

Union reps supporting learning & skills

**Detailed research findings from the
2021 survey of union learning reps
and other union reps promoting
workplace learning and skills**

Contents

Introduction	3
Key findings	4
Who are the ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills?	11
ULR and union rep posts	12
Sectors, workplace size and location	13
Covid-19	14
A changing role for reps during the pandemic	15
Online learning offer during the pandemic	18
Activities and impact	22
Training and support for reps	24
Workplace arrangements to support union learning	25

Introduction

During summer 2021 TUC unionlearn conducted a survey of union reps engaged in supporting learning at work to get an up-to-date picture of their activities in the workplace, including the main opportunities and challenges that they identified in promoting union-led learning and training. The 2021 survey included a number of new questions covering the impact of Covid-19 on the activities of these reps.

The survey was publicised on the unionlearn website and undertaken online using Survey Monkey. People were invited to respond if they were an existing union learning rep (ULR) or another kind of union rep that had some engagement in supporting access to learning and skills in the workplace. In addition, people were invited to respond if they had undertaken such a role in the past.

Forty-seven per cent of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Another 47% of respondents said that they were not a ULR but held another union rep role. Six per cent of respondents said that they currently did not hold any kind of ULR/union rep role.

With the obvious exception of the new questions relating to the pandemic, the questions in the 2021 survey were largely based on those used in previous unionlearn surveys. In particular, the current survey closely follows the questions in unionlearn's 2017 and 2014 surveys aimed at all union reps with an interest in learning and skills.¹ The 2021 survey sample size (1,278 respondents) is significantly larger than either the 2017 survey (962 respondents) or the 2014 survey (880 respondents).

Earlier unionlearn surveys tended to focus solely on the activities of ULRs and used a different methodology involving the direct distribution of postal questionnaires.² Comparisons with the findings from these earlier ULR surveys needs to take this different survey methodology into account, though general trends can of course be drawn from analysing both kinds of surveys.

The detailed research findings in this report include many of the comments from reps in response to the questions asking for more information on Covid-related matters and the development of the online/digital learning offer during the pandemic (see pages 14-22). It also includes much more analysis and statistical information drawn from the survey responses. A shorter version of the report with the key findings is available at: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-2021>.

¹ The 2014 and 2017 surveys are available on the unionlearn website at: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills-2014> and <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills>

² A summary of earlier ULR surveys is available in unionlearn research paper 16, <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-16-role-and-impact-unions-learning-and-skills-policy-and-practice>

Key findings

The key findings from the 2021 survey highlighted below fall into three distinct areas covering:

1. Changes over time in the characteristics of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills and what kind of workplaces they are based in
2. The impact of Covid-19 on the role of these reps and developments in online/digital learning during the pandemic
3. A review of the impact of these reps in supporting learning and skills in the workplace and what support they were receiving.

1. Changing picture of ULRs and union reps

Who are the ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills?

There are a number of trends from the latest survey showing that the population of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills is becoming more diverse, in particular when you look at the gender statistics and number of reps from BME groups. For example, the 2021 survey shows that:

- Over half (51%) of the respondents were women. This is the first time that women have outnumbered men in the unionlearn survey series and it is a significant increase on the previous peak of 46% reported in the 2017 survey. This suggests that learning and skills is an increasingly powerful means of attracting more women to become actively involved in union activities in the workplace
- The proportion of reps from BME groups has also increased, up from 9.8% of survey respondents in 2017 to 13.4% in the 2021 survey. This is a welcome trend and means that union reps supporting learning and skills are now more representative of BME groups in the labour market
- In line with the general trends for all union reps, the age profile of our survey respondents showed that the vast majority - 93% - were aged 35 years or older and this is similar to the proportion identified in the 2017 survey.

A range and mix of union rep roles

The survey asked a number of questions about ULR and union rep roles, including if people were covering more than one role. The responses to these questions showed a range and mix of situations, including the following:

- 47% of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Overall, 12% of respondents were solely covering a ULR role while 35% were combining being a ULR with another union rep role (e.g. mainstream union rep, health & safety rep etc.)

- Another 47% of respondents were not ULRs but were union reps that were also supporting learning and skills in the workplace. This compares with 38% of respondents in the 2017 survey, which suggests that a growing number of union representatives who are not ULRs are engaged in promoting education and training in the workplace for both workers and reps
- 6% of respondents said they currently did not hold a union post.

What workplaces and sectors are the reps based in?

The survey also asked a number of questions about the kind of workplaces and sectors these reps were based in and the key findings were as follows:

- Two thirds (66%) of ULRs and other reps were in the public sector compared with just under a quarter (24%) in the private sector. The rest were based in workplaces accounted for by the *Mixed-Public & Private* sector (7%) and the *Not for Profit/Voluntary* sector (3%).
- This public/private split has not changed much over time and is largely explained by the economy-wide breakdown of union membership. Another contributory factor is that reps in the public sector are, on average, more likely to get time off from their employers for their ULR/union rep role
- Looking at sectors and industries, the largest proportion of reps were found in the *Public Administration* sector (21%) - which includes local and central government- and in the *Health & Social Work* (18%) and *Education* (17%) sectors.
- The proportion of reps in other sectors was as follows: Transport & Communications (13%); Wholesale & Retail (11%); Other Community Services (6%); Manufacturing (5%); Other Business Services (4%); Electricity, Gas & Water (2%); Financial Services (2%); Construction (0.62%); and, Hotels & Restaurants (0.35%)
- Not too surprisingly, 74% of ULRs and union reps were based in companies or organisations with 250 or more employees, where union recognition and collective bargaining is much more likely to be in place. The vast majority (95%) of reps were in workplaces where the union was recognised for collective bargaining.

2. Covid-19

Some headline findings

The survey asked a number of specific questions about the impact of the pandemic and the responses from respondents provided the following headline information:

- Over three fifths (62%) of reps said that they had been at home for significant periods of time during the pandemic, with 55% working from home and 7% on furlough. However, 38% had continued to be based in the workplace throughout

- Nearly half (49%) of those based at home said that they had been less effective in performing their ULR/union rep role. However, 41% said that they thought that they had been equally effective and 9% thought they had been more effective
- Reps were asked if employer policies on learning and skills had changed during the pandemic - over a third (36%) said they had but 64% said policies had remained the same
- Well over a third (37%) of respondents said that the nature of their role as a ULR/union rep had changed significantly during the pandemic. Thirteen per cent of reps also confirmed that there had been changes to the amount of paid time off they received for carrying out this role
- Two fifths (38%) of reps said that the amount of online learning they organised had reduced during the pandemic, while a relatively similar proportion (34%) said that it had stayed the same. Twenty-eight per cent said that it had increased in this period.

