

Skills for the Future

A report by UNISON and the University of Exeter
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About us

UNISON is the UK's largest union, with more than 1.3 million members. We represent full-time and part-time staff who provide public services, although they may be employed in both the public and private sectors.

UNISON's Learning and Organising Services provides a wide range of learning support and courses for members. Our training and learning is designed to help members with their personal and career development and to help reps support our members.

Foreword

UNISON is the UK's largest public sector union with 1.3 million members. Our members work in local authorities, the NHS, police and probation services, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas and water industries, transport and the voluntary sector. Public service workers are the backbone of Britain, our members work round the clock to provide vital services in every corner of our society.

However, years of austerity have not just impacted services for the public, but have taken their toll on public service workers too. These staff have experienced a lack of investment in their education and skills, making the jobs they do harder in a changing landscape of redundancies, automation and outsourcing.

Over 38,000 UNISON members responded to our Skills for the Future survey and this report, which is based on what they told us, shines a light on the impact of significant underinvestment in public service employees and highlights current and future skills gaps in key parts of our workforce.

Worryingly, the threat of technical automation is felt more widely in public services than across the UK workforce more generally with almost three fifths (57%) of UNISON members feeling that automation is putting their jobs at risk, while one third (34%) of our members experience significant worry that their position will be made redundant in the next three years.

These very real concerns around change and uncertainty can be mitigated by investment in adult education and a commitment from both government and employers to lifelong learning. Our members understand the benefits of lifelong learning – not only to the economy, but to their self-esteem and ability to have some control over their own future.

Our members want to learn – over 80% said that 'learning is important' and they were 'ready to learn new skills'. They recognise that digital skills and managerial and supervisory skills are what they need for the changing world of work, but if we're going to support our members to gain these skills, everyone must have access to education and training, especially those with the lowest levels of attainment, those on the lowest pay and those most marginalised in our workforce.

In UNISON we are proud of our long history of supporting learners who may have felt excluded from learning and education opportunities in the past. And today, we remain committed to widening access to education and training through our member learning and activist education programmes. UNISON learning has helped thousands of members to realise their potential – in the workplace, for personal development and professional pathways and as activists in the union. This report is so important because it will shape the future direction of UNISON learning.

The findings of this report must also act as a wakeup call for government and employers. We need to invest in lifelong learning if we want to sustain high quality public services for all. Employers must take responsibility for investing in and developing their workforce, preparing them for the challenges and changes ahead, and they must do this in partnership with a well-resourced further and higher education sector.

We must ensure that as jobs for life become a thing of the past and as we work later into our lives, an 'all ages all stages' careers service is there for those both in and out of work. Because all our public service workers should have access to the education and training they need – not just to get the job done, but to excel in all areas of their lives.

Please read what our members say in this report. These are the voices of the people out there caring for everyone in our society, from the cradle to the grave – and their views matter. We want educators and politicians, employers and union activists to be part of this work going forward to ensure that access to training and education is seen as key to delivering great public services.

Dave Prentis
UNISON General Secretary
November 2019

Executive summary

Introduction

This executive summary presents the findings of UNISON's Skills for the Future Survey. Based on the responses of more than 38,700 members, this represents one of the largest skills surveys in Europe and provides a detailed picture of members' skills and their associated aspirations and concerns. The objectives of the study were:

- to survey members on what current learning and training they undertake
- to establish the level of support members receive to do their current jobs
- to establish the skills needs of public services employees in the future.

The findings of the study will be of interest to UNISON senior managers and union learning reps (ULRs) as well as UNISON activists looking to understand the context of their work. The findings will also help policy makers, employers and training providers to better understand what skills their current workforce has, where there is real demand from workers for training (and what in) and importantly it will help shine a light on the kinds of skills that the workforce of the future will need.

The survey research is based on a mixed-methodology combining:

- A literature and policy review to provide context to the study and to inform the development of policy recommendations.
- A major survey of UNISON's 1.3 million members using a combination of online and paper questionnaires. The survey generated more than 38,700 responses between November 2018 and February 2019. This equates to a response rate of approximately 3%. The large sample size generates accurate results that we can be confident truly reflect the wider UNISON membership.

The paper questionnaires were processed by Snap Surveys Ltd and combined with the electronic responses which were captured using the Snap Webhost survey software. Open-ended questions were coded manually using a classification system derived from the responses themselves.

