



ULR

ISSUE 29 **SUMMER 2021**

BUILDING ON THE LEGACY OF THE ULF

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FOREWORD

Kevin Rowan

Director of unionlearn

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 23 YEARS, we are working to support union learning without the financial backing of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), which the government closed at the end of March. This has presented us with a new set of challenges, particularly when union learning projects no longer have the funding they used to be able to call on to organise, promote and deliver both classroom and digital courses for their members.

But one thing unions still have access to is the network of union learning reps (ULRs). These are the activists without whom we would not have been able to build all the successful projects over the years that have engaged learners no one else could have reached or supported. And we will continue to support each and every one of them to the very best of our ability in the weeks and months and years ahead.

So, just as we do with all our other workplace reps, we want to prioritise systems and processes that will keep them informed about what's happening in the world of learning and skills; help them to continue to develop their knowledge base; and support them doing the best job they can in promoting the union learning agenda.

That's why we're maintaining the unionlearn website and the huge range of digital resources we have developed in recent years, from the union learning Climbing Frame (which has now been helping ULRs for more than 10 years) to tools like Create Your Own Future, which we only launched last year to help learners design their own career development journeys.

What's most important to get across to everyone is that the ULF may have ended but union learning is very much alive. And we're going to do everything we can to help it continue the vital work of supporting union learners moving forward. 🤝

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A close-up portrait of Frances O'Grady, a woman with short brown hair, smiling and looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a red cardigan over a dark blue top. The background is a light blue gradient.

NO LEARNING? NO RECOVERY!

To build a post-Covid recovery that benefits working people, we need a learning and skills strategy that builds on the achievements of the Union Learning Fund, says TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY

PHOTO JESS HURD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

Working women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic since they make up 69 per cent of low-earners © Christopher Furlong/Getty Images



WE NEED TO DEVELOP A NEW STRATEGY FOR UNION LEARNING to boost the post-Covid economy that builds on the legacy of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), says TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady.

"Learning and skills are critical to the challenges that we would have faced even without the pandemic, including the just transition to net zero carbon, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation," she says.

"But if economic recovery is going to work for working people, then it has to be about health, it has to be about safety, it has to be about equality, too – and union learning is at the heart of that," Frances says.

There's no underestimating the economic challenges that lie ahead. Gross domestic product (GDP) is still hovering around 8 per cent below pre-Covid levels, while 1.4 million more people have been claiming unemployment-related benefits since the virus took hold last year.

But the pandemic has not only disrupted economies across the world. It has also shone a pitiless light on the structural inequalities baked into our current system in this country.

The experience of Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities tells us all we need to know to build a fairer economy.

Most BME communities entered the pandemic at a significant financial disadvantage compared to white communities. Black Caribbean households, for example, have one-third of the savings and assets of their white British counterparts. And then more BME people lost income during the crisis – 32 per cent compared to 23 per cent of white people. Plus they accounted for a disproportionate number of severe Covid cases and deaths, with mortality rates between 2.5 and 4.3 times those of white groups.

Similar patterns of inequality have been faced by many other marginalised groups. Working women have been disproportionately affected since they make up 69 per cent of low-earners,

“WE’RE NOT ROBOTS, WE’RE HUMAN BEINGS, AND HUMAN BEINGS WANT TO LEARN AND DEVELOP, WHICH IS WHY WE NEED DECENT PAY PACKETS TOO SO THAT PEOPLE STOP GETTING STUCK IN LOW-PAID, SHORT-TERM JOBS.”

59 per cent of part-time freelancers, 54 per cent of temporary employees and 54 per cent of workers on zero-hours contracts – precisely the kind of jobs that have been worst affected. And they’ve generally been expected to take on the lion’s share of homeschooling the children in their households.

“The figures speak for themselves about who is missing out – if you’re from a BME background, if you’re a woman, if you’re young, you’re more likely to be on an insecure contract, which means you’re missing out on what I see as a basic human right to decent work – and the chance to train and develop is a critical part of what should be decent jobs,” Frances says.

“We’re not robots, we’re human beings, and human beings want to learn and develop, which is why we need decent pay packets too so that people stop getting stuck in low-paid, short-term jobs without the opportunity to get on the ladder of skills and training.”

Frances says that the new Skills and Post-16 Education Bill offers nothing like enough in terms of what’s needed now to support the economic recovery.

Instead of creating an expansive retraining programme to help all workers at risk of redundancy, the government has launched a new entitlement to a free Level 3 qualification for everyone who doesn’t already have an A Level equivalent.

This is unlikely to reach everyone who could benefit if the fall in take-up of the current free Level 2 offer is anything

to go by, with the 30 per cent drop in participation over the past 10 years underlining how cost is not the only barrier to learning.

In addition, the lifelong loan entitlement that could be used for Level 4 and 5 technical qualifications as well as degrees is not necessarily the best approach to widening participation at higher levels, either.

“Upskilling and retraining is vital to productivity but we won’t level up this country by saddling workers with lifelong debt, and many won’t be able to access the Lifetime Skills Guarantee because they already have a Level 3 qualification,” Frances points out.

And the government has just made achievement of its learning and skills aims that much harder by closing down the ULF just when working people most need access to its support.

“The government’s decision to cut funding was a massive mistake on their part but you can’t keep a good project down – union learning has a life beyond Westminster,” Frances says.

“We are going to continue and we’re going to carry on supporting our union learning reps to do the brilliant work they do getting workers into learning.”

Even though many unions have had to close learning projects because of the withdrawal of government funding, Frances believes that trade union mindset will always endure. “Whatever the government does with its funding announcements, you can’t kill that spirit, it will always be there,” she says.

Photos: Paul Herrmann, Rod Leon, Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk



Clockwise from top left: Frances visiting London bus company Metroline in 2002; speaking at the ULF conference in Manchester the same year; launching the TUC protocol with the Learning and Skills Council in 2005; partnering with Show Racism the Red Card in 2013; presenting Monika Paczkowska with the 2014 ULR Award; and celebrating the 2006 World Book Day with the then CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes (right).

"BETWEEN 2017 AND 2019, THE TOTAL VOLUME OF TRAINING DECLINED FROM 105 MILLION TO 99 MILLION DAYS."

New UNISON General Secretary Christina McAnea is a case in point. Christina made union learning a key plank of her election campaign. Now she has taken on the top job, she is already looking into setting up a new UNISON College to provide free and subsidised training to her members. And she told UNISON ULRs at an online event in March: "Just as trade unions provided education and training before the Union Learning Fund existed, I give you this commitment – we will continue to provide it after it's gone."

For Frances, Christina's commitment to learning is a reflection of her members' commitment to learning (more than 80 per cent of UNISON

members said they were ready to learn new skills and that learning was important to their self-esteem in the 2019 Skills for the Future survey).

"Christina is in touch with what her members are telling her and what potential members are telling her and signalling that she sees skills and education as absolutely critical to the future of working people, not just her union," she says.

One of the key problems faced by UK workers is the country's poor recent record on training in general.

Between 2017 and 2019, the total volume of training declined from 105 million to 99 million days, a loss of 6 million days in just two years, according to the latest Employer Skills Survey.

That's because fewer employers are offering off-the-job training, with the percentage sliding from 48 to 43 per cent over the same period.

The inevitable result is that an ever-increasing proportion of employees are going from one year to the next without getting any training at work – the percentage climbing from 38 per cent to 40 per cent.

Frances on a tour of the Mini factory in Cowley, Oxford with stewards and management
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Yet this is not about some sudden decline in the demand. The Learning and Work Institute's (LWI's) 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey showed that 43 per cent of adults embraced the opportunity to learn through lockdown, helped by the greater accessibility of online learning and the reduction in time pressures for workers freed from their daily commute.

But the devil is always in the details, and sunny headline figures can all too easily obscure what's going on in the shadows.

"We know that workers with fewer qualifications and those in lower-skilled or lower-paid roles were more likely to have been furloughed or to have lost their jobs," LWI says. "Despite facing a greater need to upskill and retrain to find work in the post-Covid economy, these workers are least likely to be accessing learning opportunities."

This is, of course, where ULRs have been stepping in for the past two decades and more, Frances points out.

"We know that the vast majority of people who go through union learning wouldn't have come close if it wasn't for the union," Frances points out. "And union learning has made a massive difference to their lives, their opportunities at work to get on, their self-confidence and their sense of themselves as people."

But the organisations where ULRs work also reap the benefits not only in improved staff morale but in the indicators that are important for the bottom line – productivity, performance, improved industrial relations, growth.

That much was clear from the employer response in the autumn when the government announced it was closing the ULF, Frances says.

"The scale of support from employers was also really striking because they recognise that this wouldn't be happening in their workplaces if it were not for the unions and the benefits of ULRs," she says.

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Developing a massive range of online learning resources has helped unions continue to help their members develop their skills throughout the pandemic
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“I FIND ULRs ARE AN ABSOLUTE INSPIRATION. AND WHAT I LOVE IS THAT SO MANY BECAME UNION LEARNING REPS BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN LEARNERS THEMSELVES.”

