

# LEARN



with Unite



Gaining new skills,  
growing our union



[www.learnwithunite.org](http://www.learnwithunite.org)

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## Foreword

**Jim Mowatt**

**T**he case studies presented in the following pages are not just a collection of great reports, but templates that any Union Learning Representative within our workplaces and branches can utilise to build our union!

As the quote often attributed to W.B. Yeats goes, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!” These words clearly describe the role of our ULRs in the workplace, as is evident throughout this booklet.

At our first national Lifelong Learning Conference in February 2013, Len McCluskey stated: “The central role of the ULR in some workplaces is extraordinary: what we have to do from this conference today is to migrate that success to all Unite workplaces.”

Please view this booklet as a tool to assist us in that process, as the question all branch activists and even employers should be asking is: “How can we afford not to have active ULRs, and workplace learning taking place?”

Lifelong learning has not remained purely in the workplace and is now ‘exploding’ into our communities alongside the new Community Membership offer and its new branches. Once again, consider how the current approaches can be rolled out in your localities!

Lifelong learning is now clearly an increasing and everyday part of our union’s agenda and the words written by George Bernard Shaw that appear on so many trade union banners, remain as true and relevant as ever: “Educate, Agitate, Organise!”

**Jim Mowatt**  
Director of Education



Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

**“ Lifelong learning has not remained purely in the workplace and is now ‘exploding’ into our communities”**

**Jim Mowatt**  
Director of Education



The Unite branch at Tata Steel is helping young apprentices make the transition from school to work

Samuel Ashfield

# Teaching the next generation

The vast majority of new apprentices at Tata Steel's massive Scunthorpe site are joining Unite, thanks to the branch's engaging and inventive induction programme every autumn.

One hundred per cent of the intake joined after the induction days in autumn 2011 and almost exactly the same proportion took out Unite cards in autumn 2012.

The induction process used to be a quick chat with the convenor, and was expanded to a half-day programme under the predecessor of current convenor Martin Foster.

"When I became involved with the apprentices, I quickly realised that a half-day isn't long enough: there was a lot we wanted to do and we didn't have enough time to fit it all in," Martin recalls.

So he approached the company in 2010 to ask for a full day with the apprentices, and they agreed.

In addition to a presentation about how the unions operate on the Tata site at Scunthorpe by Martin, the induction days also include sessions on union learning by Learning Organiser Mick Simpson.

"I talked to them about how Unite supports lifelong learning in the workplace in general and in particular how we can support young apprentices, especially in their first year when everything is brand new to them, and how Unite can help them make the transition from school to the world of work," Mick explains.

Dave Towers from Unite-supported safety project PALS also gives a presentation on health and safety

in the massive plant, which makes iron and steel products that have been used everywhere from Wembley Stadium to Malaysia and Hong Kong.

The induction days always open by asking the apprentices about what they think unions do; while a few mention the positive aspects of protecting pay and conditions, the majority usually raise the negative images from the mainstream media.

"We asked them to write down their thoughts about unions on a flipchart," Mick says. "Although the first two or three were all about strikes and pickets, once they started to give the issue serious consideration, they started to talk about protecting workers' rights and promoting health and safety," Mick says.

"It was fascinating to see the transition within just 30 minutes of discussion."

On the most recent set of induction days, the programme also included a presentation by branch equalities officer Charlotte Childs, who recently completed her own apprenticeship at the plant.

"Charlotte is only a couple of years out of her apprenticeship but she's got a very good understanding of equalities and a very good understanding of young people and of apprentices," Martin reckons.

By the end of the day (and sometimes much sooner),

# “The induction day gave me a clearer idea of what Unite can offer apprentices”

Jacob Hammond  
17-year-old apprentice

North East, Yorkshire  
and Humberside

the vast majority usually sign up to Unite's reduced rate for apprentices, and one of them steps up to become an informal apprentice rep.

“The induction day gave me a clearer idea of how Unite works and what it can offer,” says 17-year-old apprentice Jacob Hammond, who attended one of the sessions in autumn 2012.

“It helped me understand how Unite involves me and the different ways it can benefit me throughout my working life.”

Twenty-year-old apprentice Myles St. Clair also found the day-long programme very useful. “I had a rough idea of what unions did in terms of the powers they have and how they can help you,” he says.

“But the induction day gave you a more in-depth guidance as to what kind of support they could provide should you find yourself in a situation which has affected you or affected others around you.”

The full day of discussion and presentations was an effective approach, he reckons. “You got to listen to what everyone had to say, and if it was just written down for us you might not have taken it in.”

The induction days are just one element of Unite's engagement with apprentices at the plant.

“We have a monthly meeting with the management team that looks after the apprentices where we discuss any ongoing issues, whether it be with individual apprentices, or as a group, or any problems with the running of the training scheme,” Martin explains.

“We're also currently involved in a review of the apprentice scheme because we have identified a few shortcomings and the company are included in that consultation about how to address those shortcomings and improve the scheme in future.”

The partnership is based on a formal craft apprentice agreement signed in 2008, which has proved crucial, Martin says.

“Because we have this agreement, it ties the company to a certain process they have to follow in agreement with us – and if they were to step outside

the agreement, which they have done before, we have been able to say, ‘This is the agreement, we expect you to stick to it’,” he says.

Unite is now keen to use its successes with the apprentice intakes to re-ignite workplace learning among the full-time workforce and encourage more members into the onsite learning centre.

“We want to develop the centre further and make it a more viable option; it has suffered a bit with fewer courses going on because people don't have the money to pay out in this recession,” Martin says.

Mick Simpson points out that it's never too early to start educating apprentices about what Unite can do for them, and how they can participate in the union.

“It is important to ensure we continue to promote membership for apprentices as they will be the next generation of activists and representatives,” he points out.

“It is very rewarding to be involved with young people who are not only embarking on a career but also adding to the existing well-organised branch structure at Tata Steel.” ■



Unite's induction days for apprentices demonstrate how membership of the union can help them throughout their career

Samuel Asfield



Using its purpose-built cab, Unite's Taxi Project is able to teach drivers how to deal with a wide range of disability issues

# Learning on the road

After proving a huge success in the north-west, Unite's Taxi Project is moving south to the West Midlands and on to London.

Unite's Taxi Project in the North-West has recruited more than 500 new members and trained more than 5,000 taxi and private hire drivers since it started six years ago – a major achievement with a self-employed workforce.

"The recruitment we've achieved has been phenomenal, with 500 new members signed up and trained alongside existing members, swelling what was already a massive branch," says Project Manager Tommy McIntyre.

"When a new applicant spends three days with us being trained, you wouldn't be much of a union rep if you didn't take the chance to explain to them about what we actually do as a union," he says.

