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HIGHER EDUCATION CASE STUDIES

Higher Education (HE) is not just about full-time degree courses – it can encompass much more! Whether you're looking to move up the career ladder, considering branching out into a new field or want to learn while you earn, HE could be the path to achieving your long term goals. What's more you can get onto a course without any formal qualifications, so there is no need to worry if you left the classroom years ago.

HE is a term used for any study that leads to qualifications at level 4 and above. Learners can study full-time, part-time, by distance education, online or at work. HE courses are offered by universities, but also by further education colleges, specialist colleges (e.g. for agriculture, management, medicine), the Open University and work-based learning and training providers.

As part of its wider skills strategy the former Government, in order to achieve the Leitch target requiring 40 % of people of working age to obtain a qualification at Level 4 or above by 2020, encouraged the HE sector to:

- Be more flexible and offer more options to workplace learners
- Give more encouragement for people that do not come from backgrounds/ communities that normally access HE
- Improve the vocational routes into HE
- Work in partnership with employers to encourage staff into higher education

The new coalition, which supports Leitch, has changed the emphasis slightly but their commitment to take action to create more college and university places, help foster stronger links between universities, colleges and industries, and review support for part-time students in terms of loans and fees provides an opportunity for trade union-led higher learning even in the midst of recession, increasing fees and public spending cuts.

Case study themes:

1. Raising Awareness of Higher Learning: Finance Sector, *Unite*
2. Introduction to Higher Learning: Kent Fire and Rescue Service, *FBU*
3. Negotiating time off for Higher Learning: Charles Ashford, HMRC, *PCS*
4. Open University: Gaynor Purdom, NHS, *Unison*
5. Online Higher Learning: Education Sector, *ATL*
6. Tailor-Made Higher Learning: Hillingdon Hospital Trust, *Unison*
7. From Skills for Life to Higher Learning: HM Prison Service, *POA*
8. Foundation degrees: Peter Amphlett, RCM, *Unite*
9. Distance Higher Learning: Paul Harris, BT, *CWU*
10. Bite-size Higher Learning: London Fire and Rescue Service, *FBU*
11. Trade Unions' Higher Learning: Southampton City College, *Unite*

CASE STUDY: RAISING AWARENESS OF HIGHER LEARNING

Sector: Finance -

Employers: RBS, Royal Sun Alliance and
Legal and General

Union: Unite

Unite's finance sector 'United in Learning' project, with support from unionlearn with the SERTUC's 'Accessing Higher Education (HE) in the Workplace' project, held an event at Unite's London Woodberry office in March. The event aimed to raise awareness of higher education opportunities available and equip Union Learning Reps (ULRs) with the information needed to support learners wishing to undertake higher learning.

Speakers from a number of universities gave presentations about their institutions and courses. The Open University (OU) spoke of their partnership with unionlearn, the financial support available to students and their new financial services Foundation degree.

The KUBIS initiative was highlighted by Kingston University and Anglia Ruskin University informed the audience about their *Higher Skills @ Work* programme and their discounted rate on two of their Foundation degrees for union learners. Finally, Birkbeck emphasised their long history of adult education and ability to be flexible to accommodate the needs of adult learners.

Following the presentations, a Q&A session was held. Issues raised included the practicalities of the course, managing the expectations of individuals, the bite size/modular approach, confidentiality, the flexibility of HE, the accreditation of prior learning and experience, universities involvement in Adult Learner's Week, the availability of HE tasters, the information advice and guidance (IAG) available to ULRs and trade unions, employer engagement, the cost of HE, and the financial support available to learners.

In the afternoon, delegates from the Finance Sector also learned about the Financial Sector Skills Council (FSSC) 'Directions' website, a specialist source of information on careers in

financial services, accounting and finance around the UK. Unite recommends that all ULRs, workplace reps and learning organisers who want to know more about careers in the finance sector visit the Directions website (www.fssc.org.uk/directions) as it is an excellent source of information.

Feedback from the event was positive with both universities and ULRs stating that they had learnt a lot from the day.

