



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-2020-0139, 16 November 2020

Future of the Union Learning Fund

Westminster Hall

Wednesday, 18th November 2020

9.30am

Debate initiated by Lilian Greenwood MP

The proceedings of this debate can be viewed on [Parliamentlive.tv](https://www.parliamentlive.tv)

By Niamh Foley
Andrew Powell

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Union Learning Fund (ULF)

Summary

There is a debate scheduled for **Wednesday 18th November 2020 at 9.30am** on **the future of the Union Learning Fund (ULF)**.

The ULF was established in 1998, and in October 2020 the Government wrote to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to inform it that it will end the Union Learning Fund in March 2021.

1.1 Introduction

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) was established in 1998 by the then Government, with the objective of creating a “learning society”. The primary aim of the fund, which is now managed and administered by [unionlearn](#), was to “develop the capacity of trade unions and Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) to work with employers, employees and learning providers to encourage greater take up of learning in the workplace”.¹

The ULF is not used to fund the provision of training courses, but enables trade unions and their union learning representatives (ULR) to provide advice, guidance and support in order to help workers access learning opportunities to improve their skill levels.

Unionlearn has reported that for every £1 that is invested in the ULF, it generates a return of £12.30 consisting of an economic return of £7.60 to the individual and £4.70 to the employer.²

In 2018, the TUC reported that nearly a quarter of a million employees are supported into learning or training with union support facilitated through the ULF.³

Unionlearn

Unionlearn was established in 2006 by the TUC. Its aim is to provide “an ongoing framework to support union led learning in England”.⁴

The ULF is managed and administered by unionlearn under an agreement with the Department for Education. Any trade union, or national organisation representing trade unions, based in England is eligible for the fund, whether or not it is affiliated to the TUC.

Unionlearn will determine the level and type of learning activity that should be supported by the fund. In the financial year 2019-20 the following key schemes and priorities were supported:

- Improving Equality and Tackling Disadvantage

¹ Unionlearn, [Union Learning Fund](#)

² Unionlearn, [Union Learning Fund Prospectus: Round 19](#)

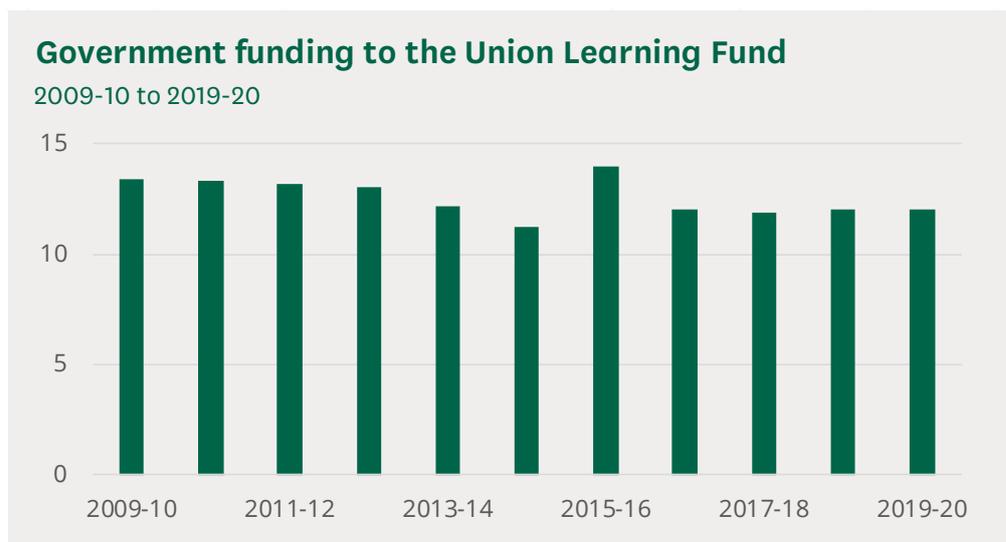
³ TUC, [Learning and skills](#), 10 July 2018

⁴ Unionlearn, [Why we're here](#)

- Improving English, maths and digital skills
- Growing high quality apprenticeships and traineeships
- Improving support for infrastructure projects, workforce development and skills progression
- Demonstrating sustainability, value for money and impact

1.2 Funding

The chart below shows the level of Government funding in the Union Learning Fund from 2009-10 to 2019-20:^{5 6}



Source: [PQ 115574](#), 28 November 2017, & [PQ 116267](#), 1 December 2017

1.3 Decision to end the fund in March 2021

In October 2020 the Government wrote to the TUC to inform it that it will end the Union Learning Fund in March 2021.⁷

A spokesperson from the Department for Education has reported that the funding will instead be invested to directly support FE colleges, other training providers and the National Skills Fund:⁸

We have taken the decision not to continue to provide grant funding to Unionlearn in the next financial year.