1.1 Changes within the workplace

Questions about changes within the workplace provide an all-important context. They enable us to see how respondents' working lives are evolving (if they are); what kinds of pressures they feel their role and perhaps their job/sector is being placed under and what kind of future it has; whether the changing world of work is impacting on them and how they feel about the future. Further, it includes a look at just how happy they are in their current role and whether this is impacting on training and learning decisions. Key findings from the questions include:

- The majority (84%) of respondents had observed at least one form of workplace change during the last three years, most commonly change in work organisation (65%). A significant minority, however, had seen reductions in the number of people doing the same work as them (45%), redundancies (22%), the introduction of new technologies (44%) or equipment (27%). Redundancies were most frequently reported by members working in further and higher education (42%), closely followed by utilities (39%), local government (38%) and transport (35%).
- Around one-third (34%) of members felt that it was 'very likely' or 'somewhat likely' that their position would be made redundant in the next three years. Perhaps unsurprisingly, relatively high levels of pessimism were expressed by respondents working in sectors that were most likely to be associated with recent redundancies: half (50%) of local government workers taking part in the survey thought their position was at risk of redundancy with similarly high percentages in utilities (49%) and further and higher education (44%). Interestingly, qualifications are positively associated with perceptions of risk of redundancy. This relationship persists even when other personal characteristics are taken into account.

- Fears of redundancy are driven mainly by concerns about ‘changes within the business or organisation’ (78%). The vast majority of the 800 respondents who took the opportunity to provide other responses feared redundancy due to government funding cuts or other financial reasons. With central government funding for public services having fallen during austerity, it is perhaps no surprise that respondents were concerned about future reductions in funding.
- Almost three-fifths (57%) felt that ‘technological automation is putting public sector jobs at risk’. Workers aged 50 and over (60%) and those working in utilities (69%) and further education (61%) were most likely to feel this way.
- Respondents were largely pessimistic about the future with most (57%) feeling ‘worried’ about the future of work as it was likely to affect them. Rather fewer felt ‘confident’ (22%), uninterested (14%) or ‘excited’ (7%). Given the higher incidence of redundancies described below it is perhaps not surprisingly that workers in utilities (61%), local government (61%) and further education were most likely to be worried about the future. The West Midlands (60%) was the most pessimistic region of the UK.
- Overall, 55% of respondents were either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with their job. One-fifth were ‘very dissatisfied’ or ‘dissatisfied’. Workers in social care (51%) and in Greater London (50%) were the least likely to be satisfied with their job.

1.2 Alignment of skills

This research points to a UNISON membership that though, on the whole, is appropriately skilled for the roles they carry out – has some persistent skills needs and offers its employers greater potential from enhanced skills-utilisation. The finding that the predominant skills issue is one of under-utilisation, as opposed to deficiency, is echoed in the 2017 UK Employer Survey (UKES) which reported that “the under-use of skills affects a considerably larger proportion of employers and the workforce than skills deficiencies do”. Other key findings from our research included:

- Where skills deficiencies were reported, these were mostly likely to be with respect to ‘computer, digital skills’ (14%) and ‘management or supervisory skills’ (18%).
- Focusing on literacy, numeracy and computing, the percentage of respondents reporting that their skills exceeded the needs of their job has fallen considerably since the last UNISON skill survey (carried out in 2011).
- Members with no or low qualifications were more than twice as likely as those with the highest qualifications to report a deficiency in ‘computer, digital skills’ and ‘management, supervisory skills’ and were more than five times as likely to report deficiencies in literacy and numeracy.
- The majority of members (57%) are currently working at a higher skill level than hitherto – with patterns by age and highest qualification broadly as one might expect with a high percentage of young people saying they are working at a higher skill level than three years ago. Members working part-time (49%) or on zero hour contracts (43%) are among the least likely to be working at a higher level than previously, possibly reflecting the movement of some women into more flexible but often lower paid employment to accommodate caring responsibilities.
- Lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy had stopped 17% of respondents from applying for promotion, 14% from taking on extra responsibilities; 13% from applying for a training course and 8% from becoming more involved in the union. These percentages are very similar to those found in the previous UNISON skills survey. Members with no or low level qualifications were around three times more likely to be discouraged from doing any of these things than those with high level qualifications.

Around one-third (34%) of members felt that it was ‘very likely’ or ‘somewhat likely’ that their position would be made redundant in the next three years.

1.3 Recent learning activity

Encouragingly, the vast majority of UNISON members are recent learners with four-in-five claiming to have participated in some form of learning during the last 12 months. This was most commonly for work or career (70%) rather than private or personal reasons. Members with no or low level qualifications, were however, considerably less likely to have participated in any learning than members with high level qualifications. Participation in learning fell with age.

While 'attending training away from your work station' was the most common method of accessing training (66%), more than half recent learners had accessed an 'online training course'. Online learning was the most popular form of learning among agency workers (56%) but was less popular among those with no or low level qualifications (44%).

Most members who had undertaken learning for work or career only had done so, at least partly, in work time and one-third (32%) had gained a qualification. Agency workers (53%) and those on zero hour (44%) contracts were more likely than other members to have trained only in their own time.

