



Supporting learners in the workplace

A guide for union learning reps

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Foreword

Our mission at unionlearn is to promote union-led learning in the workplace. So one of our top priorities has always been to support our network of trained and active union learning reps (ULRs), who do so much to spread the learning message to their co-workers.

That's why we've comprehensively revised and updated the ULR handbook we published in 2020, Promoting Union Learning.

We wanted to create a user-friendly resource for ULRs, that would be equally helpful to reps relatively new to the role as it would be for those with many years' experience behind them.

So instead of trying to cram a mammoth amount of information into a single definitive publication, we've aimed instead to provide bite-sized introductions to all the different aspects of the ULR role and signpost readers to where they can find more detailed information online as and when they need it.

By adopting this approach, we hope we've created a resource that's useful and accessible, and doesn't date too quickly – something that becomes ever more important in the fast-changing world we're living in right now.

As well as supporting existing ULRs, this new handbook is designed to help union branches recruit more new learning reps. By showing everything a ULR can do, and where they can find support for all aspects of their work, we hope it will inspire more members to take on this vital and rewarding role.

Kevin Rowan

Head of Organising, Services and Learning

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Introduction

This handbook is aimed at all union reps promoting learning and skills in the workplace. Whether you're a recently elected union learning rep (ULR) or a rep with years of experience, you should be able to find the support you need, or information about where to go for further help, when working with union learners.

Unionlearn continues to help all union reps promoting learning by:

- developing resources, like this handbook, to help ULRs in their day-to-day role
- organising webinars on key issues facing ULRs
- running national and regional events, such as our popular annual conference, where ULRs can share good practice, pick up new publications and try out digital resources
- celebrating successes by covering new initiatives, courses, events and learners' stories on our website.

To keep up to date with everything on offer from unionlearn visit:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/subscribe

You'll only receive emails direct from unionlearn and we don't pass on your details to any third parties. You can update your details or change your preferences by clicking on the links at the end of every email we send from the site.





SECTION 1

Becoming a ULR

1 Becoming a ULR

Union learning reps (ULRs) are trained union members who support learners in the workplace by giving them information and advice, signposting, coaching and mentoring.

Where their employers recognise their union for collective bargaining, ULRs are legally entitled to reasonable time off to undertake seven key functions:

- analysing learning or training needs
- providing information and advice about learning or training matters
- arranging learning or training
- promoting the value of learning or training
- consulting the employer about carrying on any such activities
- preparation to carry out any of the above activities
- undergoing relevant training.

Full details are set out in the ACAS Code of Practice: bit.ly/3L23xLN

1. Analysing learning or training needs

The best way to identify your co-workers' learning needs is to conduct a learning survey in the workplace. You can use the template on pp 12 & 13.

Once you've collected all the surveys, you can identify:

- which courses learners are interested in
- which levels may be appropriate for different learners
- any gaps in provision that the union can fill.

2. Providing information and advice about learning or training matters

You can find out about learning opportunities that could benefit your members from:

- your union
- unionlearn
- local providers (eg, further education (FE) colleges, private providers, local authority adult learning services)
- providers with track records of working with unions and union members (eg, Birkbeck, University of London www.bbk.ac.uk, National Extension College www.nec.ac.uk, The Open University (OU) www.open.ac.uk, The Skills Network theskillsnetwork.com, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) www.wea.org.uk).



3. Arranging learning or training

You can:

- work with your employer's HR/learning and development teams to arrange suitable dates and times for courses
- work with local providers to book tutors
- promote courses to potential learners through information stalls, open days, posters, staff intranets, branch meetings and one-to-one conversations
- offer taster sessions and/or 'lunch and learn' activities in partnership with local providers.

4. Promoting the value of learning or training

ULRs can help learners take the plunge by pointing out the everyday benefits of improving their English, maths and digital skills, including:

- understanding their payslip
- booking annual leave via online systems
- feeling more confident about helping children and grandchildren with homework
- taking advantage of cheaper prices online.

In addition, ULRs can point to the evidence that the higher your qualifications are, the better you're likely to be paid, according to March 2021 figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS):

- In manufacturing, the average gross weekly pay for someone with no qualifications is £418; rising to £512 for someone with a Level 2 qualification; £586 for someone with a Level 3; and £888 for someone with a degree.



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- In health and social work, average weekly pay varies from £277 (for someone with no qualifications) to £647 (for someone with a degree).
 - In IT industries, average weekly pay varies from £662 (for someone with no qualifications) to £924 (for someone with a degree).
- Read the full ONS analysis at: bit.ly/3OUso70

5. Consulting the employer on learning

Securing employer buy-in at the highest level should help you when you need to approach supervisors and managers about releasing staff for courses.

When you start to develop union learning in your workplace, reassure HR and/or learning and development staff that you aim to fill gaps in existing provision, not tread on their toes.

Your employer may be willing to provide financial and ‘in-kind’ support for workplace learning.

The unionlearn guide *Skills At Work: a guide for negotiators* sets out how ULRs and workplace reps can negotiate with employers around the development of employee skills: bit.ly/3QxFKGY

6. Preparation to carry out ULR activities

A ULR will often spend the majority of their time preparing activities, events and courses. This will involve:

- talking to and working with other branch reps
- talking to and working with members of the HR/learning and development teams
- planning with a local provider
- getting advice from union staff at regional and national level
- drawing up learning programmes
- drafting learning surveys, learning agreements, feedback forms
- preparing reports and presentations to branch meetings and branch committee meetings.

When planning a learning event, think about:

- who the audience will be
- how many people could take part
- how to remove barriers to participation (eg, timing; accessible venue or online platform).

