



January 2004

## **Towards a Unified E-Learning Strategy** **EURIM response to the DfES consultation paper**

### **Introduction**

EURIM is an all-party parliament industry group concerned with the politics of the Information Society. It has over a hundred parliamentary members (including Ministers and Front Bench Spokesmen) and over seventy corporate and associate members as well as over a hundred observers from Government Departments and the Public Sector. Because of the timescale it has not been possible to go through our normal membership consultation. This response is based on previous work done by EURIM on the need to better develop the skills necessary for the Information Society and to make the UK a globally competitive location for knowledge based industries, including learning products and services.

The response is structured with an initial preamble, which gives the background to the response, followed by a summary of key points and supporting appendices:

### **Preamble**

The White Paper, Paper "21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential", signed by the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Secretaries of State for Education, Trade and Industry and Work and Pensions begins by stating "that we must put employers' needs for skills centre stage" and the Trade and Industry Select Committee of the House of Commons has commenced an inquiry into Progress towards the Knowledge Driven Economy.

Many of the UK operations of many EURIM corporate members are now having to compete on quality as well as on price with their overseas subsidiaries for research and development and product and service development and design, not just assembly plants and call centres.

It is over twenty years since the Micros in Schools programme and the start of debate on the need to embed what is now called e-learning into the education system. Networked learning is now a global business and has become one of the major export industries of nations like Canada and New Zealand. Its exploitation to keep its citizens constantly abreast of the latest skills is central to the economic success of Pacific Rim nations like Korea.

Meanwhile major UK employers have grown tired of the cycle of consultation and initiatives and have stopped responding. An exercise for the 2002 E-Skills summit identified over 1400 groups seeking inputs from employers on behalf of DfES and its agencies or those seeking to respond to their demands. One EURIM member has already received over 3,500 requests to attend meetings over the year ahead and/or otherwise provide information on own its skills needs or those which its customers need to make effective use of its current and forthcoming product and service.

A consequence of the consultation and meetings overload is that few current advisory groups have serious industry representation and even fewer are able to make recommendations based on any real knowledge of employers' current, let alone future, needs.

We are about to pay the price. Recruitment effort (as measured by job advertisements, including those on the Internet) for e-Skills has fallen by over 75% over the past three years and private sector spend on training by over 30%. Recruitment effort appears to have begun a slow recovery but training effort has not. There are very real fears that the skills shortages we will soon face, including of those to build and maintain knowledge (including e-learning) networks will be met by a further rise in overseas outsourcing.

The need for an integrated lifelong learning strategy, which brings e-learning alongside workforce and graduate update programmes, continuous professional development and supported local access to world-class learning and training opportunities, is now urgent.

This consultation, focussed on bringing together the technology support programmes of DfES, is a welcome first step in that process, but is only a first step in a long journey.

## Summary of Key Points

1) The first priority should be to rationalise the ways in which DfES and its agencies collect and collate information on employers' needs and make this available to those bidding to supply publicly funded programmes. Ministers have said that this is the role of the regional Learning and Skills Councils and the national Sector Skills Councils. If so, they need to be given the budgets (including for large scale industry-strength market research, in co-operation with the private sector) and authority (vis a vis all the other DfES "partners" competing for employer time on their committees and panels) to do so. Until this happens the DfES, and its agencies, will be unable to "put employers' needs for skills centre stage" because they will not know what they are.

2) E-Learning then needs to be placed in context as a key component, but by no means the only key component, in globally competitive learning networks. Here the need is to enable and encourage schools, colleges and universities to respond to the growing demands for flexible education and training by expanding and building on current modular and networked programmes at all levels, including vocational qualifications and degrees, including internationally.

3) In parallel, we need to focus attention on the need to give older age-groups the confidence and ability to undertake re-training, especially those who are in their late 40's and have been made redundant, and on the need to make individually funded training towards industrially and professionally recognised qualifications fully tax deductible. A replacement to the Individual Learning Accounts, but with industry strength quality control, involving professional bodies, trades unions and trade associations, perhaps via Sector Skills Councils, is overdue.

4) There is also a need to ensure that, when current funding programmes come to an end, we do indeed have a programme to build on the best of the LearnDirect and UKOnline centres to promote sustainable community access to world class content, including funding for the necessary technical and learning support, plus crèche and childcare facilities and home access for those who need them but have no sources of employer or personal funding.

5) Given that E-Learning is now one of the major growth industries in the Knowledge Economy there is a need for DfES strategy to focus on enabling its agencies and the schools, colleges and universities they fund, through a bewildering variety of channels, to be intelligent customers in a global market, rather than seeking to centrally plan and co-ordinate products and services designed for English and Welsh markets.

## Appendices:

1) [Reskilling EUROPE for the Information Society](#) - produced over six year ago but still apposite, particularly since, even then, it had all-party consensus on recommendations relevant to this discussion - Page 3

2) [Report of 2001 E-Skills Summit](#) (Organised by EURIM with sponsorship from IMIS and CPHC) - the 2002 E-Skills summit addressed by the then Minister responsible, John Healey, came to similar conclusions but had no budget to produce a formal report - Page 8

3) [Building a world-class UK workforce, report of EURIM workshop on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2003](#) - Page 27

4) [Minutes of EURIM E-Skills working group scoping meeting on 16th September](#) - Page 33

5) [Minutes of EURIM E-Skills working group meeting on 26th November 2003](#) - Page 28