

Written evidence submitted by the TUC

Closing the Learning Gap – Opening Up Opportunities for Adults

The purpose of this call for evidence is to gather the views of key stakeholders, partners and providers on their top priorities for adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 - 10 years.

The deadline for written evidence is 20 May 2016.

When responding please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation.

Please tick the appropriate boxes below

<input type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an individual
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an organisation
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number? Kirsi Kekki, Policy Officer TUC unionlearn, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS kkekki@tuc.org.uk	

Please tick a box from the list of options below that best describes you as a respondent.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Business representative organisation/trade body
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Authority/ Combined Authority
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local authority provider of adult and community learning
<input type="checkbox"/>	Specialist designated institution
<input type="checkbox"/>	FE College
<input type="checkbox"/>	FE sector representative organisation/trade body

	FE independent learning provider
	Higher Education Institution
	FE charitable or not-for-profit learning provider
	Other education (please describe)
✓	Trade union or staff association
	Charity or social enterprise
	Student representative body
	Individual
	Policy adviser (please specify area of interest)
	Other (please describe)

Introduce yourself

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has 52 affiliated trade unions, representing nearly 5.8 million members in a wide variety of job roles in both the public and private sector.

Unionlearn is the learning organisation of the TUC. Unionlearn works with trade unions to help people in the workplace to access learning opportunities and to engage employers to provide training and support for learning. It is also responsible for administering the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and a trade union education service for delivering training courses for all kinds of union representatives and officials.

In the last year (April 2015 to March 2016) ULF projects and unionlearn delivered support for nearly 220,000 learners. Unions are very effective in reaching adult learners in the workplace and their reach is much better than any other organisation. Unions collaborate widely with local communities and are uniquely placed to work with disadvantaged learners who otherwise would have faced barriers to learning. Hence, the TUC has a wider interest and involvement in the shape of adult education in England.

Executive summary

(bullet points)

- Constant change and instability in adult education provision is a hindrance in engaging disadvantaged learners. It is difficult to maintain partnerships when funding and policy goalposts keep changing. Long-term government skills strategies and emphasis on engaging stakeholders, trade unions and provides as well as employers, are likely to reap benefits in providing learning opportunities to disadvantaged learners.

- The TUC welcomes the existing funding provision to level 2 literacy and numeracy and vocational level 2 progression and qualification for unemployed learners but the TUC is very concerned that many learners are left out because there is no funding for workplace ESOL or enough employer appetite to support their staff's learning.
- Trade unions have been successful in engaging disadvantaged learners by building networks union learning reps (ULRs) to provide peer learning support. The peer support and establishment of workplace learning centres and partnership work with employers have been instrumental in motivating adult learners to take up learning opportunities.

Written submissions are invited addressing the following points:

What is working well and/or not working well with regards to adult education in England?

- 1.1. Adult education provision, especially further education (FE) colleges, are important features in their local communities. They have dedicated and highly competent staff who understand the sensitivities that affect disadvantaged learners. Outside college provision there are also some good examples of partnership work with trade unions where workplace and community learning centres have been able to reach learners who face major barriers in accessing adult education and training.
- 1.2. The adult education system in England faces constant change which creates instability and confusion for both providers and employers not to mention stakeholders, such as trade unions, who are working hard to help adult learners to access learning and training opportunities. This appears to be very different compared to many other European countries where a social partnership approach provides a degree of consensus and stability regarding the provision of vocational learning and training for young people and adults.
- 1.3. Major funding cuts in FE since 2010 have also meant that not all adult learners have been able to access the learning they need. This has been the case with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This specific gap in workplace provision has also been exacerbated by the general decline in employer investment in training since the mid-1990s¹.
- 1.4. There is also evidence that learning providers now have fewer opportunities to deliver learning opportunities directly in the workplace, which has proven to be a crucial factor in reaching out to disadvantaged adults. This approach overcomes the barriers adults face such as lack of time for learning and/or travelling to colleges, or seeing colleges predominantly as places for young people. With the changes in funding providers are increasingly concentrating on apprenticeships and this is having a detrimental impact on adults that

¹ www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/llakes.ac.uk/files/43.%20Green%20et%20al.pdf

need to access vital courses and qualifications (e.g. English and maths qualifications).