One Rep stated that *"It was good to learn about the various courses on offer, I knew very little about these possibilities before, but now I can confidently pass on reliable information to our members who want to make progress in their career."* Another added *"I was impressed by the professionalism of the university representatives; I will certainly aim to include this information in our next newsletter."*

Furthermore, the higher education institutions (HEIs) found that the meeting *"provided universities with a great opportunity to meet with union officials especially ULRs who have direct access to union learners and to showcase the opportunities and the support available to these learners to progress to higher education."*

Akin Soetan, from the OU, continued by saying *"we need more events like this that bring HEIs, trade unions and even employers together if we are to achieve the Leitch target of 40% of the UK workforce being educated at HE level by 2020 as it is a win-win for all parties."*

Eileen Francis, Project Development Officer, initiated and chaired the event. She said:

"This was a great opportunity for Unite Representative's, Learning Organisers and Officers to meet key people from four universities each offering flexible higher education courses that can benefit our members."

CASE STUDY: INTRODUCTION TO HIGHER LEARNING

Employer: Kent Fire and Rescue Service

Union: FBU

FBU is currently promoting a course to members via Kent University. It is a short introductory programme, which members can undertake prior to enrolling on a BA/BSc in Applied Professional Practice, a flexible degree that is directly related to the workplace, job role and individual. The short course is called Make Your Experiences Count.

Bob Fitzgerald, FBU ULF Project Support Organiser in the region, said:

“This is just one of a range of learning opportunities offered to all employees through the FBU’s learning programme. What we try to do is to meet individual needs. The clever point of this degree course is that it is directly related to the workplace and can meet both individual and organisational needs.”

Most of the employers I work with recognise the importance of learning, whether role specific or otherwise, the questions they ask are about the facilities required by an individual to undertake learning, and the positive or negative impact on their role at work.

Support provided by the employer is detailed in the learning agreement. This includes access to a ULR, time to undertake learning during the working day, enrolment, induction and some teaching takes place on work premises using employer’s facilities, and assessors are allowed access to learners during the working day.

The case for support was part of the package: once we had agreement around the learning agenda, and that there was a need to bring

learning in its wider context (not just role specific) into the workplace, the case for support was self-evident. Middle management was concerned that it would have an impact on service delivery but this concern has been alleviated through constant dialogue over time.”

A number of learners successfully completed the course. One of the FBU’s learners Kerrie Moncrieff, stated:

“I thoroughly enjoyed the course as it gave me a deeper understanding of mine and others behaviour. It also helped me identify my learning style, how I perceive, process and present information and what my strengths and weaknesses are. During the course we looked at personal past experiences, what I enjoyed doing, what I disliked and why. I then had a look at where I was professionally and personally, implemented some goals, and then was helped with direction to fulfil them both short and long term. I found this course the best I’d ever taken for me personally. It gave me confidence and focus and helped me believe anything was achievable. I am very grateful to the University as they made me feel secure when out of my comfort zone and put everything simply and fun.”

The FBU will look to develop the relationship and stimulate more trade union led higher learning in the future with the support and resources, such as the *Higher Education at Work: Making the Case to Employers Guide*, provided by unionlearn SERTUC.

CASE STUDY: NEGOTIATING TIME OFF FOR HIGHER LEARNING

Learner: Charles Ashford

Employer: HMRC

Union: PCS

Charles embarked on a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Politics from the University of East Anglia in 2008. Charles undertook the honours degree whilst working for HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC). Charles negotiated time off from his employer as part of his contract and Management allowed him to revise his working hours to fit around his studies. His line-manager arranged suitable work for him to undertake during non-term time which allowed Charles to focus on his education with the added benefit of not having to search for part-time work throughout the year.

By providing the opportunity for staff to further their education and skills the employer benefits in various ways, for example, a more capable and committed workforce and a rise in employee morale,

Charles hopes to develop a long-term career within the civil service and aspires to work in the private office of a Minister in the future. Charles has developed a wide variety of skills whilst studying, such as a good writing style, greater awareness of the institutions of government and democracy and an appreciation of history and its influence on current issues.

At present Charles is proactively seeking employment within London for various government departments in order to increase his practical experience. His personal adviser, Dr. Nick Anstead asked him to consider an MA degree to build on his current skill-set and knowledge. Charles agrees this would be an appropriate next step and has already displayed an interest in the area of structures of government.

Being able to fit his education around his work schedule has allowed Charles to develop himself and carry out his job with a clearer understanding of his objectives and a wider appreciation of the civil service as an organisation. Charles is very thankful for having had the opportunity to undertake higher education and it has been a life



changing opportunity for him and has increased his future employment prospects.

