational] IT strategy. Obviously this was because there was no internal consistency between what was needed to make the support possible and what had remained available at the time to support the need. (Wild and King 1999, 161)

Although a surprise to many observers, addressing this policy vacuum became a central educational tenet of New Labour’s 1997 election manifesto, with the rebranded ICT providing the focus for a sustained agenda of policy-making over the 1998 to 2010 period. Of course, New Labour’s privileging of educational technology use coincided with the mainstream societal emergence of the internet and the world-wide web – not least related increased access to the internet and, more generally, the wider use of personal computers and laptops in workplace and domestic settings. In this sense, education was a prominent public site where the new government’s technological commitment could be demonstrated. That said, the Blair and Brown administrations did pursue a sustained educationally-focused programme of technology development across New Labour’s time in office. Most notably the schools sector was subject to three distinct phases of policy-making: the 1998 to 2002 *National Grid for Learning* (NGfL) initiative and associated National Lottery funded nationwide teacher training programme; the 2002 to 2005 *ICT in Schools* drive and associated *Curriculum Online* and e-learning credit schemes; and the 2005 to 2010 *Harnessing Technology* agenda underpinned by a sector-wide *E-learning Strategy*.

This succession of well-resourced flagship agendas was complemented by a raft of smaller discrete programmes and schemes – such as the provision of laptop computers to headteachers, the subsidised provision of broadband internet connections to low-income families, and the establishment of various regulatory bodies, advisory bodies and “watchdogs”. Perhaps most significantly, all of these efforts were accompanied by the development of an extensive administrative network. In particular the Conservative-established “National Council for Educational Technology” was expanded into the significantly enhanced *British Educational Communications and
Technology Agency (Becta). This non-government department organisation was charged with overseeing the use of ICT in UK schools and acting as a fulcrum of education policy, provision and practice – fulfilling both a regulatory and evangelical role for schools technology use. Thus in terms of policy and practice, the New Labour years saw schools technology once again transformed into a significant educational concern (see Selwyn 2008).

The development of the Coalition position on educational technology: 2010 to date

In practical terms, then, New Labour could claim rightly by the time of the 2010 election to have made an unprecedented political commitment to the use of digital technology in UK schools. This was perhaps most evident in the deployment of over £5 billion of funding towards schools ICT infrastructure alone during Labour’s time in office. Internationally, the UK lead on educational technology had a significant bearing on the wave of “policy-borrowing” in other countries throughout the 2000s, as schools technology emerged as a frenetic “global trend” in education policy-making (Lee and Caldwell 2010). For better or worse, New Labour had certainly established the UK as one of the world’s leading nations in terms of the educational use of technology.

Yet educational technology was conspicuous by its absence in the manifestos of all of the opposition parties during the 2010 election. Despite requests from various professional bodies and interest groups for clarification of their position, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats chose to say nothing on the matter during their election activities. The use of digital technologies in education warranted only a cursory mention in the Conservative party’s 21 page “Technology Manifesto” which otherwise advanced a host of innovative high-tech proposals such as the establishment of an in-house Cabinet Office “skunk works” to support the open source production of technology applications. These non-educational technology manifesto commitments certainly marked a shift from the Conservative party’s position throughout the 2000s as being ambivalent and even uninformed about digital technology matters (evident, for example, in David Cameron’s declaration in 2005 that “the Tory party may be many things but it is not an internet party”). Yet while now feeling the need to commit to “the most ambitious technology agenda ever proposed by a British political party” (Conservative Party 2010, f.4), neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats made any direct mention of schools and ICT during the election process. As such, both parties’ lack of consideration for education as a site of technological significance stood in stark contrast to New Labour’s previous privileging of the sector.

