



2020-0059397POSoS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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21 April 2021

Thank you for your email on 20 October, regarding the withdrawal of funding for Unionlearn after March 2021. I apologise for the delay in my response.

This was a difficult decision which took into account many of the considerations you raise. However, we need to prioritise how we use our resources in these very challenging times and have decided to concentrate on a number of major investments in Further Education (FE), including, as you are aware, the establishment of a £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to help adults get the skills they need.

I agree that over the years Unionlearn has provided good support to help people in work gain skills. However, as you know, COVID-19 continues to have a significant impact on the economy and workforce resulting in a rise in unemployment. We need to help these people reskill where necessary and re-enter into employment.

The Union Learning Fund operates mostly through larger employers within unionised parts of the economy and is not designed to help those out of work – only 2% of people supported via the Union Learning Fund are unemployed. It is not a model that will help us to support those unemployed due to COVID-19.

Please be assured we are committed to substantial investment in FE, with priority given to qualifications aligned with our economic need. The Prime Minister recently announced as part of his Lifetime Skills Guarantee, that for adults who do not currently have a level 3 qualification, we will be fully funding their first full Level 3, focusing on the valuable courses that will help them get ahead in the labour market. The offer will be funded from the National Skills Fund and offered from April 2021.

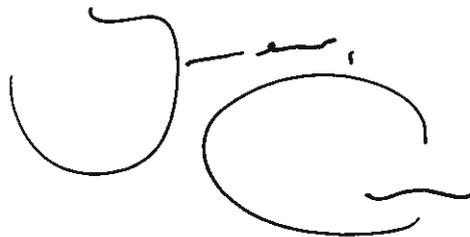
As a result, it does not make sense to continue to fund the smaller and more niche options Unionlearn offer, but I can confirm all the money will be invested in skills and retraining that will be fully accessible to everyone. I can also confirm that the government will continue to provide full funding for learners who need English and maths skills to undertake a range of courses in GCSEs, Functional Skills and other relevant qualifications from entry level to level 2.

From August this year, adults with no or low digital skills are also fully funded to undertake improved digital skills qualifications. These are based on new national standards for essential digital skills and are for adults aged 19+ in England, who do not have the essential digital skills required to operate effectively in work and day to day life.

Adult skills are vital to support the economy and tackle disadvantage and have become so much more important as people live longer lives, automation and technological changes shake up the jobs market, and we recover from COVID-19. We are keen to ensure that the system supports the wide-ranging needs of adults, including those who are unemployed, in unstable and low paid work and/or looking to upskill or retrain.

The 'Skills for Jobs' Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth White Paper was published on 21 January. It sets out our blueprint to reform post-16 education and training and is focused on giving people the skills they need, in a way that suits them, so they can get great jobs in sectors the economy needs and boost this country's productivity.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education