

# unionlearn

## **Survey of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills, 2017**



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## Introduction

In Spring 2017 unionlearn conducted a survey of union reps engaged in supporting learning at work to get an up-to-date picture of their activities in the workplace, including the main opportunities and challenges that they identified in promoting the union learning agenda. The survey was undertaken online and the data collected using Survey Monkey.

People were invited to respond if they were an existing union learning rep (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.

Fifty-eight per cent of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Only four per cent of respondents said that they currently did not hold a union post. It is estimated that 38% of respondents were union representatives without a specific ULR remit but who had some form of engagement with the learning agenda.

A total of 962 individuals responded to the survey but in some cases the response rate for specific questions was lower than this. Where this is statistically significant the actual response rate for the specific question is given in the relevant table or chart.

In order to maintain a degree of consistency over time, the questions in the 2017 survey were largely based on the questions used in previous surveys commissioned or produced by unionlearn. The current survey closely follows the questions in unionlearn's 2014 survey<sup>1</sup>, which was the first time that we surveyed ULRs and other union reps about their role in supporting learning and skills in the workplace (previous unionlearn surveys had largely focused on the role of ULRs). Both the 2014 and 2017 surveys were undertaken online with the data collected using Survey Monkey and the sample sizes for both these surveys are very similar.

However, in some cases comparisons are made with the trends from earlier ULR surveys commissioned by unionlearn and to a certain degree such comparisons must be treated with a degree of caution for two reasons. First, the surveys conducted before 2014 only looked at the role of ULRs and did not include other union reps in their samples (unless of course they were combining this with their ULR role, e.g., union reps operating as ULRs and Health and Safety reps). Secondly, most of the surveys undertaken before 2014 used a very different methodology involving postal questionnaires distributed to all ULRs on the unionlearn database in order to establish a statistically robust sample size. The ULR surveys produced on this basis before 2014 are available on the unionlearn website.<sup>2</sup>

## Executive summary

### Some key messages

In line with the 2014 survey, this latest survey was aimed more widely at both ULRs and other union reps engaged in supporting learning and skills more widely. Unionlearn changed the focus of its regular surveys from 2014 onwards because it was becoming increasingly evident that many union reps were supporting learning and skills even if they were not ULRs. In addition, we wished to see if various strategies in recent years by unionlearn and affiliated unions to mainstream learning and skills support among all union reps were bearing fruit. For example, in recent years unionlearn has embedded the union learning agenda into training courses for all union reps.

Nearly two fifths (38%) of respondents to the 2017 survey were not ULRs and had responded on the basis that they were a union rep with a degree of engagement in the union learning agenda. In comparison, the equivalent response rate for non-ULR respondents in the 2014 survey was 33%. This trend suggests that union activity in the workplace in support of learning and skills is being mainstreamed across a wider cohort of union reps and that this is a growing trend.

As identified in previous ULR surveys, 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 (46%) of the respondents to our current survey of ULRs and union reps were women, whilst the latest available gender statistics for the total population of union reps<sup>3</sup> shows that 43% are women. The age profile of respondents to the 2017 survey is also younger than the age profile of the total population of union reps, though there remain key challenges on this front.

Another positive finding is that our latest survey shows that the combined efforts of ULRs and union reps are largely sustaining the level of activity and impact on learning and skills that was recorded in previous ULR surveys. For example, 92% of the reps said that their activities had raised awareness of learning among colleagues and 83% said that they had directly helped increase the number of colleagues accessing training opportunities.

Finally, the survey shows that the union learning agenda continues to be a major incentive for people to join a union. Eighty-three per cent of respondents said that their activities had increased interest in union membership. While we cannot estimate from the survey how many of these people actually went on to join a union, the latest independent evaluation<sup>4</sup> of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and unionlearn quantifies this to a certain extent. The evaluation found that 46% of non-union members who had engaged in ULF learning or training subsequently went on to join a union.

## **Characteristics of union reps supporting learning and skills**

Marginally more men (54%) than women (46%) responded to the survey. The relatively high proportion of women responding to the survey suggests that learning and skills is a powerful means of attracting more women to become actively involved in union activities in the workplace. The 2014 survey returned a very similar figure (47%). It is notable that these most recent gender breakdowns compare very favourably with the findings from earlier ULR surveys. For example, the previous highest incidence of women reps recorded was 43%, identified in the 2009 ULR survey.

In line with the general trends for all union reps, the age profile of our survey respondents showed that the vast majority - 92% - were aged over 35 years and 32% were aged over 55. Compared with the 2014 survey both these proportions have edged up by one percentage point. But this age profile still compares favourably with the age profile of the total population of union reps<sup>3</sup>, with the latest figures (for 2011) showing that 55% are aged over 50.

The 2017 survey also asked a question about ethnic groups and 90% responded saying they were White British or White Other, with the remaining 10% identifying themselves as from a BAME group. It is estimated that BAME groups in unionised workplaces currently constitute 9% of the workforce.

## **Sector and workplace characteristics**

Around two thirds (65%) of ULRs and other reps were in the public sector compared with just under a quarter (23%) in the private sector. This partly reflects the overall breakdown of union membership in the private and public sectors. Another contributory factor may be that union reps in the public sector are, on average, more likely to get time off from their employers to undertake the necessary training to become a ULR or union rep and to fulfil their union duties in the workplace. These recent trends are generally in line with previous findings over the last decade or so (e.g. according to the 2005 ULR Survey 62% of ULRs were in the public sector and the 2014 survey showed that 66% were).

