unionlearn

Learning & Skills Policy Update

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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 and TUC 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): DfE (Department for Education); UKCES (UK Commission for Employment and Skills); SSCs (Sector Skills Councils); and LEPs (Local Enterprise Partnerships).

Apprenticeships

Government policy

To a large degree the new government's policy approach on learning and skills is building on the key policy developments implemented by the previous coalition government. However, apprenticeships have been given an even higher profile with an ambitious target of 3 million starts during the current Parliament and legislation requiring the government to report annually on progress against meeting this target. The government has also established a new "implementation taskforce" made up of ministers from across all departments to drive forward achievement of the apprenticeship target and other measures to make sure that all young people are either "earning or learning".

All these commitments are set out in the Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill which was announced in the Queen's Speech. This legislation will also put in place a new Youth Allowance for 18-21 year olds with stronger work related conditions, including that after 6 months they will be required to go on an apprenticeship, training or community work placement.

A recent BIS press release has also highlighted that, in addition to enshrining in law the commitment to create 3 million apprenticeships by 2020, the government has made the following two important commitments:

- apprenticeships to be given equal legal treatment as degrees
- public sector bodies will be set targets to help reach 3 million.

The press release says that the "Skills Minister will legally protect the term 'apprenticeship' through the Enterprise Bill [and] this will give government the power to take action when the term is misused to promote low quality courses". Commenting on the new requirements on public sector employers, the Minister said the following: "We want far more employers to get involved in apprenticeships. This means making sure that we practise what we preach in government, so we're going to require all public sector bodies – schools, hospitals, prisons and police forces – to employ apprentices."

In further support of the apprenticeship policy, the BIS Secretary of State, Sajid Javid, has announced a new scheme to place apprentices in small and medium companies quoted on AIM, London Stock Exchange's growth market for ambitious small and medium businesses. The scheme will be run by City Gateway, an educational charity based in Tower Hamlets which supports disadvantaged and disengaged young people and women into employment through training and apprenticeships in partnership with the business community. Commenting on this particular government initiative, the TUC General Secretary said:

"High-quality apprenticeships are essential to improving opportunities for young people to enter decent jobs. We welcome the Business Secretary's announcement of the new scheme for AIM quoted companies and its potential to give more young people the opportunity of an apprenticeship, especially those who are currently disadvantaged in the labour market. The government still has more work to do to ensure that all apprentices receive a decent wage, so we encourage ministers to prioritise progress on pay. Apprenticeships must never be exploited to get labour on the cheap, and it is essential that low pay is not a barrier to disadvantaged groups entering apprenticeships."

IPPR research

A recent report by IPPR focusing on the role that local government can play in support of apprenticeships, has also highlighted some of the major policy challenges that face government. Some of the key findings are as follows:

- Two-thirds of apprentices are people who were already employed by their company, rather than new recruits.
- Since 2010, 42% of starting apprentices have been over the age of 25, rather than being young people finding their way into work.
- A significant proportion of companies are failing to comply with the apprenticeship minimum wage, particularly in sectors such as hairdressing and children's care, and to the particular disadvantage of young people.
- There appears to be a mismatch between the apprenticeships people want to take on and the vacancies available.
- There is a particular concern over the poor quality of some apprenticeships – particularly in certain sectors and with certain providers – and falling success rates since 2010/11.
- There continue to be concerns centred on the quality of careers education, information, advice and guidance in schools.

Union engagement with apprenticeships and traineeships

A recent unionlearn report - Helping Young People into Work - details the work of trade unions, working with unionlearn, to help young people into work. The report highlights a range of activities to develop quality apprenticeship and traineeship programmes to help young people develop the skills they need. The report collects together a range of case studies that puts the spotlight on the work unions and unionlearn have engaged in with a range of companies and organisations, including Asda, EDF, the NHS, DHL and Caterpillar.

