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Supplement

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Why it's never too late to learn



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THE UK ECONOMY IS
DOING VERY NICELY,
THANK YOU

AGREE

DISAGREE

Still, everything can be improved upon. And there is one long standing problem area which, if not remedied, could threaten the stability and further growth of our economy.

Namely, productivity.

Granted, the UK is narrowing the productivity gap with competitors such as France and the USA, but more action has to be taken.

Action which will make a difference.

Influencing education.

We need to ensure the right decisions are being made about UK education and about skills supply. Not based simply on the experience and knowledge of those in education, or of young people, or parents, or the media – but on what the country and our economy need for a more prosperous, more modern and more socially mobile society.

That's why the demand-side needs of employers in the private sector and in public services should form a starting-point for education and training.

That's why we need Sector Skills Agreements.

What are Sector Skills Agreements?

They're about everyone concerned playing their part more effectively for the greater good. Sector Skills Agreements are partnerships between the demand side (employers) and the supply side (qualification developers, schools, colleges, training providers, universities and the bodies that fund them) ensuring the required numbers of people are skilled in the right ways to meet the needs of UK businesses and public services.

The Skills for Business network.

By mid-2005, this network will consist of 25 Sector Skills Councils covering 85% of the UK workforce. And these independent, employer-led, UK-wide bodies will champion the Sector Skills Agreements.

Put simply, Sector Skills Councils find out what employers need now and will need in the future, assess what resource is already out there, and then create comprehensive deals with supply-side partners to fill skills gaps and shortages.

Employing employers.

For the first time, Sector Skills Councils have given employers real influence in the way skills are developed and delivered throughout the UK. By bringing employers and education together, Sector Skills Councils aim to improve numeracy, literacy, craft, scientific and technological skills as well as the highest levels of management and leadership skills.

Change in the air. Change on the ground.

Sector Skills Councils are already working in partnership with relevant bodies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The momentum and enthusiasm exist to create and deliver fundamental change. Strong partnerships between employers and educational and training bodies are currently being forged to tackle skills gaps and shortages.

Four pathfinding Sector Skills Councils are in the process of drawing up their Sector Skills Agreements: e-skills UK, SEMTA (the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance), ConstructionSkills and Skillset (Audio Visual Industries).

Through its SSAs, SEMTA has identified what skills will be needed in order to stay ahead of global competition and continuing technological change. One example is the need for managers to boost their entrepreneurial and project management skills. This will impact directly on their own productivity and, consequently, that of their business.

Success is a door marked push.

It is already happening. The future is in motion. It is all around us, and it's all centred around Sector Skills Councils. They are at the heart of the nationwide drive to improve the UK's productivity. And with good reason. For example, if we could match France's productivity, we would be able to double our spending on education and skills, or even take a four-day week.

Now, wouldn't that do very nicely?

To find out more, visit www.skillsforbusiness.org.uk or employers can call now on 08000 644 044.

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That's skill, that is! I remember kids saying that all the time at school. Quite often they were in awe of someone's prowess (quite often their own) with a hacky sack or skipping rope. But it was said of all sorts of things – a new haircut, art homework, the way a friend had sewn old CND badges on to their new shoes. Whatever that "skill" happened to be, it was admired; the time, effort and, in some cases, considerable sums spent on getting it right appealed and were approved. So where did it all go wrong? At what point, and why, did I start hiding from friends that I stayed after school for extra woodwork classes? And why do so many adults feel too ashamed or scared to take up training in or outside of work?

There's no doubt in this supplement that we would all be better off if we overcame such barriers: more skill, more productivity, better economy, bigger pay. But the government hasn't helped inspire us to rise to the challenge. It has been so preoccupied with university education – aiming to make it available to as many as possible – that it has managed to devalue both universities and their (equally if not more useful) alternatives. This has done nothing to advance either the economy or equality, leaving many people feeling it's university or nothing.

What we urgently need is due respect for the type of education that satisfies both students and businesses more than a degree in medieval English (though, I admit, someone has to do it). Maybe, just maybe, businesses might not protest so much about paying more tax for education that served them better, which might just mean we wouldn't need to charge people to learn, which might just mean that more people would do so. Now that would be skill.

Emily Mann

This supplement can be downloaded from the NS website at www.newstatesman.com/supplements

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A national scandal

If training the workforce is purely about economic gain, then we should target the young and write off unskilled adults to lousy jobs or benefits. **RICHARD REEVES** asks if we're prepared to pay for skills and social justice

On the face of it, we should be the most highly skilled nation in the world. Just look at the task forces, institutions and initiatives dedicated to skills. Skills have their very own alliance, passport, minister, new deal and strategy. Britain is blessed with a Skills for Business network, Sector Skills Councils (which have made Sector Skills Agreements), FRESAs (Frameworks for Regional Employment and Skills Action), Learndirect and the Learning and Skills Council, to name but a few.

The multiplication of agencies and schemes indicates, in fact, that the UK is failing – and has long been failing – to equip large swathes of the population with the skills necessary to thrive in the labour market. While 28 per cent of the UK workforce is qualified to an intermediate skill level (in other words, apprenticeship, skilled craft and technician level), the equivalent proportions in France and Germany are 51 per cent and 65 per cent.

This is not an area of policy, however, that excites much interest. The Houses of Parliament have steamed over the funding of higher education. Who can remember the last debate about skills? Or the last front-page headline containing the word? Perhaps this is because the problems are so long-standing or so apparently intractable. Maybe it is because the children of journalists are not generally struggling with their NVQ level 2 in plumbing. For whatever reason, in political terms, skills are not sexy. It is a sad truth that members of the parliamentary lobby are more likely to write about the minister for bird sanctuaries than the minister for skills.

Anybody who has been in the skills field for more than a few years must feel like they are trapped in the film *Groundhog Day*. The problem of a large minority of the UK's workforce being without adequate skills has been diagnosed repeatedly over the past few decades, and the number of reports on the skills gap could fill the library of a further education college. But the repetition should not dull the reality. It is a national scandal that so many adults begin their careers utterly unprepared and unskilled, and are thereby consigned to a low-income, insecure and unsatisfying working life. And while there have been some important steps in the right direction during the first two Labour terms – Gordon Brown has dubbed the skills deficit "Britain's Achilles heel" – the government has yet to rise fully to the skills challenge. ▶

► Nick Isles, an expert on skills at the Work Foundation, says: “The UK is finally seeing a coherent system of lifelong learning emerge.” But he cautions that unless employers, including high-performance businesses, sign up to the skills agenda, much of the government’s efforts will be in vain.

To make progress, some hard truths need to be accepted. The first is that the private sector is not underinvesting in training; our national spend compares favourably to our competitors. And, by and large, employers know what they are doing – workers receiving employer-funded training see a 12 per cent increase in wages. As Vidhya Alakeson, the author of a new report from the Social Market Foundation (*Too Much, Too Late: life chances and spending on education and training*), points out: “The returns from privately provided training tend to be high because firms select the most able workers to be trained.”

The term “market failure” is bandied about far too loosely. The market is generally doing what markets are supposed to do – allocating capital in a manner likely to derive the greatest economic returns. A company is unlikely to invest lots of money training somebody in IT skills if that person has no basic numeracy or literacy – it will train the better-educated worker instead. This is not to say that employers could not do a better job; there is some evidence that if firms spent more on intermediate skills, they would reap productivity rewards. It is important, however, to be clear about where responsibility properly lies. That the unskilled are neglected by their employers is a huge issue, in terms of social justice and the life chances of those individuals. But in terms of a straight cost-benefit equation, businesses are making the right choices.

A second truth to face up to is the sharp policy divide between unskilled adults already in the labour market and young people who are preparing for working life. The “stock” of

There is a sharp policy divide between unskilled adults already in the labour market and young people who are preparing for working life

unskilled adults is the result of the failures of the past; the “flow” of unskilled adults into work is a failure of the present. The government is currently focused on reducing the flow; Gordon Brown, in his recent Budget, allocated funds to support young people to stay in full-time education or training, and for a pilot of work-based training for 16- and 17-year-olds in eight areas. In his statement to the Commons, the Chancellor explicitly linked his investment in skills to the global economic challenge: “With China and India producing four million graduates a year, I am convinced that Britain cannot afford to waste the ability of any young person, discard the future of any teenager, or leave untapped the talents of any adult.”

Stirring stuff, but in some respects misleading. Getting

people to NVQ level 2 will hardly equip them to compete with graduate Chinese engineers or Indian computer programmers – and in any case, the UK’s universities are flooded. There are increasing numbers of graduates doing jobs that do not require graduate skills. Our problems are not at this end of the market; or at least, if they are, they are the result of over-training, not under-training. And Brown elides the two issues of flow and stock, when in economic terms they are chalk and cheese. Britain can afford to “leave untapped the talent” of an adult if their basic skills are so low that huge investment is required to achieve modest improvements in productivity.

As Alakeson’s paper shows, the earlier an investment in skills is made, the better the return – and the greater the chance of progression to a higher level of attainment. Economic studies of skills programmes for the older long-term unemployed show returns lower than the initial spend. Given that the government spends only £7bn on all programmes to support skills, there is a strong economic case for support targeted at the young. After adolescence, the hill that has to be climbed gets much steeper.

Two key lessons need to be learnt for youth training. The first is that workplace-related training is far better than classroom learning: a message that does appear finally to have sunk in on Whitehall. Employer Training Pilots – expanded by Brown in the Budget – fund employers to train directly on the job, and Apprenticeships requires workplace-based learning. The Skills Passport is designed to capture informal learning that takes place in the workplace, which is especially important in small firms.