"But it's not just about getting them to sign a form and then cancel the direct debit a couple of months later: we put as much emphasis on retention as we do on recruitment."

Unite member Ian Hornby joined the union when he returned to the trade after a seven-year break and was looking for somewhere where he could gain the skills he would need before heading back out on the road.

"When I applied to the council – I had a badge before – they gave me a list of providers that deliver the taxi course," he explains.

"All the other providers charge – some up to £250 – but with Unite it's free," he says.

Learning with Unite showed Ian there was more to trade unions than the mainstream media would have you believe.

"Before I came back to driving, I hadn't really had anything to do with unions: I only knew what you read in the papers. This place is brilliant: it's opened my eyes to what unions really do."

Originally launched six years ago, the Taxi Project now offers National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) to existing taxi and private hire drivers, and Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs) to new entrants to the trade.

The project has not only developed a team of two dozen ULRs to help spread the word about the project and the union, it has also trained more than 40 of its own members to deliver the courses in total, with a regular tutor group of 16 at the moment, all of them trained A1 Assessors.

All of this means that the project has almost single-handedly transformed the training and education opportunities and progression routes available to members of the trade.

"Having been a cab driver for many years I realised

**“Now the project actually owns a purpose-built cab where we train people properly about how to load disabled people”**

**Tommy McIntyre**  
Project Manager

there was no training apart from ‘The Knowledge’ – there was nothing about customer safety, nothing about disability awareness,” Tommy says.

“Now the project actually owns a purpose-built cab where we train people properly about how to load disabled people – not just people in wheelchairs, but people with sight impairments, hearing impairments or bad backs.”

Tommy allows himself a little pat on the back for the way the project manages to give very experienced drivers food for thought – and skills to help them in their day to day work.

“We do an awful lot on conflict management – how to defuse an argument, how to talk someone down, get them onto your side: that’s the one where you hear drivers who have been around for years say, ‘I’d never have thought of that on my own,” he says.

“We’ve had people who have been driving cabs for 30 years who turn up to take an NVQ course thinking they know all there is to know – but when they leave, they shake you by the hand and they are absolutely made up.”

It’s all about the superiority of the union model, he argues. “I have spoken to government ministers about this and whether they like unions or they don’t like unions, what they will always say is that unions deliver a damn good education system,” he says.

The project’s approach to participation is crucial: tutors are always available to help anyone with English or maths issues that would prevent them successfully working their way through their course.

“We identify people with reading or writing difficulties and then one of the tutors will spend time with them one-to-one to make sure they can understand everything,” he says.

Interaction and involvement are the name of the game. Most tutors from partner colleges who sit in on sessions to audit the quality of the teaching are hugely impressed by the lively buzz in the classroom.

“Nine times out of ten they say they have never sat in



a course where so many people are taking part, asking questions, instead of sitting back looking at the clock,” he says.

So successful has the project been that it was forced to find new premises that would include not only the space to run the courses but also enough car parking for participants.

That’s why the project has been based in West Everton Community Centre for the past three years.

“We went round the whole of Liverpool looking at different places in the private sector, but then we thought about how unions should be involved in their communities, so we went looking for a community centre,” he explains.

Tommy is pleased that the project is set to launch in the West Midlands and further afield as the potential benefits for the union could be enormous.

“There are thousands of cab drivers in Birmingham and we haven’t got much of a foothold as a union at the moment and I’m hoping the taxi project is going to spread even further in the next 12 months.” ■



Unite is closing the digital divide between the IT haves and have-nots by giving retired members the chance to pick up the computer skills they missed out on during their working lives.

## Closing the digital divide



**T**he West Midlands lifelong learning team has been proving it pays to stay with Unite by running free computer classes for retired members to close the digital divide between people with and without IT skills.

"These days you are losing out in society if you are not computer-literate," says Nuneaton Retired Members' Association (RMA) Secretary Ron Marston, a former regional union official who retired 20 years ago.

"Almost everything today is online, so you become a second-class citizen if you don't have computer skills."

It was Ron who invited Learning Organiser Donna Till to the Nuneaton RMA group a year ago to talk about what Unite could offer his members on the learning front.

"I expected there would be seven or eight people at the meeting," Donna recalls. "But the room was packed, the response was amazing and it went from there."

In fact, of the 40 people at the meeting in the Bentley Road social club, around a dozen said they were keen to get to grips with computers, which meant that Donna was able to run weekly computer classes at the club throughout the second half of 2012.

South Birmingham College supplied the laptops and

portable wi-fi for the classes, which were delivered by unionlearn tutor Alan Cook.

The group's ICT skills varied enormously, with some already familiar with some aspects of computing and others (including Ron himself) complete novices.

"Before I took the classes, I thought learning how to turn it on and off would be an accomplishment," Ron laughs.

But the mix of skills paid off for everybody in a class whose members had an average age of 77. "The members of the group who had some previous experience could assist others who had no idea," Ron says.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Comments included: "It is great that the union is doing this for its retired members" and "a very good course that everyone is enjoying".

Ron underlines how well the sessions went. "The participants were very pleased – they considered the tutor had been very patient with all of us, the slow learners and the ones who were more advanced," he says.

Around the same time in Birmingham, Retired Members' Association secretary Eddie Blackburn

## Reaching out to the whole community

made contact with the regional office to see if Unite could organise something similar for his members.

"I asked Donna how many there could be in the class, and she said we didn't want more than 10 at a time," recalls Eddie, who retired from the Longbridge car plant 23 years ago.

"As it happened, we got 18 in total, so we ran two separate classes in the morning and afternoon at the union office in Broad Street every Monday."

As in Nuneaton, skills levels varied a lot, but everyone enjoyed the weekly sessions through the autumn and nobody dropped out, says Eddie.

"It is very beneficial for Unite to organise classes like this for retired members in the sense that today you can do nothing without computers, whatever you do, and I think we all need the basics at least," he says.

Donna agrees. "These courses show that a union is for life, that you're never too old to learn and that the trade union movement learning agenda is at the heart of the community as well as the workplace." ■

Unite's West Midlands lifelong learning team marked Black History Month in 2012 by mounting an exhibition in the regional office to mark the 50th anniversary of Jamaican independence.

The team organised an evening event to mark the opening of the exhibition, featuring guest speakers from local community organisations, while the West Bromwich office canteen provided a spread of Jamaican food for everyone to try.

"The atmosphere and inclusivity this event generated in the regional office was inspiring: the feedback from everyone who took part was positive and a credit to Unite," says Learning Organiser Donna Till.

Earlier on the same day, Unite reps taking a course in the regional office had the chance to hear from Annette Robinson from the Kingsway Project, a small voluntary organisation with a track record of successful work with youth, women and older people.

"Annette talked to the reps both about Jamaica and its history and made them aware of things that are going on in the African-Caribbean community locally, including the work the Kingsway Project is doing with local young people," Donna explains.



