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from the TUC

Learning & Skills Policy Update

March 2022

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Introduction

This newsletter is intended to keep unions and other stakeholders up to speed on recent learning and skills policy developments, including commentary by the TUC and unionlearn. It also highlights new resources developed by unionlearn to support union reps to boost learning and skills opportunities in the workplace. If you have any suggestions about either the content or design of the newsletter, please contact Iain Murray: imurray@tuc.org.uk. The newsletter and a range of other learning and skills policy briefings are available on the unionlearn and TUC websites.

Survey of union reps supporting learning

Unionlearn has regularly surveyed union learning reps (ULRs) about their activities and support for workplace learning. In recent years these surveys have been broadened out to other union reps in order to capture all union initiatives promoting learning and training. The latest survey - undertaken last year - included a number of new questions about the impact of the pandemic. It also repeated the majority of the questions in the last two surveys conducted in 2017 and 2014. It is worth noting that the 2021 survey sample size (1,278 respondents) was significantly larger than either the 2017 survey (962 respondents) or the 2014 survey (880 respondents).

The 2021 clearly survey showed how unions were making a real difference supporting workplace learning and training in very challenging times. Some of the key findings included evidence of:

- huge pressures on ULRs and other reps in the face of Covid-related priorities and other factors (e.g. closure of the Union Learning Fund)
- resilience and innovation by union reps to sustain union learning activities during the pandemic, including through the expansion of online/digital learning and other ground-breaking approaches
- increasing diversity in the population of union reps supporting learning with significant increases in the proportion of women and BME reps.

The findings from the survey are available in a summary report and a more detailed research findings report available on the unionlearn website.

Impact of the pandemic and other barriers

The responses from ULRs and union reps highlighted the overwhelming impact of Covid-19 on their day-to-day support for union learning. Over three fifths said that they had been at home for significant periods of time during the pandemic because they were working from home (55%) or they were on furlough (7%). Half of these reps said these circumstances adversely impacted on their union learning activities.

Many reps were also working round the clock to prioritise health and safety and related challenges triggered by the pandemic, including the increasing number of workers reporting issues relating to their mental health and workplace stress. There were also examples given of reduced demand from workers for any kind of learning due to an understandable focus on concerns about their health and safety, employment security and other Covid-related matters.

While no specific questions were asked about this, many reps pointed out that union-led learning and training had been destabilised by the closure of the Union Learning Fund.

Sustaining union learning in challenging times

What is remarkable is the degree to which union learning activities and their impact were sustained on a number of fronts during the pandemic, in particular through a rapid expansion of online/digital learning and other innovative approaches. Half of those reps working from home or on furlough said that they had been either equally effective (41%) or more effective (9%) in delivering support for union-led learning and training than before the pandemic. There was also evidence that the union learning offer was being taken up by many people working from home or on furlough and that virtual learning was key to this.

There were many references to a rapid take-up of online video and communication software, such as Teams and Zoom, to deliver learning and training and to facilitate networking for reps (e.g. ULR forums). Expanded use of these and other software packages by employers during the pandemic also created a demand for training that unions were doing much to support. In addition, there were extensive references to the benefits from unions and their reps expanding access to webinars and a wide variety of other e-learning resources.

Nearly 9 out of 10 reps (87%) said that their activities continued to raise awareness of learning among the workforce and 73% said they were directly supporting colleagues who had little or no experience of training. Seventy-one per cent of reps said that, as a result, they were increasing interest in union membership among non-members during the pandemic. Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role. Over four fifths of reps said they were happy with the level of support provided by their individual union (82%) and by unionlearn (83%).

Changes in the population of reps supporting learning

Over half (51%) of the respondents to the survey were women. This is the first time that women have outnumbered men in the unionlearn survey series and it is a significant increase on the previous peak of 46% reported in the 2017 survey. This suggests that learning and skills is an increasingly powerful means of attracting more women to become actively involved in union activities in the workplace

The proportion of reps from BME groups has also increased, up from 9.8% of survey respondents in 2017 to 13.4% in 2021. This is a welcome trend and means that union reps supporting learning and training are now more representative of BME groups in the labour market.

Wales Union Learning Fund

A new survey of the operation and impact of the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) during the first year of the pandemic (2020/21) shows that it delivered even more opportunities than before. Over 8,000 workers accessed workplace learning through WULF, higher than in previous years, and learner satisfaction was also up. The survey results show that the union learning model is especially good at supporting workers to progress both in learning and in their work. For example, 16% per cent of respondents reported that the learning resulted in a change of job role and 52% said it led to a pay increase. The survey and analysis of learners was commissioned by the Wales TUC from the independent Wavehill research institute.

