

20 YEARS of changing the world



unionlearn
from the TUC



“This life-changing work is only going to become ever more important in the years ahead, as we continue to equip working people with the tools they need to thrive amid the profound change of the technological revolution.”

Introduction by Frances O'Grady



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) is a remarkable programme that brings a huge range of learning opportunities to hundreds of thousands of people in workplaces up and down the country every year.

Multiply those impacts by the 20 years that the ULF has been in business, and you begin to get a sense of what an enormous impact the fund has made not only on individual learners themselves, but on the enterprises they work for and the productivity of the entire economy.

With the help of the ULF, unions have run innovative and engaging projects that have helped thousands of workers gain their first qualifications in English, maths and digital and we have helped build social cohesion by enabling migrant workers to study English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Functional skills support has always been fundamental for the vast majority of ULF projects. But that's not all that unions do, by any means. We have supported young people and older workers through apprenticeship programmes, dismantling some of the barriers

faced by women, black and minority ethnic (BME) and disabled workers trying to access the best opportunities. We have helped staff progress through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes and we have also supported union members studying at degree level.

We could not have achieved any of this without our network of passionate and dedicated union learning reps (ULRs). Twenty years ago, we only had a few hundred. Now we have trained tens of thousands to encourage their co-workers to embrace the possibilities opened up by workplace learning.

This life-changing work is only going to become ever more important in the years ahead, as we continue to equip working people with the tools they need to thrive amid the profound change of the technological revolution. I hope this booklet serves as a reminder of how we have made ourselves into the best people for that particular job.

Frances O'Grady
TUC General Secretary

Funding the skills revolution

For more than two decades, the Union Learning Fund has enabled hundreds of thousands of union learners gain the skills and qualifications they need to progress at work and prepare for the challenges of the years ahead.

For 20 years now, The Union Learning Fund (ULF) has been helping improve the skills of workers in companies large and small, in the public and private sectors and across all areas of the economy.

Central to its success over two decades has been the network of union learning reps (ULRs) who have been trained (with funding from the ULF) to provide support, encouragement, advice and guidance that many co-workers have needed to re-start their learning journeys.

Behind the ULRs have been teams of project workers employed by individual unions (their wages usually supported by the ULF), many of whom cut their teeth in a workplace learning project and have gone on to share and develop their knowledge and expertise on a broader canvas.

Delivering the learning have been tutors from a wide range of providers, including hundreds of local providers such as further education (FE) colleges, and big players on the national stage such as The Open University (OU) and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA).

Where courses have been delivered in workplaces – often the most effective setting for workers who didn't have a positive experience in classrooms at school – they have often been run in dedicated learning centres, usually kitted out by partnerships between employers, unions and the ULF.

The learning landscape has evolved enormously since the first round of the ULF in 1998/99. The Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) that were working with regional TUC Bargaining for Skills projects in the second half of the 1990s were replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2001 and the LSC itself closed in 2010. Similarly, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), which oversaw the network of Sector Skills Councils, was replaced by the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (UKCES) in 2007, and the UKCES in turn closed 10 years later. Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) came and went, as did the employer programme Train to Gain.

But throughout all this upheaval, the ULF has continued to thrive, its track record of successful outcomes valued by governments of all political stripes.

The facts and figures reveal why the ULF remains a vital component of the country's drive to improve the skills of the workforce. Between them, ULF projects deliver an estimated £1.65bn net contribution to the economy by boosting jobs, wages and productivity, according to the latest independent evaluation.

Before the ULF...

- **Return to Learn:** Originally piloted by the National Union of Public Employees (now part of UNISON) in 1988, Return to Learn remains popular with UNISON members today. The 10-week programme helps members who may have been away from learning for some time to improve their study skills through group work and individual study.

- **Employee Development Assistance Programme: EDAP**

is the learning programme launched at Ford in 1987 as part of that year's pay settlement. It remains in operation today.

- **Bargaining for Skills:** Launched in 1994, Bargaining for Skills was a set of initiatives that created learning and skills partnerships between regional TUCs and local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). The projects were later absorbed into TUC Learning Services, forerunner of unionlearn.