By taking on the role of Unite learning rep at packaging firm Smurfit Kappa's East Midlands plant, Richard Gallagher has rediscovered his taste for union activism and helped fellow-members improve their employment prospects with better functional skills.



Richard Gallagher receives his regional ULR of the year award from General Secretary Len McCluskey

Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

## Wrapping up better deals

Since taking on the role of Unite learning rep at Smurfit Kappa's packaging plant in Northampton two years ago, Richard Gallagher has helped persuade the company to sign its first learning agreement and enabled dozens of his fellow members to improve their English, maths and ICT skills.

He has also progressed up the activist ladder, first becoming health and safety rep for his shift and most recently taking on the role of branch secretary.

"When the union learning rep role came up, I thought it was a good opportunity to try and get some learning started," Richard says.

"I also wanted to get active in the union and the ULR role was a good way of getting involved in a workplace where most of the stewards have been there for a long time and are doing a good job."

After completing his ULR training in April 2011, Richard began lobbying management about a learning agreement.

But the company postponed discussions until it had finished a multi-million investment in new machinery at the plant, which meant talks only started in earnest in the autumn.

Learning Organiser Seán Kettle helped draft a learning agreement in October, and after making some minor adjustments over the next few weeks, both sides formally signed the agreement in November 2011.

The union has partnered with Leicester College to provide English and maths courses onsite, with a tutor spending two hours at the plant every Wednesday afternoon.

"Because everyone is on different shifts, guys will either stay on after work or they will do it in work time, and the agreement is that if they stay on after work they are allowed to take their hours back in lieu – so in a sense, it's all done in work time," Richard explains.

The ICT training is delivered via the Learn With Unite website, which means members can progress at their own pace at home, and ask Richard or Seán for help if they're struggling with anything.

"We have a registration period in the computer suite onsite for everyone, a two-hour session all in company time where we set them up and explain how to use the website so they know what they're doing when they carry on at home," Richard says.

As well as becoming more involved in Unite, Richard

## Developing skills to build the union

Since becoming the Unite learning rep for the Mechanical Transport (MT) section at RAF Cranwell in Lincolnshire, driver Steve Fellows has become ever more involved with the union and is now workplace rep, safety rep and branch secretary as well.

The branch is growing as a result of his learning and organising work, which includes production of the monthly newsletter Let's Unite, which he originally started to help promote the learning agenda onsite.

"Putting photographs of people achieving their qualifications in the newsletter and feeding people information about courses that are available (alongside branch and national union news) has all helped to build the profile of the branch and we have definitely gained membership as a result," he says.

With his background in air force instructing and further education teaching, becoming a ULR made perfect sense for Steve. But he had had very little experience of trade unions when he first volunteered for the role in September 2010.

"I left the RAF after 22 years and of course we are not unionised in the military so this was the first time I have become involved in unions," he says.

After taking the Unite ULR Stage 1 course in November 2010 (he has also taken the Stage 2 course with TUC Education), Steve helped put together a vocational training programme, which is assessed onsite by West Nottinghamshire College.

To date, nine people have completed NVQs in coach driving, three in Warehousing Operations, two in Business Administration and one in Traffic Office Operations, while Steve is one of four more drivers aiming to complete Coach Driving NVQs later this year.

"The college was very forthcoming with information and support, and since we are a 24-hour operation with people on different shifts, the assessor came in at various different times of the day to meet and support and assess everyone," Steve says.

Steve also arranged for a tutor from the college to run functional skills sessions in the training room onsite to help seven people improve their English and maths at the same time.

The branch signed a learning agreement with government services company Serco, which manages the site, in early 2012.



**“ Since first training as a ULR, Steve Fellows has taken on more union roles and is now branch secretary”**

has also been developing himself at the same time. After completing a Part-Time Certificate in Industrial Relations (with a distinction) at Keele University a year ago, he has now progressed onto the two-year Masters course.

With membership at pretty much 100 per cent, there hasn't been much opportunity for recruitment on the back of the courses, but they have changed people's perceptions of Unite, Richard argues.

"The learning agreement and the learning we offer has definitely raised our profile and created a positive link with Unite," Richard says.

"We want to show people that the union is in there all the time trying to do something positive for our members." ■



Unite's ground-breaking education system is helping migrant workers gain the wide range of communications skills they seek

# Migrant workers getting the skills they want

Unite has helped hundreds of migrant and domestic workers and their families secure a better deal in their lives by developing a pioneering learning programme.

**F**ormally launched in 2010, the United Migrant Workers Education Project (UMWEP) has helped around 2,000 migrant workers gain the communication skills to stand up for their rights at work and at home.

The project has achieved this extraordinary success without a penny of government money, by using a network of volunteer tutors to deliver free weekend classes in Faraday House, the London home of New York's Syracuse University (close to Unite's national headquarters).

UMWEP can trace its roots back to the learning opportunities Unite began running in 2007 as part of

the Justice For Cleaners campaign, which was created to give a voice to the migrant workers employed as cleaners in Canary Wharf, the City and on London Underground.

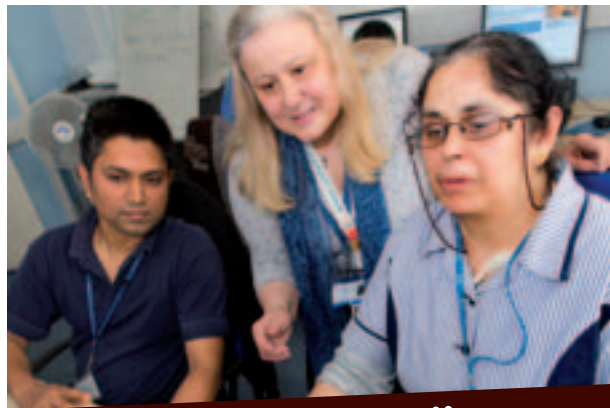
"The cleaning industry in London is dominated by migrants with English as a second Language," says Kwasi Agyemang-Prempeh, one of the first union learning reps for the Justice for Cleaners campaign.

"To overcome this and to support the campaign the union organised classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), IT, literacy and numeracy: education has been the driving force to the success of the campaign."

To build on the success of the learning programme, Justice For Cleaners, Justice For Domestic Workers, the Chinese Migrant Network and the London Hotel and Catering Branch of the TGWU (now part of Unite) got together in 2010 to create UMWEP itself.

It was the combination of migrant workers' restricted access to education in the UK and the withdrawal of

ULR Lisa Maw (centre) helps learners MD Khurshidur Rahman (left) and Bhupinder Bhambra



Joess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

government funding for ESOL learning that led the project to create its own Alternative Education Model (AEM).

