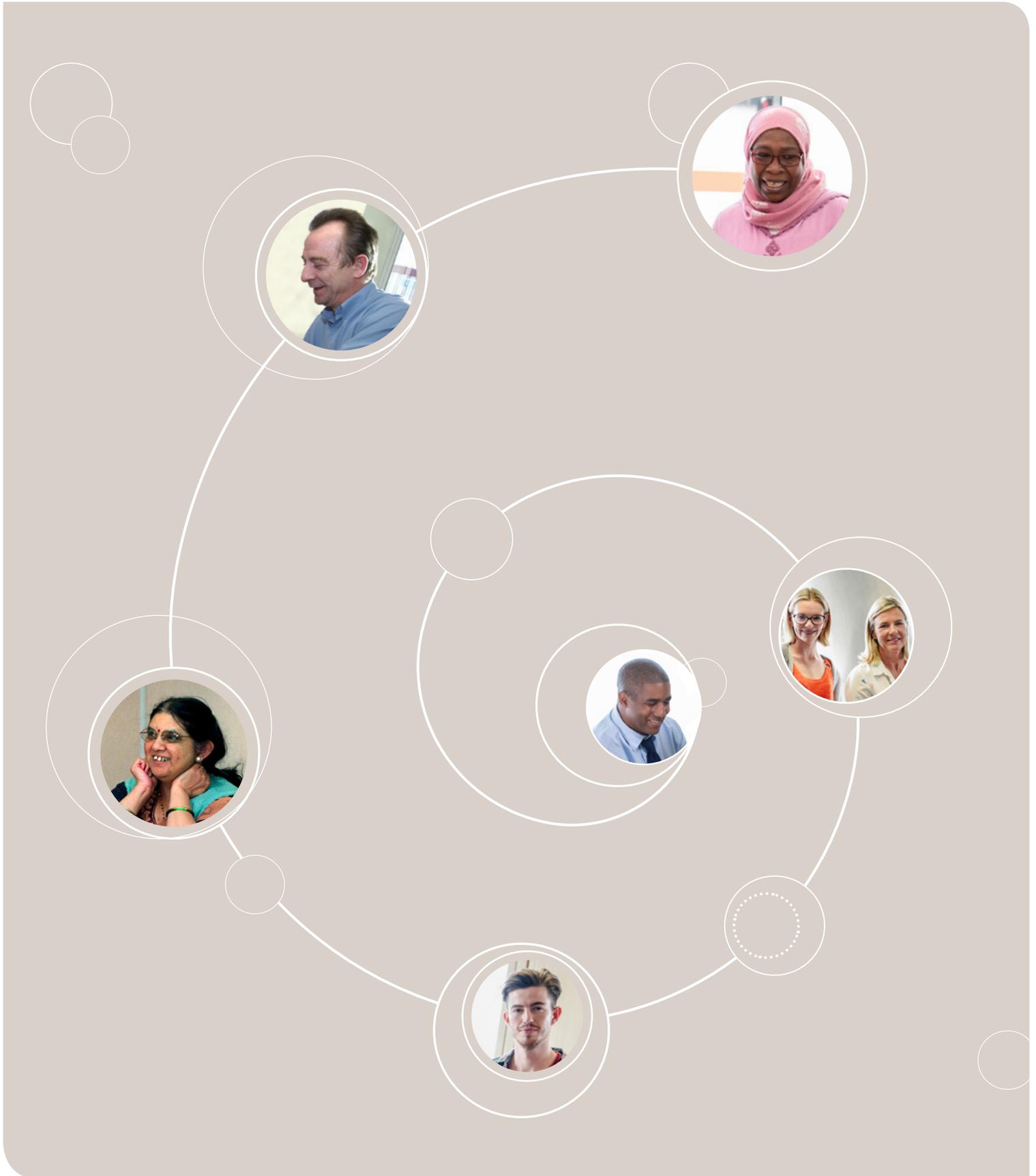


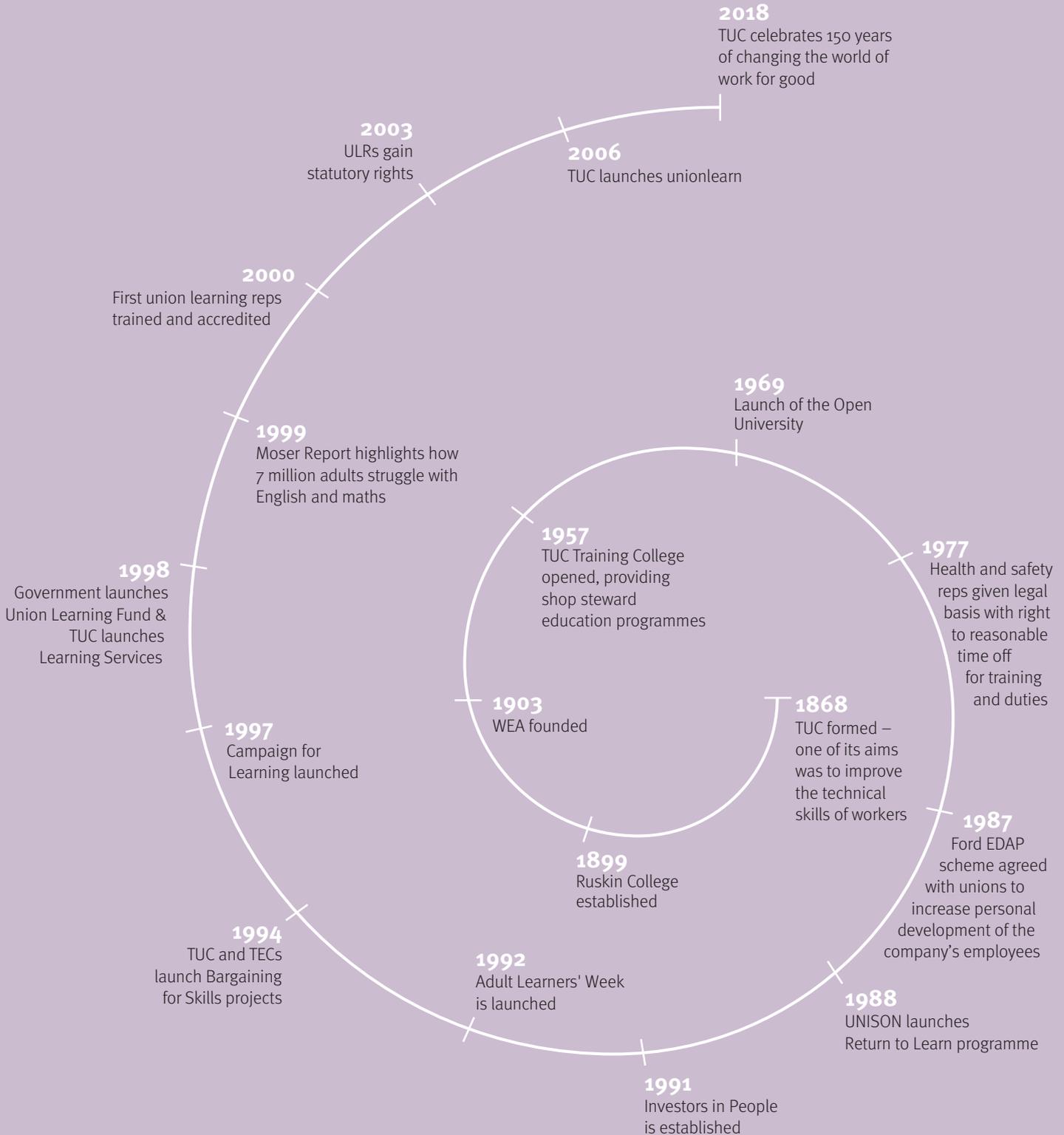
LEARNING MAKES US STRONG

unionlearn
from the TUC

**Celebrating 150 years
of union work on education,
learning and skills**



Learning makes us strong



Forging a fair transition from the old world to the new



When the union pioneers who met in the Manchester Mechanics' Institute to hold the first TUC Congress 150 years ago, Britain's second industrial revolution was transforming the way its people lived and worked.

In 2018, as we mark the 150th anniversary of that turning point in the struggle for working class rights, we are in the midst of another technological revolution that is transforming the world of work.

This fourth industrial revolution will affect all of us: automation, algorithms and artificial intelligence are already reshaping our working lives, as workers are being replaced by machines and office jobs are vanishing into the cloud.

We want to make the transition to this brave new world as fair and just as possible by equipping working people with the tools they need to thrive amid profound change – and bargaining for better skills is absolutely central to this agenda.

Education, learning and skills have always been top priorities for the TUC and the trade union movement, as you can see from some of the milestones we have marked in this short pamphlet, from our earliest debates about quality apprenticeships to our

contemporary campaigns to help workers access the learning they need to progress, whether that is their first English qualification or a university degree.

We cannot insulate working people from change. But we can shape it and influence it as far as we can. That means putting learning at the centre of everything we do. History has shown that when education fails to keep pace with technology, the result is inequality. So we have to keep innovating, keep pushing the boundaries, keep democratising education.

Like our predecessors who gathered in Manchester in 1868, we choose to do things differently and forge a fair and just transition from the old world to the new. That is the union way.



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Frances O'Grady
General Secretary

“We have to keep innovating, keep pushing the boundaries, keep democratising education.”

Building the unions through education

Since its very first Congress, the TUC has been campaigning for high-quality education, learning and skills.

From its very beginnings 150 years ago, the TUC has recognised the huge significance of education, learning and skills for its members.

