



TACKLING DISADVANTAGE

The unionlearn effect in opening
up learning and skills

Contents

Foreword	5
Background	6
The unionlearn record	7
Profile of union learners	8
Community learning centres	8
Barriers and disadvantage	10
Lack of confidence	10
Time, childcare and shift work	10
Disabilities	11
Cancer at work	12
Dyslexia	13
An ageing workforce	14
Mid-life job changes	15
Migrant and vulnerable workers	15
Management layers	15
Apprenticeship stereotypes	16
Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers	17
Role of union learning reps	17
Learning champions	26
Online learning	26
Learning centres	29
Conclusions – the union learning effect	41
Appendix 1: ULF equality and diversity learner data April – June 2014	43
Appendix 2: publications	45

Foreword

Trade unions and learning go hand in hand. “Educate, Agitate, Organise” was the slogan on the first trade union banners. Education for working people is just as vital today.

But there are still too many barriers to learning. In most organisations, those with fewest qualifications get least training and those with most qualifications get most training. Unions are challenging that unfairness. Disadvantaged workers need help. With the right kind of support they go far. Unionlearn is the learning and skills arm of the TUC. Our job is to help unions help disadvantaged workers to learn.

This report sets out to show the impact of unionlearn in widening opportunities to take up learning and skills by tackling disadvantage, identifying and removing barriers and implementing effective strategies. Further detailed statistics and data analysis can be found in unionlearn’s comprehensive annual reports.

It is not based on new research but rather on an analysis of the huge volumes of case materials generated by unionlearn. We aim to answer these questions:

- how does unionlearn identify barriers to learning and what are the most significant?
- what is the unique contribution of union learning and its specific approaches and techniques to breaking down these barriers?
- what conclusions can we draw from the unique contribution of union learning?

The report looks at some of the barriers to learning and the disadvantages created by them. An important starting point is that union learning is not based on a ‘deficit’ model which locates the problem of low skills with workers, but a ‘removing barriers’ model in which everyone can learn and develop and make a contribution. The report goes on to look at the specific methods and techniques which make union learning a unique success. The last part of the report looks at conclusions we can draw and what more must be done.

Mary Bousted

Chair of the unionlearn Board

Section two

Background

The last twenty years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in how learning and skills for work are mobilised and developed. Many thousands of workers with low skills and few or no qualifications have been re-engaged in learning. Hard to reach groups such as shift workers and migrants with poor English have found new opportunities to develop themselves and get on at work. Young people out of education and employment have found mentors to help them get into apprenticeships, and workers facing a mid-life career change have benefited from advice and support. Older workers have found learning champions who argue that they still have a vital contribution to make.

This transformation has been created by the growth of union learning and the establishment of unionlearn. The unionlearn mission is to “transform workers’ life chances through lifelong learning”. The union learning model is now valued by all political parties, and many influential employers. The key components have become familiar:

- Union Learning Representatives. Over 30,000 ULRs are now active in UK workplaces. They receive high quality training on unionlearn programmes and have statutory backing. They are key to the transformation in union learning.
- New partnership arrangements between unions, employers and learning providers have brought shared benefits and inspired a widespread new culture of learning. Many learning centres have been set up to make workplaces places of learning.
- Union learning projects focusing on key target groups and learning and skills priorities. Modest sums of public funding lever in substantial additional resources from employers and trade unions to make a real difference.

But there remain great obstacles to creating a culture in which every workplace is a place of learning. Although over 1.2 million workers have been reached by union learning programmes over the last ten years, low skills and qualifications remain a handicap for millions of workers, and a shackle on the economy. Estimates place the cost to the country of poor basic skills at £10 billion a year. This takes account of the effect of lower incomes, reduced productivity, poorer health and the cost of benefits and welfare services.

Where development opportunities for workers exist they are often limited to the people who have good skills and qualifications. At the other end of the spectrum,

too many ordinary workers miss out – part-time women workers with caring responsibilities, older workers out of learning for decades, migrant workers with poor or no access to English language training, disabled workers suffering prejudice at work, and temporary and agency workers who often are invisible when it comes to learning. Training and skills are crucial to better jobs, better prospects and a better quality of life for workers, families and whole communities.

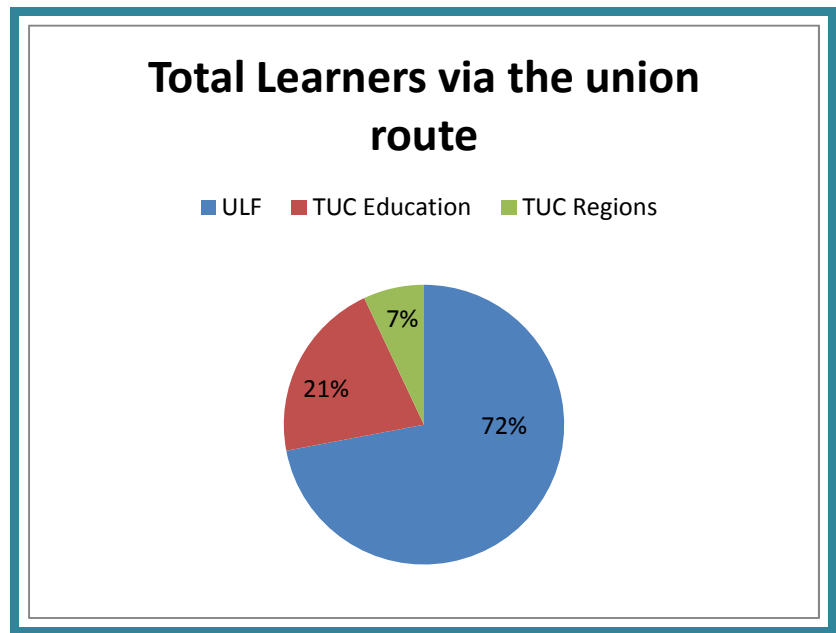
Regardless of age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion or belief, disability or the passport they hold, every worker should enjoy an equal chance to up-skill or learn something new at work. Equality legislation has provided important tools to tackle discrimination in the workplace but there remain enormous obstacles for many workers to engage or re-engage in learning.

And while skills shortages and deficits are a frequent complaint by employers, no learning provision is to be found in almost two out of every five UK workplaces.

The unionlearn record

In spite of difficulties for the economy, unionlearn continues to perform strongly in its key areas. The 2014 annual report shows that overall, unionlearn supported a total of 219,091 learners via the union route in the year to March 2014. ULF projects account for 72 per cent of this total, TUC Education 21 per cent and regions 7 percent.

- There has been an increase in the number of union learning reps. The number of ULRs trained through TUC Education was 3,636 in the year to end March 2014, including 1,053 trained through a new generic course.
- ULF projects performed well ahead of expectations with 158,483 total learners recorded. Projects performed ahead of target in relation to information and communication technology, English and maths, Level 2, Level 3, continuing professional development, informal adult and community learning, further education and Apprenticeships.
- Of the total ULF learners, 29 per cent were undertaking continuing professional development, 25 per cent were taking ICT courses and 14 per cent were learners on English and maths programmes.
- Regional outputs totalled 14,588 learners in the year to March 2014; this was in addition to regional support for ULF projects.



Profile of union learners

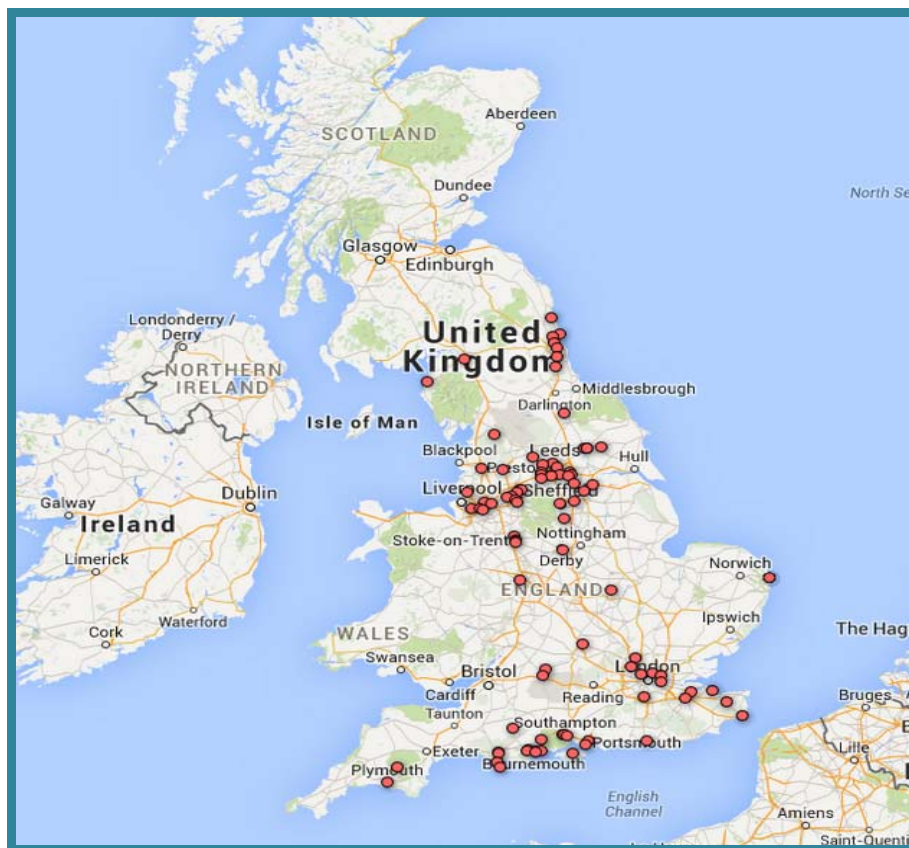
The profile of union learners does of course vary by the type of project, sector and nature of the workforce. However the overall figures show that unionlearn reaches out effectively to disadvantaged groups. Taking the most recent figures,

- Almost two out of three (64%) of all learners in the last quarter were aged 50+
- Almost one in five (18%) of all ULF learners in three months to June 2014 did not have English as their first language
- One in twenty (5%) declared a disability, a figure which would be considerably higher if dyslexia and dyscalculia were included
- One in eight (12%) of learners were from black and minority ethnic communities - well above the UK average of one in twelve
- One in eight (12%) had no prior qualifications and a further one in five (20%) had qualifications below NVQ2.

