

# Getting every adult to level 3

**How the Union Learning Fund supports  
the government's adult skills aspirations**

## Executive summary

The government has recently announced that all adults will have the opportunity to get their first level 3 qualification without paying course charges, through the National Skills Fund. Qualifications of this kind include A levels or the vocational equivalent, such as a BTEC level 3 or an advanced apprenticeship. The TUC supports this priority.

This paper sets out how union learning can make a significant contribution to realising the potential of this new entitlement for those adults returning to learning.

We know from the experience of other free entitlements to learning (such as the entitlement to first level 2 qualifications in English and maths) that there are significant barriers to learning beyond cost, such as:

- not being able to find the time to do the course
- managing caring responsibilities
- lacking the confidence to take up learning, especially if they have not done so since school
- a lack of interest.

Since 2010 the number of adults achieving first level 2 qualifications (GCSEs or equivalent) in English and maths has fallen by 30 per cent despite these courses being free of charge. This suggests that large numbers of adults will not take up the new level 3 entitlement without extensive support that helps them overcome barriers other than just the cost of the course.

This is where the Union Learning Fund can make a real difference. Union learning is open to union members and non-members alike and is rooted in workplaces and workplace priorities. It can help support the success of the level 3 entitlement in two key ways: by overcoming barriers to engagement and sustaining engagement amongst reluctant adult learners, and by ensuring that adult learners have the skills necessary to be able to engage at level 3.

### Overcoming barriers to learning

The one-to-one support offered by union learning reps helps reluctant adult learners get back into and sustain learning, and achieve qualifications. Union learning reps negotiate with employers for flexibilities to address some key barriers, including agreeing paid time off at work to study.

Independent evaluations show that union learning gets people back into learning and ready to consider progressing to level 3:

- 70 per cent of ULF learners (and 79 per cent of those with no qualifications) would not have taken part in learning or training without union support.

- More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of learners with no previous qualification gained a qualification.
- Just under half (47 per cent) of those starting with entry level or level 1 qualifications gained a qualification at a higher level.
- Over three-quarters (77 per cent) say that taking part in the ULF led to them being more likely to do further learning or training.

### **Getting the skills necessary to progress to and achieve at level 3**

Union learning is effective in helping learners get the skills and qualifications that are necessary before they can consider taking up their entitlement to level 3. In the last year ULF projects supported 37,700 adults to take up existing English and maths level 2 entitlements – a 48 per cent increase on the target agreed with the government.

## Introduction

In September 2020, the government [announced](#) that from April 2021 the new National Skills Fund will allow all adults to study for a level 3 qualification for free if they do not already have one. This will be a central feature of a further education and skills white paper that the government will be publishing before the end of the year, and expands the entitlement, which currently applies only to those aged under 24, to all adults.

The size of the group in question is significant: almost 40 per cent of young people have not achieved a level 3 qualification by the age of 25.

Giving all adults the opportunity to pass their first level 3 qualification by removing course costs is positive. But there will still be many adults who will not take up the necessary learning and training, because they face other barriers.

The Union Learning Fund has proved to be highly effective at helping adults take up an existing entitlement to free courses for English and maths despite low take-up of this in colleges. It also already helps many adults achieve level 3 qualifications. The Union Learning Fund supports projects across England, all of which are open to union members and non-members alike. However, the government has signalled its intention to end the Union Learning Fund in spring 2021 – just as this new level 3 entitlement starts.

This paper sets out why union learning and the Union Learning Fund must be retained as a key part of the plan to make sure a critical mass of adults take up the entitlement to free courses next April.

# The problem: cost isn't the only barrier to adults taking up free-of-charge learning entitlements

We already know a lot about why many adults are reluctant to take up learning or training. Repeated research has had similar findings to the latest government [survey](#). It acknowledges that cost and affordability are a major barrier to training.

Once cost and affordability are removed, other barriers stop adults learning or training, including:

- not being able to find the time to do the course, including fitting this in with a busy job and family or caring commitments
- problems with travel and transport to colleges
- lacking the confidence to take up any kind of learning or training, especially if they have not done so since leaving school
- lacking the essential skills needed to engage with a course, especially in English and maths
- lacking information and guidance on the best course and what skills they will need before starting it
- specific barriers facing certain groups, including older people and disabled people
- simply not being interested in doing a course even if it is free.

Making first level 3 qualifications free of charge will certainly increase accessibility, but it will not deal with the other barriers unless there is tailored support for adult learners.

This can be seen in the experience of free-of-charge level 2 qualifications. These entitlements have been in place for many years. But even though these courses are free, there has still been a 30 per cent decline in the number of adults achieving a level 2 qualification in English or maths since 2010.

# How union learning can make the free-of-charge entitlement to level 3 learning a reality

## Helping learners overcome barriers to learning

Union learning, through the Union Learning Fund and union learning reps, has a proven track record of engaging with adults who are reluctant to learn or train.