His manager says:

“It is particularly pleasing to have been able to support Charles in his studies towards his eventual aim of working in a ministerial office. It is hoped that this will be rewarding for both Charles, in terms of his long term aspirations, and for the department that will eventually benefit from the skills that he has learnt and his commitment to public service.”

Local Management supported Charles to ensure that he had appropriate work that would fit with both his studies and with the demands of the business. This has been a positive experience for all involved.

The Department remains supportive to employees to enhance skills and development needs particularly to support the Leitch Pledge. Outside of the Leitch requirements further education will be considered on their own merits and take into account measurable and defined benefits for both the individual and the business”.

Barry Francis, Regional Manager, unionlearn SERTUC comments: *“Securing time off to learn demonstrates the added value of trade union supported higher learning. As funding for training becomes less and less with the recession, this shows employers that there is another way to support their staff in higher learning, especially with the new Right to request time off for learning legislation.”*

CASE STUDY: OPEN UNIVERSITY

Learner: Gaynor Purdom

Employer: NHS Community Mental Health Team, High Wycombe

Union: Unison

I was working for the NHS as a team secretary for a Community Mental Health Team in High Wycombe when I began studying with the Open University at the age of 36. I became very interested in the field I was working in and decided I wanted to find out more in a way that enabled me to combine work, a home life and studying. The OU seemed ideal for the flexibility I needed in order to fit learning around my life.

For my first course I undertook a Level 1 option in Health and Social Care followed by a general health course and after this, I focused on mental health and psychology.

This year, my final year, I am studying a Level 3 course in Social Psychology. As a member of Unison I received a ten percent discount towards the cost all of the health and social care courses I took and this amounted to a substantial saving over the years. All being well, I will graduate with an OU BSc degree in December this year.

I have benefited from studying with the OU in so many ways. It has enabled me to quit secretarial work and become a care worker, working with people who have learning disabilities and mental health issues.

As well as improving my career prospects, studying with the OU has made a big difference to my personal life. As well as challenging me intellectually and academically, it has improved my confidence and increased my self-esteem immeasurably. I have no doubt of the sense of achievement and satisfaction I will feel when I finally graduate – it will be fantastic!

It also means I can go on to study for an MSC in Social Work and obtain a professional qualification if I want to pursue that professional route in the future.

The Open University holds similar values to the unions and believe that learning should be a lifelong activity for everyone and access to education and training should be open to all. Members of unions affiliated to the TUC and new to studying with the OU can now obtain a 10% discount on Level 1 30 and 60 point courses. Just quote 'union' when reserving your place. You will be asked to prove your union membership on registration. For more information and other benefits for union members please visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/unionlearn

CASE STUDY: ONLINE HIGHER LEARNING

Sector: Education

Union: ATL

Unions and providers working together:
ATL and Edge Hill University

Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and Chair of unionlearn, was particularly pleased when ATL entered into partnership with Edge Hill University to establish an innovative partnership that will provide ATL members with opportunities to secure accreditation for professional development. The courses are designed to tailor provision to the needs of members and to reduce costs and this benefits both union members and employers.

Edge Hill University is one of the country's leading providers of professional development for the wider school workforce and ATL members will be able to undertake a variety of accredited activities, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, enabling them to develop their knowledge and expertise in the classroom at little or no cost to themselves.

The University has a very successful track record in enabling staff to gain academic credit through portfolio evidence of professional activities undertaken on the job. The accreditation opportunities are for all school and college staff. At undergraduate level colleagues can work towards Fds in Supporting Teaching and Learning or in Professional Development. At Postgraduate level, colleagues work towards an MA Education.

These are flexible programmes of study that can be engaged with either online or through practice-based learning modules. These accreditation offers are designed to be flexible, innovative and focused on impact in the classroom. For staff with a first degree, accreditation is available at postgraduate level, up to and including an MA in Education. Employer support may include time off for studying and mentoring in the workplace.

Pamela Creeth, a Pupil Support Assistant and ATL member, completed her first year on the Foundation degree in Supporting and Teaching Learning. A union newsletter promoting the discounted offer to union members first made her aware of the degree.

She contacted ATL and signed up to the course finding the trade union-influenced higher learning programme more accessible than others.

"I had been looking to do a degree but was put off by the cost but the fully funded offer made my mind up" Pamela said.