A changing role for reps during the pandemic

The survey then asked reps a number of follow-up questions asking for more detailed comments about any significant changes to the nature of their ULR/union rep role during the pandemic, including any changes to the amount of paid time off they received. Some of the key themes emerging from these comments were as follows:

- An overriding consequence of Covid-19 was that many ULRs and union reps were working round the clock with employers to prioritise the health and safety agenda and related workplace issues linked to the pandemic
- There were more demands on reps to address the huge increase in the number of workers reporting issues relating to their mental health and workplace stress
- By and large the comments on changes to reps' paid time off indicated that time normally allocated to supporting learning and skills was either reduced or re-assigned to Covid-related issues. However, in some instances reps reported an increase in paid time off from employers to tackle these matters
- Some ULRs and union reps commented that all of the above reduced their capacity for supporting learning. There were also some comments saying there was reduced demand from workers for union-led learning and training due to concerns about health and safety, employment security and other Covid-related matters
- While no specific questions were asked about this in the survey, many ULRs and union reps pointed out that union-led learning and training had been destabilised by the government's decision to end grant funding for the Union Learning Fund.

Digital/online learning offer during the pandemic

The survey then asked reps a follow-up question asking for more detailed comments about digital/online activities and experiences that reps had promoted and which had

the potential to enhance the union learning offer in the future. Some of the key themes emerging from these comments were as follows:

- Some of the key benefits highlighted were to be expected and reinforced findings from previous research and surveys. Providing access to learning or training without the necessity of travelling to a physical location was a major advantage. Of course this was an even greater boost during the pandemic when social distancing, furlough, working from home regulations, and restrictions on travel made face-to-face union learning an impossibility for many
- ULRs and union reps also identified other flexibilities, including fitting learning into busy work schedules, having shorter online sessions as opposed to all- or multi-day courses, and ending the problem of classroom sessions not running due to low numbers signing up
- There were also gains from reaching out to many more learners during the pandemic, especially those working from home or on furlough who in some cases were more open to taking up online learning in these circumstances
- A number of comments that acknowledged the reach and impact of online learning also referred to the benefits of “blended learning” that combines online learning with face-to-face interactions. A common theme was that the post-pandemic union learning offer would be strengthened from building on the advances in online learning alongside reintegrating face-to-face communications where applicable
- A number of reps did point out barriers and drawbacks of being wholly reliant on online learning, including the existence of a digital divide affecting some groups who did not have regular access to the internet or digital/ICT devices and a lack of reasonable adjustments supporting online learning for disabled people
- Other barriers that were highlighted included a lack of the training needed by workers to easily access online learning and for reps to deliver it effectively. There were also examples of workers becoming jaded with, and in some instances opposed to, the necessary over-reliance on online learning and training during the pandemic. A relatively small number of comments expressed a preference for face-to-face learning without online provision
- The survey asked reps about specific online activities and experiences that they had made use of during the pandemic that would enhance the union learning offer in the future? Some of the key themes that came across included the rapid take-up and utilisation of online video and communication software, such as Teams and Zoom, to deliver learning and training and also to facilitate networking for reps (e.g. ULR forums). Expanded use of these and other software packages by employers during the pandemic also created a demand for training that unions were doing much to support
- There were also extensive references to the benefits from unions and their reps expanding access to webinars and a wide variety of other e-learning resource,

including social media. A wide range of online courses and qualifications were highlighted in the comments, including maths/English, CPD, vocational, mental health, dyslexia, sign language, workplace stress & well-being, and domestic violence. The comments also revealed a strong focus on equality and diversity, including online provision aimed at BME workers.

3. Impact of reps and support they get

Activities and impact

The comments from reps about the impact of the pandemic and the ending of the ULF on union activities to support learning and skills is reflected to some degree in their responses to specific questions in the survey assessing their impact. For example, there was evidence of a decline in their capacity to support people to take up specific courses and qualifications and networking opportunities with other reps were also curtailed to a great degree. Some examples of this include the following:

- 38% of reps said they arranged/helped to arrange courses for colleagues compared to 56% in 2017
- 15% of reps had said that their activities led to more workers accessing training in basic literacy and numeracy skills compared to 30% in 2017
- 36% said that they met and/or networked with ULRs from other workplaces compared to 54% in 2017.

Of course these findings are not at all surprising in the context of the huge pressures on ULRs and union reps due to the pandemic and the ending of the ULF. What is remarkable is the degree to which union learning activities and their impact were sustained on a number of fronts in this period through the rapid and innovative use of online/digital learning and other approaches. As highlighted in the earlier findings some reps were also able to promote increased access to union learning by certain groups (e.g. people working from home or on furlough).

A large number of reps also continued to deliver key activities to promote engagement in learning and union membership. The two activities with the highest proportion of engagement were:

- providing information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities (81%)
- recruiting/helping to recruit new members into the union (68%).

Impact was measured under a number of criteria and the responses showed that ULRs and other reps clearly continued to have a hugely positive impact on promoting access to learning and training, including the following findings:

- Nearly 9 out of 10 reps (87%) said that their activities raised awareness of learning among colleagues

- The next highest reported activities were: helping colleagues who had no/little experience of training (73%); increasing the number of colleagues accessing training (72%); and, increasing interest in union membership (71%)
- Reps also perceived that their union role had a positive impact on wider aspects of working life, including promoting dialogue on training with management (64%) and improving wider employment relations in the workplace (63%).

When asked to estimate the amount of time spent on supporting learning and skills, nearly a quarter of reps (23%) said less than 1 hour per week, 45% said between 1 and 5 hours, and 15% reported committing more than 5 hours to the role. About 1 in 6 reps (17%) reported that they could not find any time at all to dedicate to this in the most recent period. These trends are largely in line with previous surveys.

Training and support for reps

The survey posed a number of questions about the training and support that ULRs and other union reps receive. When asked about ULR training, the responses were largely positive. Nearly two thirds (64%) of ULRs said that they had taken the initial ULR training course provided by their own union and two fifths (40%) said that they had taken the TUC course (the exact same proportions given in the 2017 survey). A quarter said that they had taken follow-on courses for specialist ULR modules.

However, a significant number of ULRs and union reps highlighted major challenges in accessing time off their normal working duties to engage in union activities, including promoting learning and skills. Over a quarter (27%) said they received no paid release at all from their employer and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) said they only received a maximum of one hour per week. At the other end of the scale, 12% said they were getting 5-10 hours and 19% were receiving in excess of 10 hours per week.

Further questions on support and training arrangements showed the following trends:

- 83% said that they had reasonable time-off to undergo ULR/union rep training, but a lower proportion (68%) said they had enough training to carry out their ULR/union rep role
- 73% said they thought that they were given reasonable time off to conduct their ULR/union rep role. A lower proportion (61%) said that they were given reasonable time to discuss individual learning needs and to arrange learning or training for members
- 71% said that they had adequate access to office facilities to help with their role as a rep.

Reps were less happy with arrangements that employers make regarding providing cover for their regular job and/or allowing a reduced workload to enable them to conduct their ULR/union rep role.

- Less than half (46%) said they got cover and only 31% were allowed a reduced workload
- Two thirds (67%) reported that work pressures were restricting their ULR/union rep activities.

Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) reps said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role. Over four fifths said they were happy with the level of support from their individual union (82%) and the support provided by unionlearn (83%). Ninety per cent said they were happy to continue in their role as a ULR or union rep. When asked specifically what had helped them most, 70% highlighted support from their union, while other significant numbers pointed to the support provided by fellow union members (55%), unionlearn/TUC (32%) and employers (22%).