The vast majority who were learning for their current job felt that the provision was adequate in keeping them up to date with the skills they required in their job. Members working in police & justice (18%) and those with a disability were most likely to feel that their learning had been inadequate and reservations about the effectiveness of training rises with age and qualification level. This may reflect the difficulty in sourcing specialist training for specialist knowledge and skills.

Three-fifths (60%) of members learning for their work or career did so as part of their on-going professional development. Higher qualified members were more likely than colleagues with no or low level qualifications to have received training because they had asked for it or because it was part of their on-going continuing professional development (CPD).

Of the impacts explored, respondents (half) were most likely to identify that training had helped them improve the way they work in their job. One-fifth felt that training had helped them enjoy their job more and almost one-tenth felt that their job was more secure because of the training. Impacts related to job change or pay were less commonly reported but given that the question relates to the impact of training occurring within a fairly narrow and recent time period this is perhaps not surprising.

1.4 Barriers to learning

More than half (52%) of those who had not undertaken any work-related training over the last 12 months thought that it would have been useful. Members working in social care were among those most likely to report that learning would have been useful to them.

Employer-related factors such as 'employer was not willing to provide additional training, even though I wanted it' were more frequently reported as barriers to learning than personal factors such as difficulty 'finding time for training'.

Employer-related factors were particularly significant for members working in police and justice (74%). Very few respondents (2%) did not train because they 'did not want any training': there was usually another reason.

Almost half (48%) of those who were not learning for their current job didn't think this had harmed their employment prospects, although one-third (31%) did feel their employment prospects would suffer through their lack of training. People with a disability were most likely to feel that their employment prospects had been diminished for this reason.

The finding that the predominant skills issue is one of under-utilisation, as opposed to deficiency.

Members with no or low level qualifications, were however, considerably less likely to have participated in any learning than members with high level qualifications.

1.5 Future learning needs

Encouragingly, the survey reveals very positive attitudes to training among UNISON members with more than four-fifths claiming that 'learning is important to my self-esteem' and they were 'ready to learn new skills to remain employable in the future'. The evidence suggest that UNISON members are more willing to learn new skills than the UK workforce as a whole given evidence from similar studies elsewhere.

Positive attitudes to learning are consistently high across all respondent characteristics. Consistent with previous research the survey finds that motivation to learn increases with qualification level and decreases with age but motivation is high even among the oldest. More than four-fifths (82%) of respondents aged 50 and over agreed they were 'ready to learn new skills'.

Generally, respondents were more likely to identify a future training need (ie disagree with the statement, 'I have all the skills I need for the rest of my career') than not: around one-fifth (22%) thought they had all the skills they needed compared to one-half (53%) who felt that they did not. A further one-fifth (22%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement suggesting some respondents felt unable to judge whether their current skill set would be adequate for the remainder of their career. Members aged under 40 were mostly likely to identify a future training need (70%).

Members with higher qualifications are more likely than those with no or low level qualifications to identify a need to update their skills. This is an interesting point since central government funding for adult learning is focused on supporting adults acquire their first Level 3 qualification. Employer engagement in supporting the CPD of higher qualified workers is therefore particularly important for this group.

The survey explored the extent to which UNISON members' motivation to undertake future learning was influenced by their perception of the benefits. Interestingly, even members who felt they already possessed all the skills they would need for the rest of their career¹, demonstrated high interest in future training with more than three-quarters (78%) claiming they were ready to learn new skills for work.

Opinion was fairly divided on who should shoulder the responsibility for workplace training: almost two-fifths (39%) agreed that it was their responsibility, one-third (33%) neither agreed nor disagreed and more than one quarter (28%) disagreed with the statement. Attitudes to who is responsible for learning (and therefore who should bear the costs in terms of time and money) did not vary substantially by respondent characteristic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, agency workers (50%) were most likely to feel that they were responsible for their own skills development. By contrast, those working in transport (36%) were more likely than respondents in any other category to disagree with the statement, believing that employers should shoulder the responsibility.

Overall, 95% of members identified at least one area of skill they would like to develop. Unsurprisingly, given members' assessment of their own skills gaps computer and digital (68%) and supervisory or management skills (47%) were the most frequently mentioned followed by job specific, technical or practical skills (31%), complex analytical skills (27%), numeracy, maths skills (21%), literacy, reading or writing skills (18%) and physical or manual skills (9%).

'Stand-out' results by respondent characteristics reveal:

- Relatively high levels of interest developing literacy and numeracy and physical and manual skills among members belonging to an ethnic minority group, young people and those with low level qualifications.
- High levels of interest in developing computer and digital skills but particularly strong interest among respondents working in utilities, police and justice, further and higher education and among older workers.
- Strong interest in improving supervisory and management skills particularly among workers aged under 40 and those with high level qualifications.

