Learning Journeys
trade union learners in their own words

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This research paper was commissioned by unionlearn to inform the TUC’s policy development on delivery of learning in the workplace. As such it is not a statement of TUC policy.

Unionlearn is the TUC organisation that supports union-led strategies for learning and skills. It helps unions to open up learning and skills opportunities for their members and develop and deliver trade union education for their representatives and officers.

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The unionlearn mission is to “transform workers’ life chances through lifelong learning”. Over the years unionlearn has published many ‘good news’ stories demonstrating our success in this area, and has heard many more encouraging anecdotes. We have evaluated the impact of union learning through interviews with union officers, union learning representatives and employers and this study of learners provides an equally important dimension. The value of the union learning model has been recognised by all political parties, and many influential employers. This research has followed the life histories of a small sample of union learners in order to determine how and why union learning succeeds in breaking down some of the barriers to learning.

The research clearly demonstrates that the added value of union learning is many-faceted. Accessibility of learning spaces, flexibility of learning delivery methods and variety of subject matter all have an important part to play in reinforcing the important role of the union learning representative as a primary enabler of learning activity.

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model for union learning, and an overwhelming conclusion from this report is that adaptability is an element to be both celebrated and preserved.

Tom Wilson
Director, unionlearn
Abstract

This report explores, in the words of the learners themselves, the extent to which union learning facilitates equality and diversity in access to learning and precipitates further personal development, job progression and/or employability for learners. It finds that union learning provides a second chance for workers who have had negative experiences of compulsory education, addressing what they feel is an educational deficit and who may subsequently become ‘serial learners’. The report concludes that significant barriers continue to exist, such as cost and a lack of confidence amongst learners, but also employer reluctance and work intensification leading to demands on time and energy. However, in its application of adult education pedagogy, union learning attracts learners, with the role of union learning representatives (ULRs) key to overcoming barriers. At the workplace, learning can promote social and collective interaction and be a source of well-being. What is more, the learners speaking here value learning highly, whether it is for work or personal development, be it formal or informal, lifelong or drawn from wider life experience – ‘lifewide’. Whilst learning is central to their own self-esteem, at the same time they often express a broader commitment to the wider social purpose of education.
Executive summary

- Union learning provides a second chance for workers who have had negative experiences of compulsory education, retrospectively addressing socio-economic disadvantage, discrimination and inequality.
- In particular it engages a generation of older workers who did not expect to stay on in education and who had to leave for financial reasons or in response to family expectations, which may have been defined by gender.
- These learners often perceive themselves as having an educational deficit and that motivates their return to education which they see as integral to self-esteem and personal development.
- The narratives identify ‘serial learners’ who are continuously engaged – both formally and informally – in learning and who consider learning to be a lifelong process.
- Union learning may provide additional learning opportunities for those on existing learning journeys or be a catalyst for learning and further education.
- Learning journeys start from different points and social locations and may not fulfil aspirations, although this does not undermine the powerful commitment to the value of education that sustains them.
- For some workers learning supports them in their current jobs and/or provides opportunities for further career development or is seen as promoting individual employability in a context of job cuts – although this is not proven.
- For migrant workers English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses may help them to use existing qualifications in the UK labour market or to promote their integration at the level of the workplace and within the wider community and society.
- The confidence and personal development that learning encourages facilitates democratic engagement at the workplace but also in the wider community.
- Many learners spoke of the impact their learning has on their families, particularly in allowing them to engage with their children’s education.
- One learner defined her learning centre as an “oasis” and there is evidence that learning spaces allow workers some respite from work, particularly in the context of intensified work or poor industrial relations. Overall the strong social aspect of learning and its capacity for personal development can promote well-being at work and beyond.
- The social relationships and interaction upon which learning is based reinforced, for learners, workplace relationships and can promote integration within and beyond the workplace.
- A number of the distinct strengths of adult education pedagogy are reproduced in union learning spaces. Learners value informal, inclusive, participative and reflexive learning in contrast to prior experiences of school and traditional teacher-pupil relationships.
- The combination of adult education pedagogy and location of learning in the workplace means the majority of union learners are wedded to the wider social and societal purpose of education, although this is not necessarily counterposed to learning for work and longer-term employability.
- A progressive pedagogical model is, however, constrained by the wider context of work intensification, employer reluctance to grant time off and, increasingly, cuts in jobs and hours and the introduction of or increase in costs for learning. Some respondents also expressed concern at facing a ‘learning ceiling’ which meant that they (as ULRs or learners) might be denied access to higher level learning.
There are issues about trade union identity in workplace learning – some learners were unaware of the union’s role or union learning was defined as training for union representatives – representative training can be divorced from union learning when there could be pathways between them.

The reflexivity of union learning and its location in the workplace can provide a space to discuss employment relations in the workplace and to reinforce and promote collective relations, which in turn can also provide pathways to unionisation, activism and politicisation.
Introduction

The focus of this report is union learning. By union learning we mean that learning which is sometimes funded by Union Learning Fund projects, but which is always delivered through the auspices of trade unions – sometimes in partnership with employers. It is distinct from traditional trade union activist education and is part of a wider strategy to provide accessible education and learning to workers which may be work or non-work related.

For many people, returning to learn is a major step – as in this example:

“They wanted to be valued, and it gave them some self-esteem. And that’s what it was all about. I got someone who said, ‘don’t even think about ... because I can’t do it, I’m thick, I’m stupid. I’ve been told I’ve been thick and stupid since I was about four years old’. But if you keep going back and be persistent with them, eventually they break down. They actually say ‘well actually I’m not thick and stupid, I can do this, I can do that’. And this individual ... he’s now on a Foundation degree and every now and then I bump into him and say ‘well are you thick and stupid now?’”

(ULR, UNISON)

This report explores the extent to which union learning can facilitate equality and diversity in access to learning and precipitate further personal development for learners. It identifies and describes the processes by which unions and ULRs help remove barriers to learning, the factors that influence this and the possible long-term impact upon learners in terms of current and future work, personal development, democratic engagement and future learning – formal and informal, lifelong and context-based. Based upon interviews with learners, the report aims to convey the impact of learning through the words of the learners themselves.

The lifelong learning policies of the various Labour governments have transformed the relationship between trade unions and learning. Whilst there has always been a strong link between trade unions and activist and membership education, this expanded significantly after 1997. The transformation is reflected in the rise of a new union activist – the union learning representative; a new trade union ‘learning organisation’ – unionlearn: and a policy emphasis on learning at work. (DFEE 1999, 2000; Lloyd & Payne 2002). For Labour governments there has been a focus upon lifelong learning as a way of skilling workers and making them more employable, whereas many hold a much wider understanding that learning has a wider social and political purpose – learning for life (Fryer 1997, 2010; DFEE 1998; Wilson 2010). There may be a tension between these two concepts of learning, with learning for employability increasingly dominant.

In this report we look at the ways in which union learning is promoting inclusion – helping workers to access learning from which they might previously have been excluded. The learning might be for their jobs and working lives but also for their own personal development and may benefit the wider community. We already have some indication from previous studies that union learning can be effective because potential learners feel more confident learning through their union than they do through other more formal employer training or education (Rainbird 2000; Heyes 2000; Stuart & Robinson 2007). This means that for many adults union learning gives them a second chance to ‘have a go’ at learning.

The report describes how and why these ‘non-traditional’ learners learn within a union learning context. There is a significant literature on how adults learn in the workplace (Boud and Garrick 1999; Evan & Rainbird 2000; Illeris 2010), but little identifying the specific trade union contribution. One reason why union learning may be successful and inclusive (as demonstrated through the voices of learners in this report) is that the proven teaching and learning methods used in adult education tend to be used in union learning (Rogers 2007). Teaching and learning methods are often based upon reflection on experience, working with others, participating in learning that is meaningful and relevant, learner centred and ‘learning by doing’. Adult learners need
to know why they are learning something. (Knowles 1973; Knowles et al, 1995). Some writers say that adults learn for complex reasons, including a desire for self-transformation based on the need for social belonging and self-esteem (Maslow 1970). It is also argued that union/adult learners need to participate in their own learning (group work and problem solving) and prefer learning that is practical, which makes them feel confident and which motivates them.

Views of teaching and learning have changed dramatically in recent years and perceptions of learners have shifted from them being seen as passive knowledge receivers to active learners who can learn how to learn. Tutors who relate to learners in this way are vitally important in facilitating union learning. The literature on how courses can be made attractive to particular groups, including black and minority ethnic (BME) learners through, for example, the running of black history courses, illustrates the success of these methods (Tuckett et al, 2008b).

Flexibility in where learning takes place also plays a key role in adult and union learning. Many commentators are now writing about how learning in non-traditional locations bodes well for inclusivity and diversity (Illeris 2008; Miller 2008; Derrick et al 2010; Ecclestone et al 2010). The interviews cited below support the claims made by those writing about ‘learning spaces’ that learning in workplaces, learning centres and community settings really appeals to union learners.

Trade unions are collective organisations and much literature, as we discuss below, suggests that adults learn best in groups or collectively, though their learning style is also self-directed. (Knowles 1973; Knowles et al 1995; OECD 2003). Adults, it is argued, whilst initially learning for themselves, will usually quickly begin to see the wider social purpose and impact of their learning because they learn best with others and because the learning they do has a meaningful context (Lave 1990). Learning is situated in what is going on, rather than in abstract situations and ideas. Learners can also become involved in “communities of practice” whereby they share a mutual purpose supported by shared experiences and information (Lave & Wenger 1991).

