

Time off for learning

Education has always been important for trade unions, but in recent years its importance has increased. In addition to providing courses to train workplace representatives and officials unions are involved in developing lifelong learning for all those at work. The TUC is at the forefront of developing new approaches to education and training, involving distance and online learning. The aim is to enable all those at work to take part in, and benefit from, education.

Union workplace representatives

Representatives of independent trade unions recognised by their employer are entitled to reasonable paid time off to take part in education and training.

The main features of the law are:

- the union must be recognised by the employer for the purpose of collective bargaining
- the training must be approved by your union or the TUC
- the training must be relevant to your duties as a representative
- if time off is unreasonably refused, or your employer does not pay you, then you can complain to an employment tribunal

Union safety representatives

Employers have a duty to train all employees, including safety reps, in basic job safety. In addition union safety representatives have legal rights to trade union training which are similar to those of workplace representatives.

The main features of the law are:

- safety reps have the right to reasonable paid time off for training that is approved by their union or the TUC
- the training must be "reasonable in all the circumstances". Recent court and tribunal cases have ruled that this must be interpreted widely, as meaning that the training is helpful to the safety representative in carrying out their duties and should not be restricted to workplace issues.
- if time off is unreasonably refused, or is not paid, unions can complain to an employment tribunal

Union learning representatives

Trade unions have been appointing learning representatives whose function it is to assist their members to access learning and improve their skills at the workplace.

The Employment Act 2002 gives statutory recognition to union learning representatives and rights to time off. The key features of the new law are:

- union learning representatives will be entitled to reasonable paid time off for:
 - analysing their members' learning or training needs
 - providing their members with information and advice about learning or training matters
 - arranging learning or training for their members
 - promoting the value of learning or training to their members
 - consulting the employer about carrying out these activities
 - preparing for carrying out any of the above activities
 - undergoing training relevant to their functions as a learning rep
- the learning rep needs to be sufficiently trained to carry out his/her duties either at the time the employer is given notice of the appointment or in normal situations within 6 months
- employees will have the right to unpaid time off to consult their learning rep

TUC and union courses

Unions and the TUC provide courses for workplace reps, safety reps and learning reps. The TUC is making its core courses available online so that they can be accessed from a computer linked to the internet at home or work. The law on time off applies to courses taken online in the same way as it applies to courses taken at a college.

Using these rights

To make the best use of these rights unions need to consider:

- negotiating an agreement with the employer that builds on the rights to paid time off contained in the law
- making sure that facilities are in place, such as workplace learning areas, computers linked to the internet and workplace libraries
- developing a comprehensive workplace learning agreement that covers education and training for all, including employees as well as reps. The aim of learning reps is to encourage and enable all employees to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Why training is important

Key points in support of training:

- education and training must be seen in the wider context of lifelong learning and skill enhancement and an investment into Britain's future workforce. TUC Education and union courses make a significant contribution to lifelong learning

- it is in the organisation's interests within communities to be seen to be promoting learning at work, at home and in learning centres
- education is part of the work/life balance equation and enhances other life skills. The employer reaps the benefits in a more positive approach to work from their employees
- some skills are basic but should not be underestimated. Literacy and numeracy, for example, will improve employees skills, abilities, efficiency and opportunities for advancement. Other skills are transferable and allow career opportunities to be taken within the same workplace.
- employees who receive education and training from an employer are more likely to stay with that employer as they take on more responsibility. This further reduces the burden on employers to train new staff and reduces staff turnover

Accreditation

The TUC accredits its programme through the National Open College Network (NOCN) to provide clear national recognition of the quality of courses and the achievement of students. NOCN is the third largest awarding body for adults in the UK.

TUC course participants have a very wide range of educational backgrounds and qualifications. 36% of representatives have gained no qualifications since leaving school. NOCN credits on TUC courses will be their first nationally recognised certificate in education or training.

Open Colleges are locally based organisations linked together through the National Open College Network. They accredit a wide range of courses in further education, voluntary and community organisations. The TUC works with NOCN because of its high quality, flexible approach and its experience in working with adult learners.

There are no tests or examinations and registration for accreditation is voluntary. Representatives will build up a file which will show the work that they and other colleagues have completed during the course. The file remains a useful resource for their work as union reps. They will obtain OCN credits if they achieve the learning outcomes for the course. Achievement will be recorded in a certificate issued by the OCN to individual students.

Credits can be built up over a number of years and are transferable throughout the country. They can be used by representatives to gain access to other courses in further and higher education. They will also give unions (and employers) a clearer view of what representatives have learned and are able to do after attending a TUC course.

New pathways for union representatives are opening up every year, for example the Degree in Contemporary Trade Unionism at Middlesex University and reps should talk to the TUC Regional Education & Training Officer for up to date information. TUC Education is working with partners to develop a number of Foundation Degrees.

Standards and Accreditation

Accreditation and assessment are underpinned by the standards developed for workplace reps. The standards are endorsed by the ENTO as the appropriate standards for the trade union sector.

Open College Networks use various levels of credits to enable broad comparisons with other awards:

Entry level (equivalent to parts of Wordpower and Numberpower)

- obtaining a limited range of basic skills knowledge and understanding in highly structured and self-referenced contexts which permit the identification of progression from the learner's point of entry to the learning process

Level one (equivalent to NVQ 1, Foundation GNVQ)

- obtaining a foundation of competencies, knowledge and understanding in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts that prepare the learner to progress to further achievements

Level two (equivalent to NVQ 2, GCSE, Intermediate GNVQ)

- obtaining a broader range of competencies, knowledge and understanding which demonstrate the extension of previous abilities in less predictable and structured contexts and prepare the learner to progress to further achievements

Level three (equivalent to NVQ 3, A Level, Advanced GNVQ)

- obtaining a more complex range of competencies, knowledge and understanding in contexts which develop autonomous, analytical and critical abilities that prepare the learner to progress to further independent achievements

A programme can be made up of units at more than one level, and learners on that programme can achieve different numbers of credits at different levels, depending on their needs and achievements.

Pathways and progression

TUC courses facilitate progression. The certificate courses can act as access courses which provide pathways to university degrees and professional qualifications. An example is the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health – Safety Technician Membership and the Institute of Leadership and Management.