

WEA

Securing a
better future
for women

www.wea.org.uk

Workers'
Educational
Association

A better future for women is a better future for us all

Since the WEA was formed in 1903, women have played a central part in the development of the Association. From its early public advocacy of nursery education and the suffragette movement to its current campaign on behalf of Women Overcoming Disadvantage, women have been at the heart of our movement for social change. Despite the many advances made by women over the last 100 years, it is clear there is still much more that needs to be done to secure a better future for women.

Beyond the headlines about the shortage of women in the boardroom and at the highest levels of politics and the media, there are millions who just want the opportunity to get a job and have fulfilling, productive careers at the same rate of pay as men. Structural inequality within the labour market has trapped many women in low pay, low prospect work, while soaring childcare costs are preventing many from getting a job in the first place.

This is at great cost to the UK – both economically and socially. 40 years on from the Equal Pay Act, we still do not have workplace equality. Many business sectors feature significant gender bias, leading to skills shortages. Inequality has become ingrained across generations, which is resulting in poorer health outcomes and political disengagement for many women and their families.

Unlocking the potential of women could transform our economy, raise productivity levels and increase social mobility. The coalition government set up the Women's Business Council, which has made the business case for getting more women into work, while the Business, Innovation and Skills Select

Committee has built on its work to develop its own set of recommendations. The Government's Business Champion for Older Workers, Dr Ros Altmann, has produced an excellent report *A New Vision for Older Workers: Retain, Retrain, Recruit*, which has built on the TUC's report *Age Immaterial: Women Over 50 in the Workplace*. These reports are welcome, but little seems to change on the ground. The evidence shows that there are clear benefits for business in employing women and that there is demand for work amongst this group. I believe there are three areas government and business needs to prioritise – creating opportunities for women through flexible working; providing them with the skills business needs and giving them the confidence to take up and progress in work. Once we address these key challenges, we can release the potential of women.

I am delighted that the WEA has been able to work with Scottish Widows to begin to address these problems. By bringing together the skills and knowledge of Scottish Widows volunteers with some of our most disadvantaged adult students who are furthest from the job market, we are helping women take their first steps into employment or training. I passionately believe that both formal and informal education can inspire women to get into work and progress once they have a job. This report sets out some of our ideas on how we can do more.



Ruth Spellman

Chief Executive & General Secretary
Workers' Educational Association



Women in the workplace



The UK economy features some significant challenges.

- ▶ The UK has lower than average literacy and numeracy skills, with the association between skills proficiency and socio-economic background greater than in most other countries.¹
- ▶ 88 per cent of businesses say that school leavers are unprepared for work.²
- ▶ Demographics are changing. By 2022, there will be 700,000 fewer people aged between 16 and 49, but 3.7m will be at the 50 to State Pension age range.³
- ▶ Many workers are trapped in low paid work, with 697,000 people on zero hours contracts.⁴
- ▶ Productivity in the UK is 17 per cent below the average level of the G7 economies and still below its pre-financial crisis levels.⁵
- ▶ Business investment continues to be weak, with growth powered through household spending and debt.⁶
- ▶ There is a massive skills gap, with one in five of all vacancies suffering from skills shortages, but investment by business in skills training has declined by £2.5bn since 2011.⁷
- ▶ The non-apprenticeship skills budget has been cut by 24 per cent.⁸

Improving opportunities for women in the workplace could be transformational.

68.5 per cent of women aged between 16 and 64 are in work, the highest proportion since records began in 1971.⁹ But those that are in work are often in low paid sectors with poor career prospects. According to the Women's Business Council, over 2.4m women who are not currently in employment want to work and the ONS reports that a further 1.5m women want to work more hours. By equalising men's and women's economic participation, we could increase the size of the economy by 10 per cent by 2030.¹⁰

With the increase in the numbers of economically active women working into their 50s and 60s there is great untapped potential for the economy, providing UK government and business provide the flexible working and training opportunities for them to thrive.