While this will be more challenging without the ULF, the development of online resources has created a library that ULRs and other reps supporting learning can continue to call on.

“Look at what we did with Learning@home for workers who were furloughed or facing unemployment this time last year: we were the first out of the blocks to make sure that workers got the opportunity to use that time to strengthen their skills and improve their prospects at work,” Frances says.

“So we’ve got these online resources, we’ve got webinars, we’ve got other digital material and soon hopefully we’ll have much more face-to-face support again so that ULRs can carry on trying to win for working people.”

While the TUC played a crucial role in designing and securing the government’s furlough scheme, the unions were also arguing a year ago that employers should be encouraged to help their staff use the time most productively.

“We argued that while workers were on furlough, their employers should offer training and upskilling that would be in everyone’s interests – it’s just common sense,” Frances says.

“The government chose not to introduce that element of conditionality on employers, which I think was a missed opportunity but, rather than moaning about that, our team got on

with providing those digital materials so that workers could help themselves. The trade union movement is full of very practical people – we roll up our sleeves and we set about sorting things out.”

The Learning@home and Skills and Recovery resources that remain available on the unionlearn site were developed because of the close connections between the trade union movement and its members, Frances says.

“We’re much closer to what workers are telling us so we can spot opportunities and trends and we also know when people are having sleepless nights worrying about redundancy and whether they’ll be next,” Frances says.

“These online resources were a way of actually holding people together, giving them practical support and the chance to brush up their skills – something all of us need and the only way we’re going to get out of the problems we face as a country because we need full employment to recover.”

One massive cause for optimism is the positivity of the thousands of ULRs Frances has met in workplaces up and down the country, as well as at countless learning-themed conferences and events.

“I find ULRs are an absolute inspiration. And what I love is that so many became union learning reps because they had been learners themselves,” she says.

Frances meets Usdaw's Lifelong Learning Project Worker Pam Stanton and her fellow reps at their Cardiff office
© Wales TUC



“WHAT’S IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW IS THAT THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT REMAINS A VITAL AGENT FOR CHANGE ON BEHALF OF WORKING PEOPLE, INCLUDING ON LEARNING AND SKILLS.”

“They want to give their fellow workers the opportunity they’ve had – and would only ever have had – through their union. They want to share it and spread it. What inspires me is that generosity of spirit, where people say, ‘I’ve been helped – now it’s my turn to help others’.”

What’s important right now is that the trade union movement remains a vital agent for change on behalf of working people, including on learning and skills.

“Things will change at some point and no doubt other governments of

the future will see what a good idea the Union Learning Fund has been – these things always change so, as Jack Jones used to say, we’ve got to keep on keeping on!” Frances says.

“We’re growing as a movement – it may be modest but nevertheless, we are growing – and we can grow so much faster, so much further, by making sure that learning is at the heart of our offer, because we know that’s what workers want.” 🍷

STANDING BY OUR UNION LEARNING REPS

The TUC will continue to support ULRs, not least through the suite of online resources and tools that have proved so popular with ULRs and learners alike, says Kevin Rowan.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTO MARK HARVEY/ID8 PHOTOGRAPHY



THE TUC WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THE VITAL WORK of union learning reps (ULRs), regardless of the

government's decision to close the Union Learning Fund (ULF), says Head of Organisation and Services (OSD) Kevin Rowan.

"We're going to do everything that we can to make sure that our ULRs have the knowledge, the skills and the confidence to be able to continue to support their members like they've done for the last 20 years, because the need hasn't gone away even though the government's stopped funding the programme," he says.

That support is going to focus on maintaining and developing unionlearn's impressive portfolio of digital resources, such as the SkillCheck assessments, Value My Skills online tool, Create Your Own Future and the Learning@home digital resource.

"Last year, we only received confirmation of the ULF grant for 2020/21 on the evening of 30 March and the next day – the next day! – we launched our online suite of resources Learning@home," he recalls.

"Within three months, we had something like 10,000 learners using those materials and that's grown exponentially



Kevin Rowan has been working on the union learning agenda since his days as TUC Northern Regional Secretary, a job he started in 2002
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"WE'RE GOING TO DO EVERYTHING THAT WE CAN TO MAKE SURE THAT OUR ULRs HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE, THE SKILLS AND THE CONFIDENCE TO BE ABLE TO CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THEIR MEMBERS."

throughout the year, so we know that works and whatever normality looks like in the future, there'll continue to be a huge demand for that kind of digital learning, so we need to maintain and develop those resources."

The level of the take-up of this new digital offer was proof of how far the ULF has changed the world of adult learning over the past 23 years, says Kevin, who was director of unionlearn for the past four years before having to restructure due to the loss of ULF and locating support for union

learning in the TUC's Stronger Unions team.

"We used to talk about learning and skills in terms of negotiating with employers and trying to influence government policy on everything from apprenticeships to continuous professional development (CPD)," says Kevin.

"What the ULF introduced was a very practical approach based on the trade union principle of collective support for your peers, which has successfully legitimised trade unionism as a really effective lever on learning and skills."

UNISON
reps and
members
enjoying at
a Get Active
event in
Bristol ©
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At the heart of this practical approach were the ULRs who were trained to support their co-workers into accessing the ever-increasing number of opportunities they were able to organise with the help of ULF funding.

"There is no other part of the union infrastructure that can boast 46,000 new activists in the last 20 years – nothing as systemic, as consistent and as sustainable, in my view, as the network of union learning reps that are still doing a fantastic job for us in workplaces," he says.

And union learning has also supported union organising, Kevin points out. Those thousands

"THERE IS NO OTHER PART OF THE UNION INFRASTRUCTURE THAT CAN BOAST 46,000 NEW ACTIVISTS IN THE LAST 20 YEARS."

of ULRs between them supported 3.2 million learners over the past two decades, and many of those learners took out union cards as a result.

"Of the millions of learners that they've reached, we know that more than half who weren't in unions before are now union members, so whichever way you look at it, it's a phenomenal success," he says.

One of the key factors behind the long-term success of union learning was the way ULRs and other union reps worked together to create the kind of inclusive and supportive environments that were new to vast numbers of their learners.

"We created a process that allowed people who – for whatever reason – were unable to succeed at school and were hiding their lack of skills from

“THE ULF HELPED GIVE UNIONS A NEW CONFIDENCE BECAUSE WE COULD GO TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE WITH AN OFFER AS WELL AS OUR CHALLENGES AND DEMANDS.”

their employers, their family and their friends to find a way to address those challenges and improve their maths, improve their literacy, get to grips with digital skills,” Kevin points out.

“These are the absolutely critical baseline building blocks to progress at work and in life and that is something we should all be incredibly proud of.”

And no other organisation could do this, he points out.

“To give people who struggled with reading, who struggled with maths, a route to deal with those problems and the space where they have the confidence and the support to deal with those issues themselves – no one else does that with workers, no one,” he says.

“And the fact that those individuals then go on to do a qualification and go on to get promotion and better pay and more sustainable employment is fantastic – that’s the kind of icing on the cake.”

And engaging with thousands of employers on learning has opened doors for some unions and

strengthened workplace partnerships for others.

“The ULF helped give unions a new confidence because we could go to the negotiating table with an offer as well as our challenges and demands – we had something to bring to the equation that delivers very practical benefits for the employer as well as for the members that we’re representing,” he says.

“In some respects, union-led learning has changed the nature of the relationship between trade unions and employers – some employers now openly say that they see unions as part of the solution, so it’s changed our industrial relations environment and made it much more positive.”

That much was clear when Kevin was in an online meeting last October with Enginuity (the successor organisation to SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies), Cogent Skills (the successor to the SSC for the science industries),

the British Ceramic Confederation and several manufacturers.

“This was only a couple of days after we received the correspondence from the Department for Education (DfE) indicating the government would be closing the ULF,” he recalls.

“The reaction on the call was like I had told them a close colleague had passed on and they literally couldn’t wait to ask, ‘How can we help?’.”

And they did all rally round, of course. While the government pursued its lonely course of action, a whole host of organisations joined the campaign to save the ULF based on their own experience of its effectiveness in reaching and supporting adult learners, including Enginuity, Cogent Skills and the British Ceramic Confederation who had all been on the October call, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and the Learning and Work Institute (LWI), as well as major employers including

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“IN 2019–20, THE ULF DELIVERED CLOSE TO £1.5BN IN BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS AND INDIVIDUALS AND ESTIMATED THAT EVERY £1 INVESTED IN THE FUND RETURNED £3.60 TO THE TREASURY.”

Tesco, Heathrow Airport, Tata Steel, and Hinkley Point C.

Kevin is keen to point out that the government’s decision was not based on the data. The most recent independent evaluation of the ULF by the University of Exeter showed that in the 2019–20 financial year, the ULF delivered close to £1.5bn in benefits to employers and individuals and estimated that every £1 invested in the fund returned £3.60 to the Treasury.

