



Union Learning Representative (ULR) handbook



Foreword

Union learning reps (ULRs) are central to UNISON's strategy to put organising around learning at the heart of our union. You can find ULRs working with colleagues in branch education teams across every UNISON sector and service group.

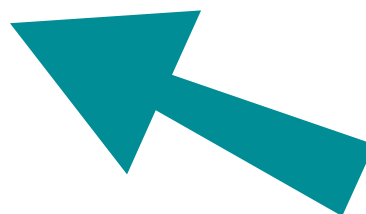
UNISON has been at the forefront of developing lifelong learning for non-traditional learners. We have always recognised the importance of learning opportunities for our members, especially those who have had limited access to learning in the past.

By lifelong learning we don't just mean vocational training – getting the skills needed to do a particular task or job – however important that is. We mean learning in the broadest sense, providing people with the skills and confidence to progress and participate at work, in the union and in wider society. Establishing UNISON College has been one of the key building blocks in widening members' access to learning opportunities.

ULRs support and encourage learners. They make the point that access to training and learning are trade union issues which help us tackle inequality in the workplace – directly in line with UNISON's core aims and values.

Christina McAra

UNISON General Secretary



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1 **The role of the union learning rep**

The role of the ULR is representative and there is an expectation that they are active in the branch

ULRs are enthusiasts and advocates for learning. Their precise role will vary according to their own circumstances. It can include:

- raising awareness of lifelong learning issues in the workplace, especially for non-traditional learners
- helping to identify and articulate the learning needs of particular groups of members/potential members
- with the branch education or lifelong learning coordinator, liaise with employers on lifelong learning opportunities in the workplace
- recruiting new members into the branch and encouraging existing members to get more involved through their interest in learning
- contacting and talking to members and potential members about how UNISON can assist them in their development
- supporting members who are on a learning programme
- signposting potential learners to possible providers
- representing and negotiating on behalf of members on issues around learning
- delivering workshops and learning events for members

The role of the ULR is representative and there is an expectation that they are active in the branch. The ULR should ensure that their own training and learning needs are met and that they have the skills necessary to perform the role.

2 *Statutory rights for union learning reps*



3 *Learning as part of core union business*

The Employment Act 2002 gave ULRs the same statutory rights as other union representatives. This includes the right to:

- time off to perform ULR's duties in the workplace
- be recognised as a union representative in the same way that health and safety reps and shop stewards are in workplaces where UNISON is a recognised union
- time off with pay to train as a ULR
- protection against unfair dismissal on grounds of their ULR activity
- go to tribunal if the employer unreasonably denies access to time off to perform their duties or for training.

These rights came into force in April 2003 and are set out in the revised Acas Code of Practice published in February 2003.

The Employment Act stipulates that the union must notify employers before ULRs can be given time off to train for the role and take up their duties. The union must then ensure that reps are trained within six months of the employer being notified. If this deadline is missed your employer has the right to withdraw recognition and refuse to accept a new notification of your appointment.

At the heart of lifelong learning activity in UNISON is the provision of personal development opportunities through learning for our members. However, our lifelong learning initiatives also connect with a number of UNISON's key concern and goals. Some of these include:

Work/ life balance

Time off for learning is a key ingredient in improving the quality of our members' lives, both in and out of work.

Social justice


Many of our members have been let down by the education system. This is often compounded by lack of opportunity for learning at work, creating undervalued workers caught in a low-pay trap with little chance of escape.

Equality

Lifelong learning helps deliver greater equality of opportunity for some of the most disadvantaged groups within the union, the workplace and society in general.



4 Organising around learning



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Building the union

The role of ULR has created more than just a new group of activists. It has encouraged people who were not previously active in their branch to get involved and has also encouraged non-members to join the union.

Better public services

UNISON's lifelong learning programme helps to deliver better public services by supporting and developing the public sector's greatest asset – its people. The government wants greater involvement from users and employees in how services are developed and offered. Access to learning and citizenship education is a key part of making this a reality.

Developing ULRs is a part of UNISON's organising efforts. This is done by:

- Offering a route into UNISON activism as a ULR
- Giving UNISON a positive profile among both members and non-members in the workplace
- Developing members' confidence and skills and consequently increasing their participation in UNISON
- Helping to give members the skills and confidence to help themselves at work and in their communities
- Developing learning agreements with employers to embed learning in the workplace and secure employer commitment
- Complementing existing branch recruitment and organising approaches by offering additional opportunities to achieve objectives
- Actively encouraging the development of branch education teams
- Creating an environment in which new members can be recruited
- Providing an issue new and existing members care about and that they can organise around – as part of the branch development and organising process.

5 Branch education teams

The main support for your work as a ULR will come from your branch. UNISON is encouraging branches to set up branch education teams, led by the branch education coordinator and/or lifelong learning co-ordinator, who acts as a link between branch officers and ULRs to co-ordinate the branch's approach to workplace learning. The Code of Good Branch Practice gives you an idea of how learning fits into the branch structures and activities.

