



unionlearn
with TUC Education

OPENING DOORS TO ALL

*How union learning
tackles disadvantage*

FOREWORD

The growth of union-led learning over the past two decades is one of the great success stories of the labour movement. With the help of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), unionlearn and Britain's unions have helped millions of workers change their lives for the better by improving their knowledge and skills.

This is no small feat. Tens of thousands of the workers we have engaged possessed few qualifications – and many none at all – before they returned to learning in their workplace in later life. A large proportion have discovered they have specific learning differences such as dyslexia that were never diagnosed when they were at school. A significant number of learners are migrant workers who have needed our support to gain the skills they need to fully participate in their workplaces and wider communities.

These – and many more like them – are the kinds of adult learners who have been excluded or disadvantaged in other contexts, such as shiftworkers whose work routines prevent them from attending classes at their local college or disabled workers who have not been provided with the support they need to participate in learning opportunities elsewhere. These are exactly the kinds of adult learners that our trained union learning reps (ULRs) have successfully engaged and once they get started, many of them have pressed on with their studies, often becoming ULRs themselves to help support more people who face barriers like the ones they did.

Union-led learning is inclusive, by definition. We open our doors without discrimination, including to non-members. This booklet showcases many of the ways in which we dismantle the barriers faced by disadvantaged learners, and help them – and the organisations they work for – to grow and thrive. I hope everyone who reads it is inspired to help us continue to open our doors to all.

Kevin Rowan
Director, unionlearn



REMOVING THE BARRIERS THAT CREATE DISADVANTAGE

By working to remove the barriers that can prevent workers from returning to learning, union learning reps are ensuring that opportunities to develop and progress are open to all.

The growth of unionlearn over the past decade or more, and the expansion of union-led learning over the past 20 years, has helped transform thousands of workplaces across the country and created new opportunities for hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom had been failed by the education system when they were growing up.

This has been good news for the individuals involved, for the businesses and enterprises that they work for and for the country as a whole, as successive evaluations of the work of unionlearn and the Union Learning Fund (ULF) have demonstrated.

Thanks to ULF support:

- 68 per cent of learners with no previous qualification gained a qualification
- 62 per cent of learners acquired new skills that made them more effective in their current job
- 91 per cent of learners have developed an appetite for further learning.

The benefits do not of course solely accrue to the individuals who take part. According to the latest evaluation by the Leeds University Business School, the boost to jobs, wages and productivity directly derived from ULF learning and training delivers more than £1.4 billion to the economy as a whole.

It is the inclusive approach that union learning reps, project workers and learning centre managers adopt to removing the barriers that might prevent workers from returning to learning that helps secure these benefits.

Potential learners can be prevented from taking up learning opportunities because of:

- workplace barriers such as shift work, lack of paid release time, unsupportive managers, exclusion of agency/contract workers
- practical barriers such as childcare demands, lack of transport, course fees
- social barriers such as excluding attitudes to disability, negative assumptions about age, gender stereotyping, lack of understanding of medical issues
- emotional barriers such as low self-confidence caused by previously low attainment in educational contexts and/or negative experiences at school.

But by systematically dismantling these barriers in their learning projects, unions are helping people achieve qualifications that in many cases they never thought possible before – qualifications that help people quietly transform their lives as a result.

“ULRs are trained to support hard-to-reach learners, including migrant workers, agency workers, part-time workers and others who can otherwise be overlooked or excluded.”

Union learning reps are absolutely central to this. Because they are often people who share, or have shared, disadvantages with their potential learners (poor qualifications, shift patterns, dyslexia), they are seen as credible and trustworthy by potential learners. Because they are union activists, they are seen to be promoting opportunities with no hidden agendas. And because ULRs are not part of HR or learning and development departments, learners know that they can talk to them in confidence about issues they might well prefer not to disclose to a supervisor or manager (such as literacy problems, suspected dyslexia or a cancer diagnosis).