Always set yourself goals that are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.



7. Training for your ULR role

Your employer should grant you paid release to train for your role as a ULR.

Many unions offer ULR training through their own activist education programmes.

TUC Education offers in-person and online courses in the TUC regions, depending on demand. Check when a ULR course is running in your region:

www.tuc.org.uk/TUCcourses

8. Notifying your employer

Your branch should inform your employer in writing that you've been elected or appointed as a ULR.

You must be trained to carry out your duties as a ULR:

- either at the time when your employer is informed of your new role
- or within six months of the notice being issued (this can be extended in the event of unforeseen circumstances such as illness or bereavement).

Your branch can use or adapt the form on p8 to notify your employer.



Appointment of a new union learning representative (ULR)

Union learning representative's details

Name
Home address
Postcode
Work department
Mobile
Work
Email address

Employer's details

Name
Address
Postcode
Telephone
Union Learning Representative's bargaining unit
Details of workplace/work departments covered
Name of branch
Branch number
Signature of Branch Secretary/Area Organiser
Date

9. Reasonable time off for ULR activity

The ACAS Code of Practice says: “The amount and frequency of time off should be reasonable in all the circumstances.”

You should give managers and line managers as much notice as you can about:

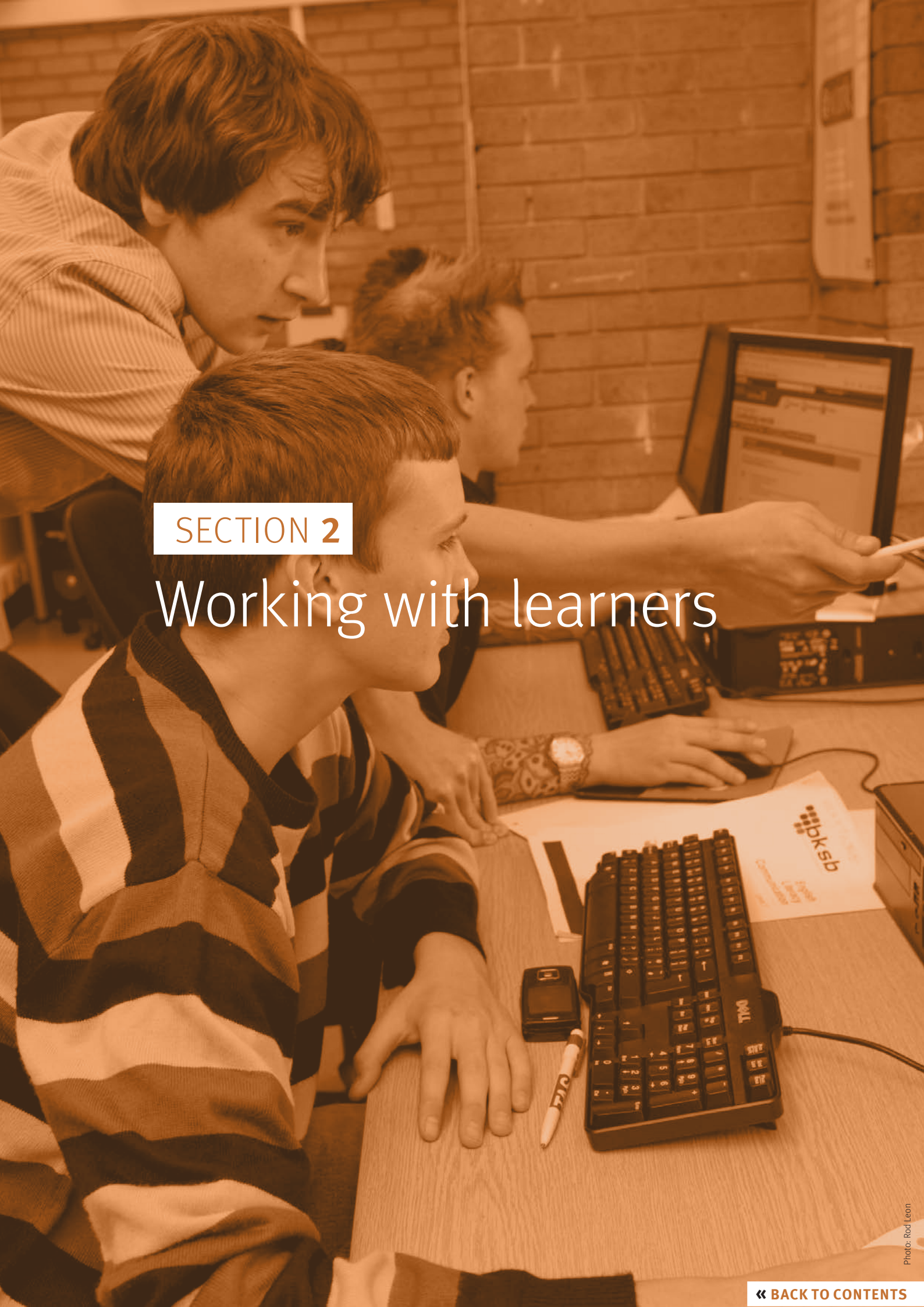
- the purpose of time off (eg, running a course, undergoing training, supporting learners with information, advice and guidance (IAG))
- the planned location
- the timing and duration of time off required.

Your employer should take into account the practical difficulties of engaging with particular groups of workers:

- shift workers
- part-time workers
- home workers
- teleworkers or workers not working in a fixed location
- those employed at dispersed locations
- workers with particular domestic commitments, including those on leave for reasons of maternity, paternity or care responsibilities
- workers with special needs such as disabilities or language requirements.