- **Steel Partnership Training:** Launched in 1997 by the Iron & Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC, now Community), Steel Partnership Training was originally created to help redundant steel workers gain new skills. It has evolved into Communitas, Community's wholly-owned learning operation, which also supports members in the clothing and footwear industries and the private justice and custodial sector.



LEARNER BENEFITS

68%

More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of union learners with no qualifications gain their first qualification through courses funded by the ULF.

47%

Just under half (47 per cent) of union learners starting at Entry Level or Level 1 gain a qualification at a higher level.

90%

Nine out of ten union learners (90 per cent) gain at least one new skill.

73%

Almost three quarters (73 per cent) of union learners become more confident in their abilities.

63%

Six out of ten (63 per cent) union learners gain a new qualification.

BUSINESS BENEFITS

77%

More than three-quarters (77 per cent) of employers say that engagement in ULF learning has a positive effect in their workplaces.

68%

More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of employers say unions are particularly effective at inspiring reluctant learners to engage in training and development.

47%

Nearly half of employers (47 per cent) believe their staff are more committed as a result of their engagement in ULF learning.

32%

Around one-third (32 per cent) of employers report that organisational performance has either increased or significantly increased as a result of ULF learning.

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

£674^m

Employers gain net benefits of £674m through the improved skills of their workforce delivering increased productivity (based on analysis of Round 18).

£12.24

Every £1 invested in the Union Learning Fund generates a total economic return of £12.24: £7.24 to individuals and £5 to employers (based on analysis of Round 18).

£3.40

For every £1 of public money invested in the Union Learning Fund, the Exchequer receives £3.40 (based on an analysis of tax receipts).

All figures from the latest evaluation of the ULF by the Marchmont Observatory at the University of Exeter, which examined the results from a survey of 2,459 union learners in 2018, and the evaluation of Rounds 15 and 16 by the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) at the University of Leeds, which included a survey of 385 employers.

Helping union learners gain their first qualifications

ULF projects have an unrivalled record in engaging and supporting functional skills learners and have helped thousands of them gain their very first qualifications with the support of their union.

Functional skills have been at the heart of Union Learning Fund (ULF) projects since the very first round in 1998/99.

Referred to at the time as basic skills and later skills for life, functional skills are the English, maths and digital skills that enable people to go about their work and personal lives confidently, effectively and independently.

And ULF projects have long demonstrated that one of their greatest strengths is their ability to engage and support functional skills learners, who are far more open to talking about their struggles with English, maths or digital with their ULF than with their supervisors, managers or HR staff.

For example, following professionalising reforms in the care sector in the early 2000s that set new qualification targets for care home staff, it was the GMB's ULF project Caretrain that was able to help workers in some of the biggest companies at the time gain the English and maths qualifications they needed to complete Level 2 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in social care.

Colin Kirkham, who was the GMB's national convenor for the care sector at the time and is now the union's National Project Director, says the project continues to influence GMB's approach to lifelong learning today.

"Had it not been for Caretrain, we would not be where we are in terms of looking after care workers, as care is one of the larger industrial sectors that we deal with," Colin says. "And as the catalyst for all the projects we have run since, Caretrain has helped us as a union create our lifelong learning offer for members, through which any GMB member can access a wide range of online courses, both free and paid."



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

"The success of the Union Learning Fund, managed by unionlearn and delivered by unions, shows how the skills and creativity in the trade union movement are totally under-estimated, as is the talent of individual workers who didn't necessarily have the best crack of the whip in terms of education first time round. What union learners over the years have demonstrated can be achieved while they're of working age is marvellous. And where employers are prepared to work with unions – and we need more of them to do that – it's win-win. The success of the ULF is a total endorsement of placing trade unions not just at the centre of industrial relations but at the heart of workforce development and industrial strategy."

Liz Smith
unionlearn Director 2006–2009

Like many unions that access ULF funding, the GMB continues to embed functional skills into learning opportunities. More recently, the union's ReachOut ULF project has helped young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) successfully complete the functional skills elements of traineeship programmes that have helped them start apprenticeships or secure full-time jobs.