Community learning centres

Recent research shows that the great bulk of community learning centres supported by unionlearn are in areas of the highest multiple deprivation. Using the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation our research shows that unionlearn's national network of 92 community learning centres are heavily concentrated in the most deprived parts of the country and therefore reach out to some of the most seriously disadvantaged communities.

Unionlearn Community Learning Centre locations



Analysis of our community learning centre locations show that a fifth are located in the top 10% most deprived areas; a third are located in the top 20%; and half are located in the top 30%.

Although the percentages vary slightly depending on what measure of deprivation is used, the results are very similar whether deprivation is measured according to overall deprivation or specific measures relating to - income; health, deprivation and disability; and education, skills and training

Barriers and disadvantage

It is easy to name groups with clear disadvantages in accessing learning at work: people with low existing skills and qualifications, workers on precarious contracts and work patterns, migrants and people with low language skills, older and younger workers are just a few examples.

Disadvantage however casts a broad shadow. One in four people will at some point in their working life suffer stress or mental illness. One in three will develop cancer or other major illness. Many will find their skills outdated or be forced to make an unwanted career move.

Barriers may be hidden – even to their victims. Many people suffer low esteem, having been labelled as failures at school, and are thus reluctant to re-engage with learning. Others have conditions such as dyslexia that they are unaware of, with others wrongly confusing it with a lack of intelligence.

We look at examples of these issues below.

Lack of confidence

Michael's experience is a common one. He did not enjoy his last year of school and skipped a lot of classes, leaving with few qualifications:

I hated school to be honest. I think I played truant for the last six months of school, and then I ended up on a building site and that was it. I can't really say [what qualifications I got] – it was that long ago I can't remember, I think I got a leaving certificate and that was it

Time, childcare and shift work

A wide variety of time pressures create barriers for access to learning. They are mentioned most frequently by those with caring responsibilities. Fitting learning around childcare and work can prove to be a huge barrier. Many FE and HE colleges have closed their on-site childcare facilities, which have had an impact on women's abilities to attend courses. One civil service worker said:

There's some things that I probably wanted to do but the time factor has sometimes meant I've not been able to do it because obviously I am a mum to young children with a job as well, so sometimes the time's not always there to do it.

Shift working presents challenges for learners. The experience of one postal worker was:

Some of my courses have been classroom based but – it's just time. I haven't got the time because I used to work 1.45 pm to 9.45 pm so I didn't have the time to do my work in the classroom. I would prefer to do it online then I could do it anytime I wanted.

Intense work pressure is an issue for many. A midwife said:

Work is extremely pressured. You hardly ever get off on time. Our shifts are structured so that there's no break, there's no meal break... We have a seven and a half hour shift; we have a concessionary coffee break that you don't always get. Because what happened before was that people had a lunch break but nine times out of ten they were working through it and they were never getting the time back. So we said we would rather have a shorter shift and go home half an hour earlier.

So consequently, there's no lunch time where people can come and look at my Learning at Work Day stuff. And when they finish work, they usually just want to get away from it as quickly as they can. So I did have some people come but I wouldn't do that again

Disabilities

More than one in five adults in Britain today is disabled. Only half are likely to be in work compared to four-fifths of non-disabled adults. And they are more likely to be employed in routine, unskilled elementary jobs, to work part-time, and to have poorer access to training and development opportunities. Disabled people across the UK are three times as likely to have no qualifications as non-disabled people. The employment rate for disabled men without qualifications halved from the mid 1970s to the early 2000s.

The high rate of exit from employment is a key barrier to learning— one disabled person in six loses their job in the first year of being disabled, increasing to more than two in six in two years. Long term or fluctuating health conditions may lead to extended periods of time away from work, resulting in a distancing from

Barriers and disadvantage

workplace learning opportunities. Time out of work means that disabled people may be unable to retain qualifications or professional registrations. Feedback from disabled employees however shows they have high aspirations for learning and careers, thwarted by experience and reality.

Identifying and dealing with disability issues is a key issue for unionlearn. Training for ULRs is key to achieving this. One ULR commented:

As a ULR I have had extensive training in disability issues, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia and have been able to recommend employees for assessments under the Disability Discrimination Act. This has led to employers making reasonable adjustments and I organised basic sign language awareness training which enabled school bus drivers to communicate with children from special needs schools.

Awareness raising on health can help identify issues of concern. Another ULR commented:

Health and well-being is a key part of the workplace, as we are living longer and working longer. Heart disease, cancer, asthma and arthritis are just some of the illnesses that can impact on working life and awareness sessions on these subjects offer members positive information to help them and their families. In the Black communities Sickle Cell Anaemia affects one in every 2,000 and information is not readily available, so awareness workshops have been invaluable at learning events in Adult Learners' Week.

Cancer at work

Over 700,000 people of a working age are living with cancer across the UK. With survival rates improving and people retiring later, the working age population with cancer is set to double by 2030. Many will continue through or after their treatment. Getting back to work during or after treatment provides psychological as well as financial benefits, and research shows that it aids recovery.

Many employers struggle to provide the support employees need, either through a lack of knowledge or understanding about the illness or legal rights, or because they have difficulty dealing with various issues that arise and striking a balance between the needs of the individual and those of the organisation.

The response of unionlearn, as outlined at many points in this report, has been to develop well-informed trade union reps to ensure employers support their staff effectively. A workbook produced in collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support contains key information about how cancer affects people, an

employee's rights, the responsibilities of their employer and a variety of workplace support strategies.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a condition which is estimated to affect one in ten of the UK population. In the past it has been confused with poor literacy and low intelligence. Many people with the condition suffer low esteem and a reluctance to engage in learning. Identifying dyslexia is complex and training for ULRs is again a key issue. Daniel, an USDAW ULR, outlines the approach he took:

It was clear that this was a major issue for our members. We were all aware that dyslexia exists but didn't really understand the impact it has on people's lives. We came up with the idea of running a 2 day Dyslexia Awareness course for reps. The company recognised that dyslexia was something we could work on together and it was great that they gave reps time off to attend the course.

Importantly, some of the sessions were run by an USDAW rep with dyslexia:

We wanted reps to understand the condition, be aware of the approaches that work and discuss the different actions that could be taken in the workplace. But we agreed that it was important to give reps some first-hand experience of what it's like to suffer from dyslexia.

One course member said:

Having someone with dyslexia on the course gave the rest of us a valuable insight into how it affects people

Steve is another union rep with dyslexia. It wasn't until the last year of primary school that he realised that he was writing things backwards. He was enrolled at a school for people with disabilities and mental health issues.

He got a part-time job collecting trolleys and was given some training in retail and money handling. After a little while he was promoted to work on the checkouts and then promoted to the bakery. This was where his dyslexia became a real problem as his job involved giving instructions for weights and measures and entering numerical barcodes into the machines. He says he was too embarrassed to ask for help or talk to someone about what he felt was a deficiency in him and was dismissed from his job after 3 years.

Barriers and disadvantage

Eight years ago Steve started a job at a local council, where he has been a Health & Safety rep and has taken a stage 1 Shop Steward training course and completed Skills for Life training in literacy and numeracy. He explained the reluctance he had to talk about his dyslexia:

It was the ULRs and site convenor at the Council that first approached me, when I started to work for the Council, as they became aware of my learning issues. I resisted at first as I didn't want to highlight my condition to workmates and my new employer. 'I hope to inspire others who face the same or similar barriers to learning as I did growing up and to show, that tackling your gremlins can lead to a better way of life. My life has improved at work with the promotion to charge hand. I can now look forward to the time I have children and know that I have the ability to be able to read to them just like all other fathers do.

We will return to the importance of ULRs having firsthand knowledge of the problems faced by members as part of the unique contribution of union learning.

An ageing workforce

At present around two in three people aged 50-64 are in employment, and one in twelve of the over 65s. Those figures are almost certain to rise as by 2034 the state pension age will rise to 68 for both men and women.

Over the years Union Learning Fund projects have been successful in reaching out to older workers and re-engaging them in learning. Latest E&D data from ULF for the quarter ending June 2014 shows that one in four (25%) of all learners were aged over 50.

