Higher education at work: Making the case to employers
A guide for trade union reps
Although there have been huge changes in higher education over the last twenty years, there are still many people who feel that it is ‘not for them’.

The image that many people have in their minds is of young people going away to university to study for a degree in some academic subject. This is often not a choice that they want to make or sometimes it is not a choice that is open to them, for financial or family reasons.

The sad thing is that many people who have the capacity to benefit from higher education currently do not participate in it. That is why there are further changes in the provision of higher education opportunities that will enable more people to follow education and training programmes that are part-time, flexible and work-based.

In this guide you will find information that will help you in discussions with employers about support for employees needing to access education and training. Why is this important? All of the available analysis shows that expansion of employment opportunities in the future will require skills and knowledge that is represented by higher level qualifications. These can be designed, like Foundation degrees, around the particular knowledge and employability skills needs of a wide range of sectors. Much of the programme can be delivered through workplace learning in collaboration with employers.

The partnership between fdf (Foundation Degree Forward) and unionlearn is about raising aspiration. It is about raising the aspirations of many employers and persuading them to see that education and training is vital to both the people they employ and their business or service. This really is about investing in people. Too many employers in the UK still do not create the conditions within the workplace for learning and development to happen. As a result many people feel under-valued and under-employed.

It is also about raising employee aspiration and demand for education and training at the right sort of levels to secure their future careers and to equip them to face the challenges ahead following the current recession. This is not just a matter of economics; it is also a matter of social justice in terms of equality.

We spend a great deal of our lives at work. Through education and training we can make our work rewarding, fulfilling and satisfying for our families and ourselves.

We hope that you find this guide helpful in furthering these objectives.
Who is this guide for?

As a union rep you have a key role to play in negotiating with employers about learning in the workplace. If you are a union learning rep (ULR) you may be working with other reps to carry out this aspect of your role and to create and maintain a learning agreement with your employer. This guide is for all reps working with all learners who wish to progress in their learning or their career.

What is this guide about?

This guide is about the skills and knowledge you will need to make a case for support for learners who want to progress to higher education (HE). It refers to frameworks and provision in England, but will still be helpful for reps in other parts of the UK.

It helps to answer the questions your employer might have about work-based HE and the benefits and impact on the workplace if staff take up opportunities at this level. The guide also helps you to research the information you need to make a strong case for securing employer support for members. Union reps and members present their experiences of employer support and their top tips for making the case.
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Using this guide to make a win-win situation for HE

The following chart sets out at a glance the seven different stages you need to go through in order to make the best possible case for access to HE in the workplace.

**THE CONTEXT**

- Who else can you work with in the union?
- Is there a unionlearn regional HE project?
- Is there a learning agreement and does it include HE?
- Is your employer signed up to the Skills Pledge or IIP?
- What are the skills gaps in your workplace or in the sector?

**THE FACTS**

- Why HE in your workplace? What is the rationale?
- What are your aims and objectives? Where do you want to get to via HE study?
- What level would be best for you?
- How do you want to study?
- Which providers offer the HE course or programme and mode of study that you want?

**6. CHOOSE THE COURSE OR PROGRAMME**

- What are the specific benefits for your employer?
- How do the benefits link to strategic or business plans?
- What support do you want from your employer?
- Who can help you at work?

- What concerns will your employer have and how will you address these?
- What is Plan B?
- What are the alternatives?
- What is the timescale?
- When is the best time for all to ask?
Using this guide to make a win-win situation for HE

3. GET INFORMATION AND ADVICE
   - Is there a policy about learning or training entitlement or a development review process?
   - How can you get senior and middle management commitment to HE?
   - Who is the best person to approach about HE in the workplace?
   - What scope is there for joint identification of needs and joint approaches?
   - Are there any HE providers your employer or union works with regularly?

4. DECIDE WHO TO WORK WITH
   - What skills and knowledge will each option equip you with?
   - What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?
   - Which options are best suited to work-based learning?
   - What are the entry requirements and will you need any tasters/preparatory sessions? When do you need to apply?

5. PREPARE THE GROUNDWORK
   - What are the costs and can they be reduced through discounts, contributions from the union or other financial help?

6. MAKE THE CASE
   - SET IT OUT CLEARLY
   - USE NEGOTIATING SKILLS
   - BE POSITIVE
   - WORK TOGETHER

Is there a policy about learning or training entitlement or a development review process?
How can you get senior and middle management commitment to HE?
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What are the costs and can they be reduced through discounts, contributions from the union or other financial help?

Higher education at work: Making the case to employers
Getting started

Why HE is important in your workplace

As a union rep, you have a key role in supporting learners, negotiating with providers to work flexibly with union learners and negotiating with employers to support staff into appropriate levels of learning, including HE.

Getting people into HE is vital for the UK economy. Seventy per cent of the people that will be in the workforce in 2020 are already working, so the Government wants to support those already in work to develop higher level skills and knowledge. HE is not just for the privileged few or just for young people. It is for anyone who wants to progress in their learning or open new possibilities at any stage in life. Unions have a unique role to play in understanding the learning needs of members and working with employers, universities and colleges to meet them.
Negotiating skills

If you are a union learning rep (ULR), you may not have any experience of negotiating with employers and you will need to work closely with other reps. The skills you will need to help union members to make a case for support to access HE courses are the basic negotiating skills needed by any union rep:

- being clear about your aims and objectives
- doing research and preparing your case
- getting the facts right and presenting them clearly
- understanding your employer’s concerns and anticipating arguments against your case
- being ready with counter arguments
- being clear about possible compromises – having a ‘plan B’.

TUC Education runs a number of courses to help you to develop your negotiating skills. You can find out more about these on the unionlearn website. Your union will also be able to help you.

HE in a learning workplace

If you are a ULR you will also be familiar with strategies to create a learning workplace, and with the sources of information needed to research your case. ‘Top Tips for a Learning Workplace’ in the ULR manual is a good starting point for thinking through how to approach access to HE for members in your workplace. They include the following:

- Use the skills and experience of all union reps, including ULRs.
- Go for a joint union-management approach where possible.
- Get commitment from senior and middle managers.
- Find out what members want to learn and how they want to learn.
- Help members to assess the best starting points for them.
- Check out what is already happening.
- Get the right information, advice and guidance and find out about ongoing support.
- Make the most of ICT to research the best courses and for online and distance learning.
- Find resources and support to help members to learn.
- Build partnerships.
- Negotiate a learning agreement.
- Publicise your successes.
- As well as what can be made available through your learning centre, find out about the range of learning options that can be built in at any level, including work shadowing, coaching and mentoring, courses with work placements, job swaps, open learning, work-based projects and assignments, and e-learning.

Start with a learning agreement

The best basis for negotiating about HE is to have a learning agreement with your employer that includes all levels of learning. Your union will be able to help you with this, and model learning agreements are available on the unionlearn website and in Working for Learners: a handbook for unions and their union learning representatives.

Get help with your research

In order to negotiate successfully about HE, you will need some specialist knowledge to support your case, which this guide will signpost you to. Don’t forget that you and your members can always use the unionlearn learning and careers advice service to find or check information about courses, funding and support at all levels of learning. You can access the service through the unionlearn website www.unionlearn.org.uk/uladvice and via a special free telephone helpline number 08000 929190 from 8am to 10pm daily. Posters, cards and leaflets are available from unionlearn to display in the workplace or in your learning centre.

Visit www.unionlearn.org.uk for details of other relevant unionlearn publications for reps.
What employers want to know

Before you approach your employer you need to anticipate the questions that might be asked about HE and do some research. You and the members you are working with might also want to know the answers!
Employers’ questions might include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is HE?</td>
<td>What will my employees actually be doing if they do an HE course while working?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you tell me more about Foundation degrees?</td>
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You will find answers to these questions as you read through this guide although you will also need to do your own research on specific courses and programmes, local provision and individual costs and funding.
What is HE?

HE has changed! It is not just about full-time degree courses. It is a term used for any study that leads to qualifications at Level 4 and above, and there are lots of different options, many of them designed for working people. Learners can study full-time, part-time, at work, by distance learning, in college, or at home.