Workplace arrangements in support of union learning

Reps were also asked a number of questions about workplace arrangements that the employer provided to boost union learning, including whether the following were in use: 1. A formal learning agreement between the union and the employer. 2. A formal learning partnership involving the union, local providers and the employer. 3. A union-led learning centre. 4. A working group/committee involving the union and employer to discuss union learning. 5. An entitlement for workers to discuss individual learning needs with ULRs/union reps in normal working hours.

There is evidence of a long-term decline in these arrangements in unionised workplaces over the last two decades. This trend is still ongoing according to findings from the 2021 survey, as highlighted by the findings below:

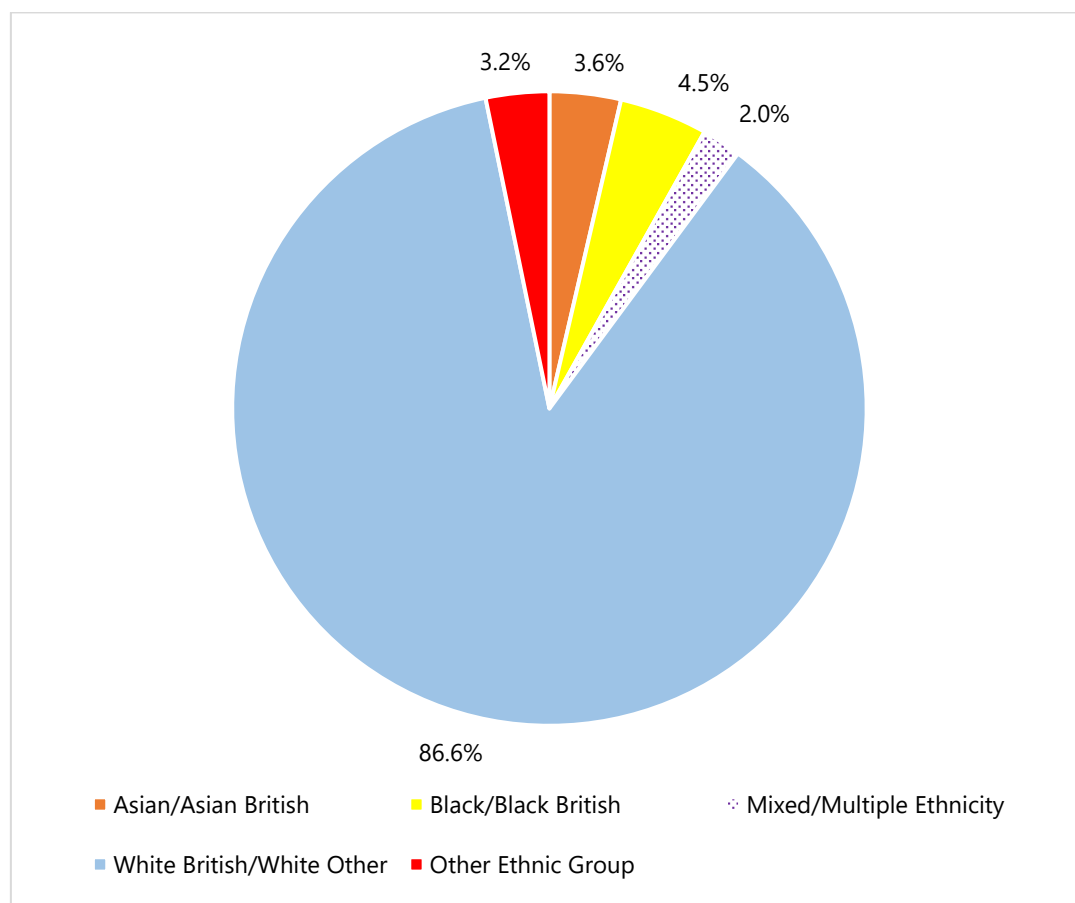
- Half of ULRs and union reps said that a formal learning agreement was in existence, compared to 58% in 2017
- Around a third (34%) reported that there was a formal learning partnership, compared with 38% in 2017
- Over a quarter (27%) engaged in dialogue on union learning with employers through a working group/committee, compared with 34% in 2017
- Twenty-two per cent of respondents said that there was a union learning centre at their workplace, compared with 30% in 2017
- Two thirds of reps reported workers having an opportunity to discuss individual learning needs with them in normal working hours, compared with 72% in 2017.

Who are the reps supporting learning and skills?

Over half (51%) of the respondents to the survey were women. This is the first time that women have outnumbered men in these surveys and represents a significant increase on the previous peak of 46% reported in the 2017 survey. Trends from earlier ULR surveys, such as the 2009 ULR Survey, showed that 43% of ULRs were women. The relatively high proportion of women responding to this latest survey suggests that learning and skills is a powerful means of attracting more women to become actively involved in union activities in the workplace.

The 2021 survey also asked a question about ethnic groups and 86.6% of reps responded saying they were White British/White Other, with the remaining 13.4% identifying themselves as from a BME group. In comparison, the 2017 survey showed only 9.8% of the survey identifying themselves as being from a BME group and 90.2% saying they were White British/White Other. The latest increase in the proportion of BME Ureps is a welcome trend and means that union reps supporting learning and skills are now more representative of BME groups in the labour market.

ULRs and union reps: ethnic groups



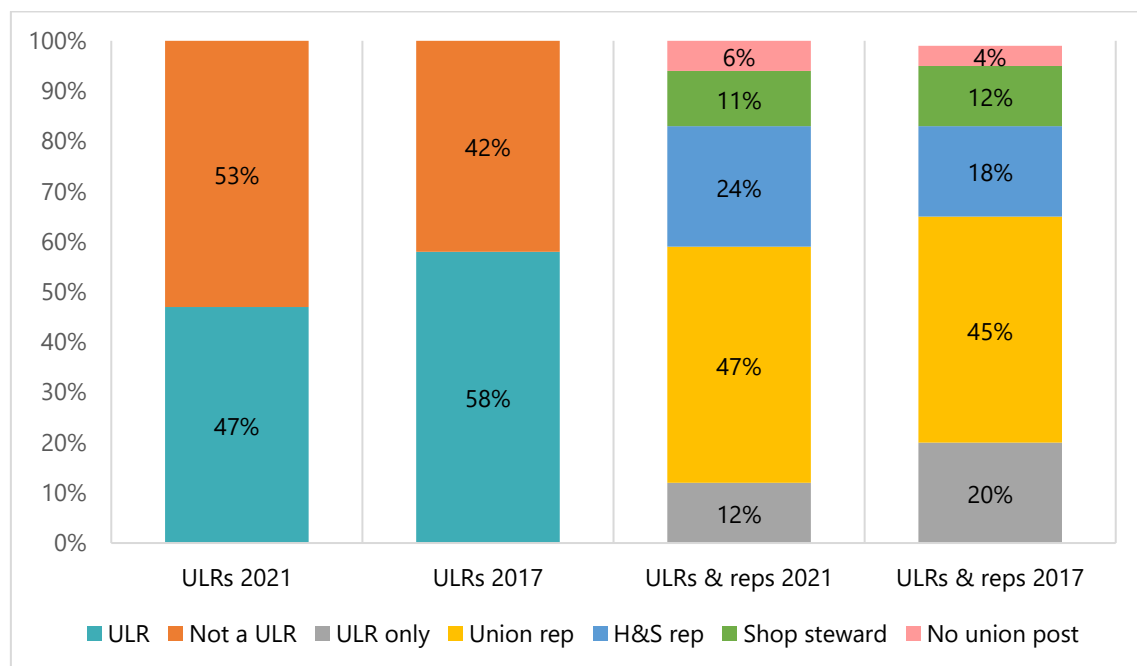
The pie chart provides more detailed figures for the breakdown of BME groups that union reps identified as when completing the survey. The breakdown is as follows: White British/White Other (86.6%); Back/Black British (4.5%); Asian/Asian British (3.6%); Other Ethnic Group (3.2%); and, Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups (2.0%).