Photo: Guzelian Ltd



SECTION 2

Working with learners

2 Working with learners

1. Overcoming challenges, breaking down barriers

Union learning reps (ULRs) play a central role in removing the different and overlapping barriers to learning opportunities in the workplace, including:

- **workplace issues** such as shift work, lack of paid release time, unsupportive managers, exclusion of agency/contract/migrant workers
- **practical issues** such as childcare demands, lack of transport, course fees, language issues
- **social barriers** created by discrimination inside and outside the workplace based on race, gender, gender identity, sexuality, disability or age
- **emotional barriers** – often rooted in negative experiences at school such as: bullying or exclusion; undiagnosed dyslexia or other learning differences; class-based prejudice – low expectations from teachers.

Find out more about how union learning can help remove barriers to participation in the unionlearn booklet *Opening Doors to All: how union learning tackles disadvantage*: bit.ly/3DSqNb5

2. Learning needs survey

Talking to colleagues helps ULRs offer them support and find out their needs and interests. A survey like the template example on pp 12 & 13 can be a useful starting point.

It's essential to collect equality and diversity data so you can monitor which groups are taking up learning opportunities – and which are not.

For instance, if the data shows migrant workers are not enrolling on courses, you could translate your promotional materials into the appropriate languages.

When collecting equality and diversity data, make sure that you observe data protection regulations. Your union will be able to advise you on the guidelines to follow.



Learning needs survey

About you

About your learning

What times would work for you? (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Morning shift – beginning / end
 ☐ Lunchtime
 ☐ Afternoon shift – beginning / end
 ☐ After work
 ☐ Night shift – beginning / end

Equality monitoring

We want to meet the aims set out in our equality policy. This includes building up an accurate picture of our union learners. Filling in this form is voluntary. The information provided will be kept confidential and will be used for monitoring purposes.

Gender (tick which applies):

Do you identify as: ☐ male ☐ female ☐ non-binary ☐ trans

Age (tick which applies):

☐ 16-24
 ☐ 25-34
 ☐ 35-44
 ☐ 45-54
 ☐ 55-64
 ☐ 65+
 ☐ prefer not to say

Disability (tick which applies): Do you consider you have a disability:

☐ Yes
 ☐ No
 ☐ prefer not to say

What is your ethnicity?

We would like to know about the group to which you perceive you belong, rather than your nationality, place of birth or citizenship.

Asian or Asian British

☐ Indian
 ☐ Pakistani
 ☐ Bangladeshi
 ☐ Chinese
 ☐ prefer not to say
 ☐ any other Asian background (please specify)

Black, African, Caribbean or Black British☐ African ☐ Caribbean ☐ prefer not to say☐ any other Black, African or Caribbean background (please specify)**Mixed or multiple ethnic groups**☐ White and Black Caribbean ☐ White and Black African ☐ White and Asian☐ Prefer not to say☐ Any other mixed or multiple ethnic background (please specify)**White**☐ English ☐ Welsh ☐ Scottish ☐ Northern Irish ☐ Irish☐ British ☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller ☐ Prefer not to say☐ Any other white background (please specify)**Other ethnic group**☐ Arab ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Any other ethnic group (please specify)**Sexual orientation**☐ Heterosexual ☐ lesbian ☐ gay ☐ bisexual ☐ other ☐ prefer not to say**Do you consider yourself to have a disability or health condition?**☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Prefer not to say**What is your working pattern?**☐ Full-time ☐ Part-time ☐ Prefer not to say**Do you have caring responsibilities? If yes, please tick all that apply**☐ None☐ Primary carer of a child/children (under 18)☐ Primary carer of disabled child/children☐ Primary carer of disabled adult (18 and over)☐ Primary carer of older person☐ Secondary carer (another person carries out the main caring role)☐ Prefer not to say

3. Using SkillCheck

SkillCheck is a web-based tool and smartphone app with a range of initial assessments and quizzes to help learners identify the level they are currently working at so they can be enrolled on to the course that's right for them.

The current portfolio includes English, maths, digital skills, grammar, apprenticeships and everyday finance.

New learners need to register and provide some personal details to use the tool. Once they are registered, learners can log in to take an assessment or view the results of any previous assessments.

The assessments work through multiple-choice questions. The results are provided to the learner when they finish, and are recorded on the system.

Learners who meet or surpass the required number of right answers in an assessment (different for each subject) can download the relevant digital badge. Digital badges can then be shared online and stacked together to tell the full story of an individual's skills and achievements, with built-in links back to verifying evidence.

www.unionlearn.org.uk/skillcheck

4. Promoting English, maths and digital skills

Promoting and organising functional skills English, maths and digital courses may take up a lot of your time (unless you work in a bargaining unit where everyone has relevant and up-to-date qualifications in those subjects).

Supporting Maths and English Learning in the Workplace: a guide for union learning reps collects lots of ideas and includes useful resources for all reps. bit.ly/3s2otZa

Ready to Read: promoting the use of Quick Reads in the workplace is a unionlearn guide to help reps make the most out of the short, easy to read and accessible books published by Quick Reads. bit.ly/45vlggh

Working to Close the Digital Divide: how unions and union learning reps can support digital skills is a unionlearn booklet to help ULRs promote digital skills learning to employers and learners that contains good practice tips developed from a range of unions and ULRs. bit.ly/3YBf4as

There are links to more online resources and tools, including BBC Skillswise, Citizen Maths, Learn My Way, Maths 4 Us and the National Numeracy Challenge, at: bit.ly/3Or6qXe



5. Mid-life development reviews



ULRs can help workers aged 50-plus make important decisions about their future work plans through a mid-life development review.