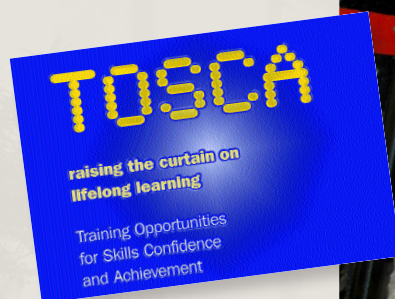
"Had it not been for Caretrain, we would not be where we are in terms of looking after care workers"

ULF INVESTMENT IN FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ULF support has helped all these learners improve their English and maths up to Level 2



BECTU union learning rep Paddy Flanagan, who worked backstage at English National Opera, helped co-workers improve their functional skills through the union's TOSCA project

Photo: Janina Struk



Placing functional skills centre stage at the opera

Media and entertainment union BECTU (now part of Prospect) raised the curtain on the first learning partnership between a union and a major employer in the cultural sector when it launched the Training Opportunities for Skills, Confidence and Achievement (TOSCA) project at English National Opera (ENO) in 2000.

The appropriately operatic name was the brainchild of Margaret Bisset, who worked part-time as the administrator on the project.

BECTU's first union learning rep (ULR) Paddy Flanagan, who was already active as a steward at the Coliseum, originally approached the union about developing learning opportunities for his backstage crew and cleaners.

That prompted the then training officer Trish Lavelle, later to become head of education and training at the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), to apply for funding to the newly-launched Union Learning Fund (ULF).

"We worked on delivering basic skills literacy and numeracy courses – as they were known then – to

members working backstage and to cleaners at ENO," Trish recalls.

The successful English and maths courses led to an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pilot to help housekeeping staff at ENO in the second year of the project.

And after gaining confidence on the English course he took himself through the project, Paddy went on to gain a Certificate in Employment Law at South Thames College in Putney in 2006.

BECTU later used its success at ENO to expand the project to deliver learning opportunities to theatre workers at regional venues around the country, including Leicester Haymarket, Newcastle Theatre Royal, Plymouth Theatre Royal and Sheffield Theatres.

"TOSCA was very bespoke and very small and it was very early days but the ULF gave us the freedom and autonomy to experiment with ideas and opportunities to end up with the model that we use today, which has evolved over a very long period of time," says Kate Elliott, who managed the project between 2002 and 2005 and remains involved (as a freelancer) in the union's training and development programme today.

Helping learners get in the Zone



Photo: Mark Harvey/iD-8 Photography

Financial support from the ULF has helped union learning projects create a vital network of workplace learning centres, where co-workers can learn together, supported by the on-site team of union learning reps.

The Learning Zone at the Argos Castleford Distribution Centre (DC) is one of the jewels in the crown of USDAW's network of workplace learning centres, offering a broad spectrum of development opportunities almost as wide as the range of products on the shelves that are picked and packed by staff.

Some learners are improving their English, maths and digital skills, while others have enrolled on apprenticeships at Levels 2 and 3 to gain all-important qualifications in business administration, warehousing, team leading and management.

The centre also offers distance learning courses in customer service, team leading, mental health

awareness and health and well-being; helps to raise dementia awareness; and successfully runs national initiatives such as the literacy scheme Reading Ahead and the National Numeracy Challenge.

Working closely with the local council and external providers of health and mental health workshops, the centre also runs Mental Health First Aid courses and awareness sessions on a range of subjects, including migrant worker mental health.

Little wonder, then, that more than half the 260 DC staff have taken some kind of course, with more than half of them progressing onto other courses and qualifications, between them racking up more than 3,330 learning opportunities.

ULF INVESTMENT IN LEARNING CENTRES Numbers of new learning centres opened by project year end



“A lot of our learning centres have been open for 10, 15, 18 years”

The massive engagement in learning has been nurtured by the team of union learning reps (ULRs) at the site, currently seven-strong and led by ULR Coordinator Sean Dixon.

Sean took over the ULR Coordinator role in 2015, a couple of years after he arrived on site with a passion for learning that he'd originally developed while working as the night-shift trainer at Co-operative Retail Logistics.

