Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated progress towards a digital society. Within a few months of its arrival in Australia, schools, universities, government services, businesses and families adapted to new ways of working and staying connected. We saw a significant increase in remote working, online businesses and online education. These trends highlight the imperative of a workforce that is proficient in using digital technologies—one that can create new ways of working, learning and interacting. Innovation in using digital technologies is important for Queensland to be nationally and internationally competitive and for our continued economic wellbeing.

Using video conferencing and online learning as part of daily practice in classrooms gives students opportunities to improve their proficiency in digital technology. To offer these opportunities, the Department of Education (the department) and schools need to provide digital technologies and the supporting infrastructure in an efficient and consistent manner across the entire state. They can then embed digital literacy into daily learning practices.

The purpose of this audit brief is to share key facts about how the department is reliably connecting learners and staff of state schools to digital resources and online content. It focuses on:

- student access to the internet and devices (such as computers, laptops, and tablets)
- technology infrastructure that connects schools to the department, to the internet, and to learning and student administration systems
- · required planning and investment to improve internet speeds and digital technologies.

Figure A shows the main facts about the department's technology intended to support digital learning.

Figure A

Key facts on technology to support digital learning



Student access to high-speed internet and devices

- The department's benchmark for internet speed is 25 kilobits per second (kbps) per student. This is well below other states and is 200 times lower than the New South Wales benchmark.
- The department started a two-phase procurement process in July 2020 to increase internet speed in schools, and as part of the second phase it invited offers from suppliers in April 2021.
- Most students report they had access to the internet and a device during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown (the lockdown).
- The percentage of students without access to a device and the internet during the lockdown was higher in lower socio-economic areas.
- 28 per cent of students reported receiving mainly paper-based learning materials during the lockdown.

Technology infrastructure

- The speed of the information technology network that connects the department to schools will not be sufficient in a few years as the demand for internet speed grows.
- The department is considering options for increasing network capacity and performance.
- Of the equipment linking schools to the department's network, 10 per cent is no longer supported by their suppliers. Over the last three years, schools have received \$198 million in information technology funding, which they can use for maintaining their technology.

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Planning and investment for digital learning

- The department understands its technology gaps for digital outcomes. It prepared its digital strategy and implementation plan, which had an estimated cost of \$754 million over six years.
- Given the changes in technology in the market since the plan was developed (February 2020), and the current economic environment, funding was not made available to the department.
- The department has not yet revised the digital strategy to what is achievable using current technologies and within the current funding environment.

Source: Department of Education and Queensland Audit Office.