The unionlearn model for mid-life development reviews covers work, finances, relationships, learning, health and wellbeing, leisure and values. It can be used one to one or in groups, in different types of workplaces and across every economic sector.

To help ULRs and learners get the most out of a development review, unionlearn has developed Value My Skills, a digital tool to help older workers:

- identify transferable skills they've developed in work, in voluntary settings and at home
- easily access bite-sized courses (Quick Wins) to help them improve their English, maths and digital skills.

This makes Value My Skills a user-friendly way for older workers to create more compelling job applications, whether they are keen to progress in their current careers or interested in exploring new career options.

Although Value My Skills is designed to work best when a ULR guides a learner through the process, it also includes a digital mentor called Anya who can support people using the tool.

Value My Skills can also be accessed in several European languages.

www.unionlearn.org.uk/value-my-skills

6. CareerZone

CareerZone is a unionlearn online resource that provides a 'one-stop-shop' for careers information, with a comprehensive careers directory, data analysis, videos, guidance and many other resources.

You can use CareerZone to:

- explore almost 400 careers through the comprehensive careers directory
- compare careers by pay, conditions and employment
- compare different careers using the Careerometer
- watch careers advice videos
- examine the gender pay gap across different job roles.

www.unionlearn.org.uk/careerzone

7. Reading Ahead

Reading Ahead is a workplace challenge run by The Reading Agency that has helped thousands of learners pick up or regain the habit of reading for pleasure.

Taking the challenge involves reading, rating and reviewing six titles (books, poems, magazine articles, blogs and other online writing) within a set timeframe.

Find out more and order resources at: bit.ly/45nMULi

Many ULRs have used Quick Reads as a very effective basis for Reading Ahead in their workplace. Quick Reads are short, easy to read and accessible books by bestselling authors, including Anne Cleeves, Andy McNab, Jojo Moyes, Ian Rankin and Benjamin Zephaniah.

The unionlearn guide *Ready to Read: promoting the use of Quick Reads in the workplace* shows how ULRs can use Quick Reads in a range of different ways to promote learning, including Reading Ahead. bit.ly/45vLvgh

8. Promoting health and wellbeing

While many employers place the burden for change on individuals joining a gym or choosing healthier eating options, unions take a collective approach that prioritises changing how work is organised and managed.

- The TUC Education workbook *Mental Health and the Workplace* sets out how all union reps can support co-workers with mental health problems. bit.ly/47uC3HY
- The TUC guide *Work and Well-being* sets out how a positive approach to developing 'good work' that involves both ULRs and union health and safety reps can lead to improvements in both the health and quality of life of the workforce. bit.ly/3qkYmzq
- The TUC webinar Talking Mental Health features Chris O'Sullivan from the Mental Health Foundation discussing practical ways for union reps to promote good mental health in the workplace and support to workers who may be experiencing a mental health issue. bit.ly/45lHLtO

ULRs can promote learning through the health and wellbeing agenda by:

- organising mental health awareness courses
- promoting the mental health benefits of reading in general (reading a book for just six minutes can reduce stress levels by up to 68 per cent, according to a 2009 study by Mindlab International at the University of Sussex)
- circulating the Mood-boosting Books list of uplifting novels, poetry and non-fiction bit.ly/458d5wH and the Reading Well booklists to help people manage their health and wellbeing bit.ly/3Yyk2Ve.

Mental Health Awareness Week usually coincides with Learning at Work Week (LaWW) in May. This provides an ideal opportunity for ULRs to work with other union reps and mental health champions to organise events that unite the two themes. bit.ly/3qzVNJB

9. Celebrating success

Organising special events where learners collect certificates for their new qualifications boosts their confidence and encourages them to take on new challenges.

- As soon as you start planning your event, draw up an action plan including who is responsible for each different element. That will help you focus on making sure you have everything in place in good time.
- Secure management support as early as possible. Ideally you want managers to provide the space and agree release time for learners to attend. If you haven't worked together before, try picking a theme where both sides have clear shared interests, such as health and wellbeing.
- Share the workload with other ULRs, or other reps interested in learning: if you're organising an event on a health and wellbeing theme, talk to your health and safety rep about working together.

Recording celebration events with photographs and a write-up for your branch newsletter or website can also inspire other members to take up learning.

When taking photographs:

- make sure the light is behind you – don't position learners in front of a window
- avoid a long line: if you have 10 learners with certificates, organise them in a couple of rows
- fill as much of the frame as possible with your subjects: try to avoid lots of walls, ceilings and desks
- when photographing learners on courses, choose images where they look interested, relaxed and happy
- use your phone's focus function to keep people's faces sharp (the autofocus function may try to focus on an object closer to the camera)
- make sure you obtain learners' consent to the pictures being used for publicity or promotion by your union and/or unionlearn.



10. The benefits of evaluation

Evaluation helps you:

- plan more effective courses, schemes and projects by identifying what works and what could be improved
- identify how you have succeeded against the aims you set yourself – the number of learners engaged, numbers of new ULRs identified, etc.
- develop your sense of purpose as a ULR and a team of ULRs
- prove the value of what you are doing to other reps, members, potential members and managers
- encourage other ULRs and union reps by generating evidence of your outcomes
- save time in the long run by identifying how to work more efficiently
- collect data (eg, from learner feedback forms) that can be used to provide evidence to funders.

Ask for feedback from everyone involved – learners, tutors, providers, managers, venues (if used) and other partners. Their different perspectives will all be valuable in assessing how to improve next time.

Don't wait until a course or project is over before you think about evaluation. Incorporating evaluation in your plan will help you identify your goals and work out how to assess whether or not you succeed, and to what extent.