The latest survey shows that the remaining ULRs and reps that did not select private or public sector (12% of all respondents) were accounted for by those working in the Not for Profit/Voluntary sector (4%) and the Mixed-Public & Private sector (8%).

The survey also asked individuals which sector they work in and the largest proportion of ULRs and union reps were found in the Public Administration sector (22%), which includes local and central government. The second highest proportion was in the Health & Social Work sector (18%). However, there have

been some notable changes since the 2014 survey, which reported that 28% of reps were in the Public Administration sector and 10% were in the Health & Social Work sector. The 2017 survey therefore highlights a significant decline, since 2014, in the proportion of reps in Public Administration (down 6 percentage points) and a major boost in the proportion in Health & Social Work (up 8 percentage points).

Not too surprisingly, 73% of ULRs and union reps were based in companies or organisations with 250 or more employees, where union recognition and collective bargaining is much more likely to be in place.

## **Current and previous union posts**

Over half (58%) of respondents were active ULRs and it is estimated that a third of them were ULRs without any additional responsibilities while two thirds were ULRs that also undertook other union roles (e.g. mainstream union rep, health and safety rep etc.). It is estimated that nearly two fifths (38%) of all respondents were union reps without a specific ULR remit, but who had a degree of engagement with the learning and skills agenda. Active ULRs and union reps were asked how long they had been engaged in these roles – over half (53%) said 4 years or more and a third (33%) said 1-3 years. Only 4% of respondents said they were no longer an active ULR or union rep.

## **Activities to promote learning and skills**

In general the amount of time reps spend on promoting learning and skills has remained relatively consistent over time (e.g. when comparisons are made with previous ULR surveys). However, the 2017 survey did highlight a welcome reduction in the proportion of reps saying they spend no time on these activities (down from 14% in 2014 to 7% in the current survey). Otherwise, a fifth (21%) spend less than 1 hour per week, 47% spend between 1 and 5 hours, and a quarter (25%) commit more than 5 hours to the role (with 12% spending more than 10 hours on it).

The survey shows that the most common activities in support of learning and skills undertaken by ULRs and union reps are providing information and advice (85%) and recruiting/helping to recruit new union members (73%). The respective percentages from the 2014 survey were 83% and 70%.

## **Impact of activities**

More than 9 out of 10 reps (92%) said that their activities raised awareness of learning among colleagues. Two impacts had 83% of reps reporting a positive result: increasing interest in union membership (up from 75% in the 2014 survey); and, increasing access to training. Reps also perceived that their union role had a positive impact on the wider aspects of working life, including promoting dialogue on training with management and improving wider

employment relations in the workplace (positive impacts for both of these were reported by 73% of ULRs and union reps).

The survey also measured impact in terms of increasing access to specific types of learning and training. Around a third of reps said that their activities had led to more individuals accessing: continuing professional development, CPD (36%); training leading to vocational/academic training (36%); job-related training not leading to qualifications (34%); personal interest/leisure courses (32%); and, basic literacy and numeracy skills (30%).

Over a quarter of reps (26%) identified increased take-up of apprenticeships and this was up from 21% in 2014. When asked about the new Apprenticeship Levy, 57% of ULRs and union reps said that they were aware of it and 23% had conducted discussions with management and/or their HR department about its impact.

When asked to provide an estimate of the total number of colleagues that they had helped with learning or training in the last 12 months, over a quarter (28%) of reps estimated that they had helped more than 25 colleagues.

## **Training and support**

The survey posed a number of questions about the training and support that ULRs and other union reps receive. Nearly two thirds (64%) of ULRs said that they had taken the initial ULR training course provided by their own union and two fifths (40%) said that they had taken the TUC course. The respective figures in the 2014 survey were 57% and 50%. However, it should be noted that some of the training courses that respondents say are provided by their own union could well have been provided through the TUC programme.

Accessing time off their normal working duties to engage in union activities in support of learning and skills remains a major barrier faced by a significant number of ULRs and union reps. Over a fifth (22%) of respondents said they received no paid release from their employer and 1 in 10 said they only received a maximum of one hour per week. At the other end of the scale a third reported that they received more than 5 hours per week.

However, three quarters (74%) said they thought that they were given reasonable time off to conduct their ULR/union rep role and 85% said that they had reasonable time-off to undergo ULR/union rep training. Two thirds said they were given reasonable time to discuss individual learning needs and to arrange learning or training for members. Reps were less happy with arrangements that employers make regarding providing cover for their regular job and/or allowing a reduced workload to enable them to conduct their ULR/union rep role (45% said yes to the former and only 27% responded positively to the latter). In addition, 69% reported that work pressures were restricting their ULR/union rep activities.

Nine out of 10 reps said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role and there was a similarly positive response regarding the support of their individual union (88%) and the support provided by unionlearn (85%). Ninety-three per cent said they were happy to continue in their role as a ULR or union rep.

Nearly three fifths (58%) of ULRs and other union reps said that a formal learning agreement was in existence and this was slightly down on the 61% reported in the 2014 survey. Thirty per cent said that there was a union learning centre at their workplace and this was identical to the finding from the 2014 survey.