In line with the general trends for all union reps, the age profile of our survey respondents showed that the vast majority - 93% - were aged 35 years or older and this is similar to the proportion identified in the 2017 survey. However, the 2021 survey does show that those aged 55+ accounted for 44% of all reps responding to the survey compared to 32% in 2017.

ULR and union rep posts

The survey asked a number of questions about ULR and union rep roles, including if people were covering more than one role. Forty-seven per cent of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Another 47% of respondents said that they were not a ULR but held a different union rep role. Six per cent of respondents said that they currently did not hold a union post.

Different types of union reps supporting learning and skills



The first two columns in the chart above compares the situation with 2017 and shows that the proportion of respondents who were ULRs was 47% in 2021 and 58% in 2017. However, this does not infer a decline in the overall population of ULRs as the total number of ULRs responding to the 2021 survey (595) was actually higher than for the 2017 survey (552). This is explained by the much larger overall number of people

responding to the 2021 survey (1,278) compared to the 2017 survey (962) and the growing number of other reps supporting the learning and skills needs of workers.

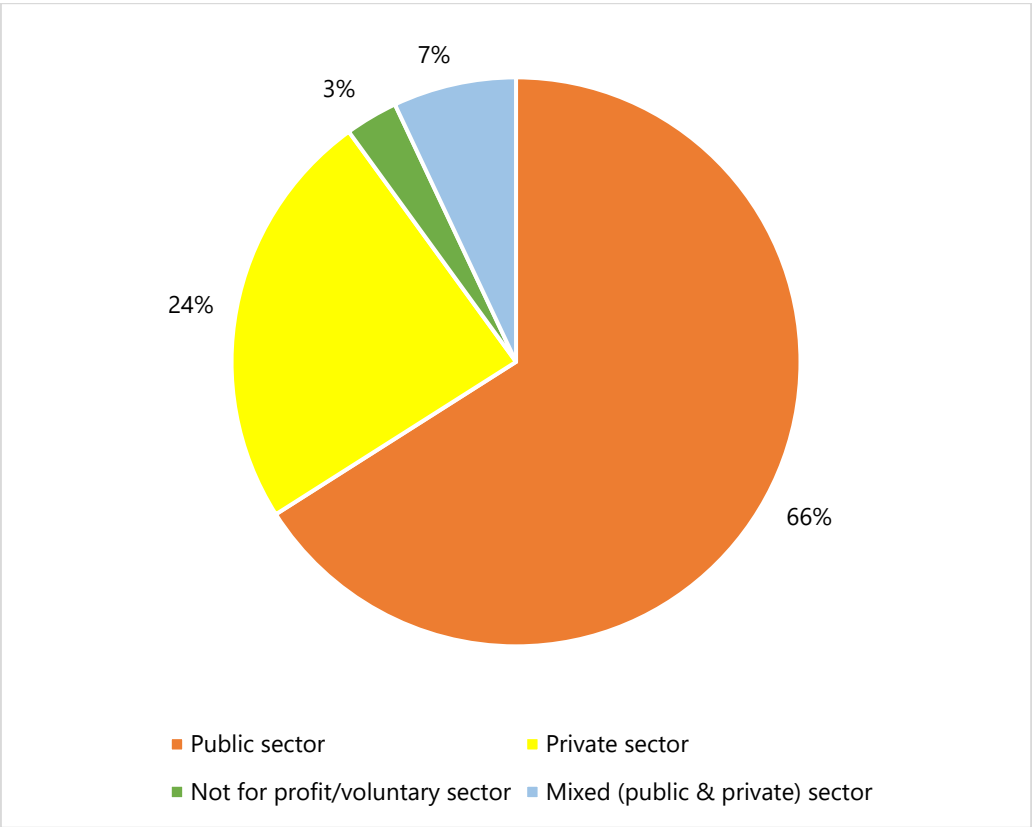
Columns 3 and 4 in the chart shows the extent to which ULRs are increasingly combining their roles with other union rep roles. Twelve per cent of all respondents in 2021 said they were only covering ULR duties compared to 20% in 2017. The other inference is that an increasing proportion of other union reps are promoting learning and skills in the workplace. From the available data we can conclude that 38% of respondents in 2017 were union representatives without a ULR role that were promoting learning and skills. By 2021 the proportion of union representatives without a ULR role that were promoting learning and skills had risen to 47%.

When asked how long they had been a ULR or union rep, 12% said less than 12 months, 31% said 1-3 years and 57% said 4 years or longer. The respective data from the 2017 survey was 14%, 33% and 53%.

Sectors, workplace size and location

As shown in the pie chart below, two thirds (66%) of ULRs and other reps were in the public sector compared with just under a quarter (24%) in the private sector. This partly reflects the overall breakdown of union membership in the private and public sectors.

ULRs and union reps: the public private split



Another contributory factor may be that union reps in the public sector are, on average, more likely to get time off from their employers to undertake the necessary training to become a ULR or union rep and to fulfil their union duties in the workplace. These recent trends are generally in line with previous findings over the last two decades (e.g. according to the 2005 ULR Survey 62% of ULRs were in the public sector and the 2017 survey showed that 65% of ULRs and other union reps supporting learning were). The latest survey shows that the remaining ULRs and reps that did not select private or public sector were accounted for by those working in the Not for Profit/Voluntary sector (3%) and the Mixed-Public & Private sector (7%).

The survey also asked individuals for more detail on which sector they work in and the largest proportion of ULRs and union reps were found in the Public Administration sector (21%), which includes local and central government. The next highest proportions were found in the Health & Social Work (18%) and Education (17%) sectors. The proportion of reps in other sectors was as follows: Transport & Communications (13%); Wholesale & Retail (11%); Other Community Services (6%); Manufacturing (5%); Other Business Services (4%); Electricity, Gas & Water (2%); and, Financial Services (2%). There were particularly small proportions of reps assigned to the Construction (0.62%) and Hotels & Restaurants (0.35%) sectors

Not too surprisingly, 74% of ULRs and union reps were based in companies or organisations with 250 or more employees, where union recognition and collective bargaining is much more likely to be in place. The vast majority (95%) of reps were in workplaces where the union was recognised for collective bargaining.

The survey asked reps to specify which TUC region in England or devolved nation their main workplace/organisation was located in and the findings were as follows: London, Eastern & South East (29%); Midlands (16%); North West (13%); Yorkshire & the Humber (11%); South West (10%); Scotland (10%); Northern (6%); and, Wales (4%).