¹ 53% of respondent felt they had all the skills that they would need for the remainder of their career.

Employer-related factors such as 'employer was not willing to provide additional training, even though I wanted it' were more frequently reported as barriers to learning than personal factors such as difficulty 'finding time for training'

An open-ended question designed to capture the main interest areas for further development generated the following:

Broad area of skills sought	Specific skills sought
Health (935)	Most frequently related to specific and/or specialist clinical skills ² (323) but also general nursing (150), mental health (101), health and safety (86), emergency care ³ (79), physical therapies ⁴ (47) and dementia (25).
ICT (429)	Within ICT the most common area was in relation to software and systems (220) which were often organisation-specific although Microsoft applications were also mentioned (44). Other interest areas were: digital media (29), computer-assisted design (23) and networking (20).
Education (445)	Most commonly related to pupils with special education needs and/or disabilities (139). Also teaching skills and curriculum knowledge (44), accessing formal teaching training or acquiring teaching qualifications (39) and behaviour management (32) and careers guidance counselling (19).
Management (337)	Most commonly: project management (132) but including: commissioning, procurement and contract (40), senior level management and leadership (26), human resources and CIPD (40) and skills relating to specific functional ⁵ management roles (57).
Legislation, law and regulations (305)	While many respondents did not provide any context to this (159), when it was provided it most commonly related to: information governance and security ⁶ (28); changes to welfare benefits (19), housing (17), employment (12), finance (8), health and safety (7); and the environment (6)
Social care (276)	This was commonly mentioned in related to social work (95), working with adults with additional needs (23) or autism (31), sign language (32) and safeguarding (19). Many (66) mentioned social care in more general terms.
Talking therapies (203)	Mainly psychology and counselling (154)
Technologies and equipment (146)	As with legislation, most respondents did not provide any context (111). When it was provided it most commonly related to changes in the use of technologies or equipment in health (24) and education (4).
Research and analytics (110)	This included research skills and analytical capabilities.
Computing (101)	Mainly: programming (54), databases (40) but also cyber security (7).
Policing (85)	Mainly in relation to specialist (33) or general aspects of their role (11) but also in terms of investigative skills (16) and forensics (20).
Finance (72)	Most commonly accountancy or accounts (41) but also auditing (6) and insurance (6).
Building (70)	Mainly a variety of building trades (50) but also skills relating to surveying (17).
Local government (62)	Housing and homelessness (25), town planning (19).
Information management (58)	Mainly related to librarianship (43) but also archives (6) and governance (4).

1.6 Union activity and support

One in 10 (10%) respondents were active within UNISON at the time of the survey, for example they held roles such as steward, health and safety or union learning representative⁷. Members with characteristics mostly commonly associated with discrimination at work (for example, older workers, or those with a disability) were more likely than those without these characteristics to be active within the union.

Overall, one in eight (13%) respondents indicated that they had accessed at least one of the UNISON member learning opportunities listed in the questionnaire. Take-up tended

² Within this Phlebotomy (26) and cannulation (20) were most frequently mentioned.

³ Including paramedics

⁴ Including: Occupational therapy (29), speech and language therapy (11) and physiotherapy (7).

⁵ Including facilities (8), change (7), finance (6), quality (8) and risk (6) management.

⁶ For example, data protection and GDPR.

⁷ "Are you currently a UNISON activist? For example, a steward, health and safety representative or union learning representative?"

to be lowest among those aged under 40, part-time workers, those working in schools or further and higher education and members living in the South West (10%), Scotland (11%), Greater London (11%) or the North West (11%).

Members who had accessed this provision were generally satisfied with it with more than three-quarters rating UNISON learning opportunities as 'excellent' or 'good'. Satisfaction levels, however, were lowest among members on zero hour contracts (66%) and agency workers (67%).

The survey reveals a strong association between learning (and UNISON member learning in particular) and union activism. Members who had undertaken any learning in the last 12 months were (11%) almost twice as likely as those who had not undertaken any recent training (6%) to be active within the union. Moreover, members who had accessed UNISON member learning⁸ opportunities were almost eight times more likely to be active (39%) than those who had not (5%). It is not possible to conclude, however, that take-up of UNISON member learning, necessarily leads to activism: association does not prove causation. The relationship could in fact, work the other way as activists are more likely to access UNISON member learning opportunities (55%) than non-activists (9%).

More than 13,000 members provided feedback on how UNISON could support their learning in future. By far the largest single group within the survey fall into the category of those who were broadly unaware of the current levels of UNISON learning activity. This group includes over 6,000 respondents who replied to the question with typically either a simple reference to being unaware of the offer, such as "I did not know UNISON did this" or who were – subsequent to the survey – now going to look and see what they could usefully do "I did not know that unison offered learning opportunities, I will look into suitable courses available to me" – as such the survey itself seems to have been a valuable awareness raising exercise. This indicates a very considerable untapped resource for the learning that can be provided through UNISON. The challenge appears to be in reaching this audience with the right training - rather than in encouraging or driving up the desire for learning itself which is a rather enviable position to be in.