Case study: WEA and Scottish Widows

WEA and WEA Cymru have formed a unique partnership with Lloyds Banking Group to help WEA students secure a better future for themselves and their families. The project is part of the 200th anniversary celebration of what was Scotland's first mutual life insurer, Scottish Widows.

During the two year project, some 400 employees will share their skills and knowledge with over 2,000 WEA students, volunteers and staff. Some Lloyds Banking Group employees will visit ESOL classes and help students with their speaking and listening skills, whilst others will volunteer in employability workshops, designed to help students to identify their strengths and skills and help them onto the path to employment.

One student commented on the difference it made to have volunteers in her class, saying 'it helped as it is good to talk and listen to different people'. Another student, who took part in an employability workshop said, 'I'm more prepared for what to expect, how to present myself and what will get me noticed'.

“

The session provided an insight in to the struggles faced by individuals in my local community. The session inspired me, it made me identify my own strengths and how much I have developed whilst also allowing me to make a difference to someone else.

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Changing women's lives

It is widely recognised that a step change in careers advice for girls and young women is required to broaden aspirations and career options. Just 13 per cent of engineering places at university and 22 per cent of mathematics and computer science courses are taken by women, reflecting an ingrained gender bias formed at the earliest stages of education.

But action is also needed for older workers and those returning to work after having children.

Many women have a common experience in their mid-life careers. Those that return to work often find their status diminished and opportunities for career progression limited. Others become detached from the labour market and struggle to develop meaningful careers.

With women also working for longer during their lifetimes, it is important that they are given the opportunity to develop their skills throughout their careers.

To transform the future of women, we believe action must be taken in three areas: **Confidence, Skills and Opportunity**.

Building confidence

Time out of the workplace can reduce women's confidence and make it difficult to make the transition back into work.

According to the WEA's Impact Report 2015, adult education can make a difference. Of those students who were unemployed or looking for work, 86 per cent felt more confident about finding a job in the future as a result of a WEA course, while 65 per cent said that as a result of their course they were more aware of the next steps required to improve their employability.¹¹

Giving women the opportunity to take part in learning opportunities while they are economically inactive is

vital to giving them the skills and confidence to return to work. The learning entitlement for all adults to achieve basic numeracy and literacy skills should be protected with a new entitlement introduced for digital skills to meet business needs.

To address areas of skills shortages, the Government should introduce targeted apprenticeships specifically for people returning to work after caring for young children. Employers should also do more to provide more effective return to work procedures such as mentoring and work experience programmes, which should be supported through Government sponsored childcare vouchers.



Case Study: Caroline Rogers

Caroline is about to take up her first Teaching Assistant post at Newdigate Infant School in Surrey. She was also a student on the WEA East Surrey Helping in Schools course which ended last term at Leatherhead Trinity School.

Caroline said, "I found out about the HiS course through a friend who had gone on to get a job as a TA. Since my children had been at school, I had always helped out and really enjoyed it so I decided to enrol on the course and I have learnt so much.

"It's a long course and it is hard doing all the work and then being on a placement and juggling a home and children. But you get so much out of it. And knowing I had done the course gave me so much more confidence in applying for a job. I felt I knew all the correct terminology, what the school expected and so on.

"After volunteering at the school for so long I am really looking forward to being a member of staff. I would definitely recommend the course – without it I know I would not have got the job."

Gaining skills

Women returning to the workplace after having children often face lower status and fewer opportunities for career progression. 37 per cent believe that having children negatively affected their career progression. At the same time, older workers, many with caring responsibilities, find their skills becoming obsolete with opportunities to re-skill limited. As a result, Scottish Widows reports that women in the UK save 40 per cent less into their pension than men over their lifetime.¹²

This is a massive waste of potential that has long-term costs for both businesses and Government.

In-work training is key to giving women the skills that businesses need. However, the UKCES has reported that the amount spent by business on training has fallen by £2.5bn since 2011.¹³

64 per cent of WEA students in work report that their courses have given them new skills they can use in their jobs while 38 per cent felt more confident about progressing in their careers.

