Union Learning Works
Britain has no divine right to be one of the richest countries in the world.

As economic power is shifting to the east, there is nothing automatic about our prosperity.

If our skill base continues to decline, there will be no growth.

If our infrastructure remains poor, there will be no growth.

If we don't support our businesses, there will be no growth.

If we don't improve our education, for everyone, our country will become - more unequal - more unfair - less prosperous. So we will give priority to spending that supports growth in our economy.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, Conservative Party Conference, 4th October 2010
Skills and employment are the foundation on which a successful economy is built and they are essential for individual prosperity, personal fulfilment and a fairer society. It is now nine years since the launch of the Northern Ireland Union Learning Fund (NIULF) and there is no doubt we have entered a new era of workplace learning with Trades Unions taking a leading role in helping to raise the skills levels of the workforce. "Success through Skills - Transforming Futures" sets out a range of skills challenges which will require transformational change to achieve the right skills profile and enable Northern Ireland to compete globally. Union learning is delivering new skills to workers and is making a significant contribution to this strategy and, ultimately, to our future prosperity.

During the 2008-2011 funding round my Department supported ten union projects, some of which are featured in this publication. They highlight the benefits of workplace learning in a range of organisations and offer an insight into learners' personal experiences of returning to education. Some of them are Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) who have helped to negotiate and broker learning opportunities which deliver real and tangible benefits to the learners and the business. Their success is rooted in their familiarity on the shopfloor and, without them, the enormous growth in workplace learning would not have happened.

I also welcome the partnerships that have been forged involving unions, employers, further education colleges, sector skills councils and others in sustainable learning. However, as we face continuing economic challenges, it is important that we continue to strengthen and build on these ties. Establishing and developing a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace doesn’t just help individual members of the workforce, it has a significant impact on the fortunes of companies in terms of increased productivity, improved quality and other business benefits. In this time of change there is a real opportunity for union-led learning to make a difference to individuals and to the future of the Northern Ireland economy.

I welcome the contribution which unions have made to adult work based learning and their continued vision of contributing to the creation of a skilled workforce that is flexible and fit for the 21st Century.
The skills agenda is fundamental to achieving economic growth and unions must play an even greater role in boosting the workforce’s skills, adult education and apprenticeships, Vince Cable, Business Secretary, said at the Union Learn conference on July 12 2010.

He said that skills in the private sector had to be improved to replace the contraction of the public sector over the next few years. He said the skills agenda is fundamental to achieving economic growth and that Union Learn has an even greater role to pay in boosting workplace skills, adult education and apprentices. He said: 'You have developed a powerful model in Union Learn, reaching out to businesses and giving individuals a chance they never would have had. I want you to build on what you have already achieved.'

He described unionlearn and the Union Learning Fund, which receives a grant from his department, as a 'good story'. He said: 'I am here to support the work of Union Learn and the Union Learning Fund, which my department supports. The figures show that last year it helped more than 230,000 people and, of those, 32,000 were people who needed help with basic things such as literacy and numeracy. An evaluation by Leeds University shows that of 80 per cent of people on unionlearn projects said they got good value, but also two-thirds of employers said they were extremely useful for their businesses; and I think that is a very good story.'

He said he was as committed to adult education as he had been when in opposition - he told conference how his mother had been 'saved as a human being' by adult education when she was recovering from a serious breakdown. He said that when making cuts to his department’s budget, he and his colleague John Hayes had not raided adult education money.

John Hayes, the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, became the first Conservative minister to address a TUC conference since the mid-1990s, when he presented the Union Learn Quality Awards for organisations which work with unions in learning.

He said that he made no apologies for praising unionlearn, now that he is in Government. He said that his father had been a shop steward and his grandfather a branch secretary and he himself was a member of the TUC-affiliated Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

He told conference: 'High-quality learning is so important. It is a vital component in helping to build and maintain a strong and competitive economy. Employers cannot stay in business without people with the right skills for the job. While people can’t hope for a good job without the skills employers are looking for.

But the case for learning is not just the economic. Raising educational and skill levels is fundamental to creating a fairer society, founded on social mobility, social justice and social cohesion. Learning should indeed be the point where the interests of individuals, their unions, their employers and of the government converge.'
Whilst these individuals have some superficial things in common, they are all different people, individual citizens who have grasped the opportunities offered by workplace learning. All have had their lives changed through education and all are committed to change by encouraging their workmates to return to learn through their union.

Many union learners move on to becoming Union Learning Representatives, fostering the talent of their fellow workers and developing a culture of learning in their workplaces. What union learners are doing is more than changing their own lives – they are changing the world around them; their families, their friends, their place of work and how they see the world.

An educated workforce is an economic necessity. An educated citizenry is a social necessity. There is a barrage of statistics that prove these points over and over again. Put simply, however, these are the facts:

• Skilled workers are better paid, happier at their jobs, are more productive and are more likely to stay at a workplace which encourages learning

• Unskilled workers are badly paid, easily de-motivated and are more transient

• More skilled people are more likely to vote and to voluntarily contribute to civic society with their talents and time

• Less skilled people are less likely to play their part in the life of their community and are more likely to feel socially excluded from the shared lives of their neighbours, leading to resentment and alienation from the people they have most in common with.

• The children of more highly skilled parents are more likely to go further in school and be more upwardly socially mobile – they have a much better chance of 'doing better' than their parents.

• The children of the less skilled are far more likely to leave school with fewer qualifications, thus reproducing the poverty and social exclusion faced by their parents. These children are more likely to suffer from bad mental and physical health, are more likely to become lone parents, are more likely to acquire an alcohol or drug habit, are more likely to be trapped in low-paid and low-status jobs or become ‘economically inactive’, and are more likely to go to prison.
Looked at this way, we cannot afford to revert to the attitudes of two decades ago and make the category mistake of viewing university education for middle class people as an ‘investment’ and skills training for the working class as a ‘social cost’.

