

unionlearn

with the TUC



Making a real difference

Union learning reps: a survey

Survey details

This survey of ULRs was carried out at the end of 2005 and the initial processing of the data was undertaken by the Labour Research Department. Only ULRs in England were surveyed.

In total, 841 people responded to the survey. Of these, 553 (66.5 per cent) were active as ULRs, 116 (14 per cent) were not currently ULRs and 162 (19.5 per cent) did not respond to the question about their ULR status and therefore were not counted as valid responses.

Foreword

Union learning reps are making an enormous contribution to changing the workplace for the better – that much is clear from this latest survey, the third in the last six years.



Every day, these new-look union activists are encouraging colleagues to return to learning, ranging from Skills for Life courses to continuing professional development.

And they are also raising the profile – and boosting the membership – of their own unions in the process.

The good news is that the number of learning reps who have never held a union position before continues to rise, and now stands at over one-third of the total of ULRs.

Equally to be welcomed is the diversity of the ULR network, especially because these new activists are more likely to be women and more likely to be younger, while the proportion of black and minority ethnic ULRs continues to grow overall.

And the negotiation of more learning agreements is another mark of the success of the union learning campaign, with over 60 per cent of ULRs now saying they have agreements in place.

But the bad news is that union learning reps continue to face some major obstacles to getting their job done – the biggest of which is time, with over two-fifths reporting this as a barrier – while employees face similar problems getting paid time off for learning and/or training.

More employers need to realise how they can reap the benefits of a learning workforce, and offer greater support both to their ULRs and to their employees.

And the government should extend paid time off arrangements to more workers, to help ensure we get organised to acquire the skills we need to compete in the 21st century global economy.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brendan Barber". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brendan Barber
TUC General Secretary
October 2006

New-look union activists

On the face of it, union learning representatives might look no different from any other union activist.

Of the ULRs currently encouraging their colleagues to broaden their learning horizons, over half are men, over half are at least 45 years old, and two-thirds have other union duties to keep up with as well.

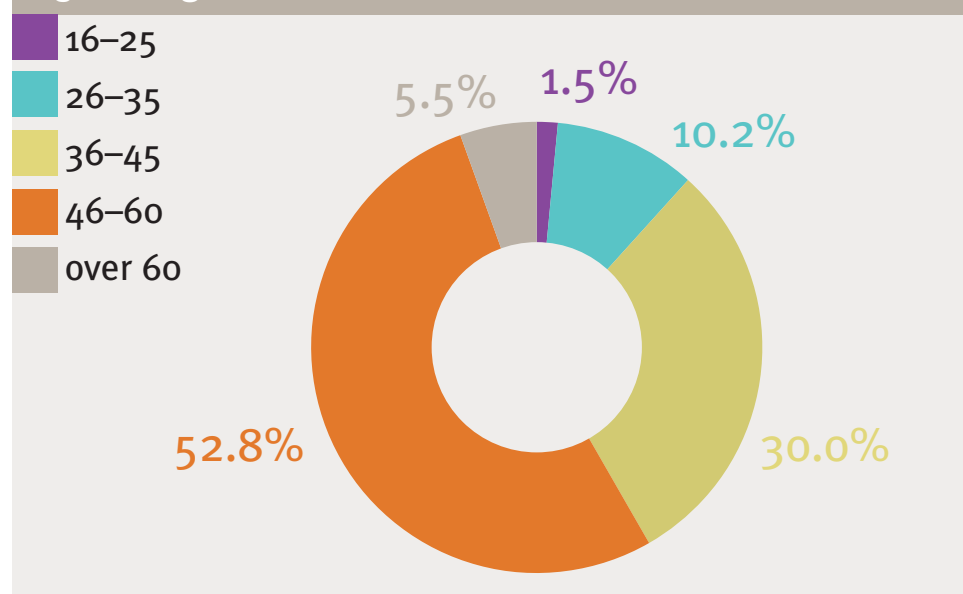
But look a little deeper, and it becomes clear that union learning is beginning to change the profile of union activism.

The proportion of reps who have never held a union position before has risen massively from 9 per cent of the overall total in 2000 to 28 per cent in 2003 and 35.5 per cent in 2005.

And these new activists are more likely to be women (53.4 per cent compared to 41.4 per cent of the overall figure) and more likely to be younger – 19.4 per cent are under 36 years old, compared to 11.7 per cent overall.

These trends mean that the ULR population continues to become more diverse overall: the overall proportion of women in the role has risen from 37.5 per cent in 2003 to 41.4 per cent in 2005; while the proportion of black and minority ethnic ULRs has increased from less than 2 per cent in 2000 to 7 per cent today.

