

Learning & Skills Policy Update

July 2016

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Introduction

This newsletter is intended to keep unions and other stakeholders abreast of policy developments in learning and skills, including providing updates on what the TUC and unionlearn are saying on specific policy issues.

If you have any suggestions about either the content or the design of the newsletter, please contact Iain Murray: imurray@tuc.org.uk. This newsletter and policy briefings providing more information on specific issues are available on the [unionlearn](http://unionlearn.org) and [TUC](http://tuc.org.uk) websites.

Please note that the following acronyms are used in this newsletter for the main government organisations/agencies covering learning and skills: **BIS** (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) which is to be replaced by the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial

Strategy; **DfE** (Department for Education); **UKCES** (UK Commission for Employment and Skills); **SFA** (Skills Funding Agency); **SSCs** (Sector Skills Councils); and **LEPs** (Local Enterprise Partnerships).

Ministerial appointments and changes to government departments

The government has changed the remit of the two government departments that previously had policy responsibilities for education and skills. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has been replaced by the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. As a result policy responsibilities for FE, skills and apprenticeships have transferred to the Department for Education. The new Apprentices and Skills Minister based in the Department for Education is Robert Halfon MP and the Secretary of State for Education is Justine Greening MP. Robert Halfon is well known for his support for apprenticeships (e.g. he was the first MP to recruit an apprentice) and he is also a union member. He has also been a keen supporter of using government procurement to drive up apprenticeship recruitment and spoke about this at a unionlearn event (see previous [unionlearn newsletter](#), page 4).

Higher education policy has also been transferred to the Department for Education with the aim being to have all education and skills policy in one department. However, the

policy remit for higher education and science research will not be transferred and for this reason the Minister for HE and Science – Jo Johnson MP – will have a joint remit covering both the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Along with many other stakeholders, unionlearn recognises the rationale for one government department having overall responsibility for education and skills. However, it will be vital that this does not lead to any diminishing in employer engagement and that the government maintains a continuing strong linkage between industrial/employment strategy and apprenticeships, skills and FE/HE. This will be especially important in the coming months as plans for implementation of the apprenticeship levy are put in place.

Post-16 Skills Plan

Earlier this month the government set out significant reforms to post-16 education and skills in England. A report into technical education by an independent panel, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, recommended simplifying the current system so technical education is provided through 15 high-quality routes with standards being set by the Institute for Apprenticeships (which is to be renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education). The report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education and the government's Post-16 Skills Plan are both available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education

The TUC welcomed the proposals in a [press release](#), as follows:

“The government must not delay implementing the important recommendations from the Independent Panel on Technical Education.

They can act as a real roadmap to the high-skill workforce the UK needs. Decent technical education requires high standards and robust monitoring. We are glad that the Institute for Apprenticeships will have a wider remit, and a clear role in assuring quality.

Trade unions must be given a central role in setting and monitoring quality standards, ensuring that workers are represented and receive high quality training.

But if these reforms are going to succeed, the government must back them up with serious investment in colleges and further education.

Britain faces a challenging future outside of the European Union, so improving our workforce's skills is vital. We also need a major new programme of infrastructure investment to upgrade our economy, boost growth and expand opportunities."

The independent Panel highlighted four key features that were necessary to achieving a high-quality technical education system:

1. While government should design the overall system, industry experts must lay down the knowledge and skills, and methods of assessment, for each qualification.
2. The new system should provide clear educational routes which lead to employment in specific occupations and must be sufficiently clear and simple that career advisers can easily explain to young people what options they have.
3. Transferability will be built into the post-16 system in order to enable individuals who come to believe they have made the wrong decision to move between the academic and technical education options, and also to support adults returning to study.

4. Individuals who are not ready to access a technical education route at 16 or older should be offered a flexible tailored transition year.

The reformed post-16 system will involve the establishment of a common framework of 15 occupational routes encompassing all apprenticeships and college-based technical education at levels 2 to 5. The remit of the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) will be extended so that it becomes “responsible for assuring standards and bringing relevant experts together to agree the technical knowledge, practical skills and behaviours to be acquired in each route for both apprenticeships and college-based provision.” The IfA will be renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education at some stage to reflect its wider remit.