“There is no budget, no paid tutors, no accreditation, no curriculum and no financial support from the official education system,” explains Learning Organiser Carlos Cruz Garcia.

“This is hard, but we have been doing it for three years now and we have not only managed to sustain the project but also spread the word across the country so other regions can follow this example.”

Before adopting the Alternative Education Model, UMWEP had just three qualified tutors and offered three courses – ESOL, IT and maths.

Since adopting the AEM, the project can now call on 22 volunteer tutors and can offer six different courses at various different levels including ESOL, maths, IT, art and dance.

In addition, this year the project has begun offering classes in Latin American traditional dance, Spanish language, creative writing and playback theatre (interactive drama, where audience members share their life stories for them to be re-enacted spontaneously on stage).

The project has also begun organising the AEM summer school seminars, which have covered:

- employment rights for people who have never been union members before;
- migration and migrant workers;
- social justice (a drama workshop delivered by the Red Ladder Theatre Company).

Carlos says that the project is not trying to provide education on a traditional model. “We are not simply trying to teach people how to add and subtract or spell the word ‘curriculum’ correctly,” he says.

“We are giving people a tool with which to organise and defend themselves, which is why domestic workers learn the English in their ESOL class that they need to deal with the problems they have, such as the way their bosses treat them like a member of the family who has no rights.” ■

## Injecting new skills in the NHS

Lisa Maw knew very little about trade unions when she volunteered to become a learning rep at West London Mental Health Trust three years ago, but she returned home from the Unite ULR course in Esher Place inspired and ready for action.

“As a newcomer, I didn’t know anything about unions at all, but being immersed with a whole mixture of people who had things happening in their companies gave me a huge boost and really got the creative juices flowing,” she recalls.

Since then she has helped dozens of colleagues improve their English and maths through Unite-led courses, and has now signed up more people for an autumn course in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) after an open day earlier this year.

A learning agreement was originally negotiated in 2011 at the joint learning committee, where the employer also agreed to fully fund ESOL courses for the lowest paid members of staff and granted some paid time off for learners.

This has been so successful that it has now developed into a rolling programme of ESOL delivery, and the employer has recently re-signed the agreement.

Promoting workplace learning has helped the branch gain new members during a period of cutbacks and restructuring, Lisa says.

“We have signed up quite a few new members, especially among the domestic staff, because they could see Unite was doing something positive, so it’s been a good recruitment tool as well,” she says.

# Turning learners into activists

With the help of learning with Unite, Southampton member Simon Cotton has not only started to come to terms with his dyslexia, but he has now also trained to be a steward and a safety rep in the branch.

Since the branch first opened an onsite learning centre eight years ago, it has helped more than 100 members complete literacy and numeracy courses up to Level 2 (equivalent to a good GCSE pass).

For many members, these are the first qualifications they have achieved, and they have transformed themselves in the process.

Refuse and recycling worker Simon is a classic example. When he arrived at the council eight years ago, he was both very shy and prone to outbursts of anger thanks to his hugely negative experiences at school.

Even though he was not physically or mentally disabled himself, Simon had been sent to a secondary school for children with physical and mental disabilities because no one had diagnosed that his problems with learning were rooted in undiagnosed dyslexia.

Frustrated at being taught in the wrong environment for him, Simon began acting up in class, which caused trouble with his new teachers.

But what really destroyed his self-confidence was when he bumped into a group of old friends from primary school one day who beat him up for wearing a special school uniform.

When he eventually left school, he started work collecting trolleys in a supermarket, before he was promoted first to work on the checkouts and then in the bakery.

But the success of his new responsibilities turned to ashes because he was too ashamed of his learning issues as a result of his schooling to ask for help with the weights, measures and numerical barcodes that were a key component of the job.

Hence his arrival at the council – which happened to coincide with the opening of the Unite branch's first learning centre.

But ULRs Dave Ross and John Early had the devil's



Southampton learner Simon Cotton, who has progressed onto shop steward and safety rep courses, collects his unionlearn award from unionlearn Regional Manager Barry Francis



Southampton Unite members enjoy a health tour of the city port during Adult Learners' Week

Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk



Southampton members dig deeper into history by exploring the city's archives during Adult Learners' Week

**“It's great to see how Simon has grasped the opportunity and faced his demons and wanted to learn”**

**Dave Ross, ULR**

own job to persuade him to try learning alongside his new colleagues.

“I resisted at first as I didn't want to highlight my condition to workmates and my new employer,” Simon recalls.

But Dave and John didn't give up. They're not that kind of people. And they eventually convinced Simon that tackling functional skills in the supportive environment of the Unite learning centre would be completely different to his experience at school.

And they were right. Not only has Simon now achieved his Entry Level 3 literacy qualification and secured promotion to charge hand, he has also completed the TUC's shop stewards stage one course and become a Unite health and safety rep.

“I hope to inspire others who face the same or similar barriers to learning as I did growing up and to show, that tackling your gremlins can lead to a better way of life,” he says.

Dave is proud of the way Unite has helped someone who had been failed by the mainstream education system.

“It is great to see how Simon has grasped the opportunity and faced his demons and wanted to learn: he is an inspiration to others,” he says.

Simon's commitment and dedication was recognised by the TUC's learning and skills arm unionlearn, when its Southern and Eastern Region named him Learner of the Year at its annual conference in November 2012.

ULR Dave, who works as a painter and decorator at the council, was already a steward and safety rep when the learning centre opened, but he was keen to get involved in the new project and trained as a ULR as soon as he could.

“I wanted to get involved right from the beginning because I felt I could offer something, that I could help people find their way back into education,” he says. “I get a buzz to see people improving themselves and see the changes they're making to their lives.”

Originally opened in 2005, the learning centre was re-launched in autumn 2012 after the authority moved its refuse and recycling operation into new premises in the Millbrook area of the city.

Staff from right across the council use the centre to

improve their skills, Dave says. “We have building maintenance people, people from refuse and recycling, parks, traffic wardens, you name it – we've even had people from management and administration doing our photo-editing courses,” he explains.

At the moment, Totton College delivers functional skills courses on Thursdays (learners are given at least 50 per cent paid release to gain their qualifications), and there are drop-in sessions on Wednesday and Friday afternoons.

In addition, the centre has now opened its doors to the local community as well, hosting English classes every Monday that are delivered by Southampton City College for small groups of local residents.

And the ULR team organises an annual quiz night, where the proceeds are always donated to a local good cause – the centre raised more than £1,200 for one of the local hospitals in autumn 2012.

Dave is keen to build on the successes of recent years and continue to expand what is on offer by responding to what learners need.

“If we find there's something that people want, then we just go that way – it's whatever we can do to help people. I would like to see the centre being used every day and every hour of the day throughout the week,” he says.

Such is his commitment to the centre (he gives up a great deal of his own time to keep everything ticking over), it's no wonder Dave was named Unite's first national ULR of the Year in February 2013.

