

**Regional Minister speech on Unionlearn and the
Union Learning Fund at the Unionlearn Midlands
Regional Conference – 15th November 2007**

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to be with you here today, and I'm also particularly pleased to be joining Sue Townsend, who has long been an inspiration to me.

I am proud to be involved and add my support to the work that Unionlearn has already achieved and will achieve on Trade Union education, and to endorse the support provided to unions as they work to become learning organisations.

Trade Union Education

As I know well from my days as a NUPE/UNISON steward, branch official and then full-time official here in the Midlands, the history of union learning is a long and progressive one – one that I thoroughly benefited from myself and the benefit of which I've sought to bring to others.

Union education is one that has always reacted to changing need, both of individuals and the world around us.

And what a history it is. From the first learning colleges set up in 1868 through the founding of the Workers' Educational Association in the early 1900s, to the TUC training college set up after the second world war.

Even in the politically cold climate of the early 1990s, TUC regions formed partnerships with Training and Enterprise Councils, and promoted union involvement in training at the workplace.

Union learning has been one of the great success stories of the last century.

But times are changing again. And there are new challenges.

New challenge – skills gap

Globalisation is transforming our labour market – and the reality is staggering.

If I can share with you some examples, China now produces:

- half the world's textiles and computers,
- around two thirds of the world's mobile phones and digital cameras,
- four out of every five of the world's photocopiers,
- and, in a single factory, 40% of the world's microwave ovens.

At wages and prices a fraction of ours.

Not only that, but together with India they are turning out 5 million graduates a year.

We can't compete on wages. Nor should we. But we can, and must compete on skills.

In the past, it was possible for millions of people to leave school without qualifications and find low skilled work.

That's just not the case anymore.

Lord Leitch, in his report on skills, predicts that, in 2020, we will need a further 4.6 million employees with

intermediate level skills. 40 per cent of jobs will be filled by graduates, and the number of unskilled workers will have shrunk from around 3 million now to around half a million.

But the improvements we're seeing in school results won't get us there.

As pointed out in the Leitch report, 7 out of 10 of the workforce of 2020 have already completed their compulsory education.

So we need to extend our influence deep into the workplace.

With trade unions providing the essential reach and grasp.

Unionlearn

And that's exactly what Unionlearn is doing.

Back in 1997, there were just a few hundred learning reps across the country, mostly working unofficially in their own free time.

Then, in 1998, the Government showed its commitment to union education by creating the Union Learning Fund and boosting funding for union learning from just £2 million a year to over £18 million a year today.

The effect has been phenomenal. There are now 18,000 learning reps. Together they've helped over 400,000 workers back into education and training – over 150,000 last year alone. All this has been supported by this Government's introduction of a statutory right to time off with pay for union learning reps to undertake training and carry out their duties.

And because they're trusted by their colleagues, they're reaching out to Skills for Life learners too - those workers most in need of new skills and who employers and other training providers find it so difficult to reach.

Union Learning reps lead from the front. Some have themselves experienced and overcome basic learning difficulties. And each course they undertake not only builds up their own confidence and skills, but is an example and an inspiration to others to take the first step back into learning.

They are making a difference to the lives of thousands of working people up and down the country. Helping them to learn new skills and update existing ones – giving them a real stake in the future, including their own. That, to me, is change in the heart as well as in the head.

Unionlearn and the East Midlands

Here in the Midlands alone there are now over 1,900 Union Learning Reps from unions as diverse as

- Unite,
- GMB (General Union),
- Bakers, Food & Allied Workers Union (BFAWU),
- Unison (Public Services Union),
- Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS),
- Union of Construction, Allied Trade and Technicians (UCATT),
- Communication Workers Union (CWU),
- Community and the Britannia Staff Union.

They are working in partnership with private and public employers to open up new learning opportunities for thousands of workers across the Midlands:

- At Gunstones' Bakery in Dronfield, Derbyshire;
- At Fenland Foods in Grantham;

- At BT and the Royal Mail in Stoke;
- At Sainsbury's Ham's Hall distribution centre in Warwickshire.

In my own constituency in Lincoln I've seen the difference they've made at Siemens, opening the Learning Centre and delivering hundreds of learning opportunities for Unite Amicus section and GMB members, from maths and English courses to plumbing.

And at Lincoln City Council a joint union steering group has worked with the Authority to achieve a nationally recognised award for their commitment to a whole organisation approach to Skills for Life.

Last year achievements

This has been a great first year for Unionlearn both in the Midlands and nationally.

3,000 Union Learning Reps have been trained, bringing the total to over 18,000 nationally. And putting you well on track to meet our 2010 target of 22,000 trained and accredited Union Learning Reps, helping over 250,000 workers per year.

Key partnerships have been forged and strengthened.

And new and innovative work has been undertaken:

- to develop an online means to help workers find the most relevant learning opportunities for them;
- to explore the potential of collective learning funds in the workplace,
- and to establish a Unionlearn quality award for colleges and training providers.

You've shown you can put together a wide range of imaginative and innovative projects.

The challenge now for Unionlearn is to take forward the union contribution so that workforce development becomes a permanent feature of the landscape, and an effective partner in Government initiatives.

Skills, education and employment have always been inextricably linked. Trade unions, formed largely by the self-taught, know the tremendous power of education to break down social barriers, unleash potential and enrich our economy. That is my own experience, both personally and in making it happen for others.

Unionlearn is the latest manifestation of this proud tradition.

So I applaud your work and will continue to support you in all that you do.

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