INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE
OVERVIEW OF UNION LEARNING

Version 2 (June 2008)
OVERVIEW OF UNION LEARNING

Trade Unions are playing an increasingly important role in supporting learning and skills in the workplace, in particular through the activities of the growing number of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), but also via negotiating channels such as workplace learning agreements.

The role of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs)

Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are responsible for the promotion and representation of the collective and individual learning needs in their workplace. This may include activities such as negotiating with an employer for learning facilities, providing information and advice or supporting someone learning a new skill.

It is recognised that common goals exist between the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and unions, as seen during the Employer Training Pilots, the presence of unions and ULRs at a workplace can be advantageous to both the delivery and impact of workplace learning.

The Employment Act 2002 introduced rights for reasonable paid time off for ULRs, to enable them to carry out their relevant duties. Some employers may be reluctant to give ULRs time off for this role. However, it has been calculated by the Government that any short-term loss of productivity that results from this time off is greatly outweighed by the added value to future productivity of employees upskilled as a result of ULRs’ advice and support.

Union Learning Representatives will be entitled to reasonable paid time off for:

- Analysing their members' learning or training needs
- Providing their members with information and advice about learning or training matters
- Arranging learning or training for their members
- Promoting the value of learning or training to their members
- Consulting the employer about carrying out these activities
- Preparing for carrying out any of the above activities
- Undergoing training relevant to their functions as a learning rep

Benefits to employers

All organisations benefit from having a skilled, trained and efficient workforce. But some people will lack the confidence to get involved in learning and will not want to talk about their learning and skills needs with their employer. Both employee and employer need a trusted intermediary. The ULR provides information, support and encouragement that enable employees to update and
acquire the new skills necessary in the world of work and beyond. They can get employees on board where employers struggle. The role of the ULR helps organisations to:

- Promote a safe, positive attitude to learning and skills amongst employees
- Improve the skills and employability of the workforce, helping them to become more adaptable to change
- Unlock potential within individuals and groups and assist them to take up promotion and progression opportunities, increasing participation in workplace learning
- Provide accessible independent advice and support for employees about learning at shop floor level, where it is needed
- Introduce and help develop a 'learning culture' where training and education are highly valued by all

**Train to Gain and ULRs**

During initial contact and discussion with employers, Brokers should identify whether there are recognised union(s) in the workplace and, in particular, active ULRs. If this is the case Brokers should arrange to meet the relevant union representatives to discuss their contribution to the implementation of any agreed training initiatives and how they might support the learners during training. The Broker may also ask the provider to consult directly with the union representatives.

**Union Learning Fund (ULF)**

Set up in 1998, the Union Learning Fund (ULF) aims to promote activity by trade unions in support of the objective of creating a learning society. Three of its key aims, in relation to ULRs is to:

- Build union capacity to sustain and embed work on learning and skills so that this becomes a core activity for all trade unions, in particular by integrating ULRs into a workplace union organisation and by demonstrating the clear links between the learning and organising agendas for unions
- Develop the key role of ULRs in raising demand for learning, especially amongst workers with low skill levels and those from disadvantaged groups
- Help unions and ULRs to provide quality information, advice and guidance to stimulate the take up of learning and promote progression to higher levels of learning and to build links with other IAG providers

From April 2007, the ULF was transferred over to unionlearn.
Unionlearn

Launched in May 2006, unionlearn (previously referred to as Union Academy) has been set up to help unions open up a wide range of learning opportunities for their members and to promote their personal progression and develop their trade union role, strengthening workplace organisation. Its mission statement states that its goal is “to become the centre of excellence for supporting high quality union-led learning”.

Unionlearn has a regional structure; supporting union learning and ULF activities, it aims to help unions:

- Become learning organisations, with programmes for union reps, regional officers and strategic support for national officers
- Broker learning opportunities for their members, running advice services, and secure the best courses to meet learners' needs

It will also research union priorities on learning and skills, share good practice, promote learning agreements, support union members on learning and skills bodies, and help shape sector skills agreements.

Further information on Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and unionlearn can be found at: www.unionlearn.org.uk.

Further information of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) can be found at: www.unionlearningfund.org.uk.