1.7 Respondent characteristics

The questionnaire included several questions about respondents' demographic and employment characteristics. It was important to establish whether members with protected characteristics and/or in flexible employment contracts reported less favourable experiences or outcomes than other members.

Members who considered themselves disabled generally reported less positive experiences, attitudes and outcomes than those who did not consider themselves disabled. This was particularly the case in terms of their experiences of work: they were among the most likely to believe their position would be made redundant within the next three years and that technological automation is putting public service jobs at risk.

Furthermore, among all characteristics, disability was also associated with the highest propensities to be dissatisfied with their current job and/or or worried about the future of the world of work as it is likely to affect them.

In terms of skills, disabled members were among the most likely to believe their skills were below (or above) those needed for their job and that lack of literacy and numeracy skills had discouraged them from progressing their careers. However, they were among the least likely to have undertaken any learning for their work and career, and those that had learned for work were more likely than non-disabled members to have undertaken this training solely in their own time and were less likely to have gained a qualification or identify any of the positive impacts explored in the survey resulting from it.

The survey reveals interesting but not wholly unexpected results by UNISON members' age. Broadly, the percentage of members expressing concerns about the future tends to rise with age: older members are more likely than their younger colleagues to believe technological automation is putting public service jobs at risk and more likely to believe they are personally at risk of redundancy. They are also more likely to feel 'worried' or 'uninterested' about their future and less likely to feel 'excited' or 'confident'. This will be partly influenced by their greater likelihood of experiencing redundancies and other

⁸ At any time, not necessarily in the last 12 months.

workplace changes over the last three years. Importantly, the vast majority of members across all age groups held positive attitudes to learning.

When looking at ethnic origin and members' experience of work the main difference identified was between those of Black/Black British origin and all other groups. Members identifying as Black/Black British were more positive than members from other ethnic groups about their own future at work and were less likely to believe they were personally at risk from redundancy. They were however, less likely to be satisfied with their current job and more likely than members with any other characteristic to feel that technological automation was putting public service jobs at risk.

Asian/Asian British members were among those least likely to have trained for work in the last 12 months and Black/British among the most likely. Black/Black British and Asian/Asian British were more likely than the larger Irish/White group to have undertaken this recent training solely in their own time and were more likely to have gained a qualification or identify an impact from their learning. They were also more likely to be active within the union and have accessed UNISON member learning opportunities.

Differences by gender tended to be small suggesting that other characteristics were generally a stronger predictor of members experience, attitudes and outcomes. Notwithstanding this, the results suggest that men are slightly more likely than women to have experienced change at work, feel personally at risk of redundancy and feel dissatisfied with their current job. Women, by contrast, are more likely than men to feel 'worried' about the future of work as it affects them.

Our analysis suggests that members who identified as transgender were more likely than members with any other characteristic, to feel personally at risk of redundancy. Despite this, they were slightly less likely than members who did not identify as transgender to feel 'worried', 'uninterested' and 'confidence' about the future but more likely to feel 'excited'.

In terms of their skills, members identifying as transgender were more likely to report that concerns about their literacy or numeracy skills had stopped them from progressing in their career or becoming more involved in the union.

Like gender, variation in the results by respondents' sexual orientation tended to be fairly small. Notwithstanding this, the results suggest that members describing themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual were slightly more likely than heterosexual or straight members to feel personally at risk of redundancy, dissatisfied with their current job, consider their ability in selected core skills above that needed for their current job, identify employer barriers to training and to feel that the learning they accessed over the last year was inadequate in addressing all their needs.

As might be expected given the subjects explored in the survey, many of the results were strongly correlated with highest qualification. Members with no or low level qualifications were less likely than respondents with any other characteristic to:

- participate in training for work or career
- identify any impact from work-related training and specifically, report that training had helped them improve the way they work
- report they were ready to learn new skills to remain employable in the future even through the vast majority are ready to do so.

They were more likely than respondents with other characteristics to:

- believe their literacy, reading or writing, numeracy, maths skills, computer digital skills and management or supervisory skills were below the level needed for their current job
- be discouraged from: applying for promotion, taking on extra responsibilities at work, applying for a training course because of their lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy
- believe they have all the skills they need for the rest of their career and that it would not be useful to develop ANY skills in future.

Higher qualified workers were more likely than their lower qualified colleagues to report changes within their workplace and believe it 'likely' that their position could be made

redundant in the next three years.