In this sense, union learning can help to stimulate a wider learning agenda to do with personal development and society. What emerged from so many of the interviews conducted for this research was a powerful belief in education and what it can do for the individual and the society in a practical and real sense.

It is also clear that adult/union learners value learning as an informal activity inside and outside of work. A recent NIACE report (2008) claims that adults prefer to learn informally through discussion and reflection rather than through structured activities. This is important because although accreditation is one aim of union learning, one of its particular strengths is the recognition that all learning is valuable both lifelong and ‘lifewide’. Lifewide learning is the notion that learners learn from and in real contexts and authentic settings in their wider lives and that this understanding should feed into adult learning curricula and practice. Commentators like Jackson (2010) argue that if this mode of learning is not taken into account then this prevents development of the whole person.

Finally union learning is about variety and change – in terms of both individuals and situations. Union learning is valued not only for what it can bring to the individual in terms of their skills and progress at work but also (as reflected in the voices of learners here) what it can bring to the ‘collective’. It is true that many barriers to learning continue to exist – in particular time, employer reluctance to give time off and cost. However where they can, union learners strive to overcome these barriers. The long tradition of adult and union education as transformational reverberates throughout the interviews. Union learning can be about the government’s learning and skills agenda – and its limitations in terms of challenging social divisions (McIlroy 2009), but for...
some writers adult learning is nothing less than individually and/or socially transformative and adult learning and critical reflection is essential to social and individual action and change (Freire 1972; Mezirow 1981; Biesta 2006). Whilst the literature suggests the importance of collective learning it rarely explores the potential of collective learning for collectivism and whether and how, in a trade union context, learners might absorb collective or trade union or wider political values – something we explore in this research.
Research methods

Stuart et al’s (2010) evaluation of the Union Learning Fund and unionlearn suggests that learning has had an impact on equality, both in terms of groups that it is engaging with and the proportion of projects specifically addressing equality issues. There is evidence that learning has attracted women, BME workers, migrant workers and those in lower skilled jobs with limited basic skills. This research aims to develop this quantitative analysis through qualitative research designed to capture processes and experiences.

The research involves in-depth biographical interviews with 42 learners largely drawn from a sampling frame of 300 learners who first engaged with learning prior to 2008. The list of learners was provided by unionlearn. These were learners who had had some engagement with either unionlearn or with TUC Education from all English regions and who had previously agreed that they could be contacted. All those in the sampling frame were approached to confirm contact details and that they would be prepared to be interviewed and available in the time period. Where possible these were contacted by email, otherwise by telephone and/or post. At the same time a short questionnaire requested details of gender, ethnicity, education, current job, the sector in which they work, union (where known) and age. This survey was provided electronically, by post or conducted by telephone. We got 41 responses from this sample, and we were able to interview 30 of these respondents in the time period. In addition, we interviewed 12 other learners who were referred to us through union learning representatives or other learners. We followed up particular groups of respondents in order to ensure that the data met the project objectives in terms of facilitating equality and diversity and that the sample was varied in terms of the following: gender, ethnicity, education, skill levels (defined by current job), sector, union, age and region.

In addition attempts were made to ensure that the sample included a proportion of union members who were not currently active in the union as well as existing union representatives, and to identify a number of part-time workers as respondents. Care was taken to ensure that both higher and lower skilled workers were reflected in the sample, but particularly lower skilled workers where the impact of workplace learning might be greater.

Two types of interviews were conducted. Five respondents were interviewed using Biographical Narrative Interpretive Methodology (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001). This process and the outcome of it will be described separately in a future report but we have extracted narrative from these interviews and embedded it into this report. A series of ‘learning snapshot’ boxes can also be found throughout the text of this report based on the BNIM interviews. For the remaining respondents the interviews were face-to-face and based upon a semi-structured interview topic guide. They were conducted at the respondents’ homes, workplaces, learning centres or out of necessity in cafes or in two cases in the respondents’ taxis! These were also biographical in nature and encouraged respondents to reflect upon the role of learning in their working lives and to identify and describe the specific processes by which unions and ULRs may have removed barriers to learning and the factors that influenced this. They focussed especially on the detailed process of engagement with learning through the union at work. The questions were designed to capture the possible long-term and wider impact of learning on:

- work and expectations at work
- personal development and aspirations for further education
- democratic engagement, including union activism.

The interviews covered:

- education
- current job and job history including expectations of work
- post-education, in-work training
- further education outside of work
- aspirations and expectations in terms of learning and education prior to union learning
- perceived barriers to training and learning
- engagement with union learning
- union learning experience
- learning spaces and pedagogy
- impact of union learning in terms of work
- wider impact of learning
- engagement with union in terms of membership and activism prior to and post-union learning
- perceptions of role of ULR or other union representative over learning
- future aspirations in terms of learning, work and the union.

Interviews lasted around 90 minutes, and were recorded with the permission of the respondent. All respondents were provided with a participant information sheet giving information on the project and describing what participation would entail. These assured respondents of confidentiality, that they would not be identified in any subsequent report and that all data would be stored securely in the Working Lives Research Institute with transcripts anonymised. Respondents were required to sign consent forms giving permission for the interview to be recorded and for them to be quoted anonymously. Interviews were fully transcribed and the researchers identified key themes, using a collective and inductive process.
Of the 42 learners interviewed, exactly half (21) were women and half (21) were men. Table 1 shows that, with the exception of senior managers, the learners represented a range of occupations as defined by the Office for National Statistics (Standard Occupational Classification 2010), but with nearly half in professional, associate professional or administrative occupations. Nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) were working in the public sector, including seven in the Royal Mail or Post Office.

Nearly a third (13 or 31 per cent) of those interviewed were over 50 years of age, 26 (62 per cent) were between 31 and 49 and only three (seven per cent) were under 30. In terms of ethnicity, seven identified themselves as black British, 31 as white British, two as black other and two as white other. Four learners had undergone ESOL training and were migrant workers. Eight (19 per cent) of the learners indicated they had a disability and a third (14 per cent) had caring responsibilities. In terms of their qualifications when they left full-time education, nine (21 per cent) said they left school with no qualifications, 17 said they left with GCSEs (41 per cent), one with A levels, seven had degrees (17 per cent) and six had a vocational qualification. As Table 2 shows the respondents were spread throughout the English regions with nearly one quarter in Yorkshire and the Humber, but under one in ten in the Southern and Eastern region.

Whilst the majority – 36 – were union members at the time of the interview and six (14 per cent) were not, over half 24 (57 per cent) had active union roles, and over one quarter were union learning representatives. The interviewees represented 14 different unions: CWU (8), GMB (8), PCS (5), Unite (4), UNISON (2), Napo (1), URTU (1), NUT (1), TSSA (1), RCM (1), ATL (1), RMT (1), Usdaw (1), Prospect (1); and six were not union members.

### Table 1 – Respondents by occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational category</th>
<th>Number of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers, directors and senior officials</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional occupations</td>
<td>5 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professional and technical occupations</td>
<td>11 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and secretarial occupations</td>
<td>9 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled trades occupations</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring, leisure and other service occupations</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and customer service occupations</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process, plant and machine operatives</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary occupations</td>
<td>6 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>42 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Respondents by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Number of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>7 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>9 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>7 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern and Eastern</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>5 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and the Humber</td>
<td>10 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>42 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Learning and the unions

“\[I\] wouldn’t be here now [in the learning centre] if it \[wasn’t for the union]” (learner, GMB)

The narratives of learners allow us to explore not only the significance of the workplace in learning, but also the specific role the union, and in particular the union learning representative, plays in facilitating union learning and whether and in what ways learners perceive union learning as distinctive and part of wider collective organisation of the workplace.

Surprisingly in a number of cases respondents were not actually aware that the learning they had done had anything to do with a trade union. Two were non-members who had undertaken ESOL training. One said she had never been asked to join a union; the other had been asked, but could not afford to pay the membership fees. They did not associate trade unions with the learning they were doing. Another learner (ex PCS member) had been in a union at the time of his union learning, but had resigned membership because he “had some bad experiences” and began to question what the union was doing for him. Also, he said that the learning opportunities on offer seemed to dry up and he did not see any further courses relevant to him.

On the other hand for some respondents union learning primarily meant union representative education, including ULR training, further suggesting that wider union learning can become divorced from union activism in the minds of both learners and reps. In the words of a ULR in the retail sector:

“\[S\]ometimes I suppose it’s a play on words, when they say unionlearn they associate it with you \[you\] must be a shop steward or you must be some kind of rep to access that learning.” (ULR, Usdaw)

Some learners located their learning firmly in a trade union context; one in local government linked it to her union work as branch health and safety and education officer:

“It hasn’t really been relevant to the work because I haven’t found anything on the courses available that does link to my work. If there was I would have immediately taken them. So the courses I’ve done have been linked to my union representation.”