Older workers may have the problem of low assessment of their abilities. One ULR said:

They seemed to believe that they were too old to learn and had developed a habit-forming tendency to avoid any learning or development

On the other hand where union learning succeeds in re-engaging older workers the results can be impressive:

For me, the over-50s group represented those who benefited most from learning in the workplace...I was thrilled when many members completed Skills for Life courses in literacy, ICT and numeracy up to Level 2. They can now use a computer and send emails to family and friends overseas, which has deeply enriched their lives

Mid-life job changes

Many workers are finding that the concept of a job for life is vanishing. They feel vulnerable when required to make a career change and often need assistance with CV writing and interview skills as well as refreshing their vocational skills. Unionlearn's response has been to devote resources and train ULR's to identify the issues for workers facing mid-life job changes and give them support.

Migrant and vulnerable workers

Migrant workers make a huge contribution to our economy and to society in general. One problem, however, is that the skills and qualifications of many of these workers are not recognised by employers. They may be university graduates but find themselves trapped in low-skill, low pay jobs that do not fully utilise their training and experience. Often they are placed on the first rung of the labour market when they could be higher up. A lack of English language skills and low awareness of their employment rights and the role of trade unions marginalises them and makes them vulnerable.

'Vulnerable' workers are employed in precarious jobs which may be outsourced, low-paid, part-time or zero-hours contracts, with insecure job tenure. They are hard to reach and present a major challenge for union learning schemes. How do you make learning available for vulnerable workers who work different shifts and sometimes don't have access to the internet? Unite devised a project to identify and tackle the issues they faced.

Unite found that large groups of migrant workers were being excluded from education, and their brief was to develop a software package to engage them in learning. The software allowed students to access the ESOL provision online 24/7. The software can be run from a USB drive without the need for the internet. This means the course can be fully delivered in even the most rural of areas, allowing a greater number of students to participate. The Unite Regional Organiser commented:

For learners, this is a unique opportunity to improve their English in a flexible way. They can study online and can attend one of our classes when they can, not missing any information if they are working in shifts or need to work long hours.

Management layers

Management attitudes towards workplace learning can be of great assistance or can add to barriers. Within one organisation attitudes may vary at different levels of management.

Barriers and disadvantage

One ULR from URTU put it this way:

Surprisingly enough, the frontline managers don't see the need for learning. They don't see why the employees should be better educated than what they are now. I think it could be because they see the workforce as a threat. But once you get to the next level of management, they have a different attitude. So what I try to do is get one of those managers on board, keep the front line managers informed of what's going on. And yes, once you get to the right level of management they're fully supportive.

We will return to the issue of getting consistent management support through partnership working and learning agreements later in the report.

Apprenticeship stereotypes

Gender and ethnic stereotyping of job roles can extend into recruitment for apprenticeships. Becci Newton, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies, and co-author of unionlearn's recent research paper on Apprenticeships, agreed that progress towards genuine equality has been slow:

Overall, the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) apprentices has not significantly changed over the past decade, with similarly slow progress in the numbers of apprentices with disabilities and learning differences.

There are far higher numbers of ethnic minority people wanting an Apprenticeship than actually successfully achieve one and we need to understand the blockages

The tendency for girls to apply for apprenticeships in 'female' occupations and boys for 'male' occupations continues to be an issue of concern.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

So far we have looked at the nature of disadvantage and barriers to learning and how they can often be hidden. Now we go on to look at the unique contribution of unionlearn, highlighting key issues and giving examples of union learning activities that work

Role of Union Learning Representatives

There is little doubt that the place to start looking at the unique contribution of union learning is through the work of ULRs. They are committed to breaking down barriers to learning and they have firsthand knowledge of the needs and problems of workplace learners. They have statutory backing and benefit from excellent preparatory and follow on training through unionlearn face to face and online programmes.

Supporting workers at risk

Sean and Andy, ULRs with Unite, identified areas within Barclaycard where workers were vulnerable through lack of qualifications or because of structural changes in the organisation. Sales telephone staff had begun to see some of their work being managed abroad, and the foreign languages team had been recently re-located to another site. Others included the contract workers providing catering, cleaning and maintenance.

Supporting vulnerable workers became the focus of a unionlearn project, with support from senior Barclaycard Management.

The project helps workers with CV preparation and interview techniques to take advantage of internal job opportunities with more confidence, helping contract cleaners gain Level 1 and 2 in Literacy and Numeracy and helping the contract caterers gain their NVQs. Sean said:

We worked with Carol who manages the relationship with all the onsite contractors at Barclaycard. Carol's enthusiasm and support of the project has been fantastic and it has meant all contractors have been offered the choice of getting involved if they want to and I'm delighted to say, many have taken up the opportunity.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

Brazilian born Lillian was one of the foreign language team members and although she had been in the UK for some time, she struggled with spoken English. Sean said:

For Lillian and the other members of the foreign languages team, having an English qualification behind them means a great deal so we're delighted this project came along at the right time -just as the team were relocating to Stockton, and we've been able to use the project to their advantage

In 2008 Rolls Royce announced they that were closing their plant in Bootle within six months. The plant had been there since the early 70s as Cooper Energy Services, then as Rolls Royce from 1999 and employed 212 people, the majority of whom were now at risk. A partnership was struck between the company and Unite, with the aim of equipping the workers with skills to gain new employment. Using Unite's Castleford Learning Centre, the union – with full cooperation from the company – started the process of bringing the Rolls Royce staff into further learning.

Despite this determination from both employer and union, it was not easy to instil a desire for learning amongst so many at such short notice. As one learner noted:

I haven't done any work in classrooms for over 25 years and couldn't really see how any of these courses would actually benefit me

Eddie, a Unite ULR, helped his colleagues overcome their doubts. He took on the role of promoter, supporter and administrator for the programme, frequently acting alone as the company's only trained ULR.

The centre began to deliver a wide range of courses: European Computer Driving Licence courses were at the forefront, but some of the employees needed more basic IT training. This helped some of them take the PC-based exams which they would need to work as electricians outside of Rolls Royce.

Growing your own talent

Helping workers to develop their talents and take on new job opportunities is a key focus for unionlearn. It is an approach used by many successful businesses. The example of Co-Operative Retail Logistics in Somerset working with USDAW is an example of growing your own talent as an investment for the future of both the business and staff, with ULRs playing a key role.

Staff have the opportunity to progress through the company's in-house training and through the on-site Learning Centre run in partnership with Usdaw and the team of Union Learning Representatives. Learning and Development Officer Mary explained:

We identified gaps in the NVQ provision. We want to plug those gaps so we're developing bespoke workshops that will give staff the opportunity to learn new skills that enhance their knowledge beyond their current role. Because we'd always look internally for suitable candidates before going externally, it means we have a ready-made pool of skilled people with the confidence and ability to progress.

Martin is one of a team of ULRs at the warehouse and has helped his co-workers take the first steps on the learning ladder. He showed his colleagues the way forward by completing an ITQ at level 2. He commented:

The skills I learned were very useful - they enhanced my job and made it easier. The way technology and the internet has come on meant a lot of people were terrified but curious at the same time. Many of them had computers at home for their children, but didn't know how to use them themselves. We ran a basic computer course for them and it was brilliant. They were all middle-aged – no youngsters – and afterwards some of them went out to buy their own computer, go on the internet regularly, and do their own emails, where a while ago they wouldn't even know how to turn one on.

The company has clearly benefited from its staff's new communications skills:

The warehouse is like a community because everyone works so closely together, but you don't have time to chat. Now on breaks or at the end of their shifts, people are using Twitter or Facebook – they're communicating all the time, which is a great morale boost

Championing learning

Working with the TUC skills and education arm unionlearn in the Midlands and the South Nottingham Employer Care Sector Forum, UNISON is offering local employers the opportunity to grow the talent within their workforces by recruiting a care or support worker to the role of "Learning Champion" with free training from the union.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

Learning Champions are based on the ULR model. They work with each other and as part of a network of partner organisations to generate access to learning and training, while helping to support a learning culture in the workplace. UNISON Project Lead Lorraine and unionlearn Senior Union Support Officer Mick have been meeting with employers around the county to help identify learning champions for their business or organisation.

Learning Champion Jane, a care workers in a 50-bed residential care home in Radcliffe on Trent, wasted no time in putting her training to good use:

After the session, I went back to my home having thought again about how to encourage reluctant staff to take up opportunities. I learned about the various barriers to learning that can be faced by staff and decided to approach things differently. Since then I have encouraged housekeepers to take up an NVQ which they were adamant not to.

Sign language and peer-to-peer learning

Shop worker and sign-language expert Sarah is one of a growing number of peer-to-peer teachers who are helping USDAW's lifelong learning agenda by volunteering to teach and share skills with their colleagues. Sarah has been able to sign from a young age as both her parents are hearing impaired:

I use to sit on the bed and my mum use to teach me as a child. I could sign before I could speak so I've been using sign as a first language all my life

She studied sign language at Stoke-on-Trent College in order to work as a communication support worker and after obtaining her qualifications she worked at Stoke-on-Trent College in this role for two years. But as she explains:

Funding for deaf students was cut and as a result there were less people undertaking courses at the college and the role of communication support worker was abolished.

Developing a learning culture in retail organisations like Tesco can be challenging, due not least to the cost of courses and shift patterns. But learning needs analysis conducted at the store revealed a keen interest in sign language. USDAW union learning representative Matt thought it could be a way of kick-starting learning in the store and decided to ask Sarah if she could help:

When I was asked if I'd like to teach sign language to my friends and colleagues I was, at first, unsure whether or not people wanted to learn sign. After seeing how many colleagues wanted to learn to sign I was amazed and only too happy to help.

