

Learning & Skills Policy Update

October 2019

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Introduction

This newsletter is intended to keep unions and other stakeholders up to speed on recent learning and skills policy developments, including commentary by the TUC and unionlearn. It also highlights new resources developed by unionlearn to support union reps to boost learning and skills opportunities in the workplace. If you have any suggestions about either the content or design of the newsletter, please contact Iain Murray: imurray@tuc.org.uk. The newsletter and a range of other learning and skills policy briefings are available on the [unionlearn](https://unionlearn.org) and [TUC](https://tuc.org.uk) websites.

National Retraining Scheme

Early development of the scheme

At the end of 2017 the government announced that it would be launching a National Retraining Scheme, with a particular focus on addressing the training needs of workers that are likely to be impacted by automation and digitalisation in the coming years. A general briefing on the development of the scheme to date is available on the [gov.uk website](https://gov.uk). In 2017 the government also

announced that a high-level advisory group, the National Retraining Partnership, was to be established to bring together government, the TUC and CBI in order to set the strategic direction and oversee implementation of the scheme.

Meetings of the Partnership are chaired by the Secretary of State for Education and are attended by the TUC General Secretary, Frances O'Grady and CBI Director-General, Carolyn Fairbairn. Other government ministers also attend, including the Secretary to the Exchequer, the Skills Minister, and the Employment Minister. The Partnership meets on a regular basis and considers the findings and recommendations coming out of regular meetings of senior officials from government departments (DfE, Treasury and DWP) with the TUC and CBI. These official-led meetings are currently focused on developing the operational model and trialling aspects of the programme, including in the first instance, the *Get Help to Retrain* online service (more details below).

The government has committed to roll out the full scheme across England by 2022 and the *Get Help to Retrain* online service by 2020. In the 2018 Budget the Chancellor committed £100 million for the current developmental phase of the National Retraining Scheme. This builds on earlier spending commitments focused on two separate initiatives that are also being taken forward. These include a specific initiative to tackle skills shortages in the construction sector and the development of digital platforms by government to support flexible online access to education and training

opportunities, especially for adults wishing to retrain. More information on these associated projects and earlier pilot work, is available on the [gov.uk website](https://www.gov.uk).

In the 2018 Budget the Chancellor described the first phase of the scheme to be trialled, as follows: “This will include a new careers guidance service with expert advice to help people identify work opportunities in their area, and state-of-the-art courses combining online learning with traditional classroom teaching to develop key transferable skills.” He also said that the “National Retraining Partnership between the government, the CBI and the TUC will focus on job-specific retraining in phase two [trials].” It is not yet known when the phase two trials will commence but further information will be made available about this on the unionlearn website when it is announced.

Get Help to Retrain

In July of this year the government launched the first major phase of the scheme, which is the [Get Help to Retrain](https://www.unionlearn.org.uk) online service. The aim of the online service is to help people to:

- understand their current skills
- explore alternative occupations and training opportunities to develop new skills
- access support from a dedicated career advisor.

Users can also search for local training options and jobs as well as being able to phone an adviser to discuss their options in more detail.

Over the summer months the new online service was rolled out to three areas:

- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- North East Local Enterprise Partnership area
- West Midlands Combined Authority.

During this phase of the rollout access to the online service was on an invite-only basis to

facilitate the developers to make improvements and add new features before it was rolled out more widely. On 16 October the online service was rolled out to an additional three areas:

- Leeds City Region Local Enterprise Partnership area
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Area
- Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership area

Importantly, at this stage access to the online service was opened up to all those adults who are eligible in the six areas where it has been made available. The eligibility criteria are as follows

- you're employed
- you don't have a degree
- you're aged 24 or over
- and you're earning below £35,000 a year.

The government has committed to roll out the online service across England at some stage next year. An early demonstration of the online service is available on a webinar that has been posted on the TUC website:

www.tuc.org.uk/resource/national-retraining-scheme-get-help-retrain. Please note that new features have been added to the online service since this webinar was originally produced.

Unionlearn is encouraging union learning reps in the six areas where the online service is available to support individuals to access it via the portal on the [gov.uk website](https://www.gov.uk). To access the service you have to insert your postcode and this checks whether you are eligible to use it at the current time (i.e. whether you are resident in any of the six areas). Where possible we would also recommend that union learning reps and individual users make use of the feedback mechanisms on the website to support further development and incorporation of additional features.