Above and beyond all of that, ULRs are trained to support hard-to-reach learners, including migrant workers, agency workers, part-time workers, and others who can otherwise be overlooked or excluded from workplace opportunities.

Learning agreements play a similarly positive role in removing barriers. One of the major advantages of a learning agreement is that it can specify the arrangements concerning both facility time for a ULR to carry out their role and the agreement on work time available for learners (most frequently in the form of an hour of work time matched by an hour of the learner's time). This can be extremely valuable for all concerned, especially in the light of the latest Leeds evaluation of union learning, which reveals time as the biggest barrier faced by learners, with 21 per cent saying work pressure was a major problem that made it hard to take time to learn and 17 per cent reporting management refusal of time off to learn as a major problem.



Learning centres onsite also play a valuable role. In partnership with flexible providers, learning centres can help ensure that learning opportunities are made available to workers on all shifts in a plant in a way that colleges cannot. Guided by trained managers and teams of ULRs, learning centres also help set the tone for workplace learning, removing the competitive element that alienated many learners at school and fostering a collective approach where learners can support each other.

Unionlearn itself also supports by helping ULRs and other stakeholders share best practice to develop genuinely inclusive workplace learning cultures – including through Supporting Learners briefing events in the regions, through its annual conference and through its publications programme.

Right across the political spectrum, from all sides in industry and from the education sector too, everyone understands that we need to increase our skills levels to compete in the global economy. Ensuring that learning opportunities are available to all can only help us achieve that goal.

GIVING PEOPLE THE CONFIDENCE TO START LEARNING AGAIN

Union learning reps have an excellent track record in removing one of the key barriers to accessing learning: lack of confidence.



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SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH LOW CONFIDENCE

Barriers to learning: Negative experiences during people's formative years at school tend to leave scars that last long into adulthood. Being bullied by your peers, humiliated by teachers, punished unjustly or having to deal with traumatic life events while growing up will often discourage people from returning to learning as an adult, as will excessively competitive classroom environments, where knowledge is valued over curiosity. Similarly, trying to learn while struggling with undiagnosed dyslexia or another specific learning difference tends to undermine someone's belief in their ability to tackle problems. All of these negative associations prevent people from taking up learning opportunities later in life.

USDAW member Yenimi Daminado, who works part-time at Boots in Beeston, Nottingham, approached her union learning reps (ULRs) at one of the regular events they run to promote the opportunities on offer in the onsite learning centre.

Yenimi didn't feel confident to help her three children with their homework: although she very much wanted to offer her help, she believed she was too old to learn herself.

"We encouraged Yenimi to enrol on to a maths course at the learning centre," recalls ULR Dawn Johnson. "We told her how easy it was to learn onsite and how she would be studying with her colleagues and friends and get lots of support."

After completing her initial assessment, Yenimi enrolled on the course, and was able to undertake the study in a mix of her own and the company's time, thanks to the agreement between the company and the union on matched time for Functional Skills courses.

“Yenimi has grown so much – she is so much more confident and is now able to help her children with their homework.”

The ULR team talks to learners all the time to help monitor their progress in the centre. “To see how much Yenimi has grown in confidence is so rewarding,” says Dawn. “She has grown so much – she is so much more confident and is now able to help her children with their homework.”

To have gained the qualifications that have enabled her to achieve her goal of helping her children with their schoolwork is proof of how effective union learning can be. But Yenimi's story doesn't end there: after 11 years work in retail, she has been able to follow what has long been a passion for her – nursing.

"The maths course I took has helped with my job and given me the confidence to apply for and enrol on the access to nursing course," she says.

FOOD WORKERS CHANGE THEIR LIVES THROUGH LEARNING

Staff at Oasis Foods in High Wycombe have boosted their confidence so much through improving their Functional Skills with the help of their union, BFAWU, that many of them are now unrecognisable from the people they were just a couple of years ago.

"I am really proud of all these achievers and of the staff who worked so hard," says BFAWU South East Project Worker Carol Hillaby, who has been instrumental in growing the learning offer onsite since she first visited four years ago.