Good HE options for working people include:

- **Foundation degrees**
  
  Foundation degrees (Fd) are work-based learning qualifications developed by partnerships of employers, providers and universities, a degree in their own right, and equivalent to the first two years of a full-time degree. They can provide access to the final year of an Honours degree. They combine academic and work-based learning, and can be studied full or part time. The part-time option is ideal for working people. Fds can be studied online and by distance learning.

- **Higher National Diplomas and Certificates**
  
  Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Higher National Certificates (HNCs) can be taken full or part time in a range of vocational subjects. The emphasis is on the development of knowledge and skills needed for the workplace. Like Foundation degrees, if relevant modules have been taken, it is possible to ‘top up’ these qualifications to a degree.

- **Postgraduate qualifications**
  
  These are usually taken by learners who already have a degree but some adult learners may be able to enter with relevant work experience. Courses may be taught or research based and may lead to a range of qualifications including masters degrees, PhDs and postgraduate certificates or diplomas.

- **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**
  
  Learners can study for a range of HE short courses, many of which carry a certificate or can count towards a qualification or to maintaining professional registration. These cover a wide range of subjects and can be studied at college or by distance learning. Short courses are often available in the evening, or as residential courses at weekends or can be completed online and at home or work.

- **Part-time or distance learning degree courses**
  
  Universities offer a range of degree courses on a part-time or modular basis but studying in this way may add two to three years to the length of the course. However, if the qualification is work-based and draws on your work experience it may take a shorter time. Degree courses are also available by distance learning, which means that studying can be done at home or at work. The biggest provider of distance learning degrees is the Open University (OU), and union members can get a 10 per cent discount for some courses.

There is a lot of choice, and for all of these you don’t have to stop working.

Employers can also get involved in developing Foundation degrees to ensure that they provide real progression routes for employees and meet business needs and sector requirements. Foundation degree courses are intended to be designed with employer involvement.

Find out more in ‘Get Involved in Developing Tailor-made HE’ (page 25).
Can you tell me more about Foundation degrees (Fds)?

Fds are accessible, flexible, tailored to the needs of working people and employers, and there is no need to stop working and run up debts in order to gain a higher level qualification.

Many Fd students are over 25 and had never thought of themselves as gaining a higher education qualification while they earn. Recent research has shown that the majority of part-time work-based learners doing Fds wanted to improve their capability in their current job, and made the choice to do this with their employer. An Fd can allow staff to train with the minimum amount of time away from work.

There are more than 1,600 Fds available in a wide range of subjects, including: Agriculture and Environment; Computing; Construction; Engineering; Performing Arts; Public Services; Sport; Business; Community and Social Studies; Education; Health; Media; Science; Retail; Technology; and Veterinary Nursing.

What are Foundation degrees (Fds)?

Available to people in work, people who want to progress their careers and those who have completed Level 3 qualifications, including Advanced Apprenticeships, and also experienced adults without Level 3 qualifications

Integrate academic and work-based learning, developing skills, knowledge and understanding relevant to employment

Level 5, equivalent to the first two years of an Honours degree, can provide access to the final year of an Honours degree

A route to improve prospects and progression at work

Designed and delivered by colleges, universities and other training providers in partnership with employers

A full list of Fds is available at www.direct.gov.uk/foundationdegrees

Learners can study for an Fd with a range of local universities and colleges and with the Open University. Ideal ways of studying for working learners are by part-time, often evening attendance at college, by distance or online learning (including ‘blended learning’, which is a mixture of distance, online and face-to face), or in the workplace when the Fd has been tailored to the needs of the employer and the workplace.

Fds have been designed with further progression in mind. They attract a minimum of 240 credits, or ‘CATS points’, and can lead to progression to an Honours degree. When they are designed and validated at least one progression route to an Honours degree must be made clear. Usually a further one year of study is required. The diagram on the next page shows options to progress to and from an Fd.
Options for progressing to and from a Foundation degree

You may need to help members to research Fds and to ‘shop around’ to find a course that is fit for purpose, will take them where they want to go and be relevant to the workplace. **fdf** has produced a checklist of questions to ask and you can find this in the ‘Advisers’ area at [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk).

A range of useful leaflets have been produced for employers by **fdf**, which can be downloaded or ordered from [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk) to help you make your case. They include three leaflets in the series ‘Where’s Your Workforce Heading?’, one for large organisations, one for small businesses and one for the public sector. These outline the benefits of Fds and some quotes from employers.

You can also find a useful quiz about Fds at the ‘Advisers’ area of the **fdf** website. It provides an easy way to understand how Fds work. You can use the quiz with other reps, with members or with your employer.
How do all the qualifications fit together? What does Level 4 actually mean?

Qualifications are very important to individuals but they may be of less importance to employers, who are more concerned about employees gaining the skills and knowledge to become more effective in the workplace than about accreditation. However, employers (and members!) might understandably be baffled about how the levels work and how things fit together, and may want you to explain.

There is current information about qualification frameworks in England on the DirectGov website www.direct.gov.uk following links to Education and Learning and then Qualifications Explained. You can call the unionlearn learning and careers advice service for further information about the level and currency of the qualifications you are interested in.

The fdf ‘Advisers’ area at www.fdf.ac.uk includes simple interactive resources to help you to understand how things fit together.

A good way to understand the way that levels fit together is to choose an area you are familiar with, for example health and safety or management. Think of all the qualifications you can do in order to progress in the subject and decide how they fit together, using Levels 1–8. HE qualifications are situated in Levels 4–8 – an Fd fits at Level 5, an Honours degree at Level 6. Then look at the pathways that can be followed in the workplace.

Sector Skills Councils are a good source of information about progression routes and career paths in different sectors and how qualifications fit together. They take into account the requirements of professional bodies. They have produced some simple and interactive resources about progression in different subsectors and in particular jobs. Go to www.sectorcareersinfo.co.uk to find links to their careers websites.

Each higher education qualification requires you to gain a certain number of credits, which you are awarded after you successfully complete each module in a course. You can gain credits at different levels as you progress through a programme of study. For example, an Fd requires 240 credits at Levels 4 and 5.
Employer-Based Training Accreditation (EBTA)

Employers will be interested in a service operated by *fdf* to support employers to gain accreditation of in-house or third party training. The service is supported by government funding as part of its strategy to support business growth, and employers can use this service free of charge and receive up to four days’ consultancy from an EBTA consultant, who will visit to get an overview of the organisation’s needs and then make recommendations on the potential for accreditation of training programmes. Using your knowledge of members’ needs and aspirations, you could work with your employer to maximise the benefits of the EBTA recommendations for all. It may be that learning offered through the union could be accredited through EBTA.

The benefits of EBTA for your employer can be:

- external verification of the quality and standard of in-house training
- matching in-house training to national qualification standards
- enhancing in-house capacity to improve and develop the skills your business needs
- attracting and retaining the best employees by providing high quality professional development opportunities
- recognising and rewarding employee achievement.

If you or your employer want to find out more, visit [www.ebtafdf.co.uk](http://www.ebtafdf.co.uk), email ebta@fdf.ac.uk or contact the *fdf* enquiry line on 01543 301150.

Who provides HE? What is available locally?

As part of its wider skills strategy, government has encouraged the higher education sector to:

- be more flexible and offer more options to workplace learners
- give more encouragement to people who do not come from backgrounds/communities that normally access HE
- improve the vocational routes into HE
- encourage employers to work in partnership to encourage staff into higher education.

So universities may now be working very differently from the way your employer expects. Employers and your union may have partnerships and agreements with particular providers, both locally and nationally. Before talking to your employer, it would be helpful for you to decide which provider is the most suitable for your members’ needs. Find out if your union has an HE Union Learning Fund project or if unionlearn has a regional HE project to help you.

Arrange taster courses to demonstrate the benefits to both employers and employees.
Unionlearn agreements with HE organisations

Unionlearn has memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the Open University and with fdf.