Covid-19

Over three fifths (62%) of those surveyed said that they had been at home for significant periods of time during the pandemic. Fifty-five per cent had been working from home and 7% had been on furlough some or all of the time. However, 38% had continued to be based in the workplace throughout.

The impact of having to work from home on their union activities to support learning and skills was queried and nearly half (49%) responded to say that they had been less effective as a result. However, 41% said that they thought that they had been equally effective and 9% thought they had been more effective. Reps were asked if employer policies on learning and skills had changed during the pandemic – over a third (36%) said they had but 64% said policies had remained the same.

This section of the survey then asked reps a number of questions about the following two areas:

1. Any significant changes to the nature of their ULR/union rep role during the pandemic, including any changes to the amount of paid time off they received from their employer
2. Online activities and experiences that ULRs/union reps had promoted and/or engaged in during the pandemic that had the potential to enhance the union learning offer in the future.

Well over a third (37%) of respondents said that the nature of their role as a ULR/union rep had changed significantly during the pandemic. Thirteen per cent of reps also confirmed that there had been changes to the amount of paid time off they received for carrying out this role. Two fifths (38%) of reps said that the amount of online learning they organised had reduced during the pandemic, while a relatively similar proportion (34%) said that it had stayed the same. Twenty-eight per cent said that it had increased in this period.

The survey then posed follow-up questions about these two areas and asked reps to provide more detailed comments on, and examples of, their changing experience as a rep during the pandemic and development of the online/digital union learning offer. Analysis of this feedback is set out in the following two sections of the report.

A changing role for reps during the pandemic

Covid-19 overload

There were a range of new demands on reps due to the pandemic that impacted on their support for learning and skills in the workplace. Understandably, the need to adapt their role to meet new challenges arising out of the pandemic was a major theme of the feedback. An immediate consequence of Covid-19 was that many ULRs and union reps needed to prioritise the health and safety agenda in the workplace, highlighted by the following comments:

- *I've been moved to become a health and well-being support officer supporting and organising staff and pupil training*
- *During the pandemic our H&S reps felt unable to continue so I was elected to the role of H&S rep too. I took on the task of creating and amending risk assessments which was completely new to me*
- *Everyone has been put on Covid work in different parts of the council, and still are. Covid takes precedence*
- *I have spent lots of time in Covid planning meetings with my union time to ensure the organisation is keeping our members as safe as possible*
- *Greater demand and workload associated with frequently updated Covid-related statutory changes, guidelines and infection rate data.*

Mental health and stress in the workplace

An associated trend was that there were more demands on reps to address the huge increase in the number of workers reporting issues relating to their mental health and workplace stress during the pandemic. Some of the comments from reps on these issues were as follows:

- *I have had to spend a lot more time dealing with mental health issues from the membership as most of my members worked through the pandemic as they are front line workers*
- *Increased workload due to members' concerns and fears during the pandemic regarding time off and anxiety surrounding company protocols and safety measures*
- *More issues surrounding absences and staff needing more support with mental health and changes at home*
- *Mental health of members has taken a huge hit*
- *Busier with a lot of staff suffering from anxiety and stress.*

Access to paid time off

The 13% of reps saying that there had been changes to the amount of paid time off they received from their employer during the pandemic were asked to provide additional comments on this. By and large these comments showed that time off for supporting learning and skills was either reduced or re-assigned to Covid-related matters. In some instances reps reported an increase in paid time off for Covid-related matters. Below are a sample of comments from reps on this issue:

- *Due to Covid and working in retail, all ULR activities are carried out in my own time or at an induction. No time away from work*
- *Working from home, employers have assumed I don't need paid time off as I should be able to tailor my work around union business*
- *Due to positive cases/isolating it's been increasingly difficult to request time off*
- *While we were in the first wave of the pandemic my role as ULR stopped due to needing to be in store*
- *I was seconded to another division on temporary promotion to work on Covid-19 issues so I went down to half time union duties*
- *My manager has been more flexible with the time off I have had to support the increased workload from Covid.*

Impact on the union learning offer

A number of ULRs and union reps also specifically highlighted that Covid-19 and inter-related impacts on working life, such as deteriorating mental health and increased

stress, reduced their capacity for supporting learning and skills. There was also some evidence from the comments that in some instances the pandemic had reduced the demand for union-led learning and training due to understandable concerns about health and safety, employment security and other Covid-related matters. Below are some of the comments on these issues:

- *There has been less time to do ULR work as other union matters such as H&S have been more pressing*
- *Had less motivation to do ULR duties due to workload and mental health during the pandemic*
- *Many meetings and a huge amount of time needed in relation to Covid safety and working from home, which has left no time for ULR and related union issues*
- *There has been a huge focus on Covid safety, and reps who are not recognised Health & Safety Reps have had to play much more of a role in monitoring and raising Covid safety issues*
- *I could not engage with my members and to be honest they did not really want to know, they had other priorities*
- *Members had the pandemic on their mind more than training*
- *Unable to get in contact with many colleagues - due to Covid pressures many colleagues have now no time to do courses*
- *Focus has been on safety of family, along with maintaining their employment.*

Union Learning Fund

Unrelated to the pandemic, many ULRs and union reps pointed to how they had been dealt another blow by the government's decision to end the grant funding for the Union Learning Fund from the end of March 2021. While no specific questions were asked about this in the survey, there were a number of comments expressed, including the following:

- *The change in my role is down to the government stopping funding the ULF/further education rather than the pandemic. Much less engagement now with our members*
- *Due to the redundancy of my regional officer and government budget ending, I feel like the ULR role is no longer supported*
- *With the loss of the ULF and classroom learning there has been far less learning offered from the union than previously*
- *It's been more difficult to engage with members and the removal of the ULF is seriously affecting what we can offer*
- *Government cut ULF funding so secondment to mobile union learning rep role was terminated*

- *Tried to engage with employer via Teams but employer would appear to prefer not to have ULR/Trade Union involvement since the ULF was withdrawn.*

Online learning offer during the pandemic

Respondents provided a wide range of comments on the positive role of online/digital activities and learning experiences that reps had delivered and promoted during the pandemic, and how this provided potential for enhancing the union learning offer in the future. However, there were also responses pointing out some of the drawbacks of wholly relying on this approach and in many cases there was support for a “blended model” incorporating elements of online and face-to-face learning. A small number of comments were more critical about online learning, but these were very much in the minority and in many cases triggered by limited experience of, and/or access to, the internet and digital/ICT devices.

