Opportunities for learning at work enhanced through new Unionlearn and National Extension College agreement

Monday 23 June, 2014

Unionlearn board chair Dr Mary Bousted and National Extension College Chief Executive Ros Morpeth have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) at today's Unionlearn conference that will make it easier for union members and Union Learning Reps to improve their skills for work through online and distance learning.

The agreement opens up new learning opportunities to more than six million trade union members in the UK by giving them a 10% discount on all NEC courses.

Unionlearn is the TUC's learning and skills organisation. NEC is the UK's only not-for-profit provider of skills-based and vocational subjects. The MOU formalises a working relationship between the two organisations that began in the 1970s. Unionlearn and the NEC share a commitment to providing union members with access to high-quality tuition and study materials to support their continuing vocational, professional and personal development. Every year, nearly a quarter of a million workers engage in learning and training through their union.

As a result of the agreement, members of trades unions will be able to fill gaps in their academic qualifications by enrolling on NEC's GCSE, IGCSE and A level courses, including maths and English. They will also be able to upgrade their workplace skills through NEC's level 3 and level 5 Certificate and Diploma courses, which lead to Chartered Management Institute management qualifications. From September, NEC will be offering the Award in Adult Education and Training level 3 course for people with responsibility for delivering training in the workplace or at a college, or who are preparing to work as trainers. Union members will be able to find out more about what's on offer from NEC through 400 workplace union learning centres across the UK.

Unionlearn board chair Dr Mary Bousted said: 'The signs of an economic recovery have not put paid to the skills gap. Around one in five vacancies is still going unfilled because of a lack of jobseekers with the right skills and experience. Access to quality training opportunities for people who are in work is as important as ever. An employer survey published by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills earlier this year showed that more workers are receiving training compared to two years ago, but a third of employers are neglecting to train their staff. The flexible provision offered by providers like NEC makes it easier than ever for businesses to fit the development of employees into the workplace.'

NEC Chief Executive Ros Morpeth said: 'NEC's agreement to work more closely with Unionlearn recognises our joint commitment to give more opportunities to learn to people who missed out first time around. Through Unionlearn, we look forward to welcoming new learners to our UK-wide community of adults and young people determined to have a second chance to improve their skills and qualifications.'

CASE STUDY: Bill Heywood - from shop floor to doctorate

Former NEC learner Bill Heywood was born before the Second World War into a working class family in the Black Country. Like many of his generation, Bill left school with no formal qualifications and went straight into an unskilled job with Phillips Cycles in Smethwick in the post-war years when work was plentiful.

Thanks to the opportunities Bill was given through the TUC and NEC to learn and gain qualifications, he ended up with a career in academia that took him all over the world. His long learning journey started in 1972, when the TUC signed him up for a social studies course with NEC. When he was in his mid-thirties and working full-time for engineering company GKN, Bill was shop steward for engineering workers' union AUEW (now Amicus) and wanted to be as effective in the role as he could. He was encouraged by his NEC tutor to apply to Ruskin College, which provides educational opportunities for adults with few or no qualifications.

He was offered a place on a thirty week a year, two-year course and went on to be awarded a diploma in Labour Studies in 1976. A BA in economics and an MSc in the history and social studies of science at Sussex University followed. In 1985, he completed his D Phil thesis on technical change and employment in the British printing industry, also at Sussex. His subsequent academic career, at the universities of Brighton and Sussex, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Laxenburg, Austria, and at Manchester Business School to South America, the United States and to most of the capital cities of

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Now retired and living in Cyprus, Bill has written a book about his life. Entitled ‘On Life’s Little Twists and Turns’, it was published in May this year by Random House imprint Partridge Books. In the book Bill pays tribute to the role of the TUC and NEC in helping him achieve far more in life than he expected when he left school.

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