
Technician Pathways project

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Technician Pathways – end of phase one project report

The Unionlearn Technician Pathways project started in October 2012 to raise technician status and promote the trade union role in supporting technicians. The project was funded by the Gatsby Foundation for two years. The project started very much with awareness-raising in mind and the need to engage unions to see the opportunities in integrating technician support into their work. The primary aim of the project was to develop positive and sustainable relationships between professional bodies, trade unions, employers and others with a view to encouraging and supporting more workers to take up technician registration.

The Technician Pathways project has been promoting the trade union role in delivering professional registration for technicians working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) covering key sectors such as, energy, education and manufacturing. Unionlearn has been working in partnership with professional bodies and other organisations to promote the professional standing of technicians recognising the valuable contribution they make both to the economy and to our lives more broadly.

The project team initially consisted of a dedicated project officer with support from a unionlearn policy officer and a senior policy officer in the Research and Policy team. The work has had clear cross-over to the work of the unionlearn apprenticeships team.

Setting up the project

The project started with mapping sectors, professional bodies, qualifications, registration schemes, apprenticeship pathways and trade union engagement. This has been an ongoing process which continues in consultation with trade unions. Useful data has been sourced from the Science Council, New Engineering Foundation, Union Learning Fund (ULF) programme and Labour Research Department. This has involved profiling, amongst other matters, collective bargaining and learning agreements.

The project team found that specific examples of institutional level of engagement directly relevant to this project were hard to ascertain. For instance, BECTU (Creative Industry Safety Passport) and UNISON (e.g. HEaTED, IfL, CODP) have been involved in some partnerships and held board level involvement in industry partnership bodies.

Two case studies were produced based on technician interviews about their experience of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Kellogg's and the University of Portsmouth. The case studies highlighted different challenges and opportunities. The project also engaged employer representatives including a major television programme maker (The Garden) which provided some interesting insights.

As a result of this engagement, the Technician Pathways project developed its outlook on the issues that technicians face, the barriers to CPD and/or professional registration and some interesting approaches taken by employers and trade unions. A very few examples of employment policies (including provisions in the NHS 'Agenda for Change' agreement) were identified. The information gathered and researched fed into development of the Technician Registration Toolkit.

Written briefings were produced and distributed with the Sector Skills Council (SSC) Union Network, unionlearn's internal apprenticeship network and the ULF project managers' network. Three briefings were also developed for the unionlearn website on topics such as 'introducing the project', 'the technician skills gap' and 'why registration?'

A project steering group was set up and consisted of members from the Gatsby Foundation, unionlearn, unions and professional institutions. The group proved to be a useful forum for information sharing and project activity dissemination. From April 2014 onwards an electronic newsletter was sent out to stakeholders with project news and wider technician agenda related information.

Project highlights

One of the main project outputs was the development of the *Technician Registration Toolkit – A resource for union negotiators and reps*. It has been well received as a source of information on who technicians are and how union officers, reps and negotiators can support technicians. The toolkit also describes the registration process and benefits of registration to individuals, unions and employers. The content of the toolkit was consulted with unions and professional bodies. Presentations in unionlearn teams and meetings with unions and website presence were the main way of promoting the publication.

Richard Blakely and Lauren Usher jointly produced an essay called [The unions and technician registration](#) published by the Gatsby Foundation. The essay

demonstrates the need for union engagement on the technician agenda and describes the common ground unions share with professional bodies as well as the historical ties of the union movement with the technician workforce.

Unionlearn's [Learning Rep](#) magazine featured a Learning at Work Day event in Diamond Light Source in Didcot where an active union learning rep has taken the technician agenda forward. The week included a variety of activities and a full day was dedicated to professional registration. A number of professional bodies had a stall for Diamond Light employees and anyone else from Harwell Science and Innovation Campus to explore. Unionlearn took part by delivering a presentation in the technician registration lunchtime seminar which was attended by over 20 technicians and three professional institutions.

Unionlearn director Tom Wilson highlighted technician registration and the unionlearn project in [Higher Vocational Education - A Collection of Think Pieces](#) published by the Association of Colleges in March 2014.

The project has been praised by Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, who spoke about the Technician Pathways project at the unionlearn conference in 2013. Matthew Hancock, Minister of State for Skills and Enterprise complimented unionlearn on the Technician Pathways project in the 2014 conference.

