

**Towards a high-skill,
high-productivity economy:
the role of trade union-led
learning and training**



Executive summary

The development of a union-led agenda to improve access to learning and training for workers over the last two decades has led to significant benefits for workers themselves, their employers and the economy in general.

The impact of government investment in union learning for the period 2012–2015 was around £916m. Each pound invested in the union learning fund generated a return of £9.15, of which £5.75 went to individuals and £3.40 to employers.

Over half (56 per cent) of those who took part in union-led learning or training reported that they had gained a qualification as a result of their learning. Half of this group had gained a qualification at a level higher than any of their existing qualifications.

Unions play an important role in facilitating access to learning and training – not least in making sure learners can access multiple learning opportunities, which are associated with better outcomes, especially for harder-to-reach groups.

Introduction

The UK's poor productivity record continues to hold back the economic recovery. UK productivity was 20 per cent below the average for other G7 nations in 2014, and it is 17 per cent lower than it would have been if it had carried on going up at the average rate it was before the recession.¹

It is widely acknowledged that progress in raising productivity requires major improvement to workforce skills across the UK. For example, most of the recommendations of the business, innovation and skills (BIS) select committee in their recent critique of the government's productivity plan focused on skills.²

There is a pressing need to improve employability skills and ensure more adults reach minimum standards in English and maths. The latest analysis by the OECD shows that more than a quarter of adults aged 16–65 in England have low literacy and numeracy levels and that five million of these nine million adults with low-level skills are currently in employment.³ In addition, the low quality of much apprenticeship provision continues to be cause for concern to unions and employers alike. The BIS select committee recently noted that “every apprenticeship, no matter what level, should be of the highest quality”.

However, investment in skills has declined significantly: one study shows employer investment in training is down by nearly a half since the mid-1990s.⁴ More recently the

¹ Office for National Statistics (2015) International Comparisons of Productivity - First Estimates, 2014, available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/icp/international-comparisons-of-productivity/2014---first-estimates/stb-icp0915.html>

² Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmbis/466/466.pdf>

³ OECD (2016) Building Skills for All: a review of England, available at:

www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf

⁴ Green, F. et al (2013) *What Has Been Happening to the Training of Workers in Britain?*, available at: [www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/llakes.ac.uk/files/43_per cent20Green per cent20et per cent20al.pdf](http://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/llakes.ac.uk/files/43_per%20cent20Green_per%20et%20per%20al.pdf)

national employer skills survey of more than 90,000 employers highlighted that “the modest economic growth of the past four years has been met by an unprecedented shortage of skills leaving thousands of vacancies unfilled”.⁵ It showed that a third of employers still admit to training none of their staff and over a third of employees say that they do not receive any training at all.

It is against this background that union-led learning and training has assumed every greater importance for the trade union movement, as part of our aspiration for decent pay and opportunities for progression for every worker, as part of a high-skill, high-productivity economy.

Over the last twenty years, the role of union learning representatives and the support of successive governments through the Union Learning Fund, established in 1998, have vastly increased the contribution of unions to supporting learning and skills development. Since 1998, over 30,000 union learning reps have been trained and each year nearly quarter of a million learners are supported through union learning.

This briefing draws together recent evidence to demonstrate the impact of unions’ involvement in promoting and facilitating learning and training – to individual workers, to employers, and to the UK economy.

In particular, it relies heavily on the findings of a recent research by the University of Exeter.⁶ They surveyed more than 2,500 employees engaged in learning and training supported by unions through round 15 of the Union Learning Fund (ULF15) which ran from 2012 and finished in March 2015. In total, ULF15 supported nearly 350,000 people through 208,000 learning or training opportunities and 145,000 information, advice and guidance sessions which helped people develop their career and identify learning opportunities.