“Back in 2019, we had the Skills Minister Ann Milton coming to our conference and writing to us saying, ‘This is all great, let’s move to a rolling three-year settlement,” Kevin recalls.

“And then a year later, we have a new Secretary of State saying, ‘We’re not supporting this’ and nothing has changed except the politics.”

The timing could not have been worse in the middle of a pandemic, when hundreds of thousands of workers need all the help they can get to gain the skills they’ll need to secure new work.

But even as it was, the money available to unions through the ULF could never have filled the gaps left by government and employer under-investment in skills down the years.

The government has halved the budget for adults attending college over the past decade and, unsurprisingly, there are now 3 million fewer adults going to college compared with 15 years ago.

And while the government is currently boasting about investing around £500m a year in the new National Skills Fund, the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) has calculated that this will only reverse 20 per cent of the cuts it’s made to the adult education and skills budgets in the past 10 years.

And the problem does not only lie with government. Since the mid-1990s, the total volume of employer-led training for workers has tumbled by a massive 60 per cent, with the lower-qualified and young adults hardest hit in recent years.

“If learning and skills were important before, they’re even more important now,” Kevin points out. “Even before the pandemic, we were at the lowest levels of participation in learning and skills, the lowest levels of government investment, the lowest levels of employer investment.”

Long before Kevin became director of unionlearn, he had been closely involved with the development of the union learning agenda.

When he took over as TUC Northern Regional Secretary in 2002, the region had already launched its own Learning For All Fund (LFAF) to support union-led learning in the region, committing £500,000 in its first year alone to workplace learning projects with the help of the four Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in the region.

In fact, the region was working so closely with the LSCs that, on his very first day in his new job, Kevin had a meeting with the Tyne & Wear LSC, to talk about the Equal funding programme

Photos: Stan Gamester, Tim McGuinness/NCJ, Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk



Top row, from left: Kevin addressing a Skills for Life conference as Northern Regional Secretary; with then Trade Minister Sir Ian McCartney at the Northern TUC International Conference in 2007; and at work in his office.



Bottom row, from left: addressing a rally in support of the 2014 national teachers' strike; presenting PCS union learning rep Ashraf Haji with his award at the 2017 unionlearn conference; and addressing participants at the same event.

"EVERY TIME YOU MEET A UNION OFFICER OR A UNION REP OR A LEARNER, THEY'VE GOT A STORY TO TELL YOU."

that had recently been launched by the European Social Fund (ESF).

"I went to see a guy called Chris Roberts to talk about the role that unions play in learning," Kevin recalls. "And I walked away with essentially two staff positions in my back pocket resourced by the Tyne & Wear Learning and Skills Council!"

Learning and skills would in fact become so central to the regional union agenda that at one point during Kevin's 10 years in office, of the 28 staff in the region,

24 were working on promoting and supporting workplace learning in one way or another.

But today, what Kevin wants everyone to hold on to are all the success stories – what learners have been able to achieve and the progress their unions have been able to make by embracing this agenda.

"Every time you meet a union officer or a union rep or a learner, they've got a story to tell you about how much they value and appreciate the journey that they've been through," he says.

"That could be the union officer who gets to tell you about securing a new learning centre or a new learning agreement. Or the learning rep who will tell you the story of someone who's written a poem or read a book for the first time. And then you get to meet the learners, and when they tell you their story it's just incredible." ü

It's vital that we continue to celebrate all the progress that union learning and union learners will continue to make in the months and years ahead, he says.

"It was an incredible experience as director of unionlearn to think that you've contributed to these outcomes – it's incredibly rewarding. And that's what we've got to try not to lose." 🍀

SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNING

The portfolio of online resources produced during the pandemic remain as relevant as ever, says Ian Borkett.

I'M REALLY PROUD OF ALL THE RESOURCES WE PRODUCED

LAST YEAR as part of Learning@home and Skills and Recovery – the bite-sized e-learning modules, the webinars, the online workshops and the new tools we produced like Create Your Own Future.

The pace of change and innovation to respond to the pandemic was absolutely amazing, moving the unionlearn learning offer online and developing even more new, exciting, innovative tools and assets.

It was a testament to the quality, talent and professionalism of unionlearn colleagues who had the foresight and the vision to see that Covid-19 wasn't going to be a blip. We were looking at some longer-term structural changes that required new solutions and new ways of thinking.

I think it shows the trade union movement at its best that during these difficult times, we came up with some fantastic



solutions and support to help those workers who are most in need.

Losing government funding is a tragedy but one of the beacons of light is the legacy that we are able to leave for union learning reps and other reps involved in promoting learning at work with the vast repertoire of high-quality learning assets that they can still access for free from the unionlearn website.

That will help them continue their valuable and much-needed work in supporting learners, giving them that second chance to get on in their careers.

My message to ULRs and other union reps promoting learning is to continue the really

“MY MESSAGE TO ULRs AND OTHER UNION REPS PROMOTING LEARNING IS TO CONTINUE THE REALLY FANTASTIC WORK THEY'RE DOING, SUPPORTING SOME OF THE MOST VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS.”

fantastic work they're doing, supporting some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. There's plenty of independent evidence that shows the tremendous impact ULRs have, helping workers to get on at work. So all I would say is, continue with the fantastic work you're doing in workplaces across the country.

Unionlearn launched the Learning@home suite of online resources within weeks of the first national lockdown, enabling union members to continue developing their skills while classroom courses had to be cancelled

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Learning@home

The Covid-19 pandemic is having far-reaching effects on all aspects of our lives, including learning and skills development.

Online learning, whether at home or on the move, is here to stay. So, we have pulled together a range of our resources, with webinars, advice and support information and much more onto one page to help you with the skills you need.

“IT’S BEEN AN ABSOLUTE PRIVILEGE TO HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK IN UNION EDUCATION AND UNION LEARNING.”

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Learning at Home with your children

Welcome to the Learning at Home with your *children* pages, on these pages we provide links to some excellent resources not only to enable your children to continue learning but also to give you the skills you need to provide support.

It’s been an absolute privilege to have had the opportunity to work in union education and union learning. You see people coming into a learning centre or a workshop maybe 20 years since they were at school and they’re feeling anxious and apprehensive. Then by the end of the session, you can see they have the confidence to fulfil their potential, to really get on in life and in their career – there is no better feeling than that: I wouldn’t change it for the world. 🧡

Ian was part of the unionlearn team since it launched 14 years ago and had previously worked in TUC Education

HELPING LEARNERS MOVE ON UP

The union learning Climbing Frame provides reliable information about a huge range of learning themes to help ULRs draw up action plans that suit their learners, says Louisa Smith.

LOUISA SMITH WAS INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNION LEARNING CLIMBING FRAME from the start – even with the original offline version. But it was in 2009 that we started working with Prospect, PCS and Usdaw on the development of the website.

We started developing the Climbing Frame because we wanted to design something of real use for ULRs that would support them in their role. We did a lot of research and collected a great deal of feedback from people to make sure we made it the best it could be.

After a number of trials across the country, the website officially went live at the unionlearn annual conference in 2010.

The website has always had two main sections. The Learning Themes provide up-to-date information to help during discussions with learners and to help update ULRs



knowledge with regards to new topics, resources and learning opportunities. And the Learner Management area is where ULRs can keep a record of their sessions with learners; develop action plans; work with them to identify their goals; and record their achievements as they progress.

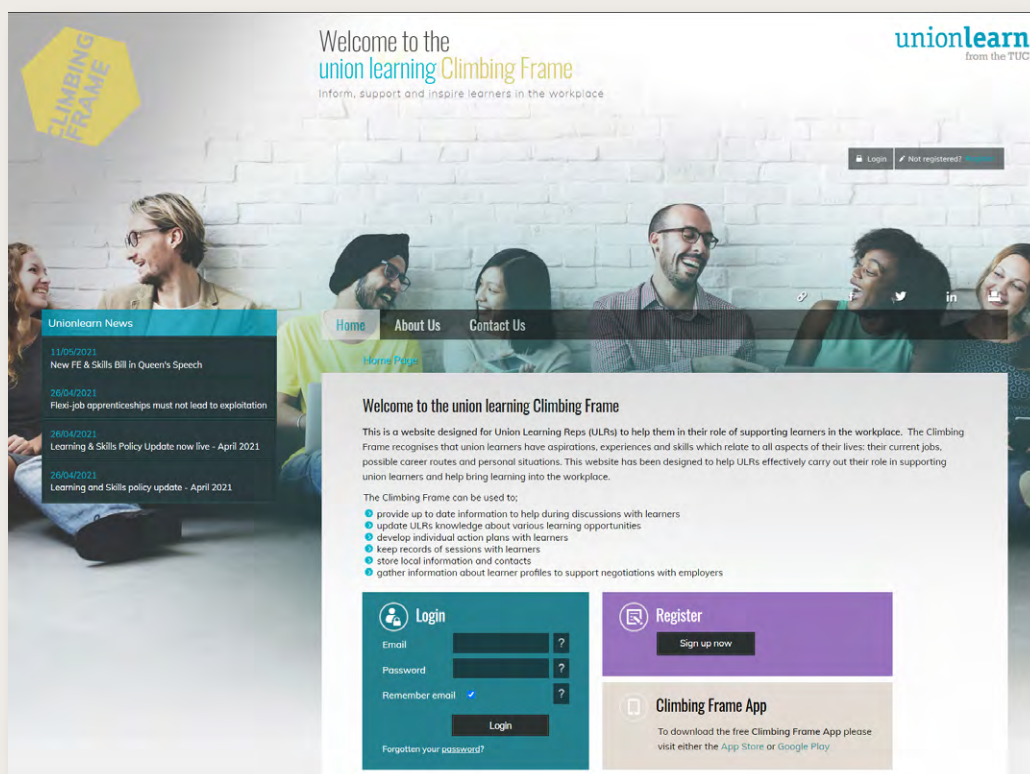
Along with the unionlearn Learning Themes available to all users, there is a range of Learning Themes that has been developed specifically for those in the health sector (produced collaboratively with the health sector unions) and the retail union Usdaw has always had a Learning Theme specifically for its members.