The economic impact of not educating the workforce is colossal. 28% of Northern Ireland’s working age population is classified as economically inactive, and those who are working in the private sector are paid on average 20% less than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.

One-fifth of working age adults in NI has no qualifications. These statistics are related and add up to a series of poverty traps. The cost to the taxpayer of not taking action to educate the workforce mounts up with welfare costs, social costs, and lost tax revenue as well as more people with less to spend.

The stories told in these pages are about individual parts of a bigger picture. Each union learner has his and her own motivation and reason for facing the challenge of adult learning. For many, the first step taken leads to life-changing experiences and valuable qualifications which can change the life chances of their families. Skilled workers can change the outlook and profitability of businesses. A society which values its citizens enough to ensure that that second chances always exist will be, literally, a smart society.

I hope that the stories told in this publication and the arguments it makes for workplace learning inspire workers to take up the opportunities to educate themselves, and I hope that employers reading this will facilitate the desire to learn among workers of all sectors.
The Union Learning Fund (ULF) for Northern Ireland was established in 2002 to promote activity by trade unions in support of the government’s objective of creating a learning society.

The ULF recognises the role that unions play in engaging adults who have been disadvantaged or excluded from education.

Union Learning Representatives are key to union learning.

What is a Union Learning Representative (ULR)?

What is the role of the ULR?

A Union Learning Representative (ULR) is a union activist who is trained to support learning in the workplace and to advise members about opportunities. ULRs complement and add value to employer’s efforts to engage workers in learning.

ULRs communicate directly with fellow workers, employers and training providers to identify a range of learning opportunities and make them available to the workforce.

What are the unique benefits of the ULR?

- Employees sometimes lack the confidence to get involved in learning and can be wary about why they might be asked to undertake training, especially in areas such as numeracy and literacy.

- Union members trust their ULR with their learning interests and needs and ULRs are in a unique position to offer support and encouragement to employees to help them feel comfortable in acquiring new skills.

- There is growing evidence that more individuals will undertake learning and training if offered information, advice and support from a ULR.

- In May 2004, legislation was introduced which gave Union Learning Representatives statutory recognition to carry out their role.

- They have the right to paid time off to get trained and to carry out their job and members have the right to get time off to consult with their ULR. Employers should also provide Learning Reps with the facilities they need to enable them to do their job.
Nine out of ten local businesses employ fewer than ten workers. These are not even small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) by the standards of most countries, but micro businesses. Developing the skills base of these firms is essential for their survival.

In Wales, where the devolved Assembly faces similar challenges to ours, EU funding is being used to train workers who are working short-time, so that companies who are on three-day weeks can retain their workers and have them trained for the remaining two days through the ProAct scheme which provides funding for employers who are facing difficulties during the recession. This innovative structure is jointly run by the Wales Assembly, employers groups and the Wales TUC, a model example of social partnership in straitened times.

Programmes such as the Union Learning Fund are making an opportunity out of a crisis. They represent a marked shift away from the attitudes of the recessions of the 1980s, when generations of workers were effectively thrown on the scrapheap, when ‘redundancy’ not only meant your job, but your worth to society.

**World of Work (WOW) Exhibition**

W.O.W was developed in collaboration with the Golden Thread Gallery and the Northern Ireland Union Learning Fund to celebrate the essence of May Day and showcase the (often hidden) value of trade union learning initiatives. The exhibition took place in the Golden Thread Gallery over the 2011 May Day Festival and we are delighted to report that over 1000 people visited the event over a three week period.

The exhibition took the form of a projection that explored the nature of ‘work’. The short film was directed by up and coming film maker, Lee Stitt who mixed interviews with members of the ICTU Retired Workers and Youth Committee, with poetry and photography submitted by workers from a range of industries. As well as uncovering wonderful stories and surprising sub plots, the exhibition also served as a backdrop to a series of talks and events aimed at encouraging further participation.

It is hoped those visitors to the exhibition of the World of Work will have been inspired and will seek the extension of lifelong learning opportunities which will allow them to develop to their fullest potential.
Margaret Commins is a checkout operator at Asda Westwood, one of the busiest supermarkets in Belfast. She was recruited in November 2006, as the store re-opened after the takeover by Asda of the Safeway chain.

Like many of her colleagues on the tills, Margaret found the training to work as a checkout operator quite easy, and she was attracted to further learning after seeing a notice promoting training in Sign Language. Many of her workmates did likewise, and they receive great satisfaction in interacting with deaf people and making them feel welcome and included.

Margaret has three daughters and initially trained to be a childcare worker, but funding issues prevented her completing her qualifications. This followed experiences of formal education which were “socially fine” but educationally unsatisfactory. A change in schools during her Key Stage 3 years disrupted her confidence. “The big problem I had was the change in the system.”

Despite some special provision, Margaret left school as 16 with few qualifications. She then enrolled in a Job Skills course at the Dairy Farm centre in Twinbrook where she studied key skills and childcare, attaining a Level 1 before funding ran out.

She continued her training in childcare at BIFHE (now Belfast Metropolitan College), where she was diagnosed as being dyslexic, previously unnoticed despite receiving extra support at Secondary level.

Invigorated by her new post at Asda and her training in Sign Language, Margaret saw a notice advertising Essential Skills promoted by her union, USDAW. Her workplace has a training room, and there she has attained Level 1 certificates in Maths and English.

She thoroughly enjoyed the learning environment, and is now continuing her studies. She has commenced her Level 2 education in Maths and English, aspiring for those GSCE certificates which eluded her during her formal education.

A big incentive for Margaret to undertake Essential Skills learning was her daughter, Marie, who is now in Primary 4, and Margaret especially enjoys helping her with her homework. It should be also be noted that Margaret has had two more daughters, and still manages to juggle a job, a young family and keep up her learning ambitions.
In fact, Margaret is also taking on Beginners classes in IT, and is saving for a computer for her home. She feels that she has benefited enormously from the “culture of learning” promoted by her union and employers, and seems to especially appreciate learning for its own sake. Asked if she has ambitions for promotion, she replied with a laugh,

“I am perfectly happy where I am!”