In these cases participants valued the interaction with others on union courses, seminars and conferences, as for an administrative officer in a government department:

“You meet up with these people and you think your problems are unique and then when you meet up with all the other sides, they’re not, they’re all the same. And you get loads of feedback and you can come back and try and improve on it. You get to know what they’re doing to try and relieve the situation or whatever and you just go on from there.” (ULR, PCS)

Whilst a proportion of learners were already committed trade unionists when they came to union learning, for others union learning has encouraged identification with the trade union; one GMB member, for example, stated that union learning had changed his opinion of the union because previously he had associated the union with disputes and negative activity. For others, however, the union was not something they had thought much about, as for one learner, who had never previously been active:

“I didn’t know much about the union. I was told when I started [work] it’s better to join the union so I joined." (learner, GMB)

There is evidence of people both joining a union and becoming more active following union learning, as in the case of this female postal worker:

“I’ve become a union member as well, and I hope they can help me more than before, if I need any help and more advice if I need it.” (learner, CWU)

In the words of a probation officer:

“Before I didn’t know really that much about unions and used to – some people have a negative view and I think that rubs off on you. They say unions are rubbish, they’re obstacles but now I understand that what you learn from the unions, thereby being in a union you’re more supportive,
more collective and it’s like camaraderie amongst people so I find that really, really good.”
(learner, Napo)

The narratives also suggest the key role of the ULR in facilitating access to learning. Two union learners described how they started learning because they were approached by a ULR. Another talked about the relationship of trust he had with the ULR, who he characterised as a “carer”:

“Because he wants to learn as well and he wants people to learn. He wants people to be able to improve themselves. That’s why someone like that puts himself forward. He’s almost a carer isn’t he? ...He cares that much about people, because he likes to learn and he wants other people to have the opportunity.” (learner, CWU)

For one learner the first course she did through the union was not linked to work, but she enjoyed that so much that she decided to go on to do an NVQ:

“The rail union learning contact at Derby... basically came up to me and said are you interested in doing some of these courses? And he talked to me about it and after I did the holistic therapies one... he said there’s another one that we’re offering called business administration. So he got the information for me and I thought yes, that’s quite interesting... so really it was through him that we found out about all this, because he’s very keen on it, promoting it.” (learner, TSSA)

Another union learner, learning at a FBU learning centre, described how she had received one-to-one support from her ULR throughout her learning and one UNISON member described how union learning had enabled him to empathise with non-traditional learners who, in his words, have been “failed by the school system”. A construction worker who worked closely with the ULR at his workplace to encourage members of his team to attend courses argued that he is successful in this because he is a learner himself:

“When I first initially said to the lads, why don’t you come and do the numeracy and literacy or different things through unionlearn, some did and some didn’t want to come on to it at all. And the ones that said ‘well I’d like to do that but...’ I think I removed the ‘but’ by saying ‘well, I’ll come on it with you’ and I went on it with them so... I think they thought there was a bit of a stigma about going on these courses... So I sort of said ‘well I’ll go on it with you if you want’ and I benefited massively from it but I’ve also seen how much they’ve benefited from it and enjoyed it as well. I want everybody who works for me to go and do the training... I try to inspire them and I try to say you can do it, it’s good for you.” (GMB learner)

Similarly for a GMB ULR:

“I can relate to these people working shifts and not being able to get time to do this and they’ve got kids, they’ve got that to do. They’ve got to go out and earn a few quid and they’ve got to work overtime to pay their mortgage or whatever. So I can relate to that...”

At least two ULRs spoke about how union learning could promote the union in the workplace, for one it was defined in terms of a positive service to members, something picked up in the existing literature (Moore 2009):

“I think it’s become more positive because I think that this is one way where we can encourage people to think widely about union membership rather than just seeing to problems and that unions are there if you have a problem. This is a positive way of promoting the union saying, this is another function of it. And it’s often a way to open people’s minds to what the union is really about.” (ULR, NUT)

Another learner talked about how union learning signified that the union and management “cared”. One ULR felt that union learning could provide a space to facilitate discussion on issues at work and through this promote union organisation:

“It definitely does that because obviously, if people are in there, you can actually say to them
(because we get a lot of people here who aren’t in the union – we don’t push it down their throat, but the first thing we ask is “do you want to join?”) …it’s something that we can talk to people about. And we don’t push union stuff into people, we sometimes sit in there and have discussions, but certainly with what’s happening within the mail centre, and the way that people are being treated, and other various bits and pieces. So we are in a position where we can help to talk to people, we do that and know what’s going on.” (ULR, CWU)

For a number of union learners, learning has led to increased or more effective activism in the union and has helped them to deal with problems at work, for themselves and on behalf of others. For example, in the case of a GMB member learning had given her more confidence with “writing official letters and for dealing with issues that come up at work” and in engaging with issues at work and speaking up in her union when she feels they are letting her and her colleagues down. For a UNISON ULR:

“It’s helping me, all the learning is helping me to become a better person in writing reports for different jobs, all to do with the union, just… giving me confidence basically to open up. I’m not a confident person, not a confident communicator, so it’s helping me in that sense.”

Another GMB ULR had also acquired the self-belief to deal with management:

“I’m a lot more confident and the very fact that I’m sitting here meeting with you, which I wouldn’t have done maybe six years ago, I don’t get phased by anyone now, if you like. Where before, when I first started the union, I can always remember the first meeting I went to as a union [rep] – I sat down with senior management and I thought I can’t handle this, I was like a little mouse frightened to say anything. And that soon went because you soon realised that these people are no better than you, you can be just as educated as them, just as knowledgeable as them. So that’s about my learning experience so far.”

One union learner described her politicisation since becoming a ULR in the retail sector:

“I’m on the political committee. I helped out in the general election, I’ve become more politically active really I would say… I’m actively always out campaigning. We did the general election; we were on the phone canvassing every Tuesday night four years before the election – the door-to-door knocking. I’m a shop steward, I go to the conferences… my face is always there somewhere doing something, helping out, to promote, run campaigns. I’m standing for election in York as a councillor at the moment… As much as I can go, get in contact with the union and help out and promote any campaigns that we’re running. I’m going down to London on the 26th for the cuts march, we’re going to Durham for the Durham miners gala in July.” (ULR, Usdaw)

Union learning courses can thus reinforce union values; as one GMB learner put it “It’s made me more militant… I expect I’m a bit more confident.” It can also help to challenge existing values:

“It’s definitely made me more civilised. More tolerant, I’m a lot more tolerant than I was when I was younger, and instead of looking for the bad in people now I always look for the good. Different faiths, creeds, colours they don’t mean anything to me. Job positions they don’t mean anything to me, sexuality doesn’t mean anything and that wasn’t so when I was younger. But that’s only through education and being educated, it’s not being preached at but by learning.” (ULR, Unite)

Another ULR argued that learning is:

“...great, for different cultures, different backgrounds, I’m all for history now. I never used to look for history but I’m all for history and learning about other people’s cultures, what they do. And when I go on holiday I never sit and sunbathe, I’m always there for the culture and see what goes on. And I think that’s more from the learning side again, I’m thirsty for that knowledge.” (ULR, Usdaw)
One respondent made a clear link between learning and political education:

“I’m going to learn all about that one of these days and then I’ll stand up for little old dears who can’t fight for themselves. Because it’s not right, they’ve put their ten bobs’ worth into the kitty and come the day – me mum wanted a bit of help, they were going to charge her £31.50 an hour, get a life, no way. You’re wrong, you’re in the wrong. It’s morally wrong and legally wrong and it ain’t happening. So I think there must be a few more thousand people like me, really and it shouldn’t be happening. So I’d like to learn more and I’d like to stand up and shout for all those little old dears who can’t do it themselves.” (ULR, CWU)

For a driver and ULR, education was related to awareness of people’s rights, in particular rights for migrant workers;

“When I left school I had no education, well basic education. I think education is very important because we’ve got a lot of migrant workers in our place and they seem to think that just because a manager says you can do this, you can do that... if you don’t know your rights then you have no rights. So I think it’s important that people know what they’re entitled to... I think a lot of the time you find that people who don’t really know what they’re entitled to because they’re poorly educated, you get frustrated and they start slapping tables – they’re losing the argument aren’t they? Losing the moral ground. And I think through education people know – even if they’re not entitled to it – they can communicate what they want to the manager and they will get respect from the managers through that and they’ll possibly get something, not exactly what they want but they might get something near to what they want.” (ULR, URTU)

Overall the majority of learners highlighted the importance of learning for the wider society. For example one local government worker described learning as “massively important to society”.

“It gives us the ground rules of self-esteem and things like that which... if the education system stays the same and keeps churning out people who haven’t achieved what they really should have achieved... they become part of society’s problems.” (learner, UNISON)

He argued that the education system is failing enormous numbers of people who then go on to become society’s problem leading to social exclusion and ‘education apartheid’ and a number of others made a link between an education deficit and anti-social behaviour, echoed in the comments of an Usdaw ULR:

“Social interaction is one of the key learnings, learning to interact with others, having good working relationships, a good marriage maybe, good communication with the kids. Even with others, friends, if you don’t have that social community and learning within what you can learn from each other, then we would be a poor society.”

Whilst most highlighted the social function of learning, there was also some emphasis upon the importance of learning to employability and the national economy, reflecting the previous government’s skills agenda:

“Really as far as this country goes, we’ve got to be more sort of ahead of everybody else learning wise, technical knowledge, research, because that’s the only way we’re going to keep ahead and keep our standards of living up. Everybody else in India, China, they’re all industrialising really quickly aren’t they and they’re going to be taking our jobs if we don’t keep ahead. So we’ve got to keep learning, you’ve got to keep your brain ticking over haven’t you, keep up to date with things, don’t let things slip and then they’ll overtake us. So I think it definitely is so important, training and companies keeping abreast of what’s going on. They need to invest in new computers, new software, training of the staff, it’s so important really.” (learner, TSSA)
Another also saw learning in the context of global competitiveness:

“The only way we can compete in Europe, never mind the world, is if we educate our youngsters up to Level Three and Level Four. We can go there and we can say yes bring your IT over here, we can build your IT, we’ve got the people to do it. We’ve got the technicians and we’ve got the scientists.” (ULR, Unite)

As we see above and throughout this report, the narratives of learners can simultaneously reflect and move between potentially distinct discourses around employability, skills and national and global productivity and more inclusive conceptualisations around democratic citizenship and social justice. Within the mind of individual learners learning can be about promoting their individual employability and at the same time be personally transformational. Nearly all respondents ascribe to the transformational capacity of education (Mezirow 1981).