“Among those attending, confidence has visibly grown since they entered the group; they are totally different people now and the company are immensely proud of their achievements.”

Carol used her connections with the local Workers' Educational Association (WEA) to organise for tutors to come in and conduct initial assessments, which revealed there was room for improvement in Functional Skills English for many staff.

The WEA then set up the first course – a 10-week, non-accredited English course tailor-made for the site, including a session on health and safety, which is a key objective for management.

Highly rated by the 13 participants, the English sessions led to the first of many accredited courses – all of them followed by celebration events that featured tea and cakes as well as speeches and certificates.

Improving the skills of staff has enormously benefited the company, according to Site Director Ian Wood. "The quality and accuracy of our traceability paperwork has greatly improved since we started this training – traceability exercises now take less time because of the improvement in the guys' English and writing skills," he says.



HELPING MIGRANT WORKERS SCORE THEIR LEARNING GOALS

Migrant workers have much to offer, although their qualifications may not be recognised in this country. But union learning projects are helping them access the opportunities they need to put their talents to best use.

SUPPORTING MIGRANT LEARNERS

Employment: Migrant workers make up 10.7 per cent of the UK workforce, but they are concentrated in low-skilled, low-paid sectors of the economy – for example, they make up 41 per cent of total employment in food manufacture, 34 per cent in clothing manufacture and 31 per cent in domestic personnel.

Qualifications: Many migrant workers may be educated up to degree level in their native countries but their qualifications are not recognised by their UK employer.

Barriers: Lack of English language skills, low awareness of their employment rights and negative perceptions of trade unions all conspire to marginalise migrant workers and render them vulnerable to exploitation.

Unite has been helping refugees and asylum-seekers in Barnsley improve their communication skills with courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) delivered through a partnership with local Red Cross staff.

“We struck up a partnership and they agreed we could use their facilities at the meeting house to deliver ESOL classes once a week to the asylum-seekers and refugees,” explains Union Learning Organiser Linda Hughes, who set up the classes with the help of Industrial Organising Officer Joe Rollin.

And when the learners began dropping into the Unite Community Support Centre (CSC) in the town to use its computers, Linda and Joe encouraged local industrial branches to cover their dues and help them extend their skills through the online learning opportunities on the members-only portal LearnWithUnite.

When Linda saw a piece about football in the local paper written by one of the asylum-seekers using the new-found English skills he had developed through the union, the lifelong football fan had an idea.

“I’ve always believed football transcends languages: it’s a universal thing that speaks to people, it’s a way of bringing people together,” she says.

So Linda and Joe got together with the union learning team at the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA) to organise a five-a-side tournament with an educational element that they called Celebrating Diversity Through Learning.

Sixteen teams took part in the tournament at the Barnsley FC Training Academy in January 2016, including the ESOL learners and three other local teams, Yorkshire St Pauli and Leicester’s FC Kolektivo (two teams that both promote anti-discrimination), Sheffield’s all-women’s team AFC Unity and a team from Manchester’s Refugee Support Centre.



“The Barnsley ESOL team absolutely loved it – they really enjoyed the chance to play football in a properly organised tournament – and Barnsley FC gave them a strip to wear as well,” Linda says.

At the halfway point, Unite Head of Lifelong Learning Kenny Barron presented the Barnsley ESOL team members with their certificates, while, after the final whistle, Dave Gibson from Barnsley Trades Union Council presented the tournament trophy to the winning team from the Manchester Refugee Support Centre.

SUPPORTING REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

URTU Project Worker Judith Swift and Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) ESOL lecturer Rita Mucha have helped English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners in Bolton join the local library and integrate themselves in local life.

Judith and Rita, who both teach groups of refugees and asylum-seekers that have fled conflicts in Syria, Somalia, Congo and elsewhere, realised that the learners rarely left their own communities except to attend classes at Bolton Language School and visit the local Jobcentre.