It sounds like Margaret is busy enough, but she is keen to point out the small differences which Union Learning has made to her daily life.

“It’s fantastic being able to help Marie with her homework, but I also find that I am doing more for myself. I am reading newspapers more, and really enjoy reading books.” She has joined her local library, and regularly borrows books as well as using the computer facilities. “I prefer true stories rather than novels,” she says, adding that the book which impacted most on her recently was Dave Pelzer’s A Child Called It.

Ultimately, Margaret would like to return to her childcare studies and complete her qualifications. However, it sounds like she is busy enough for now!

Jennifer successfully completed the introductory British Sign Language course provided by the British Deaf Association in 2009. Jennifer has long held a passion for learning Sign Language, feeling that the ability to communicate with the Deaf Community helps to provide an important service, for both her self and Translink, within the transport industry. As a consequence of learning to Sign, Jennifer then decided to help other members of staff avail of learning opportunities, by becoming a Union Learning Representative.

Jennifer has assisted new Sign language learners by giving them support and helping them to practise their new found skill. Jennifer also helps generate interest amongst staff and advises staff on what learning opportunities are available to them, in order to gain qualifications.

Jennifer says “The benefits of learning Sign Language are of significant importance on both a personal level and to Translink. I have learned a lot about myself and what learning capabilities I have. But also Translink staff, are now more able, to deliver an even higher quality of service to the Deaf Community, and therefore are helping to better integrate the Deaf Community within the travelling public using public transport.”
In 2010, the ICTU commissioned research into the effectiveness of Union Learning and as part of the exercise, employers were consulted as well as workers and Union Learning Reps. Some of Northern Ireland’s foremost employers were involved in the research, including the BBC, Irwin’s Bakery, O’Kanes poultry, the NI Fire Brigade, the NI Environment Agency, the NI Housing Executive and Wrightbus.

The research was carried out by Trademark, and they asked questions of a range of employers who participate in the UnionLearn programme, from both the public and private sectors. It has long been the contention from the trade union side that the demand is there among workers for more workplace training and education. “There is a big demand, especially for IT. We are trying to contextualise our training to the companies so the employers buy into it more,” said one ULR. Another asserted that “a lot of employers are being forced to face up to up-skilling and training as a requirement when looking for investors in people awards, this provides further impetus for us to continue on with our work.”

That these courses lead to recognised qualifications is a large selling point from both sides: “Union activists are clear that investing in workplace education is also an investment in the individuals who take part: the progression path improves the learner’s potential for promotion and the employer’s retention of staff.”

From the employers perspective the motivations to supporting union learning projects included building on the organisation’s training policy and developing opportunities to provide new skill sets to employees remained strong:

We have always had a strong training policy in the agency so were keen to get involved with Union Learning. Our role encompasses conservation, restoration and re-skilling and so providing in house training on heritage skills simply made sense – these were skills that were being lost within the sector. We would not have been able to achieve so much without union learning. We have more people up-skilling and more opportunities for trades people to come to building sites to enhance their skills in restoration and conservation. (N.I. Environment Agency)

The ULF came along at a time when the company were assessing the learning needs of the business and its employees. It made sense for to give support to the union proposals with a pilot project. (Irwins bakery)

We were involved in the early days of the programme and were attracted by the prospect of supporting ESOL courses for migrant workers whilst enhancing the essential skills of other workers. (O’Kanes Poultry)

Education is beneficial to learners and the employer - people feel that they are able to better themselves and are more confident both in work and outside of work. (Wrightbus)

We are committed to training and development and this was an opportunity to extend our positive relationship with BECTU. (BBC)

The Northern Ireland Fire Brigade saw the opportunity to get involved in Union Learning as a way of complimenting their own in-house training programme.

Employers as a whole were happy to provide support and facilities to UL staff including office space, phone access as well as release of staff time:

Whatever is needed to progress the programmes - we are happy to do that. (NI Environment Agency)

The company provides a fully functioning computer suite where the ICT and essential skills courses are held. We provide match time for people to
participate and in partnership with the union provide the appropriate materials. *(Irwin’s Bakery)*

We have provided a training cabin and all employees are paid the full amount of the time they put into the training. The training is done across the shifts and every employee has an opportunity to engage. *(O’Kanes Poultry)*

Three classrooms are provided, one of which is a fully fitted computer suite, the other two are also fully kitted out with whiteboard projection and so on for numeracy and literacy classes. *(Wrightbus)*

We don’t provide physical facilities but we do support the release of a BECTU learning rep to co-ordinate the activity. We also organised and distributed a joint BECTU BBC questionnaire to identify needs. We have provided speakers to events organised by BECTU. *(BBC)*

In terms of impact employers stated that involvement in union learning has facilitated a more positive relationship between them and unions:

Some years ago it was a them and us attitude but since this programme relations are on the same wavelength of improvements in re-skilling and enhancing skills ... we have now moved to the position where we want the union to sit on our board. *(N.I. Environment Agency)*

The company have always had a good relationship with the union but the ULF project helped us build relationships at a time when long standing management and union people were moving on or retiring and new personalities were coming forward. *(Irwin’s Bakery)*

Other employers emphasised that whilst they have always had good relations with the union that the relationship has been enhanced because of union learning project.

Employers were also keen to highlight the direct impact of the project on their employees:

The company sees clearly that those who have participated in the projects so far have grown greatly in confidence and are able to perform a greater degree of functions on the shop floor. The union learning fund has not only helped the company but enhanced the lives of employees as well and in that regard we are happy to be involved in the programme. *(Irwin’s Bakery)*

We believe that the programme has helped greatly increase the communication between workers and management as well as increase the levels of confidence of the learners. *(O’Kanes Poultry)*

We have 60 staff who have gone through IT skills training which has built confidence, some have now got their own computer at home and are using the internet which they wouldn’t have done before. Staff freely participate in the programme, in an environment that is friendly and welcoming - breaking down the barriers to learning. We are happy to promote the programme as it is beneficial to building confidence in the workforce. *(Wrightbus)*

As well as providing basic skills courses in numeracy, literacy and ICT we have been pleased that the ULRs have been able to run things like drug awareness and dyslexia awareness which has been beneficial to members and the service. *(Northern Ireland Fire Brigade)*

In overall terms it was evident that Union Learning had contributed substantially to the learning environment in a wide range of workplaces, adding to in-house programmes as well as complimenting them. The projects had benefited the relationships between unions and management, improved career prospects, provided new skills, up-skilled learners, improved productivity and increased the confidence and self-esteem of learners.

