

EdTech compliance is not enough: children deserve ethical EdTech business cultures

By Ioanna Noula

“By 2030 the largest company on the internet is going to be an education-based company that we haven’t heard of yet.”

A recent [report by Technavio](#) documents the breath-taking growth of the EdTech industry. Yet despite the promised benefits of EdTech products and services, EdTech has faced mounting criticism, centring on two key areas:

- the impact of [commercialisation](#) and [datafication on education processes](#)
- the quality of their services and their [ability to support education outcomes](#)

Critics and experts agree on the importance of checks and balances in the [procurement process](#) and developing standards through benchmarking mechanisms for the transparency and accountability of EdTech companies. But providing checks and balances is not enough.

In this blog post, I reflect on EdTech corporate ethos and business culture to identify possibilities to improve the quality of EdTech services from design through to impact, short term and long term, whether considered as impacts on individual children, education as a system or the wider society.



Photo by Giovanni Gagliardi on Unsplash

Is disruption the way to go?

Like most tech businesses, many EdTech companies market themselves as [“disruptive”](#) and [“revolutionary”](#). Branding the tech industry as disruptive is a way of communicating innovation-driven growth. It attempts to redefine disruption, getting past the negative connotations and reframing disruption as challenging the norm, confronting the conventional, or getting rid of what’s old and problematic.

EdTech companies operating in innovation ecosystems predominantly driven by a unicorn mindset. They depart from an existing or emerging market need to identify improved technological solutions that will generate profit for shareholders. Although Article 3(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) prescribes that “In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”, entrepreneurs and investors often prioritise innovation and commercial success over children’s best interests.

EdTech corporate purposes: shareholder vs stakeholder value

Society can ill-afford to take risks either with education or children’s vulnerability. Unfortunately, there is no obligation to uphold companies’ publicly stated values and priorities to “do the right thing”. Friedman’s doctrine of the primacy of profit maximisation appears to be the only approach that makes sense for shareholders and directors even with some ethical pushbacks from stakeholders in some high-profile cases. As Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, corporate mission statements are often seen as no more than noble ambitions to serve the public interest or simply marketing exercises.

A growing body of research across the disciplines of law, economics and business explores the equilibrium between corporate purpose, business practice, stakeholder value, shareholder value and sustainable development. This highlights the importance of ethical business cultures and businesses’ commitments to their stated mission to stakeholders, particularly child end-users.

Hodges’ and Steinholtz’s review of business cultures documents how corporate values, employee behaviours and team dynamics affect the performance of businesses, including risky behaviours, non-compliant forms of trading, oligopolistic practices etc. As they put it:

“ethical practice must be a non-negotiable requirement throughout an organisation. Board members and senior managers may think themselves to be ethical, but they may be unaware of what decisions are being made and on what basis. They must be acutely aware of the messages they are sending to their direct reports” (2018: 17)

While EdTech businesses are welcomed as equal and critical interlocutors in policy discussions, their values and corporate cultures defining the features and data processing that power their services should also be scrutinised. Given the intense and rapid deployment of their services and the dependencies they create, careful consideration should also be given to EdTech businesses’ long-term societal impact concerning how they reshape education ecosystems.

Frameworks for assessing risky decisions are important

Examples of such frameworks include Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) and the IEEE Standard for an Age Appropriate Digital Services Framework. So too are mechanisms for evaluating how companies stay true to their mission are helpful tools that will ensure the avoidance of long-term negative impact by minimising systemic vulnerabilities. A regulatory paradigm that relies on compliance, fines, punishment and an overall culture of deterrence will not safeguard children’s rights in the present and future EdTech business ecosystem.

New integrated approaches to sustainability which move away from the mainstream view of sustainability as a “green project” driven by environmental ethics emphasise the paramount ethical dimension of sustainable practice and the need for a holistic values-driven approach to corporate sustainability, stipulating clear links between responsible practice and impact.

“Tick box” CSR is no longer a sufficient argument or tolerable “way out” for companies to prioritise the benefits of being the first mover in the market and apologise “after the fact” (after a problem surfaces). Education stakeholders should be able to rely on EdTech businesses doing the right thing by design rather than retrofitting data protection compliance and children’s rights when regulatory enforcement catches up with them. This requires changes at corporate values and cultures levels.

To demonstrate willingness to change, EdTech businesses should be:

- vigilant about their impact on children, education, children’s life chances and the society at large
- open to communicating emerging risks, being in conversation with the communities they serve
- able to explain their decisions and technologies and offer meaningful pathways to redress.

Dr Ioanna Noula is a childhood and education expert holding a PhD in Citizenship Education (University of Thessaly) and a MA degree in Sociology of Education (UCL Institute of Education). Her research interests include citizenship education, critical pedagogy and digitalisation. She is Head of Research and Development and co-founder of the Internet Commission a non-profit organisation focusing on advancing digital responsibility. She has worked as a teaching and research fellow at the UCL Institute of Education, the University of Leeds and the University of Thessaly. Ioanna has conducted research for award winning projects on global citizenship education and active citizenship in the UCL Institute of Education and LSE’s Department of Media and Communications. Her current research focuses on citizenship, critical literacy and digital responsibility.



Originally posted on <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/> on June 6, 2022 .