Consultation on adult vocational education

The TUC has welcomed aspects of a government consultation aimed at expanding the number of opportunities for adults to access higher level vocational education. In its submission to the BIS consultation on a dual mandate for adult vocational education, the TUC said that it agrees with many of the findings about the need for reforms to incentivise and enable many more individuals to access higher level vocational education.

The submission also emphasises that safeguards need to be put in place to ensure that the proposed “dual mandate” approach does not inadvertently limit progression pathways for certain adult learners, especially those needing a “second chance” because they have been failed by the school system.

However, the TUC submission also highlights the ongoing impact of the significant decline in government funding for FE and skills in recent years and the fact that this has been accompanied by a long-term fall in employer investment in skills. The submission calls for an end to cuts to government funding for FE and skills over the current Parliament and calls for a review of regulatory measures that could be introduced to drive up employer investment in training and skills.

The TUC is also urging the government to give a clear commitment not to extend the FE loan system to cover people aged 19-23 and lower-level qualifications, as proposed in a separate consultation paper issued last year. To incentivise more adults to take up learning, the submission proposes the introduction of individual tax relief for training. The TUC argues that this could be achieved on a cost-neutral basis by reforming and redistributing the existing corporate tax relief provision that employers can claim for work-related training.

Union advantage research report

A new unionlearn research report – Skills and training: the union advantage – by Leeds Business School shows that trade union members are much more likely to receive job-related training compared to non-unionised workers. The report analyses data for the period 2001-2013 and shows that the "union effect" on training is very significant and has strengthened in recent years.

The analysis finds that, during and after the recent recession, the advantage of being in a trade union for job-related training was even more pronounced. Between 2008 and 2013, the proportion of union members accessing regular training went up from 36.8 per cent to 38.9 per cent. The trend for non-unionised employees was the opposite – down from 23.4 per cent to 22.9 per cent. In other words, in 2013 nearly four in ten union members received job-related training compared to just over two in ten non-union members.

Commenting on the research, the TUC General Secretary said: “The evidence shows it is possible to have a win-win situation for both employers and employees, and that unions are playing a hugely positive role in boosting skills and productivity. The bounce back in training in unionised workplaces in recent years is further evidence of the positive role unions have played in negotiating with employers to minimise layoffs and to safeguard skills since the recession hit the UK economy. It also shows that unions can play to their strengths in those workplaces with active union learning representatives and where the union negotiates directly with the employer about learning and skills."

A unionlearn blog about the report highlights that the research also shows that even when you strip out other factors (e.g. occupation, sector etc.), union members were still a third more likely to receive regular training at work compared with non-unionised employees. In effect this isolates the "union effect" and shows that union membership boosts access to training notwithstanding other factors. The blog also highlight other key findings from the research, including that proactive union engagement in learning and skills in the workplace is directly associated with higher wages, better job security and improved organisational performance.

The analysis in the blog says that these additional research findings strongly suggest that where unions take the lead on learning and skills, the likelihood is that productivity is also boosted. While the research did not technically measure the "productivity impact", it is justifiable to argue that the evidence of improved access to training, higher pay, better job security and improved organisational performance all point to a productivity boost in those workplaces with a proactive union approach on learning and training.

Union Learning Fund research

A new unionlearn report – Union Learning Survey - estimates that each £1 invested in the Union Learning Fund (ULF) generates a total economic return of £10.25. The report, compiled by Exeter University, estimates that £5.75 of that return goes to individuals and £4.50 to employers.

The Union Learning Survey report contains the findings of a survey of over 2,500 people who took part in learning as a result of support provided through Round 15 of the Union Learning Fund (ULF). The report shows the value added by the projects and the return on investment for employers and government.

The overall impact of investment in ULF Round 15 is estimated at around £1,025 million. The total benefit is split between:

- individuals – £580 million, made up of £470 million from higher wages and £110 million as a result of being more likely to be in employment
- employers – £445 million – resulting from the greater productivity of a better skilled workforce (less output lost as a result of working time taken to engage in learning).