The second, more challenging lesson is that low-level vocational qualifications are next to useless on their own. The government’s target is to get 85 per cent of all young adults to NVQ level 2 by 2010 – the current level is only a few percentage points below the goal. But possession of a vocational qualification at this level does not appear to enhance job chances or wages. GCSEs have a better record. The truth is that NVQ level 3 is where the gains really kick in, and a person is much less likely to progress from level 2 to level 3 once they have embarked on their working life. This suggests that the government is still aiming too low.

As far as adults are concerned, there are even tougher calls to make. It is likely that the economic benefits of investing taxpayers’ money in a mature, unskilled person will be zero. Alakeson concludes her survey of “second chance” learning schemes for adults on a gloomy note: “While it is difficult to identify exactly what percentage of the £7bn spent on the low-skilled is wasted because individual programme options are not accounted for separately, the figure most likely runs into billions. Many programmes could be stopped overnight with few repercussions.”

What does appear to work is work. The subsidised employment stream of the New Deal shows much greater impact than the learning option. And “intermediate labour markets” such as the Wise Group in Scotland, which train people as they work, show positive results in launching unemployed people of all ages into the mainstream labour market. But these



Left on the production line: the economic benefits of investing taxpayers' money in a mature, unskilled person are likely to be zero

schemes are expensive, and it is not clear that they represent “value for money”, especially for older beneficiaries. This is an area where new Labour’s insistence that economic efficiency and social justice always go in hand is palpably false. If the UK really does face a growing challenge from Asia, then arguably every spare penny should go on investing in children and young people; the “stock” of unskilled adults should be written off to lousy work or paltry benefits.

Yet there is another case for supporting those adults who were failed by the education system, for giving them a second chance: social justice. As Ivan Lewis, the minister for skills, says (see page xii), this is a question not just of productivity or competitiveness, but also of “the dignity of self-improvement”. The spectacle of millions of adults being stuck outside the mainstream labour market, in a low-pay, no-pay vicious circle, offends against decency. The difficult political question is whether we are prepared to pay not merely for skills, but for social justice.

It must also be recognised that some of the skills required in the modern labour market are hard to teach and learn. Certain attributes such as interpersonal skills, team-working abilities

and customer service – what businesses call “soft skills” – are important in a growing number of jobs. Asked what was the secret to the great service in his hotels, Rocco Forte replied: “Hiring nice people.” But there’s no NVQ in niceness, no certificate for confidence. And there is some evidence that jobs in the service sector are going to middle-class students rather than the unskilled, in part because of the disparity in these skills. In the drive to equip people with tangible skills – vital though these are – we must be careful not to neglect the ones that, while harder to measure, increasingly count.

A final challenge is the need for private sector organisations to help shape the provision of skills. Historically, employers have simultaneously derided government for sending them such shoddily educated workers and turned their noses up at state-provided training schemes. There have been some important recent moves here. The establishment of the Sector Skills Councils holds out the prospect of fitting skills to the needs of particular sectors; most of the councils have managed to land some big-hitters from the relevant bit of the private sector. “It looks as though the historic dominance of supply over demand in training is being addressed,” says Isles. “The key is to get employers on board, which will in turn ensure that they are getting the skills they need.”

The provision of skills is an area where an effective partnership is a necessity rather than a politician’s cliché. The recent closure of the NHS University – brainchild of the then health secretary Alan Milburn – demonstrates that setting up entirely new centres of learning within an organisation is unlikely to be cost-effective. And the successful entry of unions in this market suggests that there is promise in institutions brokering and combining the needs and demands of workers and employers. A new trade union academy for skills is on the way.

But ultimately the labels of qualifications, structures of funding and bureaucracies of inspection mean nothing. At the heart of the matter is quality. The further education sector, the Cinderella of the education and training world, is a case in point. (Inevitably, it is currently being reviewed.) High-quality teaching in modern, well-equipped facilities is what is required. And this applies across the piece: no amount of re-labelling will help unless the substance of the training improves. Employers will quickly sniff old wine in new bottles.

The prospect for a step change in Britain’s skills deficit is real. But the risks are equally so. If vocational training remains the second choice of both teachers and learners, if the government does not address the division between assessment systems for academic and vocational learning, if employers don’t buy in, then the current round of institution-building, reviewing and funding will simply be added to the bulging history of how the elite failed the luckless – yet another rearranging of deckchairs on the *Titanic*. We must all do better.

ns interview **mike campbell**

His quango is no bureaucracy. It's lean and mean, and determined to get businesses the people they need

by **HEATHER WELFORD**



The skills gap has “bedevilled our economy for years”, says Mike Campbell, director of strategy and research at the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). “Employers and training and education providers have been shouting across fences at each other for ages.”

The SSDA aims to end all that, by achieving first dialogue, then action. According to Campbell, “the employers would say they can’t get staff trained in the right way, to the right level, and in fact, in recent years, the providers’ main short-term interest has been served by getting students and trainees enrolled on courses. The truth is, they haven’t needed to prioritise the employability of the results.”

The need for employers and providers to ensure that skills gaps are matched by the right number of appropriately skilled employees was the force behind the establishment in spring 2002 of the SSDA, a company limited by guarantee and a non-departmental public body. Campbell explains the organisation’s remit: “We have had to develop a new network of Sector Skills Councils [SSCs] which, together with us at the SSDA, form Skills for Business. The aim is for business and the public sector to get the skills they need, with each SSC being essentially demand-led, and steered by the employers.”

The individual Sector Skills Councils represent slices of the economy, each covering a minimum of half a million people. “Anything smaller than this is not realistic,” says Campbell. The sectors that already have their own skills councils include construction, energy and utility, financial services, IT and telecoms, education, science and engineering, health, plus 15 others, making 22 out of a prospective 25 – “quite an achievement”, claims Campbell, in three years.

Each Sector Skills Council has started as a result of groups of employers coming together to “express an interest” in transforming themselves into a one-voiced council and making a bid to the SSDA. Once accepted, the fledgling council is given up to £200,000 to build a plan and establish processes, including a board, that enable it to bring a proposal to the SSDA.

Campbell uses the Sector Skills Council for the audiovisual

industries as an example of the process. Skillset, as it has called itself, represents for the first time as a unified whole the fragmented world of broadcast, film, video, interactive media and photo-imaging. Alongside the big names, the industry has many small companies driven by creative vision but lacking technically qualified personnel and people with an understanding of how the business side operates. “One of the main issues with this sector is simply skills – recruiting people with the appropriate skills and then retaining them in a sector where, despite expectations, the average wages are not that high,” says Campbell.

While many people are leaving education with some sort of media studies qualification and trying desperately to get into TV or film and earn a mint, the employers are searching equally desperately for some practical knowledge and hard-nosed business sense. As Channel 4’s Stuart Cosgrove said at the

“If we trained up just another
1 per cent of the current workforce,
we would add £8bn to GDP”

launch of Skills for Media, now named Skillset Careers, the jobs advice wing of Skillset, “the so-called ‘creative industries’ are a hugely popular career choice for many young people. But a lot don’t even know how the industry works.”

Campbell explains that, so far, each sector seems to take about nine to 12 months to sort itself out, with a board mainly of volunteer big-hitters, and an executive; each council has to ensure representation from the trade unions, professional organisations, and trainers and providers. It is then given the task of setting training standards, discovering and promoting centres of excellence in colleges, and working with training providers to deliver the required skills.

“The core business of a Sector Skills Council is to firmly nail down the action to meet skills needs,” says Campbell, whose first jobs were in the hotel and catering trade. He then became

involved in research economics, founding the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University and developing the institute's consultancy in studying labour markets.

"The SSDA also aims to drive up the demand for skills in the workforce," he says. "We want to raise employers' expectations in people, and to encourage them to invest in their workforce – it's making the business case for skills, in fact."

Campbell has a nice line in comparative statistics, which he rattles off with ease. "If we trained up just another 1 per cent of the current workforce – and by "training up" I mean undertaking any form of education or training while in work – we would add £8bn to GDP. We're less productive as a country than every EU member bar Greece, Portugal and Spain. Research shows this is in part to do with our comparative lack of skills."

He wants graduate numbers to continue rising. "Even with a fivefold increase in the number of graduates in the UK over the past 30 years, the wage premium for graduates remains – it's the highest of all the OECD countries. We still need huge numbers of graduates." He urges businesses to look at what's happening on an international level. "Obviously, the UK can no longer compete on price alone with the Far East and China. We have to sell skills, and knowledge, and quality."

Commenting on Chancellor Gordon Brown's most recent Budget, Campbell welcomes the way it "highlights the importance of skills to the challenges we face". And that's not all: "The Leitch review – due to report in spring next year – will examine the future needs and priorities for the UK economy up to the year 2020. A white paper just published sets out reforms to put employers' needs centre stage. The new National Employer Training Programme will play a key role in all this, and Skills for Business looks forward to working with our partners to make the programme a success."

Despite the SSDA's programme being on track, there have been headaches in getting some sectors to stay talking to each other. The Sector Skills Council for education – known, not altogether snappily, as the Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council – has had "huge birth pains", according to Campbell. Its chief executive, David Hunter, wrote about his "frustrating" experience in the *Guardian* last year, pointing out that parts of this sector are far more used to being in competition with each other. Higher education, further education, work-based learning and so on are more often engaged in a fight for bums on seats to maintain their funding – now they are being asked to work together at a strategic level as employers of a million people.