For just as Manchester was the obvious location “as the main centre of industry in the provinces” (in the words of the original invitation), the symbolism of gathering in the city’s Mechanics’ Institute would not have been lost on the original delegates.

Most working people had had extremely limited opportunities when growing up before the 1870 Education Act introduced compulsory schooling for all children.

The poorest might have been taught in a ragged school, which provided free education in the most deprived parts of industrial cities and towns. What that education amounted to was not necessarily what they deserved: when Charles Dickens visited a ragged school in Clerkenwell in the 1840s he found it “pitifully struggling for life under every disadvantage” and set about writing a plea for action that became *A Christmas Carol*.

For those whose parents had some money, there were private ‘dame’ schools, usually run by women in their own homes. But while some did equip their charges with some learning, many provided little more than day-care (an 1838 survey found that only half the pupils in London dame schools were taught how to write).

By contrast, the Mechanics Institutes were designed to expand educational opportunities and broaden horizons by enabling

working people to access education in science and technology for the very first time.

Convening in a building designed to help working people improve themselves could not have been more urgent for the 34 delegates who arrived in Princess Street at the invitation of Manchester and Salford Trades Council in 1868.

While the country was being transformed at a relentless pace by the almost uninterrupted expansion of the cotton, coal, iron, steel, engineering industries, the full force of the political, legal and media system had held the fledgling trade union movement at bay, helping to restrict membership to little more than 118,000 in 1868.

The prospects for progress hardly looked promising. The year before the first Congress, the courts had ruled (in *Hornby v. Close*) that unions were unlawful associations since their mission to improve wages and conditions amounted to an illegal restraint of trade.

And while the revised Master and Servant Act (also 1867) limited imprisonment to so-called ‘aggravated’ breaches of contract, 10,000 workers were still being prosecuted every year at the time, risking three months hard labour if found guilty.

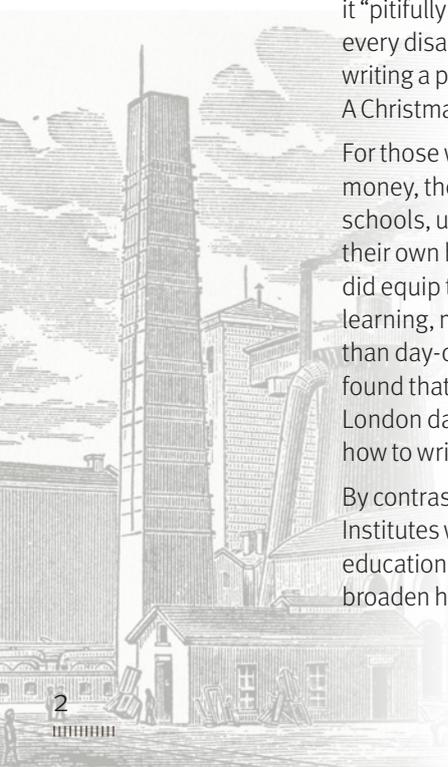
In addition to all that (as the original Congress invitation noted), a Royal Commission had been established to look into union organisation, but since it had been prompted by the violence on the fringes of the Sheffield file grinders strike the year before, the prospects for progressive reform looked dim.

