

Adult Learning and Unions Evidence from the TUC

Summary

The TUC's submission to the NIACE inquiry will focus on the role of learning and skills at work and how developments in this area can best lead to an adult learning strategy that supports economic success, social justice and personal fulfilment. The trade union role in learning and skills has increased significantly over the last decade, in particular through the role of union learning representatives, and an overview of developments in this area will be covered in the TUC's paper. The paper will highlight some of the key policy challenges that the TUC is currently campaigning around in respect of supporting employees to improve their job prospects and also their personal development through work-based learning. In addition, the paper will highlight wider policy issues such as the importance of strengthening the voice of individual adults to influence learning and skills provision.

The TUC's most recent assessment of the emerging issues for adult learners is contained in our detailed response to the Government's plans for the implementation of recommendations of Lord Leitch¹. This welcomes a number of aspects of the proposed policy reforms set out in the implementation plan and in particular the important change in tone, with the learning and skill needs of individuals and employees being more centre stage than in recent policy statements. The TUC submission to the NIACE inquiry will be contextualised within the policy reform agenda for learning and skills at work set out in the Leitch implementation plan. Some of the key emerging issues include the growing consensus that individuals should have a right to achieve a certain level of education/skills and that the workplace will have to be a focus for this. Another key issue is the increasing importance of learning and skills for supporting unemployed and inactive citizens to achieve sustainable employment and improved social mobility.

Some of the key challenges facing Government and key stakeholders in taking forward the proposed policy reforms to widen learning and skills opportunities in the workplace are located in the Government's vision of pursuing an employer-led skills strategy. While this has been tempered somewhat in the recent implementation plan, there remain some key unresolved challenges such as the need to strengthen the voice of individual employees and inactive adults in influencing work-based learning and skills provision. Giving trade unions a stronger voice on learning and skills at both the workplace level and through the developing institutional framework is a key objective for the TUC. In addition, another key challenge will be how far the Government is willing to challenge employers on meeting their responsibilities to train their staff, especially low-skilled employees, and also to legislate to bring about a necessary culture change if employers fail to respond to voluntary initiatives such as the Skills Pledge.

¹ Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills: TUC briefing, August 2007

1. Introduction

This paper will focus on the role of learning and skills at work and how developments in this area can best lead to an adult learning strategy that supports economic success, social justice and personal fulfilment. The trade union role in learning and skills has increased significantly over the last decade, in particular through the role of union learning representatives, and an overview of developments in this area will be covered in the TUC's paper. The paper will highlight some of the key policy challenges that the TUC is currently campaigning around in respect of supporting employees to improve their job prospects and also their personal development through work-based learning. In addition, the paper will highlight wider policy issues such as the importance of strengthening the voice of individual adults to influence learning and skills provision.

2. Key initiatives over the past decade

The early days: bargaining for skills

Bargaining for Skills projects commenced in the mid-late 1990s through partnerships between unions and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and aimed to increase the capacity of unions to build employee demand for learning and skills. Activities included awareness raising events for union officers concerning skills programmes such as NVQs, Modern Apprenticeships and Investors in People. In the North West, Bargaining for Skills included work with specific employers and unions through 'demonstrator' projects at workplaces to meet outcomes, such as commitment to Investors in People².

Ford EDAP and Return to Learn

Partnership projects were also developed between some unions and employers, within the context of a voluntary system with no statutory entitlements for employees or collective rights for unions to bargain over training. For example, unions at the Ford motor company made a collective agreement with the employer to establish the Employee Development Assistance Programme (EDAP) in 1987. This includes non-vocational courses outside work hours. EDAP is co-funded by the employer and the employees collectively and jointly run by management and unions. Over half of Ford employees have taken up courses.

Return to Learn was initially set up by the National Union of Public Employees in the West Midlands, and extended nationally by its successor, UNISON from the mid-1990s. The programme is targeted at groups of workers such as women, part-timers, the low paid, and black workers. Courses include basic skills and women's studies. Confidence building is a very important aspect of Return to Learn.

Union Learning Reps/Union Learning Fund

² Clough, Bert (2007), From voluntarism to post-voluntarism: The emerging role of unions in the vocational education and training system, Unionlearn Research Paper 5, June.

