

Learning & Skills Policy Update

June 2018

• Introduction	1
• Fully funded courses for low-paid learners	1
• Apprenticeships	2
• T levels	3
• Unionlearn resources	4

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. The newsletter and a range of learning and skills policy briefings are available on the [unionlearn](#) and [TUC](#) websites.

Fully funded courses for low-paid learners

The Department for Education (DfE) is running a one-year trial to fund learners who earn less than £15,726.50 per year. This means that those who are employed on low wages can access learning for free.

The current rules provide for full funding for: unemployed adults; young people (aged 19 to 23) with skills below level 2; and, adults aged 19 and over without English and maths up to level

2. Those who are outside these groups would typically have to pay half of the course cost. To receive full funding in the trial learners would be people who fall within this category and who currently earn less than £15,736.50 a year.

It is also possible for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners to be entitled for this funding if they meet the above-mentioned conditions.

The £15,726.50 annual gross salary cut-off is based on the Social Mobility Commission's low-pay threshold of £8.07 (hourly rate in 2016) and on the assumption of a 37.5-hour contract with paid statutory holiday entitlement. The learners can use their pay-slips or employment contract to demonstrate that they are eligible for full funding.

The trial starts on 1 August 2018 and lasts until 31 July 2019. More details are available in the [Adult Education Budget \(AEB\) funding rules 2018 to 2019](#).

In London, the mayor's new [Skills Plan](#) for Londoners has a similar proposal in place from 2019/2020 when the Adult Education Budget will be devolved. However, this will be available to those on a higher wage level because the pay threshold will mirror the London living wage. This means that those on an annual salary of less than £19,890 in London and £17,062.50 outside London will be also eligible for free learning.

Apprenticeships

Gender imbalance in STEM sector

Only eight per cent of STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) apprenticeship starts are by women according to a new report. The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) has released a report, [Delivering STEM skills for the economy](#), which emphasises the importance of STEM skills to the UK economy. The report highlights continuing concerns about shortages of these skills and the impact of this on productivity and related economic issues.

A previous report proposed setting targets for women STEM apprentices along the lines of the targets set by the government for Black and minority ethnic (BME) apprentices and those with learning disabilities. However, since over half of apprentices are women, there has been a reluctance among policy makers to adopt a similar approach by establishing STEM-specific performance measures for women apprentices.

The report also identifies that monitoring apprenticeship quality is a major challenge, saying the following: “Ofsted will play an important role in assessing the quality of apprenticeship programmes being delivered by individual providers, but it is unclear whether DfE has systems in place to identify poor quality provision in a timely way and take appropriate action.”

The report highlights that STEM skills are even more important as we move towards exiting from the European Union. Like many previous reports, it also says that the patchy quality of careers advice at schools is another barrier to promoting the wider take-up of STEM apprenticeships and qualifications.

The report asks government departments to develop a better understanding of STEM skills in the workforce and demonstrate the steps

they are making to ensure STEM skills shortages are addressed. The Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) being set up to work with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) have to step up to prove they are aware of the wider importance of STEM skills. Additionally, there’s a recommendation for adding more practical and commercial experience in government STEM boards.

The Young Women’s Trust (YWT) has released a new research report on the under-representation of women in apprenticeships within engineering, construction and ICT occupations. [Equality at work? Positive action in gender segregated apprenticeships](#) shows that women are not adequately represented in well-paid sectors with significant skills gaps and higher quality apprenticeship schemes.

The research draws attention to the proportion of women engineering apprentices, a group that has declined from 4.6 per cent in 2002 to 3.1 per cent in 2015. In construction, there are three female apprentices to every 98 male apprentices. In the ICT sector, there are 35 females to every 186 male apprentices.

YWT calls on employers to take positive action to encourage increased numbers of applicants from under-represented groups. They also call on the government to set national targets to increase the number of women in sectors where they are under-represented. The measures YWT supports are:

- making use of the ‘tiebreak’ provision in law that allows them to shortlist and appoint a woman over a man where they are equally qualified;
- providing women-only work experience, taster events, training days and mentoring to encourage more women to apply; and
- targeting job adverts at women.