Independent evaluations of the Union Learning Fund have consistently shown how unions support adults facing barriers to take up learning. In many cases union learners are adults who would not consider going to their local college, never mind plan how to use a skills entitlement. Union learning reps make an initial proposition about returning to learning, encourage less confident adults to take the first steps, and help sustain and support the learners to achieve their qualifications.

Seventy per cent of ULF learners (and 79 per cent of those with no qualifications) say that they would not have taken part in the learning or training without union support. Employers agree – more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of them say that the ULF is very effective at inspiring reluctant learners to engage in training and development.

Getting people to start learning again is just the first step. Without constant support many adults new to learning are likely to drop out of their course if they experience difficulties and challenges. Sustaining engagement and promoting progression is at the heart of what union learning reps do. Using one-to-one support, they have developed successful ways of helping those with few qualifications to successfully complete courses and acquire qualifications.

Independent evaluations of the ULF show that more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of learners with no previous qualification gained a qualification, and just under half (47 per cent) of those starting with entry level or level 1 qualifications gained a qualification at a higher level.

The independent evaluations also show that people get “the learning bug” as a result of union support. Over three-quarters (77 per cent) of learners say that engagement with the ULF led to them being more likely to undertake further learning or training. Sixty-eight per cent say that they are more enthusiastic about learning and training as a result. Surveys of ULF learners show that specific groups of learners facing the greatest barriers are more likely to progress to further learning and training with union support. For example, 64 per cent of disabled respondents had taken part in three or more ULF courses compared with 42 per cent of those without a disability.

One unique aspect of union learning is the ability of union learning reps to draw in the practical support of employers and managers. Reps negotiate with employers for flexibilities to address some key barriers, including agreeing paid time-off to study for qualifications. This makes learning manageable for people who find it impossible to attend night classes at their local college due to family and caring commitments. It would rarely be possible for an individual to secure this type of employer support – but unions are able to negotiate collectively and secure these benefits for whole groups of learners and whole workplaces.

## Helping learners secure the skills to progress to and achieve at level 3

Before starting a level 3 qualification course, many learners will first need to re-engage with learning, top up their existing skills and their digital skills, and secure level 2 qualifications in English and maths. The ULF and unions are effective in helping learners use their existing skills entitlements, which will be key in supporting large numbers to progress to qualifications up to level 3.

The overall numbers achieving level 2 qualifications in English and maths have fallen by 30 per cent since 2010. However, union learning has bucked this trend.

In 2019-20, ULF projects supported 37,700 adults to take up their entitlements to a first qualification in English and/or maths at level 2. This was 48 per cent more than the target of 25,600 agreed with the government at the beginning of the year.

A [2018 DfE report](#) into ways of increasing the numbers of adult learners doing English and maths noted:

“We also saw union-supported learning, through learning centres and union learning representatives, as one of the few effective existing models of work-based support for maths and English”.

[Independent evaluations](#) of the Union Learning Fund have highlighted how union learning helps workers to achieve level 2 and 3 qualifications. ULF learners on vocational courses were most likely to have gained a qualification – 75 per cent did so – and most of these were at level 2 and above. Adults who gained qualifications at a higher level than those they already had were most likely to be undertaking vocational courses at level 2 or level 3 – or even higher education or level 4 training.

Union Learning Fund funded projects are increasingly seeking to support learners to progress beyond basic qualifications. [The research](#) highlighted that 33 per cent of learners in ULF round 18 (2017–2018) were working towards qualifications at level 2 or above, compared to 26 per cent in ULF round 17 (2016–2017). It also showed that round 18 had a higher return on investment from further education programmes and vocational qualifications – which was as a result of a greater number working towards qualifications at level 2 or above.

[This survey](#) also shows that the ULF has a significant impact on the pipeline of those recruited into high-quality apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3. Learners undertaking

vocational courses through the ULF were more likely to agree that they had become motivated to apply for an apprenticeship compared with other groups.



## **Conclusion: union learning is vital to a successful roll-out of the entitlement to a first level 3 qualification**

This paper sets out how the Union Learning Fund already plays a significant role in helping learners to use their existing skills entitlements and to progress to level 3 qualifications.

Union learning reps and unions are keen to help learners take up their new entitlement to a first level 3 qualification. This could be transformative to the lives and careers of many adult learners who did not achieve this level of qualification at school.

But ending the Union Learning Fund just as the new entitlement begins would be catastrophic to the chances of many learners. Only union learning has the proven track record of finding, engaging and sustaining learners to get back into learning, and of engaging with employers to facilitate this. The new entitlement will be merely a paper promise without the support of union learning reps and the infrastructure of the Union Learning Fund to make it a reality for adults with few or no qualifications in workplaces across England.

We urge government to reconsider the decision to end the Union Learning Fund in April 2021. We remain open to a conversation with government as to how union learning can support its adult skills priorities and boost the number of learners who take advantage of the new level 3 skills entitlement.