Campbell bristles at the idea that the SSDA is another expensive, bureaucratic quango. "We are lean and mean," he says. "Given the scale of the agenda, and the importance of the role – and it is essential we get this right – our total budget of £60m is tiny. It's small compared to, say, the Learning and Skills Council. If we want British business to get the skills it needs, it is vital we oil the wheels in this way. We're not a bureaucracy. We are the ones making the bureaucracy responsive to the needs of business."

Good for business, but at whose cost?

Basic skills are expensive to provide to full-timers – and besides, employers don't see them as their responsibility. The answer is to get more out of schools and colleges. By **HILARY STEEDMAN**

Are skills good for business? The body representing employers' interests in the skills area, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), certainly thinks so. In its latest campaign to sell skills to British business, "In Skills we Trust" is "tattooed" on the upper arms of prominent business leaders. "Believe or be left behind" is the message they bring. And indeed, there is plenty of hard evidence that skills and high productivity go hand in hand.

In 2000, a Treasury survey of the UK's productivity performance and the reasons for its lag behind other industrialised countries identified skills as being key to increased productivity in recent years. Comparisons show that the British workforce is less qualified than the workforce in Germany and France. A third of the British workforce has not reached level 2 (5 GCSEs, grade A⁺-C or equivalent) compared to just over a fifth in France and just under a fifth in Germany. Both coun-

Nearly a quarter of British businesses employ people whose capabilities don't match their needs

tries have consistently higher productivity levels (calculated as output per hour worked) than Britain. So does British business still need persuading of the case for skills? And if so, why?

A recent survey carried out for the European Commission found that British businesses do not appear to be investing markedly less in training their employees than businesses in other European countries. But a more worrying finding is the result of the government's own survey of the skills needs of British businesses. The survey, which provides much of the evidence for the government's newly published skills strategy white paper, showed that nearly a quarter of British businesses suffer from skills gaps – that is, gaps between the capabilities that their employees possess and the capabilities that the business needs if it is to survive and prosper. This indicates that,



Extreme measures: a recent advert from the SSDA

even if British business investment in employees' skills is close to the average for Europe, it is still insufficient to ensure that they have the skills needed to face an increasingly competitive global environment.

Whose job is it to ensure that the "skills gap" is reduced and eventually eliminated? Why are businesses not tackling the gap? The answer from the Confederation of British Industry is that basic skills – which constitute a large part of the "skills gap" – are the responsibility of schools and colleges and not of business. The CBI's message is in line with standard economic theory that general, transferable skills such as literacy and numeracy should not be financed by employers who cannot capture the return to that investment. But the third of all adult workers who do not have the recognised standard of literacy and numeracy are no longer at school. If employers are unwilling to subsidise their employees' needs, then the task of finance must fall upon individuals themselves or, failing that, upon government. While there has always been a steady stream of individuals gaining skills and qualifications through study in their own time, self-improvement has never been a sufficiently powerful force to lead to the wholesale improvement in standards needed.

In 2002, the Chancellor announced that government funding would be made available to try to jump-start investment by business and individuals. The high cost of providing such support helps us to understand why employers and employees were reluctant to meet that cost. The Employer Training Pilots aim to spend £290m by the autumn of this year and hope to reach 80,000 employees in 15,000 businesses. The pilots are designed to evaluate whether employers will be encouraged to train employees if they are subsidised for the cost of giving them paid time off work to study, and whether employees are more likely to train if they can take courses during working hours. The proposed spending amounts to £3,600 for each employee – the cost to an employer of releasing a member of staff to improve basic skills and the cost to an employee who has to forgo earnings in order to participate in such courses. These figures help to explain the reluctance of employers and employees to meet the costs when the benefits appeared uncertain.

The high cost of training adults already in employment, many of whom have dependent families, underlines the importance of taking full advantage of the period of initial education and training that all young people are entitled to up to the age of 19. The improvement in workforce quality in Britain – from less than half with level 2 qualifications or higher in 1994 to two-thirds with those levels in 2003 – has resulted almost exclusively from the improved qualification levels of young people as they enter the workforce. But that source of improvement, which resulted from the growth spurt in post-16 participation in full-time education and training between 1988 and 1993, has now disappeared. Participation has stagnated and Britain figures near the bottom of OECD countries on that measure.

The general, transferable skills that are increasingly important to business are costly to provide to full-time employees. If government has to compensate for what are, essentially, the responsibilities of schools and post-16 provision, the cost will be huge. It is with those costs in mind that we need to appreciate the implications of what happens in schools and colleges for workforce quality. The government's latest education white paper explicitly makes this link and recognises the need to prioritise efforts to ensure that all young people achieve recognised literacy and numeracy levels while still in school. The half of British teenagers who do not enrol on A-level courses are promised a set of coherent alternative pathways with planned progression designed to raise overall achievement levels and provide relevant occupational skills.

If these goals are to be achieved, British businesses will need to be involved in all sorts of ways, providing guidance on learning objectives and work experience placements. But this investment of time and energy will directly benefit business in the form of more able employees capable of further learning and development. If these goals can be achieved, it will then be up to British employers to invest, jointly with employees, in the specialised skills needed to compete at world-class levels.

Hilary Steedman is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics



One thing we can all agree on

by **Margaret Salmon**, Chair of the Sector Skills Development Agency

UK employers are persistent in their demand for skilled employees who can contribute to the performance of UK companies quickly.

In fact, research published this month by the Sector Skills Development Agency shows an increasing number of employers think the “education system does not supply ... enough people equipped with the skills they need to start working ...”

Over half of the 13,000 businesses questioned blamed the education system in this way.

But are employers doing all they can to tackle the situation? Over two-thirds in the same research said that developing the skills of their workforce was a major business objective. Yet a third do not provide their employees with any formal training.

Learning and working together

Against this backdrop, it is clear that there is only one way to tackle skills shortages and gaps in a way which is going to quickly impact productivity and improve the UK economy.

Education and businesses must work together.

And the new Sector Skills Agreements aim to do just that.

Currently there are four Agreements which are just about to be signed off. Each is led by a Sector Skills Council – ConstructionSkills, e-skills UK, Skillset (audiovisual industries) and SEMTA (science, engineering and manufacturing).

These Agreements lay out the common objectives, goals and benchmarks for providing education and training in each of the sectors covered. Education providers and employers alike have agreed where the key problem areas and issues are, and have agreed how and when to tackle them.

What makes the Agreements deliverable is the fact they're just that – agreements. Negotiated and signed up to by employers and the organisations which plan and fund education, the Sector Skills Agreements will play a major part in ensuring that the billions of pounds spent on education and training each year result in a more successful and productive workforce. For example, the Learning and Skills Council has a major role to play in ensuring that funding for courses is organised and targeted correctly.

Indeed, the strength of the SSAs lies in the number of partners who have come together to work on the common solutions. For the first time funding and qualifications bodies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Universities UK are working alongside business interest organisations such as the Small Business Council and the CBI. And other relevant

government departments and agencies are also involved, including the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus, and the Regional Development Agencies.

Each of the Agreements which have already been developed are specific enough to tackle precise skills needs, but broad enough to ensure the full gamut of needs will be addressed. Importantly, they are also measurable, so the effectiveness of each can be monitored closely, and necessary changes can be implemented as time progresses.

Exciting projects

Some work and projects are already under way to deal with the skills issues and needs identified in the Agreements.

ConstructionSkills has used the opportunity to boost support from funding and standards bodies for the successful On-Site Assessment and Training Scheme (OSAT) which brings the college to the building site, allowing construction workers to get qualifications on the job.

e-skills UK has brought employers and education providers together to support each other. IT employers have committed to invest £2.4 billion in training workers over the next three years and, in return, education and training providers have made provision for two million people to increase their IT user skills in line with market needs with qualifications such as the new ITQ (IT User Qualification).

SEMTA has been able to begin to tackle very specific sector needs. For instance, in aerospace, 14,900 craft and operator level personnel will be helped to achieve vocational qualifications equivalent to A-level standard.

Skillset has, amongst other work, secured £50 million over the next five years from the UK film industry to help the UK become a centre for film excellence.

Driving change

Over half of business may say that the education system is not helping to provide employees with the right skills for the job. But employers also need to take responsibility for ensuring their needs are met. Those businesses which commit to working together with the education sector and use Sector Skills Agreements to set out common goals and objectives will ensure that the UK's skills crisis is dealt with and productivity is increased.

Many employers are already working with the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) – which drive the development of the SSAs as part of their remit. And as employer-led bodies, the SSCs facilitate progress which is beneficial for both education and employers. It's a formidable task, but one which is set to fundamentally change the way skills are demanded, developed and delivered throughout the UK.



**The Skills for Business network of Sector Skills Councils is growing fast.
Over 80% of the workforce is now covered.**

Employers wanting to find out how the new employer-led approach to skills can benefit them should contact their SSC, call 08000 644 044 or visit www.skillsforbusiness.org.uk.

