

Union reps supporting learning & skills

**Key findings from the 2021 survey of
union learning reps and other union
reps promoting workplace learning
and skills**

Introduction

During summer 2021 TUC unionlearn conducted a survey of union reps engaged in supporting learning at work to get an up-to-date picture of their activities in the workplace, including the main opportunities and challenges that they identified in promoting union-led learning and training. The 2021 survey included a number of new questions covering the impact of Covid-19 on the activities of these reps.

The survey was publicised on the unionlearn website and undertaken online using Survey Monkey. People were invited to respond if they were an existing union learning rep (ULR) or another kind of union rep that had some engagement in supporting access to learning and skills in the workplace. In addition, people were invited to respond if they had undertaken such a role in the past.

Forty-seven per cent of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Another 47% of respondents said that they were not a ULR but held another union rep role. Six per cent of respondents said that they currently did not hold any kind of ULR/union rep role.

With the obvious exception of the new questions relating to the pandemic, the questions in the 2021 survey were largely based on those used in previous unionlearn surveys. In particular, the current survey closely follows the questions in unionlearn's 2017 and 2014 surveys aimed at all union reps with an interest in learning and skills.¹ The 2021 survey sample size (1,278 respondents) is significantly larger than either the 2017 survey (962 respondents) or the 2014 survey (880 respondents).

Earlier unionlearn surveys tended to focus solely on the activities of ULRs and used a different methodology involving the direct distribution of postal questionnaires.² Comparisons with the findings from these earlier ULR surveys needs to take this different survey methodology into account, though general trends can of course be drawn from analysing both kinds of surveys.

A longer report with more detailed research findings is available at: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-2021>. In addition to more analysis and statistical information drawn from the survey responses, the longer report includes many comments from reps in response to follow-up questions asking for more information on Covid-related matters and the development of the online/digital learning offer during the pandemic.

¹ The 2014 and 2017 surveys are available on the unionlearn website at: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills-2014> and <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/survey-ulrs-and-union-reps-supporting-learning-and-skills>

² A summary of earlier ULR surveys is available in unionlearn research paper 16, <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/research-paper-16-role-and-impact-unions-learning-and-skills-policy-and-practice>

Key findings

The key findings from the 2021 survey highlighted below fall into three distinct areas covering:

1. Changes over time in the characteristics of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills and what kind of workplaces they are based in
2. The impact of Covid-19 on the role of these reps and developments in online/digital learning during the pandemic
3. A review of the impact of these reps in supporting learning and skills in the workplace and what support they were receiving.

1. Changing picture of ULRs and union reps

Who are the ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills?

There are a number of trends from the latest survey showing that the population of ULRs and union reps supporting learning and skills is becoming more diverse, in particular when you look at the gender statistics and number of reps from BME groups. For example, the 2021 survey shows that:

- Over half (51%) of the respondents were women. This is the first time that women have outnumbered men in the unionlearn survey series and it is a significant increase on the previous peak of 46% reported in the 2017 survey. This suggests that learning and skills is an increasingly powerful means of attracting more women to become actively involved in union activities in the workplace
- The proportion of reps from BME groups has also increased, up from 9.8% of survey respondents in 2017 to 13.4% in the 2021 survey. This is a welcome trend and means that union reps supporting learning and skills are now more representative of BME groups in the labour market
- In line with the general trends for all union reps, the age profile of our survey respondents showed that the vast majority - 93% - were aged 35 years or older and this is similar to the proportion identified in the 2017 survey.

A range and mix of union rep roles

The survey asked a number of questions about ULR and union rep roles, including if people were covering more than one role. The responses to these questions showed a range and mix of situations, including the following:

- 47% of respondents said that they were currently a ULR and many of them were combining this with another union rep role. Overall, 12% of respondents were solely covering a ULR role while 35% were combining being a ULR with another union rep role (e.g. mainstream union rep, health & safety rep etc.)

- Another 47% of respondents were not ULRs but were union reps that were also supporting learning and skills in the workplace. This compares with 38% of respondents in the 2017 survey, which suggests that a growing number of union representatives who are not ULRs are engaged in promoting education and training in the workplace for both workers and reps
- 6% of respondents said they currently did not hold a union post.

What workplaces and sectors are the reps based in?

The survey also asked a number of questions about the kind of workplaces and sectors these reps were based in and the key findings were as follows:

- Two thirds (66%) of ULRs and other reps were in the public sector compared with just under a quarter (24%) in the private sector. The rest were based in workplaces accounted for by the *Mixed-Public & Private* sector (7%) and the *Not for Profit/Voluntary* sector (3%).
- This public/private split has not changed much over time and is largely explained by the economy-wide breakdown of union membership. Another contributory factor is that reps in the public sector are, on average, more likely to get time off from their employers for their ULR/union rep role
- Looking at sectors and industries, the largest proportion of reps were found in the *Public Administration* sector (21%) - which includes local and central government- and in the *Health & Social Work* (18%) and *Education* (17%) sectors.
- The proportion of reps in other sectors was as follows: Transport & Communications (13%); Wholesale & Retail (11%); Other Community Services (6%); Manufacturing (5%); Other Business Services (4%); Electricity, Gas & Water (2%); Financial Services (2%); Construction (0.62%); and, Hotels & Restaurants (0.35%)
- Not too surprisingly, 74% of ULRs and union reps were based in companies or organisations with 250 or more employees, where union recognition and collective bargaining is much more likely to be in place. The vast majority (95%) of reps were in workplaces where the union was recognised for collective bargaining.

