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The role and impact of unions on learning and skills policy and practice: a review of the research

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In today's world there is one fundamental cause of unequal life chances that stands out above all others: education. That is why learning is at the heart of trade unionism. Unions can provide the confidence and trust required for working people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to engage with and benefit from learning that meets their diverse needs.

Another vital role for unions is to put pressure on employers to train their workforce. The proportion of employers who train their employees actually fell by a third to two fifths between 2009 and 2011. So the need for unions to make learning agreements with employers is as great as ever.

Since 1997 the capacity to get involved in learning and skills has been greatly enhanced through Union Learning Fund projects, the statutory recognition of union learning representatives and the establishment of unionlearn.

An important part of unionlearn's function has been to look in depth at the impact and potential of union learning through commissioning surveys, data analysis and case studies from leading researchers. This has resulted in the publication of fifteen research papers over the last five years ranging over a wide number of topics such as learning and organising, union learning representatives, the experiences of union learners, collective bargaining, learning partnerships and the utilisation of skills. Probably the most comprehensive research was that underpinning the evaluation of unionlearn and Union Learning Fund. The evaluation report stated that "union learning has largely met its stated objectives and delivered demonstrable benefits for learners, employers and unions".

This research paper attempts to summarise the main findings of the research papers as well as the evaluation. It provides a platform of empirical research on which to discuss the future of union learning within a voluntary vocational education and training system with few social partnership institutions for unions to exercise leverage on the formation, distribution and utilisation of skills. Even within these constraints, however, union learning can strengthen union activism, promote equality and diversity and facilitate learner progression through forming positive partnerships and promoting best practice.



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Abstract

This report summarises the main findings and themes resulting from recent research on union learning. It covers any learning and skills opportunities resulting from trade union intervention including union support for learners. The focus of the paper is on the research commissioned by unionlearn but it also refers to other academic papers. As such, it does not attempt to be a comprehensive summary of the role of unions in learning and skills.

The paper assesses the demand for union-led learning, highlights the barriers learners face and outlines the role of union learning representatives in supporting them. It discusses the issues around collective bargaining over training including the impact of learning agreements and the opportunities offered by co-investment such as collective learning funds. The paper also considers how unions could challenge managerial prerogative over skills formation such as apprenticeship training and the utilisation of skills. It also draws on the evaluation of unionlearn and the Union Learning Fund to measure its impact and sustainability. Finally, the paper considers the opportunities and challenges faced by union-led learning within the context of a voluntary and unregulated vocational education and training system.

Executive summary

- There has been a considerable expansion of union learning opportunities since 1997 with the establishment of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) supporting hundreds of union-led projects, the training and the statutory recognition of union learning representatives (ULRs) and the setting up of unionlearn as a robust framework for supporting such activity. All of this has resulted in learners accessing about 230,000 learning opportunities annually.
- There is significant current and latent demand in the workforce for union-led learning. One piece of research in Scotland showed that over half of employees in unionised workplaces believe that they would be more likely to undertake learning if it was organised through a union. These individuals were 2.5 times more likely to say they intended to learn than those who did not regard learning organised by a union as a motivating factor. Research has, however, highlighted barriers for union members to access learning opportunities and these centre on lack of paid time off and support with course costs and little employer encouragement. There is also a demand for relevant learner-centred methods that can best meet the needs of non-traditional adult learners.
- There is robust evidence that union learning is successful in engaging learners from groups underrepresented in adult learning such as those without a Level 2 qualification. Once engaged in such learning learners progress through different levels. In one analysis of the one-third learners who had progressed to another level, almost half of them had improved on existing qualifications by two levels. It has been estimated that every union learner who moves up to Level 2 creates over £3,000 annual gross value added.
- ULRs are key players in initiating and supporting union learning activity at the workplace. As many as 28,000 have been recruited and trained since 1999 with over nine in ten providing information and advice on learning opportunities, three quarters arranging courses and over a half conducting a learning needs assessment. The most significant ULR impact has been on increasing the number of members taking up training in basic literacy and numeracy skills and also training leading to nationally recognised vocational or academic qualifications. There are, however, a number of factors that limit some ULRs' activity such as not being fully valued by managers and not receiving enough time off for their duties. A typical ULR spends four hours per week on union learning activities but receives only two hours paid time off.
- Research suggests that unions are increasingly promoting a relationship between learning and organising. According to a survey of ULF project managers, the projects were resulting in ULRs working more effectively within their branch; learning becoming more linked to union organising; and learning and skills forming part of union negotiating. Case studies indicate that learning is offering a path to union activism and encouraging new activists into the union or re-engaging those who have been active in the past.
- At sector and workplace levels there is relatively little bargaining over training and no statutory underpinning of such bargaining. In the most recent Workplace Employer Relations Survey (2004), management negotiated with union representatives over training in just 9 per cent of union-recognised workplaces. Yet where unions are recognised and negotiate over training, employees are 24 per cent more likely to report receiving training. There has, however, been an increasing recognition that learning agreements made between unions and management and the presence of a joint learning committee can strengthen and sustain union learning. Almost all of employers with a learning agreement provide facility time for ULRs compared to three quarters without one. Where there is perceived high union learning impact on organisational practices such as reducing skills gaps then the difference between employers with learning agreements and those without is as much as 26 per cent.

- Although formal collective bargaining is minimal, a partnership-based approach to learning and skills has developed. This approach can lead to the establishment of collective learning funds. They are union initiatives which provide a framework for co-investment in learning and skills through financial and in-kind contributions from the employer, union(s), provider and learners. The pilots have had significant outputs in terms of take up of courses but also in improving employment relationships.
- In the UK's voluntary vocational education and training system union learning activity has inevitably been focused on ensuring that members benefitted from government interventions such as individual learning accounts, basic skills and ICT provision. There has, however, been recent union involvement in intermediate skills where, in the past, influence has been very restricted due to entrenched management prerogative and minimal collective bargaining. With a significant increase in apprenticeships unionlearn and its unions are becoming more pro-active in protecting and supporting apprentices at the workplace as well as influencing training standards and campaigning for equality and diversity in the programmes.
- There is now increasing recognition that raising productivity requires a greater focus on optimising skills utilisation at the workplace which entails the use of high involvement work practices. UK employers, however, have been slow in adopting such practices even though there can be mutual benefits in efficiency-enhancing for employers and employees. Unionlearn is raising awareness of the benefits of skills utilisation with unions and the need for their involvement in the process.
- There is mounting evidence of union learning's added value. Research has indicated that there is very low deadweight in workplace projects with the training unlikely to have occurred without the projects and with union learning not substituting for employer training. There is also significant additionality, with projects resulting in increased activities as opposed to replacing existing activities. Without ULF funding, very few learning assessments would have taken place in these workplaces and the quantity and quality of learning would not have been as high, with fewer learners and poorer provision. Some employers reported that union learning activity has contributed to increases in organisational performance.
- A key issue for union learning is how this positive activity can be sustained by both employers and unions. Employers involved in union learning activity provide financial contributions to union learning mostly in the form of in-kind provision and almost nine in ten stated that their organisation would continue to be involved with union learning activity. Among the factors influencing sustainability is a signed learning agreement, partnership between management and unions, the existence of a learning committee and the establishment of a learning centre. There is strong evidence from ULF projects that union activity increased after the funding ended. This included the link between learning and organising activity, senior officer support for union learning activity, the position of learning/skills on the union negotiating agenda and embedding the ULR role in union branches. There is, however, a view from ULF project managers that any ending of government financial support for union learning would diminish such activity.
- Although overall the messages offer optimism about the sustainability of union learning there are limits as to how this impacts on policy and practice in a vocational education and training system that is voluntary and where decision-making social partnership institutions are nonexistent and collective bargaining is limited. Progress will therefore be incremental within this restrictive framework but much can be done both in forming positive partnerships with employers and increasing union activism around the development of the workforce.

The origins of union learning

Whereas Tony Blair's three priorities for government were "education, education, education", trade union priorities since the late 1880s have been "educate, agitate, organise". It was argued that only through education would workers desire a change in society, thus allowing them a better standard of working life. It was about tackling what Ernest Bevin saw as "the poverty of aspiration of the working class". It was not just about developing a skilled workforce. It was also about campaigning for greater educational equality. Education was seen as both liberator and equaliser and was the right of all, regardless of class or occupation (Calvey, 2008). Trade union education was also about strengthening union activism through the training of union lay members to play an active role in the union and enhancing their negotiating and organising skills.

Education for emancipation

Nothing could better illustrate the link between improving working conditions and opening up educational opportunities than the life of the trade unionist Tom Mann. Mann, who had benefitted from a reduction of working hours in 1871 with the introduction of the nine-hour day in the engineering factory where he was apprentice, attended evening classes three times a week. His education gave him the knowledge and skills to agitate for an eight-hour working day. It was not just about securing more time away from mind-numbing tasks but time to develop the individual and in his words: "leisure to think, to learn, to acquire knowledge, to enjoy, to develop; in short, leisure to live" (Calvey, 2008). It appeared to be a virtuous circle – workers' education leading to increased union activism leading to more agitation for increased workers' education. Calvey notes, however, that trade union involvement in the education of working people has been "irregular, patchy and often contradictory". The Workers' Education Association (WEA) when it was established in 1903 took the liberal-humanist view that education was good for its own sake and workers should be educated so that they could influence other working class people. However, the Plebs League and its Central Labour College

(CLC) with its strong union links viewed working class education as a way forward in the fight against capitalist oppression. It was very much a collective approach – acquiring the "weapon of knowledge" necessary for the improvement of the whole of the working class – as opposed to cultural or individual advantage. The ideological rivalry and intense competition between the two organisations was ended when the CLC's successor, the National Council of Labour Colleges, was taken under the control of the TUC in 1964. In recent years there has been little ideological difference and indeed significant collaboration between unions and the WEA.

The training of union representatives has been a high priority for unions since the beginning of the last century. But until recently the skills development of their members became less of a priority for unions. This was the result of the marginalisation of unions in policy making over vocational education and training (VET) with the abolition of tripartite bodies such as the Manpower Services Commission and the industry training boards by the Thatcher government in the 1980s, together with the rapid decline of apprenticeships during this period. To allow unions a continued say in policy making would undermine the government's mission to deregulate the labour market. With the trade unions weakened and sidelined, the government attempted to improve productivity by creating a 'training market' in which decisions would be left to the discretion of employers and individuals. The nature of Britain's 'labour problem' was thus transmuted from an industrial relations problem to a skills problem (Keep et al, 2008). With the election of the Labour government in 1997, however, there was recognition that unions could play a positive role in tackling the skills problem and increasing learning opportunities at the workplace but without the return of neo-corporate institutions. There have been four distinct stages in union involvement in the VET system since the 1960s:

- 1960s–1970s: neo- corporatist system underpinned by formal tripartite social partnership policy institutions
- 1980s–late 1990s: market-led voluntary system with government initiatives delivered by employer-dominated institutions with unions marginalised
- Late 1990s–2010: centralised system with increased government intervention with enhanced union capacity
- 2010 onwards: emergence of a system which is less centralised with less intervention but with continued union capacity.

A brief history of the first three stages has been outlined in a number of articles and papers (Calvey, 2008; Clough 2007).

Green shoots in a cold climate

Although the 47 local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) that replaced the Manpower Services Commission in the 1980s were employer dominated the TUC decided pragmatically that the union movement should do business with them if it was to remain a player – albeit a minor one – in the training area. Although TECs were meant to secure local empowerment in a training market they defaulted into acting as sub-contractors for government programmes determined by the Conservative government and were funded in relation to government-prescribed outputs. Some of the programmes they delivered, such as Employer Training, were seen as workfare schemes and opposed by unions. But others such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Modern Apprenticeships, individual learning accounts (ILAs) and the Investors in People standard were in general supported by most trade unions. Although there was no right for union representation on TEC boards almost all the TECs had a union member on a “grace and favour” basis.