“The library manager met the learners and gave them an introductory talk about all the services they could access for free at the library.”

Keen to help the learners practise their English outside the classroom, open doors to further learning opportunities and introduce them to more of what the town has to offer, Judith and Rita asked the library staff if they would be able to help the learners get their library cards.

Not only did the library make sure staff were on hand to process the 30 applications on the same day, but also the library manager met the learners and gave them an introductory talk about all the services they could access for free at the library.

And the tutors devised a quiz to help the learners identify the different ways they could use the library, including to take part in family learning activities.

“The URTU ULF project team has a qualified ESOL specialist able to offer support to learners who are all too often distant from opportunities to improve their English and participate in their communities,” says Judith Swift.

“This exciting partnership between URTU, the WEA and Bolton Language School provides a sustainable route into accredited ESOL learning that is leading to further learning and improved well-being and employment opportunities for many groups of disadvantaged learners.”



ENSURING DISABLED WORKERS ACCESS UNION LEARNING

Union learning reps are trained to support disabled workers to take part in union learning opportunities.

SUPPORTING DISABLED LEARNERS

Employment: While 80 per cent of non-disabled people in Britain are likely to be in work, just 50 per cent of disabled people are likely to be in work – and they are more likely to be in routine, unskilled elementary jobs and part-time work.

Qualifications: Disabled people are three times more likely to have no qualifications than their non-disabled counterparts and less likely to have access to training and development opportunities.

Barriers to learning: Long-term or fluctuating health conditions may lead to extended periods of time away from work, reducing access to work-based learning opportunities, while time out of work means that disabled people may find it difficult to retain qualifications or professional registration.

Although she had always enjoyed learning, Sarah Eaglestone began to struggle at school as a teenager. Initially unaware that she was losing her hearing, Sarah found it increasingly difficult to join in classroom discussions and her work suffered as a result.

With the help of hearing aids in both ears and by teaching herself to lip-read, Sarah was able to pass all her GCSEs, but only – as she says – by the skin of her teeth.

However, the low grades didn't look good on her CV or job application forms, and by her early twenties Sarah had resigned herself to being a stay-at-home mum, until a cochlear implant gave her the confidence to start a part-time job as a support worker.

Moving into a full-time community role was a mixed blessing, because while she made great strides in her personal progression, Sarah was restricted in what she could do by her employer and given few opportunities to undertake anything beyond mandatory training.

After seven years, Sarah moved into a new role, but funding cuts meant she was made redundant within six months of starting. That was when she spoke to UNISON Newcastle City Branch Education Officer Wendy Aitman about training opportunities through the union.

“There is no stopping me now! I love training and attend as much as my time permits.”

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When Sarah decided to take a Level 2 Team Leading qualification, Wendy asked her what support the union could offer to help her get the most out of the training. Sarah asked for a note-taker and the branch arranged with the provider for one to be present from the very first session of the course.

“I had always loved training but struggled to enjoy it because of my hearing impairment: I couldn’t join in as well as I’d like and was always exhausted when I finished a day’s training,” Sarah says.

“UNISON enabled me to attend training courses with support and encouraged me to build my confidence so that I am able to achieve what I set out to do.”

Thanks to UNISON’s support, Sarah now has qualifications equivalent to A grades at GCSE and A Levels and has secured a new job with independent-living organisation KeyRing. “There is no stopping me now! I love training and attend as much as my time permits,” she says.

As a passionate advocate for learning, Sarah is perfectly suited to the UNISON learning rep role she has also taken on at work. “I want people out there to know that you can do anything you set your mind to with the support from UNISON just like I have had,” she says.

CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE

More than 750,000 people of working age are living with cancer in the UK, while 500,000 carers of people with cancer are themselves working full-time or part-time.

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, they are automatically classified as disabled for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, which protects anyone who has, or has had, a disability. This protection from discrimination continues even when there is no longer any evidence of the cancer.