The Open University (OU)

Unionlearn is working in partnership with the OU to help more union members into HE. A special arrangement between the two organisations means that union learners can claim a 10 per cent discount on fees for OU first year undergraduate courses that carry 30 and 60 points towards a qualification. Take up on this offer has been very good with around 1,000 union learners studying with the OU each year.

fdf (Foundation Degree Forward)

The agreement with fdf is also about helping union members into HE, and covers:

- raising union reps’ knowledge and awareness about Fds
- promoting the development of a credit-based framework for vocational awards
- supporting the progression of apprentices to HE
- developing models of work-based access to HE
- developing good practice in inclusive work-based learning.

Local agreements

Unionlearn HE projects have resulted in local MOUs and agreements with universities to make access to HE easier for union members, to ensure that work-based progression routes are available and in some cases to offer discounts and other financial support. Good examples of this are in the Southern and Eastern, and Northern regions, and details and contacts can be found on the unionlearn website.

Julie, unionlearn

Julie is a unionlearn Higher Level Skills Project Worker in the North East. Part of the project has been to raise awareness with regional employers about the benefits of union learning and in particular leadership and management skills. During the project many employers have contributed towards the cost of course fees for their employees.

As part of the groundwork for negotiating with employers, Julie has found it very useful to make arrangements with local universities for progression agreements and group concessions before approaching employers. That way, the employer can see clearly what will be involved and will be more willing to contribute financially if discounts have been negotiated.

“When negotiating with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), it has proved useful to have had a previously successful pilot scheme going, which in our case was a free accredited taster in Leadership and Management. This demonstrates both learner demand and the desire for progression.

It was really useful for us to provide numbers of learners interested in progressing to a Foundation degree and allowed us to get a discounted rate for union members based on these numbers. HEIs require numbers and are, in some cases, able to draw down funding based on this. Funding can also be linked to specific courses that fit criteria for employer engagement, which the Leadership and Management course did.

HEIs want to become much more flexible and to link with local employers so to broker a deal with unionlearn or a union is a win-win situation. Local HE providers have not been successful in targeting some high-profile employers, but unionlearn has initiated several projects in these workplaces.”
Unions and providers working together: ATL and Edge Hill

Unions have also worked closely with providers to tailor provision to the needs of members and to reduce costs. This benefits both union members and employers. ATL works in partnership with Edge Hill University to offer accreditation to all school and college staff engaging in professional development activities. Edge Hill has a successful track record in enabling staff to gain academic credit through portfolio evidence of professional activities undertaken on the job. This includes accreditation at undergraduate and postgraduate level and includes Fds in Supporting Teaching and Learning or in Professional Development. These are flexible online courses, and can lead to progression to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). All postgraduate courses developed by ATL and Edge Hill together are offered free to ATL members except the MA in Education, which is available at a discounted rate. Employer support may include time off for studying and mentoring in the workplace.

The unionlearn guide *Supporting Union Learners into Higher Learning: a toolkit for union learning reps* includes a section on working with providers. Few HE providers hold the unionlearn Quality Award for specific programmes and courses that are union-friendly. You can find these listed on the unionlearn website, and you can recommend that universities apply. Just as there are many different ways to study, there is a range of providers to choose from.

» Universities and colleges of higher education

These provide the majority of HE courses across the country. They offer a very wide range of subjects and qualifications and are focused on teaching HE qualifications to a broad range of learners. Most of these courses and qualifications are non-vocational but all will offer a small number of work-related degrees, including Foundation degrees.

» Further education colleges

FE colleges offer some HE level courses, particularly for learners who want the opportunity to study locally on a part-time basis. Many further education colleges offer HNC/D and Foundation degrees, both of which are work-related qualifications. You may also find professional qualifications on offer at a local college.

» Single subject higher education institutions

These include agricultural colleges, medical schools, colleges of art and design and drama schools. These types of institutions offer a narrower range of courses within a particular subject area. They are the best choice if a learner is interested in a career in that sector of employment. Specialist management schools are slightly different in that they offer specialist qualifications, which can be used in many different sectors of employment.
Unions, providers and employers working together: Bridges to Learning with UNISON

Bridges to Learning is a partnership between UNISON, the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and the OU. It has been funded by the ULF and has developed progression pathways for learners in the health and social care sectors – from Skills for Life to first steps of higher education and beyond. The aim is to help people achieve professional qualifications and employment opportunities, whatever their starting point. Bridges to Learning is training union members to become specialist Union Learning Representatives in the health and social care sector. These ULRs provide individual advice and support to guide union members through a continued learning experience to progress and develop within the sector. Bridges to Learning staff and ULRs negotiate with employers and learning providers to create relevant, convenient and accessible learning programmes for health and social care staff to undertake. There are many different jobs in the sector and many different routes to enter and progress within it.

Learning at work is good for employers too. It helps equip staff with the skills they need to deliver and improve services to clients and patients. Motivated staff enjoy their jobs more, which makes them more productive. Learning partnerships between UNISON and the employer are being forged and strengthened to the mutual benefit of individual, employer and union. For example, UNISON members working for Newcastle City Council have been taking OU courses to help them to progress from being home care workers to social workers, using the OU’s Integrated Vocational Route (IVR), which gives access to relevant Fds, Honours degrees and postgraduate qualifications, all detailed in the Bridges to Learning Courses Guide. This is an ideal way for the employer to ‘grow their own’ social workers from existing staff, solve recruitment problems and beat demographic trends.

» The Open University (OU)

The OU offers HE courses to learners across the UK through distance learning. The OU has around 150,000 learners taking degree courses, including Foundation degrees, nearly all studying part time and around 70 per cent in full-time employment. The OU also has a Business School, which offers a range of management qualifications and short CPD and taster courses. Union members can have a 10 per cent discount on a range of undergraduate courses. For information about the OU go to www.open.ac.uk

» Work-based learning and training providers

These are organisations that specialise in providing work-related training. Some are also now developing programmes where Foundation degrees and other higher level qualifications are on offer. Private training providers offer a range of work-related and professional qualifications in a number of job-related areas. Usually a private training provider has a learning centre that focuses on particular areas of training, for example IT, customer service or beauty therapy. Some of the qualifications on offer will be at a professional level.

» Learndirect learning through work

This programme offers individuals or organisations the chance to gain HE work-related qualifications. Learning takes place at work and online, and programmes are customised to build on a learner’s existing skills and knowledge. It is therefore a highly individual programme that is suited to those wanting to gain credit for what they already know as well as a chance to develop new skills. A small number of universities are taking part and information on this way of learning can be found at www.learningthroughwork.org
Employers will want to know about future trends and skills and knowledge gaps in order to ensure that they are able to be competitive. Supporting employees to study at HE level is an ideal way of bringing new skills and knowledge into the workplace, and one employee can cascade this to others. Providers of work-related HE courses will be well-informed about the future, but another good source of information for union reps is the network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), which can help you to find the information you need to make a strong case.

You can use SSC websites and telephone helplines to find information about career and learning pathways, jobs, labour market information, qualifications and National Occupational Standards across your sector. Links are provided to other relevant websites. The kinds of questions that SSCs can help with are:

- What is the current employment situation in jobs and careers in the sector?
- What skills and knowledge will the jobs of the future need?
- How can I find out what is happening in the local labour market?
- What different pathways are there to careers in the sector?
- Do people need specific qualifications in order to progress within the sector?
- Do people need professional registration or a licence to enter or progress in careers in this sector?

Most SSCs have sections on their websites aimed at employers. Unionlearn produces a range of publications to help you to work with SSCs and a useful source of information is the website www.sectorcareersinfo.co.uk and where you can find a link to labour market information (LMI) for each sector, and links to careers web pages with sectoral progression pathways.

Many employees will qualify for entry to a Foundation degree, and the OU is open entry. Employees with substantial relevant employment experience may not need formal qualifications but will need to show that they are ready to study at the level required.

Providers use a number of methods to assess potential learners who may need the equivalent of a Level 3 qualification to be accepted on an HE course. Level 3 qualifications include: Access to HE courses; AS/A Levels and Applied A Levels; BTEC National Diplomas/National Certificates; Advanced or Higher Apprenticeships; Advanced GNVQs; Advanced 14–19 Diplomas; and NVQs at Level 3. On occasion, students may also need certain Level 2 qualifications (for example, specific GCSEs).