“Dave has done a fantastic job over the last few years in terms of putting people through courses and building the union,” says Learning Organiser John Barr. “As well being a health and safety rep and shop steward, Dave has been an absolutely stunning ULR.” ■

# Recruiting hard to reach workers

By offering staff in a Bristol shopping centre the chance to learn through the union, Unite is building a firm foundation for expanding into a number of greenfield sites in the city.

Unite has signed a learning agreement with facilities management company OCS that enables members working at the Cabot Circus shopping centre in Bristol to undertake learning in the workplace.

And the union is both building on the learning agreement to secure recognition at the site and working to extend the learning programme to potential members employed by OCS at two other Bristol shopping centres.

It was a union member's request for help with learning issues that first brought the south-west lifelong learning team to Cabot Circus in autumn 2011.

Recently promoted to a supervisor's role, the member was having problems dealing with the paperwork, but the company was threatening disciplinary action instead of trying to get them help.

Once the threat of disciplinary action was lifted after representation by a Unite regional industrial officer, the lifelong learning team sat down with management and discussed the best way to move forward.

"We talked to them about learning in general and pointed out how likely it was that a number of their staff in cleaning, reception and security might have similar issues that they needed support with," recalls Regional Learning Manager Stephanie Wring.

"We pointed out that in order for them to be able to provide good service and stay safe at work, it would be important to look at their English and maths and give them the opportunity to upskill – and we could support them to do that."

As initial talks happened in the run-up to Christmas and the January sales that year, both sides agreed to



Adrian Pilkington

**“The learning agreement at Cabot Circus means we can start talking to management at other shopping centres”**

**Stephanie Wring, Learning Manager**

return to the issue early in 2012, when it would be easier to organise assessments and courses.

In May 2012, the company signed a learning agreement, which entitles staff to 100 per cent paid release to improve their English and maths and 50 per cent to develop their computer skills.

An IT course is already underway through Yeovil College and English and maths courses are kicking off later this year. In addition, the college has agreed to deliver an adult apprenticeship programme for staff at the shopping centre.

“We have managed to secure a pot of money with the provider to invest in our members: OCS would not have spent the money on training their staff,” Stephanie points out.

By representing what was at the time its sole member at the site and developing a relevant learning offer for Unite members, the union has recruited well over a dozen new members at Cabot Circus as well as a new union learning rep and is keen to build on its success.

“We hope that the learning programme at Cabot Circus will lead to a point where we are strong enough to secure recognition,” Stephanie says.

“But in the meantime, having the learning agreement at the site means we can start talking to management at The Galleries and The Mall shopping centres, where OCS provides the same services.”

Lifelong learning has been central to the organising campaign, Stephanie says. “It has given us a way in to support people and grow our membership in an area where people are usually hard to reach because of the shifts they work and fearful of the consequences of stepping out of line,” she says. ■

## **Giving Polish migrants a voice at work**

A three-pronged campaign involving Unite’s industrial, organising and lifelong learning teams in the south-west is helping migrant workers get a better deal at the Gloucestershire chicken factory where they work.

After a Polish worker from Freeman’s of Newent approached Unite in summer 2012, the industrial, organising and lifelong learning teams got together to invite everyone from the factory to a meeting about the workplace issues they wanted to resolve.

Thirty Polish workers arrived at the meeting, with one of their daughters taking the role of interpreter as the majority of them had very limited English skills.

While Regional Industrial Officer Trevor Hall explained the necessity of securing recognition to improve conditions and Organiser Dave Evens set out his strategy for building the union presence, Learning Organiser Andy Hewlett explained what the lifelong learning team could do.

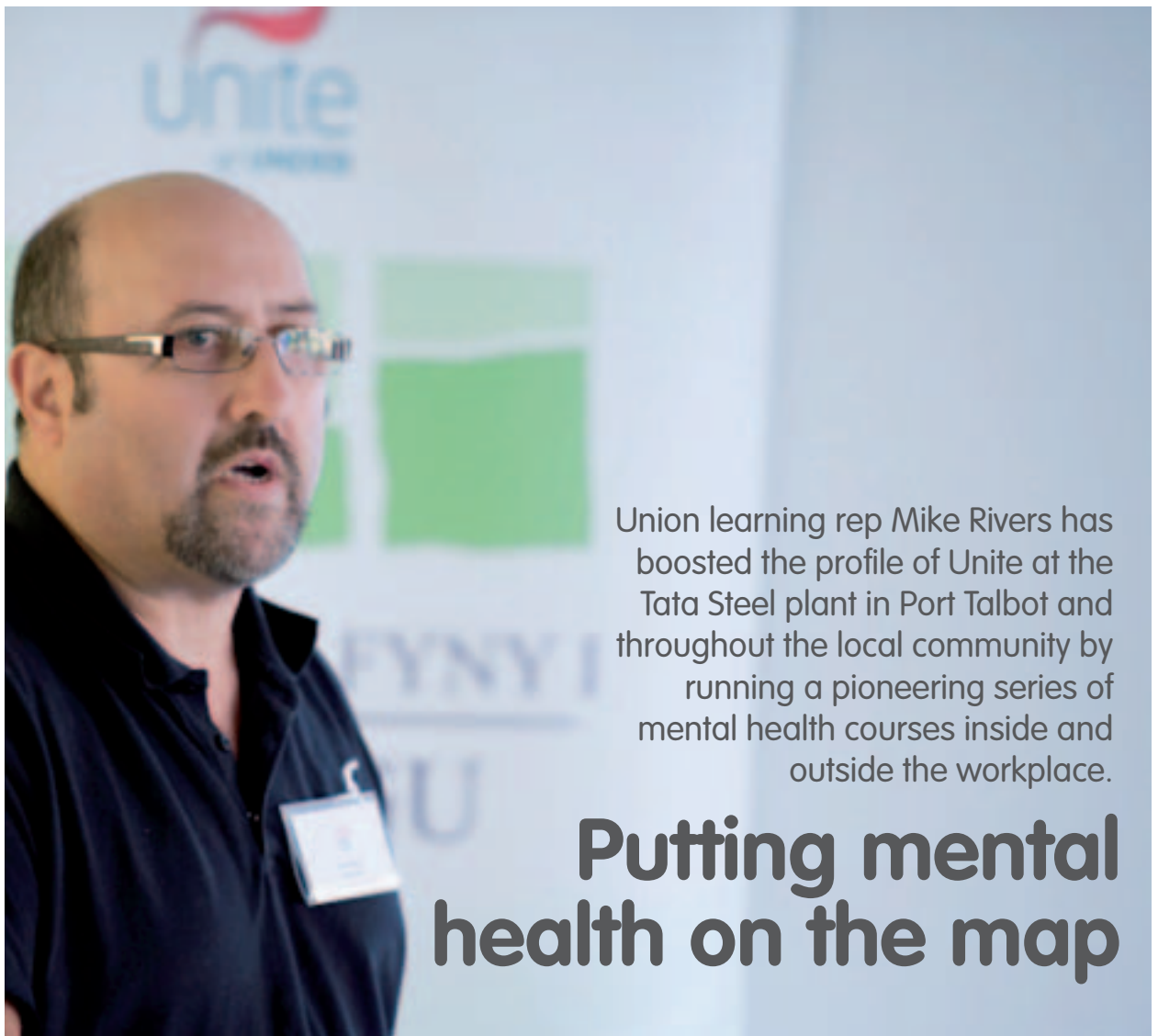
“Since it had quickly become obvious that language was a real barrier, I asked how many people would be interested in doing a course in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL),” Andy recalls.