Yet many employers fail to provide the support their employees need in the event of a cancer diagnosis.

Almost 50 per cent of people who were in work when they were diagnosed with cancer say their employer didn’t discuss sick pay, flexible working or making workplace adjustments with them. Nearly 60 per cent of cancer survivors who were in work when they were diagnosed have had to give up work or change their role following their treatment.

However, TUC Education is working closely with Macmillan to equip union reps with the tools they need to support people living with cancer.

Cancer in the Workplace: A Workbook for Union Representatives (second edition, July 2013) provides information, guidance and support for union reps who may have members who have been diagnosed with cancer or who are or become carers for someone with cancer.

TUC Education and Macmillan have also produced the eNote, Cancer in the Workplace, online learning that educates union reps about cancer, what the law says, and the role of the rep in supporting members.



► **Download Cancer in the Workplace:**
www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/cancer-workplace-workbook-union-representatives

► **Complete the Cancer in the Workplace eNote:**
<https://www.tuceducation.org.uk/enotes>



TAKING ADVANTAGE OF EVERYTHING OLDER WORKERS HAVE TO OFFER

Since older workers are going to carry on making up a larger share of the total workforce, it makes sense to ensure that we act now to remove the barriers they face.

SUPPORTING OLDER WORKERS

Employment: By 2020, over-50s will comprise almost one third of the working age population. Currently there are more over-50s in employment than ever before and the employment rate of older people is still rising. It is believed that individuals on average will change jobs six times during their working life. 46 per cent of UK employees will at some point completely change their career.

Qualifications: May be out of date. Or not connected to where older workers wish to go next in their career.

Barriers: Older workers, their younger colleagues and managers may have negative perceptions about their ability to develop themselves ('too old to learn'). When they have worked for a long period in a particular workplace, older workers may need to update their employability skills in order to move on, in the event of redundancy or the desire for career development or career change. Older workers may have more demands on their time through children and / or ageing parents that make accessing learning difficult.

Michelle Whitely, who is the Learning Centre Co-ordinator at Home Retail Group in Widnes (now Sainsbury's Argos), uses the unionlearn Value My Skills cards to help people prepare their CVs and to conduct mock interviews.

Each Value My Skills pack contains 56 cards, each with a transferable skill (e.g. teaching or using computers) plus four header cards (very competent, competent, adequate, or undeveloped). By dividing the cards among the four headings, learners can identify, for example, skills they need to develop in order to progress in a particular direction.

At Widnes, many learners have secured internal promotion and some have found other jobs outside the organisation as a result of working with the resource that Michelle calls 'Tarot for Business.'

"It's given them a common language and script to use at interviews that has proved a success," she says.

Michelle also uses the Value My Skills cards to support coaching and mentoring and as a useful tool to break down age barriers among staff.

"We need to train team leaders to ensure they understand that older workers can and do contribute so much experience and expertise to this business."

With Argos now part of the Sainsbury's group, the new management is supporting Michelle to set up a staff forum that will encourage staff to identify any specific training and support they may need, including any special adjustments in order to continue to do their job.

"As you get older you may need more time – we need to train team leaders to ensure they understand that this is not a negative, older workers can and do contribute so much experience and expertise to this business," Michelle says.

Michelle encourages learners to use the unionlearn Climbing Frame to track their learning and progression, including skills developed outside of the workplace. "This means that when managers ask for reports from individuals, they can easily provide this information and show their contribution to the business," she explains.

MAKING SENSE OF MID-LIFE

More than 5,000 people have undertaken mid-life and older workers activities through unionlearn's Mid-Life Development project.

Unions are better placed than most other agencies to support individuals through their unique network of active ULRs in the workplace.

The average worker will work six different jobs at six different companies and possibly face two periods of unemployment during their working life, according to a 2015 survey by the Association of Accounting Technicians.



"19 per cent of learners who undertook a mid-life career review benefited from work-related training as a result."