Figure 1 Age of ULRs





Opportunities for ULRs

Just over half (51.7 per cent) have a learning centre in their workplace, a slight increase from the 2003 survey, when the corresponding figure was 47.1 per cent.

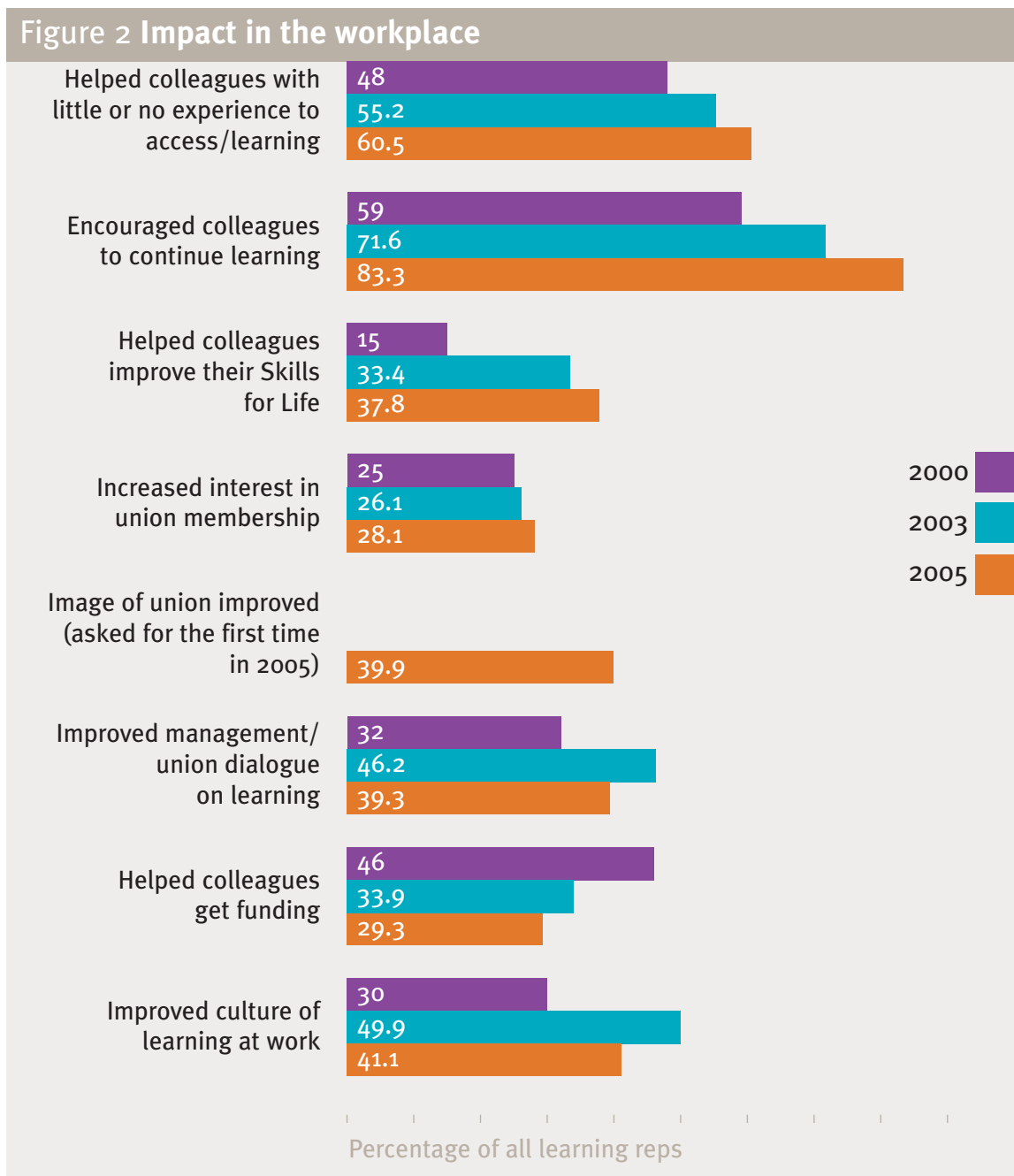
Over three-quarters of ULRs can access the internet at home and/or work: 77.4 per cent can get online at home, and 76.3 per cent at work.

Almost three-quarters (70.7 per cent) are able to take advantage of networking opportunities and seminars, of which the majority are run by the TUC (74.9 per cent) and by their own unions (64.5 per cent – almost twice the figure in 2003).

In addition, around one in ten are given networking opportunities by other sources (11.8 per cent) or by their employer (10.2 per cent).

Making an impact at work

In almost any way you care to measure it, ULRs are making a bigger splash in the workplace, year on year, as shown in figure 2.