Further, locating learning in the workplace and trade union can reinforce and promote collective workplace relationships and union values and act as a catalyst to activism and politicisation. Yet there is no automatic relationship between learning and the union, there may be no union identity to courses, or learning may be associated solely with training for union representatives. Here the role of the union learning representative is significant, firstly in giving workers the confidence to learn, but also in ensuring that learning promotes collective and union values as well as access.
Learning snapshot – Billy

Billy is 55 and was born and grew up in South Shields. He is a civil servant with an administrative role in a government department. He did a variety of other jobs before he started in this post about eight years ago: he was a soldier in the army for ten years, a bus driver for about 14 years and a delivery company driver for five years. He is now also a very active health and safety representative for his union PCS.

Billy was one of our respondents who came to learning late in life. He said that he now loves learning: “I think it’s because I didn’t like it when I was at school.” He played truant from school for most of the year when he was 15; he said that school “was just really not a very nice time” and talked about teachers using corporal punishment. There was no expectation of him staying on in education:

“I am trying to think when I left school 1971... it was the culture or the thing to do to leave school, especially for a guy and go straight into some kind of employment and bring money in. That was the thing I had ingrained in me from my father and education basically wasn’t a top priority.”

Billy left school and became an apprentice tool maker and spent two years doing a technician’s course and working at a factory. He said he “absolutely hated it” so after his two years he left that and decided to join the army. During his ten years in the army he was a gunner and learnt to drive and when he left the army he became a bus driver, but in this job received no training: “While I was a bus driver for 14 years I actually did no learning whatsoever apart from learning through life”. He became the vice chair of his union branch and did a number of union training courses, including on casework. During this period he was also politically quite active and got elected as a local councillor. He was unable to contest re-election, and gave up his job as a bus driver after he got attacked a few times. He then worked as a delivery company driver for a few years. He lost that job because some old injuries from his days as a soldier were making heavy lifting and moving difficult for him. Then, after being on the dole for about a year, he found his present job and joined the union quite soon after he started, but got more active after taking part in a strike:

“There was a strike here, about pension rights or something just a one day strike. I wasn’t on the union [committee], but I was in the union and on the strike day I just got up and I made a couple of flasks of coffee and some sandwiches and I brought them down for the pickets. The next thing, I stayed with them for a while, and the next thing I knew I had the arm band on, official picket and I had a placard."

Billy then stood as a rep, got elected and was then on another learning journey. He did an NVQ Level 2 in Business Administration which he said he enjoyed. He then did a stage 1 Health and Safety course which he said he took to “like a duck to water.” He then went on to do stage 2 and then a Diploma in Health and Safety; “I was thinking: in my 50s I’ve got a modern qualification.” He has also done other courses like public speaking and negotiations with his union. He is now a very passionate health and safety rep at his workplace.

Billy enjoys the networking side of his unionlearn courses. He says he learns a lot just from his peers:

“I go to TUC regional Health & Safety forum in Newcastle, where different unions are represented. We talk about new technology, like nanotechnology. We talk about anything, like office space to accidents and building sites, whatever it may be at that time, or whatever somebody brings to the meeting. I think there was a call centre guy came with some problems, and I gave him a lot of information that I knew and apparently he got everything sorted. I go there in my own time at my own expense and I don’t get anything from the branch – it’s just me doing it for the love of the health & safety side of things.”
Motivations

“Priority wasn’t given to my education. If I wanted to study, that was in addition to what my role as a daughter was in the home, so I found that not fair.” (learner, Napo)

This section discusses the factors that motivated the respondents to learn i.e. how they come to learning and what makes them do it. We know that motivation is a significant factor in how and why adults learn and this is likely to apply to union learners. Motivation takes many forms – from the need to raise self-esteem to proving something to oneself and others, to improving life chances (Knowles 1980). A poor formal school experience was a motivating factor for many respondents though it also explained why so many did not return to learning until they felt more confident (or ‘driven’) as adults. A significant number of respondents had negative experiences of school, including bullying and being made to feel useless by teachers. One union learner found school to be a “horrific experience” reporting that, like many of his age (mid-fifties) he was “failed by the system”, he was bullied by teachers for being left handed and punished for perceived failure. A nurse and GMB ULR recalls:

“I always remember this teacher and I always think she should never have been allowed near kids, she was really cruel. She told me mam I’d never learn to read and write... she was cruel and she used to hit you.”

Another described the discrimination she faced as a young black girl at a school where “you had to be much better than the others” to be put forward for O-levels. In response to such experiences of formal education many union learners had a strong urge to prove to themselves, or to others, that they could succeed at learning:

“[I wanted to learn] to prove to myself that I could do it. I wanted to prove a point to myself that I wasn’t thick and stupid. I wasn’t – I could achieve something and I wanted to be the best I possibly could.” (ULR and learner, UNISON)

For other union learners, staying on at school after compulsory education was never an option because of the need to start earning a living:

“I was one of five children. Money was tight so you just wanted to go out and earn your own.” (ULR, PCS)

As one prison officer put it:

“...in those days, working class people didn’t go to university unless they were absolutely brilliant.” (learner, POA)

This ‘gap’ in opportunity was therefore a motivating factor for some. Family expectations often influenced decisions to leave formal education and these could be gendered. One learner described how she was encouraged to leave school at fifteen by her parents for financial reasons, whilst her brother was allowed to stay on. This was the impetus behind her own further education, which she initiated almost as soon as she had left school and continued throughout her life. A joiner described the low expectations his family had of him at a time when jobs and work were plentiful:

“In my day, the expectation was that if you were fairly bright you’d probably do an apprenticeship and if you were just whatever, you’d end up in a factory. And that’s the routes that were open to you. I never knew anyone that went to university at all. There wasn’t that expectation I think to do well I suppose. Maybe that was culturally with my family, I mean that’s not trying to blame them but that’s just the way I was brought up. You went to school, you did an apprenticeship and that’s what you did. Me dad was an upholsterer and that’s all what was expected of me. I would do an apprenticeship in something and that’s what I would end up [as]. We were just working class people. I think in them days if you had done an apprenticeship, you were considered as doing quite well and that’s how it was. It defined who you were, you done a trade and that defined basically you for the rest of your life in a way.” (learner, GMB)
Nearly one third (31 per cent) of those interviewed were over 50 and whilst for some learning had been continuous over the life cycle, for others learning was something that you come to or rediscover in later life, as for this HGV driver:

“When I left school, when I didn’t have a chance of doing any learning. Learning and education wasn’t important to me at all. But as you get older and older and older, you see the benefits of learning... it’s getting more and more important.”

(learner, URTU)

Such motivations may explain the age profile of respondents and union learners generally, although as we see below, age could also be perceived as a barrier to further learning. For one respondent, learning became important in his thirties when his children were at school and he had undertaken the Unison Return to Learn programme. This was a way of learning alongside his children. The desire to help family members, or set a good example to children, or to be able to help with homework was echoed by several in our sample:

“Things I learn have an effect on what happens at home as well. My children and their education, and I can get involved in their education and have a bit of an idea of what I’m talking about as well, which is not always a bad thing. It’s helped!”

(ULR, PCS)

Another concurred:

“It’s the interaction; it gives you another doorway into your kids... your family.”

(learner, CWU)

One administrative assistant working for a government department and aged over 50 said that he felt the need to update his school qualifications as he perceived that “they were not worth the paper they’re written on... because they’re old qualifications. I might as well have sat the exams on Mars.”

In the context of the previous government’s skills agenda workplace learning was designed to promote employability over the life course and the need to gain new skills or accreditation in a context where workers can no longer expect a job for life. This was reflected in the sample; for one manual worker learning was a means to cope with changes in his job and the requirement to take on more administrative tasks. He began to realise that he needed training and had done union learning courses in literacy and numeracy and was working towards a European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), which had given him the confidence to pursue further learning. A probation officer also felt that union learning helped her to do her current job better:

“When I say it helps me in my career – it helps me in that I can do better work with my people – I’m not talking about climbing ladders. I’m quite happy with the position I’m in so I don’t want to see a new job. But I can offer a better service to people, be more supportive, more understanding and more empathetic with them and of their needs.”

(learner, Napo)

A postal worker felt that she missed out on opportunities because of her lack of education and that unionlearn courses might help her take on new roles:

“People get promoted and this and that, I’ve stayed back because of my education. Then I got the opportunity for this and I thought I would try it.”

(learner, CWU)

One respondent expressed the need to improve his skills – “I was getting old, wages were dropping, it’s hard in construction”, but his wider explanation illustrates how learning in his new job was motivated for a variety of reasons:

“And so I thought well, if they’re going to pay me to do some learning, why not have a go at it. Looking back on it, ...I’d never ever thought about it before, ...I thought well maybe this could be a bit of a skive basically for a length of time. If I was honest I don’t think there was any plan in it at all. I don’t think there was a plan to better myself at the back of me head. ...I don’t know – just something
– I’d never had the opportunity before because I’ve always had to, well basically earn some money... so I had a go.” (learner, Unite)

For a number of respondents training at work was limited to that related to the basic demands of the job, health and safety or legal compliance, often lasting for hours or at most a few days. A number of learners had funded their own learning, even where this was directly related to their work. One, for example, undertook a course on autism with the Open University in her own time and at her own expense. Despite there being clear links with her role as a learning disabilities nurse, she received no support from her employer. This had been the case with much of her (extensive) learning which she said she had done for herself, for her own interest, without any backing from her employer in terms of time or finance.