Evaluation isn't a negative exercise about blame and fault-finding: it's a positive process to help you learn how to do better.

When thinking about evaluation, try to identify:

- what evidence you need – eg, numbers of participants, feedback, outcomes
- how you will collect the data – eg, keeping a register, feedback forms, learner videos
- how you will make sense of the information – identify who will collect and who will analyse the data
- how you will present the evidence – in a written report or as a PowerPoint presentation
- how you will share the evidence – if you write a case study for your branch, share it with unionlearn, as well.



SECTION 3

Funding for learning

3 | Funding for learning

Successive governments since 2010 have significantly cut spending on adult education. By 2020–21, the government was spending 38 per cent less on adult education and apprenticeships than it was in 2010–11, with a 50 per cent cut in spending on classroom-based adult education.

While the 2021 Spending Review provided an additional £900 million in spending for 2024–25, this was nowhere near enough to make up the shortfall. It still meant that total spending on adult education and apprenticeships would be 25 per cent lower than it was in 2010–11.

■ *Adult Education: the past, present and future*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2022. bit.ly/3OXXUek.

1. Advanced learner loans

Adults aged 19 or over undertaking qualifications at Level 3 to Level 6, at an approved provider in England, are eligible to apply for an advanced learner loan to cover the costs of their tuition (in part or in full), so long as they meet certain residency criteria, which have changed since Brexit.

Advanced learner loans are not means tested or subject to credit checks and any individual who meets the criteria will be able to apply for a loan, regardless of their current employment status. Loans are paid directly to the college or training organisation.

Adults who secure advanced learner loans are charged interest from the day they get the first payment. They start repaying the loan once their income rises above the ‘threshold’ amount. When they start repaying their loan and how much they repay depends on the repayment plan they were put on when they started their course.

Find out more at www.gov.uk/advanced-learner-loan

2. Discounts

Unionlearn has secured discounts on course fees for union learners with a number of providers. For the most up-to-date information, search ‘Discounts’ on the unionlearn website.

3. Finding additional support

- The government’s student finance website is the best place to start for information about financial support for part-time and full-time students. www.gov.uk/student-finance
- Turn2us is a national charity that helps people in financial need gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and other financial help – online, by phone and face to face through their partner organisations. It can, for example, advise when part-time students may be able to claim benefits or tax credits. www.turn2us.org.uk
- MoneyHelper offers information about the financial support available to part-time and full-time students in the form of grants, loans and bursaries. MoneyHelper is a free service provided by the Money and Pensions Service, the arm’s-length body sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). bit.ly/3qt7CRR

A man with short blonde hair, round glasses, and a nose ring stands in a workshop. He is wearing a light-colored polo shirt and a dark and light striped apron. His arms are crossed, and he has visible tattoos on both forearms. The background is a blurred industrial setting with metal structures and warm lighting.

SECTION 4

Supporting apprentices

4 | Supporting apprentices

Both new entrants to the workplace and existing staff can take an apprenticeship. Union learning reps (ULRs), shop stewards and safety reps can all play key roles in ensuring that apprentices access minimum entitlements, which are:

- a full induction in the workplace
- a contract of employment
- a negotiated training plan or contract with the employer and training provider
- a fair wage
- a safe working environment and protection from discrimination or bullying
- six hours off-the-job training every week
- a high standard of training leading to recognised qualifications
- regular assessments and reviews of progress
- provision of an appropriate range of work experience
- access to mentor support and information, advice and guidance.

The unionlearn publication *Supporting Apprentices in the Workplace: a guide for union learning reps* contains more detailed information and advice about all aspects of supporting apprentices. bit.ly/442SwAt

1. TUC Apprenticeships Charter

The TUC Apprenticeships Charter helps ensure employers offer and deliver high-quality apprenticeships that will:

- be a job with a productive purpose
- be paid at a fair rate
- ensure high-quality training and clear individual development
- involve the union at every level of the programme
- be accessible to, and achievable by all
- be part of, and contribute towards, a healthy and safe environment
- involve a commitment from the employer to complement the workforce, not supplement it.

You can download an editable Word document containing the Charter at: bit.ly/47H56bE

Your union branch will have its own approach to negotiating high-quality apprenticeships, which could involve:

- drawing up a specific agreement covering apprenticeships
- including apprenticeships in your overall learning agreement
- negotiating collective bargaining agreements that specifically include sections covering apprentices.

If you opt to negotiate an apprenticeship agreement in your workplace, ask your regional or national learning team for a template agreement you can use as a basis for negotiation. Individual union templates are based on specific knowledge and experience of what works and what can be achieved.

2. Apprenticeships interactive guide

TUC Education interactive guides are self-contained modules that mix text, video and quizzes to help users learn about a wide range of different topics. You usually need between 20 and 45 minutes to work your way through each interactive guide.

Apprenticeships: know your rights is designed to help young people find out what kind of apprenticeships are available; what they can expect in terms of pay, training and support; and how to spot the high-quality apprenticeships that are the best fit for them.

You can work your way through the interactive guide on the TUC Education platform, Stream. Sign up or login at tuc.curatr3.com/register

3. Promoting equality and diversity in apprenticeships

ULRs and union branches should encourage employers to broaden access to, participation in and completion of apprenticeships.

Unionlearn has produced a set of guides to help ULRs and other reps promoting learning to support greater equality, diversity and inclusion for under-represented groups.