As would be expected, they're encouraging colleagues with little or no experience to try learning (60.5 per cent), supporting co-workers to continue learning (83.3 per cent), and helping people improve their Skills for Life (37.8 per cent).

They're also helping to boost the image and organisation of the union at the workplace.

Over half (56.2 per cent) provide membership information to potential members, over a quarter (26.7 per cent) have recruited between one and ten new members and two-fifths (39.9 per cent) believe their work has improved their union's image in the eyes of members and potential members.

But there has been a decline in three important areas: improved dialogue on learning (39.3 per cent); improved culture of learning at work (41.1 per cent); and helped colleagues get funding (29.3 per cent).

However, it may not be ULRs who are to blame: these are areas which are influenced by the overall industrial relations climate at the workplace and changes to government funding. Additionally, some ULRs will be plugged into mainstream funding rather than former funding streams like ILAs.

Where it's all happening

The kind and size of workplaces where ULRs are active has also been changing since ULRs secured statutory rights to time off to carry out their duties in 2003.

Now that ULRs have some statutory rights, more of them are tending to be active in the public sector and larger workplaces where unions tend to be more organised and stronger.

Over the three surveys, the proportion of ULRs in the public sector has increased from 28 per cent in 2000 to 51.9 per cent in 2003 to 61.7 per cent in 2005.

Over the same period, there has been a corresponding decrease in the proportion in the private sector, down from 66 per cent in 2000 to 47.4 per cent in 2003 to 34.7 per cent in 2005 (although the actual number of ULRs in the private sector has still increased overall).

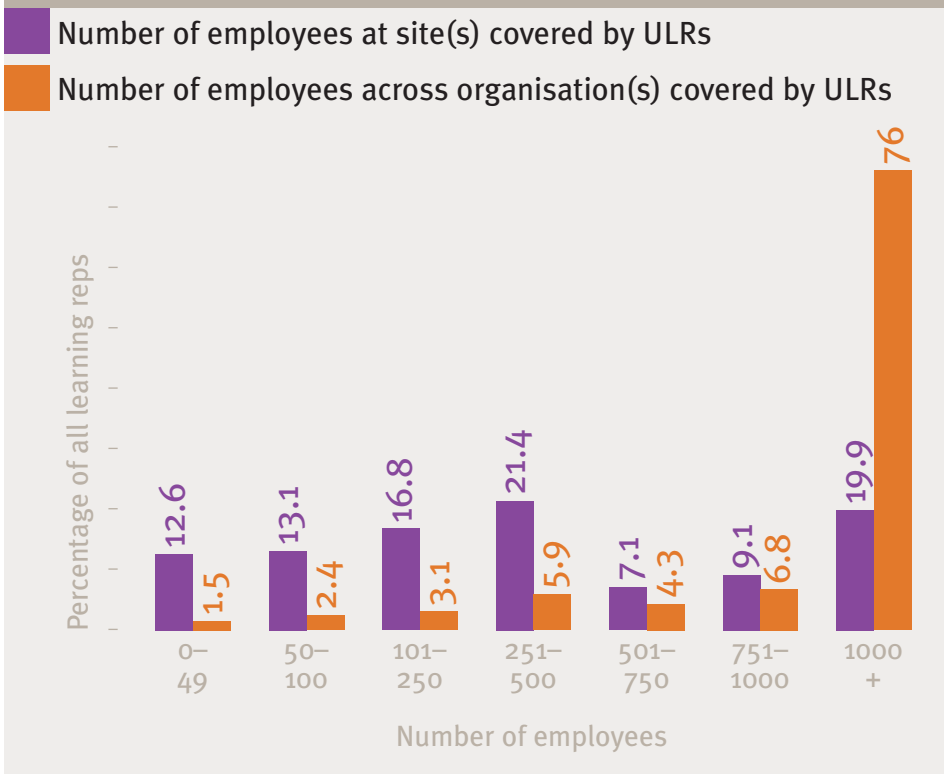
There has been a similar trend in the figures for size of organisation, as shown in figure 3. In 2005, 76 per cent of ULRs worked in organisations with 1,000 or more employees, compared to 52.6 per cent in 2003.

The proportions have also changed when it comes to small to medium-sized organisations (up to 250 staff), down from 19 per cent in 2003 to 7 per cent in 2005; and in small workplace sites (fewer than 50 employees), down from 16 per cent to 12.6 per cent.

Analysing the figures by industry sector, the largest number of ULRs are found in central and local government (29.5 per cent in total), although they are also very active in manufacturing, with nearly one in five (19.3 per cent) in the sector.