The learning culture was well and truly flourishing by this point, thanks to Sean's predecessor Monika Paczkowska, whose dedication and commitment secured her recognition as the TUC's ULR of the Year in 2014.

Although Monika now works as an NVQ assessor for vocational training provider Qube Learning, she still makes regular appearances on site at the DC in her new role.

And it's not only Monika who has applied what she learned in Castleford in the wider world. The former DHL Operations Manager Richard Dannatt, who strongly supported the learning partnership on site, took his positive experience of union learning into his next role at Iceland's Enfield Lock site.

In a demonstration of the ripples created by ULF projects, Richard went on to work closely with Unite learning rep Steve Callear at Enfield Lock, moving the learning centre not once but twice into better premises, thus helping Steve enrol dozens of full-time and agency staff on English, maths and digital courses on site.

At the Castleford Learning Zone, USDAW ULR Coordinator Sean Dixon (above) has built on the work of his predecessor, Monika Paczkowska (right), to develop the opportunities available to colleagues.



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

"The trade union movement has always helped educate its members, which is one of the reasons the Union Learning Fund has been embraced by so many people and really taken off. In the early years, you would sometimes hear people saying trade unionism was supposed to be about pay and conditions, the so-called bread-and-butter issues. But mostly what you find with an awful lot of people involved in the trade union movement is that they tend to be involved in other things as well as being shop stewards so they see the value of increasing people's self-confidence, which is what learning does – and one of the reasons I was always supportive of it was because I could see that value."

Billy Hayes

chair of the unionlearn board, 2006–2009



"The Learning Zone in Castleford is an absolutely outstanding example of a learning centre, where the people continue to learn and the company are absolutely dedicated because they see the impact that learning has had," says USDAW National Lifelong Learning Coordinator Ann Murphy, who has been at the centre of the union's learning work since the launch of the ULF.

"But there are other very long-running learning centres at Argos Widnes, McVities and Boots in Nottingham: they are all examples of how learning has taken off when we have negotiated for people to be stood down to coordinate learning initiatives and the employers have supported us because they have seen the results. A lot of our learning centres have been open for 10, 15, 18 years, which has allowed learning to become part of the culture on those sites."

Photo: Mark Harvey/iD-8 Photography

2008
99

2009
83

2010
102

2011
74

2012
115

2013
115

2014
68

2015
70

2016
179

All aboard the apprenticeships express

Union learning projects are helping apprentices get the high-quality training they deserve.

ULF INVESTMENT IN APPRENTICESHIPS

Union learning projects are helping expand the number of apprentices

2009
2,337

2010
2,400

2011
2,500

2012
3,000

2013
4,773

2014
5,971

2015
6,561

2016
7,292

Support from the Union Learning Fund combined with government reform of the apprenticeship system helped train drivers' union ASLEF play a crucial part in the development of a new apprenticeship standard in the industry.

"We'd been arguing for more than 10 years for a vocational qualification for train drivers that reflected their responsibilities," explains ASLEF Project Coordinator Shirley Handsley.

"In all that time, the ULF enabled us to build credibility and build momentum about what we were doing as a union getting people involved in learning, so when the time was right to create the new Level 3 apprenticeship standard, we were taken seriously: in fact, unlike employers, we didn't need the Levy to push us down the apprenticeship route – through other ULF projects, we had seen the benefits of apprenticeships to individuals, employers and the industry."

Designed (as all new apprenticeship standards now are) by an employer-led Trailblazer group, the standard includes English, maths and digital Level 2 qualifications, thanks to the advocacy of ASLEF.

"We convinced the employers that they had to include Level 2 ICT as well as English and maths, which is a significant achievement and will probably involve a significant upskilling for people once they're in the industry," Shirley says.

With the help of the ULF, ASLEF has also been working in partnership with The Samaritans to deliver one-day trauma support courses to train drivers, preparing them in advance for the possibility of traumatic experiences including fatalities – a much more effective approach than only offering them support after the event.

"We'd been arguing for more than 10 years for a vocational qualification for train drivers that reflected their responsibilities."