Name: Asset Skills

SECTOR: Property services, housing, cleaning services and facilities management
Tel: 01392 423399
Fax: 01392 423373
Email: enquiries@assetskills.org
Website: www.assetskills.org

Name: Automotive Skills

SECTOR: The retail motor industry
Tel: 020 7436 6373
Fax: 020 7436 5108
Email: info@automotiveskills.org.uk
Website: www.automotiveskills.org.uk

Name: Central Government

SECTOR: Aspirant SSC for Central Government

Name: Cogent

SECTOR: Chemical, nuclear, oil and gas, petroleum and polymer industries
Tel: 01224 787800
Fax: 01224 787830
Email: info@cogent-ssc.com
Website: www.cogent-ssc.com

Name: ConstructionSkills

SECTOR: Construction
Tel: 01485 577577
Fax: 01485 577503
Email: information.centre@citb.co.uk
Website: www.constructionskills.net

Name: Creative & Cultural Skills

SECTOR: Advertising, crafts, cultural heritage, design, music, performing, literary and visual arts
Tel: 020 7089 5866
Fax: 020 7089 5857
Email: info@ccskills.org.uk
Website: www.ccskills.org.uk

Name: Energy & Utility Skills

SECTOR: Electricity, gas, waste management and water industries
Tel: 0845 077 9922
Fax: 0845 077 9933
Email: enquiries@euskills.co.uk
Website: www.euskills.co.uk

Name: e-skills UK

SECTOR: Information technology, telecommunications and contact centres
Tel: 020 7963 8920
Fax: 020 7592 9138
Email: info@e-skills.com
Website: www.e-skills.com

Name: Financial Services Skills Council

SECTOR: Financial services industry
Tel: 020 7216 7366
Fax: 020 7216 7370
Email: info@fssc.org.uk
Website: www.fssc.org.uk

Name: GoSkills

SECTOR: Passenger transport
Tel: 0121 635 5520
Fax: 0121 635 5521
Email: info@goskills.org
Website: www.goskills.org

Name: Improve Ltd

SECTOR: Food and drink manufacturing and processing
Tel: 0845 644 0448
Fax: 0845 644 0449
Email: info@improveltd.co.uk
Website: www.improveltd.co.uk

Name: Lantra

SECTOR: Environmental and land-based industries
Tel: 0247 669 6996
Fax: 0247 669 6732
Email: connect@lantra.co.uk
Website: www.lantra.co.uk

Name: Lifelong Learning UK

SECTOR: Employers who deliver and/or support the delivery of lifelong learning

Tel: 020 7332 9500

Fax: 020 7332 9501

Email: enquiries@lifelonglearninguk.org

Website: www.lifelonglearninguk.org

Name: People 1st

SECTOR: Hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism

Tel: 0870 060 2550

Fax: 0870 060 2551

Email: info@people1st.co.uk

Website: www.people1st.co.uk

Name: Proskills

SECTOR: Aspirant SSC for process manufacturing

Tel: 0114 275 9345

Name: SEMTA

SECTOR: Science, engineering and manufacturing technologies

Tel: 01923 238441

Fax: 01923 256086

Email: infodesk@semta.org.uk

Website: www.semta.org.uk

Name: Skillfast-UK

SECTOR: Apparel, footwear, textiles and related businesses

Tel: 0113 239 9600

Fax: 0113 239 9601

Email: enquiries@skillfast-uk.org

Website: www.skillfast-uk.org

Name: Skills for Health

SECTOR: Health sector across the UK

Tel: 0117 922 1155

Fax: 0117 925 1800

Email: office@skillsforhealth.org.uk

Website: www.skillsforhealth.org.uk

Name: Skills for Justice

SECTOR: Community justice, court services, custodial care, police services of the UK and prosecution

Tel: 0114 261 1499

Fax: 0114 261 8038

Email: info@skillsforjustice.com

Website: www.skillsforjustice.com

Name: Skills for Logistics

SECTOR: Freight logistics industry

Tel: 01908 313360

Fax: 01908 313006

Email: info@skillsforlogistics.org

Website: www.skillsforlogistics.org

Name: SkillsActive

SECTOR: Active leisure and learning

Tel: 020 7632 2000

Fax: 020 7632 2001

Email: skills@skillsactive.com

Website: www.skillsactive.com

Name: Skillset

SECTOR: Broadcast, film, video, interactive media and photo-imaging

Tel: 020 7520 5757

Fax: 020 7520 5758

Email: info@skillset.org

Website: www.skillset.org

Name: Skillsmart Retail

SECTOR: Retail

Tel: 020 7399 3450

Fax: 020 7399 3451

Email: contactus@skillsmartretail.com

Website: www.skillsmartretail.com

Name: Skills for Care & Development

SECTOR: Social care, children, young people and families

Tel: 0113 241 1251

Fax: 0113 243 6417

Email: sscadmin@topssengland.org.uk

Websites: www.topssengland.net

www.niscc.info

www.ccwales.org.uk

www.sssc.uk.com

Name: SummitSkills

SECTOR: Building services engineering

Tel: 0870 351 4620

Fax: 01908 487709

Email: enquiries@summitskills.org.uk

Website: www.summitskills.org.uk

ns interview **ivan lewis**

The minister for skills always wanted to be a footballer. Are his goals for Britain's workforce any more realistic?

by **ELLIE LEVENSON**

It's a difficult skill to acquire but a good one to have – sounding both reasonable and earnest in everything you say. It means that even when coming out with such David Brent-esque comments as “If UK plc is going to be ahead of the game, there is never going to be a time when we can take our eye off skills”, Ivan Lewis still appears sincere and likeable. Perhaps this is because Lewis is a man who firmly believes in the job he is doing. He has been a minister in the Department for Education and Skills since June 2001, holding four positions with various permutations of the words “young”, “adult”, “skills”, “people” and “learning”. It is currently minister for skills and vocational education, but he has also been minister for young people and learning, minister for adult learning and skills, and minister for young people and adult skills.

Lewis first became active in the community as a teenager, when he got involved in voluntary work helping people with learning disabilities, and he credits this with “discovering what I wanted to do with my life”. As an adult, he worked in community care groups and social services, and was a councillor for Bury Borough before being elected to parliament as member for Bury South in 1997. So it's no surprise that even when talking about skills in the workplace and their importance for economic success, Lewis constantly returns to the benefits that skills bring to people and communities.

“It's about something I describe as ‘the dignity of self-improvement’, which for many adults is about their role as parents and grandparents and their ability to help their own children and grandchildren in their learning. We all know, if that happens, there's a much greater chance of those children succeeding and doing well, and thus replacing intergenerational deprivation with intergenerational advance.”

The “dignity of self-improvement” is a phrase Lewis came to through his contact with adult learners. But, he says, it needs to be about more than just encouraging the younger generation. “There's an interrelationship between social justice and economic success, and there is no better lever than skills, in terms of creating a fairer society by offering opportunities to people who have in the past been denied those opportunities. What's in it for people is employability. In a world where the job for life is dead, the imperative is employability for life. It's not simply having a job, but also aspiring to have a career.”

This is not to say that Lewis can't play the economic card when necessary: “Skills and training are absolutely integral to business success. Those businesses that invest in the skills of their people will be, in a competitive, tight economy, the most successful. Businesses that do not embrace this are going to find themselves left behind.”

To help businesses, Lewis is spearheading a three-pronged approach. “First of all, we develop the new Sector Skills Councils, which now cover about 80 per cent of the economy and which are organised on a sector by sector basis. We are challenging those employers to articulate clearly what their training needs are. Second, there's the bottom-up approach, learning the lesson from the Employer Training Pilots and building a national programme where brokers literally walk through the door, sit down with the employer and say ‘What are your training needs?’ and ‘We can bring those needs from the classroom to the workplace, sort out the hassle and bureaucracy and make it easier for you to access’. The third element is our communi-

“The system's job is to help you get from where you are now to wherever you want to go”

cation and marketing. My simple message to employers is that investing in skills is about business, bottom line.”

This applies to businesses of all sizes, from bus companies with learning centres in depots to the Walkers Crisps factory in Easington in the north-east, which Lewis recently visited. He was pleased to see skills being made a priority from the very top: “The managing director there said, ‘I am going to make this a priority, I believe this will make a difference’. And it is making a tremendous difference to morale and to competitiveness.”

Nor is it just the private sector where training needs to be taken seriously: “If you want to create customer-focused, personalised, 21st-century public services with the user at their heart, you can only do that if you have skilled leaders, skilled middle management and skilled front-line workers. It's all right having aspirations about modern public services, but

you've got to have the skills set to be able to deliver them." The goal, however, is constantly moving. "If you think about the perpetual technological change, we're always going to be in a race against time to have the necessary skilled population to respond to the challenges of an ever-changing global market place."

To achieve this, Lewis is calling for a tripartite agreement between the government, employers and individuals. "In terms of basic skills and the NVQ level 2 entitlement, because that represents essentially a failure of the compulsory education system, it is the state's responsibility to fund it. But we do believe that, for higher qualifications, it's right that we expect a greater level of contribution from employers and from individuals – although we do accept that, in certain circumstances where there is market failure, the government should be flexible about considering funding some of that as well." Which sounds great, until he adds: "But not 100 per cent."

Lewis applauds the way that trade unions have participated: "The trade union learning projects and the trade union learning representatives have been a major advance in terms of their engagement with this agenda. I believe the TUC now sees this as being essential to trade union modernisation, and I also believe that the general secretaries of many of the trade unions no longer see it as a soft underbelly of the movement, but actually see it as about demonstrating the relevance of trade unionism. You only have to go to a workplace, see a trade union project in action and talk to the people who are benefiting, whose lives are being transformed, who for the first time feel a sense of dignity and are learning skills after maybe a dreadful experience at school. And it's the trade union giving them this opportunity."

The minister is keen to be as innovative as necessary in order to get to the hard-to-reach groups in what he describes as "low-aspiration, low-expectation communities". "We've got to be imaginative about how we get to those people. We have to use the community and voluntary sector, including residents' and tenants' groups. We also have to use the trade unions, grass-roots organisations and community leaders, including the many communities in which there are informal



leadership structures."