The most significant engagement between TECs and the union movement were joint projects with the TUC. They were generically named ‘Bargaining for Skills’ and supported through TEC funding. The name was a misnomer: the projects were more about increasing the capacity of unions to enhance employee demand for learning and skills than helping them to formally negotiate with employers on training their workforce. The scope of the projects was limited to the helping to deliver TEC outputs such as NVQs etc., but union project workers tried to use them to promote the wider trade union agenda of lifelong learning and to support a new cadre of union representative – the union learning representative (ULR).

Enhancing union capacity

The election of the Labour government in 1997 saw the demise of the TECs, which were replaced in 2001 by a much more centralised system under the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). It assumed responsibility not just for the funding and quality control of former TEC provision but for further education colleges and local authority adult learning, as well as sixth form provision. It also covered funding for TUC projects. The return of a Labour government did not result in a return to tripartite institutions formalising social partnership or any statutory rights to underpin collective bargaining over training (Clough, 2007) but it did provide an “opportunity structure” for unions with respect to influencing workplace learning (Heyes and Rainbird, 2011).

The Labour government wanted to enhance union capacity to help deliver its national education and training targets but without restoring union influence on policy-making bodies. The government was the most interventionist when wanting to enhance union capacity to help deliver lifelong learning within an agenda broadly shared with the union movement. As noted above, there had been significant capacity building under the Conservative administrations but within the straightjacket of the employer-dominated TEC framework. Under the Labour government the scope for union involvement dramatically increased. There are a number of landmarks in this process. The National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning chaired by Professor Bob Fryer was established by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to advise him on the preparation of a White Paper. Its report *Learning for the Twenty-First Century* (1997) was wide in scope. It put great emphasis on an inclusive approach to lifelong learning, giving priority to those without basic level qualifications and stressed the need for extensive partnerships to promote and deliver this lifelong learning culture. Such partnerships would need to include trade unions. The “Fryer Report” was probably the first major policy document to recognise the role of unions in learning over the previous two decades.

“The active involvement of trade unions will assist in legitimising the purposes and processes of workplace learning in the eyes of their members, facilitating take up of learning and the development of learning partnerships at work.” (Fryer, 1997)

The resulting Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (1997), stressed the need to encourage demand for learning from the bottom up and that learning was “a natural issue for partnership in the workplace between employers, employees and their trade union”.

The Union Learning Fund

In order to help unions stimulate such demand, the Department for Employment and Skills (DFES) established the Union Learning Fund (ULF) in 1998. Two million pounds was initially allocated to support small scale union-led innovative projects in workplace learning. The fund is now in its fourteenth year with its annual budget increasing to £12.5m. Amongst its key aims are ensuring that learning and skills are core activities for unions and developing the key role of union learning representatives (ULRs) in raising demand for learning, especially from those with low or no qualifications. Much of this union activity was supported regionally by Bargaining for Skills, then TUC Learning Services and now unionlearn, which took over responsibility for the ULF from the Learning and Skills Council. The external evaluation of ULF and unionlearn conducted in 2010/2011 found that “union learning has largely met its stated objectives and delivered demonstrable benefits for learners, employers and unions” (unionlearn, 2011).

Unionlearn

In 1997, the TUC General Council set up a Learning Services Task Group to develop practical proposals to provide a “high profile role for the TUC and trade unions as providers and/or facilitators of vocational and other learning opportunities for members and potential members”. Included in the report’s proposals were a national network of ULRs, with clear roles and supported by accredited training,

the establishment of union learning centres and longer term funding for Bargaining for Skills projects (TUC, 1998). It led to the establishment of TUC Learning Services which provided a national and regional framework for supporting regional projects on learning and skills as well as ULF projects. Over the years the activities of Learning Services grew exponentially and government funding increased. It was recognised that there needed to be a more integrated a coherent framework and the TUC proposed the integration of TUC Education with TUC Learning Services. This resulted in the establishment of unionlearn in 2006 which was core funded by government. Funding for unionlearn and ULF has continued under the coalition government with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills describing unionlearn as a “powerful model ... reaching out to businesses and giving individuals a chance they never would have” (speech to unionlearn conference, 2010).

Union learning representatives

Union learning reps are the core of the union learning model and are a unique feature of the VET system. When by 2001 a critical mass of ULRs had been trained and supported, mainly as a result of ULF projects, it became apparent that there were problems for ULRs accessing training and especially carrying out their functions. The TUC thus argued the need for ULRs to be put on a similar statutory footing as union representatives as a whole. In spite of some employer opposition to statutory rights for ULRs, the TUC and its unions were successful in achieving their objective. The Employment Act 2002 set out a number of ULR functions:

- analysing training needs
- providing information and advice on training
- promoting the value of training
- arranging training
- consulting the employer over these activities.

ULRs carrying out functions in union recognised workplaces have the right to ‘reasonable’ paid time off to train and carry out their functions on similar lines as union representatives in general. The condition to being granted paid time off for ULR work is that they are sufficiently trained to carry out their duties, through accessing relevant training. This training is mainly provided through TUC Education, leading to accreditation through an awarding body, the National Open College Network. A union member also has a right to take time off in working time to contact his/her ULR, although the employer is not obliged to pay them during this contact time. Interestingly, although the ULRs’ statutory rights are in relation to supporting union members, most of them also provide assistance to non-trade unionists at the workplace. These interventions have generated a critical mass of ULRs; with over 26,000 trained by the TUC and duly accredited between 1999 and 2010 (see Figure 1). The impact of these initiatives has been well researched and evaluated and are detailed on pp17–22.

Union learners

According to NIACE’s annual survey of adult participation in learning the number of adult learners who have taken part in learning within the last three years of the survey has fallen from 43 per cent in 2010 to 39 per cent in 2011 (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2011). Of particular concern is that the least skilled and those outside the labour market (DEs) are participating in learning at the lowest reported total over 20 years, 23 per cent, a fall of seven percentage points from 2010. Furthermore, minority ethnic participation shows a drop of 6 per cent since 2010, while the drop for white Britons is half of this. If this trend continues then it undermines the government’s laudable objective in its skills strategy of tackling social exclusion.

“Skills play an important role in creating a fairer society by promoting social inclusion and social mobility. As those who choose vocational routes into work tend to be from lower socio-economic groups further education has a key role to play in opening up access to higher level skills to individuals from backgrounds with historically lower rates of participation.” Skills for Sustainable Growth strategy document, p6, BIS 2010.

The demand for union learning

The NIACE survey, however, does indicate that the decline in participation has not been

accompanied by a decline in people’s belief that learning makes a positive difference to their life chances. Over four in five of adult respondents (83 per cent) agree that learning can have positive effects on career and employment prospects. So there is a latent demand for learning as a whole. The question to be asked is whether there is also a specific demand for union-led learning.

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 low family expectations, which might have been defined by gender. Over 230,000 learners are supported by unions annually. These learners often perceive themselves as having an “educational deficit” and that motivates their return which they see as integral to self-esteem and personal development.

Management information data on union learners is at present relatively small and generalisations therefore need to be treated with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, information available from datasets, which include union learners supported by ESF projects and those doing online learning

Table 1: Qualification levels of union learners (per cent)

Previous qualification level	U-Net learners	ESF-supported learners	Learner survey	UK workforce (ONS)
Below Level 2	70.4*	50.0*	44.2*	29.0
Level 2	13.7	20.6	26.0	20.0
Level 3+	15.9	29.3	39.4	51.0

Source: *An Evaluation of unionlearn and ULFRounds 8–11* (2011): U-Net MI data 2006–2010, base: 5,898; unionlearn ESF learner data 2008–2010, base: 5,268; learner survey, base: 230; ONS data.

*The difference in proportions of union learners with previous qualification below Level 2 and those below Level 2 in the UK workforce average is significant at 1 per cent level (Chi Squared).

in learning centres (U-Net learners), indicates that union learning is successful in engaging learners from groups traditionally under-represented in adult learning. For example, learners in the 45–64 age group comprise 25 per cent of adult learners as a whole (NIACE Adult Learners Survey, 2011), but make up 43 per cent of union learners supported by ESF projects and 53 per cent in U-Net centres.

In addition, while 29 per cent of the UK workforce has qualifications below Level 2, that figure rises to 50 per cent of ESF project learners and 70 per cent of U-Net learners (see Table 1).

Union learning is also successfully targeting people who have not recently been involved in education or training and are not confident about taking part in courses. While one in ten adult learners as a whole say they are not confident learners, four in ten union learners describe themselves in those terms and over half have not taken part in education or training in the previous three years.

A number of research surveys have indicated that there is a significant demand for union-led learning. In 2006, the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) commissioned the first systematic research on estimating demand for union-led learning (Findlay et al, 2007). The research provided robust indicators of current and latent demand for union-led learning in Scotland. More than a third of those employees (including ULRs) surveyed in workplaces with union members (35 per cent) stated that they intended to undertake learning at some time in the future; with a further 21 per cent answering “possibly/maybe”, with nearly 75 per cent of this group reporting plans to undertake learning in the next two to three years. Interestingly, people earning less than average income made up almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of those who said that they might undertake learning in the future.

An econometric model of intention to undertake learning was estimated from the survey data. One of the strongest (and most statistically significant) effects

was that of being positively encouraged by trade union provision. The study showed that over half of employees in unionised workplaces believe that they would be more likely to undertake learning if it was organised through a union. These individuals were 2.5 times more likely to say they intended to learn than those who did not regard learning organised by a union as a motivating factor. There was evidence that the provision of union-led learning can, to a considerable degree, create its own demand with increased union activity in this area likely to further stimulate demand. The model also suggested that although workers in temporary employment are more likely than those in permanent employment to want to undertake learning there was a lack of participation, which highlights a supply rather than a demand problem.

There has also been research on demand in respect to higher education in the UK. This was undertaken by the Open University with support from unionlearn. A survey involving a random sample of union members revealed a large untapped thirst for higher education (unionlearn/Open University, 2007). Most of the union members who responded were ready for higher education, with 42 per cent having a Level 3 qualification and 29 per cent already educated to at least first degree level. Almost all (96 per cent) either strongly agreed/agreed that it is important to always be learning and increasing one’s knowledge. A similar proportion (91 per cent) felt that they would always keep on learning to make sure that their knowledge and skills were up to date. The reasons for wanting to take up learning were diverse, with a higher proportion wanting to study for their own personal development/leisure (81 per cent) than those thinking that gaining educational qualifications would benefit them in their work (56 per cent).

In spite of buoyant latent demand for learning, union members felt there were barriers to accessing courses. These are mainly lack of time and cost. Almost six in ten (59 per cent) felt getting paid time off work to study was a problem. Just under a half felt that they could not afford the fees (47 per cent) which was understandable given that 30 per cent earned less

than £20,000. Another barrier centred on the low recognition of how learning would help job and career (33 per cent). This probably reflects the lack of support they have received from their employers/managers. This might also be a contributing factor in their lack of confidence to take up a course (25 per cent).

Learner motivation

Not surprisingly, in view of the barriers they identified, the survey revealed that employer support was the dominant factor in taking up courses (see Table 2).

Offering appropriate learning methods is essential in meeting the needs of a diverse range of people such as union learners. The survey found that over four in five had experienced teaching session in small or large groups (84 per cent and 81 per cent respectively) and only one third (34 per cent) had had one-to-one sessions. About three in five that experienced one-to-one sessions and small group sessions (61 per cent and 59 per cent respectively) were very positive that it was the right learning method for them. But only one

in five (21 per cent) felt this way about large sessions such as lectures. The survey revealed significant differences between the demand for and provision of learning methods. Of the four in five of respondents who experienced sessions in large groups, less than one in ten (7 per cent) preferred this method, with a half preferring sessions in small groups.

Case studies have identified that union learning can enable a “jobs escalator” with workers progressing to other jobs in the organisation. Learners can also progress up a “learning escalator”, starting with learning that is not directly job-related to learning that is. Worker participation can act as a graduating experience, providing a “roles escalator” that encourages members to become ULRs who, in turn, progress to other union representative positions (Thompson et al, 2007), thus forming a virtuous circle.