Speaking about the first year she added: *"Family commitments and work have taken up most of my time, but the flexibility of a degree that you can do online, at anytime of the day and night, and the support for fellow learners that I met on the introductory day have enabled me to complete the year."*

Her employer has also been supportive as they realise that they will benefit from a member of staff with increased knowledge, enhanced skills and greater confidence: *"Although most of it was undertaken online, the School let me have time off for introductory days in London. They also provided a mentor."*

Pamela would recommend undertaking higher learning to other trade union members: *"I would definitely recommend it as it gives people the skills and confidence to move on in their careers."*

In the future, Pamela hopes to progress to the Foundation degree to gain qualified teacher status (QTS)

CASE STUDY: TAILOR-MADE HIGHER LEARNING

Employer: Hillingdon Hospital Trust

Union: Unison

Hillingdon Hospital Trust signed a learning agreement on the 19th September 2008 between the Trust Senior Management and Unison union. The Trust agreed to offer Foundation degrees (FD) in Health and Social Care. Eight learners from nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy as well as healthcare and therapy assistants signed up.

The course, provided by Thames Valley University has been running for 2 years and is due to be completed in 2011. Funding for the course was negotiated for and provided by the Union Learning Fund (ULF), Skills for Health, NHS London and the Hospital Trust.

Thames Valley University were chosen as the provider after a thorough selection process and interview by the steering group which included a student, demonstrating a clear commitment to achieving a partnership approach. NHS London provided funding to cover fees and additional running costs.

The Trust allowed students to take time off for the course, gave them real time mentors and virtual support and developed guidelines to support the learners. The Trust also ensured the learners were monitored by a steering group and curriculum group and provided the students with a book grant towards their course books.

As well as an excellent career development opportunity the learners are now being allocated higher competency tasks within the profession. Many of the learners aspire to undertake a BSc Honours and others will be given the opportunity to be appointed to a higher employment post as a result.

Jennifer Chapple, Deputy Director of Education and Training at the Trust, said:

"This FD is providing our staff with two distinct strands of learning. In the first instance they are learning more about themselves and how development can empower them to carry out their roles more effectively. Secondly, they are learning and acquiring in-depth knowledge about service delivery and the patient experience through considering and analysing how the outcomes of their actions or inactions impact on service delivery and the patient experience. The knowledge and skills our staff are developing will contribute to the Trust achieving its objectives, in particular, treatment and care which is, safe, sensitive and responsible to the individual."

Barry Francis, Regional Manager unionlearn SERTUC, said:

"This is great example of a trade union, employer and HEI working together and should encourage other employers to engage with trade union supported higher learning."

CASE STUDY: FROM SKILLS FOR LIFE TO HIGHER LEARNING

Employer: HM Prison Service

Union: Prison Officers Association

The Highdown Union Learning Centre, situated outside HMP High Down, was set up in conjunction with the Prison Service and the POA union in 2006 and is part of the U-Net unionlearn network of learning centres. It is open to 700 plus staff from the local and surrounding prisons. The Centre offers a variety of courses that are provided for free or at a union discounted rate including Spanish, Deaf Awareness plus various levels of Life Skills including Maths and English.

Lynne Willmer, the Centre Manager, stated that:

“When the Learning Centre first opened, staff members were reluctant to admit they had Literacy or Numeracy issues. After the first few learners achieved online certificates and confirmed that learning was nothing like their time at school, there was much more interest in the Learning Centre. The second challenge was to find funding, free courses and training that was geared towards working with prisoners and managing staff stress; an invaluable part of the job.”

The Centre has now progressed to provide higher education courses. These courses funded by the employer and union included Preparing to Teach in the Life Long Sector (PTLLS) Level 4. One learner to undertake the course was Robin Willis. He is an Officer Instructor at HMP High Down. Robin started working at High Down in April 1992 as a part time cleaner; became an OSG (Officer Support Grade) and was then promoted to Officer in 2001. Since joining the Prison Service, Robin has made use of the Learning Centre. His progress has reflected the growing range of courses on offer at the centre as his learning has resulted in him gaining Skills for Life (English and IT), a Certificate in Teaching Support (Level 2) and a City and Guilds – Preparing to Teach in the Life Long Sector (PTLLS) Level 4.

Lynne Willmer believes that the HE courses provided have benefited the prison service in a number of ways.

