

# **The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain**

## **A summary**

### **Foreword by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment**

We stand on the brink of a new age. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow. In our hearts we know we have no choice but to prepare for this new age, in which the key to success will be the education, knowledge and skills of our people.

Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. This is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition. Our first policy paper addressed school standards. Our Green Paper *The Learning Age* (Cm 3790) (The Stationery Office, 1998) sets out for consultation how learning throughout life can build human capital by encouraging creativity, skill and imagination. The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential for our future success.

To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite: we will need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.

Learning enables people to play a full part in their community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents, at work and as citizens.

The Learning Age will be built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society.

Our Green Paper is intended to start a national debate about how we can, together, realise the Learning Age. It is the first time that a comprehensive policy paper has been produced which encompasses the range of possibilities in developing education and skills from post-school to post-retirement. We wish to have your views on the questions raised. In the first crucial decade of a new millennium, the difference between success and failure will be the investment we make, and the seriousness with which we take, the learning opportunities which face us.

**DAVID BLUNKETT**

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### **The challenge**

The country's learning 'scoreboard' shows strengths, opportunities, but also some serious weaknesses. Our great strength is our universities which educate to degree and post-graduate level and set world-class standards.

The opportunities are for many people at work who need, and want, to update their skills. There are 14 million people who are qualified to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 (equivalent to five or more higher grade GCSEs), but not to NVQ level 3 (equivalent to two A levels).

Our weakness lies in our performance in basic and intermediate skills. Almost 30 per cent of young people fail to reach NVQ level 2 by the age of 19. Seven million adults have no formal qualifications at all; 21 million adults have not reached NVQ level 3; and more than one in five of all adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills, putting the UK ninth in a recent international survey of 12 industrial countries.

We need to change attitudes to learning. Our White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (Cm 3681) (The Stationery Office, 1997) is all about getting it right in the home and at school, but we need to carry this forward throughout life. The opportunities will be there for individuals and companies. The Government cannot force anyone to learn but we can help those who want to and we can change the culture to foster a love of learning.

### **Why learning matters**

For *individuals*, learning will help everyone to acquire the new skills and qualifications needed for employment and advancement. Learning will increase our earning power. In addition, it will help older people to stay healthy and active, strengthen families and the wider community, and encourage independence. Opportunities to learn will lead us to greater appreciation of art, music, poetry and literature, and develop our potential as rounded human beings.

For *businesses*, learning will help them to be more successful by adding value and keeping them up-to-date. Learning will develop the human and intellectual capital which is now at the centre of a nation's competitive strength. It will provide the tools to manage industrial and technological change, and help generate the ideas, research and innovation on which economic progress relies. As productivity depends on the whole workforce, we must invest in everyone.

For *the nation*, learning will be the key to a strong economy and an inclusive society. It will offer a way out of dependency and low expectation towards self-reliance and self-confidence. In doing so, it will be at the heart of the Government's welfare reform programme. We must bridge the 'learning divide' which blights so many communities and the widening gap, in terms of employment expectations and income, between those who have benefited from education and training and those who have not.

### **Our key principles**

We propose to build the Learning Age on these principles:

*Investing in learning to benefit everyone by:*

- extra money for higher and further education next year;
- new arrangements for student support; and
- making it easier for people to save for investment in their future careers.

*Lifting barriers to learning by:*

- providing information and advice to people to clear a way through the jungle of jargon and initials;
- giving people the support they need in order to learn - for instance by helping with the cost of childcare, or the cost of learning, or with access if someone has a disability; and
- encouraging people to have higher expectations of themselves and of others.

*Putting people first by:*

- reaching out to where people are, offering full and part-time opportunities for mature students; and
- making learning convenient and welcoming, whether it takes place at work, at home, in shopping centres, schools, libraries, museums or elsewhere.

*Sharing responsibility with employers, employees and the community by:*

- promoting new partnerships between firms, employees and trade unions; and

- advice to businesses, and small firms in particular, so that they address their skills needs through becoming Investors in People.

*Achieving world-class standards and value for money by:*

- better management, target-setting and improved quality assurance; and
- making sure that teaching meets the highest professional standards.

*Working together as the key to success by:*

- all the key bodies locally agreeing a strategy for improving access to learning;
- more coherent planning and advice for young people at 16 and beyond; and
- working with our European partners so that we make the most of European programmes.

## **Action**

We will be judged on our success in helping more people to benefit from world-class education and training. The main steps we are proposing are set out below. The details can be found in *The Learning Age*.

We propose to:

- expand further and higher education to provide for an extra 500,000 young people and adults by 2002;
- make it easier for individuals to learn and firms to meet their needs by creating the University for Industry (Ufi). The Ufi Pathfinder Prospectus will be launched in March 1998. The Ufi will be open for business in late 1999. It will provide a

fast and responsive service in meeting the skill and business needs of employers, employees and of the self-employed, using leading edge technology to make learning available at work, in learning centres, in the community, and at home;

- make information about learning opportunities readily available through our new freephone helpline - Learning Direct - on 0800 100 900;

- set up individual learning accounts to encourage people to save to learn, linked to smart cards to help record their learning, with £150 million investment in the first one million accounts;

- invest in young people so that more continue to study beyond the age of 16. That will include giving all 16 and 17 year-olds in jobs a legal right to undertake education and training to NVQ level 2; introducing National Traineeships as a high quality work-based route to NVQ level 2; enhancing the contribution of the Careers and Youth Services; and expanding Modern Apprenticeships;

- more than double help for basic literacy and numeracy skills among adults through colleges, our New Deal and other help for unemployed people and other routes to involve over 500,000 adults a year;

- widen access to learning in further, higher and adult education, and through the Ufi;

- tackle skills shortages with a new National Task Force supported by a unit in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE);

- look to every Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) for an integrated plan for local workforce development;

- set and publish clear targets for the skills and qualifications we need to achieve

as a nation;

- work with business and trade unions to support and develop skills in the workplace, including improved provision for small firms;
- raise quality and standards across teaching and learning after the age of 16 through our new Training Standards Council, by ensuring implementation of the proposals put forward by Sir Ron Dearing's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, and by inspection in further and adult education; and
- build a qualifications system which is easily understood, values both academic and vocational learning, meets employers' and individuals' needs, and promotes the highest standards.