Benefits of online/digital learning

Some of the key benefits highlighted were to be expected and reinforced findings from previous research and surveys. Providing flexible access to learning or training without the necessity of travelling to a physical location was a major advantage. Of course this was an even greater boost during the pandemic when social distancing, furlough, working from home regulations, and restrictions on travel made face-to-face union learning an impossibility for many. There were also gains from reaching out to many more learners during the pandemic, especially those working from home or on furlough who in some cases were more open to taking up online learning. Below are a sample of some of the comments by reps on these points:

- *Without question the ability to learn using online learning. More accessible to people who are unable to travel, or other reasons for having difficulty attending a physical location*
- *Online forum meetings have been fantastic - saved so much commute time*
- *I think that most of the learning that takes place now is online and has encouraged more people to take up the opportunity, without the hassle of leaving the house*
- *It has been more effective, ULR has reached a lot more people online. People wanting to do more learning and education as they seem to have the time to do it*
- *Had to change to working online rather than face-to-face, it has actually been easier as now I don't have to find venues and budgets to hire rooms etc.*

ULRs and union reps also identified other flexibilities of online learning that sustained union-led learning and training during the pandemic, including the following:

- *I think online learning is better than face to face because more people can fit it into busy working schedules*

- *Online training courses that are split into shorter sessions have been much more appealing compared to concentrated multi-day courses*
- *We've been able to use newly-introduced video conferencing software to plan rep training days. On a national level, training being delivered over Zoom has enabled reps based on remote sites to attend courses they would have been unable to travel to in person*
- *Delivering via online virtual meetings has enabled courses to run that would otherwise have not happened due to low numbers on sites. A wider reach has been achieved after a lot of work to provide the best learning experience. Great experience to move forward with blended options for classroom based and remote learning.*

Blended learning and face-to-face interactions

As the last bullet point above highlights, a number of comments that acknowledged the reach and impact of online learning also recognised the benefits of blended learning and face-to-face interactions. A common theme was that the post-pandemic union learning offer would be strengthened from building on the advances in online learning alongside reintegrating face-to-face communications where applicable. A few examples of this view included the following:

- *Everything been online which is OK short term but not a long-term solution to plugging the skills gap*
- *No face-to-face delivery, everything online, less opportunities to mentor reps and support members. Teams software has its uses but completely at the expense of face-to-face contact and learning and the union should encourage blending learning*
- *It has been more difficult to promote online learning to those who are new to this style of learning without spontaneous impromptu contact in a workplace*
- *Not as easy to engage with learners, we tend to chat 'face to face' but this hasn't been possible. Still, received lots of queries via email and Teams*
- *Hybrid learning, some training in person and some online is beneficial to ensure everyone has the ability to undertake training.*

Some barriers and drawbacks

A number of reps did point out barriers and drawbacks of being wholly reliant on online learning, including the existence of a digital divide affecting some groups who did not have regular access to the internet or digital/ICT devices or who were disabled. These issues are described further in the comments below:

- *Not had access to my computer so I have not carried out any union activity*
- *Not having face-to-face discussions and not being able to reach out to our lower paid workers and workers without ICT equipment or knowledge/skills*

- *Due to Covid, we have to stay in our office space unless we have specific duties to perform for the NHS the opportunity for meeting members has been reduced. Lots of members don't have PCs for Zoom/Teams meetings*
- *No online learning as I have very little access to the net*
- *Lack of reasonable adjustments for hearing impaired people.*

Other barriers that were highlighted included a lack of the training needed by workers to easily access online learning and for reps to deliver it effectively. There were also examples of workers becoming jaded with, and in some instances opposed to, the necessary over-reliance on online learning and training during the pandemic. A relatively small number of comments expressed a preference for face-to-face learning without online provision. Below are some examples of comments covering these issues:

- *No support in terms of the correct online platform to deliver to members and no training for reps on these platforms bar what we've done ourselves at branch level*
- *Moved to all virtual learning events which has been beneficial for some, with less travel and opportunity to engage. However, 'Death by Zoom meeting' is now occurring!!!*
- *Staff have little appetite for online learning as they are online all the time - in person courses are what most staff are now asking for*
- *Being forced to use online video conferencing e.g. Teams, Skype, etc.*
- *We moved to online meetings. However nothing can replace face to face meetings*
- *Not really [used online provision], the classroom experience is always the best way in my particular sector.*

Digital and online learning resources

The survey asked reps about specific online activities and experiences that they had engaged in during the pandemic that would enhance the union learning offer in the future. Some of the key themes that came across included the rapid take-up and utilisation of online video and communication software, such as Teams and Zoom, to deliver learning and training and also to facilitate networking (e.g. ULR forums). Expanded use of these and other software packages by employers during the pandemic also created a demand for training that unions were doing much to support. Below are just a few examples of the comments ULRs and union reps provided in their responses:

- *The use of MS Teams has proven effective for meetings and training*
- *Using Teams for training so people who couldn't attend before can*
- *Clearer all-rep calls (where everyone is on Microsoft Teams) has helped with better organised engagement*

- *....using Zoom and Teams to organise meetings we can use it to support learners by organising online help sessions and group support networks*
- *All has been done via MS Teams which affords different opportunities around training*
- *As more people have had to go online at 'home' there has been more calls for training on the IT packages and how to enhance them for their own use*
- *Developed my own and colleagues' skills in online meeting technologies.*

There were also extensive references to the benefits of unions and their reps expanding access to the use of webinars and a wide variety of other e-learning resources, including the following examples:

- *Webinars are a useful tool and more interactive than online learning*
- *Webinars - I would never have been able to do these if I was on site*
- *Recorded training sessions to allow members access at all times. Online drop-in Q&As*
- *Running online meetings for members within my branch and also attending online learning through webinars, including from unions across the wider movement in the UK and globally*
- *Bite-sized workshops and guest speaker events were particularly useful and easy to participate in remotely. Virtual learning for week-long courses has removed barriers for some learners. Hybrid courses need to be trialled and offered in future*
- *More engagement and signposting of other supportive organisations such as a 'directory' of additional supportive programmes of study*
- *I have taken to social media and built a website for the learning centre.*

The following comments give a flavour of the wide range of courses and qualifications that were being delivered through the online union learning offer:

- *1 to 1 maths via Zoom and Teams preparing students for future classes. Taster/awareness session in dyslexia, mental health*
- *Successful delivery of online sign language courses that were much more accessible for shift workers*
- *Have helped organise online CPD sessions for colleagues*
- *I have had more take up for funded level Vocationally Related Qualifications because people have been working from home.*
- *Menopause workshops, chronic fatigue workshops, stress workshops*
- *I have organised scam awareness, domestic violence, disability and mental health training online*
- *Online learning has been advantageous on Covid under the health and safety banner*

- *Online learning based upon personal areas of interest to enhance job opportunities and/or to keep colleagues and their families in touch with their mental health and wellbeing needs/solutions.*

In addition to the large number of courses on well-being and mental health, the comments also revealed a focus on equality and diversity, including the following:

- *Regular online meetings with Black workers in the county has raised awareness of the learning offer available and we anticipate more engagement in the future*
- *Equality in the classroom - how to develop a culturally reflective curriculum*
- *Training courses that I would not have been able to attend due to childcare issues were completed online.*

Activities and impact

When asked to estimate the amount of time spent on supporting learning and skills, nearly a quarter of reps (23%) said less than 1 hour per week, 45% said between 1 and 5 hours, and 15% reported committing more than 5 hours to the role. About 1 in 6 reps (17%) reported that they could not find any time at all to dedicate to this in the most recent period. This is not radically different to previous surveys. For example, the 2014 survey showed a third of reps saying they spent less than 1 hour a week on learning and skills activities, 45% saying between 1 and 5 hours, and 22% saying more than 5 hours a week. Fourteen per cent said they could not find any time.