“Everyone there said that they would and that they thought other workers would too.”

Andy then secured the agreement of South Gloucestershire and Stroud College (SGS) to deliver free ESOL classes at Unite’s Gloucester office on Saturday afternoons, to accommodate the workers’ shift patterns.

Run in two groups matching learners’ initial skills, the classes ran for three months in the first part of 2013, and feedback from participants was excellent.

The members have already started improving their conditions as a result of Unite’s support. At the instigation of the union, the company has now introduced a formal holiday application procedure for the first time, after a member was threatened with disciplinary action for taking a holiday she had verbally cleared with her supervisor (who then denied they had given permission when she returned to work).



Union learning rep Mike Rivers has boosted the profile of Unite at the Tata Steel plant in Port Talbot and throughout the local community by running a pioneering series of mental health courses inside and outside the workplace.

## Putting mental health on the map

**M**ike Rivers has been putting mental health on the workplace map ever since finding out that he was working in the area of Wales with the highest suicide rate for men.

The lead ULR for Unite at the Tata Steel plant in Port Talbot, Mike asked the Unite Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) team to finance a pilot project to raise awareness of mental health issues at his overwhelmingly male workplace.

"The steel industry is a very macho industry: people will come forward with physical problems but they are less willing to talk about mental health problems," Mike says.

"The idea of this course is quite simple: it is to take away the stigma about stress and increase people's understanding of stress, because taking away the ignorance helps people to come forward."

Running the pilot was Mike's attempt to change all that – and it worked, with 100 per cent attendance and 100 per cent positive feedback. "The news spread by word of mouth about what a good course it is," Mike says.

As a result, Mike has been running the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course at regular intervals at

the workplace.

Now more than 500 workers have got to grips with mental health issues by attending the 12-hour course, and the company has also adapted its training programme to ensure managers get the message, too.

Nigel Bowden, who works in the cold rolling mill, says completing the course has helped workers take better care of each other. "I feel I am better able to gauge the anxieties and sensitivities of my fellow workers – it has, quite literally, helped us to look out for each other," he says.

"I think everybody should receive this kind of advice: we should all aim to protect our mental health every day and give help to people with their mental health problems as early as possible."

To ensure the issues could be better addressed within the local community itself, Mike then successfully stood as a community councillor promoting the mental health agenda where he lives in the village of Seven Sisters.

Since his election two years ago, Mike has helped local residents improve their understanding of mental health issues by attending the MHFA course.

Unite WULF Project Manager Julie Evans is full of

praise for Mike's commitment to tackling what has been a taboo subject within the workplace and beyond.

"By raising this sensitive issue in a very traditional male environment, he is making a very real difference to his colleagues, the whole of his workplace and the rest of the local community," Julie says. ■

**“By raising this sensitive issue in a very traditional male environment, Mike is making a very real difference”**

Julie Evans, WULF Project Manager

## Helping hard-hit Holyhead

Unite has proved its worth to the hard-hit local community in Holyhead, North Wales, by opening a community learning hub in partnership with multinational electronics firm Eaton Electric.

Since opening in December 2010, the hub has quickly established itself as a vital resource in an area hit by a series of redundancies in recent years, including 450 jobs at Anglesey Aluminium and another 220 at Eaton itself.

The union works with local providers, community groups and employers to host educational events, essential skills courses and other learning opportunities that help Eaton employees and local residents develop skills to enhance their job prospects and work towards recognised vocational qualifications.

Unite WULF Project Coordinator Glyn Haynes, who knew the plant well having been the Unite convenor there for several years, first approached Eaton Electric Aftermarket Site Manager David Rees early in 2010 to suggest opening the community learning hub onsite.

"We said we would provide the computer equipment and David agreed the company would invest in the refurbishment of what used to be the canteen area," Glyn recalls.

Since the hub opened, many of the remaining Unite members at Eaton have started learning again, with the first cohort completing a



Eaton Electric Plant Manager David Rees signs the Employer Pledge to launch the Holyhead learning hub, with Wales TUC Project Worker Angela Baugh (seated, left) and the then essential skills tutor Claire Huband

Mike Powell

communications course in March 2012.

"I have learnt new skills to use in work but also in my work for the community," says Andrew Devlin. "I coach the junior football team for Holyhead and Anglesey and the new ICT skills I have learnt are very beneficial as I can produce training schedules for the teams."

In addition, the centre hosts a wide range of courses for local residents, including First Aid, health and safety, and food safety.

"Running the learning hub in an area with such high unemployment shows the local community that we are working with them, and helps us retain members at risk of redundancy as they know there is a facility they can use to help them improve their skills to find another job," Glyn says.

Unite has quadrupled its membership at the Royal Bank of Scotland Mortgage Centre in Greenock by creating a member-led learning programme that has helped more than 120 people improve a wide range of skills.

## Building the branch through learning

Unite is building a vibrant branch at the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) Mortgage Centre at Greenock, through a massively popular learning programme developed by new activist Sonya Cassidy.

When Sonya first trained as a ULR at the end of 2010, the branch had few members in the workplace and a large number of industrial issues on its plate.

But with the help of workplace rep Stephen McCauley, Sonya has set about changing all that: and now between them they have quadrupled Unite membership by developing a member-led learning programme that has helped more than 120 staff improve a wide range of skills.

"Sonya is a passionate advocate of learning in the workplace who has become a driving force in the success of this programme," says Learning Organiser Lindsey Millen, who has worked closely with her over the past two years.

"Her motivation to improve life for her members and to recruit new members was evident from the beginning and activity began straight away when she completed her training as a ULR."

In fact, it took Sonya just three months to persuade management at the centre to buy in to Unite plans for a comprehensive workplace learning offer.

Once Stow College Trade Union Education Centre in Glasgow had put together a bespoke programme to meet the needs of the workforce, Sonya and Stephen

secured agreement from the employer over onsite facilities to run the courses at times to suit the staff.