The vast majority (91.4 per cent) of ULRs operate in workplaces where their employers recognise the union for collective bargaining, more than three quarters (76.5 per cent) have been active in the role for between one and five years, and two-thirds have other union duties – 52 per cent are shop stewards and 37 per cent health and safety reps.

Figure 3 ULRS by size of workplace and organisation



ULRs in the workplace

This is the full breakdown of where ULRs are active:

central and local government
29.5 per cent

manufacturing
19.3 per cent

other services
12.1 per cent

transport and communications
9.9 per cent

distribution, hotels and restaurants
7.5 per cent

health services
5.9 per cent

education
5.5 per cent

banking, finance and insurance
3.9 per cent

energy and water
1.7 per cent

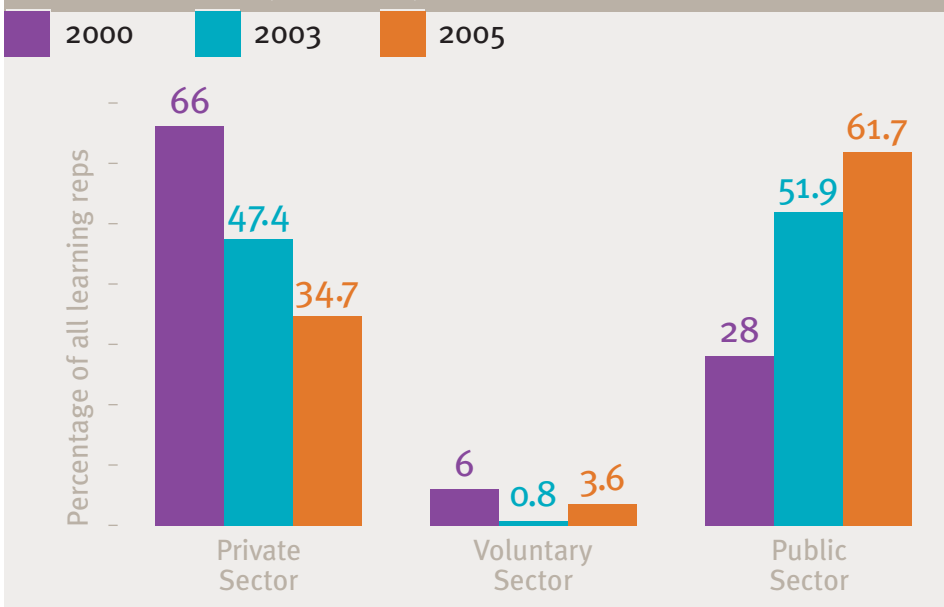
voluntary sector
1.7 per cent

construction
1.3 per cent

leisure services
1.1 per cent

agriculture and fishing
0.7 per cent

Figure 4 ULRS by industry sector



Promoting learning

The vast majority of ULRs (87.5 per cent) promote the value of learning, offer advice and guidance on learning (83.1 per cent), and/or provide information on learning opportunities (81.2 per cent).

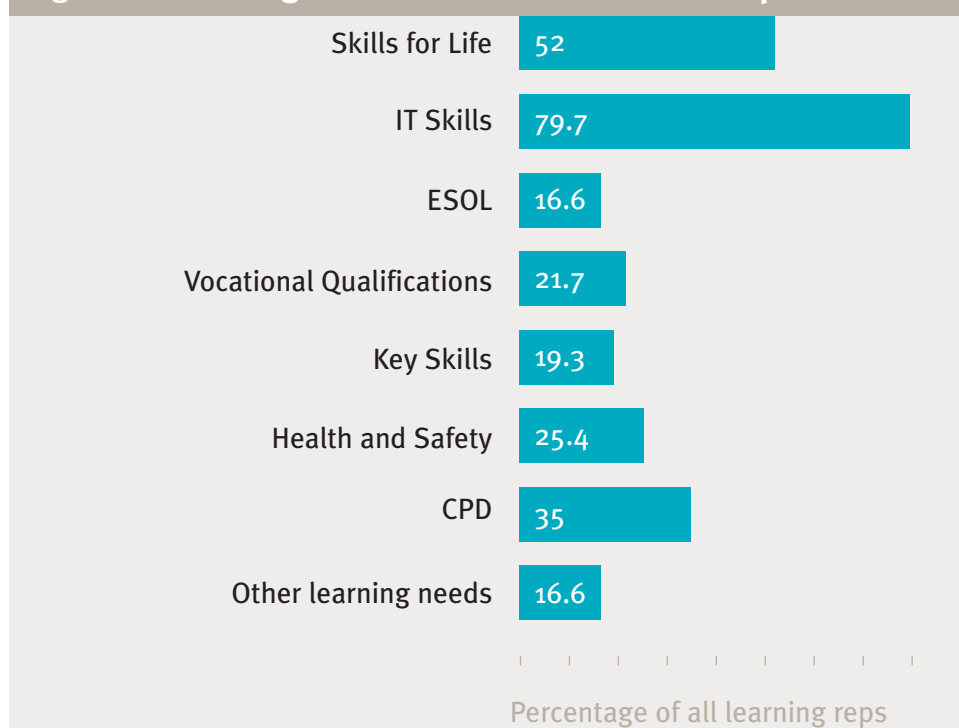
The latest survey also shows that the proportion of ULRs engaged in these activities has increased consistently over the three surveys.