The questionnaire included questions about members employment contract: specifically whether they were an 'out-sourced worker', their hours of work ('full time', 'part time', 'zero hours' or 'other') and contract type ('fixed term or temporary contract', 'agency worker', 'permanent' or 'other')⁹. Outsourced workers and those on zero hours contracts are among the least likely to be satisfied with their current job. Skills imbalances are more common among flexible workers particularly those on 'zero hours' contracts.

For example, members on zero hours contracts had the highest percentage (or among the highest percentage) of respondents who reported that their literacy, numeracy, computer skills, management and supervisory, manual or physical, or communication skills were higher than those needed in their job. Flexible workers are more likely than members on other forms of employment contract to report feeling discouraged from progressing their career, accessing training or getting more involved in their union due to a lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy. This issue is particularly prevalent among agency workers.

While part time working is associated with lower levels of participation in training than most other characteristics, this is not the case for other forms of flexible working. In fact, agency workers are among the most likely to have accessed work related training, probably reflecting their participation in company-specific inductions as they move from assignment to assignment.

1.8 Sectors and regions

While the majority of respondents in all sectors have witnessed organisational change over the last three years, changes were less commonly reported by members working in schools and to a lesser extent health and social care – but redundancies in particular were most frequently reported in further and higher education, utilities and local government. These results are important because this context provides the 'mood music' influencing how positive respondents feel about their own employment prospects and satisfaction with their current job.

Technological change was particularly perceived as a risk to public service jobs generally and respondents personally, in the utilities sector and to a slightly lesser extent the transport sector. Respondents in these sectors were also less likely than those in other sectors to report that the skill requirements of their work had increased over the last three years.

A significant minority of respondents across all sectors identified a deficiency in management and supervisory skills. There were fairly large differences, however, in whose time the training was undertaken by sector – with a significant minority of members in schools in particular but also health, transport and social care, undertaking their training solely in their own time. By contrast, training was far more commonly undertaken wholly in employers' time in the environment, utilities, police and justice and local government sectors. Training was considerably less likely to result in a qualification in police and justice, local government and utilities.

Levels of union activism was twice as high in transport, local government, further and higher education, utilities and the environment than in schools. Take up of UNISON member learning opportunities was highest in utilities and the environment.

At the aggregate level, however, in most respects, the main differences were between countries and in particular between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), with relatively little variation between the English regions although Greater London did 'stand out' from the rest of England on some topics. This is particularly apparent in the questions on organisational change where respondents in Northern Ireland were considerably less likely to report any of the organisational changes explored. Northern Ireland members were also considerably less likely to report redundancies (8%) compared to Greater London (29%), Northern region (29%) and the West Midlands (29%). Reflecting this, members living in Northern Ireland felt less at risk of redundancy

⁹ Note: a respondent can be a 'agency worker' on a 'zero hours' contract because the information is derived from two separate questions.

Redundancies in particular were most frequently reported in further and higher education, utilities and local government.

themselves than members living elsewhere in the UK.

Members living in Greater London and to a slightly lesser extent Northern Ireland were more likely than members in other regions to report being discouraged from progressing their career due to concerns about their literacy and numeracy skills. Union activism was highest in the Eastern (13%) and Greater London (12%) regions and lowest in Northern Ireland (7%) and Scotland (7%). Members in Northern Ireland were significantly more likely than those in other regions to access UNISON member learning with one-day workshops being particularly popular in the region.

Significant minority of members in schools in particular but also health, transport and social care, undertaking their training solely in their own time.

Take up of UNISON member learning opportunities was highest in utilities and the environment.

Discussion points and recommendations

The aim of this survey was to:

- identify future skills needs of members and to use this as a basis for a dialogue on workplace learning with employers
- expand the member learning offer within UNISON especially for disadvantaged groups
- help provide a more tailored offer for UNISON members in positions of middle management
- capture the link between member learning leading and enhanced activism.

2.1. Digital skills and skills for progression

The survey reveals that the two skill areas needing particular development/attention are 'computer and digital skills' and 'management and supervisory skills'. The need to respond to the growing digitization of work is not unexpected but nonetheless should inform the type of training offered – particularly to older workers who recognise that they are most in need of this support and yet are often the least likely receive training at work. This is an area that government, unions and employers are considering programmes to tackle and interventions such as the Union Learning Fund are already active in this area.

The importance of digital skills needs reinforcing. Digital skills are becoming near-universal requirements for employment. The move up the career ladder from low to high-skill jobs comes with increased demand for specific digital skills. Acquiring specific digital skills makes career progression as well as a pay increase more likely. In certain fields, job seekers need to develop digital skills related to specific technical tools of their chosen discipline to advance their careers.¹⁰

There are also concerns with access to digital skills training. UNISON's older members (aged 50 and over) were six times more likely than its youngest members (aged 16 to 26) to report of computer and digital skills needs.