A limited model, focused on tax receipts, suggests that the fiscal return to the Exchequer from learning generated by ULF Round 15 amounts to £250m or, taking delivery costs into account, generates an estimated return of £2.50 for each £1 of public funding invested in ULF Round 15.

Commenting on the research, the Director of unionlearn – Tom Wilson – said: "The survey shows that not only are unions reaching learners that would not readily engage with the learning system and improving their confidence and skills, but that we are doing it in a cost effective and highly productive way. This is a great example of unions helping those who aspire and improving the economy at the same time."

ULF and unionlearn evaluation

Unionlearn is commissioning research to evaluate the operation of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and unionlearn's role supporting ULF-funded projects. The research will focus on the recently completed Round 15 and the current Round 16, which began in April this year. The research will provide a comprehensive evaluation of these ULF projects by assessing the extent to which ULF projects and unionlearn have met their objectives under the relevant rounds.

As well as highlighting the positive impact of activity under Rounds 15 and 16, the research will explore the challenges and barriers that projects and unionlearn faced when trying to achieve their objectives. An analysis of best practice and lessons learned from Rounds 15 and 16 will form the basis of a series of detailed recommendations which will help future ULF projects and unionlearn build upon the continuous improvement evidenced through previous rounds of the ULF.

Unionlearn has released an invitation to tender and the closing date is 3 July. The most recent independent evaluations are available on the unionlearn website.

Survey of ULRs and union reps

Union activity in the workplace in support of learning and skills is being mainstreamed across a wider cohort of union reps, rather than just union learning reps (ULRs). This is the main finding of a new unionlearn report analysing the results of its 2014 survey of ULRs and union reps.

Unionlearn conducted the survey of union reps engaged in supporting learning at work at the end of 2014 to get an up-to-date picture of their activities in the workplace. People were invited to respond if they were an existing ULR or another kind of union rep involving a role in supporting learning and skills in the workplace. In addition, people were invited to respond if they had been a ULR or a union rep involved in supporting learning and skills in the past but had since given up the role.

A total of 880 individuals responded to the survey; 56% of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and a large number of them were combining this with another union rep role. Nearly one respondent in 10 said that they currently did not hold any union post. It is estimated that around a third of respondents were union representatives without a specific ULR remit, but who had some form of engagement with the learning agenda.

The survey shows that the union learning agenda continues to attract a more diverse range of union activists compared with the characteristics of the total population of union reps. Nearly half of the respondents were women, compared to the 2009 ULR survey showing the proportion of women previously peaking at 43%.

Ninety two per cent of the reps said that their activities had raised awareness of learning among colleagues while 81% had directly helped colleagues who had little or no experience of learning. Seventy eight per cent said that that as a result of their activities they had directly helped increase the number of colleagues accessing training opportunities.

Sixty one per cent of reps reported that a formal learning agreement was in existence in their organisation or workplace. This compares favourably with the 2009 ULR survey in which 57% of ULRs reporting the existence of a learning agreement.

Commenting on the findings, Tom Wilson, unionlearn director, said: "It is hugely positive that learning and skills is increasingly being promoted by a wider mix of union reps. Due to the innovative activities of union learning reps (ULRs) over the years, learning at work is now a priority for all parts of the union movement. It is also very welcome that three fifths of reps reported that formal learning agreements negotiated with employers were in force in their organisations, as this evidences a high degree of employer engagement."

English and maths

ETF review

During the past 12 months there has been a series of policy reviews focused on English and maths for adult learners, including the future role of functional skills qualifications. These reviews culminated in the Skills Minister commissioning the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in November 2014 to consider how maths and English provision and qualifications available to people aged over 16 years, other than GCSEs, are understood by and meet the expectations of employers and learners. The review asked employers, learners and other stakeholders, including unions, their opinion of functional skills and other non-GCSE maths and English qualifications. It also asked whether they understand and value them and whether these qualifications recognise the skills employers require in the workplace.

