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Dear Mr Humphreys

**Ufi Ltd's response to the proposal for the launch of a BBC digital curriculum service**

Thank you for your invitation to comment on this proposal.

In summary, Ufi's position is fundamentally supportive of the BBC's request for approval from the Secretary of State. Ufi Ltd believes that these new services will make a substantial contribution to educational opportunity for a wide range of pupils in schools. For some 80 years the BBC has provided a valuable educational resource through its free broadcasts, often supplementing them with additional documentation which has generally been provided at cost-recovery prices. Ufi sees the proposed new services as an extension of past practice and as such in line with current provision.

**Specific issues**

A key issue for the Secretary of State to consider will be the likely impact of these new digital curriculum services on the commercial market. Of the three itemised questions asked, the distinctiveness of the proposed service is perhaps the most straightforward to deal with. Whilst other broadcasters have commercial interests in the provision of digital curriculum materials, these are not typically provided through the kind of service that the BBC proposes. Equally the proposed new service represents an addition to existing program content from the BBC itself.

An altogether more difficult question to address is that of the likely impact on the market of a new public service of this type. Here it is unfortunate that in their market assessment *PricewaterhouseCoopers* were unable by their own admission to take into account the views of other commercial providers in this market space. Much of their argumentation in this regard is founded on assumptions concerning the launch of the DfES's own *Curriculum Online* which is in itself as yet an unproven activity. Both they and we are therefore forced to speculate on whether the arrival of digital services of this type would augment or replace existing market provision.

History does not help us significantly here, as it provides mixed evidence about the impact of new media on existing ones. We are told that far from having a negative effect on sales of the printed word, the arrival and widespread adoption of television have been associated with significant increases in book and periodical sales. However it is clear that the arrival of television marked the beginning of the demise of radio as a public entertainment medium, particularly in the area of drama, leaving radio to fill market segments in music and light entertainment as alternatives. From such an historical base it is not easy to predict the likely impact of additional curriculum materials on the commercial market, and the Secretary of State will necessarily be required to exercise judgement rather than pure analysis in arriving at her decision.

### **Ufi Ltd's experience**

Ufi Ltd has direct experience of more than two years' operation in the field of digital service delivery for learning. We feel that that experience can make a significant contribution to clarifying some of the issues surrounding the Secretary of State's decision.

There are three key areas in which Ufi can contribute relevant experience:

1. The views of competitors
2. The scale of national services
3. User acceptance

The following provides brief summaries of that experience. Should the proposal for the launch of the *Digital Curriculum* receive approval, we would be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss our experience and conclusions more fully with colleagues at the BBC.

#### *1 The views of competitors*

Initial reaction to announcements concerning the creation and operation of Ufi Ltd and its **learndirect** centres did not meet with universal approval. Many providers currently serving the needs of adult learners saw **learndirect** as a potential threat. All the time that the service was a concept rather than an actuality this view remained, and it would be true to say that this has still not gone away completely. However, now that **learndirect** centres exist and Ufi has been operational for upwards of two years, we note a significant shift in the views of people who previously saw themselves as competitors, many of whom now recognise their key role as partners in delivering the **learndirect** offer. We assume that once the BBC's new *Digital Curriculum* is established it will be seen to make a valuable contribution to what exists already and that as a consequence some of the anxieties previously felt will recede.

#### *2 The scale of national services*

The BBC's proposals quite reasonably focus very significantly on the cost of content production and do not dwell in detail on the costs of delivery. Ufi Ltd's experience is that delivery is a costly operation and that the services that surround it, particularly those involving a human interface, require considerable resources if they are to be effective. We note that during the proof of concept trials the BBC training personnel were available for schools in far greater proportion than they will be when the service is delivered nationally. We also note from our own experience of operating national call centre services that if these are to be truly useful they will require very

considerable investment. This is not to suggest that the BBC should not make such provision, but rather to indicate that realistic attention must be given to the likely costs of support provision when considering the business plan and operational arrangements for this service.

### 3 User Acceptance

Ufi's experience to date is that there can be considerable variation between supply and demand, not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of specific uptake. The BBC's proof of concept trial identified some areas where materials were likely to be more widely used than others and our advice would be to take heed of this guidance at an early stage so as to protect the scale of investment made. Digital services are at their most effective where they give guaranteed economies of scale. Our experience with **learnirect** suggests that it is almost impossible to over-estimate the views of potential users when designing new e-learning materials and services.

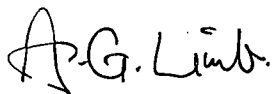
### Conclusion

Ufi Ltd's experience to date suggests that there is likely to be considerable theoretical resistance to the ideas put forward by the BBC for mounting the *Digital Curriculum*. Resistance is likely to be strongest from those who see their present and planned commercial position as potentially threatened. There is little comfort for other e-learning suppliers in the *PricewaterhouseCooper* market assessment, since it has not been possible for their views to be taken into account at an early stage, despite the considerable passage of time since the BBC first mooted its ideas. However, our experience suggests that there is likely to be, as the proof of concept trials indicated, a good level of acceptance when the service becomes a practical entity and in that regard Ufi Ltd wishes to offer its full support for the BBC's application to the Secretary of State.

Ufi Ltd sees considerable potential for partnership with the BBC as it advances its plans for providing national e-learning services for education. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the BBC to ensure the successful delivery of the *Digital Curriculum*.

I attach for information a short summary sheet clarifying the nature and role of Ufi Ltd.

Yours sincerely



Ann Limb  
Chief Executive

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## **Learning - any time, any pace, anywhere**

**learndirect** is a revolutionary new e-learning network, which aims to deliver learning that fits the needs and lifestyles of individuals, whoever they are. The **learndirect** network allows people to learn at locally managed **learndirect** centres or anywhere they can get access to a computer and the internet.

Most of the courses are online so if you don't fancy a return to the classroom or can't fit a regular class into your busy schedule, then this could be the option for you. Learning on the internet means that you can learn at a pace to suit you, in a place to suit you, at any time that you like.

There are over 1700 **learndirect** centres, which are a bit like cyber cafés. Based in places which are easy to get to such as libraries and community centres, the centres offer over 650 **learndirect** courses, covering information and communications technology (ICT), business skills and the basics of reading, writing and numbers.

**ENDS**