What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning?

- 2.1. The starting point for union-led learning is that successful adult learning requires teaching which treats learners as adults, operates in a workplace environment and is tailored to individual needs and the jobs that people do. For instance, the contextualised nature of functional skills English and maths learning makes more sense to adult learners in the workplace compared to school-based GCSEs. ESOL is an example of disadvantaged learners being highly motivated in developing better workplace communication skills but not being able to because of lack of funded provision.
- 2.2. There are also concerns about how learning is organised. Adults often respond well to collaborative learning and flexibility. Likewise, adult learners do not always seek to gain qualifications but to develop skills they can apply at work and in their home life. Therefore a tendency to focus predominantly on qualification results may hinder adult learners' willingness to take up learning. There is a need for further research to explore how study programmes can be adapted to better motivate disadvantaged adult learners.
- 2.3. Availability of career advice and guidance is paramount in helping adults to take up learning that fits their individual needs. In funding terms the entitlement to level 2 literacy and numeracy learning is one of the most important policies in building engagement for disadvantaged adult learners. Likewise, funding for the level 2 qualifications for unemployed over 24-year-olds is equally essential. However, there are major concerns about the policy direction regarding requiring that many other adults to take out an Advanced Learning Loan to fund their learning. In particular, this may be a particular demotivating factor for older adults who are more debt-averse and who have been out of formal learning for a significant period of time.
- 2.4. The government's current strategy for ESOL provision excludes a significant number of people who have the potential to progress in their working life. Where unions have managed to convince employers to support ESOL learning the results have been impressive. A recent major survey of adults accessing courses facilitated by Union Learning Fund projects has shown that ESOL learners were significantly more likely than average to report a wide range of positive outcomes, including that they: got a new job or changed to a different kind of work; were able to do their job better; were able to remain 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 future².

² www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/union-learning-survey

- 2.5. Adult learners need ongoing support to maintain their motivation. This can be best provided by peers. Union learning reps (ULRs) not only offer advice and guidance in learning matters but they also are a valuable source of peer support in the workplace. They are trained and trusted by colleagues to handle sensitive issues around people's learning needs and barriers to learning. Union learning provides access to learning to those who would otherwise be denied any training and development opportunities at work, especially employees in lower-paid jobs. ULRs also help to motivate adults by identifying key incentives linked to their home and family life (e.g. their need to be able to help their children with their school-work).
- 2.6. Locality issues are important for adult learners. Learning in the workplace not only builds skills contextualised to the world of work but it also addresses time pressures that often act as a barrier to accessing learning. Caring responsibilities and the cost of travel are key additional barriers and having an access to flexible learning opportunities in the workplace makes a major difference. This has been done successfully by trade unions and employers in partnership with local learning providers.
- 2.7. Unions' ULF projects and the activities of ULRs have also been instrumental in organising events, such as Learning at Work Days, to enthuse people to try things out with taster sessions, initial assessments and other forms of learning that incentivise adults lacking confidence in taking up learning again. Informal learning has opened doors for many adults in starting their learning journey. It is important that adults enjoy learning in order to commit to it over a longer time period. Therefore an unnecessary emphasis on qualification attainment through formal funding mechanisms can alienate people from taking on valuable opportunities improving their skills.

Do we have a sufficient demand-led approach to adult education? If not, what more needs to be done?