Photo: John Harris/reportdigital.co.uk



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk



"The success of the Union Learning Fund offers an important lesson for any government that wants to improve skills and education in this country. Many of the other initiatives that have been tried over the years were top-down and sometimes well-meaning but not always thought-through. The ULF isn't like that: because of the membership base of the trade union movement rooted in the organisation of workplaces, we have lots of feet on the ground. And the our learners are not only union members: it's their colleagues, their families, their friends who also gain access to learning opportunities. As we showed in evidence to

government, there has been a real multiplier effect around the country: in some communities where people hadn't been much involved in learning, local colleges would begin to experience the kind of influx of adult learners they hadn't seen in years – we saw that in some of the coalfield communities in Yorkshire, for example. So any government that wants to improve skills, I would invite them to continue to work with trade unions and the Union Learning Fund."

Tom Wilson
unionlearn Director 2009–2015

And in a further breakthrough, the union has recently persuaded rail employers that the course belongs as part of the core curriculum of train driver training.

"ASLEF pushed for that and we were able to demonstrate the difference it makes because of our proven track record and the credibility we have on learning and development, thanks to the ULF," Shirley says.

Having worked in and around union learning since she was a convenor in a Scottish factory 19 years ago,

and as part of the combined Rail Union Learning (RUL) project before ASLEF, RMT and TSSA set up their own individual projects, Shirley has seen a massive change in the way unions approach workplace learning.

"There was a time when some people thought learning was pink and fluffy but if you look at the evolution of the ULF and where we are now, learning is linked to pay, to employability and to apprenticeships – and you'd never class that as pink and fluffy!" she says.

ULF projects help support high-quality apprenticeships at Virgin Trains (left) and Siemens (right)

Helping teachers

One of the major obstacles facing every attempt to raise the status of apprenticeships and expand the numbers of young people entering apprenticeship programmes has been that teachers have developed themselves through the academic and not the vocational route.

As a result, would-be apprentices have often had to investigate their options off their own back, with teachers unable to provide much support.

It was to address that problem that the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL, now part of the National Education Union, NEU) developed a specific Union Learning Fund project four years ago.

"Most teachers will recommend their pupils go on to do A Levels because they don't know about apprenticeships and we also found their knowledge



wasn't as great as it should be in further education (FE) colleges," explains NEU Joint General Secretary Mary Bousted.

"That was why four years ago we developed a bid to the ULF to increase teachers' and lecturers' knowledge of apprenticeships, whereas 10 or 15 years ago, our bids were very much centred on improving the professional skills of teachers and lecturers."

How ULRs help get learning sorted



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Union learning reps (ULRs) are the foundation on which the success of union learning has been built over the past 20 years.

It's ULRs' passion for learning and their skill with supporting sometimes reluctant learners that have made all the difference between laying on courses that few would attend and chalking up successes with packed classrooms and long waiting lists.

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) ULR Parminder Kaur is a classic example. It was Parminder who persuaded management at Heathrow Worldwide Distribution Centre (HWDC, the hub of Royal Mail's international mail sorting office near Slough) to give her space for a learning centre eight years ago. And it was the Union Learning Fund (ULF) that covered the cost of new laptops and installing broadband.

Parminder recognised that her colleagues, the majority of them black and minority ethnic (BME) women, needed help overcoming some initial resistance to returning to learning. So she kicked off by embedding English and maths in digital photography courses and led by example by taking all the digital courses on offer herself.

"Parminder is a fantastic ULR who has continued to support large numbers of learners, has sustained relationships with providers to get a good range of courses and has won great respect from the management there – I think they are in awe of her!" says CWU Head of Education and Training Trish Lavelle.

"And she still manages to get people time off for learning, which is very challenging in any workplace, so that's a great credit to her."

Another CWU learning rep that took a proactive approach to engaging learners is Steve Hackford in Wolverhampton, who worked with union member Balraj Singh Atwal to set up a learning centre in the Sikh temple not far from the mail centre.