Six out of ten ULRs (61.8 per cent) have conducted a learning needs assessment at their workplace, with the average number of people surveyed being 264.

Asked to list what interests members (see figure 6), ULRs identify:

- basic IT skills (79.7 per cent)
- Skills for Life (52 per cent)
- continuing professional development (35 per cent)
- ESOL (16.6 per cent).

Figure 6 Learning needs identified in the workplace





It's about time

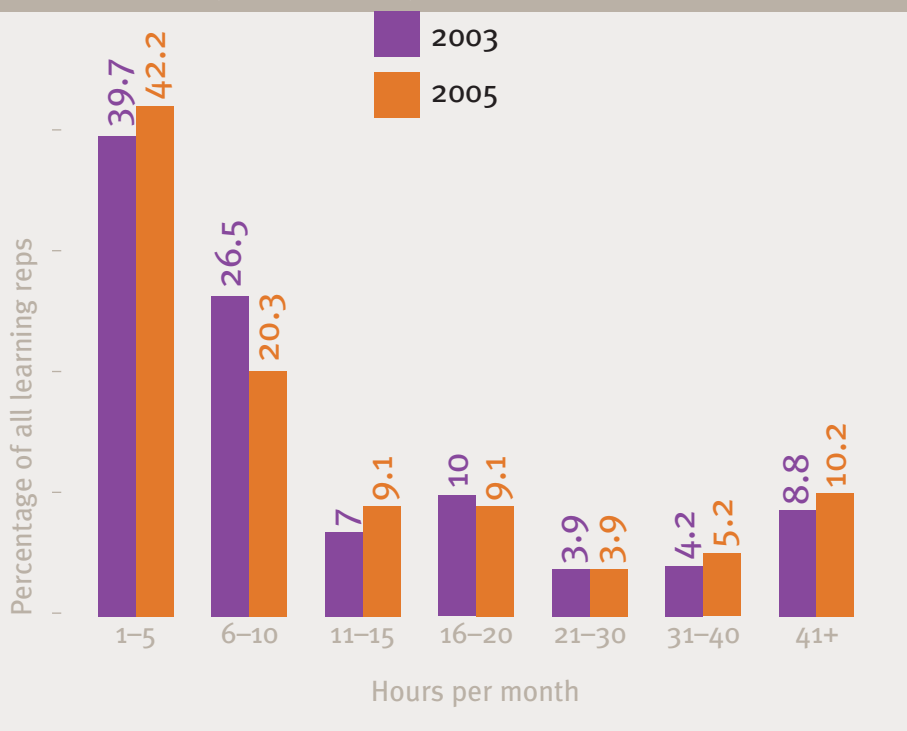
As shown in figure 7, the time ULRs spend on their duties has remained roughly similar between the 2003 and 2005 surveys: 57.8 per cent currently spend more than five hours per month (compared to 60 per cent in 2003).

Furthermore, 15.4 per cent of ULRs spend more than 30 hours on their ULR duties (compared to 13 per cent in 2003), which suggests more ULRs are being seconded full or part-time to their ULR role.

Just over half (56.8 per cent) carry out all of their ULR duties in paid time off, which means that just under half (43.2 per cent) do some unpaid ULR work.

Around one quarter do between one and five hours of ULR duties unpaid, almost one in ten ULRs (9.2 per cent) do between six and ten hours unpaid and 7.2 per cent do 11 hours or more unpaid.

Figure 7 Hours per month spent on ULR activities



Overcoming barriers

It seems clear that ULRs might achieve much more if some key problems facing both those trying to facilitate workplace learning and those trying to access it were tackled.

As shown in figure 8, the biggest problem for ULRs is time: nearly one in four (24.7 per cent) said lack of facilities time was the major problem, while 18.2 per cent said they didn't have access to time off for their duties.

In addition, 16.1 per cent blamed lack of employer support, while other key barriers included long hours at work (16.9 per cent) and cost of training (7.3 per cent)

Another issue may be the attitude of fellow activists. Asked for the first time whether they believed ULRs were accorded the same status as other union activists, respondents were evenly divided, but of the half who believed they weren't, over 95 per cent felt they had lower, not higher, status.