Some learners hoped that union learning might lead to a change in career. For example a driver was considering a move into the voluntary sector around learning or as a Citizens Advice Bureau advisor, and said he would like a role which involved encouraging others to learn. A learner who had recently left the Royal Mail hoped to develop a career in the field of employment law, but was unsure whether she would be able to get the financial support she needed. A number of learners on ESOL courses believed that improving their English would better their career and work prospects, as a male cleaner described:

“I come here to look for a job. Before I look for the job, I have to improve first my English so that is why I come here, do ...the cleaning job because ...I just want to improve my English so I can look for the job after.” (non-union member)

Another learner studying ESOL hoped that improving his English would enable him to move out of cleaning work and into the engineering profession for which he was qualified. This example raises particular issues about migrant workers and learning; in one Royal Mail sorting office the ULR was struggling to find courses for a number of Indian migrant workers, all of whom had degrees. In other cases learners valued ESOL because improved communication skills allowed them to function outside the workplace, in wider society, as one female cleaner put it:

“Learning is important for my life because I can understand people, for example, looking up work and going to see doctor. If I have a problem I can go to advice bureau, sometimes they help me.” (non-union member)

For some interviewees the prospect of redundancy was a motivating factor in learning, reflecting in part the climate of job insecurity at the time of the interviews. At least three interviewees were planning for the possibility of redundancy. One postal worker wanted to gain qualifications as a back-up in the event of being made redundant. She saw learning as a means of getting accreditation for existing skills, as well as the opportunity to learn something new:

“If the post office gives me my redundancy, then at least I’ve got something to fall back on. So it was really as a backup, it was something to back me up and... I still had a mortgage to pay for so really it was a different career or certificate to say I could do something else. So that was why I did it, to get me certificate and me accreditations really.” (learner, CWU)

Another interviewee (also in the CWU, Royal Mail) said she started learning in order to build up qualifications in preparation for a change of career in the event of redundancy.

The desire to learn can be linked to work and to the wider socio-economic context, but it can also be about personal development. These apparently distinct motivations are often, in reality, interwoven in the narratives of learners. This is reflected in the narrative of a university technician, where distinct discourses around employability and personal development are entangled:

“It’s a way of educating yourself, making you better, which at the end of the day means more money and gives you a better lifestyle. So that’s why you do these things... it’s to better yourself
financially and things like that. That’s the way I look at it, but now the photography and the [creative writing course] I’m not doing that to earn any money from it, it’s just something I want to do.” (learner, Unite)

A driver defined his learning as very much about personal development – he “got the learning bug”. An administrative officer working for a government department said that most of her learning had been linked to work “because it happens there”, but the learning she had done was not necessarily work-related (including, for example, ballroom dancing, Salsa dancing, Alexander Technique, digital photography). She envisaged taking up further learning in her retirement, purely for pleasure and enjoyment; learning for her is important because:

“It keeps me on my toes... keeps[my] mind ticking over, gives me something to think about”
(learner, PCS)

For union learners who are ULRs, the satisfaction that they get from seeing others learn and achieve is a key motivating factor. One PCS ULR, for example, described how she has used her learning to encourage others:

“I love helping people, and when you get the feedback and they get the certificates and you see their faces, it’s really nice.”

She has organised a broad range of courses for colleagues in the workplace, but had also used her learning outside of the work context to support her grandchildren at school and encourage family members, including her children, to pursue further learning opportunities. This desire to support others is a theme running through many of the interviews. As another PCS ULR stated: “even if you just get one person’s confidence up, and it’s worth it, you’ll see a difference in one person and it’s worth it”. Another ULR from the Royal Mail reported:

“I’m giving 30 hours a week of my time to make sure that other people can learn. And people say to me well, what about the money? Well money’s not the most important subject. The important subject...is to see people walk out of here on cloud nine because they’ve achieved something they never thought they could achieve... So that’s my reward ... the fact that people can walk out of here with something which they were never likely to get.” (ULR, CWU)

The narratives underline the importance of union learning to those who left compulsory education without qualifications, providing them with a second chance. In this it facilitates equality, addressing socioeconomic disadvantage, in particular for those aged over forty. There is also some evidence that learning provides further opportunities for those who experienced discrimination on the grounds of race whilst at school or for those who were encouraged to leave school because of parental expectations defined by gender. For migrant workers in the sample English language training was seen as a way to help them to compete in the labour market and to utilise qualifications achieved in their countries of origin. The interviews also confirm the emphasis in the literature on learners’ desire for self-transformation, whether this is to address a perceived deficit in formal education or for wider personal development and self-esteem. They also convey the passion the respondents have for learning in itself as they participate in communities of practice and for ULRs, the joy in seeing others learn. A range of motivations are identified here, but the underlying belief in the value of education is powerful, even where respondents had not fulfilled their learning aspirations.
Michael is 43 years old. He has been a community warden for eleven years. His job involves walking the streets reporting anything of concern to the police, council or fire brigade. The role will soon be changing to that of enforcement officer, and is overshadowed by the threat of funding cuts. Before taking on this role Michael worked in various jobs on building sites and in factories and then moved into demolition work at different sites around the country.

Michael left school with few qualifications. He did not enjoy his last year of school and skipped a lot of classes:

“I hated school to be honest. I think I played truant for the last six months of school, and then I ended up on a building site and that was it. I can’t really say [what qualifications I got] – it was that long ago I can’t remember, I think I got a leaving certificate and that was it.”

He has received some job-related training since leaving school, but most training has taken place in his community warden role. He started learning at the union learning centre two years ago, studying numeracy, literacy and computer skills, from entry level. At first Michael was reluctant to do maths and literacy because he thought he only needed ICT. However, he was persuaded to address the maths and literacy needs first. He is now working towards an ECDL.

As his job role started to change Michael realised he needed some training in order to cope with work. He had been on the brink of resigning before he found out about the union learning centre.

“That’s why I did it because I needed it for work and I thought I’m not packing me job in because I don’t know something”.

Michael described how his confidence has grown through learning:

“Initially at the beginning I didn’t have a clue when I first came. [The tutor] used to sit us down on a chair because I kept escaping because I was frightened. But I don’t do that now like … It was just horrendous … I just couldn’t get a hold of it. I thought – I’m going for a smoke. But now I’m much better.”

Michael has a disability which affects the way he learns. He was embarrassed to discuss this with his tutors at first, but they made various adjustments to help him cope which made a difference.

Learning at the learning centre has helped Michael to cope with changes to his job role, and has given him the confidence to want to learn more.

“It’s like everything in life, things get hard but you’ve just got to learn and get on with it. Just enjoy the challenge, learning new things, even though I’m getting old it’s nice to learn new things. And I wish that I could go back to when I was at school but you can’t turn the clock back can you? You learn different things, it’s much better. It’s much easier when you know what you’re doing and that’s what I would say to anybody. Just sit in the chair and learn.”

Union learning has been a positive experience for him, largely because of the people involved in its delivery:

“The people who make it work... the skills they've got to deal with different people, they should be awarded massive pay rises because at the end of the day everybody who comes through that door is different and they’re expected to try and make them learn and it is hard for them. It’s not just hard for the learner, it’s hard for the teacher as well... I would say everybody knows everybody here and that’s the difference. Because you get to know the people and that’s brilliant and that’s what makes the difference, when you get to know the people who are in here.”
“Union learning set me on this journey. It has made me a more confident person and I feel more secure in my own capabilities. ...I’m probably more confident in my role within work than I am as a person in life. But I think from my training and learning, I’ve become that more confident person in life as well.” (learner, GMB)

This section discusses the journeys that people make through their learning lives; their personal and career development, what they have learned, where it leads and whether and what aspirations are met. A number of respondents can be defined as ‘serial learners’ in that they were continuously engaged – both formally and informally – in learning. Such learners considered learning to be a lifelong process, as one university technician put it:

“No matter how old you are, [life is] one big learning curve. You can always learn, whether it’s in a formal situation or not,” (learner, Unite)

This means that some respondents were already on their learning journeys before accessing union learning, whilst for others union learning was a catalyst for such journeys. There was a feeling amongst respondents that the learning bug is addictive, as one course leads on to another, inspiring a thirst for learning; one ULR described herself as a “course-aholic”, always on the look-out for new courses, “you can never have too much knowledge!” and in the words of a postal worker:

“Maybe I’m actually becoming addicted to it, I don’t know, but you can become addicted to it, you really can. You think “oh what can I do next? I’ve finished that course, got my certificate, what can I do next?”” (learner, CWU)

Similarly for a joiner:

“I think learning is quite contagious, once you’ve done something you kind of get into a routine, or I do. You think well I’ve done that course, I need something else to occupy my time with now.” (learner, GMB)

In terms of learning the interviews confirmed that courses included basic literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT; work-related learning such as CV writing and interview techniques; but also what is sometimes termed ‘non-work learning’ including digital photography, creative writing, Spanish, the Alexander Technique and courses to help people give up smoking; as well as training for union representatives and union members (see below). A construction worker had completed a range of courses, including literacy and numeracy and a number of NVQs, however he wanted to continue with learning and had registered for a BA in Leadership with financial support from his trade union (currently deferred due to time pressures):

“I want to do more... if any training comes along now, I want it, I’ll have it, I’ll have a go [at] anything” (learner, GMB)

