Wales' £1m Plan To Get More Kids Coding Backed By Microsoft And Others

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A major plan to increase the number of children learning to code to prepare them for the jobs of the future has been unveiled by the Welsh government.

The proposals, which are being backed with £1.3 million of new funding, will be supported by schools, colleges, consortia, universities, industry, charities and businesses, including Microsoft.

As part of the new Cracking the Code initiative, Microsoft will help the Welsh government launch a Minecraft Education pilot programme, which will bring together 10 schools from across the country, as well as educators, to support the development of young people's digital skills through the use of Minecraft: Education Edition Code Builder.

There are currently around 300 coding clubs in Wales, located in schools, colleges, libraries and community centres. Sessions normally run for about an hour, with club members following step-by-step projects to create their own games, animations and websites in coding languages such as Scratch, HTML/CSS and Python.

The funding, announced by Education Secretary Kirsty Williams, will be put towards expanding those code clubs and supporting the development of coding skills inside and outside schools. Specifically, the government said it wants to 'raise awareness and highlight the benefits of code clubs to headteachers, teachers, pupils and parents; break down barriers to participation in code clubs; and broker and facilitate coding experiences with business and industry'.

'Code is part of almost everyone's life,' Williams said. 'When we check out social media, access an app or computer, we are using systems created through code. It is an essential building block of our modern world and I want to make sure as many of our young people have knowledge of it as they develop their digital skills.

'Through this £1.3 million of new investment we are aiming to expand the number of code clubs in every area of Wales for learners aged three to 16 so that they can develop their skills, which will be a vital part of thriving in our increasingly digital economy.

'We will work with teachers, the education consortia and others to help us crack the code for all our pupils.'

There are currently around 1.5 million jobs in the UK's digital sector, 400,000 of which involve coding. It is estimated that there will be 100,000 new coding jobs by 2020, as technology such as artificial intelligence and machine learning become commonplace in homes and offices. According to Cathy N Davidson, a professor at Duke University and co-director of the annual MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Competitions, '65% of children entering grade school this year will end up working in careers that haven't even been invented yet'.

To help children develop relevant skills for the future workplace, changes to the Welsh curriculum mean digital skills will now be used through all parts of a pupil's schooling and not just isolated to specific computer science classes.

The Cracking the Code partners are also supporting Wales' push to get more youngsters coding. They include Microsoft, BAFTA, Big Learning Company, BT Barefoot Computing, the Royal Air Force, Sony, Technocamps, Raspberry Pi Foundation/Code Club UK and Computing at School, as well as colleges and universities across the country. More could be added in the future.

James Protheroe, Deputy Headteacher at Darran Park Primary School, in Rhondda, said: 'I'm so excited about the Cracking the Code initiative and the partnership with Microsoft. Combining coding and Minecraft is an ingenious way of getting students to develop coding and computational thinking in a really fun way. As my students were already familiar with using Scratch, they found developing code within Codebuilder really easy. I love the progressive nature and the quality examples that are available. They provide a real starting point for young people of all abilities.'

Microsoft's involvement in Cracking the Code builds on its promise earlier this year to make digital skills

available to people across the UK to ensure the country remains one of the global leaders in cloud computing, artificial intelligence and other next-generation technologies.

Microsoft will train 30,000 public servants for free in a range of digital skills; make sure everyone in the UK has access to free; online digital literacy training, launch a Cloud Skills Initiative, which will train 500,000 people in the UK in advanced cloud technology skills by 2020; and recruit an extra 30,000 digital apprentices through its own programme for its network of 25,000 partners in the UK.

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