After the eventual formation of the Coalition government in May 2010, one of the new administration’s first educational acts was to announce the closure of Becta – the quasi autonomous non-government organisation charged with implementing and driving technology policy throughout UK schools and colleges. In one sense, Becta was just one of many victims of the Coalition’s initial efforts to “slash and burn” public expenditure in what was dubbed by political commentators as the “bonfire of the Quangos”. With an £80 million annual budget and employing 250 people, Becta was one of 192 agencies and organisations whose disbandment was first announced in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 general election. This move was not entirely unexpected to close observers, as Conservative policy advisors had
been openly canvassing public and professional opinion on Becta’s role at the January 2010 “BETT” educational technology trade show. More ominously, the agency had also been singled out by name in David Cameron’s leadership speech at the 2009 Conservative party conference. As Cameron argued with respect to the perceived profligacy of New Labour public sector spending:

> So when I see Ed Balls [then Labour Education secretary] blow hundreds of millions on so-called “curriculum development” on consultancies, on quangos like the QCDA [Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency] and Becta … like every other parent with a child at a state school I want to say: this is my child, it’s my money, give it to my headteacher instead of wasting it in Whitehall. (Cameron 2009)

While a significant reduction in Becta’s funding had been expected under any incoming government, the total disbandment of the agency came as a surprise to many commentators. This reduction in the bureaucracy of educational technology also saw the paring back of the educational technology teams within the rebranded government departments for “Education” and “Business, Innovation and Skills”, while at the same time these departments were also tasked with “retaining functions” and absorbing a small number of key personnel from those aspects of Becta’s remit that were considered to “offer real value to frontline services”. Perhaps more significantly, the summer of 2010 also saw the halving of the £200million “Harnessing Technology” funding that had been committed for expenditure in 2010/2011 and the cessation of such spending for subsequent years – effectively curtailing any financial commitment to sustaining any of New Labour’s established schools technology programme. While the longer-term significance of these cuts remains to be seen, in the short-term they prompted the closure of schemes such as the *Home Access Programme* and a host of research, evaluation and professional development programmes.

Other significant elements in the Coalition’s “rolling back” of state commitment to schools technology came from the abandonment of two broader education projects that had substantial ICT components. The New Labour-approved plans for the re-organisation of the Primary school curriculum (first mooted by the so-called *Rose Review*) had placed innovative and expansive digital technology use as one of the core elements of teaching and learning. These proposals had been described before the election by the Conservative shadow schools secretary as “another serving of vapid jargon from the quangocrats who have presided over all our existing problems with education” (Gibb 2009). Yet the abandonment of the *Rose Review* marked the retreat of a range of potentially progressive pedagogic advances with regards to recent technology developments – not least the emergence of so-called “web 2.0” technologies and the curricular inclusion of “critical digital literacy”. Alongside these changes the high-profile curtailment of the £55billion *Building Schools for the Future* (BSF) programme also represented a major withdrawal of state financing for schools technology use. While many of the emotive responses from the education community and wider public to the axing of BSF centred on the abandonment of plans for school building projects, much of this programme centred on the refurbishment and equipping of computer suites and other elements of schools’ technological infrastructures. As such the curtailment of BSF marked a significant retreat from the state subsidising of school technology resourcing.
In the three months proceeding the general election the Coalition therefore moved at breakneck speed to halt – if not reverse – much of the New Labour ICT project. The immediate impact of these changes was to destabilise the education technology community, with reductions in funding for technological resources, advice, evaluation, research and consultancy soon having “knock-on” effects in related sectors. The highly respected educational technology think-tank Futurelab hastily announced its reconfiguration from a large-scale socially-orientated R&D organisation based in Bristol and employing 70 people, to a small-scale commercial developer based in London. Previously well-funded and renowned academic research departments such as Nottingham’s “Learning Sciences Research Institute” were similarly downsized or wound-up altogether. The UK educational technology hardware and software manufacturer RM (Research Machines) announced a 13% fall in its share prices following the announcement of the BSF withdrawal of funding, citing a potential loss of £200million worth of contracts. Similarly, the interactive whiteboard suppliers Promethean World saw a 20% fall in share price triggered by what was described in the media as “fears over the impact of austerity measures on education budgets” (Wearden 2010). Conversely, there was an unsightly scramble by a number of small-scale practitioner organisations and large-scale commercial interests to assert themselves as providing leadership and governance in lieu of Becta’s diminished responsibilities – from education interest groups such as NAACE (the “National Association of Advisors for Computers in Education”) and Open Source Schools, to multinational companies such as Microsoft and Capita.