For ordinary union members, the biggest barrier to making things happen (figure 9) is lack of access to paid time off for learning and/or training, according to 46.2 per cent of ULRs.

Lack of employer support was another significant barrier reported by 15.6 per cent, followed by long hours at work (11.5 per cent) and cost of training (8.9 per cent).

Figure 8 Barriers for ULRs

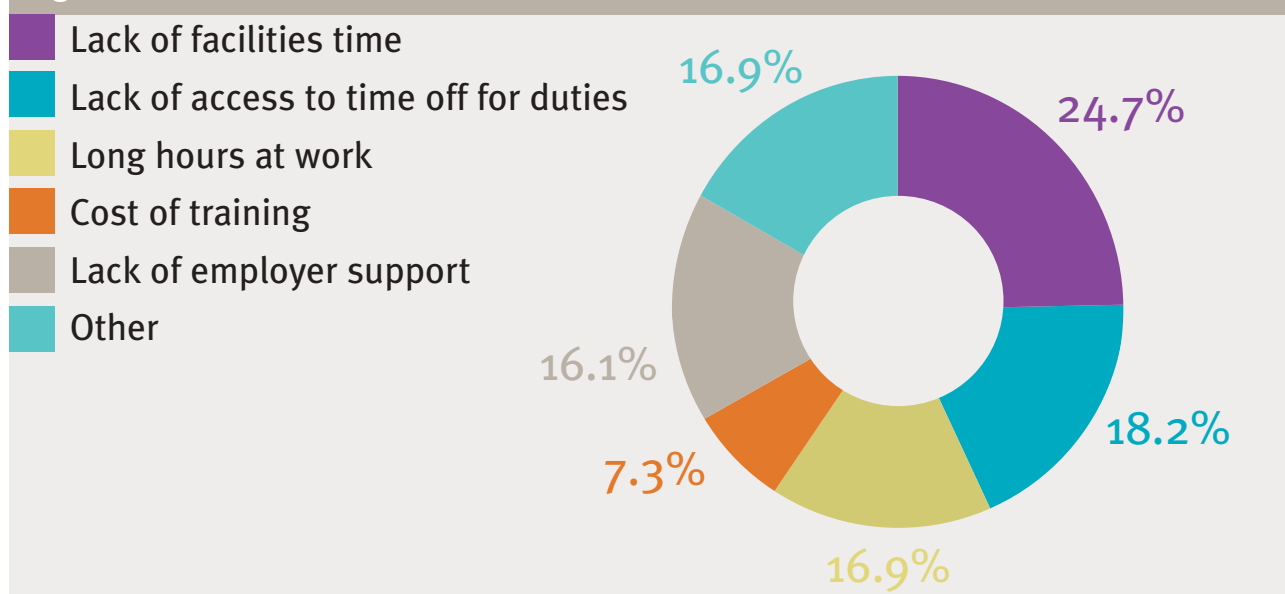
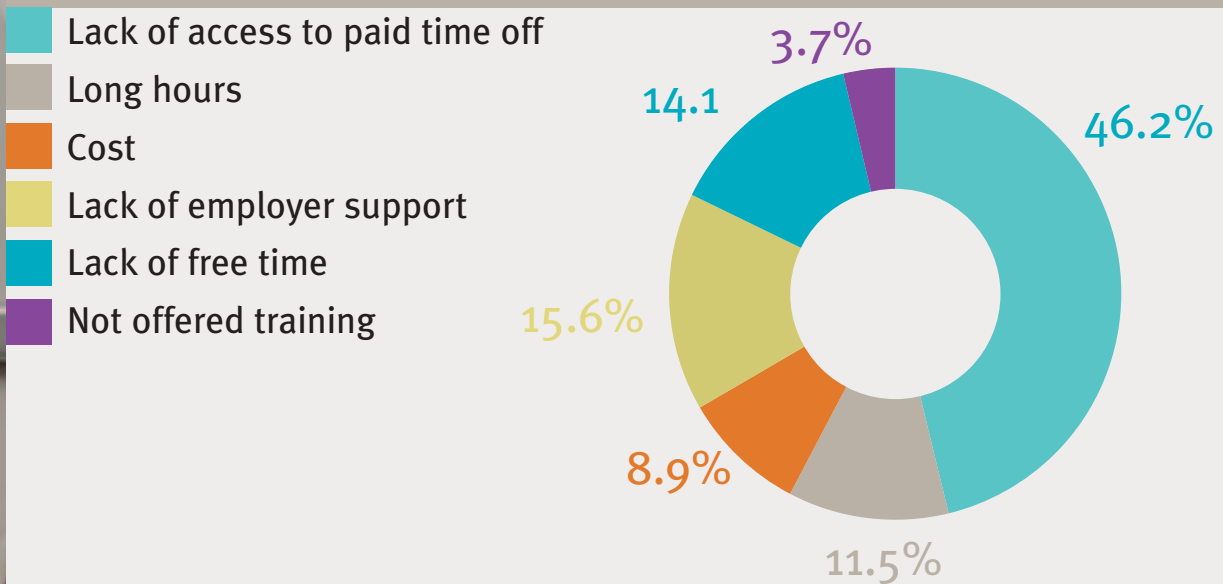