Briefings about further development of the National Retraining Scheme will be provided on the unionlearn website in the coming months. In addition, a series of regional briefings are being planned for next year to coincide with the national rollout of the Get Help to Retrain online service.

Apprenticeships

Time off for training

There continues to be significant concerns about the number of apprentices who are not receiving their entitlement to off-the-job training lasting a minimum of 20% of their normal working hours. In the [May edition](#) of this newsletter we highlighted that the National Audit Office had expressed major concerns in this area, concluding that the “government has limited assurance that apprentices are spending at least 20% of their time on off-the-job-training”.

The May newsletter also summarised a range of new government guidance resources aimed at tackling the widespread contravention of apprentices’ minimum 20% off-the-job training entitlement. Government guidance makes it very clear that: “If the apprentice does not require 20% off-the-job training, for at least the minimum training duration of 12 months, then they are not eligible for the apprenticeship programme.” Apprenticeships that are not eligible should not be funded by levy payments or government subsidies given to non-levy-paying employers.

In May the government also published a revision to the [Individual Learner Record](#) (ILR) that colleges and training providers have to complete. As a result, since the beginning of September the ILR has contained a new requirement on providers to set out the planned number of off-the-job training hours for the individual over the full apprenticeship. This replaced a previous **optional** request for data on training hours in the ILR. Commenting on this change to the ILR, the Association of Education and Learning Providers

(AELP) [was critical](#), saying: “The job is hard enough at the moment without lading on more meaningless bureaucracy which puts a lot of employers off.”

Given the scale of the contravention of the training entitlement, the government has decided to introduce an additional change to the ILR from September 2020. This change is designed to “enable visibility of actual training delivered” to apprentices by incorporating an “off-the-job training actual hours” field. In effect this should evidence on a regular basis that apprentices are receiving their entitlement to off-the-job training lasting a minimum of 20% of their normal working hours. Again, the AELP was [critical of this change](#), saying: “We warned this would happen when it was optional recording of hours – and here we now are. Total waste of time We will not let this one drop – all it does is introduce bureaucracy and cost for the provider and more importantly the employer – another nail in the employer led coffin.”

The TUC has consistently called for much more effective regulation of the apprenticeship off-the-job training entitlement, including in its [evidence to the inquiry](#) undertaken by the Education Select Committee last year looking at the quality of apprenticeships. The TUC’s evidence drew on data from the government’s latest survey of apprentices to highlight that:

- 30% of apprentices are not even aware that they are actually undertaking an apprenticeship and this lack of awareness is found among 55% of adult apprentices (those aged 25+)
- one in seven (14%) apprentices say that they do not receive any formal training at all
- 37% of all apprentices were not receiving the minimum advised amount of training.

In September the government revised its [guidance](#) on the off-the-job training entitlement and this

includes detailed policy guidance and FAQs. Some of the key issues highlighted include:

- The 20% entitlement is a minimum requirement, it must be undertaken away from the apprentice's normal working duties, it must take place during working hours (not overtime), and must only cover new knowledge, skills and behaviours relevant to the specific apprenticeship
- A *Commitment Statement* signed by the employer, apprentice and provider must be in place from the beginning of the apprenticeship. This must set out the training content an apprentice will receive and which elements count towards the off-the-job training. The apprentice's evidence pack needs to demonstrate what training has been delivered against the Commitment Statement. The DfE website includes a template of the Commitment Statement, which is a mandatory document
- The training can be delivered flexibly, for example, as a part of each day, one day per week, one week out of five or as block release
- Off-the job education and training for apprentices who need time off to meet the minimum standards in English and maths must be on top of the 20% off-the-job training requirement for meeting the apprenticeship standard or framework.

Unionlearn has a range of resources about off-the-job training and other rights and entitlement, including the Apprenticeships Essentials app aimed at apprentices themselves and negotiating guides and resources for union reps. More information on these are available at:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/apprenticeships

Travel discounts for apprentices

In August the TUC published a new report – [Get a Move On](#) – which called on the government to deliver on a commitment it gave over two years

ago to introduce a national travel discount for all apprentices. In summer 2017 the government committed to “introduce significantly discounted bus and train travel for apprentices to ensure that no young person is deterred from an apprenticeship due to travel costs”.

As well as help with travel costs, the TUC wants the minimum wage for apprentices to be boosted to youth minimum wage rates to tackle the poverty trap. Apprentices currently earn as little as £3.90 an hour if they're aged under 19, or in the first year of their apprenticeship, and there is also evidence of many being paid below this statutory minimum. It is shocking that one survey has shown that 40% of apprentices say that they are spending more money on undertaking an apprenticeship programme – including significant outlays for extras such as travel and childcare – than they get paid.