- 3.1. A key issue related to the demand-led approach is that employers very often do not necessarily know or understand the skills levels of their staff and how to respond to them. This has been recently demonstrated in a BIS research paper on the impact of literacy and numeracy learning³. The same research showed that 83 per cent of employers in the data sample offered learning as a benefit for staff, which is obviously helpful for staff, but also implied that employers do not have a strategic view of future skills needs in their business. In the same study it also was noted that 43 per cent of workplaces did not offer annual performance reviews which makes it difficult to see how employers in these cases could measure the learning and skills needs of their staff

³ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/497544/BIS-16-36-impact-of-poor-basic-literacy-and-numeracy-on-employers.pdf

- 3.2. Adult education provides skills that are often referred to as fundamentals for gainful employment, such as literacy, numeracy, ICT, communication skills and problem solving. In addition, there is a wide consensus that employers and employees also benefit from an overall increase in confidence and organisational performance from an effective strategy to support adult education and learning strategy can provide.
- 3.3. There are a number of concerns that the opportunities to develop adult education support contextualised to the needs of sectors and specific industries and services are getting more and more limited. Sectoral arrangements that previously supported this have weakened over recent years with the demise of many Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the ending of funding for Industrial Partnerships. A number of stakeholders have also questioned whether the existing Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have sufficient expertise and capacity to support an effective strategy on adult education and workforce skills in their locality.
- 3.4. For the demand-led approach to work there needs to be an established partnership approach that includes trade unions, FE providers and employers and that draws on high quality evidence. Adult learners need career guidance as much as younger learners and access to accurate Labour Market Information (LMI). They also require upskilling/retraining opportunities, such as adult apprenticeships, to fulfil the future vocational occupational needs and access routes to higher education. Various policy bodies have highlighted that such approaches are necessary if we are to meet future vocational and professional occupational needs (e.g. the recent analysis of this by the IPPR⁴ amongst others).
- 3.5. For the demand-led approach to work it will be essential that many more employers take a long-term view on how they can support their staff, especially those with literacy and numeracy needs and older workers needing upskilling opportunities, in the workplace environment. This means the employers must invest in their staff. Working with stakeholders such as trade unions is key to this. In addition, the government should look give much greater consideration to maintaining long-term stability of the FE sector and also ensure that flexible funding arrangements are in place to help disadvantaged learners take up learning.

What evidence is there on the impact, added-value and/or cost-effectiveness of adult education?

One specific area of evidence that is often not given due regard is the impact of trade unions in supporting adult education in the workplace, particularly through the supportive role of union learning representatives and also through direct negotiations with employers on learning/training. A notable exception to

⁴ www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/winning-global-race_June2014.pdf?noredirect=1

this is a relatively recent BIS Select Committee inquiry which highlighted the important role of unions (and unionlearn) in supporting adult literacy and numeracy in the workplace. (BIS Committee Adult Literacy and Numeracy, Fifth Report of Session 2014–15

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmbis/557/557.pdf

A number of recent research papers commissioned by the TUC and unionlearn have highlighted the importance of the “union effect” and “employee voice” in empowering adults, especially those with few or no qualifications, to re-engage with learning. A summary of these research findings is available in a TUC report – “Towards a high-skill productivity economy: the role of trade union-led learning and training”.

www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Towardsahigh.pdf

The detailed findings are available in the following two reports:

Union Learning Survey

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/union-learning-survey

Skills and Training: the union advantage

www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Skils_and_training.pdf

As regards to wider evidence, we have listed below a number of key research publications that have added something important to the debate.

The economic value of vocational education

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32329/11-816-measuring-economic-impact-further-education.pdf

Poverty among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2014/working-paper-series/IRiS-WP-1-2014.pdf

All Party Parliamentary Group for Maths and Numeracy

www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/sites/default/files/appg_briefing-paper.pdf

Cedefop briefing note Encouraging Adult Learning

www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9099_en.pdf

Cedefop working paper Return to work. Work-based learning and the reintegration of unemployed adults to the labour market

www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/6121_en.pdf

Name three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 -10 years?

- 1. Build FE college funding up to a sustainable level to ensure staffing is on an appropriate level and adult learners have local access to learning opportunities*

2. *Career guidance needs to be funded and developed to be available for all adults and young people*
3. *The government should launch a major campaign to promote the value of functional skills qualifications targeting especially employers*

	If your submission is confidential and you do not want it published please tick the box.
✓	Please confirm that have read the Terms of Reference and Guidelines on written submissions at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/wea/call_for_evidence/