Yet while judiciously cutting services and funding across all areas of educational technology policy-making, the Coalition could certainly not be accused of adopting an anti-technology stance in their thinking or somehow failing to recognise the societal benefits of digital technology per se. Alongside these educational reductions, the Coalition otherwise proved keen to pursue a number of wider technology drives – not least the £300million commitment to the “best superfast broadband network in Europe by 2015” (Jeremy Hunt, in BIS 2010, 2) and the establishment of “universal” access to the internet and digital skills through the Race Online 2012 initiative. So while the Coalition government may not have turned its back on public sector technology policy-making per se, why does educational technology appear to have been hit so hard? Most importantly, what may the longer-term consequences be for UK schools and schooling?

Making sense of the Coalition stance on educational technology – an absence of ambition or an ambition of absence?

At first glance, it is tempting to point towards an absence of ambition within the Coalition administration when it comes to digital technology and education. Indeed, schools technology received only the briefest of mentions in the Coalition’s first Education Bill towards the end of January 2011 – simply promising the mandatory online publication of school information (DfE 2011). Yet rather than abandoning digital technology in schools due to a lack of innovative thinking or excess of technological ignorance, the Coalition’s actions are perhaps best understood as being ideologically-driven and, it follows, linked to the wider political reorientation of education and public sector services. As such the Coalition’s ambition when it comes to educational technology could be seen as centred on clear and deliberate ambitions to withdraw the state from the governance and procurement of schools technology.
As with all instances of policy-making this “ambition of absence” is both politically and practically driven. From a purely pragmatic perspective, schools technology was undoubtedly perceived by the Coalition government education team as a sizable area of “Whitehall waste” that could be cut with relatively little controversy or disquiet amongst the electorate. In this sense, the annual cuts associated with Becta (£80million) and the Harnessing Technology funding (£100million) went some way towards bringing the Department for Education in line with the expected 20 to 30% reductions in departmental spending during the first term of government. Indeed, official statements were quick to justify the educational technology budget cuts as just one element of wider efforts to redress “£1billion of unrealistic inherited spending commitments” (DfE 2010), with the reductions in funding and bureaucracy thereby “allowing schools to reconfigure their broadband and IT infrastructure projects onto a more sustainable funding model” (DfE 2010). As the tone of these statements implies, digital technologies were undoubtedly felt by many of the Coalition education team as no longer deserving of state support and bureaucratic governance. As the same official statements reasoned:

appropriate IT is a strong supported element of good teaching and learning. It is however now well embedded in schools, and we do not think that further hypothecated capital investment is needed. (DfE 2010)

Indeed, compared to the employment of teachers and nurses, or the maintenance of social welfare payments, then it would be hard to justify educational technology spending as a particularly essential “frontline” priority. Indeed, most of the major areas of controversy during the initial announcements of education cuts centred on decidedly non-technological matters. Throughout 2010 there was significant disquiet over the non-construction of new school buildings under the BSF programme, the proposed withdrawal of funding for the School Sports Partnership programme and – most controversially – increased university tuition fees. All of these areas of educational change proved to be far more contentious issues (both politically and publically) than the prospect of schools not having access to state-of-the-art computer networks.

Of course, the Coalition’s position is not that no money should be spent on educational technology – rather that schools technology no longer merits high levels of direct state funding and bureaucracy. A second set of motivations therefore relates to wider issues of school governance. In short, the Coalition’s implicit position is that schools should be free to spend money on and procure technological resources in ways that they themselves see fit. In the brief statements made by the Department for Education officials on the subject, arguments have been made, for instance, along lines of encouraging “a more autonomous school system” (Gove 2010). This emphasis on school autonomy chimes with a general belief in stimulating and supporting a plurality of school organisation and governance models – all based around a faith in the redemptive power of localised rather than centralised organisation of public services. As such, the changes made to educational technology are perhaps best understood in light of the Coalition’s “small state” approach to public sector arrangements where central government involvement is minimised in favour of local decision-making. Of course, the emphasis on community and voluntary involvement usually touted within descriptions of the “Big Society” agenda obscures the key private-sector interests that are most likely to become involved in
public services such as schools technology. Indeed, although not acknowledged overtly in official statements, schools technology is clearly seen by the Coalition administration as an area of education provision where increased private sector involvement is likely to flourish given a reduction of state “interference” in the market.