Yet amid all the urgent discussions that were scheduled, the first

Congress also included agenda items on technical education and apprenticeships. That some craft unions were keen to restrict apprenticeships is clear from the wording of the item, ‘limitation of apprentices’: they were keen (in the words on an 1873 motion) “to protect the rights of the journeyman and to prevent the introduction into many trades of apprentice labour to the exclusion of journeymen.”

But it is important to remember that the apprenticeship system of the era was open to serious exploitation. When parents had to pay a premium to the master who undertook to train their child, some unscrupulous masters were more interested in what they could get than what they could contribute, as the 1858 *Dictionary of Daily Wants* pointed out: “there are some employers whose only anxiety is to secure the premium, and when that is received to allow the apprentice to pursue his own undirected course as best he may.” And some of the masters who took on their apprentices from the workhouse did not do so out of the kindness of their heart: many parish apprentices were so badly treated that they ran away, while the unluckiest died.

So by the time the motion urging limitation of apprentices was tabled at the 1873 Congress, it was countered by the Amalgamated Society of Journeymen Tailors President Alfred Bailey, who argued that limitation was “contrary to the interests of trades unions and detrimental to the national prosperity of the country.” And while the debate resulted in both motions being withdrawn that year, it was the Baileys of the trade union world who would win the day in the years ahead.



“Some of the masters who took on their apprentices from the workhouse did not do so out of the kindness of their heart: many parish apprentices were so badly treated that they ran away, while the unluckiest died.”

Working in partnership for 100-plus years



The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) has been working in partnership with the TUC and the trade union movement for more than 100 years to help working people improve their lives through learning.

Originally launched in 1903, when compulsory education finished at age 12 and no women had the right to vote, the WEA immediately began organising branches throughout the country where students decided what they wanted to learn.

Working with university extra-mural departments from the beginning, the WEA was determined to bring the benefits of education to working men and women who had been excluded by the design of the education and economic system.

It also worked hand-in-hand with the trade union movement, formalising the partnership with the launch of the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) in 1919.

Over the following decades, right up until 1964, the WETUC would share the bulk of adult working class education with the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC).

Launched in 1921, the NCLC was originally of a much more radical orientation, rooted in the radicalism of a group of Ruskin College students.

In practice, as London Metropolitan University lecturer Richard Ross has pointed out, workers attended classes delivered by both organisations, and some tutors even worked for both.

With the launch of the TUC Education Scheme in 1964, both organisations wound up, with some NCLC staff securing new posts for the TUC in the roles that would later become Regional Education Officers.

The wider WEA (of which the WETUC was a relatively modest component) had continued to play an increasingly central role in the learning agenda, and was one of the key campaigners for the reforms delivered in the 1944 Education Act, which finally introduced free state secondary school education for all.

The WEA has continued to provide tutors for many trade union courses, including those offered by TUC Education and by individual unions.

The WEA is today the largest provider of adult education in the voluntary sector, helping more than 50,000 students every year.



“The workers of this country are under a deep debt of gratitude to those who have successfully pioneered the Association through difficult and embarrassing times. Education is of primary importance to wage-earners, and those who engage in pioneer efforts are rendering most valuable services to the cause of democracy.”

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Fred Bramley, TUC General Secretary, on the 21st anniversary of the WEA, 1925

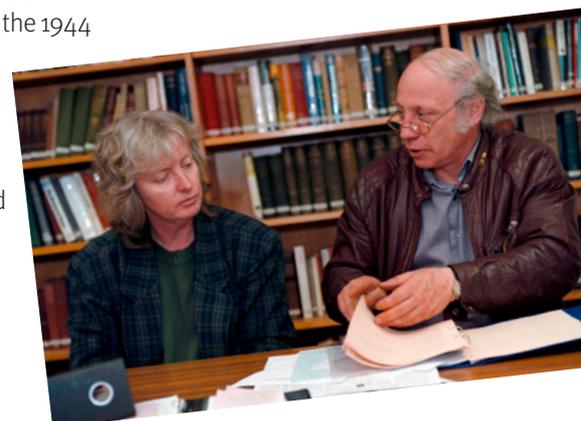


Photo: John Harris/reportdigital.co.uk

Training the reps on the front line

In the second half of the 20th century, trade unions won the argument for statutory rights to time off for training to help workplace reps undertake their role most effectively.

It was the 1957 TUC Congress that proposed a new TUC Educational Council take over the management and delivery of trade union education, previously shared between the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) and the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC).

Without the legal right to paid release to attend education courses, most union reps had been honing their skills on evening and weekend classes and correspondence courses run by the two organisations.

The seeds for statutory rights to time off for training were sown by the Donovan Commission, set up in 1965 in response to the growth of unofficial strike action at the time.

Developing more orderly industrial relations would involve a significant expansion of both officer and shop stewards' training, the commission argued in its final report, which was published in 1968.

“More full-time union officials will be required, and unions are urged to develop training courses for junior full-time officials and for shop stewards; in the case of the latter, day-release courses with the employer's co-operation offer the best prospects,” the report said.

But it would take another eight years before the government began to commit public money to trade union education for the first time, beginning with a grant of £400,000 in 1976 that enabled the significant expansion of training the commission had proposed.

The next step forward also had its roots in an earlier commission, this time the Committee on Safety and Health at Work set up in 1970 under National Coal Board Chairman Lord Robens.

The main thrust of the Robens Report in 1972 was that employers and trade unions should develop workplace partnerships to tackle health and safety issues, which laid the foundations for the 1974 Health and Safety At Work Act.

But the report also recommended that workplaces would benefit from the introduction of safety representatives and safety committees. After detailed negotiations brokered by the newly-created Health and Safety Executive, the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations were passed in 1977, establishing union rights to appoint health and safety representatives from among their members.