The union role in learning and skills escalated with the findings of a TUC Task Group on the union role in vocational and other training in November 1997, and the publication of the Green Paper 'The Learning Age' by the government during 1998. When the Task Group findings were presented to Congress in September 1998, the then TUC President called upon unions to take up the challenge and to establish a new network of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), (aiming for a network of 2000 by 2000), for unions to take up the Government's newly launched campaign on basic skills and to seek to influence and get involved in the new flagship initiatives set out in the Labour Manifesto of 1997, including Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) and learndirect.

Since then union learning has gone from strength to strength, supported by the Union Learning Fund which has expanded to £14.5 million per year for the next 2 years [check this figure], and backed by statutory rights for union learning representatives. The work of unions has been recognised in taking forward the Government's skills strategy. For example, the Government's response to the Leitch Report noted that 'Union Learning Representatives play a vital role in helping employees to develop their skills and gain new qualifications. They have been a feature of the majority of good practice case studies of Skills for Life in the workplace' (para 4.26).

Statutory rights for ULRs

The role of ULRs includes analysing learning or training needs, providing information and advice to members on learning, arranging provision and consulting with the employer about training.

Following the introduction of statutory rights for ULRs under the Employment Act 2002, like other union representatives, ULRs in union recognised workplaces have a legal right for paid time off to train and to carry out their duties. Union members also have the right to access their ULR during working hours, although this is without the right to pay. Statutory rights have further boosted and embedded this new union role.

Achievements to date

In practical terms by April 2007 the TUC and unions had:

- Built a network of 18,000 ULRs [on target for the 22,000 ULRs by 2010] who, as external surveys and evaluations show, are a key port of call for employees who want information and advice about learning opportunities;
- Established ULRs as key to delivering the Skills for Life workplace strategy that emerged from the 1999 Moser report, facilitating over 20,000 learners during 2006/7;
- Demonstrated unions and employers working in partnership through over 200 Learning Agreements (in 2006/7) signed within the private and public sectors, embedding successful initiatives into long term planning.
- Brought over 170,000 people into learning through the union route in 2006/7, on target for 250,000 each year by 2010.

- Established over 209 learning centres at work including a network of learndirect centres supported by unionlearn.
- Trained almost 50,000 union representatives through TUC Education in 2006/7.

Unionlearn

Unionlearn was established just over a year ago under the auspices of the TUC with the objective of providing a strong, high profile strategic framework and support for unions' work on learning and skills, and the training of reps and officers. All of unionlearn's work is concerned with, and supports, unions in strengthening their organisation through training and supporting officers and reps and helping their members to access learning opportunities.

In its first year unionlearn has;

- developed a research network of leading universities and published high quality research papers on unions and learning,
- provided strategic support for union representatives on sector and other public bodies,
- developed joint strategies with a number of SSCs to implement sector skills agreements, and
- taken responsibility for the programme of representatives' and officers' training.

Unionlearn has also developed products and services designed to make the ULR role sustainable and of a high quality. Much of this has focused on support for learners and their progression, including a ground-breaking electronic tool, the Climbing Frame designed to help ULRs support learners to progress through different levels of study, a Quality Award for providers that helps ULRs negotiate and identify accessible, quality, union-friendly provision, and the careers advice line recently launched with learndirect.

3. Union learning and government policy

Positioning unions in the current policy context

The TUC's most recent assessment of the emerging issues for adult learners is contained in our detailed response to the Government's plans for the implementation of recommendations of Lord Leitch³. This welcomes a number of aspects of the proposed policy reforms set out in the implementation plan and in particular the important change in tone, with the learning and skill needs of individuals and employees being more centre stage than in recent policy statements.

³ Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills: TUC briefing, August 2007

Some of the key emerging issues include the growing consensus that individuals should have a right to achieve a certain level of education/skills and that the workplace will have to be a focus for this. Another key issue is the increasing importance of learning and skills for supporting unemployed and inactive citizens to achieve sustainable employment and improved social mobility.

Addressing needs of the low skilled

The decision outlined in the Leitch implementation plan to 'bring forward new legislation to strengthen the current funding entitlement for adults to free training in basic literacy and numeracy skills, and to achieve their first full level 2 qualifications' (paragraph 15) is welcome. In principle it prepares the ground for the introduction of a full legal right to training in three years time if employers fail to support enough employees to access training up to level 2 by supporting the Skills Pledge.