The Panel also emphasised the need for additional college funding to support the new technical education system and also the need for improvements to career guidance. The government has said that it accepts and “will implement all of the Sainsbury panel’s recommendations, unequivocally where that is possible within current budget constraints.”

Apprenticeships

New Apprenticeships Toolkit

Unionlearn has published a new edition of its [Apprenticeships Toolkit](#). It is a comprehensive resource for union officers, union representatives and union learning reps who are negotiating with employers on apprenticeships or who are approaching an employer to discuss the possibility of taking on apprentices. The factsheets in the toolkit provide concise information on a range of topics related to apprenticeships and also highlight the key elements of a good quality apprenticeship. The factsheets cover:

- Negotiating and bargaining on apprenticeships
- The apprentice levy and other new developments
- Pay for apprentices
- Health and Safety and working time
- High quality training
- Widening access to underrepresented groups
- Mentoring
- English, Maths and Functional Skills in apprenticeships
- Frameworks and standards
- Professional registration and apprenticeships
- Government minimum standards for apprenticeships
- TUC Apprenticeships Charter

Hard copies of the toolkit can currently be ordered direct from [unionlearn](#) and an interactive version of the toolkit will be available on the unionlearn website from the end of July.

Institute for Apprenticeships

The government has recently been [advertising](#) for eight vacancies for Institute for Apprenticeships Board Members. The appointments are due to be announced in October. In June [Antony Jenkins was appointed](#) to the role of shadow Chair of the Institute for Apprenticeships. He was Chief Executive of Barclays from 2012 to 2015 and is currently chairman of Business in the Community. The shadow Chief Executive of the Institute is currently Rachel Sandby-Thomas but she is leaving in the autumn so a new Chief Executive will be appointed at some stage later this year. The government is currently getting feedback about the levy and other apprenticeship

reforms through an Apprenticeships Stakeholder Board. Key stakeholders, including the TUC and CBI, are represented on this Board.

People with learning difficulties or disabilities

In May a taskforce was commissioned by the Minister for Disabled People, Justin Tomlinson MP, and the Minister for Skills, Nick Boles MP, to explore access to apprenticeships for people with learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD). The taskforce was chaired by Paul Maynard MP and it considered the following challenges:

- reach an understanding of the issues and barriers that affect people with LLD in accessing and completing an apprenticeship
- identify solutions that could help overcome these barriers and raise participation levels
- make recommendations to both Ministers on which options to pursue.

The taskforce also noted the work led by Peter Little in 2012, [‘Creating an Inclusive Apprenticeship Offer’](#). One of the taskforce’s recommendations included revisiting progress against the recommendations made in the “Little Report”.

The taskforce has made [14 recommendations](#) in total and the [government’s response](#) says that it has accepted all of them. Immediate priority will be given to taking forward the recommendation to make employers more aware of the financial support from the government’s Access to Work programme for apprentices with LLD. A range of communication strategies will also be put in place to reach out to more employers, including highlighting the additional funding and financial support that is available. There are a number of recommendations about adapting the existing English and maths requirements for apprentices with LDD. Consideration will be given to setting a target for increasing the

number of apprentices with LDD and there is also a proposal to undertake a pilot to explore how the apprenticeship levy funding model might be flexed to incentivise more employers to recruit apprentices with LLD.

Skills and Productivity

Productivity Leadership Group

At the end of last year the government announced that it would be withdrawing funding for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and it has since been confirmed that the bulk of its operational activities will cease this August. A focus of UKCES’s work programme over the past year has involved the development of a Productivity Leadership Group (PLG) to develop a business-led approach to promote innovative practices to improve workplace productivity. This initiative was highlighted by the government in the Productivity Plan that it published in summer 2015.

Since last autumn the work of the PLG has focused around seven working groups which have been looking at innovative means of addressing different aspects of the productivity challenge. Unionlearn has been a member of the working group looking at the means of harnessing best practice in employee engagement and best working practice, especially with regard to learning and skills.