From the employers perspective it was clearly evident that partnership with the unions in delivery of the projects had improved relations between the two parties as well as having direct benefits in terms of upskilling employees, improving productivity and increasing the self-confidence of learners.
Alastair is the cream of the crop at Essential Skills Awards

Alastair McCormick, a UNITE trade union member is a shining example of the power of union learning to transform.

Alastair’s achievements were recognised when he was awarded the prestigious title of Northern Ireland Essential Skills Learner of the Year for 2010 at the government’s award ceremony which took place in Hillborough Castle.

In addition to being named overall winner, Alastair was also named 'Essential Skills Trade Union Learner of the Year’.

Alastair, who works for Dale Farm in Ballymena, is the epitome of a reluctant learner who went on to realise the enjoyment and achievement that can be gained from returning to study. Initially hesitant, but with the encouragement of his wife and supported by Unite the Union, Alastair undertook and achieved an
Essential Skills ICT Level 2 qualification at North West Regional College. His new-found skills have enabled him to incorporate ITC into his working day, from planning work rotas to managing financial applications and he now embraces IT tasks which would once have appeared daunting. Furthermore, Alastair’s enthusiasm for learning is infectious. He has encouraged five colleagues to join Essential Skills classes.

Alastair’s social life has also been enriched through learning – for example, he now confidently books flights and holidays online. Explaining how his life has changed since achieving his qualification, Alastair said: “I have completed further in-house training in preparation for promotion which I would never have done before. There is a whole new world available to me.”

Praising the achievement of Alastair and other essential skills learners, Employment and Learning Minister, Sir Reg Empey, said at the award ceremony: “The success stories ... serve as an inspiration to anyone wishing to improve their Essential Skills and are fitting recognition for their commitment to lifelong learning.”

The Minister continued: “Research shows that more people than ever want to improve their Essential Skills, particularly maths and ICT, and that younger people and those in part-time work with some qualifications already, have the greatest desire to improve. This bodes well for the future of our economy, as better skills levels will underpin the economic recovery and help provide a better standard of living for everyone.”

On to the page

We were also very proud to present a wonderful collection of words and images which had been drawn together from projects which also ran as part of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions May Festival 2011.

This collection came about through three separate but complementary projects. The World of World (WOW), Through the Lens explored diversity in work through digital photography and lastly On to the Page a creative writing project. Facilitated by Ruth Carr, On to the Page explored themes of diversity, respect, anti racism and anti sectarianism through creative writing.

Some of the images and words in the booklet produced are challenging, some poignant, some funny – some all three. We would like to thank everyone who participated in the projects and who gave freely of their time, creativity and enthusiasm.

Thanks too to our great partners – Golden Thread Gallery, WEA, Ruth Carr and to our funders.
Frances McAuley assists customers at the self-scanner checkouts at Asda Westwood, and has worked there since the store opened in 2006. She volunteered to be the Union Learning Representative for the education programme for workers at the outlet.

Frances had been the USDAW shop steward at the time and saw the potential for Union Learn for improving the lives of her co-workers. “I found it very exciting. We had the union and the store working together and the whole project was backed officially by the government.” The fact that the Union Learn courses would lead to officially recognised certificates and that these skills could lead to a progression to higher education was a key selling point to Frances, as she encouraged her colleagues to take up the courses.

Despite the fact that many workers in Asda have few qualifications, Frances had to contend with the stigma felt by many people whose memory of formal education was less than happy. To combat the stigma and the embarrassment felt by some who needed Essential Skills training, Frances encouraged her colleagues to try Sign Language classes. All nine participants really enjoyed doing the course, especially as “we had a fantastic wee tutor, so it wasn’t just learning something interesting, it was fun too.”

The rewards from learning sign language went further than receiving a certificate in BSL. “There was a real ‘glow’ from deaf customers in the shop when they were greeted in sign language. These people can feel really isolated into a deaf community. So our learning of sign language was good for the morale of our deaf customers as well as to the benefit of the store.”

Courses such as sign language thus had three useful functions. They acted as an encouragement, or a ‘gateway’ course for otherwise reluctant learners who may have felt embarrassed about taking up adult education. Secondly, the learners had immediate opportunities to utilise their new skills, receiving the emotional rewards of helping other people and being thanked for it. Thirdly, the business benefited from a greater sense of loyalty from deaf customers who themselves felt more welcome than at other stores. These deaf customers would, of course, tell their friends and family, the sort of personal recommendation which marketing people dream about.

Frances makes a big effort to “overcome the barriers”, for example by attending classes so she can tell her colleagues that “if I can do it, you can do it.” Two-hour classes take place in the training room at the Asda store at the crossover of day
and evening shifts, with one hour ‘donated’ by the company.

Frances then took on the ES maths course, as much to encourage some of her co-workers who felt embarrassed about taking the leap into adult education. Her motto of “if I can do it, you can do it” encouraged several younger women to join her in the course. Having a daughter of a similar age to many of her colleagues helped her communicated clearly and “gained the trust of the people I work with.”

She would “make excuses to get taking to colleagues about education,” which helped her dig into the reasons why so many of her colleagues who she felt had real potential to learn were holding back. “Many had dyslexia, often not diagnosed at school until it was too late. So they each developed coping strategies to cover their dyslexia” – such as guessing the content of written documents or avoiding writing as much as possible.

