

## NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

### DETAILS

<b>DATE:</b>	6 June 2023
<b>TIME:</b>	13:30 - 14:30pm
<b>VENUE:</b>	Room B, 1 Parliament Street (and via Zoom)
<b>TITLE:</b>	Maintaining Digital as a priority within Science, Innovation and Technology Department
<b>CHAIR:</b>	Chris Green MP (Con, Bolton West)
<b>SPEAKERS:</b>	Mark Smith - CEO, ADA National College for Digital Skills Simon Staffell - Microsoft, Director of Government Affairs Annabelle Gawer - Professor of Digital Economy, University of Surrey Allison Littlejohn - Professor, Director, UCL Knowledge Lab Michaela Neild - Government Affairs and Policy Manager, Google

### MINUTES

Chris Green MP, Chair of the APPG for Digital Skills, opened the meeting and welcomed speakers and attendees.

#### Mark Smith, CEO, ADA National College for Digital Skills

In his remarks, Mark referred to a statement made by the Chancellor in the last budget where the Chancellor said he wanted to see Britain become the next Silicon Valley. Mark highlighted that for this to become a reality there would need to be a greater focus on the supply side of the goal.

He quoted data from Tech Nation that found that there were 800,000 vacancies in the tech sector last year and 50% of employers stated that young people leaving school and university did not have the digital skills required to meet their talent shortages. He argued that this indicated a supply and demand mismatch in the sector with industry needs not being met by the upcoming and current workforce.

He spoke about the work that ADA does as the National College for Digital Skills as the first new further education college since 1993. He noted that despite the good work that the college has done to support around 2000 students thus far, there is much more to be done. He added that there has been an uplift in IT related qualification uptake, with 10% more young people taking on GCSE, A levels and B Techs in computer science.

He concluded with the point that there is much more that can be done in the education sector to support the supply chain and address issues of skills shortages. In particular, because despite increases in higher qualification uptake, 50% of schools still do not offer

computer GSCE, particularly in deprived areas, which demonstrated the crux of the issue. He stated that there needs to be more accessibility to education at all levels and that the creation of DSIT is a great opportunity to collaborate with the Secretary of State of the Department of Education.

#### **Michaela Neild, Government Affairs and Policy Manager, Google**

Michaela opened her statement by expressing excitement for the transfer of digital from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to the new Department of Science, Innovation and Technology as it places the topic in a space for growth and development within the political and culture focus. She argued that this was a clear sign to industry that the government was 'putting its money where its mouth is' and viewing tech and digital as a driver for growth.

She presented work currently being undertaken by Google to acknowledge the existing skills gap, as it affects not only direct tech facing jobs, but almost every other sector and position because it is so widespread. She spoke about Google career certificates which help applicants obtaining entry level jobs by finding where market gaps exist and addressing this lack of skill quickly. She also highlighted the need for viable apprenticeships across the sector.

She also discussed the exciting opportunities that Google's Project Catalyst is able to offer to employers, as it helps to train people from underrepresented groups to be cloud programmers. She emphasised that ongoing learning throughout a career is vital as the education curriculum does not change fast enough to keep up with the professional environment.

Concluding, she stated that digital had to be taken seriously because the growth of the technology sector was intimately tied to the national security of a nation. She criticised the country's systemic issue of a lack of digital infrastructure and inadequate training of teachers. She implored the government to continue their mission of creating a global superpower and to dive even further into tackling the issues faced in achieving this.

#### **Dr Simon Staffell – Director of Government Affairs, Microsoft**

Simon started by identifying the scale of the problem being faced by the industry and society regarding skills in tech, as it encompassed all sectors. He stated that the increasing use of AI in everyday life meant that the skills gap would continue to increase if action was not taken, particularly in industrial strategy and national security. He highlighted the economic growth that would be driven by an uptake in digital skills and noted that structural challenges could be resolved with a more skilled population.