The survey also revealed a potential among the UNISON membership for greater responsibility and career development given the finding that significant numbers have skills that are currently under utilised.

The finding that 30% of members felt they were not fully proficient in at least one of the seven skills areas identified in the survey, and 14% were deficient in computer and digital skills, indicates a real need for UNISON to continue pressing for greater digital and computer literacy support/provision. Two of the impacts of austerity within the public sector (from which most UNISON members are drawn) have been freezes on recruitment and pressure on training and career development opportunities.

Therefore, UNISON needs to ensure that staff being placed in positions with management and supervisory responsibility have been suitably trained/skilled – our survey suggests this may be problematic and can be anticipated to have both negative impacts on the organisations and individuals concerned.

2.2. Low skills remain a concern

There needs to be a continued focus on those with low skill/qualification levels. Those with low skills were significantly less likely to be training, or even seeing the benefits from training. This is clearly impacting on many areas of their lives including promotion and even union activism.

2.3. Sector differences

¹⁰ Burning Glass and DCMS 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807830/No_Longer_Optional_Employer_Demand_for_Digital_Skills.pdf

The survey reveals that the two skill areas needing particular development/attention are 'computer and digital skills' and 'management and supervisory skills'.

Two of the impacts of austerity within the public sector (from which most UNISON members are drawn) have been freezes on recruitment and pressure on training and career development opportunities.

UNISON members have clearly witnessed considerable organisational change over the last three years including considerable numbers of redundancies in a number of sectors. These highlight where UNISON could be looking to support members with both traditional union activism and with member learning: further and higher education, utilities and local government seemed to have suffered most from redundancies. When exploring which sectors were in need of training in digital skills, schools stand out.

Fears over the impact of technological change persist and may be somewhat unfounded in some sectors. The consistent finding of a desire for training opportunities in leadership and management across all sectors indicates both a willingness amongst many to seek career progression – but also the possibility that with austerity the chances for staff to progress their careers and to develop their roles have been significantly reduced. This has wider implications for the economy as a whole and is worth further exploration.

2.4. Recognise the impact of differing contracts of employment

The study found that outsourced workers and those on zero hours contracts are among the least likely to be satisfied with their current job and there are more skills imbalances among flexible workers – particularly those on ‘zero hours’ contracts. It is concerning that workers on flexible contracts are more likely than members on other forms of employment contract to report being discouraged from progressing their career, accessing training or getting more involved in their union because of a lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy. This issue is particularly prevalent among agency workers.

2.5. Ability to self-advocate for learning

Members with the highest qualifications were twice as likely as those with no or low level qualifications to have received training as a result of they themselves asking for it. Qualification is a stronger predictor of whether an individual asks for training than age/experience. This suggests that the confidence to ask for training comes with knowledge, rather than experience. Higher qualified members were more likely than their younger colleagues to say that their training was part of their professional registration or ongoing CPD.

There is a need for UNISON to continue advocating for lifelong learning and negotiating workplace agreements that guarantee individuals’ rights to training which then need to be articulated effectively to all members.

2.6. Employer responsibilities and the demand for learning

The finding that opinion was fairly divided on who should shoulder the responsibility for workplace training with almost two-fifths (39%) stating that it was their responsibility and only one quarter (28%) disagreeing with this statement may ring a few alarm bells within unions and government. Those on agency and similar ‘flexible’ contracts were most likely to think this way. Driving up employer demand for training and seeking to get the most from a workforce’s skills are increasing priorities for the UK government. Ensuring employers take responsibility for ensuring their ‘human resources’ are suitably skilled for the future should be a priority.

2.7. Access to learning and the Union Learning Fund

Members with no or low level qualifications were considerably less likely than their more highly qualified peers to have undertaken any learning in the last 12 months and were particularly less likely to learn for work or their career, or for leisure or personal interest. Overall, 34% of members with no or low level qualifications had not undertaken any learning in the last year. The Union Learning Fund has been important in bringing training and support to those most in need for a number of years and this need amongst the hardest to reach and least likely to train stubbornly persists. Having a ULR supported offer in the workplace when the learner feels a need – perhaps to support a child or

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grandchild's homework etc – remains an important priority. Presumably for government as well as UNISON.

2.8. Part-time workers

Part-time workers were least likely to have undertaken any learning and were less likely to have trained for 'work reasons'. This, linked to the female dominated gender make-up of the part-time workforce, suggests access to training is an equalities issue and an area where UNISON could seek to ensure part-time workers have access to the same opportunities as full-time ones. Presumably linked to the provision of training within the working day.

2.9. Training in members' own time

The survey looked at whether members are training for work in their employers' time, their own time, or a combination of both. To do this we looked at those who had only 'trained for work and career' in the last three years. More than half trained in their employers' time only; one third trained during their own and employers' time; and around one-in-eight trained during their own time only. There is a need here for UNISON to ensure employers are aware of the amount of training workers/members are carrying out (unpaid) in their own time.