■ *Tackling Apprenticeship Gender Inequality*

bit.ly/3Ot8D4q

■ *Supporting Black and Minority Ethnic Apprentices: a resource for union negotiators and reps*

bit.ly/3OxR7fs

■ *Accessible Apprenticeships: a TUC guide for trade union activists on bargaining for accessible apprenticeships for disabled workers*

bit.ly/449M36P

■ *LGBT+ inclusive apprenticeships: a resource for union negotiators and reps*

bit.ly/3OTkSrp



SECTION 5

Working with your branch

5 | Working with your branch

Union learning has proved to be highly effective in organising campaigns that have helped to recruit new members, develop new reps and revive flagging branches.

1. Maximising organising opportunities

- Learning can play a key role in successful union organising campaigns. Promoting learning opportunities available through the union has been proved to be extremely effective in local organising campaigns. For example, offering English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learning has boosted local union efforts to organise migrant workers. Equally, people who may have absorbed anti-union ideas from family members, teachers or media reporting can change their perceptions when the branch offers them the chance to develop their skills.
- Learning can help revive union activity in the workplace. Developing a new learning offer – especially when it is linked to wider industrial issues – can help revive branches when organisation is at a low ebb. For example, unions that have provided continuous professional development (CPD) in areas neglected by their employers have recruited new activists on the back of courses that members find genuinely useful.
- Union learning offers an important path to union activism. A significant proportion of members who enjoy a positive experience of union learning want to spread the message by becoming union learning reps (ULRs). Many will choose to stick to the ULR role if that best suits their personality, confidence or skills, while some will use the confidence gained through being a ULR to take on other roles in the branch and play an even more active part in the union. Either way, that's a win-win for the branch.

2. Mainstreaming learning

There are a number of important ways of mainstreaming learning:

- ensuring union learning is a standing item on branch committee agendas
- ensuring there is always a report (written or verbal) on union learning at branch committee meetings
- making sure upcoming learning opportunities are advertised in branch newsletters (print/digital) and on union noticeboards
- writing up learners' success stories in branch newsletters (print/digital)
- making sure your branch secretary or senior steward (or other senior union rep) attends and speaks at learning celebration events
- including promotional materials about learning on recruitment stalls
- including promotional materials about union membership in your learning centre
- branding learning promotional materials with your union logo
- building the habit of asking learners who are not union members if they would be interested in hearing what else the union has to offer (ULRs can introduce them to another rep who may be more confident about making the case for joining)
- involving ULRs in recruitment campaigns

- including learning needs in workplace mapping exercises: this will help you ensure your learning programme is meeting the needs of groups of members such as women, Black and minority ethnic (BME) members, young people, and contract, agency, shift or casual workers
- encouraging stewards, health and safety reps, green reps, equality reps and other branch committee members to complete the TUC Education interactive guides on union learning to see how they could incorporate union learning into their own sphere of work: tuc.curatr3.com/register
- encouraging ULRs to take on other roles in the branch that that would suit them: many learning reps would thrive as equality reps or green reps and others have proved to be excellent stewards
- negotiating a learning agreement
- ensuring your union branch is given the chance to address apprentices during their induction about the support available through the branch (eg, mentoring, informal advice, union membership at a reduced rate).

3. Encouraging all reps to undertake ULR training

You can enhance your workplace union organisation by encouraging stewards, health and safety officers, equality reps, young workers' reps, green reps and other workplace reps to undertake ULR training. This helps them to get their own ideas about how learning could be integrated in the branch's work in their particular workplace.

ULR training also gives union reps another string to their bow when engaging potential members. The chance to develop themselves through union learning is a big draw for many people.

TUC Education offers Union Learning Reps Stage 1, which is a 30-hour course online or in-person that's delivered over one day a week for 10 weeks by colleges across the TUC regions. There are no course fees for union reps from TUC-affiliated unions. Find out when it's running next in your region at www.tuc.org.uk/TUCcourses

TUC Education has also produced short interactive guides to show some of the key components and important benefits of union learning. Sign up or login at: tuc.curatr3.com/register

4. ULR forums

When lead ULRs organise a one-off or a regular ULR forum in their workplace, it's always useful to ensure the senior steward or equivalent can be present.

The senior steward will be able to see how a learning initiative, programme or project can boost the wider organising efforts of the branch, for instance by raising the union's profile among colleagues previously unaware or uninterested.

They can also step in if a manager is creating difficulties (eg, by not allowing ULRs the time off for their duties specified in a learning or other written agreement).

Several unions have also set up successful regional ULR forums, where learning reps from different workplaces come together to share best practice, exchange information and ideas or work together on regional projects. Regional forums also create networking opportunities for learning reps who may be the only ULR in their own workplace.



SECTION 6

Working with your employer

6 | Working with your employer

Many employers continue to regard training as a cost rather than an investment in the future of the business.

According to the Learning & Work Institute (LWI) report *Raising the Bar: increasing employer investment in skills* (May 2022):

- employer investment in training per employee has fallen 28 per cent in real terms since 2005
- the proportion of people getting training at work has fallen 14 per cent over the same period
- only 18.6 per cent of UK workers had received training at work in the three months before the report was written
- UK training spend per employee is now less than half the EU average
- people with degree-level qualifications are three times as likely to get training at work than those with no qualifications
- employer investment in training is likely to have fallen more sharply during the pandemic than in the financial crisis.

Read the full LWI report at: bit.ly/3QG3l8m



Photo: © Jess Hurd

1. Promoting the value of learning to the business

Many of the best employers are committed to workforce development through learning and training because they have seen for themselves how it helps them boost their performance.

- More than three-quarters of employers (77 per cent) surveyed by the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) at the University of Leeds in 2016 said that engagement in union learning had had a positive effect on their workplaces.
- More than three-quarters (77 per cent) said they received a return on their investment in union learning.
- Nearly half (47 per cent) believed their staff were more committed as a result of their engagement in union-led learning and training.
- Almost one-third (32 per cent) reported that organisational performance had either increased or significantly increased as a result of union learning.