## Characteristics of ULRs and union reps

A gender breakdown of the survey respondents shows that there were marginally more men (54%) than women (46%) and this is virtually the same breakdown as shown by the 2014 survey. The proportion of women is currently relatively high compared with the findings from earlier ULR surveys commissioned by unionlearn before 2014. These earlier surveys do show the proportion of women ULRs increasing over time. For example, the 2003 ULR survey showed that 38% of ULRs were women and by the 2009 ULR survey this had increased to 43%. It is encouraging that the 2017 survey shows that nearly half of ULRs and other union reps supporting learning and skills are now women.

**Table 1: Age profile of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills (expressed as % of all survey respondents)**

|             | 2017 Survey | 2014 Survey |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 18-24 years | 0.1%        | 0.2%        |
| 25-34 years | 7.8%        | 9.2%        |
| 35-44 years | 18.7%       | 21.0%       |
| 45-54 years | 41.1%       | 38.8%       |
| 55-64 years | 30.2%       | 29.0%       |
| 65+ years   | 2.2%        | 1.8%        |

Table 1 shows the age profile of ULRs and other union reps responding to the 2017 and 2014 surveys. The 2017 survey shows that 73% are aged 45 years+ and this compares with 70% falling within this age group in 2014. In 2017 only 7.9% are aged under 35 and this compares with 9.4% in 2014. The age profile of ULRs and other union reps supporting learning is of course strongly influenced by the much lower union density among the younger employee workforce.

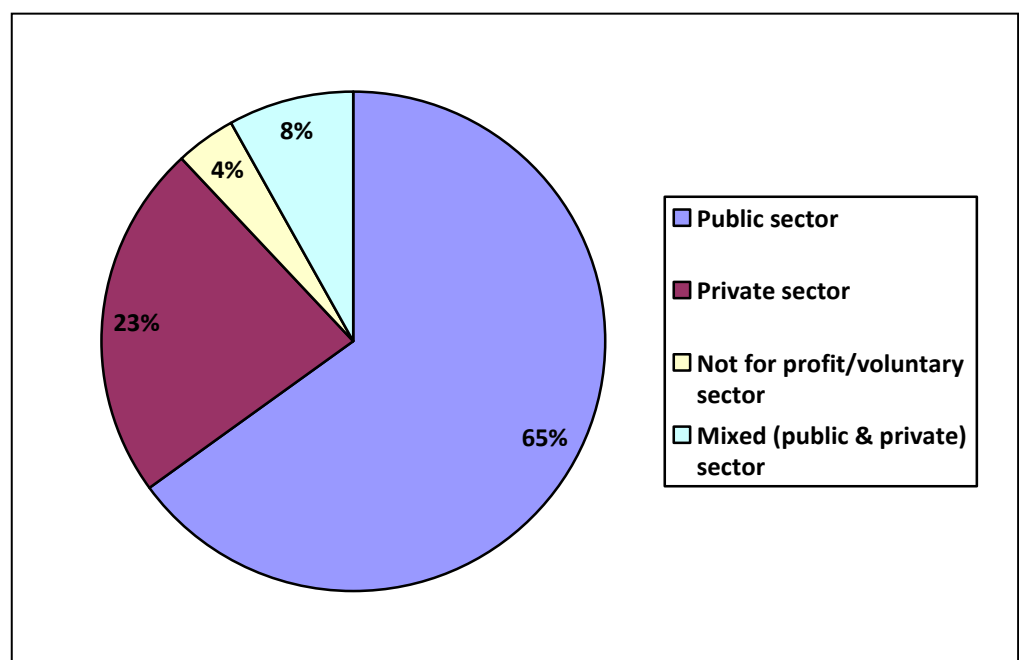
However, it should be noted that the age profile of our survey respondents compares favourably with the age profile of the total population of union reps, with the latest figures (for 2011) <sup>3</sup> showing that 55% of all reps are aged over 50.

The 2017 survey also asked a question about ethnic groups and 90% responded saying they were White British or White Other. The remaining 10% selected the following ethnic groups: Asian or Asian British (2.8%); Black or Black British (3.3%); Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups (1.2%); and, Other Ethnic groups (2.5%). This is a generally positive finding considering that BAME groups in unionised workplaces constitute 9% of the workforce.

## Sector breakdown and workplace characteristics

As shown in Figure 1, nearly two thirds (65%) of the ULRs and union reps responding to the 2017 survey were based in the public sector and just under a quarter (23%) were based in the private sector. Twelve per cent were either based in the not for profit/voluntary sector or mixed (public/private) sectors. To some extent the public/private split partly reflects the number of union members in the private sector which according to the latest union membership statistics represents 42% of total union membership.

**Figure 1: The public private split: where reps are located**



However, this does not fully explain the much higher proportion of reps found in the public sector. Another reason is likely to be that union reps in the public sector are, on average, more likely to get time off from their employers to

undertake the necessary training to become a ULR or union rep and to fulfil their union duties in the workplace.

These recent trends about the public/private split are generally in line with previous findings over the last decade or so (e.g. according to the 2005 ULR Survey 62% of ULRs were in the public sector and the 2014 survey showed that 66% were). The latest survey shows that the remaining ULRs and reps that did not select private or public sector (11.5% of all respondents) were accounted for by those working in the Not for Profit/Voluntary sector (3.9%) and the Mixed (Public & Private) sector (7.6%).

