

Supporting Learners through Trade Unions

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This article examines the role of voluntary trade union activists in delivering information advice and guidance about learning, work and careers to members of their unions. The context for this work is the learning and skills system in England, not for the United Kingdom as a whole. It presents a case study of the way in which we in unionlearn, the learning and skills organisation established by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), have developed a model and strategy for supporting learners in unions. Unions in other European Union (EU) countries may wish to consider how this model could be contextualised in their own industrial relations systems when developing the role of their union representatives and officers in learning and skills.

The political background to the current UK system has been recently described in a unionlearn research paper, which traces the history of union involvement in training 'from the neo-corporatism of the 1960/70s, through the voluntarism of the 1980s/90s, to the present "post-voluntary" era' (Clough, 2007). The paper argues the case for social dialogue around the way in which the costs of raised skill ambitions should be shared between state, employer and individual, for increased collective bargaining over training, secured within a statutory framework and for sustained capacity building for unions to enable them to take this agenda forward.

Trade unions as social partners have a major role in employment policy in the EU, and have signed up to a framework of action for the lifelong development of competencies, which identifies four priority areas for implementation of the framework: the identification and anticipation of competencies and qualification needs; the recognition and validation of competencies and qualifications; information, support and guidance; and resources.

Trade union activity and participation is now considered by organisations in the learning and skills field to be an important feature of workplace learning and also of workplace career guidance in England. Union representatives are helping members to access learning opportunities and to overcome barriers to learning, training, qualifications and progression at work. They can often reach those who cannot, or will not, use conventional services or who do not wish to disclose their learning or training needs to managers or to their

employer. These are often people who are the most disadvantaged in the labour market. Learners have reported increased individual confidence and self-esteem after they have started learning again, and increased motivation to overcome the effects of disadvantage. To help them to overcome these barriers, union learning representatives also act as brokers and set up flexible workplace learning opportunities, including the use of technology in learning and career development activities.

The learning and skills agenda is of mutual interest and importance to both trade unions and employers. Unions can work with employers to address their joint priorities of addressing national and regional skill shortages and training needs, and improving productivity. Unions also have a key role in developing a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace. They can assist their members to deal with sectoral and organisational change, and to anticipate redundancy or retirement. They can also help members to develop a concept of career and to develop transferable skills to increase employability or readiness to progress within their current employment.

unionlearn

unionlearn was established by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to provide a strong, high-profile strategic framework and support for unions' work on learning and skills, and the training of union representatives and officers. unionlearn was launched by Gordon Brown at a conference in May 2006. 'unionlearn was established to help unions open more learning opportunities to their members, particularly those disadvantaged in the labour market. Its unique selling point is that it promotes collective action to increase individual learning in the workplace.' (Smith, L, 2007). Although it is mainly funded by government, currently through the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), unionlearn is run by the unions for the unions (approximately sixty unions are currently affiliated to the TUC).

unionlearn currently has two main targets: to increase the number of trained and accredited union learning representatives to 22,000 by 2010 and to ensure that 250,000 learners annually will come into learning through their unions, and supported by union learning representatives, by 2010. Substantial progress has been made towards these targets in the first year of unionlearn's existence. Major themes across our operations include assuring quality, promoting equality, influencing policy and communicating effectively. Over the year, development work has centred on these themes. Innovations have included establishing a quality award for provision, devising tools for information, advice and guidance and planning a knowledge management system to record and disseminate good practice.

The Union Learning Fund

Another catalyst, and the basis for current activity, was the establishment of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) by the government in 1998. Since then, it has involved over 50 unions in projects in 700 workplaces. The ULF currently stands at £15.5 million a year and, since April 2007, has been administered through unionlearn. It supports over 100,000 learners every year, many of them on online courses, Skills for Life (literacy, numeracy and language) and other further education programmes. Other outcomes of union projects have been: the development of workplace learning centres and the opening of many new ones; the development and customisation of courses and training programmes; formal learning agreements signed by employers including agreements about time off for learners; and participation in dissemination or networking events.