A number of learners described a strong urge “to get on in life” and felt that learning could improve their career prospects. As we have seen above, for migrant workers the need to learn English may be vital to future work prospects. For others the impact of learning on work is not so direct and learners emphasised its impact in terms of confidence and self esteem. One learner (from UNISON) described how learning had helped him to overcome the feeling that other people at seminars, meetings or on courses were better educated or more intelligent than him. For the construction worker quoted above, whilst learning had resulted in greater confidence in his ability to do his job, outside of work it allowed him to help family members in applying for jobs and writing CVs. A local government worker commented that union learning had given him the confidence to go out on his own in the evening and meet up with other people, taking part in pub quizzes, with implications for his work and union activity:

“If I succeed at doing it, it makes me feel better inside. And it then gives me the confidence to spread the message that you should get back into learning, people should get back into learning.
I can do my job better if I’m a confident person. I can speak up better if I’m confident and that all comes with being a success at learning.” (learner, UNISON)

Other learners mentioned an increased ability to handle problems at work, reflecting the union context of learning:

“You learn to analyse, you learn to research. Well, the way I see it now is when personal cases come or when there’s an issue in the work environment, I find that it’s much easier to handle.” (learner, PCS)

A postal worker was also able to assist friends with problems at work:

“I’ve helped friends with cases as well. One of them was successful... so I do tend to help friends a lot if they do need help. If they know – well some of them do know that I do know employment law, some of them don’t – but the ones that do know, they do sort of call me up for assistance.” (learner, CWU)

Others suggest the potential of learning to promote democratic engagement; a local government worker described how union learning has given him the confidence to “have a voice”; to represent others in the workplace and in other forums:

“I thought... I want to be a voice, I want to help people in that [the Green Keepers Association]... So I actually got to be on the board of management... and I think the confidence that I got through trade union work and the learning programme enabled me to do that and become northern regional chair... It’s giving people like myself, and it gave me, the confidence... I’ve got an education, I’ve got a voice, I can actually speak. I can actually hold a conversation with people who I’ve always thought were a lot better than me.” (ULR, UNISON)

Whilst learning was sometimes seen as an end in itself, a number of learners did have a more instrumental approach, linking it more to their careers and some described frustration at the lack of progression routes, what can be described as a ‘learning ceiling’ for learners who may be seeking to work their way up from entry level. In the words of a UNISON ULR:

“You give information advice and guidance to people... say at the lower end. And the higher level people I need to speak to because at times you need to be guided yourself. You don’t know which path to go down. And you want to make sure you go down the right path that’s beneficial for yourself.”

Learning journeys start from different points and social locations. For a number of respondents, their journeys had stalled – despite their commitment to learning. Below, from a BNIM interview, we meet Mohammed, a taxi driver whose experience of education from his youth until the present time has been truncated and uneven. The narratives of learners confirm that for some, goal-orientated and relevant learning is the key motivation as can be found in the work of Knowles (1973, 1995) and learning is seen as improving the way they do their jobs or providing the possibility of promotion or even career change. At the same time – and not necessarily counterposed to more instrumental outcomes – for many others learning is individually transformative and is valued as such. In both cases learning inspires a journey and is often described as addictive and a serial activity, with union learning a springboard to further learning or an additional opportunity for existing learners.
Mohammed was born in a village in Pakistan in 1962. His father worked in Uganda and sent money home for the schooling of his eight children when he could. When his father returned to Karachi to run a market stall Mohammed was expected to work on the stall in the morning and go to school in the afternoon. When he was nine years old Mohammed was barred from school because he played truant and went off to play with his friends. His father said that in future “you’re going to look after the stall, that’s all you’re going to do”.

Mohammed remembers how he felt about this on the day that it happened:

“I wanted to learn, I wanted to get educated but he says ‘Look, I can’t afford you dossing around elsewhere, where I’m paying the fees and everything. I want you to work’ but I says to my dad, ‘Look, I do want to learn, please give me a chance’. He said ‘No, you’ve had it, that’s it, you’ve blown it. You’ve been off school, what if something would have happened to you when you were away chilling around with your friends?’ Because it wasn’t really safe and I was about 9-10 years of age. And that’s it, I stopped, no education for me. I was crying.”

Later Mohammed’s father got a job in the UK and sent for his family. Someone from the British Embassy asked Mohammed what he was looking forward to doing in the UK. He said: “I want to be educated in the UK”. When Mohammed arrived in London he travelled to the textile districts of North East Lancashire. He began school: “I really enjoyed going there and I wanted to learn” but within days was told that he was too old at 16 to attend. Mohammed remembers how this “really actually shook me”. Mohammed then began college but because he couldn’t speak English, he was unable to understand the teachers. His father suggested an alternative:

“A guy born here... he used to come to my house for one hour in the evening to teach us English so it was me, my brother, my cousins, we were all sitting in the one room with the gas fire and sitting in front of the gas fire and trying to learn basic English”.

Mohammed still found this difficult:

“I was feeling really embarrassed in front of all these people and because there were some people who were quite older than me, like elder people. So I thought no, this is not my kind of thing, I don’t understand, how am I supposed to learn this English, what do I do, where do I go? Gradually we sorted it out – he says, ‘Right you teach me the Urdu and I will teach you the English.’ This is how the combination was worked out.”

Mohammed learnt English quickly and is now fluent. Yet when he was a young man a friend said:

“Look, forget about the writing, as long as you understand what the other people are saying, what their requirement is, as long as you can express yourself, that’s fine. You don’t need to write because you’re not going to be able to go to college or university or anywhere, you’re going to work. So if you’re going to work you just need to say ‘hello, how are you? Fine, thank you’.”

As an adult learner Mohammed has participated in some NVQ learning, which he thinks was run jointly by a trade union and the local council, though he is not sure. Through informal learning and learning with his friends he has expanded his learning and skills though he has had no more formal learning of any duration since he was a nine years old:

“Even now, when I read a newspaper or a book, I can read it fast, very fast. People who have done more education than me in the Pakistan schools are nowhere near me. And they really get shocked because I can speak Urdu, I can
Mohammed is passionate about education. His daughter wants to be a barrister and he encourages all of his children to be educated. He goes to his children if he needs help in completing forms. However, he is now 49 and he believes himself too old to do any more learning. He believes he has gone as far as he can go on his learning journey. He often thinks though about how his education relates to his working life:

“And sometimes I used to think that if I were in Pakistan I wouldn’t have been their taxi driver for sure. But it’s because that’s what’s written in my destiny, I had to be here, because I’ve not been educated.”
Learning spaces

“There is a lot of banter and learners are there because they want to be.” (ULR, CWU)

This section focuses on the spaces in which union learning takes place; in particular upon the workplace as the site of union learning, but it also looks at how learning can extend into cyberspace through online learning and beyond the workplace into the household and community. The section also highlights the distinctiveness of the pedagogy of union learning.

The location of learning at the workplace defines union learning as a collective activity both informed by and potentially informing collective organisation based upon workplace and trade union relationships. This is particularly the case where there are learning centres based in the workplace. Here ULRs may aim to ensure that the space is defined as informal and welcoming, distinguishing it from the formal classroom situation which may have previously discouraged learners – in the words of one learner “it’s not stuffy... like school”. A number of learners mentioned the importance of interaction in a friendly atmosphere, describing such learning as “much more relaxed and you’re treated more like an adult rather than in a childish way”, and “you’re not spoken to – you’re spoken with but not spoken to”. Similarly for a civil servant:

“[It’s] a brilliant way to learn, it’s not... about sitting in a room being lectured at... you’re encouraging people to work together and find out information for themselves.” (learner, PCS)

In attempting to promote an informal atmosphere, one ULR described how in the learning centre in the post office sorting office where he worked:

“We always put sweets in the middle of the tables ... and they come in and they know there’s sweets for them to eat. And even to the fact now that halfway through the session ... they start bringing bags of sweets in to stick into the pot to say that’s a thank you for what we do.” (ULR, CWU)

Here the sweets come to symbolise the sharing of learning firstly between ULR and learners, but then between learners themselves. One female worker described the learning centre at work as “an oasis in a sea of shit”, referring to employment relations in the sorting office. Learners said they valued the discussion and interaction of union learning courses, as for one civil servant.

“The way the union learn courses and things are done, we share information with each other, all of us on the course we share experiences with each other. We learn from each other, we learn from the facilitator, whoever is taking the course. It’s a very relaxed atmosphere, I enjoy it.” (learner, PCS)

Respondents emphasised the social aspects of learning with the learning centre as a space where workers meet and interact in a way that there may not be time to do during the working day; courses help to develop and reinforce social relationships formed at work, as a Royal Mail ULR confirmed:

“I think it improves their social skills, certainly within the business because they’re talking to people they probably wouldn’t normally talk to ... And it just means that they get quite close and they go out and – I keep talking about photography but they go out in pairs in their time off to go and take photos, which a lot of them have done so it’s worked out quite well.”