The new rights necessitated a major expansion of the training programme, which ultimately led to the development of the tripartite model of trade union education: public funding from government



represented the acknowledgment that training union reps helped create improved economic outcomes across the UK; paid release from employers recognised how better trained reps helped deliver better industrial relations; while further education colleges contributed by providing the tutors who delivered the classes.

The next major milestone was the introduction of the accreditation of union reps' training in 1996.

In the early 1990s, the government had removed central public funding for non-accredited courses and placed restrictions on Local Education Authorities (LEAs), which had resulted in public funding for union education courses being phased out.

By introducing accreditation of their education courses, the TUC and unions were able to regain some public funding for their education programmes.

But accreditation also paid off for the reps undertaking courses themselves, since a large percentage of them had left school with no qualifications to go straight into the world of work, which meant that their stewards qualifications were often the first they had ever secured.

This was borne out in Elaine Capizzi's 1999 report *Learning That Works: accrediting the TUC*



“Nationally, 90 per cent of reps on TUC Education courses were gaining accreditation in the second half of the 1990s, while in London the figure was as high as 97 per cent.”



programme, which revealed that 36 per cent of union reps had gained no qualifications since leaving school while 48 per cent had never undertaken non-certificated courses or formal training.

Union reps quoted in the report revealed what that meant for many participants who had been excluded from successful participation in certificated learning beforehand, saying “people without qualifications really want to get their hands on them” and “people from clothing factories who left school at 16 – they really value the credits.”

The numbers made that clear. Nationally, 90 per cent of reps on TUC Education courses were gaining accreditation in the second half of the 1990s, while in London the figure was as high as 97 per cent – all the more significant when the average for other programmes within the Open College Network was running at 70 per cent.

Accreditation also helped reps improve as reps. In the Capizzi report, the majority of reps said that accreditation made them more conscientious about keeping their files (72 per cent), joining in activities (59 per cent) and making up missed work (52 per cent).

Both these strands – the significance of gaining qualifications and the developmental impact of education – would later expand exponentially when the creation of TUC Learning Services and later unionlearn extended this model to member development.

“The Improved Working Methods scheme necessitated some complex calculations and had elements like ‘traffic change factors’, which required working hours to be expanded or contracted in proportion to increases or decreases in the volume of mail handled (this was, after all, meant to be a productivity scheme). Unfortunately I was no mathematical genius ... I could add, subtract, divide and multiply adequately. I had known all that before leaving primary school. It was equations and percentages, anything beyond the basics, really, with which I’d declined to engage at school. My salvation came from a TUC booklet I came across called *Working with Figures*, which gave clear explanations of how to calculate all manner of things, including percentages.”

Former Education Secretary Alan Johnson recalling the numeracy support he needed while an activist in the Union of Communication Workers (now CWU), in an edited extract from the second volume of his autobiography, *Please Mr. Postman* (2014)



Educating for equality

TUC Education has not only helped union activists improve their understanding of the structures of industrial relations, safety or learning in order to become better stewards, health and safety reps or union learning reps.

For decades, TUC Education has also helped union activists better understand the complex nature of workplace discrimination and become better able to represent the full spectrum of their membership demographics.

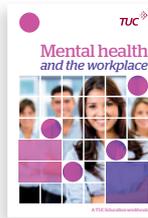
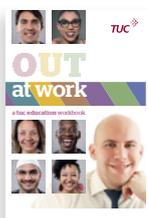
First published in 1983, *Tackling Racism* has been helping union reps challenge racism and promote equality and diversity in the workplace for the past 35 years.

Since 1991, the workbook *Working Women* has been helping secure a better deal for women in the workplace, showing reps how to combat sexual harassment, take on gender-based discrimination and negotiate for equal pay.

First written in 2007, between the repeal of much anti-LGBT law and the introduction of marriage equality, *Out At Work* remains a vital resource for union reps to combat enduring issues, such as homophobic bullying in schools and at work.

Building on the TUC’s pioneering work in training disability champions, the *Disabled Workers Workbook* (2012) is helping union reps tackle disability discrimination at every stage of the employment cycle and build genuinely inclusive workplaces.

The latest workbook, *Mental Health and The Workplace* (2015), is helping unions break the taboos around mental health, support individual members with a range of different issues and work with employers to develop ‘mentally healthy’ workplaces.



Blazing the trail for workplace learning

Unions began to put member development further up the agenda in the 1980s, with the launch of Workbase, Return to Learn and Ford EDAP.

Originally founded in 1978, Workbase Training developed a model of engagement and delivery that remains highly influential today.

The initiative was originally launched by the London Division of NUPE (one of the three unions that would later go on to form UNISON 15 years later) as the NUPE London Division Basic Skills Project.

It was the first initiative to help union members improve their English and maths, initially targeting manual workers in the capital's public sector who were NUPE members.

Later re-named Workbase Training, the initiative expanded nationwide and into the private sector, involving other unions including COHSE (another future UNISON partner), the GMB and TGWU (now Unite).

“Workbase put skills training for manual workers on the agenda in an era when nobody considered street sweepers or dinner ladies needed

to keep their skills updated,” recalls Martin Bamford, who joined the organisation in the early 1990s when it was beginning to work with the earliest TUC Bargaining for Skills projects.

“It also developed a delivery mechanism that included the active involvement of unions reps in the workplace, which was one of the key things for gaining the confidence of participants, and the use of a confidential training needs analysis (TNA), a 15-minute discussion with people about what they wanted to learn that was a way of engaging and focusing on issues in the workplace.”

A decade later, NUPE launched another pioneering initiative that would go on to influence union learning – the 10-week course Return to Learn, which was piloted in 1988.

Designed for members who may have been out of education for some time, Return to Learn helps participants improve their skills in reading, writing, note-taking, group discussion, IT and everyday maths.

Participants meet for one evening a week (or once a fortnight) and also take part in a residential weekend – with all costs covered by the union to remove any financial obstacles to participation.

After working together through group activities and on individual assignments, participants all make a short presentation on a subject of their own choosing at the final session, when they also collect their certificates.