“The benefits are enormous in terms of building staff confidence. Staff members who have up-skilled are more effective when dealing with incidents in the workplace because they have the experience and the knowledge to question bad behaviour, using better communication to defuse and de-escalate situations and they also use the Centre to find ways and methods to deal with stress and further their learning are less likely to be sick off work.”

She continued:

“Union initiated learning experiences at HE levels have led to individuals engaging in work related training, or in the case of women and BME learners, improving their earning capacity. Equality and Diversity, Race Relations and Equal Opportunities in the workplace have opened the doors to many workers who felt that they did not have the intelligence to go on to achieve a HE qualification. Finally, matching theory to practice and encouraging training up staff members with skills that are relevant to their jobs has strengthened the service we offer.”

Benefits to the employer of studying at HE level

Confidence: The benefits are enormous in terms of building staff confidence and staff are eager to help prisoners gain qualification and share their own personal experience of learning, emphasising that it is not easy for everyone and that perseverance does pay off.

Patience: Staff members who have up-skilled are more effective when dealing with incidents in the workplace because they have the experience and the knowledge to question bad behaviour, using better communication to defuse and de-escalate situations. These same staff members also recognise good behaviours and will give praise readily; a factor missing in a lot of prisoner's lives.

Sick Leave: Sick leave is a contentious area but staff members who use the centre to find ways and methods to deal with stress and further their learning are less likely to be sick off work.

Further Training: Union initiated learning experiences at HE levels has led to individuals engaging in work related training, or in the case of women and BME learners, improving their earning capacity. Equality and Diversity, Race Relations and Equal Opportunities in the workplace have opened the doors to many workers who felt that they did not have the intelligence to go on to achieve a HE qualification.

Finally, matching theory to practice and encouraging training up staff members with skills that are relevant to their jobs has strengthened the service we offer.

Governor Dawson stated:

“High Down's Learning Centre is a fantastic bonus for me as Governor. It inspires individuals to take responsibility for their own development and enjoy it into the bargain. The Centre plays a key part in giving me happier and more motivated colleagues to work with, as well individuals who are better equipped for the vital public service they deliver.”

CASE STUDY: FOUNDATION DEGREES

Learner: Peter Amphlett

Employer: Royal College of Midwives

Union: Unite

Peter left school with two A Levels and eight O Levels. Peter is currently completing a Foundation degree (FD) in Business Studies at the Open University, via distance learning.

The programme includes eight OU modules and Peter started the degree with one union and employer and is continuing with another. He receives financial support, materials, access to internal information and moral support and encouragement from his employer, the Royal College of Midwives (RCM).

“All of the modules I’ve done so far have had elements that relate to my work or my employer. In fact, because it’s an Fd, it would be difficult to do the course without work experience or current employment. The assignments I’ve found hardest have been the ones where I’ve no direct work experience, such as finance and manufacturing processes.”

I don’t take very much specific time at work for my course. It’s more about remembering incidents and gathering background information, which is harder to monitor. I spend the odd few minutes here and there gathering background information from our website, the intranet and internal documents. On top of this are the informal conversations I have with colleagues to gather info.

I’ve recently bought a small PC notebook and downloaded the course material onto a memory stick. I am able to use the long train journeys or overnights in hotels to do a lot of my studying.

I often gather background information about exercises and assignments whilst doing my day-to-day work. For some of the work, you’re asked



to relate this directly to personal experiences (the OU and the tutors give guarantees over confidentiality).

For example, I had an assignment to look at marketing and was able to use the project the RCM has at the moment to look at recruitment of ethnic minority members in London and the South East.”

I was able to make use of the marketing manager and equality & diversity officer at work to gain all the background information I needed to complete my course work. I’ve found myself reading many more of those emails, circulars, magazines and newsletters that we all get. I often save emails and articles as I think they’ll be useful as reference materials for the course. What works for me is to do a little studying on a regular basis. I try to do some studying four or five times a week, with Sunday usually being totally set aside.”

His employer supported him financially, encouraged him, and gave him materials to use as well as access to internal information. Although Peter acknowledges that full-time work did impede on his time during his degree, his qualifications were important as he was on a fixed-term contract.

CASE STUDY: FOUNDATION DEGREES

Peter said: My job, as project worker for the Royal College of Midwives, is to recruit and train union learning reps and help them identify learning needs within the unit they're based at, and find ways to address those learning needs. To help me achieve this, I decided to do a Foundation degree. There was all this emphasis on ULRs encouraging other employees to study and we realised we ought to practise what we preach a bit more.

