

Becta Blocker

This report analyses BECTA's procurement frameworks and concludes that they have placed school ICT in the hands of only a few of the biggest suppliers and that this is now acting to the detriment of school computing.

ICT has been part of schools for the past thirty years. During this time the number of computers per pupil has risen from vanishingly small to 1:3.9 and is set rise to 1:1 in the near future. School administration, an early adopter of technology is now highly dependent on computing facilities and all schools have some kind of management information software (MIS). Classroom computing is dominated by Research Machines plc (RM) and administration technology is similarly dominated by Capita plc. ICT expenditure and ICT-related energy consumption naturally has increased massively. Energy consumption, in particular, now annually represents approximately 25% of the hardware capital cost. Sustainability

The Government is concerned that schools make good use of these expensive facilities. School financial administrators are for their part starting to look warily at their energy costs and many are questioning whether their ICT represents good value or, is sustainable. By way of illustrating their concern, next month's Education Executive (a magazine that is aimed entirely at school financial administrators) dedicates most of the issue to the new greener ICT options as well as the raft of new low cost technologies available to schools. Early Diversity

The ICT procurement framework for schools was introduced with the best of intentions. Becta, a Government quango, sought to bring structure to the school ICT sector. Ten years ago schools supported a huge diversity of ICT suppliers and equipment, some very small, and many were startups that later failed. Others grew into large, publicly traded corporations. This state of affairs reflected the rapidly evolving market building on the personal computer revolution rather than the traditional inflexible top-down corporate IT that still dominated the business sector. This period was one of unprecedented creativity in the writing of educational software but its very diversity threatened the development plans for ICT in the public sector. Rationalisation

Thus the 'one man band' was officially deprecated in favour of stable, large organisations and this was accompanied by a signing of a memorandum of understanding between Microsoft and the newly elected Labour government. The effect was to monopolise school's ICT provision, both in terms of equipment and software, around Microsoft Windows. Home grown companies such as Acorn computers hitherto very successful finally ceded to Windows computers and the small suppliers were replaced by major vendors such as Ramesys, Capita, RM, Viglen and Akhter. The upgrade cycle

The major school vendors who formed the coterie of approved suppliers to the procurement framework in turn bought from even bigger vendors such as Microsoft and Intel. In return they benefited directly from 'discounted' education licences for software and the current school business model was created.

Schools at that time did not have devolved budgets so even if they wanted they were tied to the directives of their Local Authorities (LA). The LAs were tied to approved suppliers, and the latter, in turn were tied to the vast near monopolies from whom they bought their discounted operating systems and office software.

Therefore all were tied to upgrade cycles and lock-in strategies common in the industrial sector. The rest is as we say 'history'. Schools were tied to one model (as were most businesses it must be said) and to a closed list of BECTA-approved vendors who were also tied to the same model. Unintended consequences

The events described had the effect of introducing extreme conservatism in the education sector. This had an important consequence. The ability to adapt to change was severely curtailed and development was placed under the control of distant third parties. At first this did not appear obvious nor did it seem a problem.

Schools abandoned Apple and Acorn computers and switched to Windows. Windows 95 had been a great success and schools started out in earnest with Windows 98/NT and MS Office. They continued through Windows 2000/ME and then to Windows XP. Each incarnation of operating system required better computers, costlier software and used more and more power. In times of plenty this was largely ignored especially as money was poured into ICT education. In a previous article we outlined the enormous scale of the spending and pointed out that BECTA could not even account for Â£200 million money given to schools through their e-credit (elc) scheme. The building schools for the future project (BSF) was taking shape and the procurement frameworks defined the suppliers. Â£400,000 was the 'entry fee' for bidders, few LAs had the confidence to challenge their legal ties to the procurement frameworks. Times change

There is not so much money to go around in 2008 for software, licences and equipment yet there is a target to provide every child with a computer. Moreover climate change has become a serious issue and carbon reduction targets must be met. Schools for example have been asked to be carbon neutral by 2016. School computing by contrast has doubled its energy consumption every 6 years for the last 30 years and now accounts for the output of an entire power station. Energy costs are rising fast and schools from 2007 have to pay the going commercial rate for power where previously

they had been subsidised. Becta wakes up

Very late in the day, Becta woke up and realised for themselves that the cycle of spending would never stop and advised schools in October 2007 and again in Jan 2008 not to upgrade to Microsoft Vista or MS Office 2007 on the grounds that they contained no feature that schools needed. Additionally, BECTA calculated it would require a renewal of 50% of the schools' existing stock even if it were desirable. They did not add the increased energy consumption to their calculations however. The end of the frameworks?

Too late! Becta's procurement framework mean that alternatives that could meet schools' needs in terms of energy consumption, extending life of equipment, eliminating licence costs and taking advantage of new technologies such as the ultra portable low-cost laptops are not possible.

Why not? Simply because most innovations were coming from a different IT sector namely the Open Source Software (OSS) movement. No OSS supplier appears on the Becta framework. Even the most experienced and durable companies with deep industrial competence do not appear on their list. It is a closed shop.

Meanwhile the incumbent suppliers are utterly tied to the old upgrade model. Schools cannot move forward and they cannot look elsewhere unless they are brave enough to go it alone which understandably few are as this would mean defying Becta and going against their ultra cautious Local Authorities.

At a stroke Becta's rigid process model has paralysed the entire sector and promotes a culture of cronyism amongst 'approved' suppliers. The quango's response has been that of the committed apparatchik. Becta hopes that one of its existing suppliers will embrace Open Source software and business models but all the signs are that this is a forlorn hope. They have even awarded a major Open Source project to one of its 'approved' suppliers without even going out to tender. A company with no history or experience in OSS.

The most likely outcome is that OSS will be used by these vendors to lower their own costs. They will not change their business model. OSS will be employed invisibly in servers and embedded systems and schools will never have the cost benefits passed on to them. The only way that the market can become responsive again is for Becta's moribund procurement frameworks to be abolished.