The overall findings and recommendations of the PLG were set out in a report – [How Good is Your Business Really?](#) – and a new [website](#) has been established to encourage employers to engage in activities to drive up productivity. The PLG also recommended that the government should establish a new Productivity Council to drive this agenda forward. This Council would be chaired by an experienced and senior business leader, with a small but senior advisory board. It is envisaged that the

majority of the activity supported by the Productivity Council would be resourced by businesses and not dependent on public funding.

OECD Employment Outlook

The latest annual edition of the OECD's [Employment Outlook](#) includes a focus on a specific aspect of workplace skills. There is a detailed analysis of how making better use of workers' skills (sometimes referred to as improving skills utilisation) would provide a boost to productivity and wages. The report argues that too little attention is given to this area by policymakers who tend to focus wholly on supply side issues (e.g. expanding education and training programmes). The report concludes that high-performance work practices, such as team work, job rotation, bonus pay and flexibility in working hours are associated with a significantly better use of skills at work. And this in turn is a major determinant of productivity, wages and job satisfaction.

English and maths

Review of functional skills qualifications

The government has commissioned the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to oversee a review of functional skills qualifications. At the current stage of the review there is an ongoing consultation about the revised draft standards for literacy and numeracy. The [online questionnaire](#) is open for feedback until 25 July and there is an accompanying [FAQ](#) providing background information on the consultation.

Following on from the previous stage of the functional skills reform programme, the ETF has published a [summary of the findings from the employer survey](#). These findings have fed into the current consultation on revising the

standards for literacy and numeracy. The highlights of the employer feedback were that:

- employees often have a fear of maths, and sometimes English, and are reluctant to engage with the subjects. Lack of confidence and mastery of the essential skills (in speaking, reading and writing as well as use of numbers) are the main issue
- communicating skills are important and especially the SPAG group of skills (spelling, punctuation and grammar), writing accurately and comprehensibly, and being able to perform simple calculations and overcome work-based problems
- maths skills of importance include basic maths (area, estimation, conversions, days, geometrical, magnitude, perimeters, scales, 10s, 100s, 1000s), percentages, fractions, ratios and mental arithmetic
- employers are less interested in what they consider to be academic mathematics (e.g. algebra, calculus, etc.), but instead want basic applied and practical skills
- larger employers (with more than 50 staff) are slightly less happy with the maths and English capabilities of their existing workforce. Larger employers also place greater importance on collecting and representing data using ICT, including spreadsheets, while small businesses appear more likely to view mental arithmetic skills as being of greater importance.
- some employers considered digital skills as a distraction in context of upskilling needs in English and maths while some argued that everything should be integrated into digital skills
- half of the employers surveyed had heard of functional skills qualifications prior to responding to the consultation, but larger

employers are more likely to be familiar (64%) than those with fewer than 50 staff (39%).

The current phase of the reform programme will lead to a final report to be published in August 2016. Following that the ETF will start focusing on building new core curricula and producing training materials and CPD resources for teachers and trainers. The aim is to have the reformed Functional English and Functional Maths qualifications fully in use by 2018.

Post-16 Skills Plan

English and maths provision is also referred to in the Post-16 Skills Plan and the report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (see page 2). The Post-16 Skills Plan accepts the recommendation of the Sainsbury panel that each of the 15 routes “will include a ‘common core’, which applies to all individuals studying that route and is aligned to apprenticeships (including English and maths requirements, and digital skills)”. The panel also recommends that: “there is a single set of maths and English ‘exit’ requirements governing college-based technical education and apprenticeships. These should be seen as the minimum level of maths or English which all individuals must achieve ahead of securing technical education certification, as is already the case for apprentices.”

However, the panel acknowledges that the current requirements are still low compared to international standards and that over time the government “should raise maths and English requirements to reflect those of higher-performing international technical education systems.” It also recommends that the IfA should encourage its panels of professionals to “incorporate additional occupation-specific maths and English requirements into the standards for each route.”

Evaluation of ULF and unionlearn

Unionlearn’s research programme over the past year has been dominated by a major evaluation of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and unionlearn’s role in supporting ULF-funded projects. Following a tendering exercise the research commission was awarded to the Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change (CERIC), University of Leeds, and the Marchmont Observatory, University of Exeter in July 2015. The evaluation has focused on Rounds 15 and 16 of the ULF and the main objectives have been: to assess the impact of union learning activity through extensive surveying of learners and employers; to explore the challenges and barriers that ULF projects and unionlearn face when trying to achieve their objectives; and, to use the analysis and findings to draw up recommendations to help ULF projects and unionlearn maximise their impact and value for money in the future.