The benefit of union involvement

Unions make a significant difference to supporting access to regular training and development opportunities at work. A recent analysis from Leeds University shows that this positive ‘union effect’ on training is very significant and has actually strengthened in recent years.⁷ Between 2008 and 2013 the proportion of union members accessing regular training went up from 36.8 per cent to 38.9 per cent. The trend for non-unionised employees was the opposite – down from 23.4 per cent to 22.9 per cent. In other words, in 2013 nearly four in ten union members received regular job-related training compared to just over two in ten non-members.

Not surprisingly, the union impact on training is heightened when unions in a particular workplace are actively engaged in promoting learning and skills on a day-to-day basis.⁸ This engagement can include a number of activities, including negotiating with

⁵ Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukces-employer-skills-survey-2015-uk-report

⁶ Neild, B. & Stevens, H. (2015) *Union Learning Survey*, University of Exeter

⁷ Stuart, M. et al (2015) *Skills and Training: the union advantage* (available at www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/skills-and-training-union-advantage)

⁸ Stuart, M. et al (2015) *Skills and Training: the union advantage* (available at www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/skills-and-training-union-advantage)

employers to agree better training provision, but also increasingly it includes union reps developing and facilitating learning and training opportunities in their own right.

In the Exeter research, nearly three out of four felt that their union was either extremely important (39 per cent) or very important (33 per cent) in supporting their learning. It is interesting to note that respondents in many minority or disadvantaged groups attributed a higher level of importance to the support from their union than others.

Gaining confidence, skills and qualifications

In the Exeter research, the most common principal motivation for respondents' participation in union-led learning or training was to perform better in their current job or to advance their career, gain promotion or a pay rise (37 per cent). Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) wanted to gain skills that would be useful in their everyday life.

Unsurprisingly, respondents with low-level qualifications participated in learning focused on the acquisition of functional skills and ESOL. Over half (56 per cent) of respondents reported that they had gained a qualification as a result of their learning. Half of this group had gained a qualification at a level higher than any of their existing qualifications.

The majority (62 per cent) said that they had taken part in more than one episode of learning or training and 31 per cent had taken part four times or more. This shows that as well as engaging hard-to-reach employees, union support is effective at helping people to sustain and progress their learning.

The likelihood of attaining qualifications was heavily influenced by the number of courses undertaken. It appears that union learning is particularly effective at encouraging individuals to maintain engagement in learning or training over a long period of time, leading to the acquisition of higher-level qualifications. Some groups of employees were more likely to have participated in multiple episodes of learning or training, including older workers and disabled workers. Learners who participated in multiple episodes of learning or training acquired a much greater range of skills than single episode learners. This shows the benefit of fostering cultures of learning – a particular feature of union learning projects.

Union-led learning or training also appears to be an effective way to address the skills needs of workers on fixed-term or temporary contracts and those employed through an agency. Motivated by the desire to perform better in their job or to advance their career or gain a pay rise, this group were more likely to have participated in multiple episodes of learning, to have participated in ESOL courses and to have gained qualifications at a higher level than the qualifications they already held.

Applying new skills in the workplace

In the Exeter research, nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) felt that union-led learning or training had given them new skills that they could use in their current job. Two-thirds (60 per cent) felt they could use the new skills to get a new job or change to a different type of work.

Case study: union learning helping workers gain English language qualifications

The learning centre at Boots Nottingham is a testament to partnership working between employers and unions – in this case Usdaw. The facilities within the centre are state of the art, with 12 networked PCs, classroom and meeting facilities, all supported by a joint working group where Usdaw and the Boots management discuss workforce and business needs and plan the centre activities together.

Jana Kokosinska recently passed her Level 1 English course at the Nottingham learning centre. Jana, who has worked for Boots for five years, said:

“I want to take full advantage of the learning opportunities. My union learning rep Julie gave me lots of support and advice. I was very proud and delighted to receive my first certificate for Level 1 English along with my colleagues. I’m doing an IT course now and a business and administration course also. I’m hoping my new skills will help me with my future career.”

Forty percent of respondents noted that they were able to do their existing job better as a result of participation in union-led learning or training – this was the most-cited hard outcome. Large numbers of learners were also more confident about progressing in their career (35 per cent) and more confident about finding a job in future (24 per cent).