2. Covid-19

Some headline findings

The survey asked a number of specific questions about the impact of the pandemic and the responses from respondents provided the following headline information:

- Over three fifths (62%) of reps said that they had been at home for significant periods of time during the pandemic, with 55% working from home and 7% on furlough. However, 38% had continued to be based in the workplace throughout

- Nearly half (49%) of those based at home said that they had been less effective in performing their ULR/union rep role. However, 41% said that they thought that they had been equally effective and 9% thought they had been more effective
- Reps were asked if employer policies on learning and skills had changed during the pandemic - over a third (36%) said they had but 64% said policies had remained the same
- Well over a third (37%) of respondents said that the nature of their role as a ULR/union rep had changed significantly during the pandemic. Thirteen per cent of reps also confirmed that there had been changes to the amount of paid time off they received for carrying out this role
- Two fifths (38%) of reps said that the amount of online learning they organised had reduced during the pandemic, while a relatively similar proportion (34%) said that it had stayed the same. Twenty-eight per cent said that it had increased in this period.

A changing role for reps during the pandemic

The survey then asked reps a number of follow-up questions asking for more detailed comments about any significant changes to the nature of their ULR/union rep role during the pandemic, including any changes to the amount of paid time off they received. Some of the key themes emerging from these comments were as follows:

- An overriding consequence of Covid-19 was that many ULRs and union reps were working round the clock with employers to prioritise the health and safety agenda and related workplace issues linked to the pandemic
- There were more demands on reps to address the huge increase in the number of workers reporting issues relating to their mental health and workplace stress
- By and large the comments on changes to reps' paid time off indicated that time normally allocated to supporting learning and skills was either reduced or re-assigned to Covid-related issues. However, in some instances reps reported an increase in paid time off from employers to tackle these matters
- Some ULRs and union reps commented that all of the above reduced their capacity for supporting learning. There were also some comments saying there was reduced demand from workers for union-led learning and training due to concerns about health and safety, employment security and other Covid-related matters
- While no specific questions were asked about this in the survey, many ULRs and union reps pointed out that union-led learning and training had been destabilised by the government's decision to end grant funding for the Union Learning Fund.

Digital/online learning offer during the pandemic

The survey then asked reps a follow-up question asking for more detailed comments about digital/online activities and experiences that reps had promoted and which had

the potential to enhance the union learning offer in the future. Some of the key themes emerging from these comments were as follows:

- Some of the key benefits highlighted were to be expected and reinforced findings from previous research and surveys. Providing access to learning or training without the necessity of travelling to a physical location was a major advantage. Of course this was an even greater boost during the pandemic when social distancing, furlough, working from home regulations, and restrictions on travel made face-to-face union learning an impossibility for many
- ULRs and union reps also identified other flexibilities, including fitting learning into busy work schedules, having shorter online sessions as opposed to all- or multi-day courses, and ending the problem of classroom sessions not running due to low numbers signing up
- There were also gains from reaching out to many more learners during the pandemic, especially those working from home or on furlough who were more open to taking up online learning in these circumstances
- A number of comments that acknowledged the reach and impact of online learning also referred to the benefits of “blended learning” that combines online learning with face-to-face interactions. A common theme was that the post-pandemic union learning offer would be strengthened from building on the advances in online learning alongside reintegrating face-to-face communications where applicable
- A number of reps did point out barriers and drawbacks of being wholly reliant on online learning, including the existence of a digital divide affecting some groups who did not have regular access to the internet or digital/ICT devices and a lack of reasonable adjustments supporting online learning for disabled people
- Other barriers that were highlighted included a lack of the training needed by workers to easily access online learning and for reps to deliver it effectively. There were also examples of workers becoming jaded with, and in some instances opposed to, the necessary over-reliance on online learning and training during the pandemic. A relatively small number of comments expressed a preference for face-to-face learning without online provision
- The survey asked reps about specific online activities and experiences that they had made use of during the pandemic that would enhance the union learning offer in the future? Some of the key themes that came across included the rapid take-up and utilisation of online video and communication software, such as Teams and Zoom, to deliver learning and training and also to facilitate networking for reps (e.g. ULR forums). Expanded use of these and other software packages by employers during the pandemic also created a demand for training that unions were doing much to support
- There were also extensive references to the benefits from unions and their reps expanding access to webinars and a wide variety of other e-learning resource,

including social media. A wide range of online courses and qualifications were highlighted in the comments, including maths/English, CPD, vocational, mental health, dyslexia, sign language, workplace stress & well-being, and domestic violence. The comments also revealed a strong focus on equality and diversity, including online provision aimed at BME workers.