Learning journeys

Perhaps the true impact of learning on union members can best be conveyed in the words of the learners

Table 2: Incentives for union learners to participate in higher education (per cent)

I would be interested to learn if...	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
My employer provided paid time off to study	38	43	8	1
My employer paid the fees or part of them	28	45	13	2
I was given help with travel and study costs such as books and equipment	20	45	14	4
I had an assessment to find out what my learning needs are	16	40	23	3
I was supported by a colleague or a union rep trained to advise on learning	13	34	27	5
I was given help with childcare/other dependant care	12	27	9	3
My employer provided unpaid time off to study	10	20	43	12

Source: Open University/unionlearn survey 2007

themselves. This is why unionlearn commissioned the Working Lives Research Institute to carry out in-depth biographical interviews with 42 learners including ULRs. Although the voices are only a small (and necessarily unrepresentative) sample of the hundreds of thousands learners across the UK, they do depict the breadth of workplace learners from a range of social locations. The resulting research report, through the voices of these learners, indicates 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 (Ross et al, 2011). The narratives identify “serial learners” who are continuously engaged, both formally and informally, in learning and who consider learning to be a lifelong process. As the report observes “learning journeys start from different points and social locations and unions need to continue to stress the value and relevance to those on all points of the journey”.

There were examples of unions working successfully with employers to promote learning opportunities. Two learners from the Fire Brigades’ Union explained that they would not have been able to do their learning without time off from work and that their managers had been very supportive.

The narratives, however, highlight barriers for union members on the learning journey including lack of time off to study and negative attitudes of managers:

“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”. ULR, Unite

“Actually, surprisingly enough, the frontline managers 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...once you get to the right level of management they’re fully supportive”.

ULR, United Road Transport Union

“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). 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’ but it was still ‘no’ because they wouldn’t fund it.”

ULR, GMB

The research also highlights the innovative ways in which union learning can engage workers with learning. There is significant literature on how adults learn in the workplace (Ross et al, 2011). 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. They learn for complex reasons, including a desire for self-transformation based on the need for social belonging and self-esteem.

It is also argued that union and 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. TUC Education was a pioneer in using active learning methods, long before they became accepted practice in further education. The methods are designed to enhance union representatives’ capacity for working collectively and cooperatively; so that what is studied is re-enforced by the way it is studied. Talking about problems at their workplace and working with other representatives to determine solutions places them at the centre rather than the periphery of classroom activity (Rees, 2008).

This is also the experience of union learners in respect to adult learning in general. An interviewee

who was a nurse felt that she had been empowered as a union learner because she felt comfortable and confident in participating in learning that uses pedagogy tuned to her as an adult, meeting her needs and learning style. “I think it best if I can work with and 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”.

Learners said they valued the discussion and interaction of union learning courses. As one civil servant said:

“The way the unionlearn courses are done we share information with each other, all of us on the course 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. We enjoy it”. Learner, PCS

Not only is the learning student-centred, so too is the teaching and support. When respondents had a poor educational experience in compulsory schooling, a tutor (or ULR) who focused on inclusivity and making learning meaningful and relevant stimulated learning motivations significantly. The concern, however, is that the barriers highlighted above may impact negatively on the progressive pedagogical model that proves so motivational to adult learners and union learners in particular.

The location of learning is also important to union learners as it can be the setting for 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 informal and welcoming, distinguishing it from the formal classroom situation that may have previously discouraged learners (Ross et al, 2011). According to the research, “these social spaces can represent an oasis in the context of the intensification of work or poor industrial relations”.

Another reason why union learning is so powerful is that it has helped to stimulate self-esteem and self-confidence. Although much learning is associated with employability, union learning (in the best cases) was helping to engender a commitment to learning which is lifelong and life-wide for work and non-work situations. Finally, the research showed that union learning can attract new members, reinforce union identity and can lead to wider democratic engagement and participation. But this effect can only be optimised if individual learners are aware of the union involvement in the delivery of that learning, which is not always the case.

Learner progression

The evaluation of ULF and unionlearn highlighted the effect of union learning on progression (unionlearn, 2011). Nearly nine out of ten ESF project learners surveyed have undertaken more than one learning episode, with the median among the 2008–2010 cohort standing at 2.1 and the maximum by a single individual as high as 11. However, while the incidence of multiple learning episodes shows union learners are often repeatedly engaged in learning, progression from one type or level of learning to another is what is more significant; the majority of union learners are taking part in more than one type of learning (including information, advice and guidance sessions).

Of the one-third of union learners who have progressed, half of them improved on existing qualifications by one level, almost half improved by two levels and almost one in ten by three levels. Union learners tend to have such positive experiences of learning that they wish to continue their learning journeys: more than eight in ten union learners want to take part in more union learning in future, with union members from lower socio-economic groups and working in caring and service occupations most likely to want to continue. And union learners are clear about whom to credit for their progress: almost all of those increasing their qualification level credited union learning, and three-quarters of people who

have changed their job or boosted their wage levels acknowledged the part union learning has played.

The skills uplift achieved by moving up to Level 2 is equivalent to 15 per cent of salary, and the average earnings of union learners surveyed who moved up to Level 2 was £20,757. That means every union learner who moves up to Level 2 creates an estimated £3,113 annual gross value added.

Union learning representatives

A key union representative in supporting union learners is the ULR. Since 1999 over 26,000 have been trained through TUC Education (see Figure 1). Union Learning Fund projects have been the key drivers in helping unions in recruiting and support ULRs.

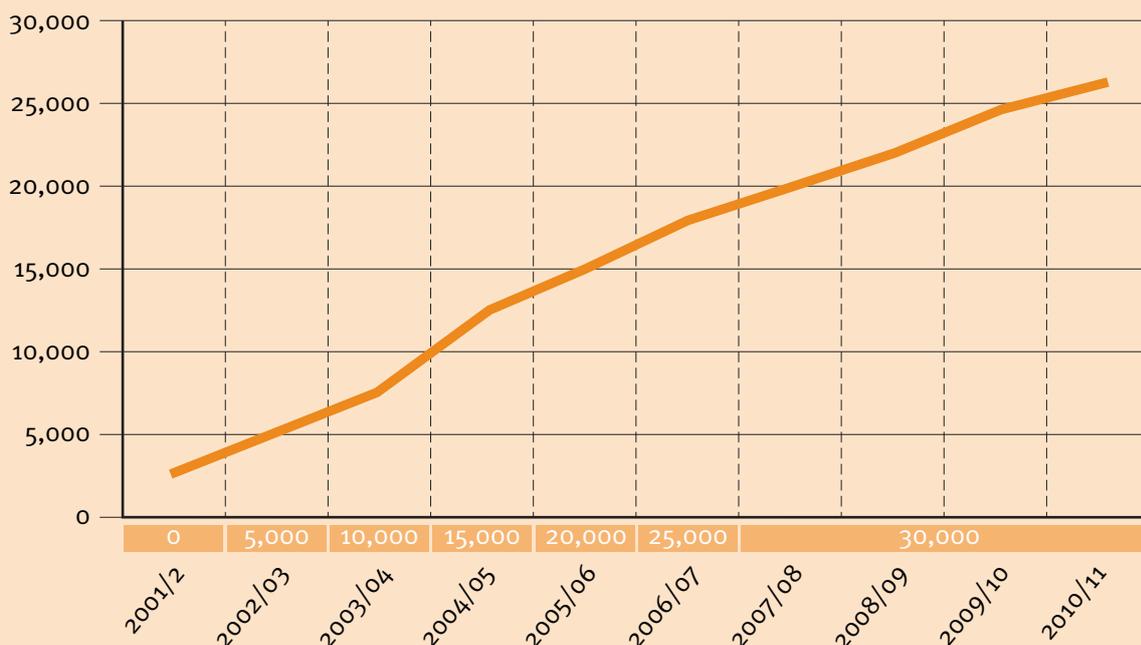
A recent survey commissioned by unionlearn has found that the ULR population is increasingly diverse, with 43 per cent of ULRs being women (Saundry et al, 2010). This compares with 27 per cent of safety representatives being women. Although almost a third of ULRs hold another union post, over a third (37 per cent) are 'new activists' i.e. new to trade union activity; almost a half being women. These new activists are also more likely to be under 45 years old. There has been a significant and sustained increase in the new activists over the last decade. The proportion of ULRs who have held no union

post before has risen from 10 per cent to 35 per cent between 2000 and 2009. This is helping to make the profile of union representatives more representative of the workforce as a whole. This impact will increase if these new activists progress to take on other union roles in the medium and longer term.

Over two-thirds of active ULRs work in the public sector (over one-quarter employed in public administration). There has been a significant decline in the proportion working within the manufacturing; from 19 to 7 per cent between 2005 and 2009, which is likely to reflect the decline in jobs in the sector.

Irrespective of workplace size, over two-thirds of active ULRs operate within very large organisations (i.e. those with over 1,000 employees); however, this represents a significant reduction from 2005

Figure 1: ULRs recruited/trained (cumulative)



Source: unionlearn data

when three-quarters worked in such organisations. There has also been a doubling of ULRs (13 per cent) working in small and medium sized enterprises (up to 250 employees) since 2005, albeit from a low base.

Activities and impact

Table 3 reports findings from the 2007 and 2009 surveys of ULRs. According to these surveys, ULRs undertook a very diverse range of activities, with almost all active ULRs providing information and advice and guidance to colleagues on learning opportunities. About a half of ULRs report have assisted a colleague to get funding for learning or conducted a learning assessment. Almost three-quarters claimed to have recruited or helped new members into the union, evidencing their organising potential.

The impact of ULRs on the take-up of training in relation to workers differed according to the type of training (see Table 4). Similar figures arose from the manager's part of the survey. There has been significant positive ULR impact on a number of learning activities but in a few areas there has been

mainly a neutral effect; although negative impact over all ULR activities is negligible. There was a very significant impact on the take up of literacy and numeracy courses, which is likely to have resulted from the former Labour government's positive encouragement of unions to reach those workers whom employers and providers have not reached in the past. This has led to a large number of union-led projects targeting these learning needs. Other activities where ULRs have stated that they had had significant impact have been training leading to qualifications, learning for personal interest and leisure and continuing professional development. There has, however, been less ULR impact on the take up of apprenticeships even though there has been a significant increase in the number of places supported by the government. This is possibly because this training continues to be subject to managerial prerogative over recent years, although there will be union involvement in negotiating apprenticeship pay and conditions of service. There is likely to be an increase in ULR involvement in apprenticeships in future years as the relatively new unionlearn Apprenticeship Project funded by the National Apprenticeship Service begins to have an impact.

Table 3: Nature and extent of ULR activity (per cent of all respondents)*

	2009	2007
Provided information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities	94.2	85
Helped colleagues to get funding for learning	48.5	n/a
Arranged (or helped to arrange) courses for colleagues	76.7	59
Recruited (or helped to recruit) new members into the union	74.3	n/a
Conducted a learning needs assessment	53.2	47
Met and/or networked with ULRs from other workplaces	79.3	n/a

Source: R. Saundry, Hollinrake, A; Antcliff, V. (2010) *Proportion of all respondents to the 2007 (n = 1389) and the 2009 (n = 1292) ULR survey

Case study 1: The ULR who introduced tailor-made learning

Bharti Dhamecha became ULR of the year in 2010 for the very stylish work she's done promoting learning to colleagues at the Leeds branch of high street chain Primark. Bharti, a shop steward, equalities rep and ULR for USDAW, became a ULR in 2007 and soon made her mark, recruiting young members and reps to the union. Crucially, she has also won respect from the store's management.

“When people say to me that they do not need a union because they have no problems at work, I tell them that unions are not there only when you are in trouble; they can play a vital role in improving your skills and job prospects,” she says.

Bharti, who works on the shop's tills, has introduced off-the-peg courses such as ESOL and maths, as well as tailor-made learning, including a skills swap-shop in the staff canteen. Thanks to Bharti, large numbers of her colleagues have joined USDAW and she has helped persuade the store's management to start a scheme that pays for all staff to take NVQs.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that there is a small but significant number of ULRs that are inactive. Almost a quarter of the respondents categorised themselves as “inactive” and there is likely to be a higher proportion of the non-respondents in this category. There are a number of factors that limit ULR activity. Less than half of respondents felt valued by their line manager or senior management with almost two-thirds feeling that senior managers are only interested in job-related training. Nevertheless, two-thirds stated that they negotiated with their employer over learning. There

was strong evidence that ULR activity was maximised within workplaces where they felt that they were valued by both senior and line management. High activity was more likely to be found in large workplaces with a formal learning agreement.