As a schoolchild, Frances wished to become a teacher. Perhaps she has done so. Her own background is common for many working class women of her generation, and many of her daughter’s generation as well. She left secondary school with no qualifications – “I didn’t even take the exams - but found work as a junior typist in a solicitor’s office.” She was not comfortable in that office environment, however (“Too stuck-up”), and get employed as a clark in a city centre bookmakers, where she enjoyed working for several years, interacting with the punters and their banter.

Her daughter Gemma was born, which brought Frances closer to her father in particular, who encouraged her to read and think for herself. “My dad constantly read books and newspapers, and engaged with the arguments being made by the writers. He was a bit of a ‘Devil’s advocate’, always making you argue for your point of view, and not just agreeing with you.” That influence has been passed onto the next generation, as Gemma’s granddad encouraged her to read as he minded her as a child. “I’m glad to say that Gemma is a good reader,” observes Frances.

Later, Frances undertook a foundation studies course in Women’s Studies at the ‘Black Man’, or the College Square building of Belfast Metropolitan College, as it is lesser known. “I loved the course and soaking up the knowledge of the course tutors, but it wasn’t feasible for me to continue.” The experience of learning helped her confidence in participating in the life of her community, and after commencing work at Asda, becoming both a Union Learning Representative and Shop Steward. Frances is now a key activist with her union, USDAW.

Like the title of her favourite novel, she has Great Expectations for her self, her colleagues and her daughter, “who wants to do social work.” Gemma will do fine if the followed the example of her mother and the advice of Charles Dickens: “Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There’s no better rule.”

Asda Award ceremony, with Lorna Young, USDAW UnionLearn Project Manager, Frances and Kate Hamilton Personnel Manager
Key points emerging from the evidence review are:

- People with few qualifications, low-skilled people, older workers, part-time workers and those working in small or non-unionised workplaces tend to have lower than average rates of participation in skills development;

- Barriers to individual demand for skills development include financial factors, lack of advice, information or guidance, negative influences from family or peers and a legacy of negative experiences of education. Other barriers identified in the literature include limited awareness of the potential benefits of skills development and perceived poor quality or lack of access to relevant provision;

- Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors appear to influence individuals' investment in skills development; however the existing evidence does not enable a clear ranking of these barriers;

- For people who are in work, employers can play a key role in overcoming barriers to demand for skills development. This suggests that policies to promote the business case for investment in skills would have a positive impact on individual participation in skills development;

- The 'culture of learning' within the workplace appears to play an important role in influencing both employer and employee decisions about investment in skills development;

- Clear progression routes and accreditation can play a role in facilitating continued skills development, particularly for people over the age of 40;

- Evidence suggests that returns to accredited training at the lowest levels of qualification tend to be relatively low. This is likely to influence low-skilled individuals' decisions to invest in skills development;

- Flexible learning provision can promote employee participation in learning. In some cases work-based provision is desired, in others home or community-based provision may be attractive to learners;

- Working in a unionised workplace tends to be associated with a higher probability of skills development. There is evidence that trade unions and trade union representatives can play a key role both in addressing individual barriers and influencing employer attitudes and practices.
**The role of trade unions**

Finally, as we have seen above, there is some evidence that working in a unionised workplace increases the probability of receiving work-related training (Arulampalam and Booth, 1998; Green et al., 1999; Boheim and Booth, 2004). There is also more direct evidence of the positive role that trade unions can play in promoting employee engagement in skills development activities. To this end, the growing importance of workplace learning to the role of trade unions is demonstrated by the creation of ‘union learning representatives’ (ULRs). ULRs are appointed from existing unionised workplaces. Their purpose is to help increase workplace training by working in partnership with employers (Hoque and Bacon, 2008). By 2008, the TUC estimated that there were 22,000 trained and accredited ULRs across workplaces in the UK.

This partnership-based approach represents a divergence from traditional conceptions of union activity that have focused on collective bargaining – however, as Munro and Rainbird (2004) note, many unions have aggressively pursued the learning agenda as a means of supporting progression for members. A review of several articles on the role of trade unions in workplace learning suggests that while trade union involvement can have a positive impact on employer-employee engagement on training, there remain questions over total impact in creating additional workplace training opportunities (Heyes and Stewart, 1998). For example, although the use of ULRs is relatively commonplace, they have sometimes faced difficulties when introducing a new learning agenda where managers have been resistant (Wallis et al., 2005).

The ability of ULRs to introduce workplace training has, to a considerable extent, hinged on the willingness of managers to create a learning culture within the workplace.

Nevertheless, there are several ways in which trade unions have demonstrated a capacity to promote workplace learning. In addition to the role of ULRs discussed above, trade unions can create learning and skills development opportunities for their members through:

- providing free or subsidised access to training;
- negotiating with employers to secure paid leave for employees to participate in training; and
- working to improve access to training opportunities for those employee groups who have not previously participated.

### Table: Cultural, attitudinal and dispositional barriers to learning

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<tr>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Learning perceived to go against social, gender or family norms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td>Learning perceived as something narrow, formal and assessed Learning institutions believed to cater exclusively for other age and social groups Scepticism about the relevance and value of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dispositional</td>
<td>Lack of confidence Fear of failure and exposing weaknesses Belief that one is too old to learn.</td>
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Source: Newton et al. (2005: 26)
Norman Gray is a security officer at Belfast City Hospital and is active in his union, NIPS A.

As well as being Health & Safety representative, ensuring the well-being of his colleagues and the public, he is also the NIPS A Union Learning Rep at the hospital, as well as taking part in active learning.

Norman has completed his Level 1 Essential Skills in ICT and is completing his Level 2. The courses have given him the confidence to aim higher and he now plans to enrol on a Diploma course in Health and Safety and believes that his new ICT qualifications will help him achieve his goal.

That goal is achievable because of the Union learning Fund and the commitment of his union and employers to a workforce which is prepared for the constant changes of the working environment.