The 2021 survey sets out the proportion of reps undertaking a number of key learning and skills activities. The two activities with the highest proportion of reps reporting engagement were:

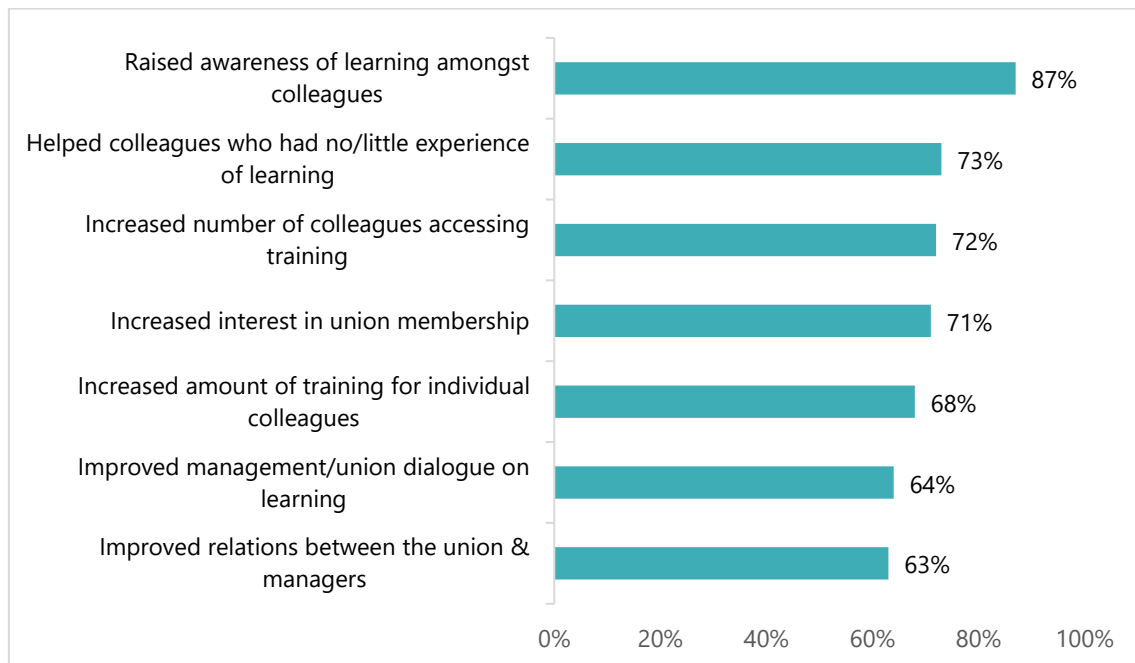
- providing information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities (81%)
- recruiting/helping to recruit new members into the union (68%).

There was less engagement, and a noticeable decline, in some other key areas. For example, 38% of reps said they arranged/helped to arrange courses for colleagues compared to 56% in 2017. Also, 36% said that they met and/or networked with ULRs from other workplaces compared to 54% in 2017. Comments from reps suggest that this reduced level of activity and collaboration with other ULRs may also have been linked to the ending of grant funding for the Union Learning Fund in March 2021.

However, ULRs and other reps clearly continued to have a hugely positive impact on promoting access to learning and training, as set out in the chart below. Nearly 9 out of 10 reps (87%) said that their activities raised awareness of learning among colleagues. The next highest reported activities were: helping colleagues who had no/little experience of training (73%); increasing the number of colleagues accessing training (72%); and, increasing interest in union membership (71%). Reps also perceived that their union role had a positive impact on wider aspects of working life, including

promoting dialogue on training with management (64%) and improving wider employment relations in the workplace (63%).

Impact of activities to promote learning and skills



The survey also measured impact in terms of increasing access to specific types of learning and training. A quarter of reps said that their activities had led to more colleagues accessing continuing professional development (CPD). Twenty-three per cent of reps cited more workers accessing training leading to accredited qualifications as a direct result of their support and 25% attributed their support to an increase in other forms of job-related training not leading to formal qualifications. Reps also reported increased take-up of apprenticeships (18%), personal interest/leisure courses (18%), basic literacy and numeracy learning (15%) and work experience, internships, traineeships (10%) due to their input.

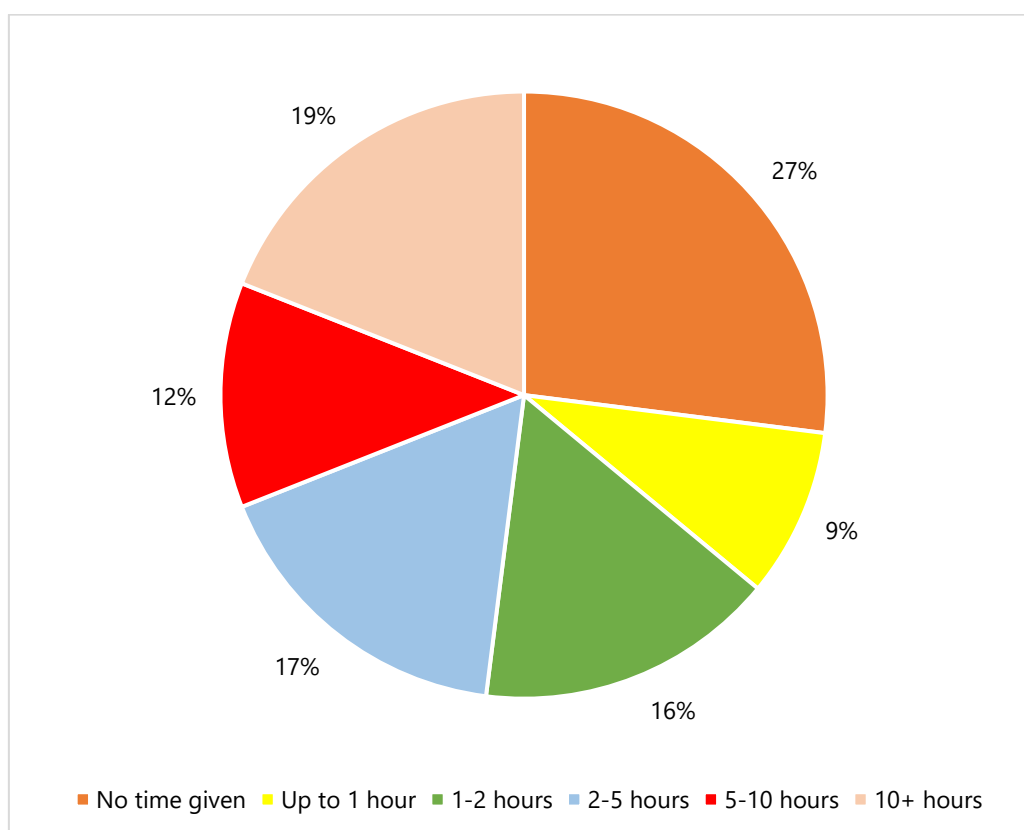
Compared with 2017 there were some significant falls in the number of reps reporting increased access to certain courses and qualifications as a result of their activities. This was most notable in areas where the Union Learning Fund had a strong reputation. For example, in 2017 30% of reps had said that their activities led to more workers accessing training in basic literacy and numeracy skills (compared to 15% saying this in 2021).