The actual Level 2 and 3 entrance requirements will vary between courses and institutions but will be stated in course information such as in a prospectus or on an institution’s website. The entrance requirements may well specify a certain type of qualification, a certain subject and certain grades.

Remember that many providers are more flexible about entrance requirements for mature learners (aged 21 plus) as they value their wider life experiences.
You and your members need to check exactly what they would need to gain entry to a course and whether their existing qualifications and experiences are acceptable or if a process called APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) is available. If not then they may need to embark on some preparatory study. It may be that they would find it reassuring to undertake a taster course or study skills course before starting their first full HE module. These tasters often carry a credit rating and can count towards the final qualification. Examples are OU short courses and the ‘Openings’ programme, which includes Understanding Management and Understanding Health.

Many unions are helping members to return to learning at different levels, and to gain the skills and the confidence they need to apply for a course. You can find out more about this in the unionlearn guide *Supporting Union Learners into Higher Learning: a toolkit for union reps*.

Unionlearn in the North East has negotiated taster courses and discounts for learners. “The HE courses that union members in the NE want are mainly Foundation degrees in Leadership and Management and Health and Safety, and the majority of the research and assessment is work-based with just one evening a week attendance at college.

At unionlearn we negotiated a free accredited taster course in Leadership and Management and a 50 per cent discount for union members against the Foundation degree, which has proven invaluable. In some cases employers have offered to fund the remainder of the course at no cost to the learner. This is also the case for some union officers who have been funded by their union.”

Choose a course that can be seen to benefit the company.
What will my employees actually be doing if they do an HE course while working?

If an employer wants to get a realistic picture of the impact on the working life of an employee, the following case studies may be helpful. The kinds of activity that employees could be engaged in at work may include:

- designing and carrying out work-related assignments or projects
- researching and writing up work-related topics
- discussing ideas with colleagues, particularly mentors
- carrying out work-based assessments, supervised by colleagues or tutors
- using the facilities in work-based learning centres
- sharing new information and ideas with the employer and colleagues.

Many part-time HE courses only require attendance at college for one evening session a week so this may not interfere with working hours. Distance and e-learning programmes will not necessarily require attendance at all, although many providers take a ‘blended learning’ approach that includes some face-to-face contact. You will need to check for particular courses but Fds should be designed to involve minimum time away from the workplace.

The activities above can be negotiated with employers to be as relevant to work as possible, and to contribute to projects that the employer may not have been able to get done otherwise.
Paul, CWU

“Through the support of both the CWU and BT I have been able to complete Health & Safety Stages 1–3, then the Certificate in Occupational Health to enable me to apply for TECH IOSH status. I am now in my third year of the BALTUS (BA in Labour and Trade Union Studies) plus Health and Safety degree, studying by distance learning through a university in London. This has all been jointly supported by BT and CWU, where CWU funds the course (including accommodation, travel etc.) and BT allows me the time to attend as and when required.

The distance learning means that at present I attend two residential weeks each year, each involving teaching for a module, and two single day classes, which are used as refresher or help days and are extremely beneficial. The time span for the completion of assignments ranges between 12 and 15 weeks, and can normally be between one and three assignments per module. I am able to contact my module tutors at any time via email and telephone.

What is a typical week like, balancing work, home and study? As a full-time employee for BT, an active CWU Safety Rep, a husband to a full-time bank manager and an active sportsman, time is a very valuable commodity. When I enrolled on the course I made a commitment to my family that I would try and keep my studies separate from family life. I work for BT from 6am to 3pm, then I collect my son from school and spend quality time with him until he goes to bed at 7:30pm. I also prepare the family meal and have a few hours social time with my wife, then for about 2 hours each night I work on my assignments either researching or writing. In addition to evening study, I also have every other Monday off (this is part of my working pattern) where I devote all day to my degree studies. I do not study at the weekend as this is family time. I have also become a school governor, where I use my new-found knowledge for the benefit of my son and his school.

So what does this mean to BT? My Health and Safety knowledge benefits the company. BT has agreed that all class-based time is agreed and paid for using special leave with pay, and it has confirmed this for the full six-year programme. In addition I am able to use my work laptop and occasional work time, as long as work tasks are completed first. I am also allowed to utilise information from various sources within the company as part of my learning. Some assignments are totally work-related. For example, one was about disciplinary measures where ill-health or accidents occur in the workplace.”

“Some assignments are totally work-related. For example, one was about disciplinary measures where ill-health or accidents occur in the workplace.”
Peter is studying for a Foundation degree in Business Studies with the Open University, which started in April 2008 and finishes in October 2011. The programme includes eight OU modules, and Peter started it while with one union and employer and is continuing with another. He receives financial support, materials, access to internal information and moral support and encouragement from his employer.

“All of the modules I’ve done so far have had elements that relate to my work or my employer. In fact, because it’s an Fd, it would be difficult to do the course without work experience or current employment. The assignments I’ve found hardest have been the ones where I’ve no direct work experience, such as finance and manufacturing processes.

I don’t take very much specific time at work for my course. It’s more about remembering incidents and gathering background information, which is harder to monitor. I spend the odd few minutes here and there gathering background information from our website, the intranet and internal documents. On top of this are the informal conversations I have with colleagues to gather info.

I’ve recently bought a small PC notebook and downloaded the course material onto a memory stick. I am able to use the long train journeys or overnights in hotels to do a lot of my studying.

I often gather background information about exercises and assignments whilst doing my day-to-day work. For some of the work, you’re asked to relate this directly to personal experiences (the OU and the tutors give guarantees over confidentiality).

For example, I had an assignment to look at marketing and was able to use the project the RCM has at the moment to look at recruitment of ethnic minority members in London and the South East. The union has a lower proportion of members in this group than the midwives population as a whole. The assignment was to look at potential reasons and the marketing techniques we were using to address this. I was able to use the marketing manager and equality & diversity officer to gain all the background information I needed to do my course work. They both willingly helped me by allowing me to interview them and discuss why they’d selected some marketing techniques in preference to others.

I’ve found myself reading many more of those emails, circulars, magazines and newsletters that we all get. I often save emails and articles as I think they’ll be useful as reference materials for the courses.

What works for me is to do a little studying and often. I try to do some studying four or five times a week, with Sunday usually being totally set aside.”
What will it cost me and my employee?

Before approaching your employer for support, learners wishing to undertake HE study need to have a good idea of the costs involved, any discounts available to them as union members, and the financial help they may be able to obtain to help pay for their studies. The costs involved in taking an HE course and the financial help available can be complicated and depend on the type of course, the mode of study and individual circumstances.

In some cases the employer may be willing to pay and many unions have their own schemes to support members undertaking specific types of HE learning. It’s also worth investigating whether those who are leaving employment to study full time can return to work on a casual or part-time basis during their breaks.

Course costs are the main outlay for HE study. They will depend on whether the course is part time or full time, the level of learning undertaken and the qualification sought. The fees for Fds are similar to those for Honours degrees. Fds and other HE courses are supported and subsidised by public funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Other costs need to be taken into account if study has an impact on the individual’s income or ability to earn. Further information about costs and funding for full-time study are on the student finance web pages signposted below.

Most part-time learners will need to pay a tuition fee. Fees are normally payable every academic year and may be paid in instalments. The amount a learner needs to pay varies enormously, depending on the institution and course they have chosen but anything in the range of £500 to £1,500 per year would not be unusual. There are no regulations stating how much can be charged in tuition fees for part-time courses, so it is important to check the fees for the first year and if they are likely to increase during the course. For courses that include a professional qualification there may be the additional registration and examination fees set by the awarding body.

As well as payment of tuition fees a learner may also

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**CASE STUDY**

Pat, unionlearn

Pat is studying for a Foundation degree in Leadership and Management at Sunderland College, validated by Sunderland University, over two years. The course involves a mixture of work-based projects and assignments, online support and self-directed learning and weekly discussion and debate. Pat attends college one evening a week during term time for lectures and workshop sessions. She works full-time for unionlearn.