The TUC is currently supporting the Skills Pledge but only on the basis that the Government remains clearly committed to introducing a statutory right to training if the pledge does not lead to a sufficient rate of improvement in investment in training by employers by 2010.

Developing an 'employment' led approach and the union role as the voice of learners

The TUC continues to have concerns about the extent to which the employer-led approach on skills is being strengthened. Employer demand and employee demand are not the same thing, and the TUC would prefer an 'employment' led approach that pays greater attention to the needs of learners.

Trade union involvement in skills helps to articulate employee demand, and to facilitate employee engagement in learning and development. For example, analysis of the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) demonstrates that where unions are recognised and negotiate over training, employees are 23.9 per cent more likely to report having received some training⁴. Unions also provide a perspective that look beyond narrow, short-term skills needs that are often the concerns of employers. The TUC will continue to press the Government to give employees and trade unions a significant voice in the new institutional skills framework, in particular via the new Commission for Employment and Skills. It is also particularly important that the workforce, through trade union representation, is able to have a significant influence on the new powers that Sector Skills Councils are to be given around the design and approval of vocational qualifications.

4. Key challenges and where to from here?

Key challenges

Some of the key challenges facing Government and key stakeholders in taking forward the proposed policy reforms to widen learning and skills opportunities in the workplace are located in the Government's vision of pursuing an employer-led skills

⁴ Stuart, Mark & Robinson, Andrew (2007), *Training, union recognition and collective bargaining: findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, unionlearn research paper 4, June.

strategy. While this has been tempered somewhat in the recent implementation plan, there remain some key unresolved challenges such as the need to strengthen the voice of individual employees and inactive adults in influencing work-based learning and skills provision.

Giving trade unions a stronger voice on learning and skills at both the workplace level and through the developing institutional framework is a key objective for the TUC. In addition, another key challenge will be how far the Government is willing to challenge employers on meeting their responsibilities to train their staff, especially low-skilled employees, and also to legislate to bring about a necessary culture change if employers fail to respond to voluntary initiatives such as the Skills Pledge.

TUC priorities for skills in the UK

The TUC's priorities for skills in the UK were set out in *2020 vision for skills*, our submission to the final report of the Leitch Review⁵. This set out policy reforms across five areas that the TUC believes would create a viable post-voluntary skills framework capable of achieving the necessary step-change to meet the skills ambition articulated by Lord Leitch. The TUC's five priority areas are set out below:

1. Employers and Government must invest more in adult skills

- there should include more state funding for boosting workplace skills for adults, including union learning initiatives. Government should also act as an employer of best practice in relation to its own workforce and continue to use public procurement to embed training obligations in contractual arrangements
- employers must invest more in staff training that leads to formal qualifications and sustainable skills, and a range of policy measures need to be introduced to achieve this end, especially at the sector level

2. Unions must be real social partners in the Government's skills strategies

- there is a need to develop genuine social partnership arrangements on skills policy and delivery at national, regional and sectoral levels in order to drive forward a genuine demand-led approach that reflects the needs of both employers and individual employees
- the sector approach in particular requires a more robust social partnership approach as it has the potential to deliver some of the key elements of a post-voluntary skills framework. Sector Skills Agreements need to include a new regulatory dimension to drive up employer investment in training and to empower employees to access quality training in the workplace

3. New legal rights to paid time off to train are essential

- adult employees without a Level 2 qualification should have a statutory right to request paid time off to train from their employer to achieve this educational standard in order to tackle those employers that refuse to allow their staff to

⁵ TUC 2006, 2020 Vision for skills: priorities for the Leitch Review of Skills

access state-subsidised paid time off arrangements (i.e. via the Train to Gain programme).

4. Positive action is needed at all levels to tackle skills discrimination

- the Government should develop concrete proposals to tackle skills discrimination for a range of specific groups, including black and minority ethnic workers, disabled employees and older workers, along with further development of ongoing initiatives aimed at women.
- Sector Skills Agreements should be strengthened so that Sector Skills Councils are obliged to come up with initiatives for improving training opportunities for all these groups of employees with clearly prescribed targets and outcomes

5. Unions and workers must have an equal voice in workplace skills bargaining

- employers and unions should be incentivised to negotiate on training by including it as a collective bargaining issue in the statutory union recognition procedure
- as agreed in the Warwick Accord, the Government should examine options to enable trade unions to negotiate more collective arrangements such as Learning Agreements and Learning Committees.