The academic team undertaking the evaluation has reported regularly to a Steering Group comprising a number of ULF Project Managers, unionlearn staff leading on the evaluation, and a representative from BIS. The final report will be published in August and will be available on the unionlearn website at:

<https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/independent-evaluations-union-learning-fund-and-unionlearn>.

Some of the key findings highlighted by the evaluation include very positive indications that union learning is highly valued by individuals, stimulates a demand for further learning, and helps individuals to get on at work. Some of the key findings from the evaluation are included in a new report – [Changing Lives Through Learning: the first 10 years](#) – which was published to mark the tenth anniversary of the launch of unionlearn. Some of the key findings include the following:

- Nearly two thirds of ULF learners (62%) say they can do their jobs more effectively as a result of union learning
- Over four in ten (43%) non-union members that undertook union learning through ULF subsequently joined a union.
- The more learning you do the better the outcome. Compared to ULF learners who undertake just one episode of learning, individuals who undertake at least three episodes of ULF learning are:
 - 3 times more likely to receive a pay rise
 - 6 times more likely to be promoted
 - 11 times more likely to become involved in their union
 - 26 times more likely to become a union learning representative.

The findings also shows that employers benefit greatly from union-led learning and training in a number of different ways. A majority of employers reported that, as a result of the ULF, there were observable increases in the take-up of learning and training, the number of employees attaining qualifications, and equality of access to learning. In addition, employers reported other positive outcomes of union learning for their organisations at large, including around a third linking it with improved organisational performance, more than four in ten citing a positive impact on employment relations in the workplace and nearly a half saying it improved employee commitment.

The evaluation also includes a calculation of the “added value” of ULF provision by estimating the long-term financial benefits for employees through the achievement of higher wages and better employment prospects and the economic returns for employers through improved productivity. The analysis estimates that once other costs are taken into account (e.g. the cost

of delivering learning and training), every £1 invested in the Union Learning Fund generates a total economic return of £10.60 of which £6.70 accrues to individuals and £3.90 to employers. There are also benefits for the public purse with a boost to tax and NI payments from increased earnings and the researchers estimate that the return for the Exchequer is £3.14 for each £1 spent on the ULF.

Unionlearn regional conferences

The government has introduced a number of significant skills reforms which will have a direct impact on the workforce and employers’ resources. Unionlearn is running a series of regional conferences to provide an overview of the proposals and to highlight the opportunities and challenges that employers and unions face in supporting the development of high quality skills which benefit the workforce and organisation.

In particular the conferences will focus on the introduction of the new apprenticeship levy. There will be an opportunity for union reps and employers to find out more about how the levy will work, what the implications will be for the workforce and how unions and employers can work in partnership to develop high quality schemes and devise strategies that will best support apprentices.

The event will promote a range of materials that will help union representatives and employers improve their apprenticeship programmes and English and maths provision. These materials will be available at the conference.

The agenda for the conferences will include:

- Regional skills challenges
- TUC Apprenticeship policy update
- Union support for English and maths
- Trade union tools to support union

engagement in apprenticeships

- Interactive workshop

We anticipate high demand for the conferences. The events will be free for all union reps and employers, and lunch will be provided. Unionlearn cannot be held responsible for reimbursing any travel costs associated with your attendance on the day.