With the help of the CWU and Wolverhampton College, the Guru Nanak temple has provided English, maths and digital courses for community members, as well as health and safety, cookery and food hygiene.

ULF INVESTMENT IN TRAINING OF UNION LEARNING REPS (ULRs) Numbers of ULRs trained

1999
734

2000
882

2001
1,640

2002
1,540

2003
2,724

2004
2,383

2005
3,799

2006
2,169

2007
3,200

Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

For Trish, two key developments have helped ULRs extend their influence in the workplace. The first was unions winning statutory recognition for learning reps in 2003, securing for them the same rights as health and safety reps and shop stewards.

“Statutory recognition was a game-changer,” Trish recalls. “It swelled the number of ULRs because they saw they could have some time to do their work and it made a massive difference symbolically because employers saw the government was giving legal recognition to ULR work.”

The other step forward was when unions began incorporating the ULR role in their rulebooks, something the CWU did in 2005.

“The learning rep had to be absolutely embedded in our structures: for union learning to be successful and sustainable in the longer term, we had to make sure that ULRs didn’t become people who worked with HR rather than their own branches,” Trish says.

Embedding ULRs in union structures has paid off for every union involved in workplace learning, with CWU’s Somerset, Devon & North Cornwall Branch a case in point.

Not only does lead ULR Geoff Hodge work with other senior officers to ensure branch reps develop the skills they need to carry out their duties, but he has also encouraged the branch to commit some of its own resources to learning above and beyond ULF funding.

“The branch now co-funds courses that its members want to do, which is really significant in terms of developing sustainable structures and shows how the branch believes they should support their members undertaking education because that’s good for the individuals, for society and for the union,” Trish says.



“The Union Learning Fund is unique. There is no other initiative that has the capacity to engage both with employers in terms of getting things done – which is the strength of union reps – and with the workforce in terms of encouraging them as peers and reassuring them about being open about anything they find difficult. It was a bit of inspiration at the TUC 20 years ago that was met with a bit of imagination in government and followed by a lot of really hard work by some talented people on the ground. Union learning is a real boon to society at this time of change: if we hadn’t launched the ULF 20 years ago, it would have been necessary to invent it now.”

Liz Rees
unionlearn Director 2015–2017

“Embedding ULRs in union structures has paid off for every union involved in workplace learning.”

Thanks to statutory rights for union learning reps, CWU ULRs like Parminder Kaur (opposite) and Steve Hackford (below, with learner Balraj Singh Atwal) have been able to promote a wide range of learning opportunities for their co-workers



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

2008
3,100

2009
1,980

2010
1,941

2011
1,674

2012
1,500

2013
1,895

2014
3,685

2015
3,100

2016
3,100

Aiming higher through the union

Union partnerships with institutions including The Open University and Birkbeck, University of London are helping union learners gain degree-level qualifications to develop in their existing careers or switch to new paths.



UNISON learner Helen Russell, who works as a healthcare assistant (HCA) at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, has just completed the first year of her Open University (OU) BA (Hons) degree in health and social care, after building her confidence through the union's Return to Learn course.

"I was interested in trying to undertake some higher education but I hadn't done any study for over 11 years," Helen says.

"I was a bit nervous that my writing and my maths skills wouldn't be up to date, so when UNISON sent me an email flyer about Return to Learn, I thought I'll try this first and see how it goes."

Helen's Return to Learn course kicked off with a maths weekend in February 2018. "It was scary at first, because maths wasn't my strong point, but the more it was explained over the weekend the easier it became," Helen says.

Working her way through the course, both the group sessions and the individual tasks, made a massive difference to Helen. "Return to Learn helped me learn how to write essays, taught me I quite like doing research and made me feel brave enough to attempt something at university level," she says.

"Return to Learn helped me learn how to write essays, taught me I quite like doing research and made me feel brave enough to attempt something at university level."

After enrolling at the OU in October 2018, Helen has recently completed the first of what is likely to be six years part-time study. "The first module guides you through the first year, which is nice if you're not used to that level of study and helps you realise what they're wanting you to do," Helen says.

When she finishes the degree she hopes it will help her progress at work, either into nursing or progressing to become an operating department practitioner (ODP).