Working as part of the branch education team:

- provides democratic accountability for ULRs
- provides support for ULRs who choose to move into further activity, either through negotiating around learning issues or becoming a workplace rep
- integrates the work of ULRs into the day to day organising of the branch, bringing major benefits in terms of recruiting members, recruiting activists and building branch structure.

If there is no branch education team in your branch yet, here are some first steps:

- Talk to any other ULRs in your branch and to your branch secretary and discuss with them the steps suggested in the Branch Guide to Lifelong Learning.
- Talk to your colleagues about the role of the ULR. A crucial first step will be to encourage a few more people to train as ULRs.
- Contact your regional education officer, regional officer or learning development organiser for advice, support and information about lifelong learning.
- Remember: learning is not an add on. Access to learning is a basic trade union issue, and there is a learning element to many of the big issues facing your branch at the moment. Be prepared to put the case to your colleagues about how a focus on learning can help the branch move forward.

6 Learning with UNISON College

UNISON College has been set up to bring together one coherent offer of learning, training and education for both UNISON activists and members. ULRs and other activists are encouraged to consult with their region about their training needs. UNISON College also provides learning opportunities nationally. The national team is always happy to hear reps' suggestions for new courses and facilitate access to training.



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Learning for members

- A broad range of training courses and opportunities nationally and across regions and nations.
- Member learning nationally and regionally is free for eligible members.
- Union Learning Fund projects in Wales and Scotland offer additional learning opportunities as well as other potential regional and local funding.
- UNISON College Bursary Scheme offers grants towards course or exam fees to members undertaking study at their own expense.
- Free training and careers advice service provided by one of UNISON's partner organisations.
- UNISON's discount arrangements with a range of learning providers are available to members on a wide range of courses for leisure, pleasure and vocational skills.

Activist education

- Initial rep and branch officer training
- Mandatory GDPR e-learning module
- Further training and advanced courses in a wide range of skills and topics, as appropriate to particular roles.
- Mandatory equalities training such as Challenging Racism in the Workplace; Equalities in the Branch; Making Equality Central to your Union Practice.

Mandatory rep training time limits are set out in the NEC Scheme of Accreditation and the UNISON rule book:

- All elected representatives and branch officers must complete their initial training within one year of appointment (time limits for statutory roles may differ according to the relevant legislation).
- All elected representatives and branch officers must complete the GDPR e-note within three months of appointment.
- All elected representatives must attend equality training within two years of completing their initial training.
- UNISON representatives and branch officers who undertake representation and negotiation should attend the Challenging Racism in the Workplace course and other appropriate equality training, such as UNISON's advanced employment equality law courses, within three years of appointment.



7 UNISON College Contacts

National team

l.organising@unison.co.uk

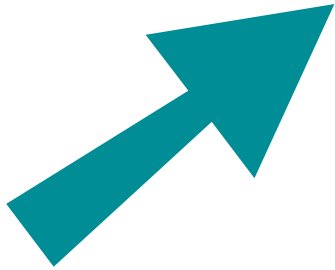
0207 121 5116

<https://learning.unison.org.uk/>

Contact details for all regional education teams are on the website here:

<https://learning.unison.org.uk/regional-education-teams/>

Resources



Acas Code of Practice ***[www.acas.org.uk/
acas-code-of-practice-on-time-off-for-trade-union-duties-and-activities/html](http://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-time-off-for-trade-union-duties-and-activities/html)***

Branch guide to lifelong learning ***[https://shop.unison.
site/product/branch-guide-to-lifelong-learning/](https://shop.unison.site/product/branch-guide-to-lifelong-learning/)***

Employment Act 2002 ***[www.legislation.gov.uk/
ukpga/2002/22/section/43?view=plain](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/22/section/43?view=plain)***

Member learning programme leaflet ***[https://shop.unison.
site/product/member-learning-programme-leaflet/](https://shop.unison.site/product/member-learning-programme-leaflet/)***

Organising space ***[https://organisingspace.
unison.org.uk/OS/login/](https://organisingspace.unison.org.uk/OS/login/)***

UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice ***[https://shop.unison.
site/product/code-of-good-branch-practice-updated-2014/](https://shop.unison.site/product/code-of-good-branch-practice-updated-2014/)***

UNISON College Bursary Scheme ***[https://learning.
unison.org.uk/unison-college-bursary-scheme/](https://learning.unison.org.uk/unison-college-bursary-scheme/)***

UNISON e-learning site ***[https://e-learning.unison.
org.uk/](https://e-learning.unison.org.uk/)*** (use My.UNISON account to log in)

UNISON rule book ***[www.unison.org.uk/
about/our-organisation/rulebook/](http://www.unison.org.uk/about/our-organisation/rulebook/)***

Design: www.the-design-mill.co.uk **Cover photo:** Jess Hurd

Published by: UNISON Learning and Organising Services

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Lines open from 6am – midnight Monday to Friday, 9am – 4pm Saturday

Visit our website **learning.unison.org.uk**