Sarah ran her first class once a week for three weeks in order to teach her colleagues the basics. After this introduction Sarah will signpost those interested in learning more or gaining a recognised qualification to local colleges. Matt commented:

It's a great model for peer-to-peer learning through colleagues who have a specific skill set and we hope that other ULRs will set up similar initiatives in the Stoke area and beyond

Improving communications

Improving language skills can be essential to improving communications and solving problems at work. ULRs can play a key role.

George, Union Learning Rep for the Communication Workers' Union at Royal Mail's Mount Pleasant Mail Centre, is a busy man. Not content with organising learning opportunities for Royal Mail employees, he has organised basic English classes for the cleaning staff at the centre. The workers are employed by Romec, whose management were aware that George had organised functional skills learning for Royal Mail employees. They approached him to see if he could help access basic English provision for Romec staff, who originate from Latin America and Portugal. Romec managers explained that the main problem was around communication in works meetings, for which they often had to use an interpreter. Often there were misunderstandings between management and workers.

George contacted the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, who delivered a course over nineteen weeks. The course has been running on site using the Mail Centre's conference rooms on a matched time basis, so half the classroom time is learners' own time and half is paid release from Romec.

Developing the caring workforce

Professional development should not be a graduate only activity if the challenges of growing care needs are to be met in the NHS of the future. ULRs are involved in promoting professional development for all.

Maive, a clinical support worker on a neonatal intensive care unit, has more than 20 years' experience working in the NHS and is a great advocate of lifelong

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

learning. When a colleague told her she would make a good union learning representative she jumped at the chance. Keen to continue her own personal development, as well as inspire others, she applied for a place on the NHS Leadership Academy's Mary Seacole development programme. The programme is named after the Jamaican woman who, without any formal training, battled discrimination to become a pioneer of modern nursing after bringing practical, compassionate care to frontline troops during the Crimean War.

The programme is advertised as open to all staff groups within healthcare and aimed at those who want to do more to champion compassionate patient care. But Maive had to overcome resistance to take part in the programme. She said the initial management response to her request to take part was: "What do you want to do that for? You do not have a degree." As a learner and ULR, Maive is determined to challenge perceptions about the learning and development of NHS support workers like her, among both managers and the workers themselves. Maive points out:

Care assistants and other support workers are often overlooked because managers don't see that we have the potential to develop and learn

Maive persevered and received confirmation of a place on the programme. Her manager congratulated her and signed off the paperwork.

Overcoming shift work and childcare barriers

Union reps often use their own experience of re-engaging with learning to inspire others.

Bakers' union shop steward Sameena has joined forces with the BFAWU union learning reps (ULRs) team at the bakery to try to break down barriers faced by women working part-time and shifts while raising young families, in some cases as single parents, and encourage them to get back to learning.

As a busy mum with young children, Sameena knows how difficult it can be to balance work with home life and find time to learn, particularly for shift workers who often struggle to find suitable childcare. But with the support of the BFAWU Learning Centre at Premier and Stoke College, she embarked on her own learning journey in 2006. Since then, she has taken courses including sewing and textiles, IT and massage. And after attending an Access Taster course and decided she wanted to pursue a career in medical administration. In 2012 she gained a level two Adult Numeracy qualification and a level three Medical Administration diploma.

Now she is using her own experiences and language skills to encourage other Asian women workers at Premier to access the opportunities on offer at the

learning centre that she is helping to develop with the ULRs. The bakery operates shifts seven days a week, so it is important that learning opportunities are as flexible as possible. Most of the courses the team has organised are Skills for Life online courses with Stoke on Trent college tutors providing learning support through informal workshops as well as running taught courses. Around 30 workers embarked on level 2 functional maths skills as well as IT and English courses, including five of the Asian women workers Sameena has been encouraging to take part. Sameena comments:

Providing learning opportunities here in the workplace means they are very flexible. It can be hard for workers here to go to college, not least because of shift patterns and childcare. Here, the learning facilities are always open so people can drop in at the beginning or the end of their shift

Mid-life career reviews

As we have seen, ULRs may be engaged in supporting workers faced with redundancy and relocation. Unionlearn has in addition developed a project to help ULRs support workers in mid-career, as part of its Supporting Learners agenda. Explains Learning Support Officer, Jane Warwick:

For us, the pilot was very successful, as we engaged more than 770 people from 15 different unions in career review activity. We developed a number of resources to help ULRs in the workplace, such as our pre-review and post-review questionnaires, and have more in the pipeline. It is a union role and there are elements of confidentiality that go with that role. Traditionally you go to your union rep if you want advice about terms and conditions of employment. ULRs are seen as a trusted intermediary with their peers, and people were very open about their personal lives in the Mid-Life Career Review Project. We are not asking union learning reps to be experts but to be there to provide that reflective space for their peers in order to be able to signpost them and support them in the areas and issues that are important for them at that stage of their life.

PCS ULR John Hamshire, who works at HMRC in Blackburn says:

The Mid-Life Career Reviews make you look at yourself: what you know, what you would like to know and what you do know but you don't realise you know – it changes your perception

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

In the twelve months April 2014 to March 2015, unionlearn is planning to increase interest and activity in this area and conduct 2,000 Mid Life Career reviews in total.

Coaching skills

Tasha, a ULR from USDAW, helped to organise ESOL classes and quickly found herself supporting those that were finding it difficult:

They wanted a bit more practice so I went along every Tuesday after the class and helped them with their conversation skills.

This work was so successful that it developed into helping staff prepare for their exams and then one to one coaching. One learner, Valson, says:

They wanted a bit more practice so I went along every Tuesday after the class and helped them with their conversation skills.

Natasha helped me a lot because I had to miss classes to pick my daughter up from school. She's improved my speaking and my reading. It's made me a lot more confident and much better at my job.

The success of this work led to the idea of an "English Club". Tasha comments:

With the difficulties around funding for ESOL we have to find another way to support people who don't have good English skills. The idea is that we ULRs run regular sessions offering people different ways of learning - group work, on line and one to one discussions so that everyone gets the chance to learn in the way they like.

Overcoming reluctance and stigma

People who feel they have been failed by the school system are often reluctant to re-engage in learning. The role of union learning reps in overcoming fears of stigma can be crucial.

A construction worker who worked closely with the ULR at his workplace to encourage members of his team to attend courses argued that he is successful in this because he is a learner himself:

When I first said to the lads, why don't you come and do the numeracy and literacy or different things through unionlearn, some did and some didn't want to come on to it at all.

And the ones that said ‘well I’d like to do that but...’ I think I removed the ‘but’ by saying ‘well, I’ll come on it with you’ and I went on it with them so... I think they thought there was a bit of a stigma about going on these courses... So I sort of said ‘well I’ll go on it with you if you want’ and I benefited massively from it but I’ve seen how much they’ve benefited from it and enjoyed it as well.

How do you persuade someone to change their mind and take a leap into the unknown? The first step according to Brenda a ULR in the North West, is to understand the reasons behind the member’s reluctance. Brenda said:

You have to analyse the barriers the member faces, because there are many, many different reasons why people don’t want to get involved in learning. It can be practical things like shift patterns, travel or cost, or a lack of confidence so not wanting to fail or go into a college with strangers. Some people are afraid of others finding out that they have poor skills - especially their manager – so they don’t want to be seen as part of a course. Once you understand why you can start to find an answer

Tackling dyslexia

Earlier in the report we looked at how awareness of dyslexia was often a key step in tackling disadvantage.

Dave a ULR at Gateshead Council said after attending an awareness course:

Although around 10 per cent of the UK’s workforce suffers from Dyslexia, there is still a huge stigma attached to the condition and people are often very reluctant, particularly mature adults, to admit to themselves or others that they might have it.

Gateshead Council is adapting to the pace of new technology and implementing new systems and procedures which improve the service it offers to its customers and helps improve productivity among the workforce. For workers who’ve been with the organisation a long time, getting to grips with new ways of working isn’t always that easy and in some cases the new systems have highlighted skills gaps.

Dave and fellow ULRs set out to help colleagues who he knew were suffering with the new systems being introduced. One of the staff, Keith is a Driver Labourer

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

with the Waste Services and Ground Maintenance team and has worked for the Council for the last 32 years. Keith admitted that he was struggling with his job as he had gone from receiving verbal job briefs to email reports which he was finding difficult to read. After a formal assessment, Keith was officially diagnosed and now spends one afternoon per week at Gateshead Council's Adult Learning Skills programme. The programme is work based and specific to the job Keith is doing. Keith said:

I've seen more changes in the way we work in the last 2 years than I have in the whole of my 32 years here. It was hard at first to admit I was struggling to read my email briefs on a daily basis but now with the help of the Adult Learning Skills programme, I'm able to read my worksheets.

Learning champions

Earlier we looked briefly at the role of learning champions in the health and social care sector. Learning champions may also work with certain groups of disadvantaged workers.

Graham is an example. He works at the Royal Mail Data Entry Centre in Stockport and has embraced the role of championing the older worker. He has developed a range of activities taking into account the needs and interests of older workers, not only for his own union but for others and has extended his support beyond the North West through national CWU activities. These activities have ranged from staging open days at Mowbray House Learning Centre for Retired Members, to promoting IT skills, to open language workshops. He has completed an Older Activists course through the TUC in Liverpool.