Return to Learn and its close relation Women's Lives often have a profound impact on participants, as attested by Workers' Educational Association (WEA) tutor Shirley Allen Jackson, who has been teaching both courses in Yorkshire and Humberside for the past decade.

“At the awards ceremonies, people say, ‘This has changed my life, changed the way I look at things, it has changed me – they have applied for different jobs, become ULRs or they have made big changes in their personal lives: it's just brilliant,” Shirley says.

Another long-established initiative that has played its part in the development of union learning is the Employee Development Assistance Programme (EDAP) at Ford Motor Company in the late 1980s.

Originally emerging out of the 1987 pay negotiations and modelled on a similar scheme in the US, EDAP was designed “to provide opportunities for personal development and training outside working hours for all employees of the company.”

When the programme was launched in 1989, Ford expected around 5 per cent of its workforce would apply for the £200 annual

UNISON's Return to Learn and Women's Lives courses continue to help public service workers improve their skills



“Workbase put skills training for manual workers on the agenda in an era when nobody considered street sweepers or dinner ladies needed to keep their skills updated.”



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grant that was then available for non-vocational training: in the first six months alone, more than 33 per cent signed up.

EDAP continues to offer a wide range of learning opportunities for the Ford workforce today, with the help of the annual grant, which now stands at £300 a year. While some

of the most popular courses have been related to home improvement (bricklaying, plastering, washing machine repair), workers have also improved their holiday French, traced family histories and learned musical instruments.

The company continues to invest in the programme because it recognises how it contributes not only to improving industrial relations but also to fostering a learning culture, which directly helps its workforce get to grips with the challenges of this era of rapid technological change.



Putting skills on the bargaining agenda



In the 1990s, TUC regions began to raise awareness of skills in the workplaces through effective partnerships with the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs).

The significant role that trade unions play today in the upskilling of their members and the wider development of the learning agenda is rooted in Bargaining for Skills, a set of initiatives organised in the 1990s by the regional TUCs and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs).

TECs were publicly-funded bodies that were originally launched in 1988 as employer-led vehicles designed to help nurture the skills they required at local level.

Locally-led and oriented as they were, the TECs nonetheless all had government-issued targets to hit on Modern Apprenticeships (as they were known at the time), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Investors in People (IIP), the standard for staff training and development.

By the early 1990s, many TECs were beginning to recognise that they would not be able to hit their marks by going it alone and some had

come to the conclusion that trade unions – with their commitment to skills expansion and access to workers outside HR structures – would make natural partners.

For their part, many unions at national and regional level recognised that partnership with the TECs represented an ideal opportunity to contribute to the skills agenda in the evolving industrial landscape of the 1990s.

The obstacle was the low awareness of the issue at shopfloor level. When the North-West TUC interviewed reps and full-time officials in the middle of the decade, researchers discovered that less than half (42 per cent) of the stewards surveyed actively participated in negotiations that resulted in a structured training outcome and very few unions reported bargaining in anything but a reactive manner – such as the need for training when somebody was injured in the workplace.

In order to raise local union awareness of the skills agenda, particularly around IIP and NVQs, the North West TUC convinced Greater Manchester TEC to bring together its regional partners in

1995 to fund the first Bargaining for Skills project.

Within two years, the project had secured £1m worth of contracts – from all 14 TECs in the region, from the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and from the European Social Fund (ESF).

The funding enabled the project to second senior reps and stewards from their workplaces as project workers who could spread the message by talking to unions and employers about the value of NVQ programmes and IIP accreditation.

“Some unions were really sceptical at the time about what learning had to do with them but when you approached it from the point of view of who was getting the investment in training and development, they could see their members were getting nothing,” recalls former Bargaining for Skills Project Worker Ann Murphy, who is the national lifelong learning coordinator at Usdaw (the union she was seconded from at the time).

Success was not restricted to the north-west: Bargaining for Skills teams were able to pursue effective partnerships with TECs throughout the TUC regions, and the projects were enormously influential on the approach to workplace learning that was adopted when the TUC set up Learning Services in 1998.

Bargaining for Skills opened up learning opportunities for road transport workers whose long hours had excluded them from conventional college courses.

Photo: Paul Herrmann



The Bargaining for Skills programme has been a vital first step in the conversion of the company's culture so that we recognise the need for personal skills development programmes to be linked to the company's business development plan.”

Don Helsby, manufacturing services manager, Horizon Biscuits, quoted in the green paper *The Learning Age*, 1998

The reps at the heart of our drive to improve

Union learning reps are the rock on which the movement has built a network that both helps members improve their skills and exercises a growing influence on the development of the learning agenda.

There is no doubt that the union role in delivery of learning and skills, and the high status of the union contribution to the skills policy agenda, rests on the dedication, commitment and achievement of Britain's union learning reps (ULRs).

In just two decades, thousands of new and existing activists have come forward to support and encourage their co-workers on their learning journeys – many of them learners themselves who are keen to spread the message that learning is never beyond anyone's reach with the right support behind them.

Support for ULRs was first proposed in the 1998 report of the TUC General Council learning services task group, which recognised that employees in unionised workplaces were twice as likely to be trained than in organisations that did not recognise trade unions.

"The union representative is key to any strategy to increase union involvement in learning," the task group argued. "Not all union representatives will have the time or interest in taking on this new role – some may lack confidence and need encouragement – but from recent experience it is clear that others will seize the opportunity, particularly if it comes with support and backing from their unions."

The same year, the TUC published its first manuals to help ULRs give initial advice on learning, signpost to other opportunities and organisations, identify their members' learning needs and develop a systematic approach to learning.

It was the launch of the Union Learning Fund (also in 1998) that helped unions significantly expand their training and support for ULRs, who would be instrumental in helping the ULF achieve one of its key aims of driving up employee demand for learning, particularly among members and non-members with few or no qualifications – a demographic that very few employers or providers had ever been able to engage before.

But it was statutory recognition five years later that made the biggest difference. A York Consulting survey in 2000 had revealed that 79 per cent of ULRs had run into problems while trying to promote learning in their workplaces, including lack of time and management opposition.

Statutory recognition meant that, for the first time, union learning reps enjoyed the same rights as stewards and health and safety reps in terms of access to paid release to undertake their role and time off to train.