The fund aims to build union capacity to sustain work on learning and skills and to make this a core activity for all trade unions, in particular by integrating union learning representatives into workplace union organisation and by demonstrating the clear links between the learning and organising agendas for unions. It also aims to develop the key role of union learning representatives in raising demand for learning, especially amongst workers with low skill levels and those from disadvantaged groups. The ULF is very relevant to this case study because it can be used to help unions to develop a framework to provide high quality information, advice and guidance to stimulate the take up of learning and promote progression. It can also be used to help unions to form active partnerships with employers and make learning agreements to tackle both organisational and individual skill needs and also address wider lifelong learning issues. It encourages unions to form active partnerships with learning providers to ensure that learning opportunities are customised, relevant and delivered appropriately and that appropriate support is provided to learners, and to develop union capacity to engage in other national, local and regional partnerships.

The government expects that projects funded by the ULF will maximise the union contribution to the implementation of the current skills strategy, particularly in securing union involvement in encouraging employers to invest in the learning needs of their staff through signing up to a 'Skills Pledge' which commits them to training all their staff to a specific qualification level. A key part of the pledge is to provide opportunities in literacy, numeracy and language as appropriate.

Unions can bid into the fund via a themed prospectus. Themes for 2008/2009 are: employer engagement; working with sector skills councils; training and supporting union learning representatives; equality and diversity; supporting learners (information, advice and guidance); Skills for Work; continuing progression; and young workers and apprentices. The most important cross-cutting theme in terms of the topic of this article is that of Supporting Learners (Information, Advice and Guidance).

In 2008-09 unions can develop projects which: develop the role and skills of union learning representatives in advising and supporting learners in the workplace; promote the use of the unionlearn learning and careers advice service, and customise and use the 'union learning climbing frame' both of which are described below, and assist learners and union representatives to identify and access progression routes. This may involve supporting specific groups of union members to access learning and career opportunities, including young workers, migrant workers, workers facing redundancy, disabled workers or older workers. Project ideas have been received from a wide range of unions in different sectors.

The unionlearn network model for supporting learners

The idea of accessing learning and progression opportunities and also information, advice and guidance through trade unions is prominent in the learning and skills scene in England. New ideas about the way in which careers services can be delivered to adults via public services are being tested and consulted on by government at the moment. The role of unions, and in particular of the 18,000 learning representatives is perceived as important in the proposed new adult 'advancement and careers service'.

'Union Learning Reps are the workplace friends of learning and ambassadors for skills. I would like to congratulate Union Learning Reps and all those learners who have taken that brave first step, gone back into education and made life better for themselves and their families. Only through improving workers' skills can we compete in the global economy and the work that unionlearn and unions are doing to spread the culture of workplace learning is vital.'

**Denham, J Rt. Hon, Secretary of State,
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills,
December 2007**

In this context, with development funding from EQUAL, Unionlearn has developed a model and strategy for supporting union learners in the workplace. Part of the support that learners need is to have access to good quality information, advice and guidance about learning, work and careers. The role of the Union Learning Representative (ULR) is central to the model, which builds on active working relationships with providers of information advice and guidance in a network. The model recognises that unionlearn is not, and does not seek to become, a specialist provider of information and advice about learning, work and careers and should work with other agencies which have this role. Unions do provide support for learners through their ULRs, which may include providing information and 'signposting' to others and some may have representatives who are trained and qualified to offer a careers advice service. Practice in unions, and in regions, varies. The 'network model' assumes that unions need to

engage with other agencies in order to find the information they need to help their members and to broker workplace opportunities effectively.

Key publicly-funded organisations in our network model in England currently include: learndirect Careers Advice, providing telephone and online services; nextstep, providing face to face services, and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) who provide labour market information and oversee the development of occupational standards and qualifications in their sectors. We have developed strong relationships with these organisations, formalised by Memoranda of Understanding and joint agreements and action plans at national and regional level.

There are various ways in which careers and information, advice and guidance services can work collaboratively with trade unions. They may make arrangements to market and deliver services together in the workplace or in learning centres. They may make and accept referrals. This activity may have been the result of bidding in partnership for funds to support learners in the workplace or to develop joint approaches to employer engagement. Public services may be able to involve unions in networking or training, invite them to events or conferences or provide access to resources for union learning representatives and union project workers. They may be able to support unions to achieve accreditation against quality standards in order to build the capacity of the union to provide the services their members need themselves. Another important area of shared information is to identify any gaps in the provision of learning and work opportunities and to feed this back to providers of opportunities.