Norman left school at 15 after an unhappy formal education. He worked in a succession of low-paid and low-skilled jobs eventually joining the Merchant Navy, as much to get away from the ‘Troubles’ as a desire to see the world.

As the years passed, Norman returned to Northern Ireland, got married and found work in the security industry. His lack of qualifications was not an issue at work, but soon became evident at home, when his three children eventually started asking their daddy for help with their homework.

“I bluffed my way with my son’s homework,” he admits. “It was more of a guessing game for me.” Norman tried to help his daughter and two sons as much as he could, and stressed to them the importance of a happy and productive schooling.

Like many people with negative memories of school and who had made their way through life without qualifications, Norman thought he could carry on. That began to change when he started working at Belfast City Hospital in 2004. Within six months, he was involved in his union and was soon elected NIPS A branch secretary by his fellow security guards. Soon, he was attending courses on becoming a Health & Safety representative and other training to facilitate his union work. He soon found that he was mentally well equipped to understand and profit from the courses, but recognised that he lacked other basic skills, especially on computers.
“A pattern developed whereby I was reliant upon other staff to help me out, especially with paperwork and databases. The secretaries were great in finding the time to type up my reports on meetings – after deciphering my handwritten notes!” But his sense of pride overrode the inconvenience of other staff who helped manage Norman’s ICT deficits.

The tipping point was reached when he decided to apply for a Diploma course in Health & Safety. He completed his Level 1 in ES ICT in May 2009.

At the same time, NIPSA were looking for a Union Learning Representative, and Norman volunteered for the role. His experience of learning and his personal motivations for so doing are useful lessons when it comes to encouraging his co-workers to take up second chance education. “I’m stubborn. I don’t like failing and I don’t like giving up.”

That characteristic of what he calls “stay-ability” has worked for his own benefit and now works for the good of his colleagues as he cajoles them into attending courses and overcoming their reluctance to take a chance on learning. “Two out of eight learners don’t complete their courses. You just have to encourage them to finish what they started and then to work on the others who won’t take up the opportunity.”

The other important player in making workplace learning viable is the employer. Some simply do not see the importance of ensuring that education and skills development is as good for those at the bottom of the hierarchy as it is for those at the top.

In Norman’s case, he finds that attitudes in the Belfast Trust vary from some managers who reflect the strong official policy of support for workplace learning, to other managers who feel that ICT skills are ‘not essential’ for all workers, or ‘not necessary for their job’.

Norman adds that “the Belfast Trust has been very good with granting time off to learn,” but is concerned that “it will get more difficult to apply and be given time off with cost cutting on the agenda and more cuts on the way.”

This could make his activity as a ULR more difficult, another barrier to learning for those who need it most. Norman has identified four main barriers which most affect his co-workers:

- Having bad memories of formal education
- Getting time off
- Family commitments
- Lack of learning facilities.

Norman now has a laptop at home, “a great piece of kit,” and writes 1,500 word essays for his H&S Diploma course. His newly acquired ICT skills are used for his H&S inspection reports and his union duties, and his wife is now interested in acquiring similar skills.
Michelle Elliott is from Lisburn and now lives just outside Moira in a quiet residential area.

Married with two children, a 7 year old son and a grown up daughter, Michelle is a UNITE member and has been an employee for 11 yrs in Langford Lodge, an engineering company which makes ejector seats and aircraft parts.

Michelle, an NVQ assessor, first got involved with union learning when her union approached her to take on the role of the Union Learning Representative (ULRs). When she heard about how ULRs were union activists who supported second chance education, Michelle jumped at the chance to take on the role. She has since completed level 1 and 2 of the ULR courses held at Unite head office, which she found very beneficial to enable her to carry out her role as a ULR.

As Michelle says

“For me, school was somewhere you went to play. Education meant nothing to me.”

Having left school with no formal qualifications, Michelle felt that the union learning project was a chance not only to encourage her work colleagues to take classes but also to go back and educate herself.

“I participated in the classes myself to gain an education and full knowledge and understanding of the course content and this enabled me to provide other interested employees with information. Also, if they saw me participating on the courses then it would encourage them to take part and make them feel at ease to talk to me about their own personal issues without feeling embarrassed.”

To date, Michelle has completed an essential skills numeracy level two and is currently completing her essential skills literacy level 2.

Her enthusiasm for learning is catching and she puts her new found confidence in dealing with all levels of management down to the union learning project.

In her role as ULR, Michelle met with management and managed to negotiate a dedicated learning suite for members and employees. She explained the benefits of a better educated workforce to the company and also other uses a learning suite would have for in-house training within the business. With classes in ICT, literacy and numeracy provided by the North West Regional College, Langford Lodge management quickly saw the value of investing in learning and purchased 12 brand new computers and furnished a learning suite.
To date 53 learners out of 75 applicants from a workforce of 250, have gone through classes in ICT, literacy and numeracy. Michelle says

“It’s such a fantastic feeling for me to watch learners getting presented with their certificates. It’s just brilliant to see people getting a second opportunity. I feel this is very important as recognition encourages us to personally develop ourselves by improving our skills, which in turn can open many new doors and give us greater confidence within. Now is the time to arm ourselves with the best possible education and skills that we can achieve, preparing ourselves for the upturn of the economy.”

On her own future, Michelle says “I don’t want to stand still, “I want to develop myself and go further.” Michelle has already put this into action moving from her job working on the shop floor to the role of production control assistant, covering for a maternity leave.

Her involvement in the union learn project has made changes in her family life too. She is much more likely to read to and with her young son and is more likely to read herself. She encouraged her daughter to continue her education and this resulted in her achieving a degree, Michelle says “That was one of the proudest days of my life to watch my daughter getting presented at her graduation ceremony. This gave me the can-do attitude which I now possess and furnished me with the attitude that nothing is unachievable.”