**Table 2: Sector and industry breakdown**

| <i>Which of the following best describes the sector in which you are a ULR/union rep?</i> |                         |                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                     | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Manufacturing                                                                             | 6.1%                    | 53                    |
| Hotels and restaurants                                                                    | 0%                      | 0                     |
| Public administration                                                                     | 21.9%                   | 192                   |
| Electricity, gas and water                                                                | 3.4%                    | 30                    |
| Transport and communications                                                              | 11.1%                   | 97                    |
| Education                                                                                 | 14.1%                   | 123                   |
| Construction                                                                              | 1.7%                    | 15                    |
| Financial services                                                                        | 2.2%                    | 19                    |
| Health and social work                                                                    | 18.3%                   | 160                   |
| Wholesale and retail                                                                      | 6.1%                    | 53                    |
| Other business services                                                                   | 4.7%                    | 41                    |
| Other community services                                                                  | 10.5%                   | 92                    |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                  |                         | <b>875</b>            |

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the proportion of ULRs and union reps in different sectors/industries and to some extent these trends reflect the public/private split highlighted above. In addition the total number of the employee workforce in each sector/industry and the union density for each sector/industry are of course other key factors. On this basis it is not too surprising that large numbers of union reps supporting learning and skills are found in sectors such as Public Administration (includes local and central government) and Health & Social Work and that the lowest proportions are found in the private sector services subsectors (e.g. there were no respondents from the Hotels & Restaurants sector).

Comparing the 2014 and 2017 survey findings, the most significant changes were the relative decline in the proportion of responses from reps in Public Administration (down from 28% to 22%) and the relative increase in the proportion of responses from reps in Health & Social Work (up from 10% to 18%).

ULRs and union reps were asked some additional questions about their workplaces, including the number of employees and whether the union was recognised for collective bargaining. As shown in Table 3, nearly three quarters (73%) of ULRs and union reps were based in companies or organisations with 250 or more employees. Not surprisingly the vast majority (95%) of reps were in workplaces where the union was recognised for collective bargaining.

**Table 3: Organisation/company size and collective bargaining**

| <i>Approximately how many employees are there at your workplace?</i>       |                         |                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                      | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| 0-249                                                                      | 26.7%                   | 234                   |
| 249+                                                                       | 73.3%                   | 641                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                   |                         | 875                   |
| <i>Is your union recognised by the employer for collective bargaining?</i> |                         |                       |
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                      | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Yes                                                                        | 95.1%                   | 830                   |
| No                                                                         | 4.9%                    | 43                    |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                   |                         | 873                   |

## Current and previous union posts

The survey posed several questions about the current and previous union posts that individuals were currently undertaking or had undertaken in the past (see Table 4). According to the responses, 58% of the sample were active ULRs. Twenty per cent of the sample were ULRs in their own right without any additional union rep responsibilities. However, many ULRs were combining this with an additional union rep role as highlighted in Table 4.

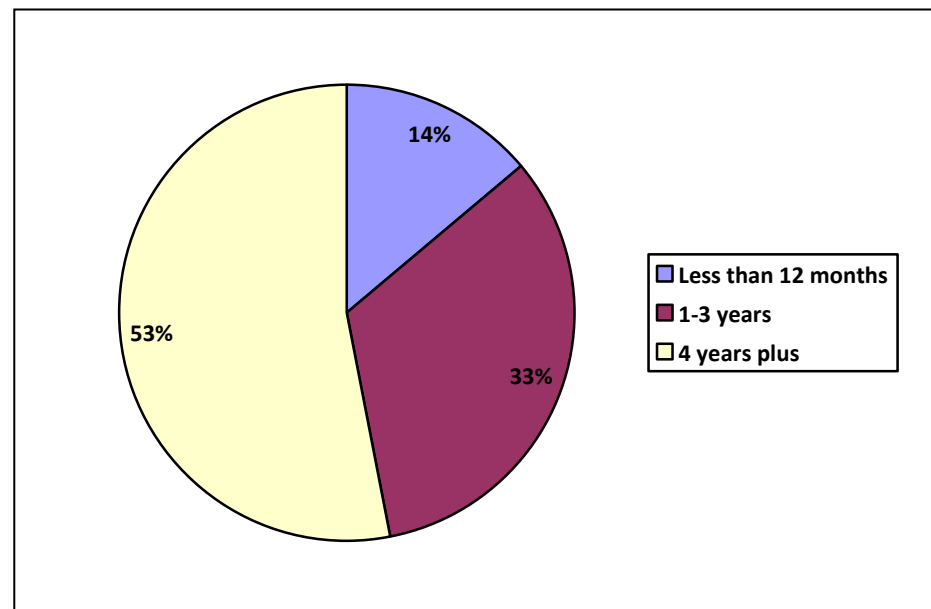
Based on the data in Table 4 we estimate that around a third of active ULRs were ULRs without any additional union posts and that two thirds were ULRs with additional union responsibilities. In addition, 38% of the respondents to the survey were currently supporting learning and skills in the workplace through a union representative role other than being a ULR. Four per cent of respondents currently held no union post.

Those who specified that they were ULRs or union reps were then asked how long that they had fulfilled this role and the durations are shown in Figure 2. Over a half (53%) had been an active ULR or union rep for more than four years and a third had done so for between 1 and 3 years. The respective figures from the 2014 survey were 59% and 36%.