It's a learning curve for Graham as well, so he understands his learners and has undertaken the Digital Champions course with Digital Unite to ensure he increases his knowledge to help older members get online. He has done work with those aged 50+, to offer Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and CV advice to the Royal Mail early shift staff in Stockport.

Online learning

The need for flexibility in learning provision has been highlighted by the many pressures of part time and shift working combined, often with caring responsibilities. Unionlearn explores the potential of online learning to help provide that flexibility.

When arrangements for an IT course for ancillary staff in the University Hospital of North Staffordshire sterile services fell through, Chris the joint-union staff side lead union learning representative stepped in. He worked with tutors at Stoke on

Trent College Trade Union Education unit to set up two IT courses for hospital staff. Although initially he found it difficult to get workers on the 6am to 2pm shift to take part in the learning opportunities on offer, ancillary staff in the decontamination unit signed up to a course.

Project workers Paul and Alan stepped in and took it in turns to deliver the ten week course in the hospital's onsite Skills Academy. Chris negotiated an unpaid break in the shift and set up an online IT course. This aims to provide new internet users and tutors a range of easy courses and useful resources. Using modules covering the Microsoft applications access, excel and word, Paul and Alan ran ten weekly three-hour sessions as flexible workshops.

Keith's story

Keith looks forward to the end of his shift when he can go home and relax, helping his two boys with their homework. It's a simple pleasure that many of us take for granted, but it's a new experience for the Cornish bus driver. Keith moved from Cornwall, where he chopped up meat for pasties, a few years ago. His new job driving a bus around his adopted county of Dorset required a higher standard of literacy so, with the help of his union, the RMT, he set about improving. He relates:

My new job means I need to read and write more because everything needs to be written down, filling out forms, safety checks. I do a lot of my work at home on my own computer. It's fairly easy to fit it in the evenings or the mornings, depending on my shifts, try and get an hour in every day, but if I didn't then it wouldn't matter because Catherine [the tutor] would give me extra time to finish it. There's no pressure. It makes me feel great. My reading wasn't up to scratch because I didn't need it for my job but I challenged myself to improve, and that's what I've done. I can now sit down with the boys and help them a bit. That's what I did it for.

His employer, Wiltshire & Dorset Bus Company, reaps the benefit of his new skills. Manager Phil says:

Any new skills are good for any company. We found our staff retention increased dramatically when we gave our drivers better training. It gave them more confidence and union learning has given the same drivers even more confidence. It's been good for us. To give you an example: there was an incident on one of the buses a while ago and it was quicker for me to take the information from Keith and fill in the form myself than it was for Keith to fill it in. That's changing now.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

ULR Kevin adds:

When he first came here he was very quiet, kept himself to himself, and I think some of the lads took the mick out of him. Now he's more confident, more outgoing. He's a different guy altogether. Everyone sees the difference in him. He's done marvellous. He comes in his own time, he sees the tutor in his own time and when he needs time off I go and see the manager and they realise how hard he works so they give the time off

Keith isn't the only success story at the depot – there are around a dozen learners, most of whom are able to fit their learning around their work. Thanks to U-Net, the flexible online learning system (learndirect) that allows learners to carry out their studies wherever there is a computer.

Learning and life

The opportunities offered by online learning are important for learners with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities. There are many examples in which online union learning had helped learners to overcome the barriers of time, cost and access, in particular for shift and part-time workers. For a Royal Mail learner:

People who have got busy lives, they can sort of do these courses now whereas before they didn't have the time. So I find online learning very useful. Even if it's online you're still chatting to other people and meeting other reps, as it were, across the country.

One learner, a single parent who cares for an elderly parent suffering from dementia, said that online union learning was the only way she could fit learning into her life.

One local government worker preferred online learning and had completed ULR training online, although this was because of the difficulties of getting time off for face-to-face training:

Because you can pick it up anywhere, if you've got your own notebook, you can do it at home when you've got time. Or if you're doing it in your lunch break you can do it at work ... and although you obviously don't have the interaction with your classroom situation, I just find it a lot more flexible and because of the nature of my work and personal life, I can find it far easier to do that. Rather than say a fixed time each week, going into a classroom environment.

Learning centres

We now go on to look at another key tool for tackling disadvantage in learning at work – on site learning centres. Almost 700 centres are supported by unionlearn in a wide variety of workplaces. They provide a focal point for flexible learning and for the work of ULRs. They offer a safe, stress free space where workers can discuss their problems and needs. The centres are usually supported through collaboration between unions and management.

Now we look at some examples which illustrate key facets of learning centre work.

Union Learning at Bullingdon

The HMP Bullingdon learning centre was set up in April 2009, in the staff centre next to the canteen outside of the prison walls. The centre is managed by a POA ULR and a learning support worker, supported by an additional 3 ULRs across the prison. Essential support was given by the prison governor.

The POA provided the furniture and the PCs, whilst the prison converted the room, provided the internet service and purchased the interactive white board. The prison has a Skills Pledge for all staff to reach NVQ Level 2, and the learning activity initially focussed around SfL literacy, numeracy and ICT. In the first 9 months of activity, the learning centre achieved 40 SfL qualifications (with some progressing from level 1 through to level 3), ULR training courses and intense PETALS courses with 15 learners achieving this qualification. The NVQ level 3 in custodial care is a mandatory qualification for all prison officers, and the learning centre now facilitates this course in partnership with Newcastle College.

The centre is open to all employees of the prison, including their friends and family and people from the local community. The ULRs are competent in providing IAG, although this is mainly provided by the full-time staff of the centre. Where they can't facilitate the needs of learners, they signpost and arrange with external providers.

Tackling visual impairment

Learning centres offer adaptations to help learners with a range of impairments. Steve's example is instructive.

Steve, an Arson Taskforce employee and member of the FBU union, had a fear of computers, and completing his flexi timesheets filled him with dread. Steve was diagnosed at birth with congenital nystagmus, which is a visual impairment causing uncontrolled movement of the eyes. Although Steve wears glasses for reading he struggles to see letters on a keyboard and words on a screen. He avoided using computers which became a burden as he was falling behind with his flexi timesheets.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

Eventually Steve confided in his manager, who was supportive and suggested he speak to the staff at the U-Net learning centre. Steve soon realised that he wasn't alone and that help was at hand. He said:

Using a computer was my biggest fear but once I'd discussed this with the learning centre and I realised they understood my condition, I had the confidence to start learning. If it wasn't for the learning centre I wouldn't know anything about computers, I never thought I would achieve this.

With the support of the Skills for Life Tutor, adjustments were made to the settings on the computer, and an accessible keyboard was provided. With these modifications in place, and the backing of the learning centre staff, Steve was able to persevere and overcome his fears. After completing a learndirect Switch On course, his new computer skills were the platform to progress and achieve the Numeracy Level 1 and Literacy Level 1 qualifications.

Twilight shifts

The PCS Quorum branch in Newcastle has faced many equality barriers since its learning centre opened in March 2004 but is still trying to overcome the barriers faced by many of our young and part-time members of staff, especially those working the twilight shifts. Funding has been secured for specialist equipment in the learning centre, such as laptops to take home, large computer monitors to aid people with sight problems and re-locating the centre to the ground floor to help it become more accessible for those employees with disabilities.

A proactive workforce

Management recognition that a passive workforce not engaged in learning is a strategy for failure can lead to strong support for learning centre initiatives.

McVitie's, like many food manufacturing companies, needs its workforce to have basic literacy and numeracy skills to become machine operatives or to be promoted to other roles. It is a requirement for health and safety reasons – employees need to be able to read and respond to instructions on health and safety.

The Learn 4 U Centre at McVitie's builds on the strong relationship between the union, USDAW, and the company and tries to engage with strategies on the digital divide and English and maths skills. A learning centre based in the canteen offers a wide range of courses – of which literacy and numeracy are the most popular. The workforce can engage in vocational training, language and IT courses. The centre has created a reading culture with ties to Stockport library

and the Six Book Challenge. Over 70 per cent of the 600-strong workforce is now involved in learning.

McVitie's Training Coordinator Lesley Flood acknowledges that the increasingly sophisticated audit and customer requirements need an educated and proactive rather than passive workforce. She sees the partnership between the unions and the company as a win-win situation for the company, the staff and the unions.

Pirelli centre

As the fifth largest tyre manufacturer in the world, Pirelli employs 1,700 people in the UK. Against current industry trends, it is retaining its status as a UK tyre producer and in partnership with trade unions it continues to promote Lifelong Learning for the whole workforce, in particular those taking their first steps back into learning.

When the results of an initial literacy and numeracy screening among staff revealed higher than expected numbers with Skills for Life needs, managers agreed with the unions that the best approach would be to open a learning centre on-site. The factory established an on-site learning centre at its Carlisle plant in 2001 with money from the Union Learning Fund (ULF). The learning centre makes it easy for the plant's 1,000 workers to fit in learning around their shift work.

One factory worker, 48 year old Keith who decided to take advantage of the learning centre, spoke about his experience:

I've worked on machines my whole life but after 23 years on the shop floor at Pirelli, I decided it was time I move up the career ladder

The learning centre employs professional tutors to help workers and has links with a range of education providers such as unionlearn, Carlisle College and the University of Cumbria. It has run courses in management, IT, health and safety, Literacy, Numeracy, Italian, Spanish and plumbing. Pirelli Learning Centre Manager, Paul said:

The centre is going from strength to strength, with interest in all kinds of courses and learning activities proving ever more popular. Many employees who came into the centre looking to improve /brush up on their Literacy, Numeracy or IT skills, enjoyed getting back into learning so much, we had to look for other types of courses for them to progress onto. This is when we decided to offer NVQ's. We see this as not only a progression route for current learners, but a way for employees to gain a nationally recognised qualification, for the work they already do

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

Drop-in sessions

Central to the successful learning taking place at First Bus Manchester Depot, are Unite ULRs Paul, Stuart and Bob Holt. They are fully qualified to support Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL. First Manchester employs over 1800 bus drivers and invests in its employees with the same rigour it invests in its business.