Another limitation is time. Although more than three-quarters (76.5 per cent) of ULRs felt that they received ‘reasonable’ time off to conduct their role, only two-fifths (41.5 per cent) received cover for their regular job and only just over one-quarter had their workload reduced to allow for ULR activity. The result was that a typical ULR spent four hours per week on union learning activities but received only two hours paid time off. Learning representatives thus have a high degree of commitment and altruism.

The survey also measured both ULR and management perceptions of the impact of ULR activities on workplace learning outcomes. Almost all the ULR respondents believed that they had increased awareness of learning amongst their colleagues. The vast majority claimed that their activity had increased the number of employees trained (78 per cent) and the amount of training they had received (75 per cent). Almost eight out of ten respondents reported that their activity had helped workers with little prior experience of learning to enter training. Industrial relations were also seen to have improved. Two-thirds of ULRs reported that their activity had improved management-union dialogue, and almost two in three stated that it had enhanced management-union relationships in general. There are also some encouraging views about ULRs from the managers' survey, albeit from a relatively small sample (n=112). Almost two-thirds reported that ULR activity had helped to close skills gaps and improve union-management relationships.

ULRs have been recognised as “trusted intermediaries” between learners and the state (House of Commons, 2001). They have been viewed by government as being able to engage with ‘hard-to-reach’ employees and to help stimulate and meet their demand for learning and skills opportunities, particularly opened

Table 4: Impact of ULR activity on learning and training (per cent of all respondents)*

As a result of your ULR activity in the site(s) that you cover, has the number of your members involved in...	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Stayed the same	Decreased a little	Decreased a lot
Training leading to nationally recognised vocational or academic qualifications	19.3	39.4	38.9	1.1	1.3
Apprenticeships	4.2	14.0	75.8	3.1	2.9
Job-related training not leading to formal qualifications	13.1	32.8	51.1	1.5	1.5
Training in basic literacy and numeracy skills	25.8	30.8	40.1	2.2	1.1
Continuing Professional Development	14.1	37.7	43.5	3.1	1.7
Personal interest/leisure courses	15.6	37.3	41.2	3.1	2.7

Source: R. Saundry, Hollinrake, A; Antcliff, V. (2010) *Proportion of all respondents to the 2009 ULR survey (n= 1292)

up through government intervention (Leitch, 2006). Their activities encompass giving information and advice, arranging courses and conducting learning needs assessment. Their role has been seen by the Labour government as helping to deliver the national learning targets, particularly in respect to literacy and numeracy and low level vocational qualifications. ULRs act to help the state mitigate market failure over learning and skills and can thus be viewed as performing a public administrative function (Ewing, 2005). This function is also shared by learning representatives in New Zealand. Nevertheless, ULRs have a complementary workplace representation function in respect of employees (individually and collectively) requesting training from their employer and this is increasing under the Right to Request Time to Train legislation (Clough, 2010).

The role of the ULR is thus framed by a partnership approach. The model has been underpinned by

considerable capacity building through government support such as the Union Learning Fund and statutory recognition for ULRs. There is, however, the need for more employers to be aware of the positive impact ULRs can make on workforce development and accordingly to increase support for them to carry out their statutory functions.

Learning reps in New Zealand

The union learning representative idea has reached other countries. There have been initiatives in Ireland, Denmark, Finland and New Zealand. Their development and scope, however, has been limited by the absence of statutory recognition and the right to paid time off for training and for carrying out their duties.

A major study of the New Zealand initiative carried out by UK researchers is summarised

Table 5: Comparison of ULR and union rep roles and support in the UK and New Zealand

UK	New Zealand
Based on the statutory rights of union reps in union recognised workplaces to paid time off to train and carry out their roles.	Statutory rights for union reps are not extended to learning reps but provisions are included in collective employment agreements.
Initiated by TUC and supported by government through Union Learning Fund.	Initiated by NZCTU and supported by government through Skill New Zealand and Tertiary Education Commission.
Trained and accredited through the national qualification framework.	Trained and accredited through the national qualification framework.
Minimal involvement with sector skills councils.	High involvement with industrial training organisations (ITOs).
Providing information and advice about learning and training to workers. Supporting learners across a wide range of learning including personal development.	Providing information and advice about learning and training to workers. Role defined in relation to what ITOs do in their respective sectors.

Source: Clough, B (2010) *Union Learning Representatives: State Agents or Social Partners?*

below (Lee and Cassell, 2009). The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU) was aware of ULRs in the UK and proposed the concept to the relevant government body, the Tertiary Education Commission, in 2003 and a pilot project was agreed. The roles of the representatives are quite extensive, including providing information and advice as in the UK but also working closely with industrial training organisations (ITOs) that regulate training in different sectors.

The type of learning a New Zealand learning representative provides advice on is likely to be narrower than that provided by a ULR. They are more likely to direct learners towards the training offered by ITOs and less likely to include provision tailored to individual needs such as lifelong learning linked to personal development. Their responsibilities thus fall into the category of a public administrative function.

Like ULRs in the UK, learning representatives are trained through programmes supervised by the NZTUC and accredited through the National Qualifications Framework. The scale of the initiative is, however, relatively small, with 422 learning representatives trained. But this reflects the country's small workforce of 2.2 million, and the fact that almost 90 per cent of enterprises employ five or less people. Their representative function scope is very limited since the New Zealand government has not followed the example of the UK government in providing the learning representatives with statutory rights for time off to train and to carry out their functions.

It is interesting to consider the issue of the sustainability of the initiative in the two countries and the potential for their introduction in other jurisdictions (see Table 5). In the UK, statutory support has been given to ULRs, whereas statutory support has not been provided to learning representatives

in New Zealand. This raises the question of whether ULRs are more sustainable in the UK than learning representatives are in New Zealand. The important criterion in measuring the sustainability in both countries would be to consider the extent to which they have become embedded in the broader context (Lee and Cassell, 2009). In both countries, there would be some grounds for optimism. The qualifications that ULRs/learning representatives undertake have been accredited within broader qualifications framework. In both countries, the responsibilities of ULRs/learning representatives have been recognised in different regulatory frameworks-in law in the UK and in collective employment agreements in New Zealand. In both countries, ULRs/learning representatives have been provided with some recognition in ongoing policies of government, for example, in the respective countries' skills strategies. There is, thus, ongoing scope for trade unions to build on the important opportunities that they have been helping to open up to their members. In both countries it was evident that an important factor to sustaining the ULR/learning representative initiative was the commitment of the individual learning representatives to progressing learning within their organisations.

It is often problematic for countries to successfully import initiatives from different socio-political and industrial relations systems. Nevertheless, the above study identifies some key factors that have underpinned these successful initiatives:

- rights for union learning representatives to train and carry out their role either underpinned by statute or through collective bargaining agreements
- quality training for such representatives accredited through nationally recognised qualifications
- support from national government as well as from national union centres
- outcomes related to wider learning and personal development not just job-specific training.

Learning and union organisation

Unions buy into union learning not just because of the benefits that their members receive but also because it strengthens their organisation. Research suggests that unions are increasingly promoting a relationship between learning and organising at national union level (Moore and Wood, 2007; Moore, 2009; and Thompson et al, 2007). In-depth interviews with union learning/education officers and organising officers highlighted the positive measures unions were taking to integrate unions with the wider union agenda, in particular recruitment and organising (Moore and Wood, 2007). The creation in some major unions of learning organiser posts at regional and national level suggests that unions are moving towards a formal and strategic recognition of the link between learning and organising. In terms of lay structures, almost all unions reported that the aim is for ULRs to be fully incorporated into local branch and workplace structures. This is often informal policy, although in some unions the ULR role is recognised in the union rulebook and ULRs have rights to representation within union structures. Learning officers see two benefits to union learning: firstly, it is an issue to recruit and organise workers around

and secondly, it is a service or benefit provided to members. Organising officers, however, were more sceptical about the links between union learning and organising. A number perceived a possible tension within union learning between promoting individuality and employability and the wider collective roles of unions in the workplace. In some cases, organising officers wanted concrete evidence of the impact union learning had on organising and how it fitted with the collective bargaining agenda.

Subsequent case study research has suggested that there has been a shift in the perception of union learning, with more and more unions seeing union learning as a crucial component of the wider organising agenda and consciously promoting the relationship between learning and organising at national union level (Moore, 2009). The case studies highlighted five key issues:

Table 6: Embedding union-led learning within unions (ULF Rounds 8–11) (per cent)

Activity	Existed before project	Established during project	Working towards	Not working towards
ULRs working more effectively within their branch	11	63	24	3
Learning more linked to union organising	12	62	16	10
Learning/skills forming part of union negotiating	20	50	20	11
Union officers having a specific role for learning	41	39	8	24
Written learning policy established	30	38	8	24
ULR role written into rulebook	27	28	26	19

Source: *An evaluation of unionlearn and ULF Rounds 8–11* (2011): Union project managers' survey, base: 84 responses

- Learning has become a key strand in union organising campaigns (see Case Study 2).
- Branches have linked learning to organising around an issue at work, but have also to meeting the learning and training needs of existing representatives in order to build branch organisation.
- Unions are addressing concerns about the integration of learning into wider union structures, agendas and organisation.
- Unions are adopting a vision of learning that goes beyond individual employability and, in some cases, learning is linked to employer skills frameworks and to members' professional development.
- Learning is offering a path to union activism, with learning encouraging new activists into the union or reengaging those who have been active in the past.

It is not easy to develop precise measures of the organisational outcomes of union learning. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence from the evaluation of ULF Projects Rounds 8–11 (2005/6 to 2008/9) that union learning helps unions build their organising capacity (unionlearn,

2011). According to ULF project officers, activities that were established during the majority of the projects were ULRs working more effectively within their branch; learning becoming more linked to union organising; and learning and skills forming part of union negotiating (see Table 6).

ULF projects have had a positive impact on participating unions, according to the union project managers. More than nine out of ten (91 per cent) believe the ULF has improved employee attitudes to the union; nearly eight out of ten (79 per cent) say it has led to members becoming more interested in taking union roles; more than eight out of ten (82 per cent) say it has helped workplace reps become more capable; and just under seven out of ten (69 per cent) credit the ULF with increased union membership. In many cases, these numbers increase after the completion of the projects, with more than two-thirds reporting increased activity in many areas (see Table 7).

Union learning can not only increase awareness of vulnerable workers to the benefits of union membership but also enhance their activism in the trade union and lead them to manage the learning activity (see Case Study 2).

Table 7: Post-project embedding of learning into union structures and policies (per cent)

Union structures and policies	Increased	No change	Decreased
Link between learning and wider organising activity	73	21	6
Senior officer support for union learning activity	68	29	4
Formal union support for wider project work	68	33	0
Day-to-day engagement with unionlearn	64	26	10
Position of learning/skills in union negotiating agenda	62	35	4
Embedding of ULR role in branches	60	37	4

Source: Union project managers' follow-up survey, base: 53 responses

Case study 2: Learning for Organising Migrant Workers project (Unite)

The Unite ULF project Learning for Organising Migrant Workers was designed to promote learning with migrant and other vulnerable workers in the contract cleaning sector. With an estimated 25,000 migrant workers involved in the sector in the capital, the focus has been on organising these workers to promote employment rights, using learning as a means of giving them access to union representation. The project was initiated with a training needs analysis undertaken by trained ULRs to identify the types and styles of learning to be delivered. To this end, they developed the concept of a project worker operating as a roving ULR, whose roles included engaging with employers with the aim of negotiating learning agreements. Employer engagement proved difficult, however, due to employer reluctance to get involved. The project began with 15 learners on a Saturday English (ESOL) class since no facilities were provided by the employers. Demand was so great that there was an immediate waiting list of 50. ICT courses were introduced as well as classes on British trade union history to raise union awareness. The migrant workers were enthusiastic about learning English particularly at no cost. This led to the idea of “standing up for their rights” since organising required communication skills.