Figure 9 Barriers for employees



Learning agreements

Three-fifths of ULRs have a learning agreement in place (60.6 per cent), an increase on 2003 when the figure was 51.3 per cent. Of these, over three-quarters (78.2 per cent) are formal agreements and under one quarter (21.8 per cent) informal.

ULRs are integrated into the negotiating process in around half of learning agreements, with just over a quarter (28.7 per cent) jointly negotiated by ULRs and shop stewards, and 19 per cent by ULRs and the branch negotiating team.

However one in ten (10 per cent) negotiate the agreement by themselves, while branch negotiating teams alone oversee just under one in ten (9.7 per cent) and stewards alone look after 8.5 per cent.

Where a learning agreement exists, the vast majority cover paid time off for ULRs to conduct their duties (92.7 per cent) and attend training courses (90.8 per cent) – statutory rights which would be expected to be high.

Just under half (46.5 per cent) of ULRs indicated that the learning agreement covers paid time off for members to access their ULR, while 42.2 per cent reported agreements covering paid time off for members to attend training.

The other areas covered are:

- unpaid time off for members to attend training (26 per cent)
- unpaid time off for members to access ULRs (20.8 per cent)
- establishment of workplace learning committees (43.7 per cent)
- establishment of workplace learning centres (50.2 per cent)
- equal opportunities (52.9 per cent).



Equal opportunities

ULRs are helping extend equal opportunities in the workplace. Many have been helping groups of co-workers who have usually missed out on learning and training opportunities (eg, manual workers) and others have ensured women, members of black and minority ethnic groups and disabled people have not been overlooked.

The survey asked ULRs how they'd helped expand equal opportunities in workplace learning. Examples included:

improving language skills and confidence through provision of ESOL courses, helping people gain promotion

creating the first opportunity to learn and train for manual employees, including large groups of female, part-time and older workers

encouraging older employees to take computer courses to give them more confidence

improving career opportunities for younger and more junior employees, the majority of them women and members of minority ethnic groups

identifying learning barriers (eg, dyslexia)

introducing adaptive technology so that everyone could take part in learning

giving people who have no qualifications a chance to improve in a supportive environment.

Training for development

The overwhelming majority of ULRs (98 per cent) have been trained for their role, but a tiny proportion (2 per cent) say they have yet to attend a ULR course.

The initial training itself goes down pretty well (figure 10), with the vast majority (93.3 per cent) very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the courses they've attended – figures which compare well with previous years and show an upward trend in satisfaction levels.

As with the 2003 survey, the most popular additional training (figure 11) covers Skills for Life. The numbers taking this additional module have increased significantly, up from 32.9 per cent to 52.3 per cent in 2005.

The next most popular module covers information, advice and guidance (IAG), which attracted one third (33.7 per cent) of ULRs in 2005.

As to future training (figure 12), the most popular option remains workforce development, with 44.9 per cent of learning reps interested in 2003 and 45.8 per cent in 2005.

Workforce development training is closely followed by IAG, which is now attracting substantial interest, rising from 29.7 per cent in 2003 to 43.6 per cent in 2005.

