[GB] Minister Approves New BBC Digital Education Service Subject to Strict Conditions

IRIS 2003-3:1/21

Tony Prosser
University of Bristol Law School

The BBC has recently developed several new digital channels, which require approval to be given by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (see IRIS 2001-9:10, IRIS 2002-9: 10). There has been strong opposition from private broadcasters who have claimed that these channels, publicly funded by the BBC licence fee, represent unfair competition to them and prevent the development of private sector services.

The minister has now approved a further service, the BBC Digital Curriculum, a new digital learning resource aimed at schools, teachers, students and individual learners. Opposition from the private sector was particularly strong in this case, and a total of eighteen conditions have been attached to the approval to try to ensure that the service is distinct from, and complementary to, services provided by the commercial sector. The conditions include requirements to innovate and promote educational and technological experimentation, to maintain high standards of content, quality and editorial integrity and to publish annual plans of content covering the following five years. The BBC is required to report annually on the service's performance and a review of the service will be held after two years to establish whether the BBC is meeting the conditions. This review will include an independent element and public consultation, and will also examine the impact of the BBC Digital Curriculum on the educational software market. The BBC has also promised to spend half of the GBP 90 million budget for content on commissioning services from the private sector.

Despite the conditions, private sector competitors were unhappy with the minister's decision and threatened to seek judicial review; this threat was later withdrawn, although a possible complaint to the European Commission on breach of the state aid rules is still being considered.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport Press Release 4/03, 9 January 2003, `Tessa Jowell Gives Approval to BBC Digital Curriculum'

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026