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SLASH TRAINING AT YOUR PERIL' WARN BUSINESS BOSSES

A coalition of the UK's most senior businessmen and union leaders today took the unprecedented step of calling on UK employers not to slash staff training in a bid to cut costs as the economic downturn bites.

In an open letter published in national newspapers today (Thursday), some of the UK's top business people including **Sir Mike Rake, Chairman of BT group** and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, **Sir Stuart Rose, Chief Executive of Marks & Spencer** and Chairman of Business in the Community, **Mervyn Davies, Chairman of Standard Chartered plc** and **Richard Lambert, Director General of the CBI**, together with **Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the TUC**, urge employers to sustain or even increase their investment in training, saying:

'Now is precisely the time to keep investing in the skills and talents of our people. It is the people we employ who will get us through. When markets are shrinking and order books falling, it is their commitment, productivity and ability to add value that will keep us competitive. Investing now in building new skills will put us in the strongest position as the economy recovers.'

The call to action comes the day before the government is expected to outline plans to tackle strategic skills challenges to dramatically reduce the complexity of the skills system in England and make it easier for employers to get their workforces the skills they need.

The 'Simplification of Skills in England' plan, developed by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, is launched today, and will be presented to leading business people tomorrow (Friday) at a high-level event at the CBI. It aims to make publicly funded training provision more flexible and responsive to business needs by providing employers with one point of contact - a single team of brokers - who will advise on the business and training support solutions best suited to their businesses.

A new web-based tool will complement the work of the brokers. Through it, employers will be able to create a bespoke skills development plan for their organisation and find out quickly and easily what's available to meet their needs from within the education, skills and employment network.



John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, said today: *'I welcome the UK Commission's plan to streamline the English skills system making it much easier for employers to navigate. We want businesses to commit to skills and training in order to support the strongest possible recovery for UK businesses from the current financial challenges. However, we can't do that while at the same time not doing all we can to enable employers and individuals to access the support and funding they need as quickly as possible. This plan paves the way.'*

Sir Mike Rake, chairman of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and BT plc added: *'This is no time to have a skills system which is extremely complex and difficult for employers to get round. Equally, we want to say to employers: 'You cannot afford to miss the opportunity to develop the skills of your workforce when the offer from public providers is being made even simpler, more flexible and more responsive'.*

In offering his endorsement and support, the TUC General Secretary, Brendan Barber, said:

'Employers are under more pressure now than they've ever been. Cutting staff training can seem like a quick fix, but it's not the solution. Research shows that companies who don't invest in training are 2½ times more likely to fail than those that do.'*

Chris Humphries CBE, Chief Executive of the UK Commission, said *'Employers were 'crying out for' a simpler and more integrated skills system, which was why it was a top priority for the UK Commission. He added that the Commission's plans to streamline the system had received a warm welcome from government and industry leaders alike, and that the plans could be implemented within a year'.*