According to the Supporting Mid-Life Development Survey Evaluation Report 2017, 19 per cent of learners who undertook a mid-life career review benefited from work-related training as a result, followed by 17 per cent who had accessed English, maths or digital skills training and 15 per cent who had progressed to higher education.

► **Download your copy of the survey from:**
www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/supporting-midlife-development-survey-report

TACKLING DYSLEXIA IN THE WORKPLACE

Union learning reps can help workers with specific learning differences access learning opportunities they would not otherwise be able to take part in.



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SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a Specific Learning Difference (SpLD) that primarily affects the way people process, store and retrieve information and is estimated to affect around 10 per cent of the population.

Employment: For many people, dyslexia can present a serious obstacle to finding a job. A bad experience of education may result in a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Problems with reading and writing can make it difficult to apply for jobs. It may also be difficult to do some aspects of a job without the employer making some adjustments.

Qualifications: Dyslexic children's experience of school is often negative. A lack of understanding of the nature of dyslexia can lead to unhelpful and damaging comments from staff that can have a long-lasting detrimental effect. Issues with short-term memory and understanding instructions pose further problems for exams.

Barriers: Many dyslexic employees experience disciplinary and misconduct-led approaches to problems that are disability-related. High levels of bullying, stress and mental health problems arise from misunderstanding and poor management of dyslexia and dyspraxia at work. There is limited understanding of reasonable adjustments, and what does and doesn't work, in workplace negotiations to resolve these issues.

Unite member Simon Cotton started work at Southampton City Council around the same time that the union opened its first onsite learning centre – but at first he turned down invitations from ULRs Dave Ross and John Early to come and find out what was on offer.

Growing up at a time when dyslexia was little understood, Simon was sent to a secondary school for children with physical and mental disabilities and was once beaten up by former classmates from primary school when they bumped into him in his ‘special school’ uniform.

Leaving school with no qualifications, Simon started work collecting trolleys in a supermarket, but when he was promoted to a job in the bakery, he was too ashamed of his numeracy issues to ask for help with weights and measures and ended up losing his job.

When Simon started his new job as a refuse and recycling worker, Dave and John felt sure union learning could help him, even though he had his own reasons for refusing their offers. “I resisted at first as I didn’t want to highlight my condition to workmates and my new employer,” Simon recalls.

Dave and John persisted and eventually convinced Simon that tackling Functional Skills in the supportive environment of the Unite learning centre would be completely different to his experience at school.

“It is great to see how Simon has grasped the opportunity and faced his demons and wanted to learn: he is an inspiration to others.”

Once he discovered there was another way to learn, there was no holding him back. After achieving his Entry Level 3 literacy qualification and securing promotion to charge hand, Simon also completed the TUC’s union reps stage one course and became a Unite health and safety rep.

Dave is proud of the way Unite has helped someone who had been failed by the mainstream education system.

“It is great to see how Simon has grasped the opportunity and faced his demons and wanted to learn: he is an inspiration to others,” he says.

OPENING UP TO EVERY SHIFT

The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) is accommodating the learning needs of workers on all the different shifts at Pennine Foods in Sheffield to help workers improve their Functional Skills English and maths.

Union learning rep Lisa Greenfield has been working closely with Dearne Valley College to ensure English classes are open to everyone.

“If a provider wants to work with us, they have to be flexible and understand the nature of our industry,” Lisa says. “We have been very lucky with Dearne Valley College, who understand this and have worked around us to meet the needs of the learners.”

“Management have been very supportive as they can see the benefits of learning.”

The college runs a workshop session onsite that people can drop in to before they start or after they have finished their shifts.

Management has been fully supportive of the classes, with the HR manager securing the full co-operation of line managers to release learners from the shopfloor in order to attend the workshops.

“Management have been very supportive as they can see the benefits of learning,” Lisa says.

Simon’s commitment and dedication was recognised by unionlearn, when its Southern and Eastern Region named him Learner of the Year.