A 50 per cent discount has been negotiated with Sunderland College for trade union members, which reduced the fee from £650 to £325. Pat’s employer (unionlearn) then funded £250 for each year and she funded the balance of £75 herself, and purchased the books needed (about £150 each year). The TUC allows time off to go to college and access to resources.
need to purchase course materials, such as books and equipment. When working out the cost of a part-time course a learner also needs to think about other expenses such as travel and childcare.

Check with your union and your regional unionlearn office whether there are any agreements in place with universities that will entitle you to discounted fees or other entitlements.

For learners who are considering a part-time HE course in England there may be financial help available. Eligible students entering HE in 2010 could apply for fee and/or course grants. The fee grant is to help students pay the cost of their tuition fees. The course grant is to pay for additional costs such as books and travel. Learners have to make a separate application for each year of their course.

There is also a new fund available called the ‘Fifty Plus In-work Training Grant’ for those who are returning to work at 50 or over, and have been on specific benefits. Adults can also apply for a Professional and Career Development Loan.

Universities and colleges often provide bursaries and other financial support and you should enquire about this when applying for a course. For example, in addition to the 10 per cent discount available to union members, there is a range of financial support available when you study with the OU. You should apply directly to the OU for this support, and exactly what you are entitled to depends on criteria such as where you live, your income, previous qualifications and level of intended study. Go to www.open.ac.uk for more details, and an ‘eligibility checker’.

For the most detailed and up-to-date general information on HE finance, help with costs for adults, and a ‘financial support eligibility checker’ to download, visit the official HE student finance web pages, go to: www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance. If you are confused, or want to check you have the correct information, call the unionlearn advice service on 08000 929190.

When you have done your research, you will be able to tell your employer:

• what the full cost of the course will be
• what government subsidies apply
• what discounts and financial help have been secured
• what the union can contribute
• what the individual can contribute
• exactly what contribution would be helpful from your employer.

If you present this information at the same time as outlining the benefits to your employer, the benefits may balance, or even outweigh the costs. For example, the benefits of Fds can be set out as follows:

• The cost of HE level training is reduced through government subsidies, discounts and financial support and will benefit the employer with little financial outlay.
• Employees taking Fds will not necessarily lose time from work.
• Much of the Fd involves work-based learning.
• Projects and assignments can be designed with employers to add value.
• Business costs can be reduced via flexible models of delivery.

It’s vital that employees construct and present a professional business case when they ask for support.
What do you want me to do?

An important part of making the case to your employer is to be able to answer the question, “what exactly do you want me to do?”.

**Sign up to a learning agreement that includes higher level learning**

If your union does not have a learning agreement with your employer, higher learning can be built in from the start. Your union and unionlearn can provide support and resources to help you to develop an agreement. A model framework learning agreement is provided in *Working for Learners: a handbook for unions and their union learning representatives*, and also on the unionlearn website [www.unionlearn.org.uk/agreements/index.cfm](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/agreements/index.cfm).

If there is a learning agreement, you can review it, using information from higher learning needs surveys to identify gaps and opportunities.

**Sign up to and fulfil the Skills Pledge**

Your employer may already have signed up to the Skills Pledge, and may be well-informed about the business benefits of encouraging staff to progress to HE as part of a coherent workforce development strategy. The Skills Pledge is intended to encourage employers to consider the skills and training priorities for all employees in relation to organisational objectives.

**Carry out joint staff surveys and reviews**

It may be that employers and unions can work together to identify staff learning needs at all levels through learning and training needs surveys and personal and professional review systems. You can then work together to identify appropriate progression routes that will benefit the individual and the employer equally.

The offer of HE can then be tied in to career progression and Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

Some employers have set up comprehensive Employee Development Schemes that provide access to courses and personal development for all staff.

**Get involved in developing tailor-made HE**

Where there are groups of staff with similar development needs, or where the business needs to move forward in specific areas where new expertise is required, the answer may be for employers to get involved in developing bespoke HE provision.

Your employer may be interested in working in partnership with other employers, unions, HE providers, SSCs, professional bodies and [fdf](http://www.fdf.ac.uk) to develop tailor-made Fds. The course content and how and where it is delivered is designed around the employer’s needs, and can build on existing in-house training. However, it can involve a substantial commitment of time and money by the employer and is usually only a good option for large organisations where a lot of employees will take the course. However, the costs and commitment can be shared among a group of employers, or an existing Fd course can be adapted. You can find out more about this process on the [fdf](http://www.fdf.ac.uk) website [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk).
What sort of support will employees need from me?

Making a financial contribution to the fees and other expenses of HE is only one form of support that an employer can offer to individuals. The employer is more likely to do this if a clear case is made to show what the organisation will gain from this investment, or if the employer is asked to match efforts already made on the part of the employee or the contribution and efforts made by the union. There may be an HR policy on entitlement to support for learning and training – check before asking!

Apart from a financial contribution, other practical support that an employer can offer could include:

- allow time for staff to apply for courses
- allow paid/unpaid time off or flexible working patterns to attend college
- allow paid/unpaid time to complete work-based assignments and projects
- provide access to computer hardware/software
- help to plan work-based projects and assignments
- provide access to resources for study and to specialist information/advice
- identify and plan appropriate mentoring and other support
- recognise achievement
- provide support for future progression
- offer encouragement, support and expertise to employees and their ULRs.

Alternatively, employers may be willing to provide HE courses in-house, to assist with brokering the right programmes to meet staff needs or to provide a room for study or for union learning clubs to meet. fdf www.fdf.ac.uk has produced a useful guide for work-based learners called **Workplace Support for your Studies**, which has further ideas about how to make a case for a range of support, and the Campaign for Learning has produced Leading on Learning: a hands-on guide for line managers, which is also helpful and can be found at www.learningatworkday.com.

What does a workplace mentor do?

If you or your employer are unsure about the role of a workplace mentor or supervisor, you can find a free online modular training resource designed by fdf and the OU called ‘Supporting Workplace Study’ on www.fdf.ac.uk or via this link http://sws.oupld.com/

The new right to request time to train will benefit employers and employees. As a union rep your role is to help members to make requests and to ensure that employers consider requests properly. This guide can help you to persuade your employer of the benefits of allowing time off to improve the skills and knowledge employees bring to the workplace. From April 2010, the right will extend to employees working in businesses that employ 250 or more people. Only employees who have worked for 26 weeks will be eligible to make a request under the new right. The right will be extended to cover employees in businesses of all sizes in April 2011. For more information go to www.bis.gov.uk/time-to-train or see the new TUC guide **The Right to Request Time to Train: A guide for trade union representatives.**
Bob, FBU South East Region

FBU is currently promoting a course to members through Kent University. It is a short introductory programme, which members can undertake prior to enrolling on a BA/BSc in Applied Professional Practice, a flexible degree that is directly related to the workplace, job role and individual. The short course is called Make Your Experiences Count.

“This is just one of a range of learning opportunities offered to all employees through the FBU’s learning programme. What we try to do is to meet individual needs. The clever point of this degree course is that it is directly related to the workplace and can meet both individual and organisational needs. Most of the employers I work with recognise the importance of learning, whether role specific or otherwise, and the questions they ask are about the facilities required by an individual to undertake learning, and the positive or negative impact on their role at work.

Support provided by the employer is detailed in the learning agreement, including access to a ULR, time to undertake learning during the working day, enrolment, induction and some teaching takes place on work premises using employer’s facilities, and assessors are allowed access to learners during the working day. The case for support was part of the package: once we had agreement around the learning agenda, and that there was a need to bring learning in its wider context (not just role specific) into the workplace, the case for support made itself. Middle management were concerned that it would have an impact on service delivery but this has been addressed through constant dialogue over time.”

What about the union – what will it do?