In these terms, the Coalition’s withdrawal of state support for educational technology should be seen as being aligned closely with wider ideologically-driven shifts in thinking regarding the funding and governance of the public sector. Thus schools technology is just one of many policy fields set to witness the growing importance of private interests in the overall governance and provision of public services and resources – what Stephen Ball (2007, 13) describes as “the fundamental re-design of the public sector [where] the state is increasingly re-positioned as the guarantor, not necessarily the provider ... the state is very much a market-maker or broker”. The fact that schools technology was one of the first areas of educational policy-making to be singled out for such recalibration probably reflects little more than the politically-spent nature of the area in the eyes of Conservative and Liberal politicians. If anything, the Coalition’s eagerness to pounce on educational technology as a suitable area for such changes reflects the high-profile nature of “ICT” over the preceding 13 years as a distinctly New Labour (or even distinctly Blairite) area of policy interest. Indeed, as soon as Tony Blair met with Bill Gates in Downing Street at the inception of the NGfL initiative, the area of schools technology became elevated in policy terms as a highly publicised and highly symbolic facet of the “new thinking” Labour administration.

Much of the apparent severity of the Coalition’s subsequent about-turn on this matter therefore undoubtedly relates to the (somewhat excessive) heights that New Labour pushed the hitherto peripheral area of education policy-making to. In stark party political terms, there was perhaps little electoral or symbolic gain for the Coalition government to have continued supporting schools technology. In the minds of many voters (and some educators) schools technology was an area of education that New Labour largely “owned” and in many ways appeared to have largely “solved” by the end of the 2000s. With its garish branding, clumsy “spin” and high-profile re-announcements of the same funding commitments, “ICT” was a quintessentially “New Labour” area of policy-making during the 2000s. Even if they had wanted to, it is difficult to envisage any distinctive “grand policy gestures” that the Coalition could have made without appearing to follow on from – and therefore endorse – New Labour’s previous efforts. As such, the Coalition were perhaps best advised to quietly move on from educational technology as a politically “spent” area of activity, and focus on their own “pet” policy interests (such as the highly publicised “Free Schools” policy and the reformation of the History curriculum).

**Considering the likely outcomes of the Coalition position on educational technology**

In the 12 months or so since their election, the Coalition has therefore presided over a withdrawal from educational technology policy-making that was as dramatic as New Labour’s embracing of the area in their first year of office. While a sudden shift in direction remains possible, the first year of the Coalition administration nevertheless provides us with relatively stable grounds for making an informed forecast.
of the near-future. Of course, confidently predicting the future of either education or technology is a foolhardy business. With most major industrialised nations still pursuing sustained educational technology policy agendas (not least the Obama administration’s recent National Education Technology Plan), then there could well be an irresistible pressure for the UK to rejoin the fray. Yet in policy terms it would seem unlikely that the Coalition will perform a volte face on the matter and, for instance, be struck by a desire to reinstate an extensive state bureaucracy and spending agenda around schools technology. All things considered, it is possible to comment with some confidence on the likely shape of educational technology at the time of the next scheduled general election of 2015. In particular, four distinct areas of the near future of schools technology merit consideration, i.e. governance, funding, resourcing and practice.

Firstly, the governance of schools’ technology use at the time of 2015 election is likely to be significantly different than the governance of schools technology at the time of the 2010 election. The withdrawal of a dedicated guiding government agency for educational technology and the diminishment of the technology portfolio within the Department for Education were intended clearly to decrease the top-down centralised control of schools technology. While these changes were bemoaned by many elements of the UK educational technology community, a number of other interests have been quick to seize the opportunity to expand their role in the leadership and governance of schools technology. Ostensibly, the Coalition’s actions served to devolve governance of digital technology to the level of the individual autonomous school. The ongoing success of this decentralisation therefore relies in no small part on the expansion of the UK educational technology marketplace with growing numbers of for-profit and not-for-profit interests able to play an increased role.