**Table 4: ULRs and other union posts**

| <i>Are you currently a ULR?</i>       |                         |                       |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                 | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Yes                                   | 57.9%                   | 552                   |
| No                                    | 42.1%                   | 401                   |
| <i>Do you hold other union posts?</i> |                         |                       |
| <i>Answer Options</i>                 | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Union Rep                             | 45.1%                   | 429                   |
| Health and Safety Rep                 | 18.3%                   | 174                   |
| Shop Steward                          | 12.2%                   | 116                   |
| Only a ULR                            | 20.0%                   | 190                   |
| I don't hold any union posts          | 4.4%                    | 42                    |

**Figure 2: Duration of union role?**



863 answered question

## Activities undertaken by ULRs and union reps

ULRs and union reps were asked, on average, how many hours a week they dedicated to supporting learning and skills activities at work and outside the workplace. Table 5 shows that seven per cent were not able to spend any time at all on supporting learning and skills and around a fifth (21%) said they

committed less than one hour a week to this task. However, 47% spent between 1 and 5 hours on these union activities and a quarter (25%) committed more than 5 hours to the role (with 12% spending more than 10 hours on it).

**Table 5: Number of hours per week spent on supporting learning and skills**

| <i>In total, approximately how many hours per week do you usually spend on learning and skills activities at work and at home?</i> |                         |                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                                              | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| No time                                                                                                                            | 7.4%                    | 52                    |
| Less than 1 hour                                                                                                                   | 21.0%                   | 147                   |
| 1 to less than 2 hours                                                                                                             | 22.5%                   | 157                   |
| 2 to less than 5 hours                                                                                                             | 24.5%                   | 171                   |
| 5 to less than 10 hours                                                                                                            | 12.3%                   | 86                    |
| More than 10 hours per week                                                                                                        | 12.3%                   | 86                    |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                                                           |                         | 699                   |

Previous surveys of ULRs have also asked this question. The main difference with the 2014 survey is a noticeable reduction in the proportion of ULRs and other reps saying that they were unable to commit any time to their duties (the 2014 survey indicated 14% as opposed to 7% in the 2017 survey). Apart from this there has been a relatively similar trend for a number of years in the amount of time ULRs spend on their duties. For example, the 2007 ULR survey findings were as follows: no time (14%); less than 1 hour (23%); 1 to less than 2 hours (18%); 2 to less than 5 hours (20%); 5 to less than 10 hours (13%); and, more than 10 hours (11%).

The 2017 survey then asked ULRs and union reps to indicate if they had been involved in six key areas of support for learning and skills in the workplace over the past 12 months. Table 6 shows that the most common activities in support of learning and skills undertaken by ULRs and union reps are providing information and advice (85%) and recruiting/helping to recruit new union members (73%). However, over half of respondents said that they also gave priority to arranging (or helping to arrange) courses for colleagues and to meeting/networking with ULRs from other workplaces. The trends identified in Table 6 are generally in line with the findings from the 2014 survey.

These specific questions were also asked in the last main survey of ULRs commissioned by unionlearn in 2009. Comparisons with this much earlier survey show a significant change in relation to the following two responses: helped colleagues to get funding for learning (26% in 2017 and 48% in 2009); and, conducted a learning needs assessment (25% in 2017 and 53% in 2009). One possible reason for these changes over time is that support services, such as learning needs assessments, are ones that non-ULR union reps would not be expected to deliver and they now make up nearly two fifths of the sample.

**Table 6: Learning and skills support provided by ULRs and union reps**

| <i>During the last 12 months (or since becoming a ULR/union rep) have you:</i> |                         |                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                          | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Provided information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities        | 85.0%                   | 573                   |
| Helped colleagues to get funding for learning                                  | 26.4%                   | 178                   |
| Arranged (or helped to arrange) courses for colleagues                         | 55.6%                   | 375                   |
| Recruited (or helped to recruit) new members into the union                    | 72.6%                   | 489                   |
| Conducted a learning needs assessment                                          | 24.8%                   | 167                   |
| Meet and/or networked with ULRs from other workplaces                          | 54.0%                   | 364                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                       |                         | <b>674</b>            |

Another factor could be that the major reductions in funding for FE and adult skills and introduction of FE tuition loans since 2010 have made it increasingly difficult for ULRs to help colleagues in the workplace to get funding for learning. It should be noted that comparisons with the 2009 survey and other previous ULR surveys need to be treated with a degree of caution due to the changes in methodology and the make-up of the sample (see page 4).

## Impact of ULRs and union reps

The survey drew on the questions asked in the 2014 survey (and earlier ULR surveys) to make some assessment of the impact of current activities on learning and skills undertaken by ULRs and union reps. Table 7 sets out a range of “impacts” that respondents were asked to score their activities against by selecting one of three options: positively (yes), yes to a certain degree, or negatively (no). Ninety-two per cent said that they felt that their activities had some effect in raising awareness of learning amongst colleagues (yes [48.6%] and yes to a certain extent [43.6%]). This was exactly the same overall finding as in the 2014 survey which showed 92% of reps saying they had delivered such a positive impact.

Most of the other impact findings in table 7 were generally in line with the 2014 survey and earlier ULR surveys. The most significant difference was relating to the impact of increasing interest in union membership. In the latest survey the two “yes categories” totalled 83% for a positive impact in this area compared to a 75% return in the 2014 survey. It is significant that increasing interest in union membership is now the second highest positive impact in this table (along with the impact of increasing the number of colleagues accessing training which also registered a combined positive rating of 83%).