The branch formally launched the new learning offer in July 2011, organising an event with Sonya and Stephen setting up a stall in the workplace where people could come and speak to them about learning, discuss their aspirations and find out more about the opportunities available.

In a huge boost to the reps who had put so much work into the event, more than 220 people completed the learning survey the activists had put together for the launch, which gave Sonya and Stephen all the information they needed about which of the Stow courses would prove most popular.

The branch kicked off the learning programme as soon as the summer holidays were over a few weeks later, with a course on Understanding Pensions in September 2011.

"This was a powerful demonstration of how Unite can quickly respond to its members' needs, and how union-led learning is truly driven by the needs of the learners themselves," says Lindsey.

"The buzz created onsite was remarkable; the increased level of union activity resulted in a visible increase in the confidence of staff members in their ability to raise industrial issues and change things for the better in their workplace."

But the learning programme didn't simply generate



Unite learning rep Sonya Cassidy collects the STUC Helen Dowie Award for Lifelong Learning from Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond

Louis Flood

**“This was a powerful demonstration of how Unite can quickly respond to its members’ needs”**

Lindsey Millen, Learning Organiser



Scottish ULR of the year Sonya Cassidy collects her award from General Secretary Len McCluskey

Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

a collective feel-good factor: staff attracted by the opportunity to develop their skills at work began joining Unite in their droves, lifting membership density from a mere 6 per cent in November 2010 to 25 per cent in just over two years.

The pensions courses has since been followed by communications, computing Level 1, Spanish Level 1 and 2 and British Sign Language introductory, Level 1 and 2.

Sonya's talent for combining the learning and organising agendas won her not one but two awards in the first half of 2013. First came Unite's own Scottish ULR of the Year award in February. And then, two months later, she won the Scottish TUC Helen Dowie Award for Lifelong Learning (following in the footsteps of 2012 winner Janette Dunbar, Unite ULR at Diageo Kilmarnock).

“I was very pleased to receive this award, which recognises the work I am doing as a ULR,” Sonya says. “I very much enjoy my role in organising and delivering learning and I’m keen to offer every single person in my workplace the opportunity to participate in learning through Unite.”

As well as attracting dozens of new members, the branch has also recruited a number of new reps, including Yvonne Milloy (workplace/equalities) and Sharon Campbell (health and safety), with three more reps currently in training: Craig McGeoghehan and Fraser McNeil (both health and safety) and Mark Perrie

(workplace rep).

The team has recently launched a second learning survey, covering Greenock and Glasgow, to help plot the next stage of the journey, and has added the sought-after European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) qualification to the learning offer.

And thanks to the activism of all its RBS reps, Unite launched a new branch at the Mortgage Centre (RBS Inverclyde) earlier this year.

“I see the opportunity for the learning programme to reach out beyond the Greenock Mortgage Centre,” Sonya says.

“I now have a contact in one of our local branches in Greenock, we have recruited two new ULRs in one of our larger Glasgow sites and a lot of our staff have family and friends working in different areas of the bank.”

Lindsey reckons the branch looks set to continue to grow through learning. “The ongoing activity around the learning programme continues to attract new members, with several new applications coming in on a weekly basis, and the positive interest generated among the staff will no doubt result in the density increasing even further,” she says.

“The learning project in RBS shows us what an inclusive, supportive and active union Unite is, and is a wonderful example of how reps can make a real difference to their members, and to the membership of the union as a whole.” ■



Unite Learning Organiser Clare Caulfield (second right) and Northern Ireland Water Training Manager Hugh Curley (second left) collect their joint AONTAS award from Irish Lifelong Learning Minister Sean Haughey (right) and broadcaster Mary Kennedy (left)

## Helping members deal with change

When Northern Ireland Water announced it was moving to a computer-based work system, Unite stepped in with a learning programme that helped union members and their families get to grips with English, maths and ICT.

**T**he massive learning programme that Unite delivered for staff at Northern Ireland Water helped the union retain members during a major overhaul of working practices at the utility company.

It also helped union members conquer lifelong issues with reading and writing and equip them with the IT skills they needed to operate a multi-million pound computer-based work system.

Northern Ireland Water planned to introduce the Mobile Work Management (MWM) system to streamline the way the company carried out its industrial operations five years ago.

But it had not taken into account how its mostly middle-aged male workforce would react to changes in work practices that would expose gaps in their functional skills.

"The way it used to work, the men would turn up at the yard in the morning, get into their van and go out

to work with their buddy – and if one of them had problems with English or maths, the other would take care of all the paperwork," explains Unite senior shop steward Nicky McAteer.

"But under the MWM programme, the guys would get into the van in the morning at home, log in through a laptop to get the details of their first job for the day and go straight there – and that was quite daunting for most of them."

The trouble was that the vast majority of the workforce wanted nothing to do with the new programme – and significant numbers were getting signed off on long-term sick leave or taking voluntary redundancy as a result.

"When we started talking to the men, it turned out that they couldn't use IT equipment, as the majority of them were in the 45 to 55 age bracket," explains Learning Organiser Clare Caulfield.

**“Northern Ireland Water were so delighted that they nominated Unite for an all-Ireland training award”**

**Clare Caulfield**  
Learning Organiser

“So we went back to Northern Ireland Water and said we would go out and assess the industrial staff in English, maths and IT and see how we could help from there.”

The results of the assessments surprised everyone. “Out of the 450 men we assessed in English, 22 per cent of them couldn’t read and 16 per cent couldn’t write their own name,” Clare recalls.

Northern Ireland Water agreed to Unite’s proposal to launch a full-scale learning programme before implementing the new work management programme.

MWM Manager Deirdre Glenholmes scheduled a rolling programme of release for learning across the company, while Unite ULR Gerry Smith was given paid release as a seconded rep to run the first phase of the project on the ground.

It was Gerry who made contact with local colleges throughout Northern Ireland, arranged classes and tutors and supported the members, most of whom were returning to learning after a break of 30-odd years.

“Gerry would meet the guys before their first class, get them settled in and stay with them through the whole session – I can’t sing his praises highly enough, that guy did a mountain of work,” Nicky says.

As part of the lifelong learning agreement Unite signed with the company, workers were given paid release to attend classes during the working day (they could go to evening classes if they preferred – the system was flexible).

The company also split the cost of formal dyslexia assessments with the union, which helped some members overcome barriers to learning that they had been living with their whole lives until then.

“There was one guy who was severely dyslexic who told me he’d been struggling with this major problem all his life – he couldn’t even write his own name before but now he is continuing a one-to-one class which he’s finding brilliant,” Nicky says.

The success of the learning programme was down to the partnership between the company and

Unite, according to Human Resources Manager Kathleen Simpson.