Encouragingly for the Coalition administration, a growing number of organisations stepped in during the aftermath of the “Bonfire of the Quangos” to assume some of Becta’s responsibilities – from the British Educational Suppliers Association hosting of the annual “Learning and World Technology Forum” to the Association of Learning Technologists’ management of the Becta Research Network. As these examples suggest, the educational technology landscape of 2015 should see a number of national organisations such as the NAACE, the Special Schools and Academies Trust and the e-learning Foundation expanding their advisory and supporting roles in schools technology use – jostling with commercial interests such as RM, Microsoft, Capita and TSL Education. Of course, these organisations have long played a role in schools technology, yet free from the strictures of state involvement their significance looks set to grow considerably. Parallel to these interests, it is also likely that many aspects of educational technology will increasingly revert to “grass-roots” arrangements, where networks of enthusiastic individual teachers play an integral role in sustaining and developing the shape of the educational technology community. One key group in this respect has already been loose alliances of “open source” and “open education” enthusiasts. While it may be naïve to imagine a totally decentralised network of technology-using educators “doing it for themselves”, schools technology is already beginning to be run along more self-organised and self-sustaining lines.

Just as offers of technology support and advice will not diminish completely, then the funding and financing of schools technology also looks set to continue, albeit in less “top-down” forms. The reduction of direct state funding for
educational technology was clearly intended to stimulate the increased marketisation of schools technology. Much of the criticism of Becta’s guiding role during the New Labour educational technology agenda came from those “competitor” interests who saw central government involvement as distorting and inhibiting the educational technology marketplace. From Becta’s perceived bias towards centralised arrangements with IT firms such as Microsoft and other “approved suppliers”, to the perceived monopolistic abuses of the proposed delivery of digital curriculum resources by the BBC, the withdrawal of state market interference could well see the financing of schools technology diversify as individual schools attempt to independently procure their own educational technology resources from a diversity of suppliers. In the absence of state support, it could well be that schools technology becomes more dependent on charitable funding as well as direct commercial financing. Although schools IT may not be a “high-end” market in commercial technology terms, it should certainly attract increasing numbers of willing investors.

In some respects, then, it could be argued that the educational technology landscape of 2015 will appear remarkably similar to that of 2010 – especially in terms of the technological resourcing of schools. It is highly unlikely that UK schools will suddenly cease to be resourced with high-tech “kit”. Indeed, under the more permissive conditions of a post-Becta landscape, some schools’ digital technology resourcing will undoubtedly flourish and diversify beyond the levels reached through the New Labour initiatives. Yet, as in any case of increased marketisation and reduced standardisation, many other schools’ technology resourcing will undoubtedly regress – with school leaders and managers deciding to spend less money on technology. This, of course, raises the possibility of increasing “digital divides” between schools, especially given the growing importance of individual institutional capacities and institutional expertise in making use of digital technology. Certainly, as with any marketplace, the withdrawal of an artificial market stimulus such as government spending will benefit some schools while disadvantaging others. This could well also threaten the continued existence of some local IT suppliers who were reliant on the relative security of state subsidised funding. Similarly, less funding could well be directed towards more peripheral elements of some schools’ spending on technology – from computer furniture to the consultancy, training and research industries that had grown up around the high levels of government money directed at the sector during the 2000s. All told, the educational technology marketplace of 2015 will certainly be leaner and more competitive than before.

Finally, we should consider the likely shifts in schools’ uses of technology – i.e. issues of practice. While digital technologies may not cease to be used in schools, it is likely that the nature and intent of this use will alter. Under New Labour, technology use was certainly aligned with a range of broad educational intentions – from social inclusion and personalisation, to creativity and modernisation. Under the Coalition’s tenure, technology use looks set to be aligned with a much narrower set of concerns – not least a return to “grammar school” arrangements for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. As such, the nature of technology practice in schools could well become more institutionally rather than individually focussed – with a growing use of technology for supporting business-like models of institutional efficiency and reductions in cost. It is therefore important to consider the potential effects that these shifts in emphasis may well have on the development of technology skills, competencies and so-called “digital literacies” amongst pupils and teachers alike. This can be seen in the withdrawal of concerns over the development of nuanced digital understandings
and competencies from the revised national curriculum. There has also been a loss of professional development guidance from the likes of Becta and Futurelab which had taken responsibility during the 2000s for encouraging and supporting teachers’ expansive and “creative” uses of technology.