**Table 7: Impact of activities to promote learning and skills**

| Do you feel that your ULR activity has had any of the following effects? |            |                                 |           |                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
|                                                                          | <i>Yes</i> | <i>Yes, to a certain extent</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Response count</i> |
| Raised awareness of learning amongst colleagues                          | 48.6%      | 43.6%                           | 7.8%      | 667                   |
| Increased interest in union membership                                   | 33.4%      | 49.2%                           | 17.4%     | 668                   |
| Improved relationships between the union and managers                    | 27.0%      | 46.4%                           | 26.7%     | 660                   |
| Increased the number of colleagues accessing training                    | 34.7%      | 48.0%                           | 17.3%     | 660                   |
| Increased the amount of training for individual colleagues               | 33.6%      | 44.3%                           | 22.0%     | 654                   |
| Helped colleagues who had no/little experience of learning               | 36.1%      | 41.3%                           | 22.6%     | 656                   |
| Improved management/union dialogue on learning                           | 25.8%      | 47.6%                           | 26.6%     | 662                   |

*Question answered by 674 respondents*

The next highest responses regarding the positive effects of union learning activities undertaken by reps in 2017 related to increasing the amount of training for individual colleagues (78%) and helping colleagues who had no/little experience of learning (77%). Union engagement in learning and skills clearly also has a positive spin off for promoting wider dialogue with management on this issue as well as improving wider employment relations in the workplace. In the 2017 survey 73% of reps cited a positive effect in relation to both these impacts.

The survey also asked a range of questions relating to how the work of ULRs and other union reps impacted on the number of individuals engaging in specific forms of learning and training during the previous 12 months (see Table 8). Around a third of all reps said that their activities had had a positive impact in supporting more individuals at their workplace to undertake: continuing professional development, CPD (36%); training leading to vocational/academic training (36%); job-related training not leading to qualifications (34%); personal interest/leisure courses (32%); and, basic literacy and numeracy skills (30%).

There was slightly less impact on apprenticeship numbers (26% of reps cited an increase) and the lowest finding was for increased take-up of work experience, internships and traineeships for young people (14% of reps cited an increase). The impact of ULRs and union reps in boosting the numbers engaged in apprenticeships showed an increase on the finding from the 2014 survey (up from 21% to 26%). In line with similar findings from other parts of the survey, the ability of ULRs and union reps to support young people into learning and training

(especially work experience and traineeships) will be lower for reasons outside their control, especially the much lower union density found among the youngest people in the labour market.

**Table 8: Impact on specific types of learning and training**

| <b>As a result of your ULR/union rep activity in the organisation that you work for, over the last 12 months (or since becoming a ULR/union rep) has the number of your members involved in:</b> |                  |                        |                  |                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <i>Increased</i> | <i>Stayed the same</i> | <i>Decreased</i> | <i>Response count</i> |
| Training leading to nationally recognised vocational or academic qualifications                                                                                                                  | 35.8%            | 57.7%                  | 6.5%             | 659                   |
| Apprenticeships                                                                                                                                                                                  | 25.6%            | 66.6%                  | 7.8%             | 616                   |
| Work experience, internships and traineeships for young people                                                                                                                                   | 13.8%            | 78.0%                  | 8.3%             | 617                   |
| Job-related training not leading to formal qualifications                                                                                                                                        | 33.8%            | 60.1%                  | 6.1%             | 642                   |
| Training in basic literacy and numeracy skills                                                                                                                                                   | 30.1%            | 61.6%                  | 8.2%             | 631                   |
| Continuing Professional Development                                                                                                                                                              | 36.5%            | 55.9%                  | 7.6%             | 646                   |
| Personal interest/leisure courses                                                                                                                                                                | 32.4%            | 56.2%                  | 11.4%            | 632                   |

*Question answered by 673 respondents*

**Table 9: Apprenticeship Levy**

| <b><i>An Apprenticeship Levy will be introduced in April 2017 for larger employers. Are you aware of this new levy</i></b> |                         |                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                                      | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Yes                                                                                                                        | 57.0%                   | 398                   |
| No                                                                                                                         | 43.0%                   | 300                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                                                   |                         | 698                   |
| <b><i>Have you had any discussions with management or your HR department about the levy</i></b>                            |                         |                       |
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                                      | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Yes                                                                                                                        | 23.3%                   | 162                   |
| No                                                                                                                         | 76.7%                   | 532                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                                                   |                         | 694                   |

For the first time ULRs and union reps were asked two questions about the Apprenticeship Levy. Table 9 shows the two key findings, which were that 57% of ULRs and union reps were aware of the levy and that 23% had conducted discussions with management and/or their HR department about its impact.

Finally, ULRs and reps were asked to provide an estimate of the total number of colleagues that they had helped with learning or training in the last 12 months. Table 10 sets out a breakdown of the response to this question, showing that over a quarter (28%) estimated that they had helped more than 25 colleagues over the past year.

**Table 10: Estimate of the number of colleagues supported**

| Approximately how many colleagues do you think you have helped with learning or training in the last 12 months? |                         |                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                           | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| 1-5                                                                                                             | 38.5%                   | 250                   |
| 6-14                                                                                                            | 23.2%                   | 151                   |
| 15-24                                                                                                           | 10.6%                   | 69                    |
| 25+                                                                                                             | 27.7%                   | 180                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                                        |                         | <i>650</i>            |

## Training and support for ULRs and union reps

The survey posed a number of questions about the training and support that ULRs and other union reps receive. ULRs (both existing and inactive) were asked if they had undertaken the initial training course provided by the TUC and/or the initial training course provided by their own union. In response nearly two thirds (64%) said that they had taken the course provided by their own union and two fifths (40%) said that they had taken the TUC course. This was significantly different to the situation reported in the 2014 survey, which had shown a closer split (50% of ULRs saying that they had taken the TUC course and 57% saying that they had taken the course provided by their own union). However, it should be noted that some of the training courses that respondents say are provided by their own union could well have been provided through the TUC programme.