We are publishing alongside *The Learning Age* our response to the reports by Sir Ron Dearing on higher education and Baroness Kennedy on widening participation in further education. In the coming months we will publish a series of documents on different elements of our vision. They will include the Pathfinder Prospectus for the University for Industry, a policy statement on the Careers Service and the development guide for the initial individual learning accounts.

### **What will the Learning Age look like?**

With the University for Industry and individual learning accounts - working together with the wide range of existing education providers - the Learning Age could look something like this.

Kate and George see a trailer for the Ufl Learning Hotline on TV. It focuses on businesses making more money and people improving their earning power through learning. They phone the 24-hour-a-day Ufl Hotline. It puts them through to the national call centre which provides membership services, initial advice and 'signposting'.

### *Kate's story*

Kate left school with five O levels. She recently returned to full-time work in a supermarket after her younger child started school. But she feels there is little chance of advancing.

When she calls 0800 100 900, the Careers Service adviser tells Kate about *What Learning?*, the 'taster' series on the new digital television Learning Channel.

The careers adviser sets up the Learning Account and Learning Smartcard and enrolls Kate on an IT skills course - all in the comfort of her own home. Kate finds that she can do her course partly on her children's computer with its on-line access and partly by going to classes on Saturday afternoons. These classes are held at the local Ufl centre run by the further education college in the local library. She can also drop in at the Ufl centre at any time if she needs advice or just wants to talk things over with other learners.

Kate tells her manager about her plans. He agrees to contribute to her Learning Account if she includes spreadsheet training in her course. He also says that Kate can use the usual Tuesday morning staff training session to develop her IT skills. He asks the Ufl centre to broker a tailored training package to help his accounts office team operate their recently upgraded IT system.

### *George's story*

George runs a catering and banqueting firm. He depends on a range of suppliers for everything from food and napkins to catering staff and DJs. This is his main problem. Although he runs a tight ship and is an Investor in People, he has problems over quality of products and failure to meet deadlines.

His Ufl adviser points him in the direction of *Chain Reaction*, a website with case studies of companies which have built quality into their supply chain by requiring high quality standards of suppliers.

George backs up his planning with a *Chain Reaction* CD-ROM produced by the National Training Organisation for his sector. He organises some joint courses on Total Quality Management and Just in Time principles with some of his regular suppliers. Within two months, George is ready to set quality standards and demand that suppliers keep to them.

Five years later .....

Kate's supermarket has funded her to take NVQs in management and financial management. She has been promoted. She uses the 'learning room' at work to upgrade her skills and has persuaded her husband to enrol on a French course at the local college.

George had a tough time with the suppliers in the first few months. However he kept going, and found an electronic 'pen pal' in a similar business based in Aberdeen through his Internet links who gave him advice. Within two years, targets had been met, and all of his suppliers were on their way to Investor in People status. Expansion was slow and controlled but within five years profits had doubled, and he was employing 20 people.

### **Telling us what you think**

We want to hear your views on the plans in this leaflet and would be very grateful if you could spare the time to complete this form and return it to us by 24 July 1998. Please write your comments in the space provided or tick the appropriate boxes. If you need more space, please continue your comments on a separate piece of paper, showing which question(s) you are answering. When you have completed the

questions, tear off this section and post it to: *Lifelong Learning Freepost, MR8192, Manchester, M1 9AZ (no stamp needed).*

If you would like more copies of this leaflet or more information, please call 0345 47 47 47. If you would like to buy a copy of *The Learning Age*, you can order it from The Stationery Office (tel: 0171 873 9090).

Responses to the consultation will be made available to the public on request, unless you indicate that you wish your response to remain confidential.

Q1 Do you wish your comments to remain confidential? Yes No

Q2. Do you agree with our vision of a learning society?

Q3. How can we make sure that the University for Industry and individual learning accounts are successful?

Q4. How can we make sure that many more people of all ages and in all situations sign up for further and higher education?

Q5. How should we meet the needs of people with disabilities or learning difficulties?

Q6. How can we help people to learn within their families and communities?

Q7. What more can be done to open up opportunities for everyone to learn at work?

Q8. What else can we do to ensure improved quality and standards in education and training (in colleges, universities, evening classes and elsewhere)?

Q9. What can we do to make sure that people understand how qualifications work and want to gain them?

Q10. What can be done to help employers and individual people to invest in education and training?

Q11. How can the Government and all the other interested organisations work together to plan and deliver education and training?

The following few questions will allow us to have a better understanding of the types of people who are responding.

Q12 Are you                      male?                      female?

Q13 Are you a parent? guardian? neither?

Q14 If you are a parent or guardian with a child/children in education or training, please show the institution(s) involved:

pre-school/nursery primary secondary

further education/6th form college university/higher education college

government-funded training scheme other (please state .....)

Q15 If you have a job or work for yourself, what do you do?

Please fill in your name and address if you would like us to let you know we have received your comments (you may keep back this information if you wish):

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms/Dr/Other (please state) .....

First name ..... Family name .....

Address .....  
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Postcode .....

Thank you very much for taking time to give us your views.