(ULR and learner, CWU)

The social aspect of union learning was important for other respondents; a number described how they have developed friendships through union learning. For example, one probation officer said:

“I feel alive when I’m learning. I feel I’m more connected with people, more understanding, more information sharing. And of course I meet lots of interesting people along the way and make friends so it improves my personal life as well.” (learner, Napo)
Similarly, for a nurse:

“I met a lot of really nice people and there’s a group of us who are going out tonight... We all go out once a month for a meal, me, Val, Geraldine and Tracey so we’re going out tonight. I’ve met some nice people.” (learner, GMB)

There is evidence that union learning can also promote integration in a workplace and/or community. For example in the Royal Mail sorting office referred to above there have been ethnic cliques, but learning had begun to break down this divide with those taking Spanish able to practice with South American workers taking ESOL. In this case learning had extended from the learning centre back into the workplace. As one postal worker put it:

“Well like staff are learning, and nine times out of ten, they come out of here and come to work and they’re buzzing. And depending on what they’re doing ... People on the shop floor, we always talk about it, yes. Where have you been? Oh I’ve been on that course. What goes on there? So you tell them. Oh that sounds interesting, I wouldn’t mind doing that.” (learner, CWU)

This ULR had organised a competition arising from photography classes and the photographs had been displayed on the sorting office floor. The ULR commented upon the respect for learning:

“On the wall here we’ve got some photos we did for a competition. We had that down on the shop floor and every time I looked out of the window from upstairs there were people stood around it, looking and trying to work out the best bits and pieces in them, what stood out – because we had some winners on it – who had won and why they thought they’d won. And I was a bit worried that being in the industry we are in, some people like to draw things, I was concerned that they would be drawn on or if they fell off that they would be trodden on or whatever. But no, we saw people picking them up and just handed them into management to say that they’d fallen down.” (ULR, CWU)

Whilst learning centres can become unique learning spaces, other learners valued on-line learning and this did not preclude social interaction. A number described how they enjoyed using online learning forums, sharing experiences with union learners beyond their own workplace and trade union. In the words of one Post Office worker:

“Even if it’s online you’re still chatting to other people and meeting other reps, as it were, across the country.” (learner, CWU)

The opportunities offered by online learning are important for learners with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities. One learner, a single parent who also cares for an elderly parent suffering from dementia, said that online union learning was the only way she could fit learning into her life. There are several examples in which online union learning had helped learners to overcome the barriers of time, cost and access, in particular for shift and part-time workers. For a Royal Mail learner:

“People who have got busy lives, they can sort of do these courses now whereas before they didn’t have the time. So I find online learning very useful.” (learner, CWU)

One local government worker preferred online learning and had completed ULR training online, although this was because of the difficulties of getting time off for face-to-face training:

“Because you can pick it up anywhere, if you’ve got your own notebook, you can do it at home when you’ve got time. Or if you’re doing it in your lunch break you can do it at work and also although you obviously don’t have the interaction with your classroom situation, I just find it a lot more flexible and because of the nature of my work and also personal life, I can find it far easier to do that. Rather than say a fixed time each week, going into a classroom environment ... I think you’ve got to be of the right sort of temperament and very well organised and used to technology to do it on line. It obviously doesn’t suit some people
but it’s just something I’ve found a lot easier and I’ve got more patience to do it”. (learner, PCS)

However, opinion was divided over the effectiveness of online learning. Others preferred the support and interaction with colleagues that is offered by classroom-based learning as for one female administrative worker working for a rail company:

“I would say probably the best way to learn is if you have a tutor there in the room with you and they’re doing the work and you’re doing it at the same time, and you’re going through it with them. It’s a bit more difficult when you’ve got it like on a disk and you put your disk in and then you are doing tasks on the computer. Because if you get stuck you haven’t got somebody there immediately to ask, there’s always a way around it. It’s probably as easy if you’ve got somebody there in front of you.” (learner, TSSA)

The important role of the tutor in engaging learners was emphasised by a number of interviewees; in one administrative officer’s words:

“If the tutor’s good you can really enjoy [the course] and I think we’ve been lucky over the years that we’ve had good tutors. And I think that’s half the battle of your learning as well, because if you’ve got a bad tutor it will put you off for life. And the first tutor I had was quite confusing, that was me ULR course and health and safety course ... he was a boring person. And I think if it’s somebody like that, it puts you off learning altogether.” (learner and ULR, PCS)

Respondents also described how their learning extends beyond the workplace into the family and wider community. In some cases this was formalised with unions offering learning to non-members, and also to learners’ families and communities:

“I think it comes into every aspect of life because when you are using learning about negotiations, communication, coordination, yes that not only enables you to run your own life and organise your family far more efficiently, but it also makes you feel a better person in yourself. And so you feel far more confident, have a greater level of self esteem. You feel that you have something to give to other people, not just in your own family but in your friendship groups, other people within your community as well. When we do after-school learning and parents come in and share learning, that’s a tremendous sense of social networking for our community.” (ULR, NUT)

Another learner’s husband has just taken on a pub and she saw this as a potential community learning space/facility and she was discussing this with her tutor.

The narratives suggest that union learning reflects many of the key strengths of adult learning in engaging ‘non-traditional’ learners. They all convey the importance of informal, inclusive and collective environments and participative and reflexive learning – distinct from previous experiences of school and teacher-pupil relationships. Whether learning is face-to-face or on-line, the social relationships and interaction upon which learning is based and which emerge from learning are crucial and these can reinforce workplace relationships and even promote integration within and beyond the workplace.
Learning journey snapshot – Alice

Alice is a midwife in her late 40s with four children. She is married to a vicar but is agnostic. She had a disrupted childhood, her father was very ill and her parents split up. The experience affected her and her learning journey:

“I left school when I was 18 but yes, things went wrong, I think that’s when they went more seriously wrong when I was doing my A levels. I didn’t cope very well with A levels, I just felt very, very mixed up and I think it started when I was about 13 my parents split up temporarily for a while. I did alright at GCSE, I worked quite hard with that, I coped with it but when I got to A level it just all fell apart and I couldn’t concentrate. And I had got a place at university on the strength of my O levels but I didn’t take it up because I just couldn’t bear the thought of any more academic study at that point. So I decided that I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, but I decided to go into the nursing – I wasn’t really sure why I was doing that. Well I had to do something because in those days you still had to get some sort of a job.”

Since qualifying as a nurse Alice has participated in numerous learning courses: “I did IT courses, I did counselling courses”. She is very driven to participate in formal learning – indeed highly motivated. However some of the formal, work-based learning courses Alice has had to take have been disappointing in terms of pedagogy; as she said:

“I don’t like it if I feel patronised. And I think the style of learning, the style of training and education that we have is very – I’m sorry I don’t know the right terminology but it’s not very experiential, put it that way. I think it’s a real shame, you’ve got a roomful of people and you don’t draw on their experience when you’re trying to teach a subject. So I resent that. If you’re having a lecture, fair enough, a lecture’s a lecture, but if you’re trying to learn about something in the broadest way possible then I think – of course not everybody’s comfortable with that you see”.

In contrast Alice likes to participate in learning which uses adult and union learning type pedagogy – that is, reflective, experiential, active learning, based on group work:

“I think I learn best if I can work with or discuss something with somebody with whom I’ve got a good understanding. Also I like people that have got ideas, people that can make me look at things in a different way”.

Alice describes the diary as a really valuable tool that she keeps whether she is involved in formal or informal learning – at home or at work:

“I just think, to try and cope with the stress of my work I keep a diary and I use – well that dates from when I did a counselling course, in the time when I wasn’t working for money, I did stuff to try and enhance my abilities as a parent and also to prepare for going back to work. And on the counselling course we had to keep a learning diary, a journal and I just took to that like a duck to water; I loved that side of it. So when I did my return to midwifery, one of the things that really pleased me about it was that that was a big part of the course that you were expected, advised to keep a diary for learning. ... So I like reflecting but I think in the workplace I spend probably too much time- I’m slow to act sometimes because I’m thinking things through. And that doesn’t really fit in with the requirements of the NHS today. You need to just get on with it a lot of the time. I sometimes think, I’ve done something before and I know what to do then I can think quickly but if it’s something new, I need to think about it before I’m sure what to do.”

Alice has been empowered as a union learner because she has felt comfortable and confident in participating in learning which uses pedagogy tuned to her as an adult – meeting her needs and learning style.
Barriers to learning

“Sometimes time can be a problem. As a lorry driver sometimes I can do about 60 hours a week and it’s trying to find time to fit the work in – obviously I’m entitled to time off for learning. But I don’t always want to take advantage.”

(learner, URTU)

Union learners identified and discussed a number of barriers to learning. Time, cost, and management emerged as the biggest barriers, with time mentioned most frequently and offering particular issues for those with caring responsibilities:

“There’s some things that I probably wanted to do but the time factor has sometimes meant I’ve not been able to do it because obviously I am a mum to young children with a job as well, so sometimes the time’s not always there to do it.”

(learner, PCS)

Shift working also presented challenges for learners:

“Some of my courses have been classroom based but I don’t know – it’s just time. I haven’t got the time because I used to work 1.45 pm to 9.45 pm so I didn’t have the time to do my work in the classroom. I would prefer to do it online then I could do it anytime I wanted.”

(learner, CWU)

Time for learning was especially constrained in the context of staffing cuts and increased workloads. Alice, the midwife quoted above, describes how the increasing pressure of work put up further barriers:

“Well, the pressure of work and work is extremely pressured. You hardly ever get off on time. Our shifts are structured so that there’s no break, there’s no meal break... We have a seven and a half hour shift, we have a concessionary coffee break that you don’t always get. Because what happened before was that people had a lunch break but nine times out of ten they were working through it and they were never getting the time back. So we said we would rather have a shorter shift and go home half an hour earlier. So consequently, there’s no lunch time where people can come and look at my Learning at Work Day stuff. And also when they finish work, they usually just want to get away from it as quickly as they can. So I did have some people come but I wouldn’t do that again – I wouldn’t do it like that again. It’s all been in my own time and it’s very hard to get time, but I’ve not even approached my head of midwifery to ask for time. I find the whole thing too threatening and I think for me partly it’s because I’m not very confident in my role as a midwife. I don’t feel confident going asking for time off to do this job and I can’t really – I don’t know if I can explain that”.

Like others she was reluctant to ask managers for time off. Lack of confidence became a barrier. Three other learners perceived their age as a barrier to learning, for a university technician:

“A lot of these training things are for younger people so I get a bit daunted by it, younger people being on it and that. And I find it harder to learn as I’m getting older.”

