

## **AMICUS response to the Department of Education and Skills consultation on "*Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*". (June 2005)**

### **Introduction**

- 1.0 AMICUS welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on "*Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*".
- 1.1 AMICUS is the UK's largest manufacturing, technical & skilled persons' union. We have over 1.2m members in the private & public sectors.
- 1.2 AMICUS is committed to the learning and skills agenda and working in partnership with employers and other organisations. We have our own Education department, a Lifelong Learning Department, several thousand Union Learning Representatives (ULR), Union Learning Agreements and representatives on various regional and national learning and skills councils.
- 1.3 On the whole, AMICUS believes that latest skills white paper contains positive recommendations which, if properly funded and implemented, would bring tremendous benefits to our members, society and the economy as well as employers.
- 1.4 We still have concerns about the assumption that employers are in the best position to judge and lead on the skills agenda. Employers have completely failed on a voluntarily basis to provide sufficient training to their employees. Around 40% of employers still do not offer any training to their employees, with the result that our global competitiveness is at risk. Although there are many far sighted employers who invest in the employees, there are many who do not. The result is a low skills economy marked by vast income inequality.
- 1.5 AMICUS welcomes the promotion of social justice and commitment to equal opportunities which underpins this White Paper.
- 1.6 AMICUS welcomes the government's support for the Union Academy which will bring huge benefits to trade union members and the wider economy and society.

### **Background – AMICUS Experience and Expertise**

- 2.0 AMICUS has always been committed to the learning and skills agenda. We have a Lifelong Learning Department which works with union officers, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), training providers, national and local Learning and Skills Councils (LSC), employers and the Government to improve access to training and education at all levels for our members.
- 2.1 Our Education Department provides training and education for workplace representatives so that they can deal effectively with change and are responsive to the needs of the members. The Education Department prides itself on providing high quality accredited training which is relevant and accessible to all, delivered

using the most effective educational techniques and responsive to the needs of our members.

- 2.2 AMICUS has extensive experience of working with employers to deliver training in the workplace. We have over a hundred learning agreements with a variety of employers and thousands of ULRs providing opportunities to improve the employability and lives of members.
- 2.3 AMICUS is also working in partnership with employers on Sector Skills Councils (SSC), where we have members on the Cogent, SEMTA and Financial SSCs' Board of Directors, Regional Skills Partnerships (RSP), Skills Academies and LSCs.
- 2.4 AMICUS supports the commitment to equal opportunities and linkage with low skills which the White Paper seeks to address. Increased learning opportunities particularly for those with low skills which can be delivered in the workplace will certainly help address these issues.

### **The Trade Union Contribution to Learning and Skills**

- 3.0 Trade unions such as AMICUS have made a tremendous contribution to delivering training in the workplace. In 2004 ULRs empowered 100,000 people to access training in their workplace. This year will see even more workers improving their skills through learning opportunities brokered by their trade union representative. With further Government support such as statutory provision for workplace learning committees, employer training levies and backing for more prescriptive learning agreements AMICUS could go even further.
- 3.1 Whilst trade unions such as AMICUS welcome the introduction and contribution of organisations such as SSCs and LSCs and their respective skills brief, trade unions are still finding themselves marginalised by some of these organisations. This is particularly a problem on SSC Board of Directors where we find ourselves outnumbered by employer representatives. There should be a minimum of two trade union members on every Board for each SSC but ideally more so that the views of the workforce are heard. Furthermore, all LSCs should have a duty to establish dialogue with trade unions.
- 3.2 AMICUS, along with other trade unions, welcomes the support that the Government has given to plans for the introduction of the Union Academy. However, AMICUS would also like to see the Government make good the promises regarding consideration of the possible inclusion of skills in statutory bargaining procedures and a review of any barriers which are preventing ULRs from carrying out their duties effectively – including the potential benefits of Learning Committees.
- 3.3 Trade unions are in as good a place as the employer on judging skill needs as it is our members' jobs, future careers and health and safety that are at stake. Skilled workers have more power in the workplace, are more productive, have higher job satisfaction and are less vulnerable in times of change such as redundancy situations. Increasingly workers have a key eye

on their “employability” and are aware of the need to be skilled and flexible in order to meet the challenges of the modern labour market.

## **Equal Opportunities and Social Justice**

- 4.0 AMICUS is pleased to see that the Government has finally acknowledged the linkage between low skills, dependency, poverty, and discrimination. Furthermore, AMICUS is pleased to see that the Government is seeking to tackle these issues with legislative initiatives such as introducing the Disability Discrimination Act and measures to outlaw age discrimination.
- 4.1 However, the Government needs to go further in attacking the vocational stereotyping that occurs in the education system, and the workplace, which traps many women and members of vulnerable groups and communities in poorly paid, low skilled and low valued work. Certain labour markets trends are also emerging which work against the training culture and undermine equal opportunities. This includes the increasing casualisation of labour and the extension of agency employment which effectively leaves workers with very few legally enforceable rights and a closed door to training opportunities.
- 4.2 Furthermore even after young people have left school the apprenticeship system continues the vocational segregation which steers girls into low paid low valued work. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has published a report entitled *“Free to Choose: Tackling Gender Barriers to Better Jobs”*<sup>1</sup>, which describes how girls are being failed by the vocational and training system. Gender segregation in apprenticeships is particularly marked with girls dominating places for child care training and boys dominating plumbing and construction.