Bob and Stuart have worked tirelessly over the last 5 years to design and deliver ESOL learning opportunities at their on-site learning centre. The learning centre has 10 PCs, paid for by Unite. The company covers the running costs of the learning centre, including staff costs, broadband, and learning materials. Stuart said:

First Manchester has a positive approach to Lifelong Learning and the senior management team appreciate the benefits that have been made to the business. We are an industry that is heavily regulated and it is important that all colleagues understand the regulations that apply to their particular role, especially in the area of safety and injury prevention. These are key issues for the business and were the initial motive for ESOL materials that were developed to support mainstream training

ESOL sessions are offered on Saturday mornings and Wednesdays, with drop in sessions available most days of the week. The Unite/First UK Bus National Learning Agreement allows for partners to take part in lifelong learning opportunities and this is reflected in the profile of the Saturday class.

Geographical coverage

RMT union have lead an innovative Learning and Skills for All Fund project, supported by Unite, at Stagecoach in the North West. The Stagecoach depots have approximately 1,200 employees and 8 ULRs. Onsite learning centre facilities were recognised as key to the project and were set up at the Morecambe, Carlisle and Barrow sites.

The team of ULRs identified learning needs by carrying out a learning needs analysis across the workforce. It became apparent that training in Skills for Life, Literacy and numeracy was a key priority. A steering group was established where unions and management formulated a learning and skills strategy. The ULRs engaged with a number of training providers, such as Lancaster Adult College, Preston College, Lancashire College, Kendal College, Carlisle College, learn direct Barrow, West Cumbria Trades Hall and Blackpool in the Fylde College to delivery Skills for Life programmes. Lead ULR Ken comments:

My role as project coordinator can be quite challenging in that I support union members/employees across a vast geographical area, including Lancashire and Cumbria. In view of the nature of the work being in shift patterns, time off for training often proved problematic and we needed to plan learning ahead of time in order to ensure we didn't interrupt the service we provided to the public.

Learning agreements and partnerships

Learning agreements between employers and unions represent a consolidation of cooperative working on the learning and skills agenda. Employers and unions benefit from clarity about learning strategy and priorities, the role of ULRs and learning centres, how resources are to be allocated, and the creation of a stable partnership.

Recent independent research into almost 300 learning agreements showed that just under two-thirds were in the private sector and one third were in the public sector and covered workplaces employing a total workforce of 672,060. Workplaces with learning agreements were, on average, larger, had higher levels of union density and had more union learning reps (ULRs) than those without learning agreements. The latest data shows that in the year to March 2014, ULF projects reported 107 new learning agreements had been signed with employers.

Union learning aims to be inclusive, as evidenced in the learning agreements. Most make reference to equality of access in their opening statement of principles. More than four out of five of agreements noted that learning opportunities were available to both union and non-union members.

Private sector employers are equally or more likely to be associated with such inclusivity. Thus, 89 per cent of private sector agreements noted that they covered all employees, compared to 79 per cent of public sector organisations. Eight in ten of all learning agreements contained an equal opportunities clause. Few agreements, however, make reference to specific groups of learners in equality terms. Just nine per cent of agreements did this. Where they did, a wide range of different backgrounds were covered, including basic skills and non-traditional learners, BME and minority groups, such as the Polish community, shift and agency workers and those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Below we look at some examples of the impact of learning agreements and partnerships.

English language skills

ASLEF, along with RMT, TSSA and Unite, are partners in a learning agreement with Greater Anglia rail. This learning partnership has delivered courses in English, maths and the European Computer Driving Licence, as well as leisure-based learning like French classes, with City College Norwich providing the courses in Greater Anglia's premises at Norwich station.

The partners agreed to address the need for ESOL learning amongst the Greater Anglia workforce with a pilot course in 2012. Union Learning Rep Trevor recruited the first course, most of whom were Polish or Latvian speakers. By agreement amongst the rail unions, ULRs from any union will support other unions' members. Running the course on site meant that it was much easier for staff to attend, as all of the learners were shift workers who could not normally attend a course at college due to work patterns and family commitments. Greater Anglia planned flexibility around shift patterns, so that learners were able to rearrange their work commitments to enable them to attend the classes.

Paper mill

A Lifelong Learning agreement between Glatfelter Lydney Paper Mill and the Unite union was signed in 2011 at the on-site Learning Centre. The agreement strengthened the existing partnership between Glatfelter Lydney, Unite, TUC unionlearn and the Royal Forest of Dean College, and is a further step towards embedding learning and skills at the paper mill.

The agreement has paved the way for the fully equipped on-site Learning Centre, funded jointly by the unionlearn 'Skills for the Future Fund' and Glatfelter the employer, to continue providing high level learning for employees. Paul from Unite said:

It is amazing what can be achieved in such a short spell, by working together we have been able to have a learning centre on site which will give all employees at Glatfelter the opportunity to train in new skills, thus being a WIN WIN for the employees and the company.

Employees are taking advantage of the initiative to participate in Level 1, Level 2 and diploma level ICT courses, and apprentices at Glatfelter make full use of the new facility. David, Glatfelter Lydney General Manager, said:

The work done to date helps underpin the future skills base of our employees. To have such a facility with first class support is a key element in the future development of our business. We look forward to the continued success of the learning centre and a continued supportive relationship with Unite and unionlearn.

Argos Distribution

The company has a stakeholder agreement with Unite and a well-developed system of collective bargaining, which covers training. The signing of a national learning agreement spurred the development of union learning at the site. The learning agreement established a Lifelong Learning Steering Committee with management, union and ULR representation. The learning centre works in partnership with a local college, which helped to purchase and service ten computers. 14 different courses have been run with several hundred course completions. Management reported a range of softer organisation outcomes that had contributed to workplace culture, including improved staff morale and confidence.

Local union convenors sought to build learning activity at the site, starting with the recruitment of eight on-site ULRs. A learning centre was established in 2007. Learning was offered on the basis of 50-50 split between company and personal time, with the former paid for out of the learning budget. Fully paid time for literacy, numeracy and absolute beginner ICT courses was given.

Airsprung Beds

Wiltshire employer, Airsprung Beds has greatly increased the skills of their migrant workforce and boosted their productivity through a learning agreement with the union GMB to organise English provision. English language barriers often mean that employers are unable to get the full value out of their migrant workforce. Around 30% of Airsprung's 409 employees are migrant workers, mainly from Poland, Slovakia and Albania. Originally few spoke good English and could not be trained to take on new areas of work. There were often tensions with UK-born employees which the company needed to step in to resolve, sometimes leading to costly disciplinarys.

In 2008 GMB negotiated the learning agreement with Airsprung to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages and literacy provision to the company's workers. Since then, the learning agreement has been extended for the whole of Airsprung Furniture Group and will cover all four sites.

Engaging apprentices

UNISON support has helped Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust develop an apprenticeship programme to offer a wide range of health sector career opportunities to local youngsters. In May 2012, management and the unions at the trust signed an apprenticeship agreement.

More than 200 young people have undertaken apprenticeships at Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust over the past four years, while another 250-plus staff have in Bands 1-4 have developed their skills through the apprenticeship programme. The programme is so successful that it regularly

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

accounts for 50 per cent of the region's target for new apprenticeship places as set by the Cambridgeshire County Workforce Group. Cambridge Health Branch Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator Carole says:

The agreement puts everything on a much more formal footing and means that the apprentices know where they stand on issues such as pay and training

CUH Employee Development Manager Linda agrees:

The agreement has helped us make sure everybody is happy and content with the contract and understands the terms and conditions. It means we can show that we are not exploiting anybody and that the programme is not putting at risk any full-time jobs in areas where apprenticeships are introduced. We have a close working relationship with our unions here at the hospital: they have been very supportive of the scheme and helped us promote the programme – having them on board has been really beneficial

Apprentice roles include business and administration, customer service, healthcare support services, management, IT and maintenance. Almost all the training is delivered onsite by local provider Cambridgeshire Regional College.

Mobile learning

Unite are running a pilot scheme in partnership with Veolia Environmental Services depots in London, as part of their Lifelong Learning agenda. The union is delivering Skills for Life to depots based in Regents Park and Bromley-by-Bow and are looking to extend the scheme further to neighbouring depots.

There have been successful results with a number of students passing entry Level 1 and Level 3 course, who are now working on higher level courses. To deliver the course, mobile learning facilities have been utilized, bringing laptops to the learners and their workplace. Many students come to the course because they find it difficult to access courses locally due to issues such as unsociable working hours.

Students come from a wide and varied background and ethnic groups, including learners who have left school recently and mature learners who wish to gain a qualification to improve their work prospects, promotion or simply because they want to learn.

Lifelong learning

Nicholas and Harris is a speciality bakery business based in Salisbury. The company employs 275 employees most being of Polish nationality. There has been a learning partnership agreement between the union and management since 2009.