The TUC report flags up a range of innovative travel discounts that are currently being delivered through devolved arrangements in England. For example, Liverpool City Region now gives all apprentices aged 16-24 in the region an entitlement to half price bus and train travel and it is estimated that these discounts will save apprentices up to £420 on bus fares and up to £680 on train fares annually. In Greater London and Greater Manchester apprentices aged 16-17 get completely free bus travel and other travel discounts are available to older apprentices. The TUC report argues that the government should draw on the best aspects of these initiatives to develop a national travel discount entitlement.

In addition to calling for a national travel discount to be delivered urgently, the TUC is pressing for a range of other apprenticeship reforms to boost wages, increase the numbers able to access apprenticeships (especially from under-represented groups), address shortcomings in the quality of training and employment, and give

unions a stronger strategic voice. The main reform proposals include the following:

- The National Minimum Wage apprenticeship rate should be raised to the level of the youth rate, an increase to £4.35, and NMW enforcement for apprentices should be strengthened
- There should be stricter enforcement of training standards, especially the entitlement to 20% of working time for off-the-job training
- Apprentices completing a Level 2 apprenticeship should have a statutory entitlement to progress to a Level 3 programme
- The government should reform the remit of Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to give it a remit to tackle equality and diversity challenges
- Unions should be given a voice at the table on the IfATE as is the case in most other countries with similar national apprenticeship bodies.

English, maths and digital skills

Maths and English functional skills qualifications

The government has been on a long road to reform the functional skills [qualifications](#) in English and maths. The new qualifications have now gone live and from September 2019 onwards all newly registered learners need to work towards the revised qualifications. Last certification for the legacy qualification will be 31 August 2020. This means that learners who haven't achieved all the relevant elements of the legacy qualifications and got their certificate by this date will have to start again with the new qualifications.

The new content doesn't differ substantially from the legacy qualifications. The qualifications are still about applying maths and English to purposeful contexts. However, for English the focus is now on spelling, punctuation and grammar without

dictionaries or computer proofreading aids; and at Entry Levels there are now detailed reading and spelling expectations based on the structured teaching of phonics. And for maths there's more of an emphasis on the underpinning knowledge and skills required to solve mathematical problems including tasks such as using times tables and working with and without a calculator.

Some of the notable changes include the following:

- The increase of recommended guided learning hours from 45 to 55 which will mean slightly more content. This may have an impact on agreements with employers regarding paid time off for learning.
- Within English all three components (speaking, listening and communicating, and reading and writing) must be achieved at same qualification level for a pass.
- Likewise, all three maths components (numbers, measure and shape, and data handling) need to be passed.
- Dictionaries or spellcheck equipment cannot be used in writing assessments.
- Calculators are not allowed in 25 per cent of the maths assessment tasks/questions.

There are some handy mapping documents available to compare the differences between the new functional skills content statements and the legacy criteria for [English](#) and [maths](#). The awarding organisations also offer sample assessment papers online.

Unionlearn has produced a reform [briefing paper](#) for unions to explore further how the changes impact learners and workplace learning.

Unionlearn's Literacy Works Week takes place 9-13 March 2020.

Learning and skills trends

New research by unionlearn

Over the summer unionlearn published a new [research report](#) about the amount and quality of training made available to workers in recent years. The research was undertaken by Professor Francis Green of UCL and drew on previous research showing that the total volume of employer-led training declined by a half between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the current decade. The new TUC research tracks trends from 2011 to 2018 and it paints a similarly depressing picture, including the following key findings:

- analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows that since 2011 the volume of workplace training declined by a further 10%
- the LFS data also show that workers with the lowest-level qualifications (below GCSE or vocational equivalent) have been hit hardest, experiencing a cut in training of 20%, which is double the average rate of decline
- young adult workers aged 16-34 have also been hard hit with the amount of training they receive down by 16%
- a range of data sources show that the quality of workplace training has not improved in recent years, with fewer people accessing off-the-job training, longer courses, and nationally recognised qualifications
- analysis of various studies, including by the OECD and parliamentary select committees, evidences that there continues to be weak oversight and regulation of both the quality and duration of training in our apprenticeship system.