It is likely, therefore, that the nature of digital technology use within schools will shift in its nature and form. Indeed, there are already signs that where ICT is being prioritized by the Department for Education then this is very much in terms of supporting wider priorities and concerns of system efficiency – i.e. the use of ICT to support the online provision of teacher professional development, assessment of student learning and the teaching of subject areas otherwise seen as “difficult” (e.g. modern foreign languages). In this sense, the nature of technology use within schools could well change considerably from being a learner-centred to a manager-centred resource. It could well be that technology budgets will be increasingly spent on institutional technologies such as “management information systems, managed learning environments and other systems dedicated to ‘producing knowledge of what is happening’ rather than supporting teaching or learning per se” (Griffith and André-Bechley 2008, 40).

**Considering the wider implications of the Coalition stance on educational technology**

Of course, it is unlikely that the withdrawal of state involvement will herald an imminent collapse of educational technology funding, resourcing or practice. On the face of it, digital technologies will continue to be a central part of the UK educational system – albeit with increased inconsistencies, inequalities and uncertainties. While the exact details may remain uncertain, it appears likely that schools technology use will certainly be more fragmented and less stable. Indeed, the prospect of reduced government involvement has understandably led to much consternation within the educational technology community. Yet, it could be argued that this introduction of a “limited government” approach is a natural progression in the “maturing” of schools technology use. In particular, it should be remembered that any period of state involvement in schools technology use over the last 30 years has been intended to be finite. For example, the initial push under the Thatcher government throughout the 1980s was only ever intended as “seed corn” funding designed to assist the initial growth of the “infant” IT industry and schools technology marketplace in the UK. Similarly, the New Labour push through the NGfL initiative was intended as a short-term policy device to initiate the widespread use of digital technology throughout the UK schools sector. It is easy to forget that the underlying aim of the New Labour activity was to support schools in becoming “autonomous”, “confident and competent” consumers of digital technology, willing and able to spend their own finances in this area. Of course, this aim of developing and supporting a thriving “ICT culture” and marketplace was tempered by New Labour’s tendency towards centralised control and bureaucratisation – yet the underlying ethos of limited policy intervention remained. As was observed at the time of the NGfL:

> At best, the government could only hope to maintain their present level of involvement over the next five to ten years at most. Indeed, one of the pivotal aims of the NGfL is to create a “technological” culture of ICT within education which stimulates
and provokes schools to autonomously proceed with the procurement of ICT once central funding is eventually phased out. Although this “model of decreasing dependency” is based upon an obvious financial constraint it is also a pragmatic response to the nature of technology provision and the education ICT marketplace. In the words of one of our interviewees, the government overtly “recognise that they can go so far and no further”. Indeed … any prolonged political administration of technological competition involves complex bargaining and good technical knowledge of the sectors involved beyond the reach of most governments. Thus in the medium term, the government clearly intend to leave the NGfL to a revitalised education ICT marketplace, which at the moment they are quite closely directing. (Selwyn and Fitz 2001, 569)

In these terms, then, the forthcoming diminishment of state interest and involvement could be seen as a sign of the “normalisation” of educational technology within the UK schools sector. Unlike the situation facing policy-makers in 1980 and 1997, digital technology use is perhaps no longer a special case that merits state support and particular policy attention. After 30 years of state cosseting and preferential treatment, it could be argued that schools technology is now sustainable enough an area of education for the state to disengage its responsibilities. It may have taken a change of government for this disjuncture to occur, but the apparent demise of schools technology policy-making could be argued to not be cause for particular concern.