Obviously, Lewis would hope that his vision of an aspirational, skilled workforce and heightened economic success is shared by the Labour leadership. And at the moment he can be reassured that his enthusiasm for this seems to have paid off. "What the skills white paper is about is saying: 'Wherever you are now, you can do better, and the system's job is to help you get from where you are now to wherever you are capable of going and wherever you want to go.'"

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor, when they speak about education now – and this is quite a significant change over the past 18 months – include a focus on the adult learning and adult skills agenda. It's going to feature very heavily in our third-term vision."

Because Lewis is a nice bloke, he takes seriously my

proposition that it is important to have some very low-skilled people to do the really rubbish jobs that no one else wants to do. "No, I don't accept that. I think that the low-skill, low-pay equilibrium is very damaging, because it limits the aspirations and ambitions of far too many people. Everybody has the potential to be better skilled than they are at the moment, whether they have no skills or whether they have relatively high-level skills. The system's job should be to support the individual to pursue their personal goals and whatever their potential is."

And by "everybody", he means even himself. "I still feel very nervous and hesitant about using IT," he admits. At least he can do something about that, unlike the other area the avid Manchester City fan identifies as a problem: "I always wanted to be a professional footballer." As he ruefully points out, "it might be a bit late".

Because you're worth it

The role of further education colleges remains fuzzy. But with a little love and money, they could be the answer to Britain's skills crisis, writes **PETER KINGSTON**

The enthusiast to avoid is anyone who has accepted a government commission to do something about further education. Invariably they have had no previous acquaintance with this world, having themselves floated from good school to good university. But once they have seen the enormous range of people served and the good done in these colleges, they are bedazzled. The widespread ignorance of further education almost makes them cross.

In many respects, further education is a marvellous world. There are undeniably wonderful people working in it doing wonderful things for rates of pay that almost disgrace a sweatshop. But it is the second-chance ethos that really tugs at the tear glands of the newcomer: colleges embracing 16-year-olds who have sidled through 11 years of schooling without scoring a single academic achievement and putting them back on track; picking up adults who failed to retain anything at school and teaching them reading, writing and arithmetic; nurturing other adults – often 11-plus casualties who didn't fulfil their potentials at school – and coaxing them into university.

This remedial service that colleges perform, immeasurably important though it is, is only part of the story. And here lies another of further education's problems: the impossibility of defining it in a simple positive phrase on its own terms. The only way to keep a description to one side of A4 is to take a negative approach and define further education by what it isn't. It isn't schools and it isn't universities.

This fuzzy image of a sector that somehow fills in the large gaps between schools and universities and salvages their casualties – that is, those who have been failed by one and haven't a prayer of getting into the other – lacks the bold, clear impact that organisations these days are supposed to have.

This government believes that it can make a more credible claim than previous administrations to value further education colleges and recognise their roles. These it sees as fuelling the economy with skills and making Britain a fairer place by persuading people who would otherwise shun education to acquire qualifications that enable them to get skilled employment.

There is some justification in the claim. Labour has put more cash in, though it has squeezed more work out of colleges. Some of its ministers have experienced further education. The last education secretary but two, David Blunkett, even taught in a college. But Labour's entitlement to call itself further education's best friend is marred by a continuing anomaly. It has persisted with paying out more for young people who stay on at school to study their A-levels than for

those who choose to do them in colleges. And for some youngsters, whose schools will not allow them back to do A-levels because of their GCSE results, there is no choice.

Three years ago, the then further education minister Margaret Hodge said that Labour would close this funding gap, which is generally agreed to stand at about 10 per cent, but nothing significant has been done to honour that promise.

All the time that schools and colleges were funded via separate bodies, excuses could be made for the gap. It could be ascribed to historic differences and bureaucratic quirks. But for the past three years, money to school sixth-forms and to colleges has flowed from the same source, the Learning and Skills Council, a quango set up by Labour to fund all post-16 education and training outside universities.

Closing the gap would give tremendous symbolic clout to Labour's claims to cherish colleges. Does the government's slowness to act therefore indicate some intention to take A-levels out of further education colleges for the 16- to 19-

Labour persists with paying more for young people studying A-levels in schools than in colleges

year-old age group in order to make a clearer distinction between colleges and schools? Does it envisage a sharper and more simple identity for these colleges as places that concentrate solely on vocational courses?

Such a radical change would appear unlikely. More young people in this age group study for A-levels in colleges than in schools. But Labour does appear disenchanted with the general idea of the all-things-to-all people agenda of further education colleges. As with schools, it has tried to encourage specialisation, and colleges have responded enthusiastically to the invitation to become "centres of vocational excellence".

Labour says that it wants colleges to teach the skills that industry needs in order to stay competitive in the global economy. It would especially like the further education sector to play a full role in addressing the skills shortages that it believes are keeping British productivity levels behind those in French and German industry.

The government's funding, however, tells a different story. It is sticking more doggedly than ever to supporting further education's remedial role in two of its three funding priorities.

It will provide public cash for adults wanting to acquire “basic skills” – literacy, numeracy and basic computer techniques. It will also pay for adults who failed to get a “level 2 qualification” – 5 GCSEs grades A⁺-C, or their equivalent – at school to have the necessary tuition to achieve this. Many of the courses for 16- to 19-year-olds, its chief funding priority, also have a remedial element to them.

There is no money to be made available to accommodate any growth in adult education that falls outside these priority areas. On the contrary, funding in this area is being cut. The adult education lobby says that this is dangerously muddle-headed. After the brief current bulge in the 16- to 19-year-old age group, the demographic trend shows numbers of young people falling. Two-thirds of new jobs in the economy are going to have to be taken by adults.

Labour emphasised these funding priorities in its skills white paper two years ago. That document also talked about 100 per cent funding for selected level 3 qualifications in regions and industrial sectors where specific skills are in acute shortage. And yet it is at level 3 (A-levels and their equivalents) that the critical skills shortages which make a difference to productivity and competitiveness begin.

Ministers are anxious that the message taking root is that Labour is prepared to fund only up to and including level 2 qualifications, which are not thought to be significant enough to boost an individual's or the economy's fortunes. It wants more made of its limited willingness to fork out for level 3s.

But the government's clear intention is that, in most cases, employers and individuals must pay more for level 3 and higher qualifications. Up until now, the state has paid three-quarters of the cost for adults pursuing courses for level 3 qualifications in the expectation that colleges would recover the remaining quarter from the students or from their employers.

In reality, many colleges have not done this. In some cases, particularly in areas such as the north-east of England, colleges have charged individuals and employers nothing. In other cases, colleges appear to lack confidence about the quality and desirability of their product. If they ask the punters to pay a little more for courses, won't the punters vote with their feet?

The answer, says the government, is that colleges must make their product much more desirable to industry. Employers must be allowed to dictate the content of courses, and when and where these courses are taught. Colleges must be much more prepared to go on to employers' premises to train people on the job, in the way that private training firms do.

Whether the government can convince industry that colleges have a product worth them paying more for, and at the same time persuade colleges that making changes to their product will hook the employers, remains the big unanswered question.

Peter Kingston is the Guardian's further education editor

What skills are they looking for?

Emma Hopkins Pearson

“We look for three things above all – commercial awareness, analytical ability and a good attitude. A good attitude is often what's most lacking. Some of the graduates who apply to us have a tendency to think that the world owes them a living. This is the wrong attitude to have. After all, it's not just what Pearson can do for them – it's what they can do for Pearson.”

Clare Price Personnel manager for graduates, Tesco

“Graduates often have very good ideas that shine through at assessment centres, but often find it difficult to act and make choices about those ideas when faced with multiple options. This indecisiveness indicates that many candidates want someone to provide the direction and tell them the answer. Our graduate schemes support the transition from university to work by encouraging responsibility and decision-making. While Tesco is keen to provide support and encouragement to our graduates, ultimately it is their own drive and determination that will govern their progress.”

Graduate team Accenture

“Graduates come to us with good core skills – there are ten applications to every position, so Accenture is in a position where it can choose good people. When the graduates start their training, it is focused on technical training that is specific to their roles at Accenture.”

Peter Bennett HR director, Network Rail

“We have found that our first priority is to hone our graduates' interpersonal skills – to make them more aware of their impact on others. Second, we have to get them into the right frame of mind to prepare for the world of work. This means concentrating on their approach to issues such as punctuality and getting them to understand the commercial aspects of running a business.”

Sarah Williams Senior HR manager, Lloyds TSB Talent Management & Learning

“Our graduate recruitment programme is geared around identifying graduates with real leadership potential. Once people have joined, we concentrate on developing their skills in four key areas: people management, change management, operational skills and strategy. We expect to see existing evidence of some of these skills. In addition, common sense and political awareness are now the rule rather than the exception. Graduates are increasingly astute about the need to demonstrate commercial acumen, and successful applicants know the value of participating in work placements during their course or in holidays.”

ns diary the teacher

How do you get a class of adults to think about adjectives? It's simple, says **JESSICA WATERS**. Bribe them with sherbet lemons and cola cubes

Sometimes when I tell people what I do for a living (I teach Skills for Life, formerly Basic Skills, to adults in the workplace), they assume I teach those who can't read, write or add up. They are wrong. My students come for diverse reasons.

I passed maths GCSE a long time ago, but I'd still proudly put my grade C on a CV. However, there's no way I could do long division without a calculator, or recite Pythagoras's theorem. I mean, who cares about Pythagoras? (I'm an English tutor, before you panic.)

But I do have to calculate percentages, average class attendance, class viability based on hours of supported learning and levels of attendance. We all need to use a certain level of maths and English every day, depending on our many and varied roles at home and work. I know what I need to know and have "lost" much of what I learned at school.

