

# Megatrends in e-learning Provision

## Learn Direct

### Introduction

Learn Direct is the brand name of the University for Industry (Ufi) in the United Kingdom. The Ufi was set up by the United Kingdom government in 1998.

Today Learn Direct is the largest provider of e-Learning in Europe with 500,000 students per year.

Learn Direct has been evaluated by the Office of the United Kingdom Auditor General ([http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao\\_reports/05-06/0506460es.htm](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/05-06/0506460es.htm)). This is a very severe evaluation process.

The Auditor General states:

Many adults with low levels of skills, who failed to learn at school, are reluctant to engage with formal learning, for example at further education colleges. The Department created Ufi in 1998 to develop people's skills and work with employers to increase employees' capabilities. In seven years it has grown from an idea to an organisation providing 500,000 learners a year with the opportunity to improve their skills at either one of 2,400 Learn Direct centres, or work or from their home computer. Of the 2,400 learndirect centres, 1,600 are main centres that provide a wide range of learndirect services, while a further 800 are link centres that provide access to basic services and refer people on to main centres. Since 1998 to the end of July 2005, Ufi and the learndirect service have received £930 million of education funding, including £218 million expenditure in the academic year 2004-05.

Learn Direct now has the largest number of students of any educational organisation outside China. It is one of the largest e-learning networks in the world and there are no similar organisations – most other e-learning networks in the UK and elsewhere are associated with university education.

Businesses, voluntary organisations, colleges and community centres run Learn Direct centres on behalf of Ufi. There are centres in shopping malls, schools, colleges, football clubs and prisons. The Learn Direct network works alongside further education colleges, with many centres providing a place to learn for people who are reluctant or unable to attend their local college. In 2003, Learn Direct took on responsibility for co-ordinating the network of 6,000 UK online centres located across the country in libraries, internet cafes, community centres and village halls. These centres offer a range of services linked to IT and learning, and encourage people to use the internet to find information and advice. They do not offer the range of supported learning available at Learn Direct centres. Around 90% of the population in England live within 40 minutes' walk of a Learn Direct or UK online centre.

The service provided by Learn Direct is described thus:

**1** learndirect and UK online can help learners and employees to improve their skills

<p><b>Individuals</b></p> <p>How can learndirect help me improve my skills?</p> 	<p><b>Employers</b></p> <p>How can learndirect help my employees improve their skills?</p> 
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- If you phone the learndirect Advice Line or visit the learndirect website, you can receive information and advice on learning opportunities
- If you visit the learndirect website you can purchase learndirect courses and use them from your home or at work
- If you visit a learndirect centre your skills needs can be assessed and you can be enrolled on an appropriate course. You can then access the course and support services from the centre, your home or at work
- If you visit a UK online centre you can receive help and training on how to use a computer and the internet
- If you are a business, a specialist learndirect centre will send an adviser to identify your company's training needs and provide your employees with supported learning at their centre or on your company's premises
- If you are a large employer learndirect Solutions Ltd can tailor learning to meet your needs

Source: National Audit Office

The Auditor General provides these statistics:

Awareness of Learn Direct brand name among adult population	74%
Awareness of Learn Direct services for businesses	37%
Total number of Learn Direct students (to July 2005)	1.700.000
Total number of Learn Direct course takeups (July 2005)	4.000.000
Learners who had not done any learning in past three years	65%
Learners progressing to other Learn direct courses	59%
Learners qualified below level 2 progressing to level 2	9%
SMEs that have used Learn Direct	200.000
Number of courses taken by learners from SMEs	600.000
Learn Direct information and advice calls (to July 2005)	7.300.000
Learn Direct website information and advice (to July 2005)	18.100.000
Percentage of calls progressing to e-learning	63%
Number of Learn Direct users a year	500.000
Number of Learn Direct new users a year	200.000
Percentage of Learn direct students progressing to further learning	19%

The Auditor General provides this commentary:

The Department set up Ufi, which is unique in the world, as a company under the public-private partnership model so that it could focus firmly on its objectives. Ufi has achieved much in the seven years since 1998. It has:

- established and developed the Learn Direct national telephone Advice Line and website, which provide comprehensive information to help people decide what, where, and how they want to learn – the supporting database holds details of over 950,000 courses;
- commissioned partners to set up a uniquely extensive network of accessible centres where people can go to learn – in April 2005, there were some 2,400 Learn Direct centres, of which 1,600 were main centres providing a wide range of Learn Direct services, and a further 800 were link centres providing access to basic services and referral to main centres, and Ufi also oversees the 6,000 UK online centres; and
- developed a wide range of courses and support to meet diverse needs of learners and employers.