In terms of outcomes, the project trained 27 ULRs, all but two drawn from the migrant workers; over a thousand were brought into learning with information, advice and guidance offered to almost 1,500 learners. All those workers interviewed as part of the project evaluation stated that they had joined the union as a result of becoming involved in the initiative. For the union, the key outcomes are developing a collective consciousness and solidarity, integrating migrant workers into mainstream trade union activities. According to the project manager, it has brought new committed people into the branch committee structure improving organisation and contributing to union renewal.

After the ULF funding came to an end, the project became part of the union’s United Migrant Workers Education project. The migrant workers are managing the initiative themselves with the support of Unite, who are seeking funding and trying to establish partnerships with providers. The self-managed character of the activity is an important factor in its sustainability.

Source: Unionlearn evaluation case studies

Learning and skills: a collective issue

At sector and workplace levels there is relatively little collective bargaining over training. As has been noted, unlike pay and conditions, no statutory underpinning exists for such bargaining. The proportion of employees covered by collective bargaining over pay and conditions has fallen from 38.8 to 36.4 per cent between 1995 and 2010. The incidence of collective bargaining over training is substantially less. An analysis of the last Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) undertaken in 2004 found that management negotiated with union representatives about training in 9 per cent of union-recognised workplaces (Stuart and Robinson, 2007). This compared with management consulting (30.5 per cent), informing (24 per cent) and not even informing (36 per cent) union representatives about training. Where unions are recognised and negotiate over training, employees are 23.9 per cent more likely to report having received some training. ULRs in particular are associated with higher levels of training. Where a workplace has ULRs, recognition and a representative structure that includes employee representatives, employees are 14.9 per cent more likely to report receiving training.

The fact that statutory union recognition under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 does not include training as a bargaining issue indicates that unions have no regulatory function over this issue. Moreover, the limited coverage of collective bargaining indicates that unions have a weak collective representation function in respect to training. Nevertheless, unions and their ULRs have a significant representational function in supporting individuals in accessing learning opportunities. As has been noted, these functions are set out in statute and are increasingly included in formal learning partnerships agreed between unions and employers at the workplace level. This representative function is likely to be increased through the introduction of a statutory right for an employee to request time to train by the former Labour government under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The introduction of the right was available to employees with 26 or more weeks' service in organisations with 250 or more employees from April 2010 and the coalition

government did not extend it to all employees from April 2011 as was planned. It is, however, employees in small and medium enterprises which could most benefit from such a right as they are less likely to be trained or be a member of a union. The right is modelled on the right to request flexible working. The employer is under an obligation to consider the request but there are a range of 'business reasons' they can use to refuse it. Furthermore, the request is limited to training which helps to improve the employee's job performance and that of the business, and the employer is not required to pay for the time that the employee is training or to pay for the course. There is a role for the ULR in the procedure since the worker who makes the request has the right to be accompanied by a colleague or a union representative as in disciplinary and grievance hearings under the Employment Relations Act 1999. Although the measure is an individual right, collective approaches will be necessary when meeting the skills needs of workers in the same jobs, with the union or ULR brokering collective requests.

Learning agreements

A key way of formalising collective bargaining over learning is establishing a learning agreement. An analysis of 281 learning agreements and a survey of 415 employers involved in union learning concluded that "the development of workplace learning agreements can be seen as one of the success stories of union learning activity" (Stuart, 2011). The report found that learning agreements were an example of "institution-building" around union-led learning activities. They help to frame such activities, establish the ground rules for union learning with management and help to identify areas for joint union and management co-operation, investment and regulation. They can also play a role in sustaining union learning activities at the workplace. The analysis found that:

- Workplaces with learning agreements were, on average, larger, had higher levels of union density and had more ULRs than those without learning agreements.

- They were typically associated with more favourably disposed management, a higher prevalence of partnership agreements and workplace conditions arrived at by a higher degree of negotiation. Of those managers reporting learning agreements nearly twice as many negotiated over training compared to those cases without learning agreements.
- They were associated with higher levels of support for union learning activity. Around half of workplaces with learning agreements provided financial contributions to support union learning, compared to less than a third of workplaces without such agreements.
- Just over six in ten (63 per cent) of all learning agreements made reference to time off arrangements for the take up of learning opportunities which has been noted above is a major incentive to employees to engage with learning. Such time off is often co-investment, with for example one hour's learning in an employee's time matched by an hour paid for by the company.
- About three-quarters of agreements made reference to the establishment of joint learning committee. A key feature of union-led learning is the presence of a learning committee representing the employer, union(s) and sometimes including providers. Their remit included the identification of learning needs, the development of organisational and individual learning plans, the provision for time off for training and the responsibilities for the ongoing monitoring of the agreement. In the most detailed cases they also included provisions for the establishment of learning centres and the support structures that needed to be put in place for ULRs.

Case Study 3: Learning agreement between Argos Distribution (Bridgewater) and Unite

The company has a stakeholder agreement with the union and a well-developed system of collective bargaining, which covers training. The signing of a national learning agreement spurred the development of union learning at the site. Local union convenors sought to build learning activity at the site, starting with the recruitment of eight on-site ULRs and a learning agreement was signed in 2006. A learning centre was established in 2007. The next year the company made a £100,000 learning budget available, to be shared across sites, with ULRs managing it. The Bridgewater site was awarded £19,000 towards the initial set-up costs of the learning centre, with a budget of £15,000 per year subsequently. Learning was offered on the basis of 50-50 split between company and personal time, with the former

paid for out of the learning budget. The learning agreement also established a Lifelong Learning Steering Committee (with management, union and ULR representation), which played an ongoing role in overseeing the learning budget. The learning centre works in partnership with a local college, which helped to purchase and service ten computers. Whilst there had been high demand for learning, the 50-50 funding model had been seen as a barrier for some staff, as they were unable to be involved in learning in their own time. As a result the "time off" policy was changed to offer fully paid time for literacy, numeracy and absolute beginner ICT courses. In total, 14 different courses had been run with 228 course completions. Management reported a range of softer organisation outcomes that had contributed to workplace culture, including improved staff morale and confidence.

Source: *The Context, Content and Impact of Union Learning Agreements*, Research Paper 15, unionlearn

The analysis also provided empirical evidence of the positive impact of learning agreements on learning policies and organisational practices at the workplace. Employers' engagement with union learning, their learning policies and organisational practices is significantly larger in workplaces with a learning agreement. For example, almost all (98 per cent) of employers with a learning agreement provide facility time for ULRs compared to about three quarters (76 per cent) without one and almost three quarters (74 per cent) with an agreement have a joint learning committee compared with just over a quarter (26 per cent) who didn't. Where there was perceived highest union learning impact on learning practices – an increase in equality of access to training opportunities – then the difference between employers with learning agreements and those without was 16 per cent.

Where there was perceived to be the highest union learning impact on organisational practices – an increase in addressing skills gaps – then the difference between employers with learning agreements and those without was as much as 26 per cent. Where employers had a learning agreement, 59 per cent reported that consultation of learning and training issues had increased as a result of union learning, while negotiation was reported to have increased by 52 per cent. The reported differences on the incidence of consultation and negotiation with employers without learning agreements were 25 per cent and 23 per cent respectively.

Collective bargaining on training is thus much more in the realm of an “integrative” bargaining model rather than the “distributive” kind typified by bargaining over pay and conditions (Walton and Kerslie, 1965). It is about establishing mutuality over training decisions and the process is based more on “cooperative”, as opposed to “adversarial”, relationships between management and unions. It is not, however, about passive relationships, with unions just being consulted over training and management asserting their prerogative. It is about unions being proactive and in some activities taking the lead. However, without rights to negotiate over training unions will remain in a relatively weak position in advancing this agenda and challenging employer prerogative as regards on-the-job training and the utilisation of skills.

Partnership and co-investment in learning

Learning partnerships

A qualitative study of learning agreements (Wallis and Stuart, 2007) resulting in six in-depth cases suggested that the adoption of a partnership-based approach to learning is, however, even more important for the advancement of the learning agenda at the workplace than the conclusion of formal learning agreement. Such agreements are nevertheless able to contribute to the sustainability of learning partnerships when they result in the establishment of effective workplace learning committees, and embed trade union involvement in the development of the learning agenda. Equally significantly, the findings indicated that the best outcomes in terms of the trajectory of employee participation in learning and the development of workplace learning cultures are associated with learning partnerships in which there is a relatively even balance of power between employers and unions.

The learning agreements concluded at five of the workplaces, and the informal arrangements at the other workplace indicated that a partnership-based approach to learning had developed, or is developing, within each of these organisations. Yet these cases suggest that such processes are not necessarily linear, and that formal or informal agreements can be utilised either to initiate or to buttress the development of a partnership approach to learning.

The learning partnerships established at two organisations resemble what have been described elsewhere as ‘labour-parity’ arrangements, in which there is a relatively even balance of power between the employer and the trade unions, and where outcomes reflect the interests of both parties (Kelly, 2005). This has been manifest in the agreements concluded within these organisations encoding trade union involvement within the development of human resource development strategies, thus establishing this as an area of bilateral rather than managerial prerogative. The agreements in these organisations are also linked to the existing grievance procedures, and as such represent not only an

acknowledgement that the interests of employers and trade unions in relation to learning are not always congruent, but also provide a mechanism for resolving disputes in relation to this issue.

The formal agreements that have been concluded at three organisations, and the informal arrangements at the sixth organisation, by contrast, do not embrace such provisions. The development of a human resource management strategy therefore continues to be an area of managerial prerogative within these organisations, while learning, though regarded as having the potential to deliver mutual gains, is nonetheless positioned within a unitarist rather than pluralist framework. These outcomes, then, reflect that the learning partnerships within these organisations are more characteristic of what has been described as ‘employer-dominant’ arrangements, in which the balance of power is favourable to the employer, and the agenda primarily reflects employer interests and union compliance, rather than genuine cooperation. This is despite the unions having taken the lead in developing both the partnership-based approach to learning and the learning agreement within some of these organisations.

The cases indicate that best outcomes in terms of the trajectory of employee involvement in learning activities and the development of organisational learning cultures are associated with learning partnerships that resemble ‘labour-parity’ rather than ‘employer-dominant’ arrangements, and where those arrangements have underpinned broader change in relation to human resource management and organisational development strategies. In all the case study organisations the advancement of the learning agenda has been made possible because a partnership-based approach to learning has been adopted (irrespective of the nature of that partnership), rather than because a formal learning agreement has been signed. Learning agreements do, however, serve to formalise the establishment of learning partnerships, and thus may contribute to the sustainability of such arrangements. This is particularly likely to be the case when they secure

trade union involvement within human resource development strategies, but is also so when they result in the establishment of dedicated forums for the advancement of the learning agenda.

Although contextual variables have influenced the development of partnership-based approaches to learning in each of the case study organisations, it is nevertheless possible to identify a number of common key factors that are associated with the development of effective learning partnerships.

Similarly it is possible to identify a number of key barriers to the development of effective partnerships for learning (see Table 8).

Co-investment in learning

As noted above, learning agreements can formalise co-investment in learning and skills. The challenge for policy makers is how to increase more private investment in the skills of the workforce and whether

there should be a different balance between private and public investment. The TUC has long argued that employers should increase investment in the development of their workforce if the UK is to improve its productivity, competitiveness and social inclusiveness. There is a powerful argument that if there was a stronger culture of co-investing in adult learning between employers and employees then this would lead to increased expenditure on workforce development and over a wider range of provision leading to more transferable skills. As the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning has stated:

“Things work best – most support is given financially, but also in terms of genuine commitment – where all parties invest in learning. A society where everyone recognises that they have a stake in learning, and where there are collective as well as individual returns, will produce high rates of investment in it.”
Expenditure and funding model in lifelong learning (Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning)

Table 8: Facilitators and barriers to effective learning partnerships

Facilitators		Barriers
Policy framework	Organisational	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Statutory recognition for ULRs ■ Public funding for union-led workplace learning initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Positioning of learning within mutual gains frameworks ■ Commitment of key actors ■ Key actors sharing understanding and goals ■ High trust relationships ■ Stable industrial relations ■ Learning not explicitly linked to trade union renewal strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unions and/or employers adopting adversarial modes of engagement ■ Turbulent industrial relations ■ Inter-union rivalries

Source: *A Collective Learning Culture: a qualitative study of workplace learning agreements*, Research Paper 3, Unionlearn

The anticipated steep reduction in public subsidy provides an imperative to promote such co-investment. For the academic year, 2010/11 the assumed private contribution increased to 50 per cent. College and training providers receive from government, therefore, half the level of funding that they would receive for a fully-funded learner and this is half of a smaller amount than in 2009/2010 as funding rates were reduced. This is likely to sharply decrease as a result of the comprehensive spending review.