We've carried on collecting feedback with a survey every year where users could let us know what they like and what they don't like and suggest ideas for changes, which is why we've added lots of different resources and sections over the years to make it really useful for users. That's why we developed the app in 2013, so ULRs could use it when they're out and about, and we gave the website a new look and new logo in 2018.

We've always tried to update it and keep it

"WE'VE CARRIED ON COLLECTING FEEDBACK WITH A SURVEY EVERY YEAR WHERE USERS COULD LET US KNOW WHAT THEY LIKE AND WHAT THEY DON'T LIKE AND SUGGEST IDEAS FOR CHANGES."

Ever since the launch of the union learning Climbing Frame in 2010, unionlearn has revised and expanded the resource in response to feedback from ULRs



fresh, which is why last year we added a learning theme dedicated to Learning@home and another one dedicated to mental health, with lots of resources in there, and we've updated it to include all the new Skills and Recovery resources from unionlearn too.

Last year, we celebrated 10 years and it's still doing well – even after all this time, it's still supported by so many ULRs from different unions and different sectors.

Even though the ULF has been closed, I know union learning reps will want to carry on supporting learners

“ULRs WORK SO HARD AND MANY OF THEM DO A LOT OF WORK IN THEIR OWN TIME AS WELL. THEY'RE JUST AMAZING.”

because that's the kind of people they are, so I hope they continue to make use of the Climbing Frame. ULRs work so hard and many of them do a lot of work in their own time as well. They're just amazing, so hopefully they will continue what they've been doing and their unions will be there to support them, too. 🧡

Louisa Smith started work for TUC Learning Services in 2001 before joining the unionlearn team when it was launched in 2006.

TELLING THE STORIES THAT SHOW WHAT WE DO

Sometimes there's nothing better than a case study to illustrate the power of union learning, says Keith Hatch.

THE MASSIVE DATABASE OF CASE STUDIES ON THE UNIONLEARN WEBSITE show what union

learning does and how it's supported a massive range of different people across different regions, different workplaces and in different areas of skills development..

We have been knocking out more than 100 case studies a year, so there really is something for everybody.

The one problem I've had is we want to show what union learning reps and union members are doing is really positive but they just see it as really normal! A lot of people have got fantastically good stories to tell even though they don't think they're doing anything exceptional.

Case studies can really show what union learning can do, how unions are about much more than just pay and conditions – we're about supporting working people to get the best in everything.



We've got examples of people with no qualifications and after they've done a couple of basic English and maths courses have moved on and developed themselves further and have ended up getting degrees – something that would never have happened without union support.

Case studies can also inspire people who haven't yet got involved. That's why, as well as the in-depth high-end case studies of a fantastic piece of work, it's really nice to have those bread-and-butter case studies where there's a ULR on the ground setting up an English course. They're just as important because someone can

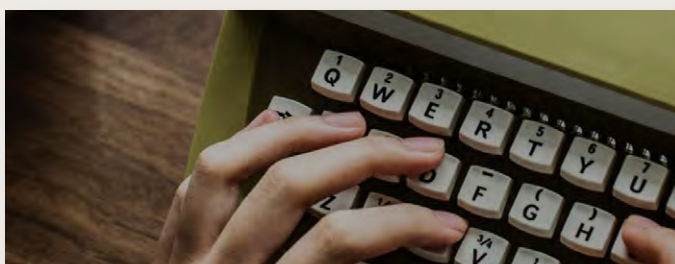
“CASE STUDIES CAN REALLY SHOW WHAT UNION LEARNING CAN DO, HOW UNIONS ARE ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN JUST PAY AND CONDITIONS.”

see those stories and say to themselves, 'I could do that, it's worth doing and it will make a difference'.

The whole point is telling people's stories and what I've found really interesting is the way working people support each other and help each other get on – union learning brings out the best in people and it's only the individual stories that really gets that across.

My message to ULRs and other union reps

Case studies use workplace stories to illustrate how unions are dedicated to helping working people get on at work, as well as secure decent pay and conditions



RESOURCES > CASE STUDIES

Case studies

Browse and search through our *case studies* below.

Filter options

APPLY RESET

Changing the Fire Service for the better

10 February 2021

The FBU's Lifelong Learning Project has led the development of a new culture within the Fire Service, one that helps firefighters support each other through the mental health challenges that come with the territory.

Unions: FIRE BRIGADES' UNION (FBU)

Tags: ADULT & COMMUNITY LEARNING APPRENTICESHIPS DIGITAL LEARNING (ICT) HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SUPPORTING LEARNERS

"UNION LEARNING BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN PEOPLE AND IT'S ONLY THE INDIVIDUAL STORIES THAT REALLY GETS THAT ACROSS."

promoting learning is to keep making use of all the resources that will still be online. And although there won't be as much support available as there used to be, if you're keen to support your members, there will still be people around who will be happy to help you. 🌱

Keith started work with South West TUC on the Green Workplaces Project in 2009 before joining the regional unionlearn team in 2010 and the national team in 2015.

Changing the Fire Service for the better

10 February 2021

The FBU's Lifelong Learning Project has led the development of a new culture within the Fire Service, one that helps firefighters support each other through the mental health challenges that come with the territory.



Every time a firefighter answers an emergency call, they have to be prepared for the worst. It may turn out to be a false alarm or a small-scale incident that only makes the local news. It may turn into a national tragedy like the Grenfell fire. But the threat to life and limb – for the public involved and for the firefighters themselves – hangs over every emergency and any firefighter can find themselves battling with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a harrowing incident.

But up until comparatively recently, when firefighters were struggling with the stress and trauma that come with the job, the standard response was usually to help them drown their sorrows, says Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Lifelong Learning Project Manager **Mark Dunne**.

Mark said:

“The culture of the Fire Service was that if you were having a hard time, or if you've got all the stresses and worries that everyone else is going through in their life, the answer would be, 'Let's go for a pint.'”

But looking for answers to mental health challenges in the bottom of a glass is a short-term solution at best that can lead to greater isolation and, however well-intentioned, isn't a genuinely inclusive approach to peer support.

And that's not to mention the health issues around alcohol misuse both for individuals and for the health service. Problem drinking is the biggest risk factor for early death, ill health and disability for those aged 15 to 49 years, while government estimates indicate alcohol-related harm costs the economy £2bn a year.

But there's been a substantial shift in the way firefighters support each other in recent years, Mark says. And that's down to the FBU Union Learning Fund (ULF) project's focus on mental health, which has led to its mental health awareness course being its most popular offering every year for the past eight years.

OPENING UP APPRENTICESHIPS TO EVERYONE

No one else could have produced the set of guides we did to supporting people from under-represented groups on apprenticeships, says Kirsi Kekki.

THINK THE GUIDES WE PRODUCED TO HELP ULRs support people from under-represented groups on apprenticeships are both unique and very useful.

There are other organisations that touch on these issues but not from the point of view of how these different groups are supported at work by unions. That was a point made to us by external organisations, particularly when we published the LGBT+ guide.

So these are resources that don't exist anywhere else. And they are not just useful for ULRs: to be honest, I think it would be very helpful for managers to read the guides, as well!

It didn't start as a series of guides, it evolved quite organically. We started with *Accessible*



Apprenticeships, which we produced around the time of the Paul Maynard taskforce, which the government launched in 2016 to look at Improving access to apprenticeships for people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Once we'd produced that guide, the series began to evolve because we recognised there are other under-represented or disadvantaged groups that union learning reps and other union reps can support to widen participation. So we moved on to produce *Supporting Black and Minority Ethnic Apprentices*, *Tackling Apprenticeship Gender Inequality* and *LGBT+ Inclusive Apprenticeships*.

Although we have produced resources to help ULRs support young people on traineeships, for example, we haven't produced a lot of material aimed at supporting young people so, when ULRs have asked for material, these guides have proved useful.