Unionlearn organised a consultative meeting with the ETF review team which was attended by a wide range of affiliated unions. The key message that unionlearn and the unions highlighted was to emphasise that the GCSE route is not always the most useful and motivating option for employers and adult learners. This viewpoint was also the centrepiece of unionlearn's submission to an earlier review undertaken by NIACE on behalf of the government regarding implementation of the new English and maths GCSEs into post-16 education. This submission had been informed by two union workshops facilitated by unionlearn.

The final report of the ETF Review - Making Maths and English Work for All - reflected the views of 1,400 employers, learners, training organisations and other key stakeholders, including unions. The review's conclusions highlight that many employers, like unions, are aware of functional skills qualifications and value them. The study showed that 47% of larger employers know about functional skills and that 87% of these employers value them for their approach to applied skills, flexible assessment and problem solving.

The review also recognised that functional skills should be viewed as qualifications in their own right and pointed out that many young people and adults need an alternative route to improve their English and maths skills, not just the GCSE route. Another key finding was that functional skills should not be simply viewed as a 'stepping stone' to help learners achieve GCSE but as "a qualification in its own right with the key purpose of satisfying employer requirements".

On the other hand, the review did conclude that functional skills qualifications could be improved and awareness of their purpose and value could be widened. The Skills Minister welcomed the review's findings and recommendations, which he said showed "the current functional skills system is generally serving its purpose, and reflects the Government's commitment to ensure all adults have the opportunity to study English and maths".

Commenting on the report, Tom Wilson, unionlearn director, said: "We have found that adult learners appreciate functional skills because they are relevant to them in their everyday and working lives. Functional skills also provide more flexibility in the way they are assessed than more academic qualifications such as GCSEs. It is gratifying to see that the employers share unions' positive attitude to functional skills. For years now, trade unions have been successfully supporting adult learners to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. Unions drew on this experience in giving their views to the review. Now it is time to build more awareness of functional skills and engage more employers to offer functional skills learning."

BIS research on numeracy and literacy skills

Earlier this year BIS published a research paper - International Evidence Review of Basic Skills: Learning from High-performing and Improving Countries - which investigated possible measures to improve the English and maths skills of the workforce. The research looked at provision in four countries - Netherlands, Norway, Canada and South Korea – in order to inform best practice. The report's findings demonstrate a similar focus in the case-study countries on workplace provision of English and maths skills and identified a need for provision to be made available throughout all stages of learning. It also identified a generational effect, with the level of parents' education having a particularly strong impact on the skills levels of young people in England.

The lessons for England include:

- Policy makers should give as much attention to implementation as to policy development. For example, more adults need to be made aware of the funded Level 2 literacy and numeracy learning opportunities and more guidance was needed for those who take this up.
- Policy makers should ensure that funding is long-term in nature to allow providers to understand local need, develop appropriate provision and build capacity. Funding also needs to be invested in rigorous evaluations of literacy and numeracy initiatives, which take a broad view of the impacts of provision rather than focusing only on short-term outcomes.
- Workplace programmes should be tailored to the needs of the workplaces in which they are situated in terms of the relevance of the content of the training to the literacy and numeracy demands on the workforce, and should be relevant and flexible enough to avoid disrupting the smooth running of the business.

Technician Pathways project

Unionlearn is currently leading a Technician Pathways project which is supporting progression for the technician workforce, recognising the valuable contribution they make both to the economy and to our lives more broadly. The primary aim of the project is to develop positive and sustainable relationships between professional bodies, trade unions, employers and others with a view to encouraging and supporting more workers to take up technician registration. Registration provides benefits in the form of access to continuous professional development (CPD), opportunities for progression, further training and increased recognition and status.

The project is funded by the Gatsby Foundation, which has recently published a pamphlet, Our Work Supporting Technicians. This describes their work with a range of partners, including trade unions, to raise the status of technicians' and to enhance access to more training and development through technician registration schemes.