## **Economic Development, Global Competition and Skills**

- 5.0 The skills shortages in the UK workforce are becoming more critical as technology is changing and Information Communication and Technology (ICT) skills become more important. At present, due to the UK’s relative wealth and high standards of living we have been able to import skilled workers but this is neither a moral nor a sustainable solution to the problem.
- 5.1 Employers have been able to get away with failing in their responsibilities to train their workers, and as a result, industries such as the print industry are facing skills shortages. The UK will see further erosions of its economic competitiveness if employers fail to address issues of poor job design, untrained workers and lack of investment in new technologies.
- 5.2 The Government’s own report on *“Skills in the Global Economy”*<sup>2</sup> makes a convincing argument for improving skills and the contribution of trade unions. The report sets out how skilled workers benefit from higher earnings,

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<sup>1</sup> *“Free to Choose: Tackling Gender Barriers to Better Jobs”* The Equal Opportunities Commission (March 2005)

<sup>2</sup> *“Skills in the Global Economy”* HM Treasury, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Trade and Industry. December 2004

companies benefit from greater productivity and profits. Meanwhile the economy benefits from participation in markets for higher value products.

### **Delivery and Access to Learning and Skills**

- 6.0 It is still too early to properly assess the results of the National Employer Training Programme (NETP) although we continue to have concerns about placing purchasing power in the hands of employers given their poor record on investing in training. However we welcome the commitment to free training up to level 2 but would like to see this extended to level 3, and a wage subsidy for those enrolled in the NETP.
- 6.1 Ensuring that courses are properly accredited by the QCA is an important part of improving the skills of the UK workforce. At present many workers receive informal training in the workplace for which they do not receive proper accreditation. The quality of informal training varies tremendously and without appropriate accreditation workers can not exploit the full extent of their employability in the labour market.
- 6.2 The establishment and expansion of a multitude of initiatives and organisation involved in delivering learning and skills has gained a separate momentum of its own. For example in addition to LSCs, SSCs, RSPs and Regional Development Agencies (RDA) there are also Skills Academies, Skills Alliances, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) and other initiatives such as the Skills for Business Network, National Employer Service and Business Link.
- 6.3 This poses problems for those seeking to gain access to training, and for important social partners such as trade unions who have varying degrees of influence across these organisations. There is also a strategic problem which manifests itself at local, regional, national and sectoral levels. It is not clear how these organisations are supposed to fit together or how delivery related issues such as signposting and consultation are supposed to be resolved.
- 6.4 The Government has attempted to deal with this problem through the development of Information, Advice and guidance (IAG) services but there is a danger that IAG adds another layer of confusion that users must negotiate if not designed and tailored to their needs.

### **Educational Reform and Labour Skills Gaps**

- 7.0 It is well recognised that the UK education system fails to produce enough people trained for technical, advanced craft, skilled trade and associate professional jobs. This is as a result of an inherent bias in favour of traditional academic subjects which is not helped by the GCSE/A-level qualification structure. Whilst the UK job market is deluged with arts graduates there are real skills shortages in vocational areas. Replacing these qualifications with the type of diploma recommended in the Tomlinson Report would have gone a long way to addressing this fundamental problem.
- 7.1 It is recognised that there are some good employers out there who are training their workers in anticipation of the future needs of their business and

the economy. However, 40% of employers are still failing to offer any training at all and a radical cultural change is needed. If employers continue to fail to train their workers the Government should have the power to impose statutory training levies.

### **Summary of Further Action**

8.0 AMICUS broadly welcomes the proposals outlined in this White Paper including the strengthening of the trade union role through the Union Academy, the expansion of ULRs and the further development of the NETP. However we would also like to see the following introduced:

- Statutory provision for workplace learning committees
- Mandatory training levies for employers especially those who are failing to train their workers.
- More support for ULRs who are facing barriers to carrying out their duties such as difficulties getting time off for ULR related activities
- Minimum of two trade union representatives on all Sector Skill Councils' Board of Directors
- Backing for more prescriptive learning agreements
- A duty on all LSCs to establish a dialogue with trades unions
- Free training extended to Level 3 and a wage subsidy for those participating in the NETP
- Implementation of the Tomlinson's recommendations on the introduction of a national diploma to replace GCSEs and A-Levels

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