Writing in the foreword to the report, Kevin Rowan (Director of unionlearn), said that the research findings highlighted the need for “better and more effective policy levers to stop the decline in skills in the UK” The [TUC press release](#) set out a number of skills policy reforms that the TUC is calling for, including:

- A new lifelong learning account open to all adults that would incorporate fully funded entitlements to enable all adults to attain a minimum skills level and to access retraining opportunities
- A right to a mid-life skills/career review for workers and development of a high-quality skills/career advice service for all adults
- Reform of the right to request time to train so that it is changed to a new strengthened entitlement to paid time off for education and training.

Adult Participation in Learning Survey

The latest [annual adult learning survey](#) undertaken by the Learning and Work Institute was published last month. The annual survey is currently part-funded by the Department for Education and the latest survey was based on interviews undertaken at the end of 2018. The survey has been running since 1996 and draws on responses from a sample of 5,000 adults (aged 17+). The survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wider range of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The main measure of participation used is whether a person has engaged in any learning in the past three years. The latest survey highlights a decline in adult learning in line with trends from other research sources.

Some of the key findings are as follows:

- The 2018 data show the lowest participation rate since the survey began in 1996. Only 35% of adults said that they had engaged in any learning in the past three years
- The latest survey continues to highlight persistent inequalities in learning based on social class. Nearly half (48%) of all adults in the AB social grade had participated compared to a fifth in the DE social grade. In addition, the gap between these two groups

has widened by three percentage points since the last survey in 2017

- Those who left the formal education system at the earliest opportunity are also less likely to be engaged in adult learning. Only 18% of those who finished formal education at 16 or under had recently engaged in adult learning compared to 45% of those who remained in education until they were at least 21
- People in work are more likely to be engaged in learning - whether they are full-time (40%) or part-time (41%). In comparison, only 29% of unemployed people said they were current or recent learners. Forty-three per cent of all current and recent learners said their participation was work-related (e.g. a workplace training course)
- While the data exhibit a degree of regional differences, the authors conclude that “evidence that adults living in more deprived areas are less likely to be learning suggests that difference within regions are likely to far outweigh the differences between them.”
- The top five barriers to adult learning cited by respondents were: work/other time pressures (16%); not interested/don't want to (13%); feel too old (12%); caring commitments (11%); and, cost & affordability (10%).

The survey also asked a number of questions about upskilling and retraining to inform the ongoing development of the National Retraining Scheme. Based on these responses the authors make the following recommendations:

- There is a need to make more people aware of the need to develop new skills, especially those working in declining industries or jobs at risk of automation
- Those at risk need encouragement and support to consider jobs in other sectors – the survey shows that those at risk are currently more likely to look for similar work

in their current industry (46%) compared with 20% considering wider opportunities

- The National Retraining Scheme should disseminate available opportunities via online and off-line/face-to-face services. Based on the survey findings, the authors conclude that “while a growing proportion of adults (47%) have some experience of online learning, significant barriers still exist for some, particularly those with limited digital skills and access.”

Impact of unions on learning and skills

One encouraging finding in the new unionlearn research report on workplace training trends (see page 6) is the positive impact of unions. The study shows that the union ‘mark-up’ on training is holding up well, with training volumes averaging a 19 per cent higher level in unionised workplaces. Training participation rates also show a positive trend, with 37% of union members saying that they accessed training in the latest 3 months compared to 22% of non-union members.

Independent evaluations in recent years have tracked the impact of union learning, including how it transforms lives and strengthens the economy. A new unionlearn pamphlet – [Union learning in facts and figures](#) – brings together some of the key impacts, drawing on the data available for people engaging in Union Learning Fund (ULF) provision. Some of the key findings include:

- 70 per cent of all ULF learners (and 79% of those with no qualifications) say that they would not have engaged in the learning or training on offer without the support of their union
- more than two-thirds (68%) of learners with no previous qualification gained a first qualification through union learning

- out of all participants, 9 out of 10 gain at least one new skill, nearly two thirds gain a qualification, and 1 in 4 gain promotion or greater responsibility in their current job
- progression is an intrinsic feature of ULF provision, with two thirds of people taking part in more than one episode of learning and a third engaging four times or more
- over three-quarters (77%) of employers say that union learning has a positive effect in their workplaces and that their organisation receives a return on their investment in union learning projects
- each annual round of the ULF is adding £1.65 billion to the economy from a boost to jobs, wages and productivity
- there is also a very positive impact on union membership and organisation. Half of non-members engaging in the ULF learning or training subsequently go on to join a union and 28% of all ULF learners go on to take up a role as a union rep.