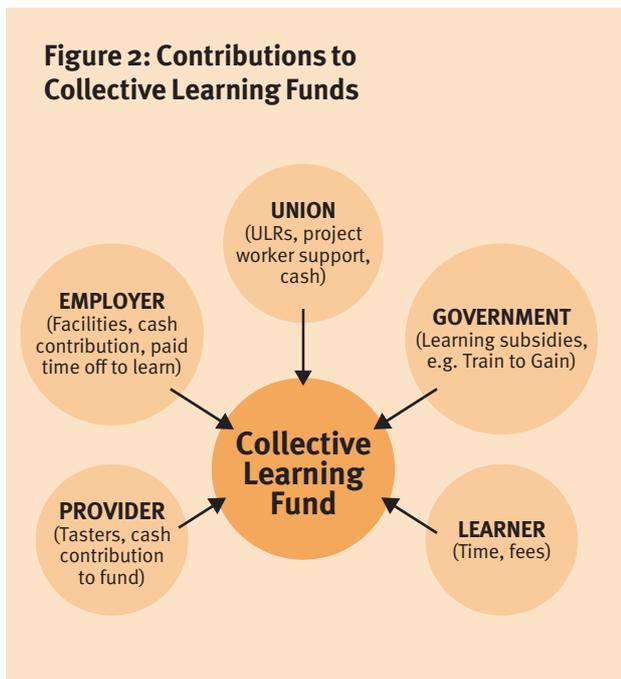
The National Skills Task Force established by the last Labour government called for “the collaborative commitment of all organisations – employers and employer bodies, trade unions, education and training providers, and the government – to work together to enable the nation to thrive in the 21st century’s knowledge economy” (DfEE, 2000). It set out stakeholder responsibilities for the costs of vocational education and training. Individuals should co-operate fully with their employer in job-specific training designed to meet business objectives, and those who can afford to should make a reasonable contribution to the time and costs of transferable learning to improve their continuing employability. Employers should bear the cost of job-specific training, and contribute through encouragement, support and investment in developing the transferable skills and continuing employability of their staff commensurate with the benefits which accrue to them by doing so. Government should ensure that all citizens have equitable opportunities to obtain a minimum foundation of learning for their future employability, and to contribute to cost of continuing learning, through fees grants or loans, according to economic priority and individual need. Trade unions should encourage and support their members to re-engage with learning, and recognise their shared responsibility for their employability. It is the area of transferable skills and long term personal development where there is the greatest need for collaboration and co-investment between the employer, individual and the state.

Collective Learning Funds

Collective learning funds (CLFs) are union-led initiatives to stimulate co-investment in the personal development of the workforce to make such learner affordable and accessible. They are a way of leveraging in cash and in-kind contributions from employers, providers, unions and individuals. The aim is to establish a framework of mutual trust and co-operation whereby employers are willing to invest more in the personal development of their workforce provided that the employee and the state also make a contribution and vice versa. The objective is to create a non-sum-zero or win-win situation that optimizes the investment in workforce development. Key facilitators in such scenarios are trusted intermediaries such as trade unions. Collective learning funds are often underpinned by a learning agreement between management and the union(s) and delivered through a joint union/management learning committee.

The pioneering collective learning initiative was the Ford Employee Development Assistance Programme (EDAP) scheme which was established through a collective agreement between the company and its unions in 1987. It was negotiated as an individual entitlement for funding as part of the pay negotiations. The EDAP allowance was set at a maximum of £200 per year for each employee. The actual amount paid into the scheme by the company initially was £40 per employee. This has now been raised to £90, with the ceiling raised by £100 in respect to learning leading to nationally recognised qualifications. The employee contribution is mainly time, with all EDAP learning having to take place in his/her own time although they also contribute to the fees. EDAP was set up to not to meet the company’s needs but the employees’ needs for personal development. A wide range of lifelong learning was taken up including basic skills, non job-related vocational skills, academic qualifications up to graduate level, and a range of personal interest and leisure courses. The participation rate is phenomenally high. Last year over three quarters of Ford employees on the Dagenham site took up some form of learning. A

Figure 2: Contributions to Collective Learning Funds



joint management union committee oversees the programme, with overall responsibility devolved to local committees at each site with the unions taking a lead role in running the programme.

The Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006) supported a collective approach to co-investment:

“Collective Learning Funds ... would encourage joint employer-union initiatives to increase the scope of training and development opportunities for their workforce and to commit new investment to this. In addition, these funds could encourage employees to co-invest their time along with the employer in a wider range of non job-specific training and development.” (paragraph 5.40)

Figure 2 shows a number of possible sources for contributions to a collective learning account which can be in the form of cash or in-kind provision such as time off to study.

- Employers can contribute in a number of ways by providing paid time off for study, paying some or all of the tuition fees or providing loans, establishing and equipping learning centres at the workplace and providing facility time for union learning reps to support learners. Employers are often more disposed to make in-kind rather than cash contributions.
- The state can contribute by providing entitlements to free tuition for certain groups of learners and subsidising course provision for learners in general.
- Providers can offer free taster courses to potential learners, subsidise courses, help equip learning centres and provide tutors for the centres.
- The learner can study in his or her own time. As noted above, there are many examples of employers offering employees one hour to study in work time provided that this is matched by one hour study in their own time. Learners also often contribute to the cost of the fees where there is limited public eligibility to funding.
- Unions also can make a contribution. Some can contribute cash but the most likely contribution is that of time. For example, ULRs use some of their own time to support learners and run CLF projects.

A project was first established by the TUC in the North West and then extended to include the East Midlands, to help define a strategy for joint funding models to support learning in the workplace and to identify models of good practice. It was supported and funded by the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The project included 25 pilots across a number of workplaces in different sectors and unions; each receiving £4,000 start-up funding. The project was evaluated by the Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change, University of Leeds (Stuart et al, 2011).

Different types of learning funds emerged during the pilots involving different combinations of partners and different ways of building and using resources. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the different types of projects

Case Study 4: PCS and Jobcentre Plus Lincolnshire

Very little union-led learning had taken place until the CLF pilot was set up. A learning survey and Learning at Work event identified a high level of interest among staff around NVQs. The opportunity of affordable learning for NVQ training was a key motivator to set up the fund. It was kick-started with the £4,000 grant from unionlearn. The employer provided mainly in-kind contributions – time for assessments, rooms and facilities. Each individual’s contribution was in the form of study time usually done in his/her own time. The union contributed rep time and resources and state funding was used to meet the cost of NVQ assessor training through Train to Gain. The fund was managed by a steering group made up of union and management representatives who decided on how to allocate the resources available. Outputs included 22 learners signed up to NVQs in Customer Care or Information, Advice and Guidance at Levels 2, 3 and in one case Level 4; four learners completing Skills for Life at Level 2; and a series of deafness and dyslexia awareness sessions held in work time. There has been strong support from both union and management. While the CLF helped develop a new joint relationship on training between the union and the employer, the branch secretary also felt it was helping to build a different relationship between the union and its members and potential members – with new members and reps being recruited as a result. The Jobcentre Plus Customer Services Operations manager felt that industrial relations had improved – “the working relationship has been enhanced through the CLF project”.

developed different combinations of co-funding and co-resourcing partners. The contributions varied

Case Study 5: Usdaw Check Out Learning, Merseyside

The pilot is delivered in partnership with seven colleges and two learning providers. Shop workers are getting a £50 voucher to subsidise new learning across colleges on Merseyside. The vouchers are distributed by union learning reps to learners on-site or at their local learning venue. The union Usdaw contributed £10,000 to the Fund. Usdaw project worker Julia Baldwin states: “The voucher scheme has been a great success across Merseyside and is certainly an idea we would like to roll out in other areas if we can.” Greater Merseyside Connexions is a key stakeholder in the project, which aims to provide affordable and accessible learning opportunities to Usdaw members. They receive a subsidy on their chosen course and can access the same fund to take up a new learning opportunity every year.

with each pilot. While 20 had ‘in kind’ contributions from employers, eight received cash contributions from employers (varying from small sums to pay travel expenses to, in one case, £20,000).

One pilot, however, had difficulty involving the employer because the company had a centrally-driven training programme with national Train to Gain/ National Employer Service contracts (Case Study 5). Consequently, the union developed a voucher system in partnership with local colleges to help to make learning affordable to shop workers in 25 stores.

Overall, six pilots negotiated cash contributions from colleges (based on course completions) and a further two negotiated ‘free’ courses from colleges. Most of the pilots had used some of their CLF to make learning affordable by subsidising courses, subsidising an individual or providing low-interest

or interest-free loans. In one case, the provider paid 20 per cent of the course fee back into to the CLF on the delivery of the ITQ qualification.

Collective Learning Fund pilot outputs

In total, the 23 sites reported the following achievements as either directly or indirectly resulting from the CLF pilots.

- 2,719 learning episodes (including 721 Skills for Life, 527 IT, 884 NVQs and 587 wider/personal development)
- five workplace learning centres established to add to the 11 already existing centres
- nine learning committees established or refreshed to add to the seven already functioning joint learning committees/steering groups
- learning that is either directly or indirectly supported through a CLF taking place, or will shortly take place, across 20 projects.

As the evaluation report stated, the success of the CLF project should not be judged in terms of numerical outputs alone. The project should also be viewed from an industrial relations as well as an educational perspective. The evaluation found that in a number of the pilot workplaces CLFs played an important role in initiating partnership working between unions and management for the first time. This was evolving by embedding learning activity through joint management/union learning committees and agreements. It is this process work and the institutions that evolve to plan, organise and deliver learning that point to the most significant contribution that the CLF can make to workplace learning. The robustness of these institutions is likely to determine the sustainability of such activity. While some sites had previously engaged with the former Labour government's strategic priorities using Train to Gain funding, it is noteworthy that the CLF either helped a number of projects engage

with Train to Gain for the first time – or extend a previous involvement with Train to Gain. The majority of the Skills for Life and NVQ learners were funded through Train to Gain, demonstrating the CLFs potential to help deliver a national skills agenda.

The evaluation report found that all parties to the employment relationship, employees, unions and managers appeared to be taking stock of the added value of the CLF and to be buying into the concept. ULRs were often initiating and leading the CLF work, but to be effective union branches and shop steward structures also needed to be brought around to the credibility and value of the CLF. This was equally the case with employees and managers. The evaluation presents evidence, at this stage suggestive rather conclusive, of how this 'buy in' to the CLF is being achieved and how improved relationships around learning are being forged.

Skills formation and utilisation

For the most part, the union role has been seen by the state as that of increasing access to those learning opportunities opened up through government intervention, particularly for those with no or low qualifications where there is perceived market failure. Such interventions in New Labour's so-called "post voluntary" era included individual learning accounts and the Train to Gain programme, which were both disbanded, and ICT learning. There has been minimal union involvement in skills formation such as determining occupational standards and the qualifications on which they are based. This is the result of the lack of social partnership institutions in the VET system. There has been even less involvement by unions in how skills are utilised at the workplace, which is the result of managerial prerogative and limited collective bargaining over such issues.