We will instead be investing the money to directly support further education colleges, other training providers and our new £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to help more people learn new skills and prepare for the jobs of the future. The Prime Minister also recently announced a new 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' offering adults without an A Level or equivalent qualification a fully-funded course.

When asked for the reasoning behind the decision to end the ULF, the Minister for Apprenticeships and skills reported that basic entitlements have been increased, and delivery partners are being streamlined:⁹

⁵ [PQ 115574](#), 28 November 2017

⁶ [PQ 116267](#), 1 December 2017

⁷ TUC, [Don't let the government cut union learning](#)

⁸ TES, [Union Learning Fund to be scrapped from March 2021](#), 7 October 2020

⁹ HC debate, [Further Education Funding](#), 4 November 2020, col 167WH

I was going to come to that, but I will address the hon. Lady's question. Effectively, we have increased a lot of the basic entitlements—obviously with English and maths, and with the digital entitlement. We are trying to streamline the delivery partners, including to the devolved areas, to ensure that it is simpler for people to get easy and broader access. That was the decision, and I have communicated that personally to the general secretary of the TUC.

Reaction

The TUC has described this as an “astonishing and counterproductive decision”.¹⁰

They argue that there is evidence that the demand for union workplace learning has gone up since the start of the pandemic, and that learner numbers have risen sharply.¹¹

They also point to recent research findings from the Universities of Exeter and Leeds on the benefits of the scheme. This includes the following findings:¹²

- Over three quarters of employers reported a positive return on their investment in union learning.
- Union learning makes an estimated net contribution to the economy of £1.45 billion.
- The estimated return to the Exchequer of the fund in Round 16 (20-) was £3.57 for each £1 spent.
- The majority of learners would not have undertaken the learning without the support of the union.
- They also report that the ULF has inspired reluctant learners to engage in training and development.

The TUC has reported that similar positive findings were reported in a 2018 evaluation. In the same article, they include reaction from various employer and training bodies, and major employers, who have pointed out the value of the ULF.¹³

1.4 Devolved Nations

Similar schemes exist in Scotland and in Wales. In Scotland, the Scottish Government invests £2.3 million¹⁴ in [Scottish Union Learning](#), which is managed by STUC. The aim of Scottish Union Learning is

¹⁰ TUC, [Don't let the government cut union learning](#)

¹¹ Wales TUC, [Wales TUC says UK Government proposal to scrap the Union Learning Fund \(ULF\) in England is taking away support for workers at a time when evidence shows it is needed most](#), 19 October 2020

¹² Unionlearn, [Evaluation of the ULF Rounds 15-16 and Support Role of Unionlearn](#), 21 October 2016

¹³ TUC, [Employers and unions unite in call to protect "brilliant" and "vital" Union Learning Fund](#), 19 October 2020

¹⁴ Joe Dromey, *Learning and Work Institute*, [Levelling up skills after coronavirus](#), October 2020, p19

to deliver, in partnership with unions, workplace learning opportunities in all sectors across Scotland, in line with STUC policy on learning and skills.¹⁵

In Wales, the [Wales Union Learning Fund](#) (WULF) is provided by the Welsh Government to Wales TUC. It aims to “support workplace learning activities in unionized workplaces, and to support partnership working between unions and employers”.¹⁶ In April 2020, the Welsh Government identified the WULF as

a vehicle for trade unions to deliver immediate skills solutions and support to workers during the Coronavirus (Covid 19) crisis.¹⁷

¹⁵ STUC, Scottish Union Learning, [Our structure](#) [accessed 16 November 2020]

¹⁶ Joe Dromey, *Learning and Work Institute*, [Levelling up skills after coronavirus](#), October 2020, p19

¹⁷ Ken Skates, Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales, [Written statement: Wales TUC and Wales Union Learning Fund Programme Update](#), 29 April 2020

2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: The Library is not responsible for either the views or the accuracy of external content.