He presented a white paper which Microsoft had recently published on education and apprenticeships. He noted that the number of students engaging with computer science GSCE is proportionally dropping, as is the number of people coming through the STEM education pipeline. He stated that schools had to increase the pipeline of young people going through the pipeline into tech qualifications in order to increase the provision of digital learning. He acknowledged that it was incredibly difficult for schools to

continuously keep their curriculums up to date but argued that this did not mean that a holistic practice approach to digital skills could not help.

He told an anecdote of going to his children's school and offering a new piece of educational software that Microsoft had developed and realised most schools did not have laptops for students, let alone teachers capable of using the software. He pointed to the systemic problem that this represented for the entire educational system and how any change needed to acknowledge this problem and address it.

He concluded with speaking about the importance of apprenticeships and how companies need to do better at supporting them in productive ways. He mentioned that they needed to be more flexible, more modular and take a lifelong learning approach to apprenticeships. This would help people upskill throughout their careers and keep up with the job market.

#### **Professor Annabelle Gawer, Professor of Digital Economy, University of Surrey**

Annabelle opened her statement with emphasising the need for digital skills to be approached from a holistic and all-around perspective. She highlighted that as the issues of lack of skills and lack of education were all-encompassing and the solution had to mirror this. She argued that there had to be a review of what the definition of digital skills was, as we have to be careful that it isn't simply reduced to coding.

She argued the government has to ensure that there was an open dialogue to having skills not be lost and not focusing on the details of technology. She emphasised that although the world was increasingly becoming digitised, we were all still human and needed to maintain our own personal touch to the work we do, particularly in the humanities. She stated that the focus on digitisation could easily mean that people would be left behind and questioned how we could work with government to ensure the space was inclusive for all ages, backgrounds and skill levels.

She concluded that though digital skills are vital and it was right of the government to be focused on this, we couldn't forget the importance of other fields and sectors in society. She stated that the increased spotlight on STEM in school had meant that many soft skill subjects such as art, music and sport had been overlooked or abandoned. She warned that in moving the debate forward, contributors had to look at how those subjects could be enhanced by technology and not become forgotten.

#### **Professor Allison Littlejohn, Director of UCL Knowledge Lab, IOE, UCL**

Allison opened her speech by congratulating the government for setting up the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, stating it was the right place to be having conversations about digital skills and their place in society. She stated that having a dedicated department meant that a rounded approach could be taken, which would yield much more productive policies.

She focused on the impact that a lack of digital skills has not just on disadvantaged individuals but on the average person, including those with university degrees or in the workforce. She highlighted how questions on AI focused on how people could best use the

technology to be more efficient at work, however, the majority of people do not even know what to ask an AI system. She stated that this issue would continue to proliferate as technology continued to improve and expand unless people had access to ongoing educational support.

She concluded that the problem was not unsolvable, and that training and education were just one part of the solution. She called for collaboration across departments and industry to conduct thorough reviews into how people interacted with technology at work and how they could be supported continuously throughout their career.

## Questions and Answers

In the Q&A session Lord Goddard asked what the panel thought about providing skills training for elderly people who already struggled with technology before AI. He also mentioned the clear absence of elderly people from the discussion of digital skills.

Allison said that the question was super important and very much aligned with the idea of a holistic approach and that a large segment of the population did fall into this category. She said that the conversation had to include elderly people and that lifelong learning needed to extend beyond just career work but had to prepare people for interactions with technology at any age and in different situations, particularly as digital fraud cases have been increasing by targeting elderly people.

Virtual attendees commented in the chat function that people who are already behind feel as if they will never catch up.

Simon replied that we must ensure technology works for people and does not hinder or harm them. He noted that we all use AI in our lives already, almost on autopilot and that we needed to help people transition to see it as a co-pilot in our lives.

A virtual attendee asked about the accessibility issues that people face with digital skills as many services such as council services, banks, etc are no longer in person affairs, but rather are conducted online for the majority of their services.

The Good Things Foundation talked about the lack of digital infrastructure in several areas of the country and how this was something that proved that the current ways of thinking about digital skills were totally out of line with the reality of the population. She argued that this needed to be rectified first before the conversation could truly be inclusive.

The Chair thanked all in-person, virtual attendees and guest speakers for giving their time and sharing their insight and ended the meeting.