The learning partnership agreement between the company and GMB Southern aimed to encourage staff within the company to participate in lifelong learning. The agreement was expansive, with the company making a commitment that all members of staff would be given reasonable covered time off for training, retraining should they find themselves in a redundancy situation, establishing a learning centre within the workplace, in addition to facilitating the statutory rights for union learning reps (ULRs) to support the learners. The agreement covered all employees with consideration given at times to staff employed through employment agencies.

The two ULRs in the company are both Polish and hold surgeries with potential learners before or after shifts. They were involved with the project workers with the learning needs survey which was in Polish, in explaining the course provision to the potential learners and in helping to get the best providers.

The learning agreement recognises the importance of equal opportunities and equal access to enhance skill levels and stated that the Learning Partnership Committee would make every effort to ensure that the learning needs of specific individual employees are taken into account. Previous collection of equality and diversity data had been inadequate and the union felt it did not address the importance of wider participation and individual needs. An equality workplace survey was thus carried out by the union and the results provided the right set of data to assess the needs of all employees effectively.

GMB project worker Paul explains:

Previous work done did not necessarily address the diversity of the company and through the learning committee we discussed how we would move forward. We had a couple of very useful training sessions on equality run by the Unionlearn Call to Learn project manager. There were discussions involving the GMB project workers, the ULRs and the HR Manager on how to ensure that the terminology used in the survey did not offend anyone as well as doing what we wanted it to do. We ran the equality survey parallel with the learning survey which was useful in identifying what we need to do.

Learning campaigns

As we have seen much of the work of widening access to learning and overcoming disadvantage is down to the work of ULRs and partnership working between unions and employers. Where a learning culture is weak or absent however a more campaigning approach may be needed.

Here are some examples.

Checkout learning

Project Worker Phil outlined the campaign:

Checkout learning is running in seven USDAW regions across the UK, with project workers like me supporting the campaign. As many retail staff are paid at barely more than the National Minimum Wage, and are often working part-time hours and shifts, the aim of the campaign is to bring in accessible and affordable learning into stores. The campaign aims to identify potential new ULRs so that they can be brought into the union organisation in retail stores and work with shop stewards and other union reps to build and sustain learning there

The campaign targets stores where the union has a partnership or recognition agreement with employers, such as Tesco, Morrison's and Sainsbury's. The project worker liaises with other officers in the union before meeting with Human Resources (HR) the Store Manager and the union reps in store to get Skills for Life courses and English as a Second Language up and running.

At Tesco's Harrow store, the initiative kicked off with a promotional day involving the Check Out Learning Roadshow complete with bespoke posters and free gifts, to encourage workers on both day and night shifts to come and find out about the learning opportunities on offer, and complete an initial learning assessment with college tutors from Brent Adult Community Education and ULRs. The company gave paid release for workers to attend the promotional day and complete assessments, and the union brings in a team including experienced ULRs from other stores.

Learning lunches

Workers at Bournemouth's HMRC office were offered a week of Learning Lunches tasters organised by PCS ULR Steph, with support from Dorset's unionlearn Support Officer Keith. The week offered a wide range of sessions based around the Health & Wellbeing agenda, and demonstrated how ULRs can help colleagues try something new. The Learning Lunches included a community singing workshop lead by a choir master, a holiday Italian taster, and

introduction to Herbs & Herbal Medicines and Ikebana flower arranging. One of the most popular was a session on relaxation and stress busting.

Learn for Life with the NHS

The Social Partnership Forum in the NHS has launched a campaign to promote workplace learning in the health service, especially among low-paid staff. Learning for Life aims to spread the word about learning opportunities, increase the amount of training taking place and highlight the positive impact of training on patient care for all NHS staff.

With the help of a toolkit, posters, podcasts and other materials, the campaign stimulates participation in learning among the lowest-paid staff in bands 1–4.

It aims to increase recognition among chief executives and board members that supporting the development of staff makes good business sense. Explains Christina, chair of the NHS trade unions and UNISON head of health:

We know that when staff have access to good- quality appraisal, learning and skills training, and are properly equipped to undertake their job role, this has a positive impact on the patient experience and the quality of health outcomes. “This campaign will encourage employers and trade unions to work together to promote learning for all staff – particularly those in the lower pay bands – and will help to ensure that staff have the right skills for the job and the confidence to act in the patients’ best interests.

Community champions

Newcastle UNISON is leading a unique partnership project with Newcastle City Council to develop Community Learning Champions to spread the word about lifelong learning in Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and other communities in the city. The branch secured funding from the Community Learning Champions programme financed by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education.

The Newcastle Community Learning Champions Project initially approached council workers from the Sudanese, Iranian, Brazilian, Pakistani and Congolese communities to identify potential learning champions and then broadened its approach, spending three months reaching out to organisations that worked with community groups on learning and training, learning providers and individuals.

Tackling disadvantage and removing barriers

Reaching the hardest to reach

With the help of Union Learning Fund, Unite is reaching out to domestic workers by helping them overcome barriers to learning and play a major role in their communities and workplaces. Every weekend, around 150 workers gather to study IT and take literacy and numeracy courses as well as English for Speakers of Other Languages courses.

Success has been such that Unite has had to move the courses out of its Transport House building into the more spacious surroundings of the nearby Faraday House, where learners can spread out over six classrooms, in a 30 piece IT suite, and take advantage of the student lounge.

The young members section of the Justice for Cleaners campaign, where many of the migrant workers first made contact with the union, runs workshops for up to 40 young people on photography, video, art, drama, music, dance, food and Spanish.

Steve, Unite National Union Learning Organiser said:

We couldn't have achieved any of this without the backing of the Union Learning Fund. The workers themselves couldn't communicate with their employers, colleagues or indeed with the union around industrial issues, but now they've taken the courses, they have a bit more confidence and are really taking the agenda forward

TOPAZ

Unionlearn in the Midlands recently joined forces with the pioneering new TOPAZ project for older lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people in Birmingham to deliver the first IT course run by unions for the LGBT community in the city.

The Older Peoples A to Z or TOPAZ was launched from the Birmingham LGBT Centre and is funded by Birmingham City Council. It aims to encourage people to be part of a vibrant older LGBT community in the city, and in doing so, improve their quality of life. It consists of a befriending and peer mentoring service together with a range of events and activities, including new learning and training opportunities. It aims to reach out to older LGBT people (aged 55 and over) who are in danger of becoming socially isolated and offer them support in a variety of ways, including providing help to attend events, with shopping and with attending appointments for example.

Conclusions - the union learning effect

Why is union learning able to reach out to workers often regarded as ‘hard to reach’, often with low qualifications and self esteem, and with multiple disadvantages? This report has suggested some of the answers.

- Union learning reps are close to their members. Often they share learning disadvantages with them, such as low initial qualifications, dyslexia and difficult working patterns. This means they are seen as ‘one of us’. Often they lead by example by being the first to sign up to new programmes. ULRs are particularly effective in supporting disadvantaged and less confident adults in areas of learning such as English and maths, English for speakers of other languages, digital inclusion and informal adult and community learning. They encourage, coach and support learners because they themselves have witnessed the great benefits of re-engaging in learning. ULRs are well-trained through high quality unionlearn programmes and continuing support. Developing skills and solving problems are key aspects of the training. The status of ULRs is substantially enhanced through statutory backing.
- Learning agreements and partnerships with employers help pave the way to the creation of a new culture of learning. Tensions between different layers of management over the priority to be given to learning and development can be eased through clear agreements. Steering groups involving unions and management help analyse needs, set targets, and monitor programmes.
- Onsite learning centres help provide the focal point and inspiration for workplace learning. They offer flexible access and may provide specialist equipment and software. The centres offer a focal point for the work of ULRs.
- Unions can help spread the lessons from successful workplace learning projects from employer to employer and from sector to sector. Learning campaigns help to spread the message more widely and reach out to groups not yet engaged.
- Union learning provides significant leverage through cooperative working. Small amounts of public funding help generate matching contributions from employers and unions through facilities, time off, equipment, and expertise. A huge amount of volunteer time is contributed through the work of union reps.