(learner, Unite)

For a female cleaner:

“[I would like to do] a zoology course but I think at my age maybe too late – the zoology course is good for younger people.”

(Non-member)

Some learners described how they have overcome personal barriers to learning. One ULR in the retail sector described how, for much of her life, dyslexia has been a constraint, as were cost and “personal barriers; the disbelief that I could actually learn anything”. However, she added “I’m not letting any barriers stop me – not anymore. I try not to put them there.” Others similarly talked about overcoming barriers; with one non-member arguing that if you really want to do something “nothing can stop you” and one civil servant said:

“Previously before I became a union rep then... I looked at myself, I’m a part time mum, there isn’t any time for learning, there isn’t time for things like that. And that did stop me for a long time doing anything like that. But not now, not now, it all fits in together somehow.”

(ULR, PCS)
Another civil servant also talked about how familial roles could constrain time and energy for learning, but also how learning provided an opportunity to expand her role beyond the familial, she wanted to learn to:

“...develop myself, I’d got stuck in a rut. I’d got stuck in that – like a lot of people do... mums of young children, you go to work and that’s it. You see, this is what it’s going to be like till I finish. And I got to the point and thought no, regardless of whether I’ve got family, I want something else, I want something for me.” (ULR, PCS)

Cost was also an issue and this is likely to become an increasing barrier to learning. A nurse illustrated this:

“The only thing is, it's the fees now isn’t it, they've gone up so much. I know there’s a girl at work and – because I took my stuff in to work and she was asking about it... she’d like to do some things but I don’t know whether she’ll do it or not, I think it’s the fees mainly, trying to get those paid.” (ULR, GMB)

Cost was an issue constraining her own learning:

“I would like to do the degree in autism but I can’t afford it. ...I haven’t got the money so I can’t do it....I remember years ago looking at it, and they said you needed a degree to get on this course, so I did a degree with the Open University, got the degree ...[I] can get on the course but can’t get the funding – just too expensive. At the moment like I say, it’s funding... now I just work part time and I’ve got me little boy and me husband’s out of work at the moment, until he gets another job. Never mind, keep plodding on.” (ULR, GMB)

For some, barriers to learning were attributed to a lack of support from employers and management. A number of learners expressed frustration at this and argued that whatever learning is taking place benefits the employer as well as the individual, but that this is not always recognised by employer. In the words of a ULR from a mail sorting office:

“Someone came in and said ‘what’s it doing for your business?’ I said ‘well you must be stupid because obviously you can see what it’s doing for the business. People are happier in their jobs ... making it easier for them to do their jobs because they’re learning. For you to turn round and say it’s not giving anything to the business I think is just stupid and just about shows how much you realise what we do’. We’ve had some help here with the mail centre manager who gave us ten laptops to start off with, which obviously saved us a lot of money. And he gave us a lot of impulse to get us going. And we haven’t really had anything from any others. We did, on the photo competition last year. We as a union raised £300 to offer as prizes and the mail centre manageress that was here then – she matched that. But that’s all we’ve really had and we obviously get the room, but they want to try and take this back. I think it’s a battle all the time and I’ve got it easier here than most people.” (learner, CWU)

For a Unite ULR:

“Work has been a barrier, it’s a complete barrier. It’s a barrier through the production element and getting facility time to do courses, getting facility time for learners to do courses is a major task on its own isn’t it? The employer has been a barrier, it has been a major barrier, and they’ve not given me release for certain courses and I’ve had to wait six months.”

An URTU ULR distinguished between the barriers erected by the various layers of management:

“Actually surprisingly enough, the frontline managers or FLMs as they call them, they don’t see the need for learning. They don’t see why the employees should be better educated than what they are now. I think it could be because they see the workforce as a threat. But once you get to the next level of management, they have a different attitude. So what I try to do is get one of those managers on board, keep the FLMs informed of what’s going on, but go above their head and use
that manager. And yes, once you get to the right level of management they're fully supportive in that. That's why I'm here today.”

For the nurse cited above learning often had to be related to work:

“Anything that we might be interested in, it was 'oh no you can’t go on that, it isn’t part of your KSF (Knowledge and Skills Framework), it’s got to be highlighted in your KSF. If it isn’t highlighted in that, you can’t. And you might come up and say 'well – when I was doing my KSF I said look, I want to go on this autism course, there is a need' and all this but it was still ‘no’ because they wouldn’t fund it.” (ULR, GMB)

At the same time there were examples of unions working successfully with employers to promote learning opportunities. Two learners from the Fire Brigade Union explained that they would not have been able to do their learning without time-off from work – they reported that their managers had been very supportive. Royal Mail management had supported learning centres within sorting offices in the South West – however, a change of manager was threatening the use of one centre, the facility time of the ULR and time-off for learners. Both individual and structural factors thus define union learning.

Whilst the student-centred character of union learning reflects the strengths of adult education, the external factors which shape workplace relationships – manifested in job cuts and work intensification – appear to be increasingly limiting the time and energy that workers have for learning, whilst cost is also increasingly becoming an issue.
Conclusions

This report indicates – through the voices of learners – that union learning is making an important contribution to facilitating equality and diversity in access to learning whilst at the same time precipitating further personal development for learners. Although the voices are only a small (and unrepresentative) sample of the hundreds of thousands learning across the UK, they do depict the breadth of workplace learners from a range of social locations.

Union learning initiatives are clearly successful on a number of counts. Firstly, union learning facilitates inclusion because it tends to use pedagogical approaches that meet the needs, aspirations and expectations of adult or ‘non-traditional’ learners. This means that not only is learning student-centred – active, group based, experiential, situated and reflexive – but so too is the teaching. When respondents had a poor educational experience in compulsory schooling a tutor (or union learning representative) who focused on inclusivity and making learning meaningful and relevant, stimulated learning motivations significantly.

Secondly, union learning appears to be successful because of the learning spaces it is able to occupy. Whether learning online, in learning centres or in community settings, this flexibility around space and delivery enabled people to learn who wouldn’t normally do so because of their other commitments. Crucially these social spaces can represent an oasis in the context of the intensification of work or poor industrial relations. This combination of adult education pedagogy and the location of learning in the workplace means that the majority of union learners that we spoke to are wedded to the wider social and societal purpose of education as well as learning for work and longer-term employability.

A third important conclusion as to why union learning is so powerful is that it has helped to stimulate self-esteem and self-confidence and a belief in learning variety. For example, although much learning is associated with employability, union learning (in the best cases) is helping to engender a commitment to learning which is lifelong and lifewide for work and non-work situations. This has enabled union learners to evaluate their own learning journeys and situate themselves and their learning appropriately.

Union learning has other strengths. The research shows that union learning provides both additional learning opportunities for those on existing learning journeys and new learning opportunities (a catalyst) for those who have not had such access. The serial learners (of whom there are many) and those for whom union learning is a catalyst, share a powerful commitment to the value of education and the ‘learning society’. This signals that learning journeys start from different points and social locations and that unions need to continue to stress its value and relevance to those on all points of the journey.

A final point lies in the successful role of union learning (and in particular ESOL) in relation to migrant workers. ESOL can help migrant workers to utilise existing qualifications in the labour market or promote their integration at workplace and wider community and society levels. Some of these findings are familiar to those interested in union learning and are positive for unions. For example, union learning can attract new members, reinforces union identity and can lead to wider democratic engagement and participation. At the same time there are learners who are not aware that learning is delivered by the union and this is clearly a missed opportunity.

Worryingly, barriers continue to exist for learners and for some ULRs these may be becoming more rather than less negotiable. The problems of inhospitable management, issues to do with time, cost and work intensification remain and may impact negatively on the progressive pedagogical model that proves so attractive to workers. Some respondents also raised their concerns about a ‘learning ceiling’ for themselves as ULRs and for members’ learning more generally. It is likely that in the context of a reconfiguration of publicly supported services these tensions will sharpen as funding cuts bite further. The question of concern to all of those engaged with union learning will inevitably be: how sustainable is union learning in a new climate and how can the progress that has been made be consolidated and built upon?
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*From Voluntarism to Post-Voluntarism: the emerging role of unions in the vocational education and training system*
By Bert Clough
Unionlearn

**Paper 6**
*Estimating the Demand for Union-Led Learning in Scotland*
By Jeanette Findlay, Patricia Findlay and Chris Warhurst
Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Strathclyde

**Paper 7**
*Migrant Workers in the Labour Market: the role of unions in the recognition of skills and qualifications*
By Miguel Martinez Lucio, Robert Perrett, Jo McBride and Steve Craig
University of Manchester Business School and University of Bradford School of Management

**Paper 8**
*Integrating Learning and Organising: case studies of good practice*
By Sian Moore
Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University

**Paper 9**
*The Impact of the Union Learning Representative: a survey of ULRs and their employers*
By Nicholas Bacon and Kim Hoque
Nottingham University Business School

**Paper 10**
*Learning Representative Initiatives in the UK and New Zealand: a comparative study*
By Bill Lee and Catherine Cassell
University of Sheffield and University of Manchester Business School
Paper 11
Unions and Skills Utilisation
By Francis Green
Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Institute of Education, University of London

Paper 12
Union Learning Representatives – Activity, Impact and Organisation: results of the 2009 survey of ULRs and their managers
Richard Saundry, Alison Hollinrake and Valerie Antcliff
Institute for Research into Organisations, Work and Employment, University of Central Lancashire.

Paper 13
Co-investing in Workforce Development: outcomes from the collective learning fund pilots
By Mark Stuart, Bert Clough and James Rees
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