“I hope to inspire others who face the same or similar barriers to learning as I did growing up and to show that tackling your gremlins can lead to a better way of life,” he says.



TURNING LEARNING AT WORK INTO A REALITY

Unionlearn supports more than 350 learning centres in a large variety of workplaces, which offer non-threatening, non-competitive and inclusive environments where workers can develop their skills and improve their qualifications.

Most learning centres are partnerships run by unions and their employers, with management usually providing the room, furniture and broadband, while the union usually trains the ULRs, undertakes the promotional and organisational work and often provides the IT and specialist equipment.

Union learning centres are able to engage many hard-to-reach learners who would be unwilling to attend a local college or unable to learn off-site due to shift work and/or other commitments.

Ever since USDAW set up The Learning Zone at the Argos Castleford Distribution Centre (DC) near Wakefield, West Yorkshire, the team of union learning reps (ULRs) has worked hard to remove obstacles that might prevent staff and agency workers from accessing the opportunities on offer.

And it's paid off. Since USDAW and DHL first signed a learning agreement in 2010, more than half the 260 DC staff have taken some kind of course, with more than half of those engaged progressing onto other courses and qualifications, between them racking up more than 2,766 learning opportunities.

The Learning Zone offers a spectrum of learning opportunities almost as broad as the range of products on the shelves of the DC itself.

There are people taking Functional Skills courses to improve their English, maths and computer skills, while others have enrolled on Apprenticeships at Levels 2 and 3 to gain all-important qualifications in Business Administration, Warehousing, Team Leading and Management.

“If you’re working here, you should be able to access learning: when we run things like Reading Ahead, I make sure agency workers are aware they can take part.”

There are also staff taking Continuous Professional Development (CPD) distance learning courses in customer service, team leading, mental health awareness and health and well-being. In addition, by tapping into resources available through Wakefield Council and its partners, the centre runs a range of workshops and sessions on various aspects of physical and mental well-being and is currently running a ‘Six Weeks Five Years Younger’ challenge that involves health assessments six weeks apart with personal goals and lifestyle change to get healthier.

Lead ULR Sean Dixon also uses the centre as a base from which to run national initiatives such as literacy scheme Reading Ahead and the National Numeracy Challenge; as a home for meetings of the new workplace book club; and as the headquarters of a new campaign to spread awareness of the issues surrounding dementia.

The Learning Zone is open to everyone – union and non-union, full-time and part-time, payroll and agency (there are many migrant workers on long-term agency contracts). “If you’re working here, you should be able to access learning: when we run things like Reading Ahead or the National Numeracy Challenge, I make sure agency workers are aware they can take part, it’s not just for the full-time staff,” Sean says.

Sean tries to remain aware of potential issues that might prevent learners from getting the most out of their opportunities at the centre. When Peter, one of the warehouse clerks, was showing signs of having trouble taking information on board after enrolling on an Apprenticeship, Sean and the tutor from provider JTDS spoke to him about whether undiagnosed dyslexia might be behind his struggles.

When Peter revealed he too had wondered if he might have the condition, Sean made sure both the learner and his tutors learned how to change the background colours on the computer screens in The Learning Zone.

After enabling Peter to find the best colour combination for doing his coursework, Sean also bought a set of coloured overlays and reading rulers that would help him to read printed course materials more easily.

To ensure opportunities are genuinely available to everyone, the steering group also evaluates the data ULRs capture not only on learner numbers but also on equality and diversity. The Learning Zone collects feedback from everyone who passes through its doors to identify how it can improve the project and make any necessary adjustments in terms of what learners are specifically looking for.

LEARNING AGREEMENTS

Learning agreements between unions and employers help both sides benefit from clarity about their priorities – including facility time for union learning reps to carry out their role, paid release arrangements for learners and the partnership bodies that will oversee the implementation and monitoring of the agreement.

According to the latest independent evaluation of the Union Learning Fund (Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change, University of Leeds & Marchmont Observatory, University of Exeter, October 2016) about half (48 per cent) of employers reported they had signed a learning agreement with their union learning project.