They all make the case for widening participation in apprenticeships, on the basis that it benefits the workplace, the union and the apprentices themselves – and they make that case in clear, simple wording that hopefully encourages

“THEY ARE NOT JUST USEFUL FOR ULRs: TO BE HONEST, I THINK IT WOULD BE VERY HELPFUL FOR MANAGERS TO READ THE GUIDES, AS WELL!”

The four apprenticeships guides all make the case for widening participation because it benefits the workplace, the union and the apprentices themselves

Accessible Apprenticeships

A TUC guide for trade union activists on bargaining for accessible Apprenticeships for disabled workers



unionlearn
from the TUC

"ONE OF THE REASONS THAT I'M VERY HAPPY ABOUT THE GUIDES IS THAT THEY WERE ALL PRODUCED COLLABORATIVELY WITH THE POLICY OFFICERS."

union reps to think, 'This is something I'd like to do'.

Finally, one of the reasons that I'm very happy about the guides is that they were all produced collaboratively with the policy officers at the TUC who have oversight of these policy areas. Also, quite a few unions were involved in

each of them because we asked them to contribute case studies and stories and feedback. And I learned a lot myself through developing these guides: I can't claim to be a policy expert in these areas, I learned from working with everyone. 🍷

Introduction

Disabled people are disabled by the barriers they face every day. These barriers may be environmental, societal, or attitudinal. We call this the social model of disability.



The social model of disability

The diagram below explains the medical model in the social model. It explains why the TUC advocates for the social model, where disabled people themselves can determine the adjustments they need in order to work and lead independent and autonomous lives. The social model sees the person first and identifies the barriers that can make it impossible or very difficult for disabled people to access jobs, buildings or services. Removing the barriers is the best way to include millions of disabled people in our society.



At the heart of this guide is the social model of disability and how union representatives/officers can use it to address the barriers disabled people face when accessing Apprenticeship opportunities.

The medical model of disability	The social model of disability
- Needs and wants to be CARED - Can make LITTLE OR NO CONTRIBUTION at work - Has SOMETHING WRONG with his/her - The DIFFERENCE is the problem - Should be AT HOME or IN A HOME	- Needs and wants to BE ACCEPTED - Can make a SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION at work - Has SOMETHING DIFFERENT with respect to the equipment if necessary - THE DIFFERENCE and DIFFERENCES are the main problems - Can be INVOLVED in society at work and otherwise

GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDY

Helping disabled apprentices progress into full-time work

As a young man with autism, David Herbert faced some significant challenges during his Advanced Mechanical Engineering Apprenticeship at the Sellafield nuclear power plant in Cumbria.

The kind of communication problems that are common among people on the spectrum sometimes led to conflict when David and his co-workers misunderstood each other, while his greater dependence on his parents (another common characteristic) made his transition from school to work a bumpy ride for many of his peers.

But the quality of his work was never in doubt: he won a company award recognising his

contribution in and outside work, and was a finalist in the Apprentice of the year category at the local Chamber of Commerce Excellence in Cumbria awards. However, after he completed his Apprenticeship, the transport department where he was first placed did not have a full-time position available, so the company asked Carl (another name, who is the disability lead on the CMBE national equality forum, as well as the company's disability, equality and welfare adviser) to help find an alternative place for David to progress in the business. Since Carl had supported people with autism before and had a nephew who is autistic, he knew it would be important to get to know David himself and learn about the barriers he himself faced in the workplace.



Kirsi worked on union learning projects for financial services union Unifi (now part of Unite) and telecoms union Connect (now part of Prospect) before joining the unionlearn team in 2009.

TACKLING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

ULRs can access a wide range of online resources to help co-workers improve their digital skills, says Andy Moss.

DIGITAL SKILLS HAVE BEEN BECOMING MORE AND MORE IMPORTANT in people's home lives and work lives. But while people are being expected to do more work digitally, not all of them are necessarily being supported with that.

That's why we've been paying more attention to digital exclusion in recent years – and our experience of the pandemic has only highlighted even more how vital it is to tackle it.

When many employers made that major shift to homeworking as a result of the pandemic, we'd already produced a lot of resources people could call on when looking to



access learning and job opportunities from home.

Working To Close The Digital Divide, which we produced in 2019, contains a lot that is still pretty useful.

And *Promoting Union Learning: a handbook for ULRs and reps*, which we published last year, included a lot of coverage of digital skills – there was much more to say than there had been in the previous edition.

And as part of the Skills and Recovery work we did last year, some of the learning we put together covered looking for work and applying for jobs in a digital environment, creating a digital CV and preparing for online job interviews.

We have also updated the Digital Skills Learning Theme on the Climbing Frame and the digital skills section on the unionlearn website, with all the signposting to different organisations and different courses so people can access learning to improve their digital skills.

We now have three SkillChecks on digital skills – the latest was the online safety assessment we did last year.

Of course, unionlearn by itself could never solve all the challenges of data poverty or lack of connectivity or the cost of the equipment.

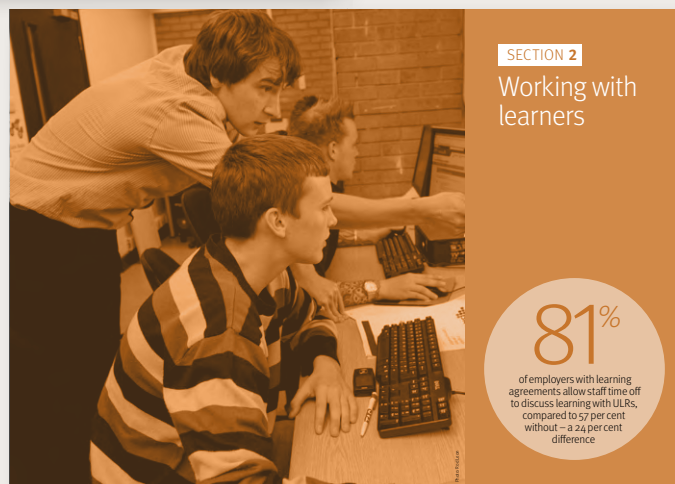
But we have been able to talk about these issues and make the case that everyone should have the opportunity to benefit from the online world.

“WE’VE BEEN PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO DIGITAL EXCLUSION IN RECENT YEARS – AND OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE PANDEMIC HAS ONLY HIGHLIGHTED EVEN MORE HOW VITAL IT IS TO TACKLE IT!”

The new edition of *Promoting Union Learning* published last year included much more coverage of digital skills than the previous edition



“WE’VE BEEN ABLE TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO IMPROVE THEIR DIGITAL SKILLS AND FEEL MORE CONFIDENT ABOUT WHERE TO GO TO GET MORE SUPPORT AND INFORMATION.”



And we’ve been able to encourage people to improve their digital skills and feel more confident about where to go to get more support and information or try courses – these are all really important ways of making people more included. 🍷

Andy Moss began working for TUC Learning Services in the South West in 2003, and took on regional roles in TUC Education, the Green Workplaces Project and an apprenticeships project, before joining the national unionlearn team in 2016.

HELPING OLDER WORKERS VALUE THEIR SKILLS

We still have a wide range of resources ULRs can use to help older workers identify and develop their skills, says Jane Warwick.

WE WERE ALREADY SUPPORTING OLDER WORKERS in various different ways when what was then NIACE (now Learning & Work Institute, LWI) secured some government funding for a feasibility study on mid-life career reviews in 2013.

We were one of 14 partners on the project, which had a target of completing 2,500 mid-life career reviews – we completed 770 of them just by ourselves. That project was just such a success that we carried on, which was why we were able to develop all the tools ULRs are familiar with now.

That's where we started using the Value My Skills cards but not as you would recognise them now. We would print them out on paper or



cardboard and I would sit for ages chopping them up with a guillotine! But once we started getting the packs of cards printed, they became the most requested resource unionlearn has had – we've had numerous reprints.

And they're not just used by mid-life and older workers because none of the resources we've developed are age-specific – they've helped younger and older apprentices review the skills they have, as well. People just love the way the cards encourage discussion.

"WE WOULD PRINT THEM OUT ON PAPER OR CARDBOARD AND I WOULD SIT FOR AGES CHOPPING THEM UP WITH A GUILLOTINE!"

Then we were lucky to secure funding from the European Union's ERASMUS+ Programme in 2017 to run the Mid-Life Skills Review Project with seven other partners from across Europe. That helped us create the online version of Value My Skills, which is now available in 10 European languages.

So that's undergone the biggest transformation and it just constantly evolves: the new Create Your Own Future career development tool contains a shortened version of Value My Skills.

There are lots of resources to support this agenda. *Valuing The Skills Of Older Workers* contains everything you need to do a mid-life development review.

Unionlearn has developed a wide range of resources supporting mid-life and older workers in the past eight years, including the career development tool Create Your Own Future, launched in 2020



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Create Your Own Future

Create Your Own Future is a new tool that has been built around a programme of support to help users prepare for future careers.