Apprenticeships

There has, however, been increasing union involvement in intermediate skills such as apprenticeships as they had moved up much higher on both the former Labour government's and the present coalition government's agendas. The role of the TUC has been to help unions to protect and support apprentices in the workplace and to negotiate a greater take up of apprentice places as well as pressing the government to tackle some key policy challenges, in particular, to improve quality of training, ensuring equality of access and increasing employer demand for intermediate skills (Grindrod and Murray, 2011). This work has been supported by the unionlearn apprenticeship project supported and funded by the government's National Apprenticeship Service. The project raises awareness of unions of the benefits of apprenticeships and provides advice on how to engage with employers and protect the pay and conditions and secure the health and safety of apprentices as well as monitoring the quality of the training and helping union reps to provide mentor support. There has been considerable progress made by government – albeit from a very low base – in increasing the number of places at the same time as securing better quality standards and vastly

improving completion rates as well as the introduction of a national minimum wage for apprentices. There are, however, deep-seated problems of systemic inequality and lack of diversity and some employers who use the programme merely to subsidise their own narrow company-specific training.

The major problem is the voluntary nature of the UK VET system which has been summarised by Hilary Steedman (Steedman, 2011) as follows:

"In England, the state provides a feeble regulatory framework, largely leaving it to the market to determine the demand for and quality of apprenticeships. Yet at the same time, the state is far too dominant in the governance of skills: the design, content and delivery of apprenticeship frameworks is developed largely through state-funded quangos and training agencies without any real engagement with employers or learners. This is the inverse of the European social partnership model that underpins strong apprenticeship systems, where the state provides a much stronger regulatory framework for vocational education but steps back when it comes to governance. While the details vary, in most countries with strong vocational education systems – notably the German-speaking countries, the Netherlands and Denmark – national and sectoral partnership bodies are involved in the policymaking process and responsible for developing the broad frameworks for apprenticeships and other vocational qualifications. The content and delivery of vocational education is then developed by social partnership bodies at local level, which ensure flexibility according to local economic needs."
Rethinking Apprenticeships p129 (2011) IPPR

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also highlighted the need for unions in this country to operate in a way that replicates the role played by their counterparts in countries such as Germany and that "unions should be involved in the design of apprenticeships and other work-based learning initiatives alongside sector skills councils" (OECD, 2008).

The TUC has recognised that emulating this model would be difficult to establish in the UK as it would involve a direct challenge to entrenched opposition among some employers to more regulated training. It would also require employers and unions to commit to high-level partnerships governing apprenticeship provision. As the TUC argues, “the challenge facing policymakers is that it is difficult to impose an apprenticeship quality standard across all sectors due to the wholly voluntaristic nature of the UK skills system and the absence of a social partnership approach” (Grindrod and Murray, 2011).

The TUC in the IPPR paper has, however, argued for a number of regulatory measures. These include setting minimum national standards such as minimum duration, the right to progress to a full Level 3 apprenticeship and greater enforcement of equality of access. Ways to increase employer engagement would include sector agreements that are binding on social partners and a more extensive use of procurement.

Skills utilisation

There is now increasing recognition that raising productivity, competitiveness and living standards requires a greater focus not just on raising the supply of skills but on optimising their use at the workplace. Francis Green in a research paper commissioned by unionlearn states that skills utilisation entails the use of ‘high involvement work practices’ (HIWPs) (Green, 2010). These are a set of human resource practices whose aim is ultimately to enable organisations to make the best use of the creative and productive powers of employees to improve efficiency, devise new products or raise the quality of services provided. They form packages of good practice such as enhanced channels of communication, e.g. participating appraisal systems and quality improvement circles. They also include an enhanced focus on recruitment of employees with the right skills to fit with the organisation’s objectives and the commitment to a high quality learning and training environment. Their outcome is one where not only is learning enhancement built in as a necessary

support but also the skills are well matched to the needs of the job – that is, high utilisation of skills.

The paper argues that the view that HIWPs are good for employees is, however, a conditional one: the potential benefits for job quality are indeed substantial but they could be lessened or even cancelled out if the practices are allowed to intensify work effort and do not compensate with sufficiently greater autonomy. Well-organised unions can, however, act to make sure that potential gains are realised. Green argues that if HIWPs which could introduce organisational improvements that raise productivity are inhibited by lack of capacity or the high cost of change, the collective voice of workers through their unions might help to realise those gains by persuading or assisting management to adopt efficiency-enhancing changes to their HR practices. Unions might then win a share of those gains to benefit their members as well as the company’s bottom line.

UK employers have been slow in adapting HIWPs despite the fact that they are associated with higher levels of productivity and performance. The extent to which employers grant employees’ discretion over their own jobs and autonomous team working has actually declined throughout the 1990s and shows no sign of improving.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has stated that government has a legitimate role to promote HIWP wider use and, as a result, established the Skills Utilisation Project. UKCES has recommended the establishment of a system-wide commitment to skills utilisation. There are very few workplaces where there is significant union involvement in HIWP although the rewards where such practices have been introduced can be considerable for both management and workforce (see appendix).

Green states “that despite the potential advantages, it would be naive to imagine that the preferences of generations of managers in Britain could be quickly

transformed". It remains to be seen whether the vision of the UKCES will affect managerial cultures in Britain which are imprinted with the neo-liberal tradition opposed to state intervention. To make this more likely he suggests that UKCES could usefully delineate more explicitly the role that unions, where they are present in workplaces, could usefully play in the voluntarist strategies that it seeks to put in place. More prominence could also be given to the role that unions play on the boards of sector skills councils (SSCs), and to the developing networks of unions that engage with SSCs around the functions of ULRs. Any changes are likely to be evolutionary and long term, even if the economic recession might shake some attitudes. Unions therefore will have to play the long game, if they are to take a greater part in the new skills utilisation orientation.

Added value

The *raison d'être* for union learning is that it strengthens union organisation, enhances workplace performance and furthers learner progression. There is now mounting empirical evidence of its additionality – its net impact after making allowances for what would have happened in the absence of ULF and unionlearn – and attempts have been made to measure its added value. Just over four in ten union learners (42 per cent) surveyed in the evaluation of unionlearn and ULF reported that as a result of their union learning experience they had taken part in more training provided by their employer that would have otherwise been the case (unionlearn, 2011). Employees more likely to increase their participation through union learning are members of lower socio-economic groups and people who hadn't taken part in training at work in the three years before they started union learning. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills guidance suggests that, based on previous research, the 'skills uplift' achieved by those attaining a vocational qualification gain up to Level 2 is 15 per cent of salary. For those with a Level 2 achieving a vocational qualification at Level 3 this gain is estimated as five per cent addition to salary. The average earnings of the union learners surveyed achieving uplift to Level 2 was £20,757. This gives an estimated £3,113 annual gross value added (GVA) per union learner achieving this gain. The average earnings of those learners surveyed achieving uplift from Level 2 to level 3 was £21,799. This gives an estimate of £1,090 annual GVA per union learner achieving this gain (unionlearn, 2011). The degree of deadweight (where the training was likely to have occurred without the projects) was around a quarter (23 per cent) for the learner survey, much lower than national measures of similar programmes, indicating value for money of learning and skills funding through effective targeting. Also, a lower recorded measure of deadweight was found in the ULF union project officers' survey, of 12 per cent. Questions of substitution were explored in those instances when union learning delivered work-related skills such as ICT. It was found that "union learning did not substitute for employer training, as employers had not been previously offered this type of training". The cases also identified how the ULF

was enabling partners to undertake development work in a way that would not have been possible from internal resources. Costs per learner have been dramatically reduced over the lifespan of ULF. Taking a three year average, the cost per learner has been cut from £580 per annum over Rounds 1–3 to £142 per annum over Rounds 9–11, an impressive improvement in terms of return on investment.

As noted above, according to the ULF project managers their projects have had positive impacts across learning and organisational practices resulting in a substantial increase in such activities compared with levels before the projects began (see Table 9). It is important to estimate what activity would not have taken place without the projects – demonstrating their additionality. Without ULF funding, according to union project managers, very few learning needs assessments would have taken place (see Table 9). The quantity and quality of learning also would not have been as high; with fewer learners and poorer quality learning provision.

It is also important to measure employer perceptions of the impact. This was done by surveying employers involved in union learning projects and analysing the views of the 415 respondents. In their view union learning has increased equality of access to learning and training qualifications in 56 per cent of workplaces (in 65 per cent of those with a learning agreement); boosted the number of employees attaining qualifications in 55 per cent of workplaces (in 70 per cent of those with a learning agreement); and addressed skills gaps in 54 per cent of workplaces (in 68 per cent of those with a learning agreement) (see Table 10).

In terms of performance, employers report that union learning activity has contributed to increases in organisational performance (32 per cent), service/quality indicators (34 per cent) and health and safety (39 per cent). Given that union learning does not aim to address these factors *per se*, the fact that a large minority of employers attribute such increases to union learning is a notable and important finding.

Table 9: Additionality in ULF projects

What would have happened without ULF funding?	Per cent (Yes)
No needs assessment	76
Same learning but fewer learners	58
Learning would have been of a poorer quality	44
No learning at all	35
Learning would have occurred later	24
Same learning but for less time	17
Same learning would have taken place	12

Source: *An Evaluation of unionlearn and ULFRounds 8–11 (2011)*. Union project managers' survey, base: 84 responses

Table 10: Employer views on impact of union learning (per cent)

Indicators	Increased	No change	Decreased
Equality of access to learning/training opportunities	56 (65)*	43	1
Number of employees attaining qualifications	55 (70)*	44	1
Addressing skills gaps	54 (68)*	42	3
Consultation on learning/training issues	46 (59)*	54	0
Positively addresses basic skills gaps	46 (58)*	39	16
Level of trust between management and unions	42 (53)*	54	4
Staff morale	42 (52)*	56	3
Take up of job-related training	41 (52)*	59	0

Source: *An Evaluation of unionlearn and ULFRounds 8–11 (2011)*. Employers' survey (figures in brackets relate to where there is a learning agreement) *significant difference to overall percentage, base: 415 responses

It is not easy to measure the impact of union learning or any other learning and skills initiative in terms of productivity gains, since there are other external factors to take into consideration. Nevertheless, through the use of the Return on Investment methodology it is possible to

demonstrate the positive impact of a union learning initiative on the formation, delivery and utilisation of skills at a workplace (see Appendix).

Sustainability

A key issue for union learning is how this positive activity can be sustained by both employers and unions. A follow-up survey of union project managers who had run projects that had been completed indicated how unions were successfully embedding learning into union structures and policies (see Table 11).

There has been significant investment by employers in union learning. Four out of ten employers

involved in union learning activity provide financial contributions to union learning, with an average investment of £23,000 from those that put a figure on that contribution. Employers are most likely to make in-kind contributions, including: equipment (69 per cent); office space (71 per cent); learning centres (52 per cent); ULR time (77 per cent); management time (58 per cent); and employee time (73 per cent). This provides a useful indication of employer support and this is reinforced by positive views of

Table 11: Post-project embedding of learning into union structures and policies (per cent)

Union structures and policies	Increased	No change	Decreased
Link between learning and wider organising activity	73	21	6
Senior officer support for union learning activity	68	29	4
Formal union support for wider project work	68	33	0
Day-to-day engagement with unionlearn	64	26	10
Position of learning/skills in union negotiating agenda	62	35	4
Embedding of ULR role in branches	60	37	4

Source: Union project managers' follow-up survey, base: 53 responses

Table 12: Sustainability and added value of union learning – employers' views (per cent)

Views of employers involved in union learning	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Unions should continue to develop their role in the learning agenda	91	8	1
Organisation will continue to be involved with union learning activities	87	10	4
Union learning benefited individuals taking part	81	15	4
Management very supportive of the union role on learning	79	16	5
Union learning of benefit to the organisation	63	18	19
Learning activities will take place, even without external funding	43	29	28

Source: *An Evaluation of unionlearn and ULFRounds 8–11 (2011)*. Employers' survey, base: 415 responses

Table 13: Factors influencing sustainability of union learning (per cent)

Factors	Enhances	No impact	Diminishes
A signed learning agreement	81	15	4
Partnership approach between management and unions	78	20	2
Consultation on learning	74	26	0
A learning committee	72	39	0
Formal bargaining on learning	68	32	0
A learning centre	58	39	4
End of government financial support	2	15	84

Source: Union project managers' follow-up survey ULF Rounds 8–10, base: 54 responses

employers on union learning. Over four in five stated that they would be involved in such activities with two in five stating that such learning would continue, even without external funding (see Table 12).