[The government must consult on a very detailed plan for the national skills fund](#)

Simon Parkinson, *FE Week*
16th November 2020

[Bring in a national recovery council to steer us out of economic crisis](#)

Frances O'Grady¹⁸, *The Times* [may require subscription]
11th November 2020

[Rethink cut to Union Learning Fund and work with unions to level up skills after coronavirus](#)

Learning and Work Institute, *FE News*
9th November 2020

[Refusal to save Union Learning Fund "blatantly partisan", say trade unions](#)

Andrew Kersley, *Labour List*
5th November 2020

[Labour: Scrapping Union Learning Fund is 'vindictive'](#)

Kate Parker, *TES* [may require registration]
4th November 2020

[Manufacturing sector organisations back union learning fund](#)

Union Learn
29th October 2020

[Leaders plead with Government not to scrap £12m retraining fund](#)

Richard Beecham, *Yorkshire Evening Post*
27th October 2020

[Employers and unions unite in call to protect "brilliant" and "vital" Union Learning Fund](#)

TUC
19th October 2020

[Wales TUC says UK Government proposal to scrap the Union Learning Fund \(ULF\) in England is taking away support for workers at a time when evidence shows it is needed most](#)

Wales TUC
19th October 2020

¹⁸ Frances O'Grady is general secretary of the TUC

Scrapping in-work training fund will harm economic recovery, warn trade unions

Richard Adams, *The Guardian*
19th October 2020

Employers and unions unite in call to protect "brilliant" and "vital" Union Learning Fund

TUC, *FE News*
19th October 2020

Scrapping Union Learning Fund would be 'tremendous loss'

Ashleigh Webber, *Personnel Today*
19th October 2020

Union Learning Fund to be scrapped from March 2021

Kate Parker, *TES* [may require registration]
7th October 2020

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 Parliamentary questions

[Union Learning Fund: Coronavirus](#)

3 November 2020 | UIN 110928

Asked by: Claire Hanna

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if the Government will rescind its plans to cease funding the Union Learning Fund in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Gillian Keegan | Department for Education

We are focusing on a much larger and more comprehensive package of training support. This includes the establishment of a £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to help adults get the skills they need, including the Lifetime Skills Guarantee which will support any adult who does not yet have an A level equivalent qualification to obtain one. This is in addition to the existing entitlement for adults without English and maths level 2 qualifications or Basic Digital Skills level 1 to get fully funded support to gain these essential qualifications.

As part of our expanded commitment to skills development through the National Skills Fund and Lifetime Skills Guarantee, I can confirm all the money will be invested in skills and retraining that will be fully accessible to everyone.

The government has no plans to reverse this decision.

[Union Learning Fund: Coronavirus](#)

2 November 2020 | UIN 110167

Asked by: Patrick Grady

To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of continuing finance for the Union Learning Fund to provide support for workers affected by the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Steve Barclay | Treasury

My officials continually consider assessments of the value for money of public spending.

The government has provided unprecedented support for jobs, and remains committed to investing in adult skills and retraining. The Plan for Jobs provided funding for skills and training to help workers affected by the Covid-19 outbreak, and the forthcoming Spending Review will confirm details of the National Skills Fund to help more people learn new skills and prepare for the jobs of the future.

[Union Learning Fund](#)

20 October 2020 | UIN HL9383

Asked by: Lord Taylor of Warwick

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to replace the

Union Learning Fund to ensure that workers continue to have access to training.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The National Skills Fund is a substantial commitment to invest £2.5 billion in skills development over this parliament, which compares to £12 million in the current annual budget for Unionlearn. There is an existing adult entitlement to support any adult without English and Maths level 2 or Digital Skills level 1 to gain those qualifications, which my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, extended with his speech at Exeter College on 29 September 2020, confirming a new Lifetime Learning Guarantee that any adult without a level 3 qualification would be fully funded to obtain one. Reinvesting our existing funding for Unionlearn in our expanded offer will therefore contribute to a much more comprehensive offer in future, accessible to a wide range of learners, helping them to develop their skills and careers.

[Union Learning Fund](#)

20 October 2020 | UIN HL9389

Asked by: Lord Watson of Invergowrie

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Berridge on 30 September ([HL8220](#)), why they have ceased funding of the Union Learning Fund with effect from March 2021 when the capacity for the National Skills Fund to replace it is not known.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The government's commitment to the Union Learning Fund has never been open-ended and the current funding was due to cease in April 2021. We have made no commitment to funding beyond this date and have always been clear any future funding would depend on the government's Spending Review. The decision not to renew funding after April 2021 has been communicated at this stage in the Spending Review process in order to give a greater period of notice.