“Because it was done through the company and the union, the frontline operatives realised that Mobile Work Management wasn’t change for change’s sake: it was about what we need to do to bring individuals along and how we could support people through it,” she says.

“And on the back of the learning agreement, the way we released people through their work to take part in learning, which had never happened before, showed we were willing to get through this together.”

Overall, Unite has helped 400 people gain qualifications in English, maths and IT at Northern Ireland Water – and the union extended the offer to family members as well.

“It was absolutely huge: Northern Ireland Water were so delighted, they nominated Unite for one of the all-Ireland training awards run by the Irish adult learning organisation AONTAS – the first time a union had ever been nominated by an employer,” Clare recalls.

In fact, Unite ended up winning the workplace category throughout Ireland, collecting the award at a special ceremony in Dublin Castle.

By developing the comprehensive, worker-oriented learning programme, Unite has successfully retained membership levels at Northern Ireland Water through a period of enormous upheaval.

“We were losing members through voluntary redundancy and people resigning before anyone knew what the issue really was,” explains Clare. “But once we went round and started working with the men, we ended up retaining them.” ■



Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

# Learn with Unite

Unite has its very own learning portal featuring a wealth of resources to help members improve their skills across a wide range of subjects. To get started, simply log on to [www.learnwithunite.org](http://www.learnwithunite.org) with a valid email address.

- New to computers but keen to learn?
  - Happy using a computer but want a qualification?
  - Interested in taking your skills to a higher level?
- We offer a range of help, support and accredited learning to members and activists at: [www.learnwithunite.org](http://www.learnwithunite.org)

## Online Basics

Short course for those new to computers, covering:

- using a keyboard and mouse
- searching and exploring the internet
- keeping in touch by email
- staying safe online.

## Keyboard Pro

Ever wondered what it would be like to type with all your fingers? This interactive online programme will take you just that, taking you through the keyboard and improving your typing speed and accuracy. This course usually costs over £30, but as a Unite member you pay just £10.

## Introduction to ICT

You can work towards an ITQ Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3 on these courses, which cover:

- computer basics
- file management
- internet and email security
- improving productivity
- Word
- Excel
- PowerPoint
- creating a web presence.

## Redundancy support course

Whether you are facing redundancy or simply want to prepare yourself to look for another job, this course helps you to:

- create a CV
- practise completing application forms
- create targeted and speculative letters
- prepare for job interviews
- search online for jobs.

Find more support in the 'Members Matter' area on the site if you are facing redundancy or have recently been made redundant.

# Useful resources

This is a short selection of websites and self-help portals where learners and learning reps can find useful information and resources.

## Improving skills

### British Dyslexia Association

Support and resources for dyslexic learners  
[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)

### Learn with Unite

Your union's own learning portal with a range of resources  
[www.learnwithunite.org](http://www.learnwithunite.org)

### Move On

National campaign to improve adult literacy and numeracy  
[www.move-on.org.uk](http://www.move-on.org.uk)

### Quick Reads

Publishes annual collection of short novels for emergent adult readers  
[www.quickreads.org.uk](http://www.quickreads.org.uk)

### Skills Workshop

Free functional skills resources  
[www.skillsworkshop.org](http://www.skillsworkshop.org)

### Six Book Challenge

Useful reading initiative for workplaces  
[www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk](http://www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk)

## Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

### National Careers Service

Provides information, advice and guidance to help people make decisions on learning, training and work opportunities  
[nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk](http://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk)  
 0800 100 900

### Unionlearn

Offers a range of resources and training courses to help ULRs inform, advise and guide their learners  
[www.unionlearn.org.uk/supportinglearners](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/supportinglearners)

### Floodlight

Originally launched to help Londoners find courses, now expanded to cover 43 major towns and cities all over the UK  
[London.floodlight.co.uk](http://London.floodlight.co.uk)

## Sector Skills Councils

Independent, employer-led organisations that help shape the learning opportunities available to Unite members. Follow the links to the SSC that covers your sector from the unionlearn website  
[www.unionlearn.org.uk/our-work-and-projects/supporting-learners/careers-advice/sector-skills-councils-careers-links](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/our-work-and-projects/supporting-learners/careers-advice/sector-skills-councils-careers-links)

## Campaigning organisations

### Campaign for Learning

Runs Learning At Work Day every year, plus other workplace initiatives  
[www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk](http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk)

### National Institute for Adult Continuing Education

Runs Adult Learners' Week every year and other lifelong learning initiatives  
[www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

## Equality and diversity

### Equality & Diversity Forum

Network of national organisation committed to progressing equalities  
[www.edf.org.uk](http://www.edf.org.uk)

### Equality and Human Rights Commission

Responsible for promoting equality and human rights, producing codes of practice and giving advice and guidance  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

## Higher Education (HE)

### Birkbeck, University of London

Union members can claim a 10 per cent discount on their course fees at London's only specialist provider of evening higher education, which runs regular free advice and support sessions for prospective students  
[www.bbk.ac.uk/unions](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/unions)  
[www.bbk.ac.uk/tryit](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/tryit)



Unite's lifelong learning team, photographed in March on the steps of the union's Eastbourne centre

# Introducing the lifelong learning team

Unite's lifelong learning team works to create flexible, quality learning opportunities within the workplace and the community. We support members with personal development, improving their employment prospects and quality of life while enhancing the union's strategy for growth.

## What we do

- Develop educational opportunities that support the diversity of our society both in the workplace and the community.
- Ensure that learning is available, accessible and inclusive for all, allowing all who wish to join us the chance to grow and reach their full potential.
- Collaborating with local education providers to ensure high quality learning, support and progression, from English, maths and ICT to Higher Education.
- Building free community learning initiatives, using community members to facilitate learning programmes through Unite's Alternative Education Model.

## How we do it

- Recruiting and training union learning representatives (ULRs) to promote learning in the workplace.

## What it means for you

Through lifelong learning, we can help you develop your potential in the workplace, the community and also within Unite the union itself.

# Stay in touch

The team comprises the Head of Lifelong Learning, Regional Learning Managers, learning organisers and national coordinators.

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# Unite's lifelong learning vision and our strategy for growth

## Unite will:

- increase the life chances of its members in the workplace and the community using lifelong learning
- guarantee the high standard and quality of all its flexible learning opportunities
- use lifelong learning to develop its members so that they will be able to reach their full potential within the Unite organisation
- bring flexible learning opportunities into the heart of communities
- be the most progressive trade union organisation that will be able to create sustainable and innovative alternative education models
- use lifelong learning to enhance ongoing employment opportunities to its members through the member retention strategy
- measure the success of lifelong learning through its activities delivered within its strategy for growth.

**Union  
Learning  
Fund**

with **unionlearn**

The logo graphic for Unite the Union, featuring a stylized flame or ribbon shape in red and orange colors.

**unite**  
the**UNION**