There may of course be individuals who will have taken both courses and this presumably explains why the two responses total more than 100% in both the 2014 and 2017 surveys. In the latest survey 22% said that they had attended follow-on ULR courses specialising in specific aspects of learning and skills and this was similar to the 24% reported in the 2014 survey.

ULRs and union reps were then asked how many hours of paid release they normally received from management to undertake their union activities and the results are set out in Table 11. Twenty-two per cent said they received no time at

all and this was similar to the finding from the 2014 survey when 24% reported this situation. One in ten (10%) received less than one hour and again this was no worse than in 2014 when 1 in 9 (12%) reported this situation. Over a third (35%) received between 1 and 5 hours, the same percentage as in 2014. A third (33%) received more than 5 hours of paid release per week, and out of those 12% received 5-10 hours and 21% received more than 10 hours. The 2014 survey reported lower percentages for these longer durations - 30% received more than 5 hours of paid release per week, and out of those, 14% received 5-10 hours and 16% received more than 10 hours.

**Table 11: Paid release for ULRs and union reps**

| How many hours per week of paid release from work do you normally receive from your employers for union activities? |                         |                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                               | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| No time                                                                                                             | 22.1%                   | 153                   |
| Less than 1 hour                                                                                                    | 10.1%                   | 70                    |
| 1 to less than 2 hours                                                                                              | 16.0%                   | 111                   |
| 2 to less than 5 hours                                                                                              | 18.9 %                  | 131                   |
| 5 to less than 10 hours                                                                                             | 12.3%                   | 85                    |
| More than 10 hours per week                                                                                         | 20.6%                   | 143                   |
| <i>answered question</i>                                                                                            |                         | 693                   |

ULRs and union reps were also asked a few additional questions about their view of the time off they received for different aspects of their ULR/union rep role and these findings are set out in Table 12. Nearly three quarters (74%) said they thought they were given reasonable time off to conduct their ULR/union rep role and a higher proportion (85%) said they received reasonable time off to undergo relevant union training. The respective responses in the 2014 survey were 75% and 83% suggesting a degree of continuity on this front.

Two additional questions were asked about the amount of time off reps received to discuss individual learning needs and to arrange learning or training for individual members. To both these questions there were similar responses with around two thirds responding positively, which was very much in line with the findings from the 2014 survey.

Reps were then asked if their employer provided cover for their regular job and/or a reduced workload to enable them to conduct their ULR/union rep role, and 45% said yes to the former but only 27% responded positively to the latter. The respective proportions from the 2014 survey were 41% and 23%.

**Table 12: Employer support for ULRs and union reps**

| Does your employer provide you with:                                        |            |           |                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------------------|
|                                                                             | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Response count</i> |
| Reasonable time-off to conduct your ULR/union rep role                      | 73.9%      | 26.1%     | 689                   |
| Reasonable time-off to undergo relevant union training                      | 84.8%      | 15.2%     | 691                   |
| Reasonable time-off to discuss individual learning needs with your members  | 64.5%      | 35.5%     | 670                   |
| Reasonable time-off to arrange learning or training for your members        | 64.6%      | 35.4%     | 662                   |
| Cover for your regular job while you are conducting your ULR/union rep role | 45.0%      | 55.0%     | 675                   |
| Reduced workload to enable you to conduct your ULR/union rep role           | 27.0%      | 73.0%     | 653                   |

Question answered by 693 respondents

**Table 13: The view of ULRs and reps about levels of support provided**

| To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your ULR/union rep role? |                       |              |                 |                          |                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
|                                                                                                          | <i>Agree strongly</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree strongly</i> | <i>Response count</i> |
| I have adequate access to office facilities                                                              | 39.8%                 | 39.3%        | 13.2%           | 7.7%                     | 699                   |
| I have enough training to carry out my ULR/union rep role                                                | 27.3%                 | 47.2%        | 19.7%           | 5.8%                     | 655                   |
| I get sufficient support from my union                                                                   | 38.8%                 | 49.6%        | 9.5%            | 2.0%                     | 695                   |
| I am happy to continue in my role as a ULR/union rep                                                     | 46.0%                 | 47.0%        | 5.5%            | 1.4%                     | 632                   |
| My work colleagues are supportive of me                                                                  | 32.9%                 | 56.9%        | 8.7%            | 1.5%                     | 687                   |
| Work pressures restrict my ULR/union rep activities                                                      | 29.8%                 | 39.1%        | 24.8%           | 6.4%                     | 645                   |
| I am happy with the support I get from unionlearn                                                        | 25.3%                 | 59.8%        | 12.8%           | 2.1%                     | 664                   |

Question answered by 702 respondents

Table 13 provides more information on support and training and this shows seven out of 10 reps (69%) agreeing that work pressures restricted their union activities. This table also sets out responses to further questions about support provided by employers, including whether reps get adequate access to office facilities (79% agreeing) and whether they receive enough training to carry out

their union role (74% agreeing). More than 9 out of 10 (93%) said that they were happy to continue in their role as a ULR or union rep.