Getting Active is a resource pack to help people engage and kickstart conversations in the workplace. There's four mini-guides – health and wellbeing, mental health, pensions and finance and support for carers. Smart Choices: Supporting older workers, which we launched last March, is designed to help union officers and reps in England raise awareness of how workplaces can provide better support and opportunities for older workers.

While I've been working for unionlearn, I've met so many people who have got through to mid-life and then decided to

improve their literacy and numeracy skills or start an apprenticeship to change career because their ULR has said, or someone from unionlearn has said, 'This is something you can do'. And then you see them go from strength to strength, changing their jobs and changing their lives, because of deciding to take that step with their ULR – it's been so rewarding. 🌱

Jane Warwick worked for the TUC for 24 years, beginning in TUC Education and moving on to TUC Learning Services before joining the unionlearn team.




Valuing the skills of older workers

How to do a mid-life development review

A practical guide for union reps

CHANGING THE FACE OF ADULT LEARNING

The Union Learning Fund may have been closed down but its legacy will live on because it has been genuinely transformational. It's helped learners change their lives for the better and companies boost their bottom line. And it has transformed the way the trade union movement thinks about learning and skills.

STORY MARTIN MORIARTY PHOTO JESS HURD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK



ONLY AS RECENTLY AS THE LATE 1990s, WORKERS WHO WANTED TO DEVELOP non-vocational skills basically had two options. They could travel by themselves to a further education (FE) college after work. Or they could take a distance learning course with The Open University (OU) – again, almost always by themselves.

Neither model was not without its problems. To enrol on an FE course meant having the time, the resources and the domestic support to do that – and the confidence to be able to walk through the doors of your local college without being triggered by negative experiences from school.

And while the OU had – and has – a brilliant track record supporting union learners, many of its students at the time tended to be people who were already prepared for studying at a higher level, rather than workers looking to improve their English or maths.

The ULF transformed that adult learning landscape. First, it helped train thousands of union learning reps (ULRs) to encourage their co-workers to take up a huge range of new opportunities to improve or upgrade their functional skills. And those ULRs were central to developing new collective learning models, nurturing small groups whose members could support each other on their learning journeys.

Second, the Fund helped bring those opportunities to the workers in their workplaces by investing in onsite learning centres and funding FE tutors to run sessions at times that suited the learners – before their shifts, after their shifts, in their lunch breaks or early evenings.

Back in 1998, the Labour government's decision to launch the ULF and the TUC's decision to create what was then TUC Learning Services were both rooted in the achievements of initiatives like Workbase Training and Bargaining for Skills.

Workbase Training emerged from the Basic Skills Project launched in 1978 by UNISON forerunner NUPE, which was the first programme to help London public sector workers improve their English and maths.

One of the prime movers behind the project was the London Division Area Organiser Jim Cornelius, who realised something had to be done when he found out that one of his stewards could not read or write. And what really highlighted the inequalities in educational opportunity at the time was that the steward concerned worked for the University of London.

Later expanded to help members of COHSE (another UNISON predecessor), the GMB and TGWU (now Unite), the programme went on to train tens of thousands of mainly low-paid union members between 1980 and 2015.

The Workbase approach to English and maths learning as a collective right rather than an individual failing also fundamentally shaped the model adopted first by TUC Learning Services and later by unionlearn.

It also developed a delivery model that took advantage of the rapport between union reps and their members to gain the confidence of potential learners. It used confidential one-to-ones between reps and learners to create personalised Training Needs Analyses (TNAs) that would guide their development. And it

“THE ULF HELPED TRAIN THOUSANDS OF UNION LEARNING REPS TO ENCOURAGE THEIR CO-WORKERS TO TAKE UP A HUGE RANGE OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES.”

Unionlearn's first director, Liz Smith, presenting the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, with his Skills for Life Advocate award in 2006
© Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk



“MANAGEMENT ORIGINALLY BUDGETED FOR 5 PER CENT OF THE WORKFORCE SIGNING UP FOR THE PROGRAMME, WHICH OFFERED £200 GRANTS TO WORKERS TO FUND NON-VOCATIONAL TRAINING ONSITE OUTSIDE THEIR HOURS OF WORK.”

placed a premium on organising events to celebrate learners’ successes.

All these elements would later become embedded in every successful ULF project – testament to the inspired leadership of Frances Graham, the South African political exile who was at the helm of Workbase throughout its existence, and whose death in 2017 left a huge gap in the world of lifelong learning.

But Workbase wasn’t the only NUPE initiative to influence the development of workplace learning. The union also launched its Return to Learn programme in 1988, closely followed by Women’s Lives. Both programmes were designed to help members develop their study skills by working in a small group over a number of weeks with a tutor from the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) – and both remain popular with UNISON members to this day.

Nor was union learning restricted to the public sector. Unions at Ford Dagenham had helped create the Employee Development and Assistance

Programme (EDAP) as part of the 1988 annual pay negotiations and it had been thriving ever since. Management originally budgeted for 5 per cent of the workforce signing up for the programme, which offered £200 grants to workers to fund non-vocational training onsite outside their hours of work. They soon had to adjust their spreadsheets, as more than 33 per cent signed up in the first six months.

Bargaining for Skills was a set of regional TUC projects that began to develop a more systematic approach to union learning by building successful partnerships with local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in the mid-1990s.

The TECs were the local employer-led bodies that had taken over responsibility for a range of training programmes in 1991 after the abolition of the old Manpower Services Commission (MSC) three years earlier.

But in order to hit government targets on Modern Apprenticeships, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and

Investors in People (IIP), the more enlightened TECs began to recognise they would need help to engage the learners HR departments couldn't reach.

To the ideologically open-minded, unions would be the natural collaborators in this endeavour. They had the workplace networks in place, of course. And several of them had already proved they could engage their members in the kind of non-vocational skills development that both the regional TUCs and the TECs were interested in developing.

It was the successes of the various Bargaining for Skills projects throughout the country that alerted policy-makers to the untapped potential of the trade union movement in generating demand for adult learning and engaging hard-to-reach learners in the later 1990s.

"The active involvement of trade unions will assist in legitimising the purposes and processes of workplace learning in the eyes of their members, facilitating take-up of learning and the development of learning partnerships at work," wrote Bob Fryer – one of the doyens of the education sector – in his agenda-setting 1997 report *Learning for the 21st Century*.

"They can be particularly useful in stimulating the motivation to learn among those in their membership in order to increase demand and encourage individuals to take ownership of their own lifelong learning for personal growth, the acquisition of new skills and continuing career development."

It was clear-sighted analysis like this that made his death only six months ago such an enormous loss to lifelong learning.

And Bob was right. The ability of ULRs to stimulate their members' appetite for learning has been central to their success. From the off, members trusted these colleagues to look after their learning needs because they had



Professor Robert 'Bob' Fryer CBE was one of the Campaign for Learning's founding trustees
© Campaign for Learning

"THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF TRADE UNIONS WILL ASSIST IN LEGITIMISING THE PURPOSES AND PROCESSES OF WORKPLACE LEARNING IN THE EYES OF THEIR MEMBERS."

no connection to HR or any other management function but came with the independent imprimatur of the union.

Someone who would never contemplate disclosing their poor English skills to their supervisor for fear of the potential disciplinary consequences was far more likely to be able to open up to their ULR, especially when that ULR may have been open about their own struggles with learning, as many often were.

While the ULF did not create the role of the ULR – there were already a few hundred learning reps when the Fund was launched in 1998 – it did support the massive expansion of the network

“EVERYTHING STARTED ON A RELATIVELY SMALL SCALE, OF COURSE. IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ULF, THE 45 DIFFERENT PROJECTS GOT UNDERWAY WITH AN AVERAGE OF JUST £40,000 EACH.”

The CWU launched a successful learning project at the Royal Mail Heathrow Worldwide Distribution Centre, Slough
*Jess Hurd/
reportdigital.
co.uk*



through specialist training and support in the years that followed.

Everything started on a relatively small scale, of course. In the first round of the ULF, the 45 different projects got underway with an average of just £40,000 each, mostly because they were local or regional rather than national, as they later tended to become.

The ULF was originally run by a small team of civil servants based in the former headquarters of the MSC – ironically the organisation whose responsibilities had not long before been transferred to the TECs that had been working on skills with the regional TUCs.

For the first eight years, the civil servants were responsible for the

contracts while TUC Learning Services supported the unions bidding for support.

But when unionlearn replaced Learning Services in 2006, the government transferred management of the ULF management to the TUC, in recognition of the union movement's track record in successfully supporting the use of public money to boost workplace learning and skills.

There can be no doubt that the data show the ULF has been an unalloyed success over its entire lifetime. Not only has it engaged more than 200,000 learners every year, it has helped those learners boost their pay packets and the organisations they work for gain in productivity.

According to the latest evaluation by the University of Exeter (November 2020), Round 20 of the ULF delivered close to £1.5bn in benefits to individuals and employers. And every £1 the government invested ended up generating £3.60 in returns to the Treasury.

