Good morning conference and can I extend the warmest of welcomes to you to this our 13th Annual Learning Representative Conference.

Borad da a croeso

My name is Shelia Bearcroft and I am Wales TUC Cymru President. I am delighted to be here and I shall be chairing the event over the next two days.

Colleagues,

13 years of ULR Conferences is quite an achievement – these are flagship events which we know, because *you* tell us, are hugely valued as learning experiences for ULRs.

Some of you, I know, will be old hands at this event – welcome back to all of you, but I’d like to take the opportunity to extend an especially warm welcome to new delegates.

This is **your** conference – it is the opportunity for you, the Union Learning Reps, to share your experiences, your trials and your triumphs, and give each other a big pat on the back for a job well done.

Let me tell you about what we have planned over course of the Conference – we have a number of distinguished speakers who will share their knowledge and expertise with you over the two days. There will be presentations and the opportunity to ask questions and of course, we have a range of stalls, packed with information for you to take away with you.

We have looked hard at what you have told us in your evaluations, and I know from these that you really value the time that you spend in workshops. You will all have the opportunity to attend three workshops of your choice during conference and again, these are led by people with real expertise in their areas of learning and skills.

I want too; to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Welsh Government whose foresight and strategy has recognised the hugely important role played by unions in delivering learning in the workplace.

This really is partnership in action.

Without Welsh Government’s funding support, we would not be here today, there would be no WULF, and unions would have had a much bigger struggle to bring learning to their members.

On the other hand, many thousands of the hardest to reach learners in Wales have accessed learning opportunities only because of the engagement and support given to them by their unions through you, their ULRs.

I am terribly sorry to report that Julie James, our new Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology, who was due to address you this afternoon has had an accident, and so is unable to come. I know how she values the union contribution to learning and skills and she has asked me to convey her apologies and best wishes due to this unfortunate change at short notice.

I am delighted to say though, that Richard Harris, Head of Delivery in the Employment and Skills Division to address conference in her place.

Colleagues, UK government spending cuts are continuing to have a very real impact on jobs here in Wales.

The trade union movement is absolutely committed to fighting redundancies and protecting Welsh jobs and services.

What is clear however, is that opportunities for workers to up-skill, re-skill and perhaps as importantly, accredit their existing skills to make them transferable to elsewhere in the labour market will be a key weapon in our armoury for sustaining and enhancing employment. And of course, the Wales Union Learning Fund must remain as an essential tool in that process.

We welcome the approach taken by Welsh Government to extend the dialogue with unions to ensure that we lessen the impacts of UK government austerity in areas of devolved responsibility.

We also welcome the commitment from Welsh Government to make skills a key priority of its economic, as well as its education strategy.

An area which is, of course, of great concern to us all, is ensuring that adults in Wales have first class opportunities to access Essential Skills learning. Poor literacy and numeracy, and in today’s world, ITC skills, blights lives. Perhaps more than any other factor, poor essential skills prevents individuals from reaching their full potential in work, in their unions, and in their communities.

The Wales TUC and its affiliates will continue to work with Welsh Government in supporting literacy and numeracy learning – we believe that our track record on this is excellent – after all, members trust their Unions. You know better than anyone that telling your ULR that you need Essential Skills support, and that ULR organising your learning and supporting you through the process, has meant that many of the hardest to reach learners have overcome the barriers and met the challenge head on.

It is life-changing and I congratulate you all for the fantastic role that you play.

Colleagues, union-led learning has proved to be a terrific success – peer support from ULRs, funding from WULF, partnership with employers and other partners to support learning infrastructure, and expert guidance and support from the Wales TUC Learning Services team all combine to make union-led learning a dynamic force for change and one which we must develop and extend to build for future generations.

Now I would like to tell you about a brand new initiative from NIACE Cymru – The **Festival of Dangerous Ideas** is to be held from 16th to 27th February 2015.

Unfortunately NIACE are unable to join us for Conference but this is such an interesting opportunity, I’m sure you will want to hear about it.

NIACE will commission and oversee the delivery of a **festival of dangerous events** across Wales, with up to £1000 grant available to get your dangerous idea off the ground. The chosen projects will stimulate ideas and debates about new methods and modes of delivering adult education and training, along with priorities for public funding and investment, and you can get involved in a number of ways....

 We have a short video with links to further information

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIqhrmqz37k>

I’m pretty sure that some of you here will want to get involved. Leaflets giving you more information are available on your tables.

Colleagues, as I said at the start, this conference is about you. This is your opportunity to learn, not only from the speakers and the workshops, but most of all from each other. The formal part of conference will let you focus on your own learning, but I suspect that the informal learning which will take place over dinner and in the bar later this evening will be just as important.

So grasp the opportunities with both hands, and can I wish you all a successful and rewarding Conference.