When asked to provide an estimate of the total number of colleagues that they had helped with learning or training in the last 12 months, over a half (52%) of reps estimated that they had helped between 1 and 5 colleagues, 24% said 6-14, 8% said 15-24 and 15% said 25 or more.

Training and support for reps

The survey posed a number of questions about the training and support that ULRs and other union reps receive. Nearly two thirds (64%) of ULRs said that they had taken the initial ULR training course provided by their own union and two fifths (40%) said that they had taken the TUC course. The respective figures in the 2017 survey were exactly the same for both questions. There may be ULRs who will have taken both courses and this presumably explains why the two responses total more than 100%. It should also be noted that some of the training courses that respondents say are provided by their own union could well have been provided through the TUC programme. A quarter of reps said that they had taken follow on courses for different ULR modules specialising in different aspects of learning and skills.

Hours per week of paid release



Accessing time off their normal working duties to engage in union activities, including promoting learning and skills, remains a major barrier faced by a significant number of ULRs and union reps. As shown in the pie chart below, over a quarter (27%) of respondents to our latest survey said they received no paid release at all from their employer and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) said they only received a maximum of one hour per week. A third reported getting between 1 and 5 hours – 16% getting 1-2 hours and 17% getting 3-5 hours. Thirty-one per cent said they were given more than 5 hours

(comprising 12% getting 5-10 hours and 19% who were receiving in excess of 10 hours per week). These findings are by and large in line with trends identified in the 2014 and 2017 surveys.

When questioned further, 73% said they thought that they were given reasonable time off to conduct their ULR/union rep role and 83% said that they had reasonable time-off to undergo ULR/union rep training. In spite of this a lower proportion (68%) said they had enough training to carry out their ULR/union rep role. Over three-fifths (61%) said they were given reasonable time to discuss individual learning needs and to arrange learning or training for members. Seventy-one per cent said that they had adequate access to office facilities to help with their role as a rep.

Reps were less happy with arrangements that employers make regarding providing cover for their regular job and/or allowing a reduced workload to enable them to conduct their ULR/union rep role. Less than half (46%) said they got cover and only 31% were allowed a reduced workload. Two thirds (67%) reported that work pressures were restricting their ULR/union rep activities.

Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) reps said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role. Over four fifths said they were happy with the level of support from their individual union (82%) and the support provided by unionlearn (83%). Ninety per cent said they were happy to continue in their role as a ULR or union rep. When asked specifically what had helped them most, 70% highlighted support from their union, while other significant numbers pointed to the support provided by fellow union members (55%), unionlearn/TUC (32%) and employers (22%).

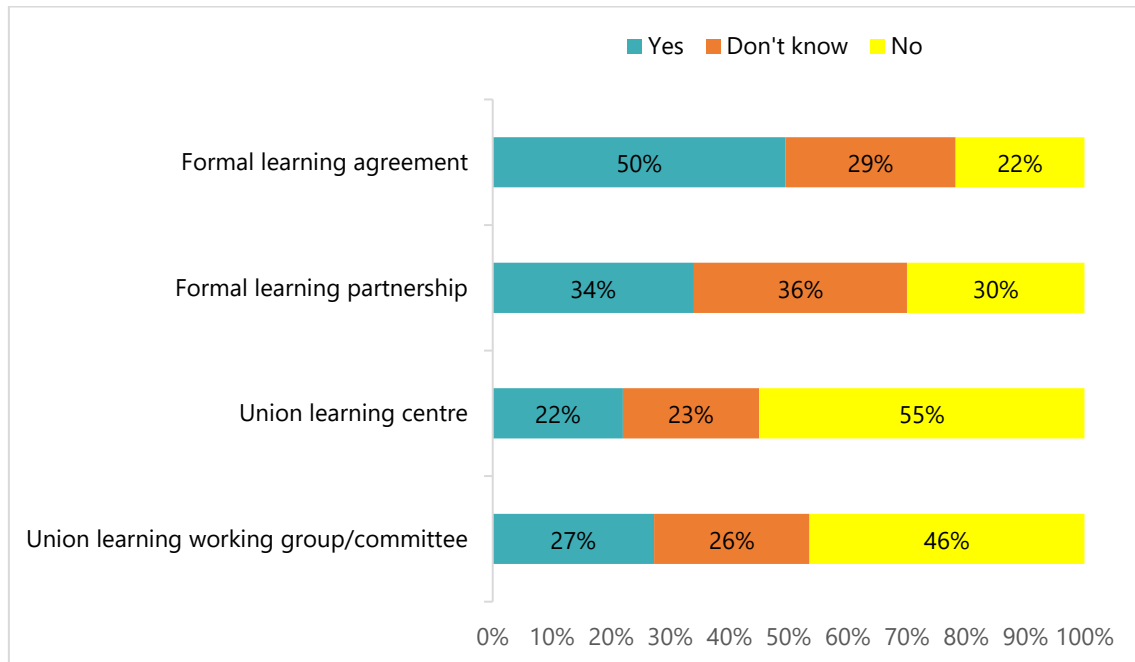
Workplace arrangements to support union learning

Employer and union collaboration to boost the capacity of union learning is often demonstrated by institutional arrangements in the workplace that facilitate the union role in support of learning and skills. Four key developments on this front include: formal learning agreements between the union and the employer; formal learning partnerships involving the union, local providers and the employer; a union-led learning centre; and, a working group/committee involving the union and employer to discuss union learning.

The chart below sets out the main findings regarding these arrangements reported in our latest survey. Exactly half of all ULRs and other union reps said that a formal learning agreement was in existence in their organisation or workplace and this compares to 58% and 61% respectively reported in the 2017 and 2014 surveys.

Around a third (34%) of ULRs and other union reps in our current survey reported that there was a formal learning partnership and this compares with 38% and 40% in the 2017 and 2014 surveys (and 47% in the 2009 ULR survey). The current survey also shows that over a quarter (27%) of reps engaged in dialogue with employers through a working group/committee with a remit for discussing union learning and this compares with 34% and 38% in the 2017 and 2014 surveys.

Union learning workplace arrangements



Twenty-two per cent of respondents said that there was a union learning centre at their workplace. This compares with 30% in both the 2017 and 2014 surveys. There is evidence of a longer-term decline in union-led learning centres (e.g. 34% of ULRs in the 2009 survey, 44% of ULRs in the 2007 survey and 52% of ULRs in the 2005 survey said there was a union learning centre available in their workplaces).

The ability of ULRs and union reps to engage with individual employees is also influenced by the culture of the workplace and whether the employer encourages this form of engagement by ULRs and union reps. Another important factor is whether formal structures exist for individual employees to discuss their training and development with the employer. These issues were followed up by asking if there was:

- An opportunity for workers to discuss individual learning needs with ULRs/union reps in normal working hours
- A formal entitlement for all workers to an annual performance review with the employer, involving discussions about training and development (these reviews are normally undertaken with line managers).

The latest survey showed that 67% of reps reported having an opportunity for workers to discuss individual learning needs with them in normal working hours. This compares with 72% in 2017 and 75% in 2014. Seventy per cent of reps confirmed that there was an entitlement to an annual performance review and this compares to 74% in 2017 and 75% in 2014.