Nor did the ULF simply represent exceptional value for money. Throughout its lifetime it has successfully managed to reach those who need its help the most, as evidenced by the 2015 evaluation showing that 12 per cent of union learners had no prior formal qualifications – four times higher than the average across unionised workplaces.

In addition, ULF projects were brilliant at stimulating demand for further development. When asked about what difference union learning had made to their lives as part of the 2018 evaluation,

TGWU
learning rep
Sonia Mullins
with the
Computer
Training Bus
at Willesden
Bus Garage
Jess Hurd/
reportdigital.
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74 per cent of respondents said it had made them more enthusiastic about learning; 68 per cent that it had boosted their confidence in their abilities; 58 per cent that it had helped them improve their organising and mentoring skills; and 46 per cent that it had improved their quality of life and well-being.

The government's decision to close the ULF will make it that much harder for the hundreds of thousands of people who would have accessed their union project to improve their skills in the months and years ahead.

That much should be clear from the case studies in the pages that follow. They reflect just a handful of the projects that have helped change the face of lifelong learning in the past 23 years. Limited space prevents a fully comprehensive overview. But these stories should convey something of what has been achieved by the tens of

"THROUGHOUT ITS LIFETIME
THE ULF HAS SUCCESSFULLY
MANAGED TO REACH THOSE
WHO NEED ITS HELP THE MOST."

thousands of dedicated ULRs and the hundreds of thousands of learners they have supported since just around the turn of the century. Lives have been changed and history has been made. But just as there was union learning before the ULF, there will be union learning after it. Here's to everyone working hard to make that happen. 🍷

HITTING THE HIGH NOTES AT ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA

WHEN BECTU (NOW PART OF PROSPECT) launched a new functional skills project at English National Opera (ENO) in September 2000, it was its administrator Margaret Bissett who came up with the perfect name.

Training Opportunities for Skills, Confidence and Achievement may have looked like a bit of a mouthful but its initials spelled out the name of an Italian opera that was a staple of the repertoire – Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*.

The very first learning partnership between a trade union and a major arts organisation, TOSCA trained five ULRs in its first year and 11 in its second, who between them supported more than 120 of their backstage co-workers to enrol on English and maths courses and, later, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.

Originally a small-scale two-year project, TOSCA significantly expanded between 2002 and 2005 under the direction of Project Manager Kate Elliott, who had earned her organising stripes as part of a trio of union activists who spent one afternoon every week knocking on West End stage doors to spread the BECTU message to backstage staff.

As well as helping hundreds of backstage staff to improve their functional skills, TOSCA also helped the union build learning partnerships with key players in the West End including Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group (RUG) and the entertainment giant the Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG).

When BECTU brought down the curtain on the project in 2005, Kate joined the union's training team, and later went on to run it as training manager for five years, helping to



The Union Learning Fund helped Kate Elliott progress from working part-time for a learning project to managing her union's training department
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re-engineer the union's learning offer to meet the growing number of creative freelancers as the industry steadily began moving away from full-time employment.

As well as helping them gain the skills they needed to thrive in self-employment, like managing their tax affairs, the BECTU project also helped them refine their professional skills, designing workshops for white hair and make-up professionals to help them learn the best ways of working with Black and minority ethnic performers.

After leaving the project following BECTU's merger with Prospect, Kate was working as a freelance trainer in the creative industries until her sudden death last summer. The International Federation of Actors (FIA), with which she had been working at the time, dedicated its Handbook on Trade Union Organising in the Media, Arts and Entertainment Sector to her memory. And her colleagues at Prospect's office in south London installed a bench and planted flowers as a memorial in the garden overlooked by the union's training suite.

Many Asian women improved their English skills through free courses at the Community and Trade Union Learning Centre on the Olympic Park
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BREAKING RECORDS ON THE OLYMPIC PARK

THE YEAR 2012 MAY BE REMEMBERED FOR THE MEDAL HAUL accumulated by home-grown elite athletes like Mo Farah, Vicki Pendleton and Bradley Wiggins on the Olympic Park in east London.

But away from the spectators, reporters and TV cameras, in a distant corner of the sprawling site, hundreds of workers and members of the local community were chalking up their own achievements with the help of the team inside the Community and Trade Union (CTU) Learning Centre.

In all, close to 600 people living near or working on the Olympic Park before, during and after the sporting spectacular gained vital new English, maths and IT qualifications at the centre, which was provided by the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) and staffed by unionlearn.

The free courses helped many locals gain qualifications they needed to apply for jobs onsite, while others helped improve the skills of those already working on the park, including many of its 600 apprentices.

But one of the most successful programmes was a women-only English course, which proved particularly

“CLOSE TO 600 PEOPLE LIVING NEAR OR WORKING ON THE OLYMPIC PARK BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE SPORTING SPECTACULAR GAINED VITAL NEW ENGLISH, MATHS AND IT QUALIFICATIONS.”

popular with Asian women who wouldn't have felt comfortable in a mixed group. Many who had below entry-level English skills would attend every week with more fluent friends or family members, and all of them showed exemplary commitment to making progress, according to unionlearn staff at the time.

Centre staff also worked off-site, running regular English, maths and IT groups for parents of children at family centres and local schools throughout east London, where they also ran employability sessions to help parents improve their CVs, submit better job applications and practise their interview skills.

The CTU was just one of hundreds of workplace learning centres opened with the help of the ULF.

EVERY LITTLE BIT OF LEARNING HELPS

WHEN USDAW RAN TWO SMALL PILOT PROJECTS in the first round of the ULF, it was obvious that one of them had to be in the home shopping sector, which was still huge as recently as the turn of the century.

And that was why the union went on to open one of its very first workplace learning centres inside the Greater Manchester site of Littlewoods, the home-shopping and betting operation that still employed several thousand people in the late 1990s.

Usdaw alone would go on to run more than 70 learning centres around the country, including enormously successful operations like the Castleford Learning Zone at the Argos Distribution Centre (DC) in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, which only closed its doors last year when the company left the site.

Steering the ULF project throughout its 20-plus years was former Littlewoods senior rep Ann Murphy, who had been researching the barriers to learning faced by part-time women workers at Wirral Metropolitan College and been one of the project workers for the North West TUC's Bargaining for Skills project beforehand. (Another member of the team was her sister Pauline, who would go on to work for the ULF for the entirety of its existence.)

Under Ann's leadership, Usdaw trained more than 750 union learning reps who supported tens of thousands of members through innovative campaigns like Check Out Learning in the retail sector. Some of them attended the union's 2003 annual conference to help celebrate the decision to grant statutory rights to ULRs: when the union leadership made the announcement



Usdaw's Check Out Learning campaign helped thousands of members develop a taste for learning
© John Harris/
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"USDAW TRAINED MORE THAN 750 UNION LEARNING REPS WHO SUPPORTED TENS OF THOUSANDS OF MEMBERS."

from the platform, they all rose to take the applause from delegates in T-shirts emblazoned with the legend 'We're legal'.

Usdaw's ULF project continued to innovate as the years went by, most recently partnering with writers and tutors from the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) to help workers at several different sites with everything from improving their business English for emails to getting in touch with their creativity and writing about their lives.



New funding arrangements between UNISON branches and their employers in the north-east have enabled three Bridges to Learning project workers to continue supporting lifelong learning in their workplaces
© Sasa Sevic

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE PUBLIC SERVICES

THOUSANDS OF PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS IN THE NORTH-EAST gained professional qualifications and developed their careers through the unique three-way partnership between UNISON, The Open University (OU) and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) that was Bridges to Learning.

Launched in 2008, Bridges to Learning was a project based in UNISON's Northern region that originally aimed to open up higher education (HE) opportunities to some of the lowest-paid public service workers in the country.

But it later evolved to help provide a much broader range of opportunities, from functional skills English and maths to continuous professional development (CPD) as well.

The project used its ULF investment to cover the staffing costs of seconding ULRs and other union reps from local authorities and health trusts across the region as project workers to promote opportunities, organise courses and support learners.

The model delivered enormous success. In the last five years alone, more than 1,800 learners gained maths qualifications and more than 1,600

gained English qualifications through the project, which also engaged more than 4,200 IT learners in that time.

The project also encouraged learners to complete more than 4,000 vocational qualifications and supported 500-plus people through university courses, at the same time as helping 7,600 CPD learners over the same period.

While the withdrawal of ULF funding has forced Bridges to Learning to close, three of its five project workers are continuing to work on the lifelong learning agenda through funding agreements between their UNISON branches and their employers.

The project is also leaving in place the online hub that it developed early in the pandemic in order to provide access to a specially curated set of learning opportunities, which is open to UNISON members not only in the Northern region but across the UK: bridgestolearning.org.uk/online-learning

THE COURSE ARRIVING ON PLATFORM 3 ...

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF THE ULF, there was only one multi-union project, and that was a joint rail union project in the early years of the programme.

Early in the 2000s, the lifelong learning teams at Aslef, RMT and TSSA were able to overcome the occasionally prickly inter-union relationships to work together and plant the seeds of a new lifelong learning culture within the sector.