A report from the Gatsby Foundation and Learning & Work Institute has also called for new strategies to encourage more women from all backgrounds to apply for engineering apprenticeships. According to the report, [Understanding the under-representation of women in engineering apprenticeships](#), success on this front would help to help tackle skills shortages in the engineering sector and begin to close the gender pay gap. Some of the key findings include the following:

- Women are much less likely to apply for apprenticeships in the sector: nearly 35 per cent of male applicants for apprenticeships choose engineering, compared to less than 4 per cent of women.
- Women applicants tend to be less persistent than their male counterparts: only 25 per cent of unsuccessful female applicants for engineering apprenticeships try again, compared to 43 per cent of unsuccessful male applicants.
- Women from a Black and minority ethnic (BME) background are significantly less likely to apply to the sector than their white counterparts (2.5 per cent compared to 3.6 per cent).
- To achieve gender parity in engineering, the report recommends greater encouragement of applications from women and more support during the apprenticeship to enable them to complete successfully.

Apprenticeship levy transfer extended

From July 2018 onwards employers can transfer up to 10 per cent of their apprenticeship levy funds to as many employers as they choose. According to the [DfE](#) only two per cent of all employers have to pay the levy but the levy revenue pays for more than 40 per cent of the apprenticeships started this year.

The previous rules stated that employers could only transfer 10 per cent of their levy funds to a single employer. For employers the levy transfer option is an opportunity to work closely with their supply chains, for instance, by encouraging supply chain employers to recruit apprentices and fully funding this via the levy transfer flexibility. This option may also help large employers to spend more of their levy funds if they are unable to use up all their levy contributions by recruiting apprentices in their own organisations.

T levels

The government has announced its latest plans to implement new [T levels](#) as the main college-based alternative to academic education post 16. The first T levels courses will be delivered in construction, education & childcare, and digital from September 2020 with 22 more courses to follow by 2023. At Level 3, The T level courses will be the vocational equivalent of A levels.

DfE also named the first 54 colleges and post-16 providers who will be delivering the new T levels. The qualifications' course content will be created by expert panels of employers. A three-month compulsory industry placement is required for T levels to give young people the experience and wider skills they need to be ready for the world of work. Standards will be assured by Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA).

The IfA also [released](#) a content outline for three T level pathways for consultation:

- Construction (Design, surveying and planning)
- Digital (Digital Production, Design and Development)
- Education and Childcare

[Unionlearn](#) responded to this latest announcement on T levels, as follows:

“T levels provide an opportunity to bridge the gap between vocational education and high-quality apprenticeships and strengthen the skills on offer for young people. High quality industry placements will be essential to the success of T levels. This means employers need to engage strongly and commit to helping overcome future skills challenges. Trade unions have a key role to play in agreeing and monitoring quality criteria and ensuring work placements are safe, supported and effective.”

New construction sector fund

The DfE has [announced](#) a £22 million Construction Skills Fund to bring training to construction sites, allowing learners to apply their knowledge in a real-world environment. The scheme is set to tackle the sector’s skills shortages and will last 18 months. It will be administered by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB). According to the DfE press release, the initiative “will help meet the needs of employers and tackle the construction skills shortage, while also supporting those who want to join the industry, particularly adult learners.”

The expectation is that 158,000 new construction jobs will be created in the UK over the next five years. The fund is part of the government’s Industrial Strategy and target’s future skills needs. The aim is to deliver the training on construction sites to help trainees to be ready to work on-site sooner than under many existing construction training programmes.

The fund aims to support:

- 20 on-site training hubs.
- Work experience and placements for people working to join the industry.

- Entry pathways for those currently unemployed.
- Pathways for career changers.

Unionlearn resources

Unionlearn has a number of new resources available on the [website](#) to support union reps and officers to promote workplace learning:

- An updated and ever-popular *Apprenticeships Toolkit* includes all the latest rights and regulations, including the 20 per cent off-the-job training rule.
- *Apprenticeships levy – 15 useful negotiating tips* has also been updated to address recent changes.
- *Helping young people into work and training* includes five case studies about union engagement in innovative pre-apprenticeship and pre-employment programmes aimed at supporting young people at the start of their working lives.
- *Promoting union learning – the reps who spread the word* summarises the latest findings from a survey of union reps who are helping their co-workers to acquire and develop the skills that enable them to improve their job prospects and their home lives.
- *Supporting Black and minority ethnic apprentices* is a new resource to help union reps and officers to explore how they can work with employers to build a diverse apprenticeship population in the workplace.

All these resources can be downloaded from the unionlearn website and hard copies can also be ordered.