The dates for the conferences are as follows:

London: Monday, 26 September 2016 from 10:00 to 15:30. Congress House, 23-28 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3LW

Bristol: Tuesday, 27 September 2016 from 10:00 to 15:30. Bristol Science Centre, Anchor Road Harbourside, Bristol, BS1 5DB

Leeds: Wednesday, 5 October 2016 from 10:00 to 15:30. St George's Centre, 60 Great George Street, Leeds, LS1 3DL

Newcastle: Wednesday, 12 October 2016 from 10:00 to 15:30. Mercure Newcastle, County Hotel, Neville Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 5DF

Manchester: Thursday, 10 November 2016 from 10:00 to 15:30. The Manchester College - Ashton Old Road, Manchester, M11 2WH

Further information is available at:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/events

Other policy and research news

Parliamentary group calls for new strategy to boost adult education

A new [report](#) commissioned by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Adult Education has made five recommendations to boost the role of adult education. The Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) was commissioned by the APPG to undertake a study to scope the need, reach and areas for

policy and practice development for adult education concerning disadvantaged adults.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- A new strategy: establish a national and regional strategy for adult education, health, employability and wellbeing
- Redistribute resources: Develop an adult education framework that seeks to rebuild and rebalance resources fairly for adults across the different life-stages
- Improve awareness: Provide careers information, advice and guidance in local communities and building capacity in the adult education workforce to make greater use of labour market intelligence and mid-life reviews
- Data and evidence: Identify and gather more evidence on the full impact of adult education, including the voices of adults and their needs.
- Private sector support: Encourage more employers to step up and offer opportunities to adults, particularly older adults keen to remain active in employment.

Unionlearn submitted evidence to the review and the recommendations draw on the pioneering work of union learning representatives (ULRs) in supporting adults, especially the most disadvantaged, to return to learning. For example, in recent years unionlearn has been promoting a [mid-life review process](#) to empower ULRs to support adults to take stock of their skills and job prospects and to consider their learning needs in this context.

The main report also highlights the role of unionlearn and unions in supporting disadvantaged learners to improve their English and maths skills through adult education

provision delivered in the workplace. The research also included a survey of adult learners and this highlighted that 6% of them had found out about their course from a union representative.

National Colleges

In May the [government announced](#) further details about the five new National Colleges that are being developed to provide technical training in priority sectors and to support the delivery of major infrastructure projects like HS2 and New Nuclear. The press release says that these “centres of high-tech training will ensure the UK has skilled people in industries crucial to economic growth – high speed rail, nuclear, onshore oil and gas, digital skills and the creative industries”. The National Colleges will focus on delivering high-level technical skills at levels 4 to 6.

Details of the five new colleges are as follows:

- National College for High Speed Rail (hubs located in Birmingham and Doncaster). £40m of government funding. Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, and Sheffield Combined Authority and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP are providing £6m each and industry is donating approximately £5m in equipment. Opening September 2017.
- National College for Nuclear (hubs located in Somerset and Cumbria). £15m of government funding. The South West LEP is providing £3m and Bridgwater College is providing £4.5m. Opening September 2017.
- National College for Onshore Oil and Gas (hub located in Blackpool). £5.6m of government funding and equipment donations from industry. Opening September 2017.
- National College for Digital Skills (hub located in London; Tottenham Hale and

Whitechapel). £13.4m of government funding. Greater London Authority (GLA) and the London Enterprise Panel is providing £18.2m. Opening September 2016.

- National College for the Creative and Cultural Industries (hub located in Purfleet, Essex). £5.5m of government funding. £500,000 will be provided by Creative and Cultural Skills SSC and industry is donating approximately £1m in equipment. Opening September 2016.

Parliamentary Select Committee report on careers advice and guidance

In July the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy published a [report](#) of its inquiry into careers advice and guidance. The main findings of the report were that too many young people are leaving education without having had the chance to fully consider their future options or how their skills and experiences fit with opportunities in the jobs market. It also concluded that a host of policy changes, initiatives and new bodies introduced in recent years have failed to make serious improvements and in some cases have even been counter-productive.

The Committee makes a number of recommendations to improve careers advice and guidance, including:

- Providing incentives for schools to improve their careers provision and mechanisms for holding to account those that fail to do so
- Taking steps to untangle the complex web of national organisations and to create efficiencies by bringing funding streams into line
- Bringing greater coherence to the unruly market of organisations and websites offering careers information, advice and guidance services
- Ensuring advice and guidance is grounded in

accurate information about the labour market

- Giving young people the opportunity to understand better the world of work, through encounters with employers and meaningful work experience opportunities.

The TUC and a number of affiliated unions submitted written evidence to the inquiry and copies of these submissions are available on the Parliamentary Sub-Committee's [website](#).