Much of the success of the network of ULRs is down to the learning reps themselves – good listeners, trusted confidants and supportive mentors who are well trained, well-informed and well connected.

But what marks them out from, for example, even the most effective member of a company learning and development team is that they are not only workplace learning advocates but also part of the activist team in their union branch.

As well as identifying, supporting and developing them in the first place, their unions have placed their work within the wider horizon of the movement's commitment to equality and inclusion.

The failure of well-intentioned attempts to promote non-union

learning champions in non-recognised workplaces over the years demonstrates the vital importance of the union dimension to the role.

Development of the ULR network has proved essential for developing the workplace skills agenda, since without a trusted colleague to talk to about skills needs, including functional skills issues, significantly fewer learners would ever have come forward to take part in the learning opportunities that unions have made their own in the past two decades.

As many have observed over the past 20 years, learning reps have been able to reach ordinary workers in ways that nobody else can and it is their continued dedication and commitment that has allowed first TUC Learning Services and then unionlearn to help build the workplace learning culture the UK needs.



GMB rep Sandra Allen was named Union Learning Rep of the Year in 2003 for successfully managing learning centres on Unilever sites in Grimsby and Hull.

Photo: John Jones



One of the most successful developments in the union movement in recent years has been the growth of the army of trained union learning representatives. They are encouraging more and more people into learning, particularly those that the education system has failed to reach in the past. This is happening because they have the unique trust of their members and their role has to be formally recognised by their employer. As health and safety reps have made the workplace safer, so union learning reps are now making the workforce smarter."

.....
Brendan Barber, then TUC general secretary, in *The Quiet Revolution: the rise of the union learning rep*, first published 2001.



Right: ULRs are trusted colleagues who can help sometimes reluctant learners develop their skills at work.

Photo: John Jones



“Much of the success of the network of ULRs is down to the learning reps themselves – good listeners, trusted confidants and supportive mentors who are well trained, well-informed and well connected.”

Spreading the message to everyone

When Khadija Najlaoui arrived in the UK from Morocco in 2007, she was by herself, with no family to help her, and she could not speak English.

But since developing her reading and writing through Unite’s pioneering United Migrant Workers Educational Programme (UMWEP), Khadija has gone on to train as a union learning rep, union rep and accredited support companion and has also facilitated a conversation club at the programme.

“In my country, I spent just seven years in school: my parents were poor and when school time arrived I could see they were struggling because there were nine of us, so when I was 15 I started working to help my family,” Khadija recalls.

“I was working in a garment factory in Morocco but after my father died and my mother became ill and needed monthly medications, the money I earned was not enough to cover everyone so I thought it

would be better to go abroad where I will earn more.”

A domestic worker herself, Khadija found out about Unite’s pioneering United Migrant Workers Education Programme (UMWEP) through the Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW) campaign.

Since it was launched in 2007, UMWEP has grown from a single English class with one tutor and 15 learners to a weekend’s worth of learning opportunities delivered by a team of 30 volunteer tutors and facilitators for around 180 participants every week.

UMWEP is built on Unite’s Alternative Education Model, which encourages learners to become active and critical participants in their own development in order to help transform the world they live and work in.

“For me, UMWEP is everything,” Khadija says. “My first language is Arabic, my second is French but I started with zero English. Today, I can read and write in English and I

can speak much better. I can speak in public with more confidence. Unite supported me and gave me the opportunity to be able to communicate with my colleagues, family and friends.”

More than 7,000 migrant workers have now gained the confidence and skills to stand up for their rights at work as they build new lives in the UK through UMWEP’s ground-breaking work.

Khadija decided to train as a ULR, a tutor and a union rep because she wanted to help more migrant workers in similar situations to her own.

“Every time we finish a course at UMWEP we have a celebration and everyone gets their certificate,” Khadija says. “When I started at UMWEP, I was the only Moroccan, but I have encouraged six or eight others from my country to learn with Unite and I am very happy to see them around me and I am very happy that they are learning as well.”

Left: Unite rep Khadija Najlaoui helps migrant workers improve their English skills through the United Migrant Workers Educational Programme (UMWEP).

Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Promoting learning for all

TUC Learning Services brought together the best of the work of the regional Bargaining for Skills projects, set about training the new union learning reps and helped hugely extend participation in what were then called basic skills courses.

Launched in 1998, TUC Learning Services first consolidated and then extended the successful work of the Bargaining for Skills projects in the TUC regions, most importantly by training and supporting what was at that time a new kind of activist – union learning reps, trusted colleagues who were recognised by their co-workers as the best source of help and support on a wide range of skills issues.

The new arm of the TUC originally emerged from a General Council working party launched in 1997 and chaired by the late rail union leader, Jimmy Knapp.

Inspired by *Learning for the Twenty-First Century*, the 1997 report by Professor Bob Fryer that made the case for the development of a lifelong learning culture throughout the UK, the Learning Services task group report to the 1998 TUC Congress set out the unanimous view that unions should up their

game on learning because of the enormous importance of skills to the economy.

And it proposed that the key contribution the union movement could make would be to formalise the new role of the union learning rep, someone who could not only support their members with learning but also work with existing reps to bring skills into the union mainstream.

One of the most significant developments during the Learning Services era was the high priority given to improving what were then called basic skills, later skills for life and now functional skills.

Basic skills have long been embedded in TUC Education courses for union reps, who needed strong literacy and numeracy skills to be able to represent their members, read and write reports and negotiate with employers, particularly on pay and conditions.

What was new about Learning Services was the enormous widening of participation represented by offering support with English and maths courses to union members and potential members in the workplace.

For the first time, members who had been failed by the education system while at school could gain the skills they missed out on, often in the supportive environment of a workplace learning centre where

The new lifelong learning culture is about opening windows of opportunity; not slamming doors on people the system has failed. It is about giving people a second chance to learn and making these opportunities available throughout their life. It is about enabling people to acquire the competence and confidence to enhance their employability and to increase their career chances in a world of rapid changes in markets, technology and work organisation. More than this, a learning society is about developing active citizens with the skills to learn and to participate in a democratic society within their workplace and local communities.”