Yet to welcome this apparent maturing of technology use into the background of the contemporary educational consciousness is perhaps too simplistic an analysis – overlooking some substantial points of concern for the nature of schools technology in the near future. If there is anything to be learnt from the past 30 years of educational technology, it is that technology use in schools is an intense site of conflict and a focus for the struggles of wider educational politics (see Selwyn 2011). From this perspective there are a number of obvious silences and contradictions in the current withdrawal of state involvement and increased reliance on market forces that merit attention and analysis – not least from the academic educational community. In particular, the withdrawal of the state as a mediating and guiding influence in schools’ use of digital technology certainly looks set to intensify inequalities. As is the way with most marketplaces, the devolvement of responsibility to individual schools is likely to allow better-resourced and more able schools to thrive and advance at the expense of less-privileged and less-able schools. Although technological disparities and inequalities clearly persisted throughout even the most centrally-directed phases of the New Labour ICT agenda, the total absence of the state as a regulator and champion of whole-sector use of digital technology will certainly increase the disparities between technology-rich and technology-poor(er) institutions.

Allied to these issues are the inevitable growing “privatisations” of schools technology use, with the nature, form and governance of digital technology use in schools increasingly predicated upon the involvement of commercial firms and other non-state interests. This will be the case not only in terms of the initial selling and supplying of digital resources to schools, but also in terms of attendant needs such as technology maintenance, training, technical support, the provision of peripheral products and so on. In this sense, a pressing concern for critical observers of educational technology is the lack of sustainability that is likely to be associated with commercial involvement in schools technology. Unlike the state, it could be argued that private interests have little or no obligation to remain involved in schools’
technology beyond the terms of their latest contract negotiations. Perhaps more than ever, the sustainability of schools technology will be increasingly shaped by the “conflict of interests between those answerable to shareholders and those answerable to stakeholders” (Potter 2005, 142).

Conclusions
The current withdrawal of state support for digital technology in schools, and the ongoing contractions and contortions of what had become a well-resourced and well-tended sector of education throughout the New Labour years should come as little surprise. As this paper has argued, the recent shrinkage of the educational technology policy field simply reflects the wider politics of public sector “reform” under the Coalition administration. Despite the convictions of some educational technologists, digital technology is not “above” or “beyond” politics any more than other aspects of schooling. Educational technology has always been a profoundly political process – based around ongoing negotiations and struggles between various interests – from the organisational concerns of schools to the concerns of state policy-making, the IT industry and other professional and technical communities. As such UK schools technology has always been far more than a simple technical matter. During the 1980s, schools’ “microcomputing” benefited greatly from the symbolic need for the state to be seen to “do something” about the new area of “information technology” – not least to be seen to kick-start the British computer industry and to address the economic and societal need for IT skills and computer literacy. Similarly, during the 1990s and 2000s schools’ “ICT” benefited greatly from the symbolic need for the state to be seen to respond to the mainstream emergence of the internet and the need to recast Britain as a “modern”, “socially-just” knowledge society. Now at the beginning of the 2010s, schools digital technology is reflecting the symbolic need for the state to be seen to cut public spending, reduce budget deficits and decentralise the provision and governance of public services. Such shifts in emphasis may well begin to take hold in other countries as the centre-left, social democratic politics of the 1990s and 2000s give way to new forms of centre-right post-recession austerity. Yet, for the time being the UK is again leading the way with educational technology policy – albeit in a retreatist rather than expansionist manner.

While many commentators have bemoaned the retreat of the state from educational technology, it is important to retain a sense of perspective on the significance of “ICT” within the grand narrative of public-sector policy-making. After 13 years of working with administrations that (over)privileged and (over)emphasised the educational importance of technology, it would be easy to be outraged by the Coalition’s apparent lack of consideration and foresight for all things technological. Yet the acid test may well be whether a returning Labour government in 2015 would be inclined to reverse this decline, and return to a new era of heavily centralised bureaucracy and sustained state funding for technology in education. It could well be that when the Conservative–Liberal Democrats are succeeded in government then there will be a similar reluctance to re-energise state support for technology-based learning. In other words it could well be that educational technology has had its heyday as a frontline area of state policy-making – at least until the next cycle of technological development and subsequent policy response takes place.
Note
1. While making no substantive mention of schools technology, the Conservative “Technology Manifesto” did describe – in passing – the example of producing communal-citizen websites for “people [to] come together to discuss issues and solve problems [when] registering children for schools” (Conservative Party 2010, 1.4.6).

References
Cameron, D. 2009. “Party Leader’s address” speech to Conservative Party Conference, October 8, in Manchester.