Ufi has pushed the boundaries of learning methods by making innovative use of technology to help make learning much more flexible. Ufi has developed courses and the technology to enable learners to learn in 'bite size' chunks at home, at work or at a Learn Direct centre. People can learn at a pace that suits them and at times that fit in with work and personal commitments. The combination of learning materials and tutor support result in a positive learning experience for many learners, which is improving further as Ufi learns from people's experience of its products. Developing learning to support some groups of people, such as those with sight problems, has taken longer but good progress is being made.

Learn Direct is a well known and visible brand. Ufi has applied consumer marketing techniques to develop a good understanding of what people need and want, and direct its marketing activity. In summer 2005, awareness of Learn Direct stood at 74% of the adult population. Over half of people with a literacy or numeracy need and those who have not undertaken learning for some years are aware of learndirect.

The level of provision to learners in Learn Direct centres was 110% of planned provision in 2004-05, funded partly from overhead savings. This represented a considerable improvement on earlier years, when services to learners fell short of the Learning and Skills Council's planned performance for Learn Direct.

Ufi, Learn Direct and UK online have attracted learners who might otherwise not have taken up learning.

Learn Direct provided around 6 million advice sessions in 2004-05, 1 million by phone and 5 million via the website. Just under half of all callers to the National Advice Line Service, and a third of website visitors, have not done any learning in the last three years. Over half of callers to the National Advice Line Service have gone on to undertake training or learning.

Half a million people are using UK online centres every year. Many had never used the internet before, almost two-thirds are from the 2,000 most deprived and geographically disadvantaged communities in England and 80 per cent are from key disadvantaged target groups.

1.7 million people have taken over 4 million courses through Learn Direct. Two-thirds of learners (at summer 2005) had not done any learning in the last three years. Learn Direct is attracting increasing numbers of learners with lower than level 2 qualifications (pre-level 2 learners) – in 2004-05, 60% of learners were pre-level 2. Currently, over 70% of learners are completing courses and over 50% are achieving their goals.

### **Historical context**

Learn Direct was a new foundation. It came straight to e-learning and had no distance education background. It was set up for the first time in the academic year 1999-2000. Learn Direct got a lot of help from Government in its early stages.

Many of the staff that were appointed had a good background in distance education skills and this was an important factor in early successful development. The development of competence in e-learning at Learn Direct was essentially due to the fact that it had some of the best people available in relevant areas: e-learning content development; e-learning standards; instructional design; technology skills.

The choice of the right LMS (Learning Management System) was central to success. The Learn Direct LMS is internally developed and maintained.

A further development that was crucial for success was the creation of 790 Learn Direct Centres across the United Kingdom. These Centres have tutors for assisting learning, machines for student use and motivational factors for encouraging students to continue with their studies.

Early research studies at Learn Direct had highlighted the importance of focusing on contacting hard-to-reach learners and Learn Direct set out on the path of providing access for hard-to-reach learners. Research at Learn Direct is government-backed and uses both the public and the private sectors. A major focus is the United Kingdom's Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). Much of the research is comparison of Learn Direct's activities with e-learning best practice. Pedagogical research is focused on the Learn Direct way of doing things. We learned by our mistakes. At present we are developing a manual of best practice in e-learning.

### **Technical issues**

Learn Direct has 100 people with high expertise in information and communications technology. This expertise allows half a million students a year to study by e-learning at Learn Direct.

The Learn Direct LMS is internally developed. It is robust and has a reliability rate of 99.98%, that is a downtime of only three minutes a week. It handles online chats, tutor reports and student qualifications. However, because it is a home developed system, some courses developed elsewhere or purchased can be non-compliant.

Learn Direct students do not have to purchase software to do Learn Direct courses. The hardware requirements are low standard, compared to even three years ago. All Learn Direct students have three study options: they can study at home, or at the office, or at a Learn Direct Centre. The Learn Direct Centres are available for use for those who need them. There is a Learn Direct Centre available nearby for every student. Only McDonnell's has more locations in the United Kingdom than Learn Direct. Learn Direct Centres are friendly places with a welcoming atmosphere and biscuits available for students.

The integration between the different Information Technology systems at Learn Direct is good. Although complete systems integration is of value, the focus at Learn Direct is on robustness and scalability. The goal is that the system does the basic things well all the time. This is essential for a system that runs 500.000 students a year.

## **Courses**

Learn Direct has three main types of courses:

- Information Technology courses
- Leadership and Management courses
- Basic Skill courses – Numeracy and English.

Additional courses are available in Health and Social Care, Customer Services, Food Hygiene and Health and Safety at Work.

