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### **Digital skills should be core subjects, says report** By Judith Burns

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#### **Children should be taught "digital literacy" as a core skill alongside maths and English, a [report by a House of Lords committee](#) says.**

Computer technology brings "huge opportunities for the UK, but also significant risks", the Lords Digital Skills Committee warns. The internet should be viewed as a utility service, alongside water and electricity, it says. But without action, the UK may fall behind in the new digital era.

#### **'Ambitious approach'**

The reports says:

- No child should leave school without basic digital literacy
- Universities should ensure all graduates are "digitally competent"
- Apprenticeships should have a greater emphasis on digital skills

The committee calls for action to give teachers in England the confidence and skills to deliver the new computing curriculum, otherwise "inconsistent teacher training" risks letting pupils down. In particular, a "paucity" of women in digital careers and in science, technology, engineering and mathematics generally risks holding back UK competitiveness, the report says. "Girls have to be engaged earlier and across all education levels" and the perception of these jobs as "male-oriented" must be addressed, it adds.

The report says 35% of current jobs in the UK could be automated within 20 years. It urges an ambitious approach to secure the UK's digital economy, with the government acting as the "conductor of the orchestra", focusing on business and education. "We are at a tipping point," it says. "Digital businesses can locate anywhere in the world, and if we fail to provide the right conditions for them to flourish in the

UK, we will become a branch economy, much less prosperous and influential than we could be."

A digital divide persists in the UK, with some six million citizens never having used the internet and 9.5 million lacking adequate digital skills, partly because they have been "poorly served at school", the report warns.

In particular, it says, a shortage of medium and high-level digital skills "needs immediate attention" if the UK is to remain globally competitive. It urges action at all levels of the "talent pipeline - primary, secondary, further and higher education".

### **'Wake-up call'**

Baroness Morgan of Huyton, who chairs the committee, called the report a "wake-up call" to whomever forms the next government. Its recommendations would entail a "radical rethink" of education for people of all ages, said Lady Morgan, the former chairwoman of Ofsted. She said: "From an early age, we need to give digital literacy as much importance as numeracy and literacy.

"While we welcome the introduction of the computing curriculum, we are concerned about the ability of teachers to deliver it - with more than half of our IT teachers not having a post-A-level qualification relevant to IT.

"At the higher education level, there is an urgent need for industry input, so that graduates are learning job-relevant digital skills."

Lady Morgan also said it was unacceptable that some urban areas still lacked mobile or broadband coverage.

### **'Options limited'**

Valerie Thompson, chief executive of the e-Learning Foundation, particularly welcomed the report's emphasis on the need to ensure all children had access to the internet.

"Digital skills are an enabler across the curriculum, but there are real issues of access for poorer children," she said. Too many families did not have the internet at home, said Ms Thompson. "And if your mum

and dad are not comfortable with the internet, the options for you to be a comfortable internet user when you leave school are limited."

Ms Thompson said schools needed more resources for computers and broadband to allow students online access for every subject.

A Department for Education spokeswoman said it was vital to ensure young people had the skills and knowledge to "secure jobs in our country's burgeoning tech industry". She said: "To achieve that, we have redesigned our national curriculum to be the world leader in computing, meaning young people in England will start learning the basics of coding from age five.

"We have also provided £3.6m to make sure teachers have the confidence and knowledge to teach this new curriculum and are engaging leading technology companies to support schools in delivering it."

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