Nine of out of ten agreements have provision for ULR facility time and 86 per cent for staff time off for work-related training, according to the Leeds evaluation. And around half of respondents reported that their agreements included provision for the joint financing of learning.

Higher levels of training were more likely to be associated with the presence of a learning agreement and greater employer investment.

HELP OPEN DOORS WITH TUC EDUCATION eNOTES

eNotes are a great resource to help reps keep up to date on key workplace issues.

Each eNote is a self-contained module that contains a mixture of text, video and quizzes and takes between 20 and 45 minutes to complete (and can be returned to as needed).

Many of the eNotes that TUC Education produces to help union reps focus on the ways in which ULRs and others can help dismantle barriers to participation in workplace learning.



To work through any of the eNotes below, simply register or log in at www.tuceducation.org.uk/enotes

Union Learning Representatives

Introduces the role of the union learning representative (ULR) and details how union members' lives have been changed through learning. The eNote:

- explains the role and key tasks of the ULR
- identifies the benefits of union learning
- details the key role of the ULRs in promoting union learning to members, unions, other ULRs and employers.

Supporting Learners

Explains how union reps can support learners in the workplace. The eNote:

- explains how to successfully interview learners to find out their learning needs
- suggests sources of further information on learning opportunities
- details different methods of recording an action plan.

Climbing Frame

Highlights the key functions of the Climbing Frame and explains how users can navigate their way around the website to record and plan learning activities. The eNote covers:

- learning themes
- learner management – basics and advanced
- using reports.

Language support for workers

Shows how English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learning can help union organising by demonstrating the positive impact of union support. The eNote:

- describes the benefits of ESOL learning for workers
- outlines the business case for ESOL learning to employers
- highlights why ESOL is a union issue
- suggests ways to set up and support ESOL activity.

Tackling Vulnerable Employment

Looks at how union reps can help precarious workers in their workplaces. The eNote:

- examines the circumstances in which a worker may be vulnerable
- explains the negative impact this can have on their lives
- looks at case studies of workers in vulnerable employment.

Cancer in the Workplace

Raises awareness of the impact of cancer in the workplace and how union reps can support members affected by cancer at work. Produced in partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support, this eNote:

- explains what cancer is and highlights some of the side-effects and its treatments
- examines the law relating to cancer
- details the role that union reps play in supporting members affected by cancer.

Supporting Mid-life Development

Explains how ULRs and workplace reps can conduct mid-life development reviews with their colleagues. Produced in conjunction with the Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE), the eNote:

- explains the benefits of mid-life development reviews
- helps reps understand the issues faced by mid-life workers
- explains how to conduct a mid-life development review
- gives guidance as to where reps can refer colleagues to for further information and guidance.

Apprenticeships: a guide for union reps

Explains the key issues when negotiating for high-quality Apprenticeships in the workplace. The eNote:

- defines Apprenticeships and sets out why quality schemes benefit both employers and unions
- sets out the elements of a high-quality Apprenticeship and how unions can help establish successful Apprenticeship programmes
- explains how to negotiate with employers to ensure apprentices receive the conditions and support they need.

Mentoring

Shows how union reps can support apprentices within the workplace. The eNote:


- outlines why young people need additional support/mentoring in the workplace
- defines mentoring and outlines its benefits
- sets out the next steps that reps should take if they want to mentor/support young people in the workplace.

Mental Health in the Workplace

Raises awareness of the impact of mental health issues in the workplace and how union reps can support members affected by issues associated with mental health. The eNote:

- describes common mental health illnesses
- helps reps recognise when colleagues may have mental health issues
- summarises the law on mental health in the workplace
- help reps support and represent members with mental health problems.

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Published by
unionlearn
Congress House
London WC1B 3LS

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www.facebook.com/tucunionlearn
Twitter: @unionlearn

June 2017

Cover photograph: Neil Turner
Design: wave.coop
Print: College Hill Press