Linking up with unionlearn is a good first step for information advice and guidance providers if they want to work with unions. The regional managers are able to supply contacts and facilitate joint working with unions. Because the role of the union learning representative is voluntary, it is important to check the most appropriate way of contacting them while at work and of working with them. unionlearn can advise on the best way to do this through their unions.

At the heart of the model is the role of the union learning representative.

Union learning representatives (ULRs)

'Fifty unions are now engaged in what I believe is the biggest transformation since the growth of the shop steward movement: a total of 18,000 trades union learning representatives in workplaces all round the country. Today your learning representatives are working in 700 separate workplaces, and they are helping 100,000 of our fellow colleagues at work.'

Gordon Brown, Prime Minister, TUC Congress 2007

In England, there are 200,000 trained union representatives, working in different roles, including the 18,000 ULRs on whom we are focusing in this article. While some ULRs have other union roles, many are new activists and from previously under-represented groups. It is recognised that ULRs can make a significant contribution to promoting and developing workplace learning and the support services that underpin it. ULRs are voluntary union activists with statutory rights which enable them to carry out their role and to attend training courses, set out in the Employment Act of 2002. Recent government reviews acknowledge the role played by trade unions in fulfilling the government's skills strategy, and specifically in motivating and providing support to their members in the workplace.

The role of the ULR is currently attracting considerable attention in the context of the development and delivery of information, advice, guidance and careers services to adults. There are currently more than 18,000 ULRs promoting learning in workplaces in England, many of them supported by project workers engaged in Union Learning Fund projects. It is intended that 22,000 ULRs will be trained and accredited by 2010. The role has encouraged many union members to become activists who have not traditionally come forward, including women and members from black and ethnic minority communities.

Their key functions are set out in the Employment Act 2002 and include: identifying learning or training needs; providing information and advice about learning or training; arranging learning or training; promoting the value of learning or training; consulting the employer about carrying out such activities; and preparation to carry out any of the above activities. Negotiating learning agreements and access to learning and training opportunities with employers is also an essential part of the role of the ULR, and other union representatives may have a role in this. The TUC provides accredited training for this role.

This role has elements which clearly overlap with the role of a professional advice or guidance worker, or that of a tutor or practitioner delivering these as 'embedded' services as part of learning or training provision. The ULR has a role in supporting, coaching and mentoring individual union learners, in identifying the learning needs of members, in providing basic information and advice about learning, with signposting or referral to other provision or specialist services as appropriate. Recent research we have undertaken has shown that learners in unions would prefer to receive front-line support and information from a union representative than from an outside agency (Haughton and Hughes, 2006).

The ULR is therefore in a unique position in that they can provide information, advice or guidance services either formally (when they are qualified and helping learners in a learning centre) or informally (when helping learners in the

workplace setting). They have intimate knowledge and intelligence about the organisations they work for, the industry, the people and the managers. Some ULRs are well placed, due to their length of service and industry/sector knowledge, to provide members with sector specific advice. The majority of ULRs are able, depending on the amount of release time allowed by their employer, to work with learners, providing help and support over a period of time according to the needs of the individual. This is unlike other work-based intermediaries such as *nextstep* who are time bound by the funding available, and can only deliver a service to those who are eligible.

Another great strength of the ULR role is that it is capable of impartiality as the ULR is not usually committed to one specific provider or group of providers either for the purposes of brokerage or signposting. However, the impartiality of ULRs may be affected by the setting in which they are working, the range and scope of information they have access to and the limits of their skills.

Whilst ULRs have a vital role to play in delivering this informal support to learners the vast majority are not professionally qualified information, advice or guidance workers and inevitably some requests for advice and support will be beyond their remit and ability to respond effectively.

The situation in workplace learning centres can be quite different as there may be ULRs who have achieved nationally-recognised qualifications in advice and guidance. In these situations it is expected that members can access a full impartial service through their unions, accredited to the 'Matrix' standard which applies to career guidance services. There is, however, always an underlying tension: although ULRs are in the best position to deliver information advice and guidance and other support to learners, they are volunteers and full-time workers and may easily be overloaded if asked to take on too complex a role. Whilst unions are keen to involve their ULRs in progression training there can be obstacles to overcome regarding release time for further training, usually due to shift working patterns and lack of cover on production lines. There can also be problems of sourcing reasonably priced local provision of nationally-recognised qualifications, and training and assessment programmes do not always recognise the problems that ULRs may encounter in trying to undertake portfolio building in the workplace.