I'm no different from the people I teach. A lot of my students have been inspired because their children are asking for help with homework. Parents want education to be a positive experience for their kids, when perhaps their own experience was very different. Many realise that their lack of confidence has been holding them back in and out of the workplace, and they want to change and move on.

Every Monday I teach an English class within a manufacturer in Leeds. The firm has recognised a need to up-skill its workforce to help them adapt and grow with the company. The class has been going for four weeks, but it has taken us more than six months to arrive at this point with the full support of the company. It has taken time to identify interest, build up adequate class size and find a time that most learners can attend (I have one dedicated student

who attends even after his night shift).

Students want to work on spelling and grammar, formal writing and reading strategies to help them digest the never-ending raft of impenetrable documents from the Health and Safety Executive. Many just need to boost their skills before taking on a more vocational qualification. We call these courses "Brush up your English" or "Essential skills for work". Nobody wants to be told they have "basic skills" needs.

How do you get a class of adults to think about adjectives? It's simple – bribe them with sweets from their childhood. "Do you remember sherbet lemons and cola cubes," I ask, handing

I have to negotiate with employers, who often fear they are training staff to leave

them out. "What does it taste like? Does it look the same as you remember? What sound does it make when you crunch into it? Now write me a paragraph describing this experience."

Much of my role involves negotiating with employers. How can a small company justify releasing staff to attend a weekly class? Enthusiastic as I am, I'm very aware of the barriers that can hinder middle management. Often they fear that they are training staff to leave, though in my experience staff feel more valued when a company invests in them. How do you explain to a shift manager that production may be down because some of the staff are attending a maths or English class, but that they still have to meet their production

targets? The classes may be free, but supplying replacement staff is not. There are funding streams that give money to companies to release staff, but they're not always easy to access.

Ahhh, funding. A favourite issue among providers. Colleges are also businesses, and we have to ensure a financially viable operation. The government rightly prioritises Skills for Life provision and, to encourage participation, insists that provision is free, so we in turn have to insist on minimum class sizes. It can be very disappointing to have to explain to an employer that we can't supply a tutor for a small class. There are alternatives. In some areas, colleagues have arranged for companies to share a tutor. We also look at distance learning and refer to local centres offering courses.

It is important to be able to teach in work time, as this helps the students get through a lot of barriers. How many of us have signed up to an evening class only to drop out when it turned cold and dark, we had to work late or couldn't get a babysitter? Adult life has so many more commitments, and these are obstacles we have to overcome.

I love my job. Every week I see people reinvigorated by learning and motivated to continue. Last week I helped a learner find out about conservation courses to help them turn a hobby into something more concrete. To signpost someone on a route that will take them towards realising what they thought was only a dream is very rewarding indeed. All that and I get to eat cola cubes, too. I'm a very lucky girl.

Jessica Waters is a workplace Skills for Life tutor at Park Lane College, Leeds

ns diary the learner

There is room for improvement in staff at every level of a company – not least the bosses at the top. Chief executive **MICHAEL MORAN** explains why he pays for a coach

The role of chief executive can be lonely. You are responsible for business strategy. Making the right calls. You are responsible for managing the implementation of that strategy. Picking the right people, motivating and monitoring their performance. You drive through the change. You are responsible for the leadership of the business. You are a role model. All staff watch your behaviour, you can't afford to exhibit any behaviour that is inconsistent with the message you are selling.

As a newly appointed CEO of a loss-making business, desperately in need of change, who can you talk to? There is a need for you to be consultative, the team must feel free to challenge and, yes, you can change your mind. But you must not exhibit doubt or an inability to make the right decision. Likewise you don't want the team to feel you don't have total confidence in them. So you are on your own.

So who can you talk to? A coach. I am charged £675 per session (two and a half hours). He normally charges £2,500 per session for the serious captains of industry. I can't afford that, so I have struck a deal whereby, if I achieve my financial targets in 12 months, I will pay him a one-off fee of £15,000. I reasoned that if he didn't buy into this deal, he wasn't the coach for me.

What do we do? I talk, he listens, he challenges, I counter, sometimes squirm, he sets me homework. We always work away from my normal office. We review the strategy and explore the options. He checks out how my behaviour is perceived by others by using anonymous feedback from the team. Have my messages landed? We discuss how I might get leverage on the business, given that there is a finite number of hours a chief executive can work in a day. We talk about putting together a management team and how we ensure I pick the right people and we function effectively as a team.

He makes me "draw pictures" in portraying to the staff where we are today. I must point out why it's unpleasant and the need to change. I draw pictures of where we going, and benefits we will all accrue on arrival. I outline the journey. We define the key components of my job: leadership, team development, business development, thought leadership in the industry and managing our investors. We review how I spend my time. Does that reflect the priorities? He sets my homework for our next session.

Why am I doing this? Because I need someone to share my thoughts. I know I can improve my performance and that of my team members. Anyway, in 12 months' time, I will know whether or not it's money well spent.

Michael Moran is chief executive of Fairplace, an HR consultancy specialising in talent, career and change management

Are you being skilled?

Sharon Resourcing consultant

"My employer did provide me with training. I have just been made redundant, so getting extra skills is an especially important concern for me at the moment."

Aga Cafe supervisor

"There are customer services courses and others, but I don't take part."

Guy Nursery school deputy manager

"I am sent on courses, and get to choose which I go on. There's no

need for me to improve my skills outside of work, as the company provides everything I might need."

Tim Learning support teacher

"I wouldn't consider extra training outside of work because I'm not going to be in the business long enough for it to be worthwhile."

Derek Civil servant

"Training includes personal, IT and managerial skills. I've done a degree to improve my qualifications on top of my job. It took six years, but I got a First in history, which is great."

Shane Registered nurse

"There is training, but it's hard to come by. I studied at a postgrad university to improve my qualifications."

Tanya Waitress

"I don't get any training at work, and because I work day and night, I have no time to do any off my own back."

John Electrician

"My company gets us qualified enough for what we need to do. I'm far too busy to take on extra training – unless the rewards came quickly. If it helped get more money, then maybe."

Never too old to learn

With too few young people to fill job vacancies, we need to train our ageing community, writes **ALAN TUCKETT**

Gordon Brown's recent trip to China clearly had an effect on him. Impressed by the breathtaking scale of China's investment in knowledge and skills, he described British adult skills – or, rather, lack of them – as “the Achilles heel of the UK economy”. Britain's economic challenge lies in high-skilled as well as low-cost work, which makes it unsurprising that the government's lifelong learning policy focuses strongly on skills for work.

Is that focus enough, however, to secure not just economic competitiveness, but also an inclusive society? In the next ten years, because of the changing demographic of Britain, only one in three jobs will be filled by young people entering the workforce. Some of the vacancies will be for new jobs – evidence of the strength of the UK economy – but far more will result from a generation of makers and menders hanging up their tools. Replacing them will not be easy. It will involve serious strategies for upskilling the existing workforce, like that pioneered through the NHS Skills Escalator. Yet the first government skills strategy, published in 2003, had nothing to say about the impact of demography on the skills challenge facing the UK. To date, too little has been done in public education and training policy to prepare for the change in the pattern of employment and re-skilling we can expect in the years ahead.

More women, and particularly women from minority ethnic communities, will need to be recruited, and to a much wider range of jobs. There will be a rise in migration to the UK, particularly for skilled workers. Already, speaking Polish or Hungarian is a distinct advantage if you are managing a city building site. In addition, we shall need to persuade older people to stay on in the workforce, or to come back to work.

The need to improve skills has led the government to set a range of targets in higher education. The aim is to engage 50 per cent of 18- to 30-year-olds through foundation degrees (developed to strengthen the link between higher education and the world of work), the Skills for Life strategy (which seeks to secure literacy, language and numeracy skills as a right for every adult) and the skills strategy target (which aims to get

We can't guarantee people a job for life, but we can help make them employable for life

unskilled and low-skilled adults qualifications that can secure employability, and a platform for further study). As the minister for skills, Ivan Lewis, has put it: “We can no longer guarantee people a job for life, but we can help make sure they are employable for life.”

Another strategy is the National Employment Training Programme, built on pilots run over the past two years. It offers employers advice on skills and meets the full cost of training employees up to level 2 (5 GCSEs, grade A*-C or equivalent), in or out of the workplace. The trade union movement, too, has made an important contribution to the skills agenda through the brokerage role played by union learning representatives.

Three million people currently draw invalidity benefits. The New Deal for Skills, led by the Department for Work and Pensions, uses skills coaching and individualised programmes to offer people trapped in benefits poverty the chance to prepare for work they can manage. It even includes provision to

overcome the infamous 16-hour rule, which stopped a generation of unwaged adults from using too much time to study in case they were unavailable for short-term employment.

Nothing similar is in place to engage older workers, or to create pathways to skilled employment for people not on benefit but currently outside the labour market. And we lack an effective mechanism to recognise skills and qualifications gained overseas. These groups would all benefit from a development strategy.

Yet as investment in young people rises, cuts in provision for adults is likely. Legislation charges the Learning and Skills Council to provide sufficient education for young people, and to spend what is left on adults. Recent success in improving staying-on rates at 16, coupled with a short-term growth in 16-19s, put pressures on the budget for adults. These pressures can be contained with rising budgets, but a tight spending round presages a real crisis from 2006-7. School budgets and the government's targeted programmes for skills will be protected. The brunt will be borne by community-based “other education” in the college sector. These are the modest short courses people use for personal development and as a first step to learning. They have a critical role to play in social cohesion and in supporting the move towards skilled work for the very women, migrants and older people who need to be involved if demographic change is to be managed successfully.