The great thing about Foundation degrees is that there has to be some relevance to the work you're doing. That's why I chose business studies. I felt that, although I had become pretty good at encouraging people to take up learning, I didn't have a great degree of knowledge about the business decisions behind that – that is, what factors would influence an employer to support someone or not. I just thought certain courses were a great idea for certain employees, but for employers it's a bit more complicated.

The course has helped me understand that to persuade an employer to work in partnership with me there has to be some business benefit – and how to fit my work into the goals of the organisation. For me, it's been fantastic. I haven't done a qualification since before my A Levels 35 years ago."

Denise Linay, Employment Relations Advisor/ULR Project Manager at the RCM, said:

"The RCM believes that developing staff to achieve their personal and professional goals is crucial if they are to deliver an effective and efficient service to RCM members. This includes identifying further and higher education opportunities including foundation degrees. In Peter's role as a Project Worker he is required to work in partnership with employers. The merit of the OU Foundation degree is that it is directly work related so can assist him in better understanding employers needs which will equip him to achieve the best outcome for RCM members."

Foundation degrees are an excellent route for working people to undertake higher Learning and unionlearn SERTUC will work with ULRs and the trade unions to encourage more of them in the future" said Barry Francis, Regional Manager unionlearn SERTUC.

CASE STUDY: DISTANCE HIGHER LEARNING

Learner: Paul Harris

Employer: BT

Union: CWU

Through the joint efforts of both CWU and BT I have been able to complete Health & Safety Stages 1–3, then the Certificate in Occupational Health to enable me to apply for TECH IOSH status.

I am now in my third year of the BALTUS (BA in Labour and Trade Union Studies) plus Health and Safety degree, studying by distance learning through a university in London. This has all been jointly supported by BT and CWU, where CWU funds the course (including accommodation, travel etc.) and BT allows me the time to attend as and when required.

The distance learning means that at present I attend two residential weeks each year, each involving teaching for a module, and two single day classes, which are used as refresher or help days and are extremely beneficial. The time span for the completion of assignments ranges between 12 and 15 weeks, and can normally be between one and three assignments per module. I am able to contact my module tutors at any time via email and telephone.

What is a typical week like, balancing work, home and study? As a full-time employee for BT, an active CWU Safety Rep, a husband to a full-time bank manager and an active sportsman, time is a very valuable commodity. When I enrolled on the course I made a commitment to my family that I would try and keep my studies separate from family life.

I work for BT from 6am to 3pm and then I collect my son from school and spend quality time with him until he goes to bed at 7.30pm. I also prepare the family meal and have a few hours social time with my wife, then for about 2 hours each night I work on my assignments either researching or writing. In addition to evening study, I also have every other Monday off (this is part of my working pattern) where I devote

all day to my degree studies. I do not study at the weekend as this is family time. I have also become a school governor, where I use my new-found knowledge for the benefit of my son and his school.

So what does this mean to BT? My Health and Safety knowledge adds value to the company. BT has agreed that all class-based time is agreed and paid for using special leave with pay, and it has confirmed this for the full six-year programme.

In addition I am able to use my work laptop and occasional work time, as long as work tasks are completed first. I am also allowed to utilise information from various sources within the company as part of my learning. Some assignments are totally work-related. For example, one was about disciplinary measures where ill health or accidents occur in the workplace.”“Some assignments are totally work-related. For example, one was about disciplinary measures where ill-health or accidents occur in the workplace.

Barry Francis, Regional Manager unionlearn SERTUC stated:

“Like this example, our research shows that flexible higher learning is key to an engaged union learner. SERTUC unionlearn will work with ULRs and trade unions to secure similar learning in the future.”

CASE STUDY: BITE-SIZE HIGHER LEARNING

Employer: London Fire and Rescue Service **Union:** FBU

Last autumn funds became available via the 'Festival of Learning' for trade unions to help raise the profile of workplace learning. Especially in areas where little activity had taken place in regard to engaging with employers and involving Union Learning Reps (URLs). An emphasis was placed on the learning to encompass subjects like the arts, environment, sport, culture and encourage staff to engage in higher education.

The FBU's London region Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator, Tim Davis, felt this was an excellent opportunity to offer personnel the chance to enrol in one of the Open University's 'Openings' courses as they satisfied the conditions of the funding plus the OU have a very close relationship with unionlearn and the affiliated unions.