Auto-enrolling workers at all levels into Training Accounts to support skills development – with matched contributions and Government funding for English and Maths qualifications would go some way to supporting in-work training. The Government should also provide 'Return to Learn' training vouchers for parents in receipt of child benefit when their first child starts Year 7 to help secondary age children understand the importance of lifelong learning.

Employers who give employees opportunities to learn should also be given tax relief to encourage training.

Case Study: Mariia Gulevska

Despite having studied English at school in Ukraine and achieving three healthcare-related NVQ Level 3 qualifications since she arrived in the North East seven years ago, Mariia was not satisfied with her writing and speaking ability in English.

“When I used to take the bus to my job at the care home in Wylam, I used to try to listen and understand other peoples’ conversations. I tried to speak and think in English all of the time at work, as I couldn’t fit in going to classes to improve my English because of my shift patterns.

“When I saw the poster on the UNISON noticeboard in the hospital about the Bridges to Learning Functional Skills course with the WEA I enquired straight away. My manager agreed that I could take four hours each week away from my job.

“The thing that attracted me most was that both the English and Maths skills are taught as they used in everyday life so, funnily enough, I soon realised that I was learning new words and phrases all of the time I was attending the Maths class.”

Now that Mariia has successfully completed her Level 2 English qualification she is eager to the next step on her career ladder and plans to train to become a nurse.

Developing opportunities

Most companies now understand the value of flexible working and the benefits it can bring to businesses. According to the CBI 2011 Employment Trends Survey, 96 per cent of UK companies offer at least one type of flexible working practice.¹⁴ However, there is a perceived risk in extending them further.

For many women with caring responsibilities, flexible working is essential to attract them back into work. This is particularly important at managerial levels, where women often feel they cannot work flexibly to meet their caring roles.

The Agile Future Forum, led by the former Chair of Lloyds Banking Group, Sir Winfried Bishchoff, has shown that flexible working benefits business and can save 3-13 per cent of workforce costs.¹⁵

To encourage flexible working, the “Happy to Talk Flexible Working” scheme extended and receive direct Government backing. Employers who offer flexible working at all levels and in-work training should be able to apply for a ‘Kite-Mark’ accreditation from Government.