Increasingly, the focus of lifelong learning policy is on the world of work. But healthy economies are based on thriving communities that provide a platform for the creative workforce the UK needs. As people develop skills and confidence in one place, they use it in another and so learning permeates through society. That principle remains the cornerstone of employee development programmes. As Gordon Brown says: “We need to address not only what we are, but also what we might become.”

Alan Tuckett is director of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

The key to life

Education really can open doors. It did for **MAVIS CHEEK**, and even does for the hard-nut prisoners she now teaches

I was lucky to go to college when I was in my mid-twenties – more than 25 years ago – for in those days mature students were encouraged. Once a place was offered, a state grant was mandatory and the amount was age-related. At over 25, I received a bigger grant, which sounds like a fairy story now and meant I could give up paid work and not be paupered. For my self-esteem, it meant that instead of remaining a working-class dork who failed the 11 plus, went to a secondary modern B stream, learnt how to be a good clerk typist (keep your nails short, be amenable to anything your boss requires, and be careful with personal hygiene – I never knew if these were connected) and then left school at 16, I was encouraged to blossom. Interviewed for a radio programme while I was a student, I said it was like unlocking door after door, and understanding that education was the key to life. Of course it is. But I do mean education and not skills. Skills are good but limited. Education is the manure of life.

I went to Hillcroft College for Mature Women. Thanks to Margaret Thatcher, who scuppered plans for more further education colleges of its kind, Hillcroft remains unique in its statutory role as a place for women to get their second bite at the educational cherry. How badly let down we all felt. A woman prime minister legislating against the education of women. She also took against the Open University. Unforgivable.

The age range at Hillcroft was early twenties to early sixties (Ursula, at 63, went on to take a degree at York and complained bitterly that they wouldn't let her join the flying club). We had to pass a short written test (much easier than the 11 plus) and an interview. I studied art history, English literature, history of western civilisation and political ideas. Best course in the world.



Our tutors eased away residual fears of school and moved us into college thinking – they nurtured us in those first difficult days. We felt we had time. Alas, even Hillcroft has now succumbed to short courses – a year being the longest you can study there, and more of the programme being skills-based. In my day, there was time (though it scarcely felt like it) to explore a subject before specialising. In our first year in English, for example, we went from Greeks, medieval and Enlightenment right through to Eliot and Plath. In that first year I grew my wings. One-year courses can only be a taster.

After Hillcroft, and about to read English at Goldsmiths, it was wonderful to discover that my queasiness during finals was pregnancy. When my daughter was born, I wanted to be at home with her – at the same time I was surrounded by all those newly opened doors. What to do? The huge confidence of Hillcroft's legacy, plus the zeitgeist of women's liberation, allowed me the impudence to ask: "What can I do to be

at home with this baby?" And answer: "I'll be a writer." Never having had much money helped. It gave me the grit to work at it – satin knickers could come later. Instead of learning skills and taking a job and bringing in a bit of low pay, I gave myself until Bella started junior school to become good enough to be published. For those years, we lived very close to the financial bone. Luckily it worked. I had my first novel published in the year that Bella began Juniors.

Now I go into prison on a voluntary basis and teach creative writing, and what I see there is reflected in my own experience. Bright, overlooked, unconfident men who are suddenly given the opportunity to learn grow wings, and dare to fail. It helps to be able to tell them that I, too, was once designated thick by a very silly system. My prisoners have written some brilliant stuff, and perhaps it gives them back some self-esteem. In prison, whatever the media may say, there isn't a lot of self-esteem around. I get letters from some who are now out remembering the pleasure – why not? – that writing gave them.

The prison education system is hard-pressed (maybe if prisoners had the vote, governments would take it more seriously), but my publisher, Faber, was generous and donated to each man in the group a copy of DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* – which they all relished. Only afterwards did I tell them that they had just read and discussed critically the latest Booker Prize winner . . . a good moment. In last year's Koestler Awards (the Koestler Foundation was set up to bring arts into prisons), four of the group won prizes for their writing. And one of the full-time tutors at the prison said that when she stopped one of the harder nuts in the corridor, he rushed off saying: "Sorry, Miss – got to go. Got to get my writing homework done . . ."

I've no solutions for the appalling drop-out rates for boys and girls in ordinary education, but I do know that if there is something available for them second time around, it can work. See me.

Mavis Cheek's latest novel is Patrick Parker's Progress (Faber)

Teaching the parts others fail to reach

With a learning fund, learning reps and a new academy, the trade unions are taking skills as seriously as pay and conditions. **FRANCIS BECKETT** on a progressive advance

The Trades Union Congress has just launched its bid to be a key player in the workplace learning business, in the form of an ambitious prospectus for its proposed union academy. The unions, in training as in many fields, have come a long way in recent years. Many trade unionists who are still active can remember a time when trade union education meant just what its name implies: courses in how to be an effective shop steward, health and safety representative, paid official or union publicist. Training people to do their jobs was not generally considered the business of unions.

They have always been involved in learning, but this has tended to be mind-broadening stuff rather than skills. Trade union members studied in public libraries and mechanics institutes, and unions helped pioneer liberal education. The Workers Educational Association and Ruskin College Oxford were places where working men and women could broaden their minds and equip themselves for something better than the mind-numbing jobs that were then available to the unskilled.

Unions have not, until recently, been providers of the skills needed to turn the wheels of industry. How far they have travelled may be gauged from the language they now use. The academy prospectus offers dense management-speak that fits comfortably into a world in which the Sector Skills Development Agency refers to schools, colleges and universities as “the supply side” (employers are “the demand side”).

Today, unions consider it a central part of their work to support the government’s skills strategy. The Union Learning Fund was set up in 1998 to promote training and education in the workplace. It has helped to arrange learning programmes for thousands of people, and to convince union members that learning is the route to job satisfaction, security and employability. Union learning representatives have helped to bring thousands of employed people into learning, and have negotiated formal learning agreements with employers. They bargain at least as ferociously over proper training facilities for their members as shop stewards have ever bargained over pay. The TUC has trained 8,000 union learning representatives

who have helped 100,000 employees on to courses. More than 450 Union Learning Fund projects in 3,000 workplaces have arranged courses for 14,000 people. Time off for training has been negotiated for 1,250 union members, and nearly 40,000 union activists a year are trained.

The TUC general secretary, Brendan Barber, can boast that “trade unions are helping people at every level, from brushing up their basic skills to gaining MBAs”. Unionised labour is more likely to take training seriously, and more likely to benefit from it. More than one in three union members do some training in any three-month period, but this is true of only a quarter of non-union members. Unionised workplaces are 17 per cent more likely to have a training centre and 11 per cent more likely to have a training plan. And union members get a better pay-off for their training. For male union members, the post-training wage is 21 per cent higher than the pre-training wage, while the corresponding increase for non-union members is only 4 per cent.

This may be why the academy proposal finds favour with both the Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, who believes it “will help drive up the demand for learning and skills and lead to a step change in the number of working people engaged in learning”, and Chancellor Gordon Brown, who says it will help “to bridge the gap between what people are and what they have in themselves to become”. And the government also hopes it will improve Britain’s productivity. Ministers believe that unions can reach those workers with whom management and training providers have failed.

The plan is to establish the union academy over the next two years, giving plenty of time to accustom all the unions to the idea. The TUC plans to work out the staffing and develop regional centres (called, inevitably, Centres of Excellence) straight away, and launch the “brand” at the Congress in September. Next January it will appoint the core staff, and next March a national board will be elected. Then it will begin the process of transferring the Union Learning Fund to the academy, with the full merger pencilled in for next April. The following



Learning to work: trade unionists get a helping hand

month, a research and strategy centre will be established.

The academy will concern itself with everyone: union activists, those in need of basic skills, and the training needs of technical, supervisory, managerial and professional workers. The aim is to train at least 22,000 union learning representatives by 2010 and to help 250,000 or more union members into learning in that year. But the academy will not just deal with union members. Their families, retired members and non-members (or “potential members”, as the TUC calls them) will also be targeted. Retired members may not need, or want, marketable skills; but as people live longer, educators are finding that the thirst for knowledge for its own sake is strong among those who are no longer young.

There is, says the TUC prospectus, “a vast ‘learning market’ of almost 6.4 million union members, as well as their families, which must be tapped”. The TUC cannot force member unions to do anything. Unions will choose whether to opt into any of the academy’s customised services, and each union will decide for itself whether the services it provides should be free to non-members. The academy will, however, be able to offer unions economies of scale, because greater numbers of learners generally make courses viable to run and can drive down costs to levels that unions and their members can afford.

The TUC claims that a union academy, particularly at the local level, will be able to help different unions at different workplaces to identify learning needs, and either arrange appropriate courses or offer advice on who can run them. It will help make learning and skills provision more flexible and demand-driven, so that workplaces do not have to fit in with training providers – providers will fit in with them.

The prospectus says: “Approved centres would operate under contract with the national academy and would continue to be inspected regularly for quality assurance purposes. The unique feature of these centres of excellence would be their trade union credentials. They would be staffed by people trained and accredited through TUC programmes or similar union courses.” The TUC hopes to make itself central to the whole training process by handling much of the training provision that is currently organised by the Learning and Skills Council, the government quango responsible for training.

But is training really the role of trade unions, which were formed to protect members’ pay, conditions and security against rapacious employers? Yes: you can no longer separate training from pay and conditions, says Jeannie Drake, president of the TUC and the unions’ representative on the board of the Sector Skills Development Agency. “If you care passionately about pay and conditions, then in today’s world, people’s capacity to get these is directly related to skill levels. You can’t separate them any more. If people are to protect their jobs, the workforce has got to be in the top skills range. Training is an integral part of our role now, and vital if we are to defend jobs and pay and conditions. We need to give union officials the capacity to help deliver the skills agenda.”