As part of the project, Michelle asked Langford Lodge to invest in a set of Quickread books (short books written specially for emerging adult readers) and she set up a bookcase outside one of the canteens. They have been a great success and employees have even been donating their own books to build up a mini workplace library to encourage others to read.
Martin McMullan works in the sorting office at Royal Mail in Mallusk and is both a CWU Union Learning Rep and an enthusiastic learner. Martin has worked for the postal service for over 30 years after being unable to complete his City & Guilds as an Electrician, as he could not find steady work.

“I saw working in the Post Office as something on a temporary basis, but I’m still here 30 years on!” He had a good school record, leaving with six O-Levels, but the circumstances of his family meant that he “simply had to get a job.”

No-one in Martin’s family had the opportunity for third-level education, but he “always had an inkling to someday take up Further Education.” He continued to read, especially non-fiction, recalling the strong impression made upon him by Jacob Bronowski’s The Ascent of Man.

The opportunity to pursue further education arose when Martin saw a poster on his union notice board. The Communications Workers’ Union was encouraging its members to take up courses from the Open University. Subsidies meant that CWU members at the time could try out the introductory courses for free. Martin was very tempted and applied for a place. However, he knew that there was one additional hurdle which he had to overcome – his computer skills.

Martin first signed up for an Essential Skills course in ICT, so he would have the ability to participate in distance learning. “I had to fill a 25 year gap in my education” so he could master the technology which would help him fulfil his dream of attaining a degree, in particular word processing and email, as well as using the internet as a research tool.

Having completed his ICT Level 1, Martin began his 10-point introduction programme for the Open University. “Initially, I was worried if I would be capable, especially considering it was so long since I had studied as an electrician, but the 10-point course was a really good taster.”

Martin utilised his newly earned IT skills from the start, “as learning was all through correspondence, with feedback from my OU accessors by phone and from email. For me it was perfect. I felt less embarrassed than I would have in a lecture hall in somewhere like Queen’s University.”

Martin’s main motivation for taking the time and effort to take on a BSc degree course in Computing with Mathematical Services is “personal satisfaction” although he is keenly aware that it will improve his job prospects. Martin is
positively evangelical about the impact of union learning on his life. “It was improved my confidence hugely, and it has also widened my view of the world. I find that I read more ‘quality’ newspapers rather than tabloids and I really want to read more and more, especially non-fiction.”

Martin has been elected a Union Learning Representative by the CWU branch members and is urging his fellow postal workers in the sorting centre to use the learning suite and other on-side facilities. There are over 700 postal workers and many are learning for reasons of their own. Some are improving their skills with an aim of furthering their careers in Royal Mail, others are learning so they can help their children with homework, others are learning for the fun of learning.

As well as Essential Skills courses in Maths, English and ICT, there are other courses available in Irish, Spanish, Photoshop and even yoga. The Spanish classes were very popular and are a good example of the positive influence of having an on-site learning facility. The classes were taught by a postal worker who was a native Spanish speaker, who offered short classes in simple language skills which could be used on holidays, such as asking and understanding directions, ordering a meal in a restaurant or using cash.

Some might argue that workplace learning facilities should be solely utilised for skills which can be quantified as making the workplace more efficient. Fortunately, human beings are not cogs in a machine that will run faster and be more ‘efficient’ if the right oil is poured over them. People take a variety of motivations with them to the learning suite, and the point should be that they are attending and learning at all. Even if the subject which attracts them to the learning suite will not directly improve their output, familiarity with its surroundings will make such places seem less intimidating, and they would be more likely to eventually take up Essential Skills training or more advanced studies. If yoga or Spanish language classes are the gateway to the world of learning, then so be it. For Union Learning Reps in every workplace, the two key challenges are getting people into the classroom, and then keeping them there.

As with union learners in other workplaces, Martin observes that “stickability” is a key issue for learners, especially those who have spent years away from formal education. “They tend to drift if they are not convinced that the course is right for them or is what they expected. For me, it is about helping them find the right course and then keeping people focused. It takes some effort sometimes, but it is just part of my job as a Union Learning Rep.”

The other primary reasons that some workplace learners have are to do with time: “Family responsibilities and shift work. If you have a new addition to your family and are not getting enough sleep, it is hard to keep motivated or to simply have a few spare hours per week to study. So a big part of my job is to be continually motivating people.”

Martin’s experience is that “older workers, and those whose families are a little older, are less likely to drift.” Martin also acknowledges the support of his union and its strong relationship with those other essential components, employers, FE colleges and the ICTU who mediate with DEL for funding.

Aside from the satisfaction he receives from helping his co-workers get onto the learning ladder, Martin has found that his personal experience of learning has changed his outlook on life. “Doing all of this has improved my confidence no end. I find that I am reading more ‘quality’ newspapers and wanting to read more – even if most of my reading these days is OU material!” Martin is a man with a distinct target: “To get a degree!”

With his determination and creativity, reaching his goal should not be a problem.
Kim Bradley is a nursery assistant at St Ita’s Primary School in south Belfast and is completing her Open University certificate in Supporting Children’s Learning in the Early Years with the assistance of the Union Learning Fund through her union, Unison.

Kim has worked at St Ita’s since 2005 and had always wanted to work with children, but her formal education was disrupted by a family tragedy and she returned to her studies at BIFHE (now Belfast Metropolitan College) where she attained a diploma in CACHE (Childcare and Education) while working part time in Marks & Spencer.

When Kim was awarded her diploma in 2003, she “felt relieved and exhausted” but was nevertheless “delighted to be qualified to work with children.” Kim worked for two years at another local primary school as a classroom assistant, helping children with special needs, before getting her present post at St Ita’s when it opened in 2005.

Kim loved her job and it confirmed her vocation as someone who could make a meaningful difference to the lives of children. Still, she was looking for an avenue to become a fully qualified teacher. In November 2006, Kim saw an advertisement in Unison’s newsletter promoting Open University courses for its members. Among the courses on offer was one on Supporting Children’s Learning in the Early Years.