The courses provided by Learn Direct have flexible start-up and progression timings. This is because the Learn Direct goal for student access is 'Any time, Any place, Anywhere'. Students like this and students want this and this flexibility is a great attraction in Learn Direct courses. Statistical research shows a 92% student satisfaction rate with access at Learn Direct. This is a unique feature, when compared with university and college classroom structures.

Learn Direct offers full qualifications to students by e-learning and has 60.000 fully online assessments.

Learn Direct maintains a balance between synchronous and asynchronous communication in its courses.

## **Management, strategy and attitudes**

The Learn Direct philosophy is learning by doing. Things have changed greatly since five years ago and management leadership has been very important. It is vital for Learn Direct to have the right people. Learn Direct has five different directorates as its management structure

There are no attitudes of different groups to e-learning. This culture just does not apply. Learn Direct employs 400 people fulltime and 1500 are employed in total. All of these use e-learning all the time. This culture of the company is believed in by the staff, especially the e-learning dimension. If they did not believe in e-learning and in reaching out to those who need the courses and who do not want a university culture, they would not work for Learn Direct. This is central to staff satisfaction at Learn Direct.

The policy of Learn Direct is based on the fact that it is an e-learning institution and e-learning is central to all that is done.

The Learn Direct goal is to improve quality all the time. Learn Direct is organised in 5 year phases for quality control. The focus is on actually improving the quality, rather than talking about doing it.

The effectiveness of the administrative routines is amply demonstrated by the handling of half a million student enrolments a year.

Predictable and manageable workloads for staff working in e-learning are guaranteed by the Centres working like retail shops by predicting and providing the right number of staff at the right times. The Centres have trainers and tutors and have a ratio of one tutor/trainer to 10 to 15 students. The Centres operate in different ways but a basic structure would be that 50% of students book their time at the Centre in advance and 50% just visit the Centre. The goal is to have the correct ratio of tutors to students at the busy times.

Collaboration with other educational institutions is shown by Learn Direct working closely with a lot of colleges. Learn Direct has a network of 60 to 100 colleges who use Learn Direct courseware and embed it in their programmes or have local Learn Direct Centres on their campuses. Learn Direct also works with 10 to 15 universities with whom it has 50%/50% joint ventures. Learn Direct also cooperates with small, private sector providers who average less than £1 million per annum turnover.

Learn Direct's credibility is very good. The Government started it up and the Department of Education and ministers like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, have been very supportive. It has been labelled by Government as 'the best innovation' and Members of Parliament have been delighted by its performance and attend its functions. The University for Industry (Ufi) is the Holding Company and Learn Direct is the brand name.

Learn Direct is able to handle its half a million students because its technology platform is robust. The platform has a 24 hour a day support line for any technical issues and a 60 second response time to all technical issues.

## **Economy**

E-learning is a lot cheaper than other forms of provision. It is cheaper to supply training by e-learning than by other methods. The Learn Direct model shows that on average e-learning is cheaper. How could one provide quality training to half a million people by any other model? The Leitch Review on Post 16 Education in the United Kingdom showed that the shape of the future is online learning.

There are two categories of students enrolled in Learn Direct:

- Students who pay fees
- Students who do not pay fees – these are students without a GCSE who get Learn Direct courses free of charge.

Income is stable. Learn Direct is trying to employ more sales people. It wants to set up a new team who will sell training in bulk to large employers.

The facility to adapt to a changing market is necessary because politicians have changing priorities. One day the government wanted bite sized courses, then it

wanted full qualifications with full assessment. What is important is that Learn Direct can meet these changing targets more quickly than other providers. Learn Direct can achieve a 7-9 months turn around time on changed priorities.

Central staff at Learn Direct in Sheffield are all full-time staff. The Centres all over the country have more staff turn over. The tutors in the Centres mirror the sector average – there is more turnover and pay is not great. Learn Direct has developed a 15 module course for prospective staff called ‘How do you teach in e-learning?’. All applicants have to study this. There is then a second qualification on ‘How to teach a particular subject by e-learning’. This course was also developed by Learn Direct.

## **Conclusion**

Other factors which have contributed to success include successful lobbying with government, emphasising why the Learn Direct model is unique and describing how its experience is spread.

The Learn direct brand is vital for success. It is now the second biggest educational brand in the United Kingdom after the Open University. Research shows that 82% of the UK population recognise the Learn Direct brand. The Learn Direct marketing department are retail brand people and Learn Direct advertises online, on news programmes and on TV and uses brand positioning. The goal is always to get students into e-learning who have never successfully studied before.