Unions can provide the following support, which then can be offered to the employer as something they may be willing to match with contributions in kind:

- Help learners to build confidence to study at HE level (there are ideas in the unionlearn toolkit *Supporting Union Learners into Higher Learning*).
- Build HE into learning agreements.
- Develop partnership agreements with local HE providers to develop bespoke programmes, to improve access to existing courses and to negotiate discounts.
- Generate large-scale demand for bespoke programmes to make course development cost-effective for providers.
- Work with Aimhigher partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) to promote higher-level opportunities.
- Develop resources for project workers and reps to help them to promote HE opportunities.
- Provide access to good-quality information and advice about HE and career progression.
- Develop progression maps and case studies to show the way to learners and employers, including progression from apprenticeships.
- Show members how HE can help with promotion.
- Make it affordable by providing grants or bursaries (and looking for sources of local, regional and sectoral funding that will support this).
- Publicise the discount offered to unions by the OU.
- Develop workplace learning clubs to build confidence, share experiences and support progress.
- Publicise and broker taster courses.
- Broker CPD courses at HE level.

It may be that your union has found ways to provide these things at a regional level or as part of specific projects and partnerships. Check out if there is anything you have missed. Unionlearn can tell you about what is happening in other unions so that you can pick up good ideas and use them in your own situation.
Developing new skills through HE

Giving employees access to HE doesn’t just benefit them personally; it can equip them with many new skills that may be of great benefit to their organisation. Making sure you are fully equipped to demonstrate the wider business benefits to employers can be a very useful tool.
A lot of research has been done about the skills that employers value in their employees, and these are sometimes referred to as ‘employability skills’. Developing these skills is also of great value to employees themselves, since they can use them in different ways in their lives. They are also known as ‘transferable skills’.

Peter Hawkins, who developed the Windmills Programme said: “To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure.” Participating in HE can help to develop these skills.

These skills are often divided into four groups: people skills, self-reliance skills, generalist skills and specialist skills.

Apart from the technical or specialist knowledge needed to do particular jobs, what skill set does your employer value most in employees?

Sebastian, BECTU, says:

“HE support can be a hard case to make. Within the arts sector there are too many examples of degree qualified students found lacking in vocational skills and thus unsuitable for employment.

There is a need for leadership and management skills and learning in the arts sector. There has been very little investment in this area, although the Arts Council England has a subsidised leadership programme.”

Check the language your employer would use. Would words like ‘teamwork’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘creativity’ be in the list or would other words be better to describe the most valued skills? Would it be like the list on the left in the table on page 30?

Research has also shown that the transferable skills developed through academic programmes are very similar to the top ten employability skills identified by employers. Your employer may not be aware of this, particularly if they have not participated in HE, or not for a very long time. Think about the HE course you or your members want to do and ask the provider how the course will help to develop these skills.

Good-quality HE programmes will not only build in the development of these skills into the teaching and assignments for courses but will also link learners to other personal and career development activities and resources provided by the institution.

When you want to make a case to your employer for the value of HE in general, or of a particular course, you can use your own lists or the table on page 30 to argue for the added benefits for both employees and employers. The skills in the left hand column are said to be the top ten employability skills that employers want.
# Top ten employability skills valued by employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills that employers want</th>
<th>What does this mean?</th>
<th>Skills developed in HE programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Express ideas clearly and confidently in speech</td>
<td>Verbal communication, presentation skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Work confidently in a group and co-operate with others</td>
<td>Teamwork, working on group assignments and projects in the workplace, online or in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing and investigating</td>
<td>Gather information systematically, problem solving</td>
<td>Research skills, using a range of sources, information management, critical thinking, analytical ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation and drive</td>
<td>Act on initiative, identify opportunities and put forward ideas and solutions, determination to get things done and make things happen, look for new ways of doing things, be responsible</td>
<td>Manage own learning; complete a complex programme of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use numbers</td>
<td>Multiply and divide, calculate percentages, use statistics and a calculator, interpret graphs and tables</td>
<td>Carry out research including data, present research findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication</td>
<td>Express ideas clearly in writing</td>
<td>Written assignments, case studies and projects, note taking, presenting ideas, showing understanding of reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organising</td>
<td>Plan activities and carry them through effectively</td>
<td>Planning learning and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial or business awareness</td>
<td>Understand the commercial realities affecting the organisation and its customers, and work culture, the need for up-skilling and re-skilling</td>
<td>Gain new and broader knowledge, up-to-date information and technical skills, business and marketing skills. Use in work-based projects and assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management, flexibility</td>
<td>Manage time effectively, prioritising tasks and able to work to deadlines. Adapt successfully to changing situations and environments</td>
<td>Coping with multiple tasks, presenting assessed work to deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT skills</td>
<td>Learn and adapt to new technology, use software packages, keyboard skills, electronic communication</td>
<td>Computing skills, presentation skills, communication skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other important employability skills are:

- interpersonal skills
- customer focus and care
- negotiating and persuading
- leadership
- self-awareness and confidence
- willingness to learn
- stress tolerance
- integrity
- independence
- creativity
- professionalism
- action planning
- decision making
- networking
- using foreign languages
- cultural awareness.

If your employer is not convinced that the top ten are what the organisation needs, it would be easy to demonstrate that pursuing a course of higher learning would develop these additional skills as well. Encouraging existing employees to participate in higher learning could be the route to a dream team in the organisation without any additional recruitment. Many of the skills you will be developing by carrying out your role as a union rep!

A lot has been written about employability skills and most universities have a section on their websites about how to develop transferable skills, including checklists and skills dictionaries. These can be very useful in helping you to decide what the benefits of a particular course of study will be and to find the right language to discuss this with your employer.
Developing staff

Many of the benefits listed in this section will be benefits for employers as well, so when you are making a business case for employees participating in HE, you can paint a picture of a highly skilled, knowledgeable and motivated staff team, with no need for additional recruitment.
The benefits of HE for employees

Start by listing the potential benefits for members of participating in HE, noting where personal benefits can also be seen as business benefits.

You might have some of the following:

- higher-level technical skills and knowledge
- transferable and employability skills
- new skills and knowledge in different areas
- confidence
- self-esteem
- personal development
- capacity to anticipate and cope with change
- reaching personal and work-related goals
- gaining qualifications
- job satisfaction
- willingness to take on more responsibility and expand role with current employer
- pride in current job
- promotion
- higher income
- more security.

Chas, PCS, says:

“What are the advantages? I truly hope that by the end of the course some of the skills that I have developed and improved will be as follows: an improvement to Level 6 as specified in the Leitch Review of Skills; a more developed analytical mind with improved investigative and research techniques; a vast improvement in my writing skills; to be able to deliver presentations to a technically high level; and an enhanced life experience based on the time spent at college thus leading to a more developed awareness of the society in which I live.”

Stuart, USDAW, says:

“I went into this course only with the expectation that it would get me back into studying, which I achieved. I also got a whole lot more: simple things like having targets to meet improved my time management both in and out of study, achieving these targets and getting feedback gave me more confidence and self-belief in my ability and it also taught me how to take constructive criticism and use it to improve my standard of work. Talking to fellow learners in the workplace and giving or receiving advice helped me to improve my communication skills and brought people together. Be it a specific course for a career or just a hobby, the OU has a course for you and the benefits you get aren’t just a certificate, it’s an improvement in yourself and your everyday life.”

With support from the organisation learners will flourish and the impact on the organisation can only be positive.
Although every learner has their own motivation for undertaking HE study, there are some common benefits of achieving an HE qualification.

- Increased employability: the recent Government report on skills, *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – world class skills* (the Leitch review), repeats the message that skills are the key determinant of employment. It found that nearly 90 per cent of those with higher education qualifications are in work compared to less than 50 per cent of those with no qualifications. It also found that the chances of finding work for those with no qualifications have fallen over the past 10 years.

- Job mobility: an HE qualification not only helps people to move up the career ladder in their current field of employment, it also helps them to change careers. This is becoming more important as the pace of economic change increases and people work longer.

- Financial reward: there are financial advantages to having an HE qualification – on average those with a higher level qualification earn up to 50 per cent more over their working life than those without one.