The skills required by ULRs to work effectively to support learners have been defined in recent research done by unionlearn (Haughton and Hughes, 2006), and new accredited training programmes and materials are currently under development by unionlearn. These will be delivered by TUC Education centres or adapted by unions, and offered as options to accompany the five day basic ULR training. While it is recognised that many of the skills developed by ULRs are the same as those required for

information and advice work, coaching and particularly mentoring it is intended that ULRs will work closely with other agencies to ensure that union members have access to all the services they require.

Other EU countries have experimented with this role in unions, calling their representatives, for example: learning ambassadors; near-by and learn-trust representatives; personal development consultants; competence pilots and career counsellors' assistants. We at unionlearn regard the role of the ULR to be critical in facilitating workplace learning and skill development.

Resources to support ULRs in their work

The unionlearn website provides access to information and resources which will help careers practitioners to understand the role of trade unions and the ULR and the range of learning and skills activities they are engaged in. In the *Supporting Learners* area of the website, union representatives can find the unionlearn strategy, research and other relevant reports, case studies, downloadable resources including a set of *Guides for Supporting Learners*, and a guide to help unions to achieve the 'Matrix' quality standard which applies to information, advice and guidance services. Regular email alerts keep representatives informed about new resources available on the site.

An important outcome of our EQUAL Supporting Learners project was the launch in June 2007 of the unionlearn learning and careers advice service, in partnership with learndirect Careers Advice, to support both union representatives and union members. Representatives and officers can call a free telephone number to access a range of services tailored to the needs of unions. They can search for courses and make other email enquiries via the portal to the service on the unionlearn website. It provides a 'one-stop shop' which ensures that union representatives can easily find all the information they need without having to build and store their own information bases. They can also check that the information they have is correct and current, and find out about opportunities which they were not aware of. The learning and careers advice service can be accessed in nine languages for migrant workers and others whose first language is not English. A range of leaflets and posters are available from the unionlearn website to display in the workplace and to encourage members to use the helpline for themselves.

Representatives and officers can also gain access via this service to a range of free resources to help them in their work with members. These include a Skills and Interests Inventory, a curriculum vitae (CV) building tool, a Qualifications Calculator, a Career Values tool and guides for working with different groups including ex-offenders, refugees and migrants, older workers and those recovering from mental illness.

As part of the suite of EQUAL development projects we have also developed an online tool called the 'union learning climbing frame'. This is an easy-to-use electronic tool which allows union representatives to create pathways of learning and action plans for individuals which can be reviewed and updated as they progress on their learning journey. It allows ULRs to keep ongoing records of who they are working with and what action has been agreed, and allows unions to generate accurate profiles of their own learners. It also provides up-to-date information for ULRs about a broad range of learning opportunities. It can be customised by unions to fit the needs of members and sectoral priorities. Learners like the climbing frame because it allows them to link recreational, personal and vocational goals and to indicate what type of learning they are interested in. The action planning tool has visual appeal and learners like having a printed plan to take away with them.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is an important concept for the future development of global labour markets. This case study is about what we have been doing at unionlearn to support learning through trade unions, and shows the important role that unions have in delivering services to support members in their learning and career progression. We have learnt a great deal in the last two years about the excitement and enthusiasm which can be generated for learning through the intervention of union learning representatives, and the changes that learning can make in the lives of working people if they are well supported and are able to select and take up good quality opportunities. We need to continue to build the capacity of unions to support them and to offer representatives training, resources and support to carry out their role in their unions.

It is hoped that there will be 22,000 ULRs active in the workplace in England by 2010, and that they, in partnership with careers practitioners and other specialists, will have a significant role in promoting access to the proposed new adult advancement and careers service. Trade unions, with other social partners in the EU have a key role to play in assisting the workforce to develop and maintain competence in their roles, and the provision of information, support and guidance for individuals is a vital part of this.

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A range of reports, case studies and press releases are available on the unionlearn website www.unionlearn.org.uk.

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