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

The Union Learning Fund has been completely transformative. We know that union learning is the most effective and efficient model for helping union members with multiple learning needs – support with English, maths and digital, for example. And we know this from the independent evaluations of the ULF, which show that union learning is the most effective way to help people because

they don't feel judged when learning with their colleagues – they feel supported. The key problem we have in this country is that the lion's share of training and development is enjoyed by people who are already very well trained and very well developed because they know what to ask for. But if you have literacy and numeracy problems, it's very hard to ask. So the ULF has been the most

transformative vehicle for skills development on an absolutely massive scale that has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy learning that is accessible to them, targeted to them, in or near their place of work, that can be done alongside their jobs."

Mary Bousted
chair of the unionlearn board
since 2009

U nite member Felix Hamilton, who works as a health and safety officer for a London housing trust, is studying criminology and criminal justice at Birkbeck, University of London to gain the qualifications he needs to work in the prison or probation service.

“Birkbeck’s evening classes are perfect for working people in London,” says Felix, who was able to secure a 10 per cent discount off his course fees through unionlearn’s agreement with the provider.

“Studying at Birkbeck has been marvellous: I never knew there was so much support available at university until I got to Birkbeck,” he says.

“At Birkbeck, there is so much support, especially with study skills, and my personal tutor directs me to the right places and responds quickly.”

Felix had been out of education for many years, after completing his teacher training qualifications in his

“First year is a whole lot of unknowns for everyone. There was a lot to read and it was hard to keep on top of the reading.”

native Ghana back in 2002, so he knew his first year would be challenging, especially as he had to continue with full-time work.

“First year is a whole lot of unknowns for everyone. There was a lot to read and it was hard to keep on top of the reading,” he recalls.

In addition to keeping himself on track in his second year, Felix has been mentoring two first-year students, as well. “I’ve encouraged them to be determined: they tell you it’s difficult but I tell them what works for me,” he says.

Now at the end of his second year, he feels much better about what lies ahead. “Halfway through, I feel very good in myself and confident that I’m really going to achieve what I wanted to for myself,” Felix says.

ULF projects have helped hundreds of union learners study at university level



Always ready to try something new

One of the key components of the success of the ULF over the past two decades has been the way unions have always been looking for new ways to develop workplace learning.

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) has supported innovation since its very beginnings. Using unions to engage huge numbers of adult learners was a radical departure (although not without precedent on a smaller scale). Developing the role of union learning rep (ULR) introduced a new kind of activist to branches up and down the country. Working within the constraints of project funding represented a different approach for most unions that secured backing from the ULF in its early years.

“The ULF allowed us to be even more creative,” recalls Pam Johnson, who was UNISON’s head of learning and organising services when the ULF was launched. “It allowed our branches to develop new ideas and then use the funding to see what would work.”

Most of the experiments unions have tried have paid off over the years: offering taster sessions on activities like photography, craft skills or health and wellbeing reduces people’s fears about returning to learning, and gives them the confidence that the union approach won’t trigger negative memories of school.

But without the support of the ULF, few unions – especially the smaller ones – would have had the resources to take those risks, especially in the early years, when everyone involved was on a pretty steep learning curve.

To help preserve the spirit of innovation, the ULF is currently helping six unions develop specific projects that are entirely focused on trying new approaches to workplace learning.

The Fire Brigades’ Union (FBU) one-year project Heat Illness Prevention and Awareness is one of the six to have secured backing from the ULF.

Recent research has shown how working in high temperatures increases the risk of heart attack, while coroners’ reports into firefighter fatalities have called for greater awareness of the importance of remaining properly hydrated.

That’s what’s behind the new project, in which the FBU is working with the University of Brighton and design company Beach on a fully interactive digital e-learning tool, with infographics, animations and videos underlining key points for learners as they work their way through the content.

“For us to be given the opportunity to do something we know a lot about and to share it with anyone and everyone to make people more aware of their own bodies and how others may be suffering in a way that will definitely save lives is a huge positive and something that will be around for a long time to come,” says FBU ULF Project Manager Mark Dunne.