Figure 10 Satisfaction with ULR training



Figure 11 Other training courses attended

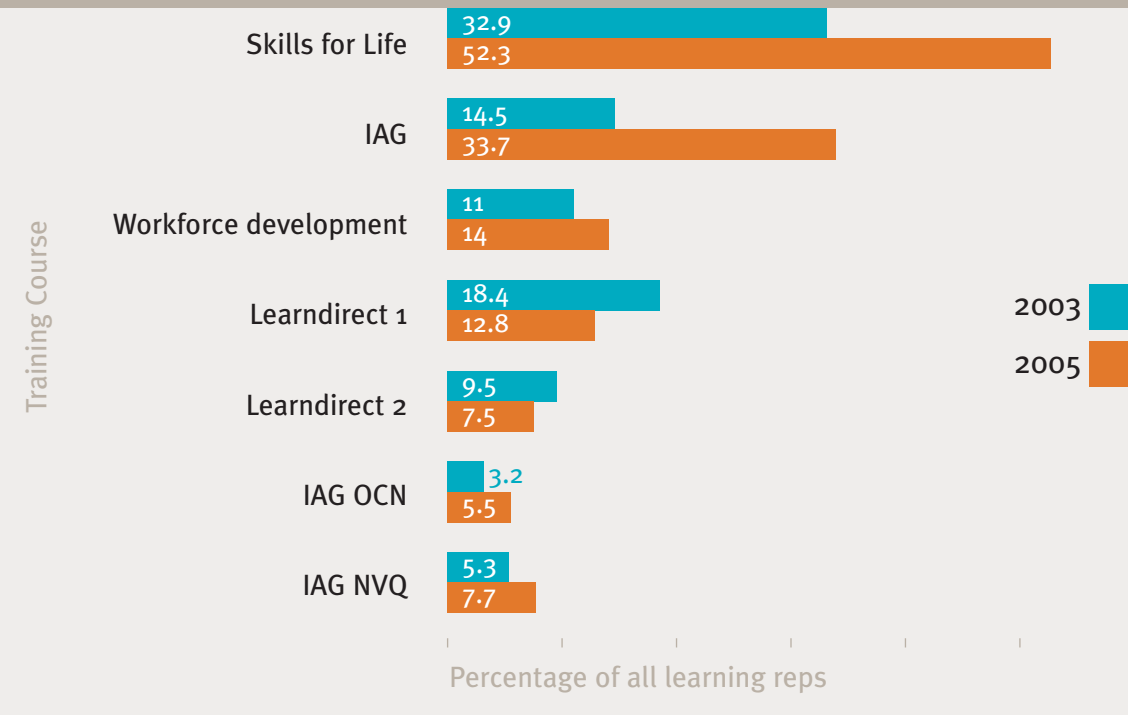
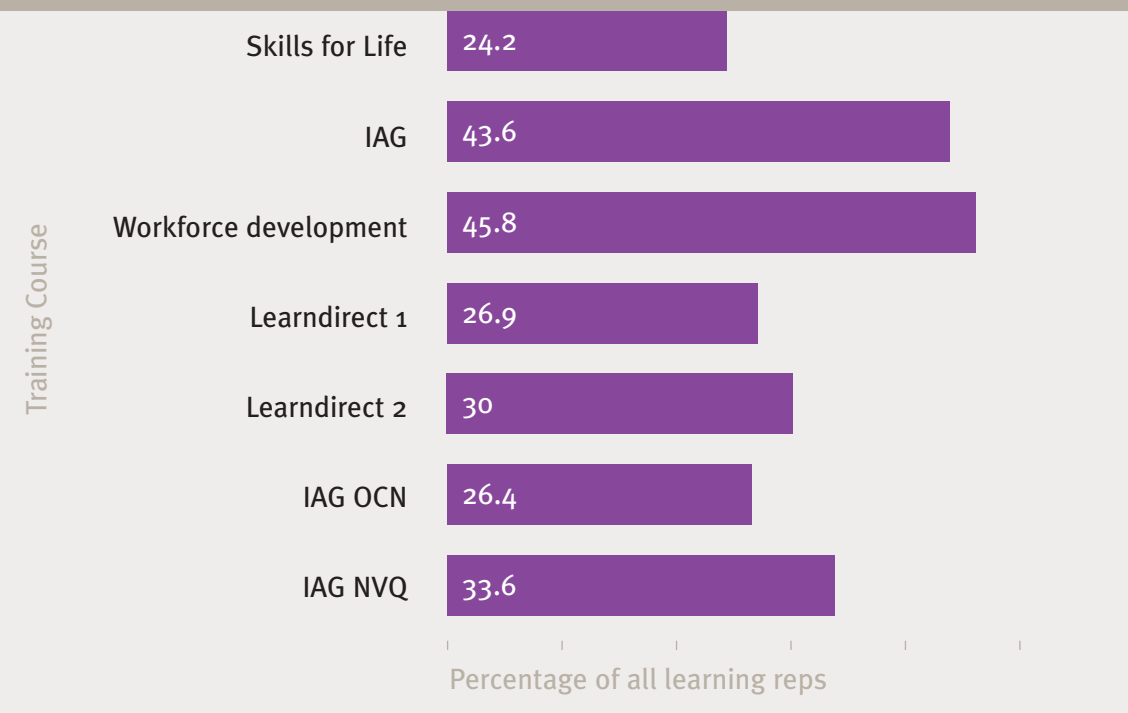


Figure 12 Future training plans



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