The findings also show that WULF is delivering for vulnerable workers and under-represented groups. Seventy per cent of WULF learners were women and 22% of participants reported having physical, sensory, learning or mental health impairments. The findings also show that during 2020-21 WULF supported increased participation, better equality of access and enabled workers to progress in both their own personal development and in their careers.

Some of the other key findings from the survey of WULF learners included the following:

- 98% found the training useful, 91% reported that it was relevant to their job and 69% that it had improved their work performance
- around 75% of the learning and training was undertaken online, yet still 41% received paid release to learn
- around half of the workers surveyed were new to WULF and had never engaged in the programme before
- take-up among non-traditional and atypical workers was relatively high, e.g., 11% of learners were freelance and two thirds of this group found new work as a result of WULF support
- 87% reported that the key result of their experience was increased confidence
- around a third of learners surveyed said they have already moved on to further learning since they undertook their original course, and a further 47% reported that they are likely to do so in the near future
- over one in five learners also received information and support on their workplace rights whilst engaging in WULF learning.

The report highlights a continuing success story for the Wales Union Learning Fund. With a new tranche of projects set to start in April 2022, the Welsh Government has committed to supporting trade unions to deliver benefits to thousands of workers year on year until 2025.

Wales TUC General Secretary Shavanah Taj said “It is clear from this report that WULF really works and delivers positive outcomes. There are many challenges that need to be addressed in order to grow our economy in a way that leaves no worker or community behind, and creates good quality jobs. This report shows that the model that we have nurtured in WULF over the last two decades is ideally placed to support this ambition.”

More information about the research and WULF is available in a TUC Wales press release and blog.

Skills and levelling up

At the beginning of February the government published its long-delayed Levelling Up White Paper. The policy proposals on education and skills were trailed in a DfE press release the day before publication of the full white paper. A TUC blog questioned the level of ambition on training and skills, saying that the proposals did not go near enough to countering the sharp decline in funding and participation over the past decade. We highlighted how cuts to adult skills funding has decimated education and training opportunities delivered by colleges and training providers in recent years.

For example, DfE data show that since 2014/15 the number of adults benefitting each year has fallen by a million (down from 2.6 to 1.6 million). The decline in participation is even greater over a longer time period going back to 2010. The white paper refers to a new ‘skills mission’ involving targeting 200,000 more people for training every year by 2030, including 80,000 more in areas with the lowest skills levels. As part of this the DfE says there will be an additional £550m spent on the relatively new Skills Bootcamp training programmes.

The White Paper also simply repeats many of the skills proposals included in the Skills White Paper and the last Budget/Spending Review. The TUC view on these are set out in more detail in previous editions of this learning and skills policy update newsletter, which are available on the unionlearn website.

Skills forecasting and planning

The White Paper did contain a new announcement that government will establish a new *Unit for Future Skills* to boost strategic planning on skills. This will involve three government departments - DfE, BEIS and DWP – working together to "bring together the skills data and information held across government." This data will be used to inform local skills demand, future skills needs and how this should influence the courses delivered by colleges and training providers.

The government also announced a national rollout of a new skills planning approach based on Learning and Skills Improvement Plans. These LSIPs are to be led by employer representative bodies and local Chambers of Commerce are currently running a number of LSIP pilots. It is expected that the employer representative bodies should work in partnership with colleges, training providers, any Mayoral Combined Authorities in the locality, and other stakeholders. There is however no direct reference to trade unions or any conceptual approach to assessing the skills aspirations of individuals and workers. The TUC has consistently called for a much more inclusive partnership approach on skills planning, involving getting employers and unions round the table with government through a new high-level National Skills Taskforce. This is a common approach in many other European countries with a reputation for high-quality skills systems.

Devolution of skills funding

The proposals on devolution in the white paper will also undoubtedly lead to more government skills funding being devolved. In recent years this has been confined to devolution of the adult skills budget to Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and the Greater London Authority (GLA). However, this is likely to be extended to many other parts of England through the proposals to encourage the establishment of more MCAs and also to develop new County Deals.

There is also a commitment to extend the powers of devolved authorities and this will begin with negotiations on trailblazing "deeper devolution deals" with the West Midlands and Greater Manchester combined authorities. The white paper states that these "deals will act as the blueprint for other mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) to follow, with bids for more powers welcome." A number of mayors have previously called for devolution of more skills funding pots, including for young people and apprenticeships. On the day the white paper was published the Mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority tweeted that skills funding would be one of three areas he will request more power over during forthcoming negotiations with the government.

More institutional reform for schools & colleges

Many of the proposed education and skills reforms are focused on a new programme of structural changes to schools and colleges. Most controversially there is a move to develop new elite sixth forms based on the free school model and to force more local authority schools to join multi-academy trusts. Initial views from key stakeholders highlighted major concerns about a renewed reliance on promoting academies and free schools as the solution to education and skills challenges.

The Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, David Hughes, was quoted as saying said he "would question what evidence there is for the need for new 'elite sixth forms' in our education system." The General Secretary of the NAHT trade union representing school leaders, Paul Whiteman, made a similar point. He highlighted that the announcement appears to fall short of what schools and communities really need and instead "the government appears to have once again reached for simplistic solutions linked to structures and targets". The TUC blog said that "instead the focus should be on boosting funding and resources that are to the benefit of all young people, and especially those from our most disadvantaged communities"

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship trends

The latest data released by the government shows some degree of recovery in the number of people starting apprenticeships during the August-October 2021 quarter. The number starting an apprenticeship was 130,200 compared to 91,100 in the August-October 2020 quarter. This was an increase of 39,100 or 43%. Comparisons with the equivalent quarter in 2019, well before the pandemic hit, shows a much smaller increase of 4,400 (+3%).

Further comparison of this quarterly data from the last three years shows that the large fall in the number of young apprentices (aged under 19) in 2020 has seen a recovery nearly back to the level in 2019. These apprentices in the 2021 quarter accounted for 31% of all starts, compared to 26% in 2020, and 32% in 2019. Apprentices aged 19-24 now comprise 31% of all starts compared to 29% in the 2019 quarter. Apprentices aged 25+ accounted for 38% of starts in both the 2021 and 2019 quarters. The general aged-related apprenticeship picture is of a return to trends from two years ago.

The number of starts by apprenticeship level have seen some change in trends over the last two years for intermediate apprenticeships (level 2) and higher apprenticeships (level 4+), as follows:

- intermediate apprenticeships in the 2021 quarter accounted for 27% of starts compared to 33% in the 2019 quarter
- higher apprenticeships in the 2021 quarter accounted for 29% of starts compared to 24% in the 2019 quarter.

These trends are being driven by a number of factors, including the development of new apprenticeship standards increasing the scope of higher level apprenticeships and reducing the scope of intermediate apprenticeships. The apprenticeship levy has also influenced matters, with evidence that levy-paying employers have been partly recouping their funding by providing higher-level apprenticeship opportunities to existing staff. The proportion of advanced apprenticeships (level 3) has remained relatively stable, accounting for 43% of starts in the 2021 quarter compared to 44% in the 2019 quarter. Annual data going back before the apprenticeship levy started in 2017 shows an even greater rate of decline in intermediate apprenticeships, e.g., falling from 57% of starts in 2015/16 to 26% of starts in 2020/21.

Apprenticeships in Manufacturing Group

The Minister for Skills, Alex Burghart MP, announced the launch of a new *Apprenticeships in Manufacturing Group (AiM)* during National Apprenticeship Week in February. An overview of the initiative is available on the website of Make UK, the employer body for the manufacturing sector. This describes AiM as a new partnership between industry and Government to grow the number of high-quality apprenticeships in the manufacturing sector. The Minister said: "The group has my full support in its vital agenda to grow the number of high-quality apprenticeships, the opportunities for young people, the number of manufacturing SMEs offering apprenticeships, and apprenticeships in new and Net Zero sectors."

Bhavina Bharkhada, head of policy & campaigns at Make UK, said: "Make UK are delighted to be a founding member of the Department for Education's Apprenticeships in Manufacturing group. Apprenticeships and apprentices are the lifeblood of UK manufacturing, innovating, creating and making our future a reality. Through collaboration and coordination, the AiM will be the collective voice for promoting manufacturing engineering apprentices amongst SMEs, boosting apprentices across the country in our sector, and leading the way in developing apprenticeships ready for our digital and green future."

The AiM group will be chaired by Anita Davenport-Brooks of the Lander Group. The following nine organisations will be represented on it: Cogent Skills; Engineering and Machinery Alliance (EAMA); Enginuity; Food and Drink Federation (FDF); Furniture Interiors Education Skills & Training Alliance (FIESTA); Make UK; National Skills Academy for Food and Drink (NSAFD); UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT); and, the UK Metals Council (UKMC).

The Minister announced the new initiative at an event hosted by the National Manufacturing Skills Task Force. The Task Force was established by a number of employer bodies, trade unions and sector skills bodies in 2020 with a commitment to "work collectively to improve the situation and ensure that manufacturing in all its many forms has the talent it needs to rebound successfully post-pandemic and post-Brexit". A number of employer bodies and the TUC and Unite were founding members of the Task Force and are represented on it. In addition to close links with the Task Force, AiM will regularly engage with various government departments including DfE, BEIS, DEFRA, DWP and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.