TUC Learning Services task group report, September 1998

colleagues helped each other with anything that was a struggle.

The drive to open up learning opportunities to those who had missed out while growing up (and usually continued to miss out later too) was rooted in the union movement’s commitment to equality. For the first time, union members were systematically encouraged to think of learning as a rights issue. This was to have profound and far-reaching consequences in the decades ahead.

One of the most significant developments during the Learning Services era was the high priority given to improving what were then called basic skills, later skills for life and now functional skills.”

TUC Learning Services widened participation in English, maths and IT learning.

Photo: Roy Peters



Funding skills for growth



Through changing governments and evolving economic priorities over the past two decades, the Union Learning Fund has continued to help build a culture of workplace learning across the country.

The 1998 launch of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) marked a significant change in the evolution of government skills policy by allocating public money to the trade union movement to invest in workplace learning.

It was a decision rooted in the evidence of the previous 10 years. As the Green Paper that originally proposed the ULF pointed out, the regional TUC Bargaining for Skills projects had already demonstrated how unions could work successfully with employers and local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) to boost skills levels. In addition, UNISON's Return to Learn programme provided further evidence that unions could work

effectively with providers – in this case, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) – to help members improve their reading, writing, research, IT and maths skills.

In the early days, projects tended to be small-scale: in the first round, 45 projects were awarded an average of £40,000 each. For example, media and entertainment union BECTU (now part of Prospect) ran an early ULF project for backstage crew at the English National Opera

called Training Opportunities for Skills Confidence and Achievement (TOSCA) – the success of the original programme enabled the union to expand it later to cover more workplaces.

It was later, as unions demonstrated their ability to manage projects that met and exceeded their targets, that it became the norm for unions to apply for funding on a larger scale, with national projects holding the reins for local and regional work.



Trade unions have long made a valuable contribution to workplace education. Through this route many employees are encouraged to become interested in learning, leading on, for example, to further study in higher education or at residential colleges. We propose to support innovative projects in workplace education by establishing an Employee Education Development Fund. We will allocate £2 million to this fund next year and will discuss with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) how it can most effectively be used.”

The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain, Department for Education and Employment, February 1998

The Union Learning Fund continues to deliver impressive results for workplace learners



Photo: Roy Peters

For the first eight years, the ULF was run by a small team of civil servants in what was then the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE), based in the former Manpower Services Commission building in Sheffield. Originally set up in 1973, the MSC had coordinated a range of employment and training services until it was replaced by the 72 TECs in the late 1980s.

In the original division of labour, the civil servants were responsible

for the contracts while Learning Services supported the unions who made successful bids into the ULF.

But with the creation of unionlearn in 2006, management of the fund was transferred to unionlearn outright – a ringing endorsement of the union movement’s strong record in successfully supporting the use of public money to boost workplace learning and skills.

According to the latest union learning survey by the University

of Exeter, ULF’s boost to jobs, wages and productivity delivers an estimated £1.6bn-plus net contribution to the economy.

It is these significant outcomes that continue to be achieved from a relatively modest outlay that have ensured that the ULF, unlike some other initiatives from the same era, has continued to deliver for two decades, under governments of all stripes.

“The Union Learning Fund's boost to jobs, wages and productivity delivers an estimated £1.6bn-plus net contribution to the economy.”



Photo: John Jones

Ready for the challenges ahead

With the help of unionlearn, the TUC and the unions are helping members gain the learning and skills they will need in all aspects of their lives as we negotiate the fourth industrial revolution.

The creation of unionlearn has helped the TUC and its affiliate unions expand their work on learning and skills by bringing together what had been three different strands of work – member learning, reps' training and the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

When unionlearn was launched at Congress House in 2006, it represented a major development of the union learning agenda.

“The creation of unionlearn was a qualitative change, which perfectly demonstrated how we had succeeded in making unions indispensable to effective workplace learning and emphasised how much the government trusted us to deliver even more,” says unionlearn director Kevin Rowan.

“It was also an acknowledgement of the quality and integrity of what unions had already achieved since the creation of the ULF and a recognition of our track record in

Union projects tap into the thirst for learning in workplaces across the country.

Photo: Sasa Sevic



engaging hard-to-reach learners in a way that nobody else could.”

Unionlearn has indeed worked hard to open doors to many of the groups that had been excluded from learning in the past. In keeping with the union movement's commitment to equality and inclusion, it has helped thousands of workers gain their first qualifications and supported part-time workers (many of them women), shift workers, disabled workers (including many with learning differences like dyslexia), Black and minority ethnic workers and migrant workers.

Union learning is increasingly supporting workers to adapt to significant change, especially the impact of automation, and the TUC and CBI are currently collaborating with government to establish a new National Retraining Scheme.

Unionlearn's continued success is demonstrated by the figures: every year, it helps around 200,000 learners to access opportunities to improve their skills in a wide range of subjects.

The people who make that possible are the union learning reps (ULRs) that have been the backbone of the union learning revolution from the

outset. Between them, unionlearn and Learning Services have trained more than 40,000 ULRs over the past two decades, sending them back to their workplaces to encourage their co-workers to see where they could go with the help of the learning they need.

In addition, TUC Education trains close to 30,000 unions reps of all varieties (including ULRs) every year, activists who are able to not only stand up for fairness and equality at work but also help the organisations they work for function more effectively through improved workplace relationships.

A key component in unionlearn's continued success over the past 12 years, through governments with ever-changing political outlooks, has been the rigorous independent evaluation of its work.

The accumulation of more than a decade's worth of robust data has made it considerably easier to persuade politicians of the need for continued support in an era when value for money is increasingly important to any element of public expenditure.

Another key ingredient in unionlearn's effectiveness is the

“We have worked very hard and hit a lot of targets; we have been innovative and creative; and we have reached new learners in new ways.”

way it has remained nimble and innovative in its response to the changing political, economic and indeed technological landscape.

ULRs can now use the unionlearn SkillCheck tool to help learners assess their English, maths and IT skill levels on a desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone, and many individual unions have developed IT solutions to help learners and ULRs.