This course was specifically targeted at Classroom Assistants and the cost of the courses was carried by Unison, using funds from the Union Learning Fund. “This course is aimed at practitioners working in a wide range of early years care and education settings with young children and their families. The content has direct vocational relevance to practice.” If completed, it would lead to a recognised Level 4 qualification in the National Qualifications Framework, but also held out the opportunity for further advancement. “The Foundation Degree in Early Years offers a progression route to an honours degree in Childhood and Youth Studies. It is possible to progress to Qualified Teacher Status.”

This was perfect for Kim and she is presently completing her cherished dream of a BA honours degree in Early Years. “For me, gaining the degree is the goal and anything else is a bonus.” After the disappointments she faced during her secondary schooling, Kim is entitled to feel that she has justified her talents, and if the high demand for places in St Mary’s teacher training college means that it takes a little more time to get qualified to teach, then she is prepared to wait. “For now, I am perfectly happy to stay working with Early Years schooling.”
The Open University and its methods of learning worked well for Kim. “It offers the flexibility choosing when to study, which makes it much easier if you have a full-time job. Still, you have to meet the deadlines, which can be very stressful.” Kim was ably assisted by the “very good OU materials and study plans, which kept me on track, and most of all by the lovely tutors, who offered tutorials every few weeks where I could discuss where I was at various stages. Plus, it was nice to meet other participants in the course and to share experiences.” As Kim was the only learner in her school, this helped create a sense of community and kindred spirits among the OU students.

Email was used to contact tutors and her fellow learners, and make meeting deadlines for essays a little easier to meet. Another vital assistance was the use of the Union Learning fund by Unison, which meant that Kim did not have to worry about finding the money to complete the course. Kim’s union also provided non-material help through its Union Learning Officer, Fidelma Carolan. “Fidelma was a great support. She showed me how to go about applying for the course and was a constant source of encouragement.” Such assistance, which is impossible to quantify in cash terms, was vital for Kim as she did not have the support which ‘traditional’ colleges and universities provide for their students.

Completing here OU course meant cramming work into the school holidays and spending hours every week away from her friends and family. Her employers at St Ita’s helped where they could, allowing her time off for exams and letting her use the school’s office facilities, for online research and photocopying. In return, the school is developing a worker who is committed to the place and its ethos. “I feel happy and secure here in my present job, which I still really enjoy, but soon I could act up as a sub-teacher and could contribute some more to the school.”

Not that all of this extra study was easy. Kim found that the OU course “involved having to read to very difficult books, where a clear understanding of the terminology is essential.” Also, her social life was affected, “but what I lost out on in some cases, I have gained in so much more.”

Despite the challenge of the course and the demands upon her personal time, Kim noticed that what she was learning was broadening her horizons and helping her look at the world in a different manner. “The course has changed me. I have become more analytical and have developed a more critical worldview of many things I used to take for granted. For example, I have been studying television commercials and how they affect children, plus how the media portrays images of children. I have also become more interested in how children use media, such as on mobiles and social networking websites. The academic language of the course materials was difficult, but it has helped me change my approach to children. I see my role now as helping them find their own way.”

With the OU course nearing completion, Kim hope to have time for some “easier” reading, such as her all-time favourite book, Bridget Jones Diary. “I have had no time to enjoy ‘fun’ books for the last couple of years.” Not that the course alone has kept her busy. While completing her course, Kim and her partner have built their own house in the country, which means a long commute to work every day, but she loves the surroundings. “Oh, and I got married as well,” she adds.
In 2010 Naomi successfully completed the “Introduction to Spanish” language course provided through South East Regional College. Not only did Naomi already have an interest in learning languages, but she had a particular interest in learning Spanish. As a Technical Engineer in Translink, it is a part of Naomi’s job to work closely with the Spanish company CAF, who manufactured Translink’s Class 3000 trains.

Naomi regularly visits Zaragoza in Spain to oversee the manufacture of the new 4000 Class trains, where she can put her new language skills into practice, as well as gaining a working knowledge of the Spanish language.

Naomi says,

“Zaragoza is a typically Spanish city with not too many English speaking residents or tourists. Having a basic knowledge of the language has made my time in Spain much easier and more enjoyable as I am able to communicate, albeit on a very basic level with the locals. I am able to usually get my message across – eventually! However, I am fortunate that the people I work alongside in the CAF factory can all speak English better than I can speak Spanish!”

Naomi was taught by a tutor from Argentina, Maria Potts.

“Maria was great fun and an excellent teacher. She made learning so much easier for the class, which in turn helped me to gain this important qualification”.

Naomi Orr
TSSA
Spanish Language Student
The Figures
Access to training differs significantly by occupation, being least in elementary (routine) occupations, plant & machine operatives and skilled trades.

Proportion of working-age adults in employment who received job-related training in the last three months.

Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009.
*The lower a person’s qualifications, the more likely they are to be lower paid*

Percentage of employed people aged 25 to 49 who earn less than £7 per hour gross

- Total
- Degrees or equivalent
- A level or equivalent
- GCSEs A*-C
- GCSEs below grade C or no qualifications

*Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009*

*People with no qualifications are much less likely to receive any job-related training*

Proportion of working-age adults in employment who received job-related training in the last three months

- Average
- Higher Education
- A-level equivalent
- GCSE’s A*-C
- GCSEs below Grade C
- No qualifications

*Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009*
Access to training differs significantly by industry, with the best access being in the public sector.

Proportion of working-age adults in employment who received job-related training in the last three months.

- Manufacturing
- Transport & Communication
- Other services
- Distribution, hotels & restaurants
- Construction
- Banking, Finance & Insurance
- Public admin, education & health

Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009.
The lower a person’s qualifications, the more likely they are to be lacking but wanting paid work

The proportion of people under who lack basic qualifications rises sharply with age

For each age group, proportion of people with no educational qualifications

Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009

Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009

'Economically inactive' who want paid work

Men

Women
The proportion of the working-age population without any educational qualifications is much higher in Northern Ireland than in any of the regions in Great Britain.

For each region, proportion of people aged 20 to retirement with no educational qualifications.

Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS; the data is for the average for 2006 to 2008; updated Mar 2009.
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