The unionlearn Technician Pathways project is working closely with similar initiatives in support of the technician workforce, including the EngTechNow project. EngTechNow is promoting the benefits of individuals registering for EngTech status, which is awarded by professional engineering institutions (PEIs) on behalf of the Engineering Council. Unionlearn also contributed to the recent EngTechNow campaign report highlighting the looming skills gap in engineering, The Experience Gap.

Unionlearn's contribution to the report highlighted that the majority of the 2020 technician workforce is already in the workplace and therefore providing up-skilling opportunities to these employees is crucial. However, meeting this challenge will require a strong partnership approach by government, trade unions and employers. Employees need better support, such as the role of union learning reps (ULRs) advising and helping colleagues to identify learning opportunities to support their career progression. More employers also need to be made aware of how they can benefit from providing financial support for schemes like professional registration which enhance access to learning resources and continuous professional development (CPD).

The launch of the EngTechNow report took place in Parliament in March and this was accompanied by formal signings of the EngTechNow charter. Two unions – TSSA and Prospect - signed the charter as a commitment to take practical steps to provide support for technician workers and apprentices in achieving professional status.

Manuel Cortes, General Secretary of TSSA, said:

"Engineering is the lifeblood that keeps our modern society working 24/7 365 days a year. It is the heart and soul of British industry. We need to do all we can to ensure that we do all in our powers to recognise and support that vital role."

Dai Hudd, Deputy General Secretary of Prospect, said:

"In signing the EngTechNow charter, Prospect is signalling the importance it attaches to developing and safeguarding a skilled workforce. As the union representing skilled workers, Prospect aims through its RegTech project to promote and support the registration of not only engineering technicians, but also IT and science technicians in the many workplaces where its members can be found."

The other signatories of the charter included two major infrastructure projects, Crossrail and Thames Tideway, and eight engineering employers: Balfour Beatty, Carillion, Doosan Babcock, EON, Jaguar Land Rover, NG Bailey, QinetiQ and Royal Mail.

Other research papers

In recent months the OECD has published two major skills policy paper focusing on the important economic and social gains from ensuring that all citizens achieve minimum skill levels. One of these reports – Universal Basic Skills: what countries stand to gain – highlights how even modest improvements in the quality of education by 2030 could generate more wealth by the end of this century than is spent on primary and secondary schools today. The aim of all countries should therefore be to ensure that every child not only has access to education but, through that education, acquires at least the baseline level of skills needed to participate fully in society.

Another major report – OECD Skills Outlook 2015: Youth Skills and Employability – also focuses on the urgency of equipping all young people and young adults with the baseline level of skills. It reports that 35 million 16-29 year-olds across OECD countries are neither employed nor in education or training and are twice as likely as prime-age workers to be unemployed. The OECD contends that: too many young people are not acquiring the skills they need to make a smooth transition from education to the workplace; many of the young people who do manage to find work are not using the skills they acquired during their schooling; and, young people are best integrated into the labour market when education systems and employers work together to help young people match their skills to prospective jobs.

The World Economic Forum recently launched its Human Capital Report, 2015. This includes a Human Capital Index which quantifies how countries are developing and deploying their human capital and tracks progress over time. The index provides comprehensive information on the talent base in each country, including information on education levels of the employed, unemployed and the inactive members of the population as well as the specific qualifications of the latest entrants to the workforce.

Globally, Finland tops the rankings of the Human Capital Index in 2015, scoring 86% out of a possible 100. Norway (2), Switzerland (3), Canada (4) and Japan (5) make up the rest of the top five. They are among a group of only 14 nations that have crossed the 80% threshold. Among other large advanced economies, France is in 14th position, while the United States is in 17th position, scoring just under 80%. The United Kingdom holds the 19th spot and Germany 22nd. Among the BRICS, The Russian Federation (26) scores highest with a score of 78%, with China next at 64, having optimized 67% of its human capital. Brazil is in 78th place, followed by South Africa (92) and India (100).