This distribution was repeated across almost all categories with the notable exception of learners on zero hours and agency workers whom were the most likely to undertake training for work or their career in their own time only – suggesting a real need for UNISON to look at how best to support the training needs of these groups which was not being met through traditional employer routes.

2.10. Awareness raising and the role of ULRs

A surprising number of respondents were not particularly aware of the learning that was on offer to them via UNISON. Those that had accessed the learning were extremely positive and this suggests there is real potential to help support far more learners if the message about the current offer can be better communicated. ULRs should be central to this. Similarly many respondents knew they needed help or some training but were not in a position as yet to articulate just what that was. This is a group that ULRs should be targeting through information, advice and guidance (IAG) to ensure they take the chance to think about their needs and how they can be supported.

2.11. Disability

The survey explored learning and personal characteristics. Groups identifying as having a disability are a clear priority. Members who considered themselves disabled generally reported less positive experiences, attitudes and outcomes than those who did not consider themselves disabled. These members were also particularly worried about redundancy and the risk of technological automation putting public service jobs at risk.

Among all characteristics, disability was also associated with the highest propensity to be dissatisfied with their current job and/or worried about the future of the world of work as it is likely to affect them. There were other findings that indicate this group needs some policy attention – notably that they identify as having lower than required skills levels compared to other groups, combined with a feeling that lack of literacy and numeracy skills had discouraged them from progressing their careers.

2.12. Ethnicity

There were some interesting findings relating to ethnicity and these are worth exploring in terms of the attitudes to technological change within the Black/Black British group and why the Asian/Asian British members were among those least likely to have trained for work in the last 12 months. Further identifying why the Irish/White group were seemingly less likely to train at home is of interest – notably as it may link to why this group were also less likely to have gained a qualification or identify an impact from their learning.

The vast majority of members across all age groups held positive attitudes to learning – so if the learning offer is made then there is scope to remove some of this unneeded uncertainty and worry.

2.13. Gender

Gender difference did not emerge strongly from the study; however, the fact that women are more likely than men to feel 'worried' about the future of work is definitely worth further attention. It is also worth exploring why members who identified as transgender were more likely than members with any other characteristic to feel personally at risk of redundancy and were more likely to report that concerns about their literacy or numeracy skills had stopped them from progressing in their career or becoming more involved in the union.

2.14. Older workers

In terms of age, older workers were more worried about the future and the impacts of technological change. UNISON has a workforce with an older profile. The learning offer was valued across different age groups and younger respondents certainly were utilising the training – logically it could be part of a redefined member offer as the union seeks to engage with a younger potential membership. The older respondents were sometimes looking for support with pensions and retirement planning. For those in the 45-60 age group in particular linking with the Mid-Life Career/Skills Review activities may generate an important offer for members that could be delivered through ULRs.

2.15. Activism

There were clear associations between accessing and using training materials and wider activism within UNISON. These are quite possibly not causal – it seems more likely that those active in the union are just more likely to find out about the training available to use it. However, the positive impacts and response to the UNISON training suggests it is a valuable resource and one that can clearly only be beneficial to supporting members with impacts on how the union is perceived and used.

2.16. Build on the positive feelings members have towards learning

The vast majority of members across all age groups held positive attitudes to learning – so if the learning offer is made then there is scope to remove some of this unneeded uncertainty and worry.

2.17. Possible future areas to explore

It is worth exploring if members expect to have to up-skill or re-train in order to remain employable at some point during the remainder of their working life, and who is responsible for this and how will they seek to do it. Similarly it would be useful to look at what learning opportunities members are interested in pursuing in future and how likely it is that they will fulfill these aspirations is.

Barriers to learning is another area - what factors might prevent members from learning, and indeed, are the kinds of learning opportunities they are interested in available and accessible to them?

It may be worth exploring if there any particular patterns of interest in terms of learners' demographic characteristics (age, gender and ethnic origin), existing qualification level (e.g. especially low skilled) or nature of employments (eg middle managers, shift workers, outsourced workers) that may help shape future campaigns.

The clear demand for learning grants and bursaries is worth exploring, perhaps with government or particular providers to see what may be possible.

In terms of recruiting future workplace representatives UNISON could look at whether members who have undertaken learning provided by UNISON are more likely than those who have undertaken other learning or those who have not undertaken any learning to subsequently become activists.

The results suggesting that lesbian, gay or bisexual members feel personally more at risk of redundancy as well as dissatisfied with their current job and identified their employer as a barrier to training are also worth exploring.

It is worth investigating why the differences in survey findings persist between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and to a lesser extent between Greater London and the rest of the UK (linked perhaps to an examination of their greater concerns about their literacy and numeracy skills).