3. Impact of reps and support they get

Activities and impact

The comments from reps about the impact of the pandemic and the ending of the ULF on union activities to support learning and skills is reflected to some degree in their responses to specific questions in the survey assessing their impact. For example, there was evidence of a decline in their capacity to support people to take up specific courses and qualifications and networking opportunities with other reps were also curtailed to a great degree. Some examples of this include the following:

- 38% of reps said they arranged/helped to arrange courses for colleagues compared to 56% in 2017
- 15% of reps had said that their activities led to more workers accessing training in basic literacy and numeracy skills compared to 30% in 2017
- 36% said that they met and/or networked with ULRs from other workplaces compared to 54% in 2017.

Of course these findings are not at all surprising in the context of the huge pressures on ULRs and union reps due to the pandemic and the ending of the ULF. What is remarkable is the degree to which union learning activities and their impact were sustained on a number of fronts in this period through the rapid and innovative use of online/digital learning and other approaches. As highlighted in the earlier findings some reps were also able to promote increased access to union learning by certain groups (e.g. people working from home or on furlough).

A large number of reps also continued to deliver key activities to promote engagement in learning and union membership. The two activities with the highest proportion of engagement were:

- providing information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities (81%)
- recruiting/helping to recruit new members into the union (68%).

Impact was measured under a number of criteria and the responses showed that ULRs and other reps clearly continued to have a hugely positive impact on promoting access to learning and training, including the following findings:

- Nearly 9 out of 10 reps (87%) said that their activities raised awareness of learning among colleagues

- The next highest reported activities were: helping colleagues who had no/little experience of training (73%); increasing the number of colleagues accessing training (72%); and, increasing interest in union membership (71%)
- Reps also perceived that their union role had a positive impact on wider aspects of working life, including promoting dialogue on training with management (64%) and improving wider employment relations in the workplace (63%).

When asked to estimate the amount of time spent on supporting learning and skills, nearly a quarter of reps (23%) said less than 1 hour per week, 45% said between 1 and 5 hours, and 15% reported committing more than 5 hours to the role. About 1 in 6 reps (17%) reported that they could not find any time at all to dedicate to this in the most recent period. These trends are largely in line with previous surveys.

Training and support for reps

The survey posed a number of questions about the training and support that ULRs and other union reps receive. When asked about ULR training, the responses were largely positive. Nearly two thirds (64%) of ULRs said that they had taken the initial ULR training course provided by their own union and two fifths (40%) said that they had taken the TUC course (the exact same proportions given in the 2017 survey). A quarter said that they had taken follow-on courses for specialist ULR modules.

However, a significant number of ULRs and union reps highlighted major challenges in accessing time off their normal working duties to engage in union activities, including promoting learning and skills. Over a quarter (27%) said they received no paid release at all from their employer and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) said they only received a maximum of one hour per week. At the other end of the scale, 12% said they were getting 5-10 hours and 19% were receiving in excess of 10 hours per week.

Further questions on support and training arrangements showed the following trends:

- 83% said that they had reasonable time-off to undergo ULR/union rep training, but a lower proportion (68%) said they had enough training to carry out their ULR/union rep role
- 73% said they thought that they were given reasonable time off to conduct their ULR/union rep role. A lower proportion (61%) said that they were given reasonable time to discuss individual learning needs and to arrange learning or training for members
- 71% said that they had adequate access to office facilities to help with their role as a rep.

Reps were less happy with arrangements that employers make regarding providing cover for their regular job and/or allowing a reduced workload to enable them to conduct their ULR/union rep role.

- Less than half (46%) said they got cover and only 31% were allowed a reduced workload
- Two thirds (67%) reported that work pressures were restricting their ULR/union rep activities.

Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) reps said that work colleagues were supportive of their ULR/union rep role. Over four fifths said they were happy with the level of support from their individual union (82%) and the support provided by unionlearn (83%). Ninety per cent said they were happy to continue in their role as a ULR or union rep. When asked specifically what had helped them most, 70% highlighted support from their union, while other significant numbers pointed to the support provided by fellow union members (55%), unionlearn/TUC (32%) and employers (22%).

Workplace arrangements in support of union learning

Reps were also asked a number of questions about workplace arrangements that the employer provided to boost union learning, including whether the following were in use: 1. A formal learning agreement between the union and the employer. 2. A formal learning partnership involving the union, local providers and the employer. 3. A union-led learning centre. 4. A working group/committee involving the union and employer to discuss union learning. 5. An entitlement for workers to discuss individual learning needs with ULRs/union reps in normal working hours.

There is evidence of a long-term decline in these arrangements in unionised workplaces over the last two decades. This trend is still ongoing according to findings from the 2021 survey, as highlighted by the findings below:

- Half of ULRs and union reps said that a formal learning agreement was in existence, compared to 58% in 2017
- Around a third (34%) reported that there was a formal learning partnership, compared with 38% in 2017
- Over a quarter (27%) engaged in dialogue on union learning with employers through a working group/committee, compared with 34% in 2017
- Twenty-two per cent of respondents said that there was a union learning centre at their workplace, compared with 30% in 2017
- Two thirds of reps reported workers having an opportunity to discuss individual learning needs with them in normal working hours, compared with 72% in 2017