The National Skills Fund is a substantial commitment to invest £2.5 billion in skills development over this parliament, which compares to £12 million in the current annual budget for Unionlearn. There is an existing adult entitlement to support any adult without English and Maths level 2 or Digital Skills level 1 to gain those qualifications, which my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister extended in his speech at Exeter College on 29 September 2020, confirming a new Lifetime Learning Guarantee that any adult without a level 3 qualification would be fully funded to obtain one. Reinvesting our existing funding for Unionlearn in our expanded offer will therefore contribute to a much more comprehensive offer in future, accessible to a wide range of learners, helping them to develop their skills and careers.

[Apprenticeships](#)

20 October 2020 | Volume 682 | c.893

Asked by: Pat McFadden

Let us look at the record. Capital investment in further education is running at less than half the level put in by Labour 10 years ago. Apprenticeship starts are down 43,000 this year, with the biggest drop among under-19s, and yesterday we learned about the short-sighted, vindictive move to scrap the union learning fund. Why is it that, when the need is for help now with new skills and retraining, this Government have done so much to kick the ladder of opportunity away from working people?

Answering member: Kemi Badenoch

I think that it is probably a good time to remind the right hon. Gentleman that in the Budget we actually increased significantly the amount of money spent on further education. On the union learning grants, I refer him to the Department for Education Ministers who made this decision; I am sure they can write to him again on this. But the Government remain committed to investing in adult skills and retraining: in addition to the plan for jobs, at the comprehensive spending review we will be allocating our new £2.5 billion national skills fund to help more young people learn new skills and prepare for jobs for the future.

[Union Learning Fund](#)

19 October 2020 | UIN 105353

Asked by: Toby Perkins

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the equity of the decision to cease funding to the Union Learning Fund.

Answering member: Gillian Keegan | Department for Education

The government's commitment to the Union Learning Fund has never been open-ended and the current funding is due to cease at the end of March 2021. We have always been clear any future funding would depend on the government's Spending Review.

The decision considered the impact on Unionlearn and their activities and was taken in light of our expanded commitment to skills development through the National Skills Fund, and Lifetime Skills Guarantee. Overall we are investing much more in adult skills retraining, and doing so through a broad offer, rather than a small dedicated fund promoted through the union network.

[Union Learning Fund](#)

16 October 2020 | UIN 104714

Asked by: Toby Perkins

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussion he has had with (a) training providers, (b) Sector Skills Councils and (c) further

education representative organisations on the decision to terminate the Union Learning Fund.

Answering member: Gillian Keegan | Department for Education

The government's commitment to the Union Learning Fund has never been open-ended and the current funding was due to cease in April 2021. We have made no commitment to funding beyond this date and have always been clear any future funding would depend on the government's Spending Review. The decision not to renew funding after April 2021 has been communicated at this stage in the Spending Review process in order to give a greater period of notice.

As part of our expanded commitment to skills development through the National Skills Fund and Lifetime Skills Guarantee I can confirm all the money will be invested in skills and retraining that will be fully accessible to everyone.

Union Learning Fund

12 October 2020 | UIN HL9011

Asked by: Lord Balfe

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to allocate a proportion of the National Skills Fund to projects that aim to directly engage learners in the workplace, replacing the current work undertaken by Union Learn, following the decision to cease funding for the Union Learning Fund.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The government has taken the decision not to continue to provide grant funding to Unionlearn in the next financial year. This decision should not be seen in isolation but as part of the department's overall plans for improving the skills offer.

This was a difficult decision. However, we need to prioritise how we use our resources in these challenging times and have decided to concentrate on a number of major investments in further education.

The government has announced it will introduce a £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to help adults get the skills they need. My right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, as part of his Lifetime Skills Guarantee, recently announced that for adults, who do not currently have a level 3 qualification, we will be fully funding their first full level 3, focusing on the valuable courses that will help them get ahead in the labour market. The offer will be funded from the National Skills Fund and offered from April 2021.