- Personal benefits: taking an HE course can involve meeting and getting to know new people; this could mean new friendships and new work contacts. HE learners are also likely to face new challenges and as a result will learn new skills and develop different points of view. They could also have the opportunity to visit new places and some courses offer the opportunity to gain work experience. In addition the sense of achievement that comes from succeeding will boost learners’ confidence and self-esteem.

Pat, unionlearn, says:

“I do believe that the course content has enhanced my skills in a multitude of areas, which has given me confidence in my own ability to take the lead, particularly in areas I have not had experience in previously. This has benefited my employer.”
The benefits of HE for employers

Having staff who are higher-level learners can help employers to meet the challenges facing businesses, such as increased competition, shifting markets, technological and organisational change, and financial crises. It is well known that the UK economy is suffering from intermediate and higher-level skills gaps, and that a high proportion of jobs in the future will need higher-level skills.

Successful organisations have strong strategic management, anticipate change by training or buying-in skills, enlarge their range of products and services, become more customer focused, adapting to changing markets, and modernise processes. HE can equip employees with the generic and specific skills and knowledge they need to contribute fully to the survival and success of their organisations.

Employers will value skill development and specialist knowledge. If employers are to be convinced that it is worth supporting employees to become HE learners, they will want to know what the business or organisational benefits will be and what impact this will have on everyday practice.

Graham, RMT, says:

“Managers want to know where it is all going and what the benefits are of a trackman learning above the business needs of that role. You have to show a progression of learning, give them something from you to believe in and try not to use what has been learnt to disrupt or block what they are trying to achieve. Then they can see at first hand how you can help them as well as yourself and other members. I told them that learning at HE level encourages people to seek a route into management roles within the company. They liked that.”

Point out that it is much better to retrain and invest in staff than to have to go through expensive recruitment processes.
The benefits listed in the table below are well recognised as employer gains from investment in HE, particularly work-based HE. Look at the table and identify ten of the general benefits to employers that you think would apply to your employer if staff were developed through HE programmes. Make a note of the reason why each specific benefit would apply. Then you have the basis for making your case! Some sample answers have been given below to get you started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits to employers</th>
<th>Which benefit of HE would apply in your workplace?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase profitability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase output of products/services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve quality of work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce time per task/improved efficiency</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce error rate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce waste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill skill shortages and gaps</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve customer retention</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Respond to changing customer demand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet customer demand for high-quality products or services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get projects done as work-based assignments</td>
<td>Assignments can be planned with employer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve health and safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase staff loyalty, commitment and retention</td>
<td>I will definitely be staying if I do the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain better corporate image as an employer, and in the community</td>
<td>The union and unionlearn will publicise my case regionally and nationally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be perceived as excellent in training and development by shareholders, analysts and potential employees</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce staff turnover and recruitment costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees anticipate and deal better with constant change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement changes due to restructuring more easily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits to employers | Which benefit of HE would apply in your workplace?
---|---
Improve management/employee relations |  
Improve working relationships and teamwork |  
Boost employee morale/attitude to work | This challenge will improve everything I do  
Reduce absenteeism |  
Employees develop lifelong learning attitudes |  
Better take-up and success in on-the-job training |  
Improve team performance |  
Improve effectiveness of supervisory staff |  
Improve staff understanding of and commitment to organisational culture |  
Implement new legislation/technology |  
Comply with regulations |  
Employees make more informed decisions |  
Employees are better at solving problems |  
Employees are better at using new technologies | This is an integral part of the online course  
Employees are more adaptable – higher success rate at promoting or transferring employees within the organisation | Completing the course will enable me to get on the internal promotion ladder and stay with the organisation  
Identify and use talent, rather than lose it |  
New jobs can be created and filled by existing staff | This is a way to grow your own senior staff  
Employees can pass on higher-level knowledge and skills to others | I would be happy to participate in training other staff  
Reduce recruitment and training costs |  
Employees introduce new approaches and ideas | Current skills and knowledge are taught  
Fulfil the Skills Pledge |  
Achieve quality standards such as IiP | This will contribute to IiP  
Respond to changing quality requirements |  

Higher education at work: Making the case to employers  

Use the new right to request time to train, and work with other union reps to make a strong case for employer support.
Making the case

At this stage you should have gathered the information you need to argue your case:

• what employees want and need
• what the joint benefits will be for employer and employee
• what skills and knowledge will be gained for the workplace
• what impact studying will have on a working week
• what it will cost and how these costs can be reduced or covered
• what support the union will provide
• what support is required from the employer.

However, with all this ammunition, there may still be some objections, and you need to anticipate these and be ready with some answers.
It is a waste of time training non-managers.

- The UK productivity problem is due to low levels of skills, education and expectations – all staff can achieve more.
- Learning will encourage staff to aim to be managers, or to be promoted.
- Learning will also encourage staff to show initiative, be proactive and find new ways of doing things.
- A lot of talent and skills are being missed.

I haven’t got a higher qualification – why do my staff need one if I don’t?

- Your experience, skills and knowledge as an employer are invaluable to providers of courses who want to make them relevant to today’s workforce.
- You could get involved in developing a course that will benefit your business as well as your employees.

I did a degree and it was useless – I never use it for anything at work.

- Modern HE courses, particularly Foundation degrees, are designed, often with the employer, to help employees to develop the skills and knowledge needed in the workplace.

Staff will leave for a more highly paid job if I invest in them.

- It has been wisely said that if you train them they might leave but it is much worse if you don’t train them and they stay!
- It is more likely that staff will want to stay with an employer who invests in their development.
- Staff who gain skills and knowledge at HE level can then progress within the organisation into both technical and management positions.

My budget won’t cover it.

- It would be very helpful if you can provide financial support but there are other ways of supporting employees, including providing some time off to work through modules and to complete assignments and assessed activities.
- Foundation degrees are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and it is unlikely that the full costs of a degree would have to be met. Discounts, bursaries and grants may be available.
- If the employee and the union can find half of the cost through discounts and bursaries, will you match this?

If my employees are doing work-based learning, they won’t be getting my projects done.

- In many work-based HE courses, assignments and projects are designed with the employee to enhance their work. This would be agreed in discussion with the employer. It is actually a way of getting your own projects done!

Employees on Foundation degrees spend a great deal of time out of the workplace. I can’t get cover for staff who want time off for learning.

- Part-time Foundation degrees have been designed to take staff away from the workplace for the minimum amount of time and involve a lot of work-related learning.
- If a group of staff are doing courses, they will be willing to swap shifts to cover for each other.

Getting a degree will only benefit individual employees and not the company.

- HE courses help people to develop employability skills that employers say they want.
- Employees will put back more than they take out and will pass on their skills and knowledge to you and to others in the workforce.
- It will help you to maintain IIP and to meet the Skills Pledge, and give your company a better business reputation.
Graham from RMT says:
- Play the game. Individuals know their managers and how they work, so understand them and what pressures they are under and give something back in return.
- Tell managers what they want to hear and show them what they want to see, and if possible let them think they thought of it first!
- Let managers see you are working to resolve issues with them, and let them see every time you have progressed that it helps all parties.
- Talk to HR staff more, tell them of your aspirations, as they will surely pass on the positive news about you.
- The ULR is still surrounded in clouds of mystery and lower and middle management are not fully aware of the role. We need to help them to understand how we can all work together.

Martyn from USDAW says:
- Ensure that HE is part of a learning agreement about a broad range of learning, from Skills for Life to HE.
- Use examples and case studies so that employers can see what the level is like and what is involved – OU OpenLearn is ideal for this.
- Use information about future skills to sell the idea that staff need to train at a higher level.
- Sell the business benefits.
- Present information about the flexibility of modern HE courses, for example the OU courses, which can be done partly at home and at work in a supportive environment.
- Utilise taster courses or modular degrees so that learners and employers are not over-stretched.
- Negotiate arrangements for a small group of members to study together so that they can offer mutual support and tackle new challenges together.