Events and meetings

The project was promoted and technician registration raised in a number of events and meetings. These include:

- Presentation to the Manufacturing Skills Alliance October 2012
- Attendance at World Skills to meet with employers and others engaged with 'technician competitions', October 2012
- ULF project managers' network meeting, December 2012
- A round table discussion with UNISON and two professional bodies was delivered to explore working relationships between unions and professional bodies and to do groundwork relating to the toolkit in February 2013
- GMB reps' training day, August 2013
- Unionlearn's Putting Technicians on the Agenda conference in July 2013. There is a video of the conference highlights on the unionlearn website. The event raised awareness of the fact that technicians have not had enough recognition for the productive role they play in society and the valuable skills they hold which directly contribute to the UK's economic success.
- Unionlearn annual conference featured a Technician Pathways workshop and launch of the toolkit in October 2013

- HEaTED conference in October 2013
- IET apprentice conference in October 2013
- UNISON regional conference October 2013
- Unionlearn Yorkshire & Humber regional conference, November 2013
- Unite National Industrial Sector Committee for Education, November 2013
- Unite Higher Education Conference presentation, November 2013
- Unite /Cogent conference presentation, June 2013
- University of Nottingham event stall, January 2014
- TSSA reps event presentation, March 2014
- Pathways to Progression event presentation, March 2014
- Women in STEM fringe event at the TUC Women's Conference in March 2014 – working together with Women in Science and Engineering (WISE)
- Unionlearn higher learning and Open University meeting presentation, April 2014
- UNISON Further Education conference, April 2014
- Presentation in Learning at Work Week event in Diamond Light Source, May 2014
- Project's Advisory Stakeholder Group met three times with the aim of keeping the unions informed of project progress, the overarching policy agenda and trade union priority discussions over the project life-span

Unions

The project has actively engaged with the following unions:

- UNISON (FE and HE)
- Unite (education – e.g. Sheffield University, Engineer Surveyors Section, electricals, engineering – e.g. EoN, BAE, Rolls Royce, HS2)
- TSSA and RMT (rail – e.g. Network Rail, Crossrail)
- Prospect (promoting registration through their App for apprentices, AWE)
- CWU (Royal Mail)
- BECTU
- GMB (e.g. utilities industry)

Professional bodies

The Technician Pathways project has been building relationships with professional bodies and institutions. There has been steady communication through the project with the EngTechNow project as well as with the Science Council and Engineering Council. EngTechNow is a project concentrating on technician registration and it is run by three Professional Engineering Institutions (3PEIs): Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE), The Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) and Institute of Civil Engineering (ICE).

Unionlearn participated fully in the Technician Registration and Membership (TRaM) project which was part of the Engineering Council's technician engagement and research work. The aim of this project was to create and launch a revised registration product that is valued by employers and embraced by technicians. Unionlearn took part alongside professional bodies, employers and others and made important contributions in terms of co-ordinating trade union input in to the research programme.

The Director of unionlearn is engaging with stakeholders through his membership of the Technician Council. However, towards the end of the project lifespan the Council meetings ceased and its future is uncertain.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Science Council was signed by the TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady and the Science Council's Chief Executive Diana Garnham in June 2014. The MoU describes a framework for joint activity. A statement on union support for registration featured in a report on technical services in Higher Education commissioned by the Science Council. The report was sent to technical managers across the UK and the statement showed that unions are a key partner in gaining support for registration within their institutions.

The project has directly engaged with the following institutions:

- IET
- IMechE
- ICE
- RSC
- SOE

Challenges

It would be prudent to say that the Technician Pathways project has made a good start in engaging unions to consider how technician registration could enhance access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD). A challenge has been to engage relevant union officers and reps but the project has nevertheless

raised discussions and interest with unions and union members. The Technician Pathways project has been competing with many different organisational agendas and has therefore been difficult at all times to get the time and attention of senior officials. Some of the trade union concerns have been raised around licence to practice as a hindrance to entering workforce in particular areas. The question of funding the registration cost has also been pertinent. The general view has been that employers' financial support is essential considering that they gain a great deal from ensuring their workforce is up to independently set professional standards.

Identifying the technicians in the workforce has not always been simple either. The definition can sound loose and the whole term 'technician' can be confusing when people work in a multitude of roles and industries with a multitude of job titles.

Like many other good initiatives it takes time and resource to convince all concerned including the union members in the workplace. The benefits of registration and who registration is for may not always be clear compared to the daunting tasks of finding the appropriate professional body and building the evidence for assessment. Some technicians who have been in their roles for a while have also fed back that registration may bring more benefits to younger entrants to the workplace rather than those who are already established in their roles and not wanting to take steps to other roles or progression.

Conclusion and next steps

The Technician Pathways project started as an exploratory exercise of scoping how trade unions can link to the technician agenda. This has meant casting a net wide to unions and workplaces to find out more about union support to technicians and relationships with professional bodies. Unionlearn internally also needed to get grips with the concept of the technician workforce, who they are and what they do. Gatsby Foundation funding enabled unionlearn to put resource into this work.

It has become evident during the project that the union offer on, and members' access to, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) are important strands of the technician agenda. This project has been a pathfinder for such an initiative, engaging key affiliates and developing a CPD agenda with which reps can engage.

The project has offered an excellent opportunity to raise questions about the invisibility of technician workforce while highlighting how hugely important they are for industries and economy as a whole. There is undoubtedly further work to be done in improving the penetration of Technician Pathways project both with unions and employers.