The type of learning undertaken had a significant impact on the attainment of hard outcomes. Respondents who had participated in vocational courses were more likely than others to report outcomes relating to employment progression: that they had gained promotion or greater responsibility in their job, felt more confident about progressing in their career, and/or felt more confident about finding a job in the future.

Those who participated in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses were significantly more likely than average to report a wide range of outcomes. These included that they got a new job or changed to a different kind of work; were able to do their job better; stayed in a job they might otherwise have lost; felt more confident about progressing in their career; and felt more confident about finding a job in the future.

Learners who engaged in multiple episodes and types of learning attributed many more hard outcomes to their learning than single episode learners – and it was particularly linked to gaining a new job, a promotion or a pay rise. Once again, this appears to support a policy of encouraging multiple episodes of learning.

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And there were wider implications too: more than 80 per cent agreed that union learning had helped them become more confident in their abilities (82 per cent). Over half of all learners agreed that union learning had improved their quality of life and well-being (51 per cent) and had resulted in them getting a better idea about what they want to do in their life (53 per cent).

Case study: union learning helping workers apply new skills in the workplace

Leigh Moss works in the IT team at the Cooperative Bank in Staffordshire. The Britannia Staff Union (BSU) supported Leigh to gain new skills. He completed qualifications in Microsoft Word, Excel and Powerpoint, an ISEB qualification in systems development essentials and the NCFE functional skills online in mathematics level 2. Leigh has since been offered a secondment opportunity within the company.

Leigh said:

“I studied maths to demonstrate that I could still operate at an A-C grade, due to the amount of time that had passed since I left school. The course identified areas I had forgotten, which helped me refresh my knowledge and understanding of how useful certain aspects of maths were in my day-to-day role inside work and my life in general.

The economic impact of union-led learning and training

Workers who take part in training are likely to earn higher wages and are more likely to be in employment as a result of gaining qualifications. For the individuals who took part in union-led learning or training through ULF15, these benefits amounted to £470 million from higher wages and £110m as a result of being more likely to be in employment – a total of £580m.

The net benefit to employers resulting from the greater productivity of a better skilled workforce (minus any output lost as a result of working time taken to engage in learning through the ULF) is estimated at £336m.

Thus the overall impact of investment in union learning through the ULF15 was around £916m. Taking into account the cost of delivering the learning through colleges and other providers, it is estimated that each pound invested in the ULF generated a total economic return of £9.15, of which £5.75 accrued to individuals and £3.40 to employers. The estimate of return on investment varies significantly by the type of learning or training provided, with apprenticeships, accredited further education and vocational programmes showing the highest level of net return on investment. The return on ICT and English, maths and functional skills are also substantial.

A limited model, focused on tax receipts, suggests that the fiscal return to the UK state from learning generated by the ULF15 was £250m. Taking delivery costs into account, this generated an estimated return of £2.50 for each £1 of public funding invested.

Case study: union learning helping workers progress their careers

Wayne Hambly has been employed at HMP Dartmoor for over ten years, initially on an operational support grade and then moving to the estates department as a labourer. In 2011 Wayne decided to improve his career opportunities by studying for an apprenticeship in electro-technical engineering on day release. The course was run by a technical college in Plymouth, and Wayne's completed his academic study at the Prison Officers Association (POA) learning centre at HMP Dartmoor.

Wayne successfully completed a Level 3 apprenticeship in electro-technical installations, City & Guilds Level 2 in English, maths and ICT, and an AM2 certificate of electro-technical occupational competence. He then successfully applied for a post as an electrical engineer with a local construction company – attaining his career aspirations and 20 per cent pay rise.

Wayne said:

“If it were not for POA learning at HMP Dartmoor my studies would not have run so smoothly. I cannot thank POA Learning enough for their support over the last four years. The new career is an exciting prospect and the pay rise that goes with it will help my wife and I develop the house that we have recently moved into.”