A number of factors necessary for sustaining union learning were identified by union project managers after their projects had been completed. High on the list were learning agreements and learning committees (see Table 13). The survey found, however, that union project managers were less sanguine than the employers about the effect of any reduction in government financial support. Nevertheless, overall the messages offer optimism about the sustainability of union learning.

Challenges and opportunities

Superficially, skills formation could be viewed as the consensual dimension to industrial relations. But while all parties may be “in favour” of training, their motives invariably differ and their interests are not entirely congruent (Winterton, 2008). For employers, the major issue is having a workforce with the competence to perform in accordance with their business objectives which may be expansive or very restrictive. For employees, training can represent a means of raising and accrediting skills and competences, which should provide a route to higher earnings, improved job satisfaction and job security, as well as increased labour mobility. Individual learner needs are therefore likely to be longer term and wider than those of employers. State skills strategies are even wider in scope and are based primarily on increasing national productivity as well as promoting social inclusion. Social dialogue over VET can identify issues for collaboration and resolve conflicts of interest at different levels. In most European countries this involves a tripartite approach bringing the social partners together with state agencies at national, sector and regional levels to develop VET policy. These social partnership institutions are often established by statute such as the Vocational Training Promotion Law in Germany and France’s Labour Code. Decision making over issues such as training and development and the utilisation of skills is, however, increasingly devolved to the workplace level, often underpinned by binding sector agreements. As has been noted above, in the UK there is no statutory underpinning of collective bargaining over training at the workplace, coverage being minimal.

The UK VET system, however, is essentially voluntary, with no devolvement to social partnership institutions backed by law. There is union representation on the UK Commission on Employment and Skills, which uniquely is by its composition a social partnership body, but it has more a strategic rather than a policy decision-making role. There is also limited union representation on employer-led sector skills councils but these have no funding powers such as the levy grants of the former industry training boards. In essence, it is central government and its agencies which determine VET policy and, in the absence of social partnership institutions, union influence is limited in scope and informal. A

centrally driven skills strategy funding programmes to achieve prescribed targets aimed at meeting the needs of employers and their workforces with little social partnership engagement and ownership of the content and accreditation of skills is counter-intuitive. It has been argued that the state, constrained by its long-standing commitment to a deregulated labour market and voluntarism in training, combined with the absence of strong institutional pressure on employers to train, has limited options for securing its objectives (Keep, 2006). In many cases, it can only step in through subsidy for employer activity in centrally prescribed programmes as the former Labour government did, through schemes like Train to Gain. Participation, however, lasted only as long as the funding. In such a voluntary system employers can exercise their prerogative not to train and as many as a third of employers do not train their workforce. Those that do train are not required to train to national standards, they might only train those on higher grades and may not fully utilise the skills of the workforce they do train.

It has also been argued that unions should embrace skills formation as the centrepiece of a new cooperative strategy whilst retaining a strong independent power base with a capacity to impose obligations on employers (Streeck, 1989). Although there is limited leverage that unions can exert over employers in a voluntary, unregulated system there are innovative ways in engaging with employers. As has been noted above, bargaining over training is integrative and about establishing mutuality over training decisions, based on cooperative as opposed to adversarial relationships between management and unions. These partnerships are most effective when they are ‘labour-parity’ arrangements, in which there is a relatively even balance of power between the employer and the trade unions, and where outcomes reflect the interests of both parties. Such arrangements in the form of learning agreements and joint learning committees have been encouraged by UK governments through supporting innovative union-led Union Learning Fund projects and the recruitment, training and statutory recognition of ULRs. They have resulted in the opening of learning opportunities to employees, who might never have taken them up without union learning. Such cooperative

arrangements have also supported co-investment between employers, employees, unions and providers in learning through union-led collective learning funds.

There is also substantial evidence to show that union learning is strengthening unions. The view that union-led learning actually revitalises the union movement has, however, had some critics. It has been argued that in the absence of robust regulation and an institutionalised union role, such as has been consistently argued for by the TUC the “fallback has been to develop a second –track approach based on ULF and ULRs, surrogates for social partnership” (McIlroy, 2008). Ewing identifies skills and training as areas where “the government has enlisted the assistance of the trade unions to act effectively as agents of the State” to help the skills deficiency of the labour force. He defines the government and public administration functions as those which involve unions in the ‘development, implementation and delivery of government policy’ and categorising ULRs as having a public administrative function (Ewing, 2005). It has, however, been argued that the election of the Labour government in 1997 provided an “opportunity structure” for unions in respect to workplace learning. Such an opportunity structure provided unions with “a context that they may attempt to shape by mobilising influence and resources through their relationships with politicians and civil servants, through their contribution to tripartite bodies through their campaign activities and by convincing those in power that they are able to deliver desired outcomes” (Heyes and Rainbird, 2011). The researchers’ in-depth evaluation of a ULF-funded UNISON initiative, *Embedding a Culture of Learning*, demonstrated this potential effect. It found that “shifts in the opportunity structure allowed UNISON to develop new means of attracting members, to build on members’ enthusiasm for learning through new union roles and to forge a link between the union’s learning and organising agendas”. ULF had provided trade unions with an important “external” financial resource and a means by which they might create further “internal” resources (e.g. project workers) to support initiatives relating to learning.

Over the last few years, the scope of union-supported learning has widened to include apprenticeships

and informal adult and community learning and not just limited to basic skills and ICT. The next challenge for unions is to influence the demand side as well as the supply side. In Northern European ‘high skills economies’, particular emphasis has been placed on the ability of strong unions, operating in relatively well-regulated labour markets, to close off low wage, low-cost approaches, forcing companies to compete on the basis of product quality and skills. With the decline of collective bargaining, however, the ability of UK unions to ‘block off’ low wage competitive strategies which are so prevalent in the VET system remains limited (Lloyd and Payne, 2006). The utilisation of skills has, however, been moved up the agenda by the UKCES and unions are increasingly recognising the need to engage with employers on high involvement work practices (Green, 2010). Employee gains from such practices such as enhanced job quality, better training and reward for greater productivity and avoiding work intensification is best secured through dialogue between unions and employers through labour parity partnerships. Green, however, counsels that any changes are likely to be evolutionary and long term and unions therefore “will have to play the long game, if they are to take a greater part in the new skills utilisation orientation”.

In conclusion, there is empirical evidence to demonstrate that union learning has had considerable success in helping employees access a wide variety of learning opportunities. There is also evidence that this activity has positive impact on the skills, industrial relations and performance of workplaces as well as strengthening union organisation. Strong support from employers and unions evidences that union learning is sustainable. There has, however, been less room for unions to influence supply side issues such as training standards and accreditation of skills. Unions must influence the demand for skills by becoming involved in dialogue on skills utilisation, which is gradually moving up the VET national agenda. Until institutions are established with decision-making devolved to social partners at national and sector levels and collective bargaining over training put on a statutory footing then the influence of unions will be sub-optimal and the VET system will continue to underperform in meeting employee needs.

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Appendix: Union learning and productivity

Workplace Study 1: BAE Military Aircraft and Intelligence/Unite/Warton, Lancashire

BAE's Military Aircraft and Intelligence division is one of the world's leading producers of military aircraft. Its business strategy involves moving from primarily meeting the requirements of the UK military aircraft market to competing in a global market. This has placed increased pressure on the company to improve productivity, to find more effective ways of working, and to optimise the skills and knowledge of the workforce, however, industrial relations at the site had been through a challenging period and several attempts to change the culture to support continuous improvement and reach agreement with the unions had failed. As the union convenor, Phil Entwistle said, "There was a culture change, where people began to see that they weren't maximising the potential of the skilled population on the shop floor, by giving them more roles and responsibilities."

In 2008, new discussions began between the managers and unions. Management wanted the workforce to participate in continuous improvement to reduce costs. The Unite union wanted to secure progression opportunities for the aircraft manufacturing, maintenance and support staff (AMMSS) bringing greater parity with other groups of employees at the site. Both employees and managers were aware that productivity improvements were being held back by clear demarcation between trades. The AMMSS employees had developed considerable knowledge of how to resolve problems in the production process but were unlikely to share that knowledge in a way that could contribute to continuous improvement. A complex new agreement was agreed over 18 months based on multi-skilling and continuous improvement.

- As part of the negotiations a cross-skilling group made up of shop stewards and managers was established to work with the employees to map and record all the skills used by the 13 trades.

- This resulted in a series of skills portfolios detailing all the tasks carried out by each trade with each employee given an individual portfolio plan, which identified the additional skills from another trade that would assist to improve the process on which they worked.
- Almost all (97 per cent) signed up to the scheme, Working Practice Change, in the first year and at the end of the year, each employee would gain a 2.5 per cent pay increase, and begin to use that skill. This process was then repeated, so that the employee would have two portfolio skills, and a further 2.5 per cent pay increase. By the beginning of the second year, 100 per cent of the workers had signed up to the scheme.
- Groups of workers, as opposed to managers, decided on how to change the balance of work between teams.
- Joint union/ management committees were also set up to review the use of portfolio skills in each area and identify the skills they believed were necessary to improve the processes in their area.

By widening the skills of the AMMSS workforce and creating more flexibility in their deployment, and by engaging the workforce in continuous improvement, BAE has seen significant improvements in productivity. Over the two years of the scheme the worker hours required to complete one unit of the Eurofighter reduced from 11,000 to 7,990. The benefits to the workforce included a means to progress as they acquired and utilised new skills, opportunity to improve their pay and narrowing the difference between them and other parts of the workforce as well as improving the relationship between manager and employees.

Source: *Making Skills Work: trade unions and their role in optimising the use of skills in the workplace*, Research Paper 17, (forthcoming) unionlearn

Workplace Study 2: Return on investment (CSEU and VT Shipbuilding)

Agreements were negotiated between management and the CSEU to up-skill craft workers to maximise the productivity returns of the company's investment in new equipment and technology. During 2002, the Confederation of Shipbuilding Unions (CSEU) formed a learning partnership with VTS, the Learning and Skills Council, the then Southern and Eastern Region TUC Learning Services and Eastleigh College. A ULF project was established resulting in the establishment of a workplace learning centre. A network of 10 ULRs was trained and a learning agreement was established providing 50 per cent paid release for employees attending courses at the learning centre. VTS informed the unions that they would be introducing a semi-supervisory position of charge hand, which along with the leading hand would become permanent positions. The unions took the opportunity to raise their members' concerns regarding the lack of training provided for these positions and initiated a successful bid with VTS and the college from the Trade Union Fund South East/Learning and Skills Council (TUFSE) programme established to supplement the ULF. Under the contract, the unions provided the project management and also the network of ULRs to support the participants during the training programme for the 60 charge hands and leading hands. Its aims were to raise numeracy and literacy levels, ICT competence, enable the workers to support team leaders more effectively and to change culture, raise the confidence and improve communications within the two grades. The training delivery ran from February to August 2005; 100 per cent passed the ICT course, 96 per cent the literacy Level 2 test and 86 per cent the numeracy Level 2. The

unions believed that the team leaders would, as a result, be able to delegate more responsible tasks to the leading hands and charge hands and that their members would have more confidence to apply for promotion opportunities that they previously believed would be beyond them.

An evaluation of the programme was agreed between management and the unions and supported by DfES using Phillips Return on Investment (ROI) evaluation methodology. The results on business impact were as follows:

- Charge hands in the Light Fabrication Shop were able to use their numeracy skills to assume direct ownership of budget overspends and involvement in cost reduction processes and planning which were normally the responsibility of the shop manager and the team leaders.
- Charge hands in a number of departments used their ICT training to take over accessing information and installing data in the programme which measures progress; thus reducing team leaders and draughtsmen time on the tasks.

The total cost to the company of the training programme including participants' salaries, tutor costs and project management was £109,437 with funding of £30,500 from Trade Union Fund South East. A total of £262,764 was the estimated saving to the company, with a return on investment of 140 per cent and of 232 per cent when TUFSE funding was included.

Source: CSEU /VT Shipbuilding Evaluation Report



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