In addition, TUC Education now offers a growing range of courses for union reps (including ULRs) online, which means new reps no longer have to wait until a classroom course is scheduled and can get started on their training immediately and work their way through the curriculum at times that suit their work and home lives.

And union reps can brush up their knowledge and skills on a wide range of workplace issues using the ever-expanding resource of TUC Education’s eNotes, short online modules that mix text, video and quizzes to highlight the key elements of subjects as diverse

as apprenticeships, organising migrant workers, combatting sexual harassment and supporting mid-life development.

For the future, as we all begin to grapple with the economic, social and educational impacts of the fourth industrial revolution, unionlearn will remain awake to the evolving needs of workplace learners.

“We have worked very hard and hit a lot of targets; we have been innovative and creative; we have reached new learners in new ways; and we have all heard the testimony from union learners about how they have changed their lives through the work we have done to date,” says director Kevin Rowan.

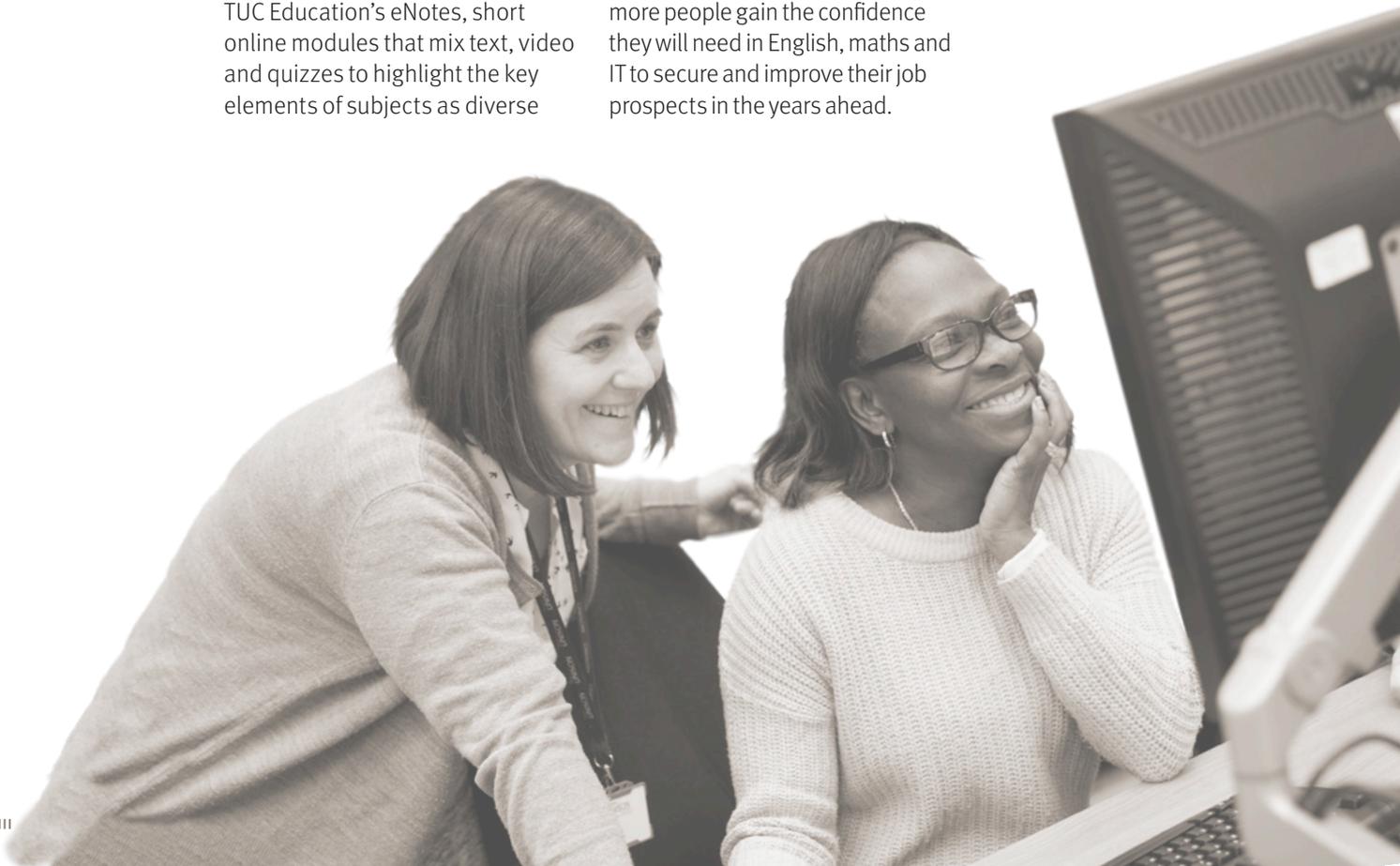
“But we still have a huge job to do, as the country still needs to improve its skills base, still needs to create better quality and more inclusive apprenticeships, still needs to help more people gain the confidence they will need in English, maths and IT to secure and improve their job prospects in the years ahead.

“There is no doubt that this is a challenge for all of us – government, employers and unions alike. But if there is one thing the trade union movement has demonstrated again and again over the past 150 years, it is that we are always up for the challenge.”



“Unionlearn is the single most important development in trade unionism in a generation – something that can act as a catalyst for a trade union resurgence in the years ahead; that shows we are fully attuned to the challenges posed by globalisation and labour market change; and that proves we are in step with the aspirations of today’s workers.”

The then TUC general secretary Brendan Barber on the launch of unionlearn, 2006



Unionlearn in numbers



WE TRAIN AROUND

30,000

union representatives through
TUC Education every year

WE HELP AROUND

200,000

people access learning
opportunities every year.

WE HAVE TRAINED MORE THAN

40,000

ULRs in the past 20 years

This title may also be made available, on request, in accessible electronic formats or in Braille, audiotape and large print, at no extra cost.

We are enormously grateful to the current and former unionlearn staff who generously contributed their insights and assessments to help put together this booklet: Bert Clough, Dave Eva, Barry Francis, Phil Gowan, Liz Rees, Liz Smith, Judith Swift and Jackie Williams.

Published by unionlearn

Congress House
London WC1B 3LS

Tel 020 7467 1212
www.unionlearn.org.uk

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