But the FBU has not only used ULF backing to help look after its members from a physical point of view: over the past decade, like many other unions, it has helped members look after their mental and emotional wellbeing, too.

“We have been able to get a lot of firefighters learning about themselves, what they go through, their emotions and how to deal with them and how to deal with other serious life-changing issues,” Mark says.

“These awareness-raising courses and qualifications on mental health, nutrition and looking after loved ones have impacted in a positive way on thousands of FBU members and their families and friends.”

And these are not the only elements of the FBU learning offer that positively impact on fire services, Mark says. “We’re helping FBU members improve their communication skills, they’re more aware of situations they are put in through work or the kinds of problems people face when we turn out, and that’s why most managers are more than happy to work with us because they see the benefit.”

This kind of development is really what the ULF is all about, Mark says. “The ULF isn’t government money going to trade unions – it’s government money invested in people and their development, so people who left school with few or no qualifications are able to gain confidence, gain skills and make progress – we’ve had members who have gone on to do degrees on the back of having this second chance, and the impact of that is immeasurable,” Mark says.

ULF projects have consistently adopted creative approaches to develop learning, whether through the FBU’s latest innovation project to raise awareness of working in high temperatures (below) or Unite and the PFA partnering to deliver a five-a-side football tournament (right) promoting learning and celebrating diversity





SCORING AGAINST RACISM

The ULF projects run by Unite and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) took the unusual step of organising a five-a-side football tournament with an educational component to demonstrate how learning (and sport) can bring people together.

Called Celebrating Diversity Through Learning, the tournament took place at the Barnsley FC Training Academy in January 2016.

The teams included a squad of refugees and asylum-seekers from Barnsley who had been studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) with the help of Unite, as well as Yorkshire St Pauli and Leicester's FC Kolektivo (two teams that promote anti-discrimination), the all-women's team AFC Unity from Sheffield and a team from Manchester's Refugee Support Centre.

The Barnsley ESOL learners were presented with their certificates

at the halfway point of the tournament by Unite's Head of Lifelong Learning, Kenny Barron.

"The Barnsley ESOL team absolutely loved it – they really enjoyed the chance to play football in a properly organised tournament," commented Unite Learning Organiser Linda Hughes, who put the event together with the help of Industrial Organising Officer Joe Rollin and the PFA.

Afterword by Kevin Rowan



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) has always retained cross-party support over the past 20 years for one very simple reason: it works. Politicians, business leaders and educational institutions have all recognised that our model of training union learning reps (ULRs) to engage all sorts of learners that other organisations cannot reach is both successful and cost-effective.

For a relatively modest outlay of public money, the independently evaluated returns are remarkable: thanks to the way improved skills boost productivity, employers made net gains of £674m through Round 18 of the ULF, while every £1 of ULF money benefited the Exchequer to the tune of £3.40.

And then there are all the advances made by individual learners who benefit from learning opportunities supported by the ULF: 90 per cent of ULF learners gain at least one new skill, 73 per cent boost their confidence and 63 per cent secure a new qualification. And all of this makes a difference to their pay packets – as any union-supported programme should – with every £1 of ULF money generating an average return to individual learners of £7.24.

“The ULF was a good idea 20 years ago that has become a great success story today.”

As these figures show, the ULF continues to make a crucial contribution to the country’s drive to improve the UK skills base, as we navigate the challenges posed by the fourth industrial revolution, which is already changing the way we live and work today. The ULF was a good idea 20 years ago that has become a great success story today. Everyone who has played their part – politicians, civil servants, union officers, project workers, tutors, managers, ULRs and above all the union learners themselves – should feel very proud of what we continue to achieve through this very successful partnership.

Kevin Rowan

Director, unionlearn





“Politicians, business leaders and educational institutions have all recognised that our model of training ULRs to engage all sorts of learners that other organisations cannot reach is both successful and cost-effective.”

This title may also be made available, on request, in accessible electronic formats or in Braille, audiotape and large print, at no extra cost.

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Congress House
London WC1B 3LS

Tel 020 7467 1212
www.unionlearn.org.uk

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