Conclusions - the union learning effect

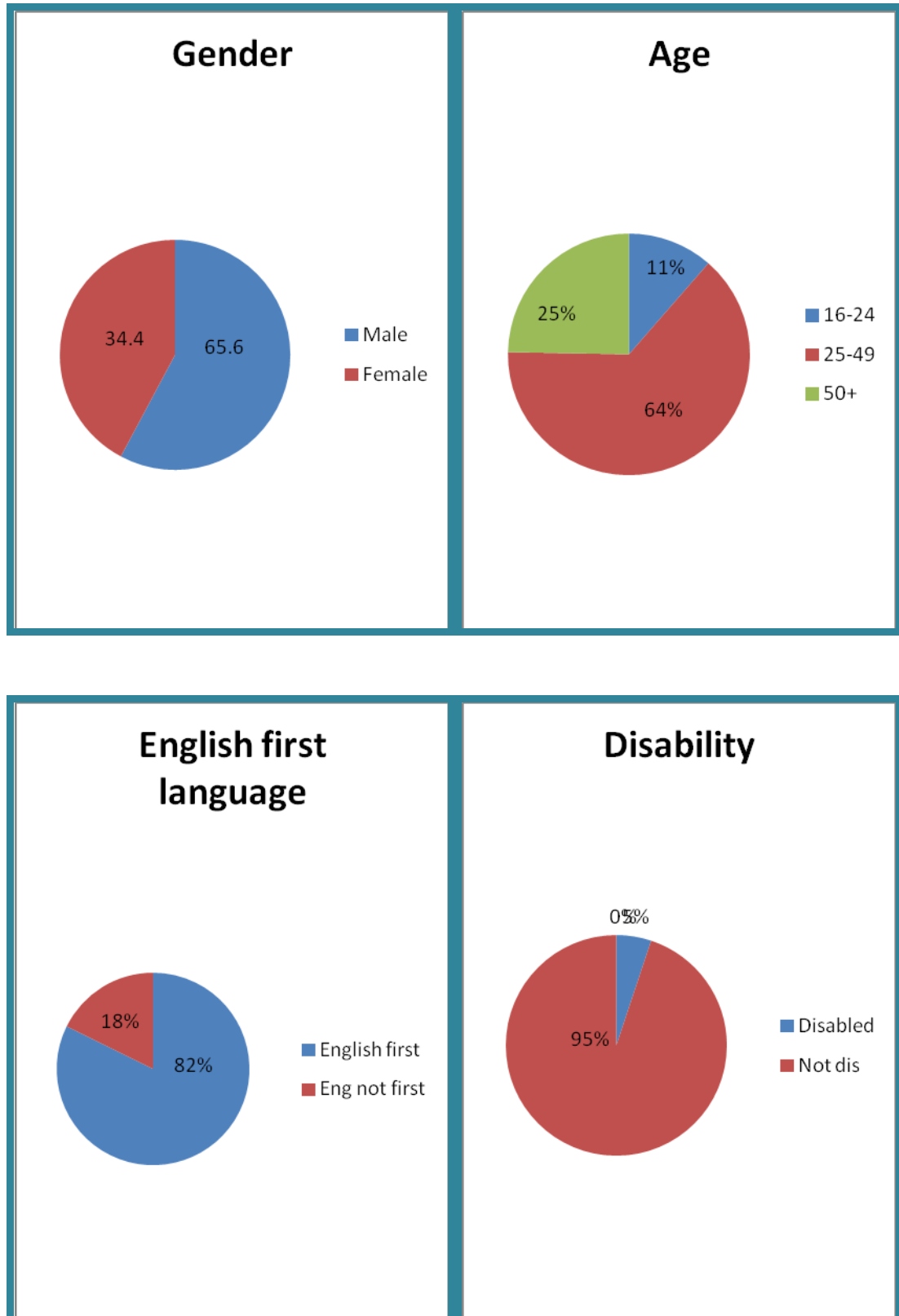
- Government funding for unionlearn works out as costing £75 per learner. It has been estimated by Leeds University that between £6 - £8 are “levered in” from employers for every £1 of government funding.

Summary

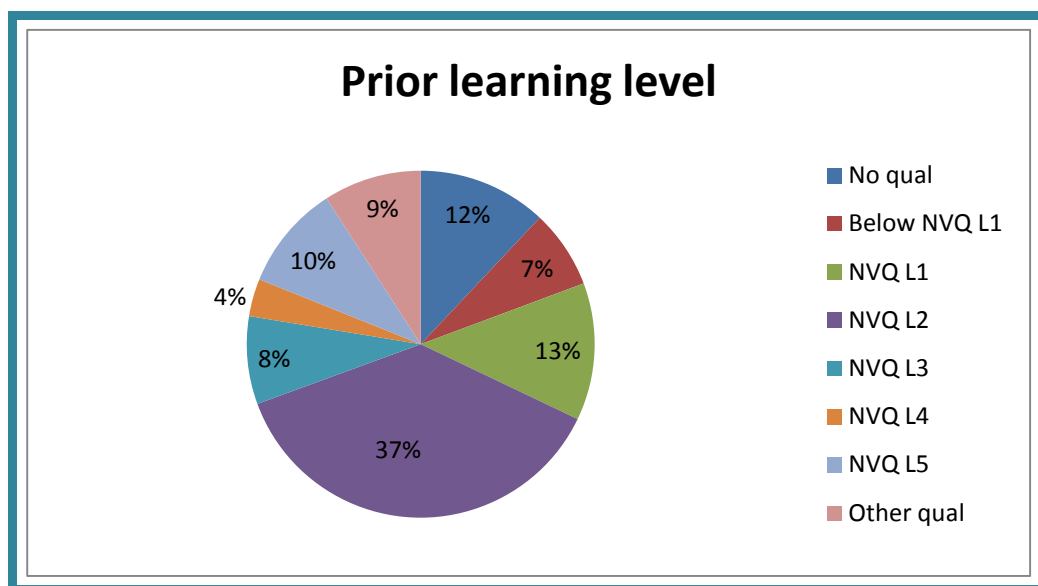
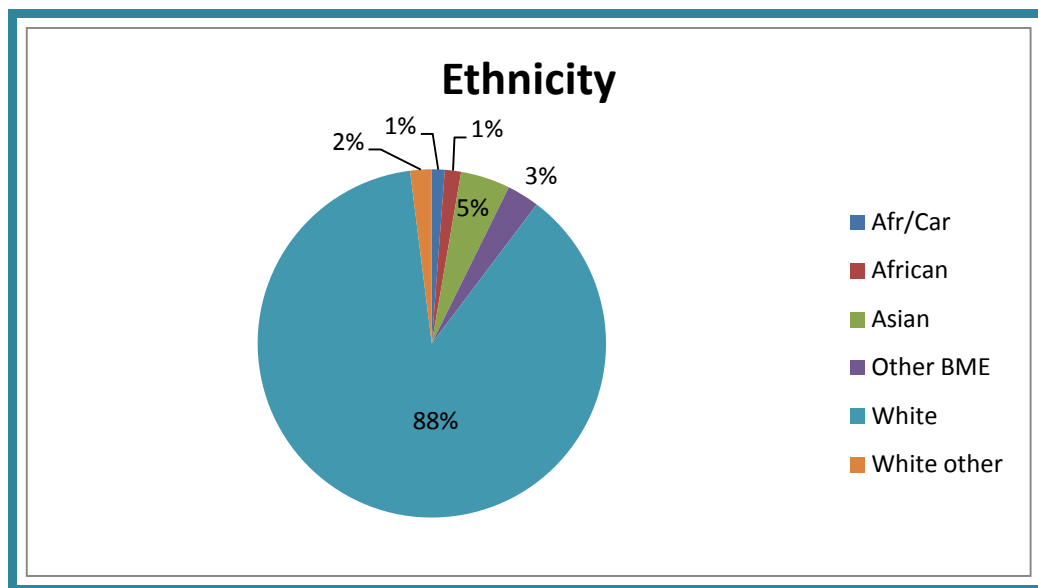
Union learning is highly successful. It tackles complex issues of disadvantages in ways that no other organisation can do. It has a strong track record helping the “hardest to reach”. For individuals it transforms lives, for employers and government it builds a sustainable economy and strong civic society.

To find out more - and how you can help – log on to www.unionlearn.org.uk

Appendix 1: ULF equality and diversity learner data – April to June 2014



Conclusions - the union learning effect



Appendix 2: Publications

The following lists examples of publications available from the unionlearn website. For more information go to: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications>

- Unionlearn strategy for supporting learners 2014
- Learning Rep magazine
- Supporting Learners newsletters
- Unionlearn briefing on BIS Adult Literacy and Numeracy report
- Cancer in the workplace
- Research paper 20: The role of mentoring in supporting Apprenticeships
- Falling off the radar: The impact of living off-line
- Work Experience Placements - Guidance for reps
- Unionlearn annual report 2013-14
- Union Learning Fund Prospectus 2015/2016
- Midlife career reviews - Helping older workers plan their future - Evaluation report
- Climbing Frame newsletters
- Call to Learn – Case Studies
- Still making a difference – The continuing impact of trade union education on Britain's workplaces
- Managing Future Talent: how do you create workplaces that give young employees the opportunity to thrive?
- Age immaterial - women over 50 in the workplace
- Plain Maths cards
- TUC Model Traineeships Charter – guidance for union representatives
- Union Learning Impact Report
- Everything you need to know about functional skills
- Union Engagement - Learning in the workplace and the community
- Working Women - a TUC handbook for all trade unionists
- Reading and Writing: Literacy, Language and Numeracy series for union learning reps
- Making learning and meetings accessible to all

Conclusions - the union learning effect

- Payday maths - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Olympic legacy - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Medicines and maths - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Managing time in life and work - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Energy - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Computer bytes - unionlearn Quick Maths Menu
- Negotiator's brief for ESOL and a learning agreement model text
- Supporting Learners Packs
- Union Engagement - Learning in the workplace and the community
- Reading and Writing: Literacy, Language and Numeracy series for union learning reps
- Making learning and meetings accessible to all
- Union learning: Attitudes and outcomes
- Making the most of skills – a guide for reps
- Research Paper 16 - The role and impact of unions on learning and skills policy and practice: a review of the research
- Making informed choices - Supporting learners at 50+
- Breaking through the barriers - Equal access to learning for all
- Reaching communities - the community learning toolkit
- Union learning adding value – an evaluation of unionlearn and the union learning fund
- Research paper 14 - Learning Journeys - trade union learners in their own words



Published by
unionlearn
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS

020 7079 6920
unionlearn.org.uk

January 2015

Designed and printed by TUC
Cover photo © Philip Wolmuth/
reportdigital.co.uk