Two presentations were delivered by the Open University's Regional Manager, Ernest Dyer, at the London Fire Brigade Training Centre in Southwark, South London. More than 100 members of staff attended these events which provided them with an opportunity to find out how these courses are delivered, the different subjects' available plus general information about the OU. At each presentation each attendee was also provided with an Openings course prospectus.

Ernest Dyer had the following to say about his relationship with the London Fire Service and the Fire Brigades Union:

"In my work as a Regional Manager for the Open University's Centre for Widening Participation, I am able to enter into education partnerships with a range of different groups. I personally can't think of any more rewarding organisation to work with than the FBU. In being prepared to help facilitate access to higher education for its members the FBU are recognising that formal education can be the key to advancement with the Service (as well as offering opportunities beyond the Service) and also that education can, in itself, help to enrich a person's life.

I have very much enjoyed going along to the London Fire Service training centre in Southwark, South London – not just to discuss our courses with potential students but to see for myself, all the other activities going on in and around the court-yard as new intakes of London Fire fighters undertake their training. I would say that Tim Davis, the FBU official

that I have been working with, has been brilliant.

Tim's self-effacing, but really well-organised approach, has proven to be very effective in relation to recruiting Fire Service personnel to education courses.

The central programme of courses that I help to manage, is composed of a set of courses known as 'Openings' – the name rather gives away the purpose of these courses. 'Openings' courses are intended to offer an 'open door' into higher education. Given this, the courses are designed with, yes interesting subject matter, but also with a focus on fostering the academic skills required for successful engagement with higher education. The programme has been running now for 10 years and so far 100,000 students have shown its value. There are 11 Openings courses, ranging across natural sciences, social sciences, health, sport, management, and the arts... in fact the programme offers courses that cover the range subjects delivered by the Open University's academic faculties.

The courses are short (up to 22 weeks) and if successfully completed, credits are awarded that can contribute to a degree – on average about 93% of those who complete an Openings course pass.

We have approximately 60 students who work in the Fire Service studying on the March presentation of a number of different Openings courses – all of these students were funded via the FBU. And I do hope that this will be 60 students taking the first steps on an educational journey that will be completed when, in a few years time, they will each gain a degree and that there will be many more Fire fighters following in their footsteps."

Some of the students have already provided feedback; Jason Baptiste, a fire-fighter based at Romford Fire Station states:

"I noticed on the information board at my Station, a leaflet with all the courses available, and decided to do 'Understanding Society' to gain a better understanding of the world and the people on it. I also found all of the topics in the introductory course very appealing to me.

I manage my time relatively well, working the 2-2-4 shift system; this allows me to study on my days off when my children are at school and again on the night shift. My tutor provides me with feedback and structure on my essays and clears up any questions I may have on any subjects"

CASE STUDY: HIGHER LEARNING FOR TRADE UNIONISTS

Learner: John Fitzpatrick

Employer: Southampton City College

Union: Unite

Higher Learning has numerous benefits for union learners but it can benefit the trade union movement itself by giving activists the key skills to improve the lives of their fellow workers.

John Fitzpatrick, a TU Education Tutor at Southampton City College, is a good example of this learning in action.

Through the trade union movement and information provided by unionlearn SERTUC, John has taken a number of courses including the standard union representatives training, the Diploma in Employment Law and Level 2 Numeracy and Literacy qualifications. John has personally benefited from the skills he has attained, along with his employer and the wider trade union movement through his work at the TU Ed Studies Centre, at which he teaches new reps about the movement.

He says:

“The biggest challenge was getting started as I had no qualification beforehand and doing it on my own was hard but the college (my employer) and the union movement have given me the IAG to support me through the process.”

His employer part-funded the training as they see investing in their staff as an effective way to enhance the standing of the college in the local community. At the moment, he is undertaking a City & Guilds Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Sector (Level 5) to gain a teaching

qualification.

Furthermore, John has also used the skills developed during his higher level course to influence his union nationally via being a delegate of the BME executive

John stated:

“At the age of 56 my learning experience has provided me with more opportunities to employment, high self-esteem, confidence and the amount of credits I have achieved during my learning experience. I am at present working towards a teaching qualification and when this is completed I will continue working towards my BA. I consider myself to be a role model to the younger activists, pointing out that if I can make the achievements that I have, so can they.”