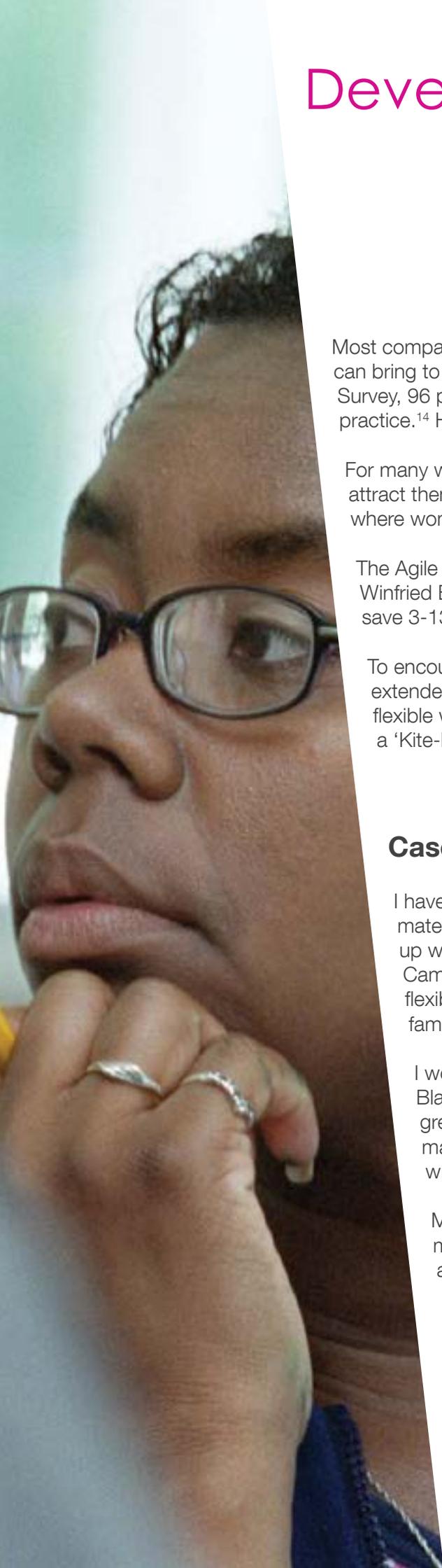
Case Study: Kirsty Chalmers

I have a very busy role and a big team. I was worried coming back from maternity leave two and a half years ago that it would be difficult to keep up with the demands of my job while still seeing enough of my little boy, Cameron. However, Lloyds Banking Group offers a fantastic level of flexibility that has enabled me to achieve a balance that suits me and my family.

I work compressed hours, from Tuesday to Friday, and have a Blackberry and laptop which means I can be a bit more flexible. The great thing about this is there’s usually only one day that I don’t manage to pick up Cameron from nursery so I still have plenty of time with him.

Myself and my partner (who is also a Lloyds employee) both take the maximum £243 Childcare vouchers which is a great benefit and pays a big chunk of Cameron’s nursery costs.

I’ve worked for the Group for 17 years, and a lot of my spare time and social life revolves around work friends. I think it’s a very good package that they offer, and there was no pressure to come back until whenever suited me - which was good. It has worked out really well for me. I feel I’m still as capable and committed to my role but manage to spend a lot of time relaxing with Cameron.



Recommendations

- ▶ Introduce a new entitlement for digital skills and protect the learning entitlement for all adults to achieve basic standards of numeracy and literacy.
- ▶ Promote a targeted apprenticeship scheme for women and men who are returning to work after caring for children for sectors with skills shortages.
- ▶ Provide childcare vouchers for economically inactive parents with very young children to enable them to take part in work experience and workplace mentoring programmes.
- ▶ Auto-enrol workers at all levels into Training Accounts to support skills development throughout their working lives, with matched contributions and Government funding for English and Maths.
- ▶ Provide Return to Learn vouchers for parents in receipt of child benefit when their first child starts Year 7 to help secondary age children understand the importance of lifelong learning.
- ▶ Create a Government 'Kite-Mark' scheme for employers that offer flexible workplaces and in-work training opportunities for staff at all levels.
- ▶ Provide tax relief for employers who give employees opportunities to learn and who open training opportunities to others in their supply chains and people on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)
- ▶ Give employees a statutory right to ask for flexible working from the start of their contract providing they have previously notified their potential employer.

Footnotes

1. OECD Skills Outlook <http://skills.oecd.org/skillsoutlook.html>
2. All Party Parliamentary Group on Inclusive Growth https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/412405/How_to_deliver_growth_through_people_over_the_next_Parliament.pdf
3. Report to the Government by Dr Ros Altmann CBE - Business Champion for Older Workers https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411420/a-new-vision-for-older-workers.pdf
4. ONS <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/contracts-with-no-guaranteed-hours/zero-hour-contracts--2014/index.html>
5. ONS <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/elmr/economic-review/march-2015/art.html#tab-Key-points>
6. ONS <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/elmr/economic-review/march-2015/art.html#tab-Investment-and-household-consumption>
7. UKCES Employer Skills Survey https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf
8. TES <https://news.tes.co.uk/further-education/b/news/2015/02/26/adult-skills-budget-cut-by-11-per-cent.aspx>
9. ONS http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_393554.pdf
10. Women's Business Council <http://womensbusinesscouncil.dcms.gov.uk/executive-summary/>
11. WEA Impact Report <http://www.wea.org.uk/publications>
12. Scottish Widows: 200 Years of Women and Finance <http://www.scottishwidows.co.uk/knowledge-centre/savings/200-years-women-and-finance.html>
14. CBI <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2011/06/private-sector-jobs-recovery-continues-cbi-harvey-nash/>
15. The Agile Future Forum <http://www.agilefutureforum.co.uk/introduction/>

Read our vision, mission and values at: www.wea.org.uk/vision



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