Bob from FBU says:
- HE should form part of a learning agreement and a programme of learning that meets a wide range of needs and not as a separate area for negotiation, or in any way exclusive – encourage access for all employees regardless of position held or role.
- Get the learning agreement included in the employer’s learning and development strategies.
- Use your ULRs and learning agreement to demonstrate what has already been achieved, and that HE is a natural progression for those who want the opportunity.
- Get university workforce development officers to come and talk to management about the benefits, not only to the individual, but also to the organisation.
- Emphasise that the learning is the responsibility of the learner but that with support from the organisation those learners will flourish and the impact on the organisation can only be positive.

Paul from CWU says:
“Prior to doing my BA course, I asked BT to support me doing a TECH IOSH course, and they rejected me on the basis that this would cost a lot of money, that they could not see the benefits and that they did not believe that I was committed to doing the course. Fortunately the CWU sponsored the courses, which I completed over the space of a year, involving four week-long residential sessions and home-based learning. I went back to BT with my qualification, thus demonstrating my commitment to learning, and showing how my knowledge could benefit the company. I now support my team, my manager, and the firm with the knowledge I have obtained.”

Julie from unionlearn says:
- Have a good understanding of the training needs of individuals and their fit within the workplace.
- Know about the key findings of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), and skills gaps within your region and sector.
- Tell employers that staff are their best resource and it is much better to retrain and invest than to have to go through the expensive process of recruiting externally.
Sebastian from BECTU says:
- Choose a course that can be seen to benefit the company.
- Relate the course to a staff development scheme, if one exists.
- When asking for a fee contribution, remember that arts training budgets are small, and often used up on compliance training.
- Negotiate through or with a training officer, who should be sympathetic.
- Don’t expect salary increase linked to successful course completion – grading progression schemes don’t often exist in the arts sector.
- The best course style would be an OU degree, distance learning or courses with a flexible learning pattern. Employment patterns in the arts do not usually allow for regular ‘learning windows’.

Don’t forget to...
» Arrange taster courses to demonstrate the benefits to both employers and employees – participating in any learning may improve staff confidence and ability to work in teams or use initiative.
» Make it easy for the employer by researching information thoroughly before broaching the subject – be clear about the business benefits.
» Work with HE institutions to agree flexible arrangements, progression routes and discounts and bursaries and find out how they work with business and industries, what successes they have had in engaging employers.
» Make a shopping list of support needed and be prepared to match as much as possible with contributions from the provider, the union and the employee.
» Find out what the employer is already offering and if there are any favourite providers – work together to fulfil the Skills Pledge.
» Be positive about your case and encourage your union to support you. If there are things that you can offer the employer in return, build those into the case you make.
» Use the new right to request time to train, and work with other union reps to make a strong case for employer support.
» Analyse skill gaps in the workplace, including ‘employability skills’ and demonstrate how HE courses and work-based projects and assignments can help to fill them.

Peter from Unite says:
- Courses must be attractive to the learner, both in terms of subject matter and level of training. They should also be in areas that the employer sees as essential or desirable – relevant to the current job or the business in general.
- It’s essential for employees to do thorough research into courses, costs, locations and availability. Ideally employers should also be involved.
- It’s vital that employees construct and present a professional business case when they ask for support. This needs to include the contribution the individual is making – time commitment, finances and family support. It should demonstrate that the learner is capable of studying at FE or HE level and that he or she is committed to the course.
- The new legislation on the right to request time to train can and should be used by union reps. ULRs can help research the available courses and advise on relevancy and achievability. The key role, though, will be accompanying the learner as their ‘friend’ at the meeting with their manager.
- Learners should seek out a mentor or ‘buddy’ at work. Unless you’re part of a group doing the same studying, learning can be a bit lonely, especially if it’s distance learning. A ULR is an ideal person for this.

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Further resources and jargon buster

This is a small selection of useful websites plus a glossary to explain some of the terms used in this publication.
» Contact your union for HE resources, projects and training. A full range of unionlearn publications for reps, including Supporting Union Learners into Higher Learning: A toolkit for union reps, and Working for Learners: A handbook for unions and their union learning representatives, is available at www.unionlearn.org.uk

» The new web-based union learning Climbing Frame has an information theme about HE, which includes links to other resources and websites. This will be launched in July 2010. Information about the Climbing Frame is available at www.unionlearn.org.uk/climbingframe

» The unionlearn learning and careers advice service can be accessed at www.unionlearn.org.uk/uladvice or by telephone (free from a landline) at 08000 92 91 90.

» You can also use the unionlearn website to find out about TUC Education training in negotiating skills, skills for supporting learners and for working with employers, available at local centres. A module is also available about supporting learners into HE.

» Fdf has created a range of resources for advisers, employers and learners about work-based HE, particularly about Fds. The adviser site includes a list of resources and links to national and regional resources, including the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). These are all available at www.fdf.ac.uk following the link from the homepage to ‘Advisers’.

» For Workplace Support for your Studies: A guide for work-based learners, and Supporting Workplace Study, the modular training resource for workplace mentors and supervisors, visit www.fdf.ac.uk

» Leading on Learning: A hands-on guide for line managers is available from the Campaign for Learning website for Learning at Work Day www.learningatworkday.org.uk

» For general information about HE opportunities, qualifications and finance for learning, visit www.direct.gov.uk. This site links to the main sources of information for learners at all levels.

» For links to the careers websites, LMI and other resources about progression pathways produced by SSCs, visit www.sectorcareersinfo.co.uk

» Visit the Open University site for information for learners and employers about its courses, discounts for union members and financial assistance www.open.ac.uk

» The Learning revolution has created free resources, Learning Clubs and Groups: Help and advice to make them work, at www.selforganisedlearning.com
Aimhigher: a government initiative to encourage people to think about the benefits and opportunities of higher education, especially those from families with no tradition of HE.

APL/ APEL: Accreditation of Prior Learning/ Experiential Learning – credit given to people for achievements, skills and knowledge they have already gained. Credit is awarded for learning that can be demonstrated through providing evidence.

Blended learning: a programme of study that includes a mix of distance learning and face-to-face learning at a college or university.

Campaign for Learning: a national charity that aims to create a passion for learning that sustains people for life. It organises Learning at Work Day.

CATS: Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme – an agreement across the HE sector about the number of credits required to complete a recognised HE programme (e.g. a degree) and about the number of notional study hours required. All courses and modules are worth a number of CATS points and these are transferable between courses and institutions.

Climbing Frame: the union learning Climbing Frame is an online tool for ULRs and other union reps that holds information about a range of learning themes and opportunities, including HE.

CPD: Continuing Professional Development – processes or activities to increase the knowledge, skills and personal qualities necessary for professional and technical duties.

Distance learning: the provision of teaching and learning to those who are studying away from the college or university. This will involve written or web-based course materials plus online, telephone or face-to-face tutorial support.

Foundation degree: vocational degrees equivalent to the first two years of an Honours degree, carrying 240 credits at Level 4 and 5. They are designed and delivered by partnerships of employers, employer organisations, universities and colleges, often with union involvement.

Graduate: usually refers to a person who has been awarded a university degree.

HE: Higher Education.

HEI: Higher Education Institution – either a university or a college.

HND: Higher National Diploma – a work-related qualification at Level 5.

Honours degree: a classified degree (from First Class to Third Class) awarded for successful completion of at least 360 credits at different levels.

Leitch Report: the government-commissioned review of skills that will be needed in 2020 and which set out recommendations on how to achieve a world-class workforce by then.

Mature student: a generic term used in HE to refer to learners aged 21 and over.

Module: a self-contained part of an HE study programme, the successful completion of which leads to the learner gaining HE credits. Modules do not usually carry a qualification but will be clustered to create a full programme.

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding, which sets out joint objectives and action plans.

NVQ: National Vocational Qualification – a work-based award achieved through training and assessment.

Quality Award: unionlearn’s award to providers who demonstrate that union learners are considered in the design, development and delivery of services and programmes.

SSCs: Sector Skills Councils – employer-led bodies with union representation established to increase opportunities to boost the skills of the workforce in the sector.

Unionlearn Advice Service: a free, impartial, confidential service operated for unionlearn by the Careers Advice Service to help union members to develop new skills, improve their job prospects or change jobs.