The shift work that the industry relies on represented something of a massive obstacle at first. Rostering might help keep services running and infrastructure maintained at all hours but it represents a major headache for a ULF trying to bring a group of learners together for a classroom course at any particular time.

Nonetheless, when RMT opened its first learning centres at London Euston and Birmingham New Street in partnership with Virgin Trains, they quickly proved popular with learners and new centres soon followed set up in collaboration with train operating companies such as Connex South Central, First North Western, Midland Mainline, Silverlink and South West Trains. (The fact that none of them remains in business today is a reminder of the way ownership churn in the industry is another hurdle for unions trying to develop a learning culture.)

“ASLEF’S ULF TEAM WENT ON TO WORK WITH VIRGIN TRAINS AND PROVIDER TQ TRAINING TO DEVELOP THE FIRST TRAIN DRIVER APPRENTICESHIP.”

Aslef’s learning team helped launch the first train driver apprenticeship in Crewe in 2017 © John Harris/reportdigital.co.uk



While the three unions later went on to submit individual bids to the ULF, they have all continued their efforts to develop learning opportunities for their members.

Aslef’s ULF team went on to work with Virgin Trains and provider TQ Training to develop the first train driver apprenticeship, which was launched at Crewe in February 2017 with the three young people who had made it onto the pioneering programme out of a total of 1,200 applicants.

That same year, RMT’s ULF team and ULFs worked with infrastructure management company Network Rail and national training provider The Skills Partnership to extend apprenticeship opportunities to existing staff. They seized the chance to gain business and leadership qualifications with the support of the union: 120 staff from London North Western (LNW) enrolled in the first year of the programme in the first year alone.

And in 2019, TSSA played a crucial role in the development of the Trade Union Officials Apprenticeship as part of the Trailblazer group that developed the standard, going on to become the first union in the country to sign unionlearn’s Apprenticeship Charter to affirm its commitment to delivering a high-quality programme to its own apprentices.

Originally launched as a regional project in the north-east, the FBU lifelong learning programme quickly expanded into a national initiative that became a byword for innovation and creativity
© John Jones/TUC



ANSWERING THE SKILLS EMERGENCY

THE FIRE BRIGADES' UNION (FBU) WAS CONSISTENTLY INNOVATIVE in the ways it used the funding it secured from the ULF.

It was Northumberland FBU that made the first bid into the ULF, when local ULR Adrian Slassor asked his deputy chief fire officer if management would become part of a new regional ULF project in 2002.

The union's original idea was to train a team of ULRs that could promote learning, organise functional skills training and negotiate time off to study. But TUC Learning Services Development Worker Barney McGill encouraged them to be more ambitious and include plans in the bid for a learning centre onsite at Morpeth Fire Station.

The suggestion proved inspired. Demand for the courses was so overwhelming in the first six months that the project team had to take a six-week break from enrolling members on new courses to make the time to offer support to those already studying.

And it was the success of the Northumberland project that encouraged the FBU to put together its first national project in 2004, which

was when it began to create its network of learning centres as part of the Trade Union Hub.

Throughout the life of the ULF, the FBU continued to innovate its learning and skills offer, which it extended to friends and family of FBU members.

In 2016, the project launched a Level 3 Personal Trainer apprenticeship to help members continue to meet the physical demands of the job. The 18-month programme was such a huge success that the union was at one point working with 23 different fire and rescue services in England to help firefighters gain the knowledge and skills they needed to sustain longer and healthier careers and support their work colleagues.

And in 2019, the project produced one e-learning package to help firefighters tackle overexposure to heat on the job and another addressing the specific effects of heat on women – something that had never been done before. The resources have already helped train thousands of firefighters across the UK and are helping their counterparts in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, South Africa and the USA through international dissemination by the union.

But the jewel in the crown, according to the union's last ULF project manager, Mark Dunne, was the way the project helped change the workplace culture through the mental health courses it provided for members and which were the most popular part of the FBU learning offer for the past eight years.

"In terms of breaking down those barriers and feeling comfortable with our emotions and our health, the FBU learning project has led the fire service and firefighters into that position," Mark said earlier this year. "And above everything else we've done in the ULF, that for me has been the number one success story, without any doubt at all." 🍷

NOTICEBOARD



DISCONNECTED? EXPLORING THE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

World Skills UK/Learning and Work Institute/Enginuity, March 2021

Key message

Boosting digital skills will be crucial for the future of the UK economy after the pandemic but many employers say significant numbers of their workers lack basic and advanced digital skills and many businesses are struggling to recruit workers with the digital skills they need.

Key stats

- ▶ While 82 per cent of job vacancies ask for basic digital skills, 27 per cent of employers say the majority of their workers now require advanced digital skills.
- ▶ 23 per cent of employers say that their current workforce lacks the basic digital skills that they need, and 37 per cent say their workers lack the advanced digital skills required.

- ▶ 21 per cent of young people from the poorest households lack access to a laptop, desktop or tablet, 9 per cent can access the internet only over their mobile phone network and 6 per cent have no internet access at home. The equivalent numbers for children in the wealthiest households are 1, 3 and 2 per cent respectively.

Key quote

"If we are to avoid growing digital skills gaps holding back our growth, we need to ensure more young people are able to develop the advanced digital skills that our economy will increasingly demand, and we need to boost employer investment in digital skills too."

Where to find it

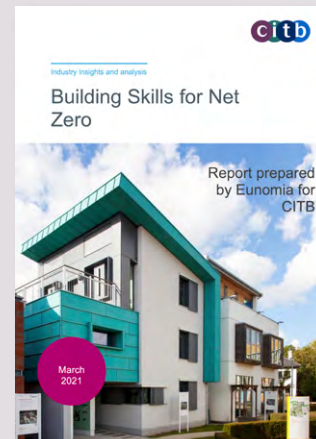
Click here to download the full report

BUILDING SKILLS FOR NET ZERO

CITB, March 2021

Key message

Only radical changes to the sector can enable UK construction to achieve net zero by 2050 in line with government targets. Crucially, business-as-usual demand-led development and provision of training won't cut it: new qualifications and training courses must be designed to plug the skills gaps and the industry must create tens of thousands of new jobs.



Key stats

- ▶ The construction industry has a key role to play in achieving net zero by 2050 since 40 per cent of total emissions come from construction and the built environment.
- ▶ Up to 95 per cent of emissions from the built environment over the next 30 years could come from buildings that exist today.
- ▶ The majority of the 350,000 additional full-time workers that are likely to be needed by 2028 will need to be trained to deliver improvements to existing buildings to reduce energy demand.

Key quote

"A 2050 target means that the process needs to be complete by then, at full speed by 2040, and well on the way by 2030, so we have maybe five years to get underway, and we're only just starting to talk about it."

Where to find it

Click here to download the summary and the full reports

NOTICEBOARD



SIX NEW QUICK READS TO MARK 15 YEARS

The Reading Agency has unveiled this year's set of six new Quick Reads, which mark the 15th anniversary of the pioneering programme that has helped union learners since its inception.

- *Wish You Were Dead*, new crime fiction featuring Detective Roy Grace by multiple award-winning writer Peter James (Macmillan)
- *How To Be A Woman*, a specially abridged version of the feminist manifesto by Critic of the Year Caitlin Moran (Ebury)
- *The Motive*, an introduction to Javid Qasim, the happy-go-lucky small-scale dope dealer, who features in three previous novels by Khurrum Rahman (HQ).
- *The Baby Is Mine*, a family drama set in lockdown Lagos by Booker-nominated Oyinkan Braithwaite (Atlantic)
- *The Skylight*, a dark domestic thriller from British Book Award winner Louise Candlish (Simon & Schuster)

- *Saving The Day*, an uplifting romance by best-selling author Katie Fforde (Century)

All six are available now for just £1 in bookshops and free to borrow from libraries.

Best-selling author Oyinkan Braithwaite says she enjoyed writing specifically for people who might not have a lot of time to commit to reading.

"Quick Reads tapped into my desire to create fiction that would be an avenue for relief and escape for all who came across it," she says.

Khurrum Rahman says he used to feel overwhelmed by the idea of reading a book when he was growing up and only started later in life when he tried a book recommended by one of his friends.

"This initiative is so important for people like I once was, to engage in stories that may mirror their own lives or to read experiences far beyond their imagination," Khurrum says. "Just like a friend once did for me, I hope I am able to play a small part

in encouraging somebody to pick up a book."

Katie Fforde says she was delighted to contribute a title as she can still remember how she struggled to read because of her dyslexia. "Anything that might help someone who doesn't find reading easy is such a worthwhile thing to do," she says.



To mark the 15th anniversary of the publishing initiative, every one of this year's titles that is bought by 31 July 2021 will be matched by a donated copy that will be distributed by The Reading Agency.

The 'Buy one, gift one' campaign is funded with the help of the six publishers involved this year.

[Click here to download Quick Reads 2021 posters, reading guides and social media assets](#)