Read the full unionlearn report at: bit.ly/3DUkBzb

2. Promoting the right to request time to train

If you work for an organisation in England, Scotland or Wales with 250 or more employees, you have the right to request time to undertake study or training (or both).

Your employer must consider your request and respond in writing within 28 days – so long as your written request includes:

- the date
- what you want to study
- when and where you want to study
- who's providing the course
- what qualification (if any) you could get
- how it would help you do your job better/help the business.

Applications for time to learn or train are made under section 63D of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

Once you submit your request, your employer has 28 days to:

- accept the request
- hold a meeting with you to discuss your application: you can take your union learning rep (ULR) or other union rep to the meeting
- turn down the request for one or more specific business reasons.

If they say no, you have the right to appeal within 14 days of their decision.

The appeal must:

- be in writing
- be dated
- set out why you're appealing.

Your employer must then arrange a meeting with you to discuss the matter within 14 days of receiving your appeal. They then have 14 days to give you a decision in writing.

Read the government's detailed breakdown of the process at: bit.ly/3QyUCVD

3. Learning agreements

Learning agreements should:

- set out the learning and development aims of both sides, including a specific commitment to equality of access to learning opportunities
- spell out the role of ULRs in the workplace, the facilities they will be able to access and the training they will undertake
- be clear about the role of management and other stakeholders (eg, learning providers)
- establish a joint learning committee to oversee and monitor learning in the workplace
- set out employees' rights to learning, including paid release where possible
- include provision to monitor and review the operation of the learning agreement.

Once you have negotiated a learning agreement, organising a launch event will help your branch raise awareness of the opportunities it has created and the employer's commitment to supporting workplace learning.

A learning agreement is not an end in itself: it exists to help more people access learning opportunities, especially in workplaces where employers have tended to offer little more than mandatory training; have concentrated on training senior staff; or have failed to invest in developing staff in lower pay bands.

Learning agreements can be relatively short enabling documents or more detailed and specific: it's up to you to decide which approach would work best in your workplace.

You can negotiate a learning agreement before organising learning in your workplace or you can draw one up to formalise arrangements that have developed since learning has been under way.

Many unions have developed their own model learning agreements, suitable for the sectors that they organise in. Find out more from your regional or national learning team.



Model framework learning agreement

1. This agreement is between [*name of union*] and [*name of organisation*].
1. Both [*name of organisation*] and [*name of union*] are committed to working in partnership to promote and support lifelong learning and ensure equal access to learning opportunities.
2. Both parties will encourage staff to take up learning activities.
3. The union will be responsible for recruiting ULRs and will inform management of the names and workplaces/departments of the ULRs.
4. The number of ULRs will be [*number*].
5. The functions of the ULRs should cover:
 - analysing learning or training needs
 - providing information and advice about learning or training matters
 - arranging and supporting learning and training
 - promoting the value of learning and training
 - consulting the employer about carrying out such activities
 - preparation to carry out any of the above activities
 - undergoing relevant training.
6. Paid time off will be granted to ULRs to enable them to carry out their duties effectively. [*Include the agreed number of hours per week.*]
7. Paid time off will be granted to ULRs in order to undertake training. Initial training will take place as soon as possible after appointment.
8. Employees will also be entitled to time off to participate in promotional events and to access their ULR. [*Include when it will and when it will not be paid.*]
9. A procedure will be established to resolve any disputes about the application of the ACAS code.
10. Suitable facilities will be provided eg, offices space, filing cabinets, notice boards, stationery, telephone, access to IT equipment and networks, etc.
11. A joint learning committee will be established. [*Add timescale for establishing the committee.*]
12. The terms of this agreement will be reviewed by the learning committee [*at regular intervals or by a specific date*] to ensure that they continue to reflect the needs of the workforce.

■ Adapted from *Delivering Better Learning Agreements: a guide for union reps and officers* bit.ly/3KHgKZZ

4. Joint learning committees

Joint learning committees or steering groups promote, initiate, support and monitor lifelong learning activities across a workplace site. They work to make learning opportunities as accessible and affordable as possible to all employees, enabling them to increase skills and maximise their own potential.

Their terms of reference should comprise:

- a specific number of ULRs
- a senior union rep from each recognised union
- a senior operations manager
- representatives from HR and learning and development teams
- an officer from the relevant union(s)
- a representative of the partner learning provider.

The group can then co-opt representatives from other outside organisations to help as and when necessary.

Steering groups should meet on a regular basis as required: a minimum of six times a year will usually be about right. Often the lead ULR (or similar) would be responsible for compiling the agenda. Each meeting should ensure a nominated member of the group records all the action points that are agreed.

The key responsibilities of a steering group are to:

- identify learning needs and aspirations of employees in line with the ULR's learning needs analysis
- develop and promote a range of onsite learning initiatives to encourage workers (full-time, part-time, agency) into learning (and into the learning centre, where there is one)
- monitor and evaluate activities, feedback and effectiveness of the initiative in accordance with agreed criteria
- work together with providers and other outside bodies to maximise potential for learning opportunities
- identify funding (internal and external) to help with learning activity and explore options for making learning both affordable and sustainable
- support the network of ULRs in their role as advocates and organisers of learning
- explore new initiatives (inside and outside the organisation) that support the learning process
- ensure effective communication with the existing trade union and employer structures regarding the aims, objectives and progress of the lifelong learning initiative
- provide regular reports to the relevant recognised national trade unions and unionlearn.