Training, says Drake, is now “a mainstream part of our efforts to keep members in jobs”.

Make the most of what you’ve got

Many refugees have skills in areas where Britain is crying out for workers. We should be giving them more opportunity to use them. By **PETER KINGSTON**

As a pay-off line, “I had a physics professor once in the front of my cab” would hardly do for *Private Eye*’s regular column celebrating the gentle wisdom of London taxi drivers, but many of us could truthfully say it. Taking a minicab in London can be an academically humbling experience. The man at the wheel – it is usually a man – is quite likely to have been a doctor, engineer or architect in his homeland and would no doubt prefer to be practising his profession rather than rattling through the streets of the capital at midnight.

It is not just a question of personal fulfilment, though, but a serious waste of opportunity to the British economy, according to the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), a body set up in the 1930s to help academics fleeing from Nazi Germany. It says it can cost as little as £1,000 to prepare a refugee doctor to practise in this country. Compare that with the £250,000 it takes to train a doctor from the outset. Other professionals such as scientists and engineers can have their skills updated for less than £12,000.

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The British Medical Association has just over 1,000 doctor refugees on its register who want to practise, and CARA believes there are probably a further 500 unregistered but who have the same ambition. The British Dental Association has registered 101 dentist refugees, and CARA estimates that there are at least 3,000 other academic refugees.

“It is a scandalous waste that these people are not offered more support, especially given that they often have skills in areas where Britain is crying out for key workers,” says John Akker, CARA’s executive secretary.

Akker explains that skilled refugees or asylum-seekers often need a bit of further education or guidance to adapt to meet British requirements, but what can be much tougher to get, for any immigrant, are the fundamental skills of being able to



Where to? Doctors driving cabs is a huge waste of skills we need

speak, read and write the English language.

According to the 2001 census, 3.65 million people out of a total UK population of 59 million were born in countries where English is not the national language. No one knows how many of these people have English language needs. According to Philida Schellekens, an independent researcher specialising in English language teaching to people who have come to settle in the UK, between a third and a half of this group – between 1.2 million and 1.8 million people – lack the English required to function in society and in work.

State-supported language learning is available; there are complex lists from the Learning and Skills Council on who qualifies for free tuition. It includes anyone recognised as a refugee by the government and anyone refused refugee status but who has been granted humanitarian protection or discretionary leave, or who was granted exceptional leave to enter or remain before April 2003. It also includes anyone who has been living here legally for the three years immediately preceding the start of the programme, and asylum-seekers and their dependants who are receiving income-based benefits.

For more than 20 years, the English teaching establishment has made a distinction between how the subject should be taught to permanent immigrants and how it should be taught to people who have come here for a finite period specifically to learn our language. The latter group, typically seen as educated and wanting to improve language skills for career and leisure, get EFL – English as a foreign language. The former,

seen as poor and uneducated and needing English to survive here, get the less familiar ESOL – English for speakers of other languages.

“It strikes me that these generalisations are being eroded, if indeed they were ever true,” says Schellekens. Her studies show that the priority for ESOL students is to learn English for work or study, and that while most have low socioeconomic status once they arrive in the UK, many had high status in their country of origin. She cites recent research by the Home Office showing that refugees tend to be better qualified than the UK population at large. That said, the range of skills among newcomers is amazingly wide.

“They vary from no prior knowledge of English at all to highly proficient; from no formal education to highly qualified; and from no transferable skills to professional skills and experience for which there is considerable labour market demand,” Schellekens says. Clearly ESOL has to stretch far if it is to accommodate at one extreme the person who has not had the opportunity to learn to read and write in their native tongue, and at the other extreme the surgeon who needs to learn medical English.

For the past four years, the bulk of ESOL has been taught under the government’s Skills for Life programme. Although this initiative was originally designed to address the serious literacy and numeracy problems among the indigenous adult population – remember those TV gremlin adverts? – at least half the people going through it are doing ESOL. Demand for it is fierce. Hackney Community College in east London, for example, where ESOL and basic skills make up 35 per cent of what it teaches, has a waiting list of 600.

Skills for Life has undoubtedly boosted the availability of ESOL, but lumping ESOL within a basic skills programme for the indigenous population worries some language specialists. They would prefer a much clearer distinction to be made between a programme for improving the communication skills of mother-tongue speakers and one with a specific focus on language learning. They cite the Skills for Life qualification that brackets together speaking and listening as one communication skill. For the language learner, each is a distinct operation with its own formidable difficulties to overcome.

On the other hand, says Schellekens, much Skills for Life ESOL is pitched at too basic a level of English for the person wanting to get a job. Too many teachers underestimate the level of English required for employment, whether by a construction worker needing to understand the safety procedures on a big site or a doctor trying to make sense of a distressed patient’s description of symptoms.

How long does it take to get from no English to the level of competence required for further study or a job? In England, at least, no one appears to have established a time. According to an Australian estimation, it should take 1,765 hours of teaching. A full-time further education student doing 450 “guided learning” hours a year would thus require almost four years of study. For a part-time student doing four hours of tuition a week for 30 weeks a year, the journey would take 14 and a half years.



The Skills for Business network.

By mid-2005, this network will consist of 25 Sector Skills Councils covering 85% of the UK workforce. And these independent, employer-led, UK-wide bodies will champion the Sector Skills Agreements.

Put simply, Sector Skills Councils find out what employers need now and will need in the future, assess what resource is already out there, and then create comprehensive deals with supply-side partners to fill skills gaps and shortages.

Employing employers.

For the first time, Sector Skills Councils have given employers real influence in the way skills are developed and delivered throughout the UK. By bringing employers and education together, Sector Skills Councils aim to improve numeracy, literacy, craft, scientific and technological skills as well as the highest levels of management and leadership skills.

Change in the air. Change on the ground.

Sector Skills Councils are already working in partnership with relevant bodies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The momentum and enthusiasm exist to create and deliver fundamental change. Strong partnerships between employers and educational and training bodies are currently being forged to tackle skills gaps and shortages.

Four pathfinding Sector Skills Councils are in the process of drawing up their Sector Skills Agreements: e-skills UK, SEMTA (the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance), ConstructionSkills and Skillset (Audio Visual Industries).

Take 'e-Skills UK', the Sector Skills Council for Information Technology, Telecommunication and Contact Centres, for example. It is establishing partnerships between employers and universities to offer new employer-supported Honours degree courses, founded on a balanced portfolio of technical, business, interpersonal and project management competencies. This gives graduates the basis for a faster start and progression in their IT professional careers.

Success is a door marked push.

It is already happening. The future is in motion. It is all around us, and it's all centred around Sector Skills Councils. They are playing an active role in ensuring that learners come out of education more 'oven-ready'. That they are willing – and able – from the start to make a positive contribution to the productivity of their employer and to their own future development. And, of course, to the UK economy.

To find out more, visit www.skillsforbusiness.org.uk or employers can call now on 08000 644 044.

An outrageous statement? In a way, yes, because learners can leave the education system – despite having worked hard and achieved great results – and still be judged unemployable.

In our recent survey* of 13,000 employers, over half felt the education system was failing to equip people with the skills necessary for today's workplace. This view is shared by many within the education system, which implies that there is not a conspiracy against the status quo but something wrong. Something that should be put right.

A problem that can be turned into an opportunity.

It could be argued that two or three or more years solely in educational institutions don't give learners a capacity to make their way in the world of work. Especially if they are not taught other complementary skills such as communication, team working, customer relations, IT skills or management and leadership.

Influencing education.

We need to make sure that the skills we have are the skills we need – that the right decisions are being made about UK education and skills supply. Not based simply on the experience and knowledge of those in education, or of young people, or parents, or the media – but on what the country actually needs for a more prosperous, more modern and more socially mobile society.

That's why the demand-side needs of employers in the private sector and in public services should form a starting-point for education and training.

That's why we need Sector Skills Agreements.

What are Sector Skills Agreements?

They're about everyone concerned playing their part more effectively for the greater good. Sector Skills Agreements are partnerships between the demand side (employers) and the supply side (qualification developers, schools, colleges, training providers, universities and the bodies that fund them) ensuring the required numbers of people are skilled in the right ways to meet the needs of UK businesses and public services.



THE NETWORK OF EMPLOYER-LED
SECTOR SKILLS COUNCILS

* SSSA employer survey of 13,000 employers Dec '04 to Jan '05.

An incendiary statement, perhaps – but what it's designed to do is ignite the blue touch paper under the UK productivity issue. If we can successfully do this, we can get UK productivity where it should be – alongside, or even ahead of, productivity levels of the European Union and the USA.

Whatever side of the debate you fall on, we should all agree on one thing: it's critical that our education and training system keeps pace with business needs and delivers enough people of the right calibre, with the right skills and appropriate qualifications to galvanize business and reform public services.

Influencing education.

If we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got. We need to ensure the right decisions are being made about UK education and about skills supply. Not based simply on the experience and knowledge of those in education, or of young people, or parents, or the media – but also on what the country and our economy need for a more prosperous, more modern and more socially mobile society.

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Skillset, for example, has set up 'A Bigger Future, the UK Film Skills Strategy'. It has a five-year plan and a £50m strategy to stabilise the industry in the face of increasing global competition. Amongst its initiatives are mentoring systems using 25 big name industry professionals as well as the establishment of Skillset Screen Academies at further and higher education levels to promote excellence in the £5bn UK film industry.

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