Ninety per cent (90%) said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role and there was a similarly positive response regarding the support of their individual union (88%) and the support provided by unionlearn (85%).

When asked specifically what had helped them most nearly three quarters (73%) said their union and nearly half (48%) cited the support of fellow union members (see Table 14). In answer to this question a third (33%) referred to the support of unionlearn/TUC and over a quarter (27%) referred to the support provided by their employer.

**Table 14: The most important form of support**

| <i>What has helped you most in your work as a ULR/union rep?</i> |                         |                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                            | <i>Response Percent</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Support from your union                                          | 72.6%                   | 486                   |
| Support from unionlearn/TUC                                      | 33.0%                   | 221                   |
| Support of fellow union members                                  | 47.5%                   | 318                   |
| Support from your employer                                       | 27.1%                   | 181                   |
| Other (please specify)                                           | 9.4%                    | 63                    |
| <i>answered question</i>                                         |                         | 669                   |

Employer support for union learning is often demonstrated in the form of institutional arrangements in the workplace that facilitate the union role in support of learning and skills. Key to this are: formal learning agreements between the union and the employer; formal learning partnerships involving the union, local providers and the employer; a working group/committee involving the union and employer to discuss union learning; and, a union-led learning centre.

Table 15 sets out the main findings regarding these arrangements. Fifty-eight per cent of ULRs and other union reps said that a formal learning agreement was in existence in their organisation or workplace and this compares to 61% reported in the 2014 survey. Despite this small decline it should be noted that the survey preceding the 2014 survey (unionlearn's 2009 ULR survey) showed 57% of ULRs citing the existence of a learning agreement. It is therefore positive that the 2017 survey suggest that learning agreements remain a major foundation of the union learning agenda in many workplaces.

Thirty-eight per cent of ULRs and other union reps in our current survey reported that there was a formal learning partnership and this compares with 40% in the 2014 survey and 47% in the 2009 survey. The current survey also showed that

one third (34%) of reps engaged in dialogue with employers through a working group/committee with a remit for discussing union learning and this compares with 38% in the 2014 survey.

**Table 15: Learning agreements, learning centres and dialogue on training**

| At the organisation you conduct your ULR/union rep role:                                        |            |           |                   |                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                           | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Don't know</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| Is there a formal learning agreement for ULR/union reps?                                        | 57.7%      | 22.7%     | 19.6%             | 692                   |
| Is there a formal learning partnership involving your union, local providers and the employer?  | 37.7%      | 33.1%     | 29.2%             | 685                   |
| Is there a union learning centre?                                                               | 29.6%      | 54.2%     | 16.2%             | 685                   |
| Is there a working group/committee involving your union and employer to discuss union learning? | 33.8%      | 45.4%     | 20.8%             | 689                   |
| answered question                                                                               |            |           |                   | 693                   |

Three tenths (30%) of respondents to the 2017 survey said that there was a union learning centre at their workplace and this was identical to the finding from the 2014 survey. However, despite this there is evidence of a longer-term decline in union-led learning centres (e.g. 34% of ULRs in the 2009 survey, 44% of ULRs in the 2007 survey and 52% of ULRs in the 2005 survey said there was a union learning centre available in their workplaces).

**Table 16: Opportunities for individual employees to discuss training and development with union/employer**

| Do your members have:                                                                                          |            |           |                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| <i>Answer Options</i>                                                                                          | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Response Count</i> |
| The opportunity to discuss individual learning needs with you in normal working hours                          | 71.9%      | 28.1%     | 691                   |
| A formal entitlement to an annual performance review which involves discussions about training and development | 74.0%      | 26.0%     | 685                   |
| answered question                                                                                              |            |           | 693                   |

The ability of ULRs and union reps to engage with individual employees is also influenced by the culture of the workplace and whether the employer encourages this form of engagement by ULRs and union reps. Another important factor is whether formal structures exist for individual employees to discuss their training and development with their employer (e.g. a formal entitlement to an

annual performance review which involves discussions about training and development). Table 16 sets out the results of the two questions asked in this area.

It shows a similarly positive response to both questions with 72% of ULRs and union reps saying that individuals in their workplace had the opportunity to discuss individual learning needs with them in normal working hours and 74% reporting that there was also a formal entitlement to an annual performance review involving discussions about training and development.

## References and notes

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<sup>1</sup> The 2014 survey is available on the unionlearn website at:

[www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills-2014](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills-2014)

<sup>2</sup> The last two comprehensive ULR surveys were undertaken in 2007 and 2009 and the findings are available on the unionlearn website at: [www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-09-impact-ulr-survey-ulrs-and-their-employers](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-09-impact-ulr-survey-ulrs-and-their-employers), and [www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-12-union-learning-representatives-activity-impact-and-organisation](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-12-union-learning-representatives-activity-impact-and-organisation)

<sup>3</sup> Charlwood, A. and Angrave, D. (2014) *Worker Representation in Great Britain 2004-2011: an analysis based on the Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, Acas Research paper, 03/14

<sup>4</sup> Stuart, M. et al (2016) *Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund Rounds 15-16 and Support Role of Unionlearn*, Leeds University Business School and University of Exeter (available at: [www.unionlearn.org.uk/2016-evaluation](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/2016-evaluation))