5. Union learning centres

Learning centres can play an integral part in the development of a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace and demonstrate the commitment of unions and employers to employee development.

They widen participation by making learning more accessible and available to people whose work, shift patterns or home commitments would prevent them enrolling with an offsite learning provider.

They help secure greater employer engagement with the learning agenda through investment in IT equipment and support, broadband provision, office space, staffing resources, financial backing and promotion.

ULRs say learning centres encourage greater take-up of learning opportunities because:

- they raise awareness of courses and services on offer
- they secure greater employer engagement
- they improve and expand partnerships with providers
- they increase the variety of courses available
- they are best placed to offer the courses and support that learners need
- they fill gaps in existing provision.

Source: *Unionlearn Workplace Learning Centre Survey*, March 2017, bit.ly/455xz9m



Photo: © Jess Hurd

A photograph of two men standing in a modern office hallway. The man on the left is Black with dreadlocks, wearing a dark zip-up jacket with a 'Nottingham City Homes' logo and a lanyard with an ID badge. The man on the right is white, wearing a grey polo shirt with a lanyard and an ID badge. Both are smiling. The background shows a long hallway with a grid ceiling and recessed lights.

SECTION 7

Working with providers

7 | Working with providers

1. Working with national partners

■ National Extension College

Unionlearn's partnership with the National Extension College (NEC) means union learners can claim a 10 per cent discount on all NEC courses.

NEC is an excellent choice for adult learners who are studying while in full-time work, especially when they haven't enrolled on a course for some time or left school without formal qualifications. Learners can study at their own pace, using the NEC's virtual learning environment learn@nec, which is where learners: access their course materials and additional resources; access information about exams and assessment; and contact their tutor and the student support team.

www.nec.ac.uk

■ The Open University

The Open University (OU) offers more than 600 courses delivered by distance learning. Each module is accessed through an online portal, which includes: all the study materials and resources students need, plus a week-by-week study planner; the assessment section, which outlines what's required for each assignment and when it's due; and the tutorial booking system, online tutorial room and your tutor's contact details.

www.unionlearn.org.uk/open-university

Learners who want to boost their confidence and brush up their study skills can undertake an OU Access module in one of three areas: arts and languages; psychology, social science and wellbeing; or science, technology and maths. Access modules start in February, May and October every year and involve around nine hours' study per week over 30 weeks, with one-to-one tutor support by phone, in writing and over email.

www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/access

■ The Skills Network

Union members can access a wide range of free, fully accredited distance learning courses through The Skills Network.

The Skills Network delivers its 40-plus fully funded Level 2 courses via its online platform, with full support from tutors via email.

The courses, which take between 12 and 16 weeks to complete, include:

- information, advice and guidance
- mental health awareness
- nutrition and health
- understanding autism
- specific learning difficulties
- equality and diversity.

Find out more and enrol on courses at unionlearn.theskillsnetwork.com

■ The Workers' Educational Association

The UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) delivers friendly, accessible and enjoyable courses for adults from all walks of life.

The WEA provides: English, maths and IT skills for employment; courses to improve health and wellbeing; creative programmes to broaden horizons; and community engagement activities to encourage active citizenship.

As well as running classroom-based courses in local communities, the WEA also delivers workplace learning, on topics including change management, mental health, mentoring and teamwork.

www.wea.org.uk

2. Setting up local partnerships

Most union learning reps (ULRs) will need to work with external providers, such as local further education (FE) colleges, to secure the services of qualified and experienced tutors able to deliver courses to union learners.

Establishing a partnership with a college means that you can ensure courses will be run to suit members' needs, usually onsite and timed to be accessible to different shift workers. This means learners don't have to attend a college they might not feel comfortable in and removes the travel time and cost of attending courses off site.

While the cost of courses might be challenging for individual members, union branches can often negotiate reduced rates for groups of learners. Colleges will also help in identifying functional skills needs of members with the support of their specialist staff.

When considering if a college is likely to turn out to be a suitable partner for a union learning project, check that its courses are:

- accessible to working people
- flexible and adaptable to the needs of union members
- delivered by trained and experienced staff who have an understanding of workplaces and of unions.

In addition, make sure that:

- its mission statement is in line with union aims and values
- it has robust equality and diversity policies
- its work is endorsed by appropriate assessors and inspectors.

3. Working with libraries

ULRs can call on a wealth of expertise and resources for promoting reading from their local libraries, which can make a massive difference to workplace learners, especially at the beginning of their learning journeys. By working closely together, ULRs and libraries can help learners enjoy their learning and keep going when they reach bumps in the road, as everyone does.

- Libraries can help organise author visits to the workplace, using their local knowledge to reach out to writers able to make good connections with learners.
- Libraries can enhance a workplace's Reading Ahead programme by co-hosting events, sharing resources and using their own knowledge and experience of promoting reading to adult learners.
- Librarians can help learners choose books to borrow that are a good fit with their skills and interests.
- Many libraries also offer health and wellbeing resources union learners may be interested in.
- Many libraries can help union learners access local archives to explore family, community or local history.



SECTION 8

Get in touch

8 | Get in touch

■ You can get in touch with unionlearn through the contact form on the website:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/contact

■ You can email us directly at:

unionlearn@tuc.org.uk

■ You can phone us on:

020 7467 1212

Unionlearn also supports a network of project workers in the regions.

For an up-to-date list of contacts, visit:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/regional-projects

To keep up to date with everything on offer from unionlearn, visit:

<https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/subscribe>

You'll only receive emails direct from unionlearn and we don't pass on your details to any third parties. You can update your details or change your preferences by clicking on the links at the end of every email we send from the site.



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