My right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, also recently announced digital bootcamps to support local regions and employers to fill in-demand vacancies by providing valuable skills. Adults in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, and Liverpool City Region can now register their interest to take part in the digital bootcamps. In early 2021, the digital bootcamps will also be available in Leeds City Region, Heart of the South West, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. We are

planning to expand the bootcamps to more of the country from Spring 2021 and we want to extend this model to include other technical skills training.

Further plans for the National Skills Fund will be announced in due course.

Alongside the National Skills Fund, the department has been working to provide further support in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. In his Summer Economic Update, my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced investment of over £500 million to deliver a package of support for people to access the training and develop the skills they will need to go on to high-quality, secure and fulfilling employment. The Skills Recovery Package included:

- Apprenticeships: A new payment of £2,000 to employers in England for each new apprentice they hire who is aged 24 or below and a £1,500 payment for each new apprentice they hire who is aged 25 and over, from 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021.
- Traineeships: £111 million to triple the scale and reform traineeships for those aged 16 - 24 (25 with an Education, Health and Care plan), with additional funding available to providers in 2020-21 to support 30,000 new places. We have also introduced, for the first time, payments of £1,000 per trainee for employers who offer new or additional work placements (up to 10 trainees).
- Careers information, advice and guidance: £32 million over two years to help 269,000 more people of all ages receive advice from the National Careers Service.
- Sector-based work academy programme (SWAP): £17 million to triple the number of SWAP placements in 2020/21, enough funding to support an extra 40,000 job seekers with additional training opportunities and the chance of a job.

In addition, the recently announced expansion of The Skills Toolkit means that people can now choose from over 70 courses, covering digital, adult numeracy, employability and work readiness skills, which have been identified as the skills employers need the most. These courses will help people stay in work or take up new jobs and opportunities.

The government appreciates the importance of adult education to improving people's life chances. We will continue to explore options within adult education to aid the post COVID-19 recovery.

Union Learning Fund

12 October 2020 | UIN HL9009

Asked by: Lord Balfre

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they consulted with (1)

employers, and (2) business and trade representative bodies, prior to terminating the Union Learning Fund.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The government did not consult with any outside bodies prior to making the decision not to continue to provide funding for the Union Learning Fund after 31 March 2021.

We have made no commitment to funding beyond this date and have always been clear any future funding would depend on the Government's Spending Review. The decision to cease funding after April 2021 has been communicated at this stage in the Spending Review process in order to give a greater period of notice.

[Union Learning Fund](#)

12 October 2020 | UIN HL9007

Asked by: Lord Balfé

To ask Her Majesty's Government, following the independent evaluation of the Union Learning Fund by Exeter University, Union Learning Survey 2018 Results, published in September 2018, whether the Department for Education undertook a further assessment of the Union Learning Fund; and if so, whether (1) that assessment demonstrated a decline in outcomes, and (2) they plan to publish the findings of the assessment.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The department did not undertake a further formal evaluation of the Union Learning Fund following the evaluation by Exeter University.

As part of the Spending Review process, the Department has assessed its priorities across all its objectives, including considering the evidence from the Unionlearn evaluation. The decision to discontinue funding for Unionlearn beyond this financial year reflects the consolidation of investment to support retraining in major new programmes, including the National Skills Fund, which support progression to higher levels of attainment.

[Topical Questions](#)

12 October 2020 | Volume 682 | c.18

Asked by: Kate Green

I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. On 1 October, he said that people must be given

“the opportunity to retrain and upskill”—[\[Official Report, 1 October 2020; Vol. 681, c. 541.\]](#)

but it has now been announced that his Department will be scrapping the union learning fund, which supports hundreds of thousands of learners each year, many with little or no formal education. That scheme benefits workers, our economy and business, so getting rid of it must be

either astonishing incompetence or playing shameless politics with people's life chances. Which is it, and will the Secretary of State rethink this wrong-headed initiative?

Answering member: Gavin Williamson | Secretary of State for Education

It probably wasn't worth the wait, Mr Speaker.

It is very kind of the hon. Lady to read out the press release that the TUC sent her, but the reality is that we are investing more in skills and further education than ever before. That is why we are investing over £1.5 billion in capital in further education. That is why we are investing more in level 3 A-level equivalent qualifications. That is why we are driving opportunities forward. I will not apologise; if we think we can spend money that was previously channelled to the TUC in a better way to deliver more opportunities in our colleges, yes, we will do it in a better way, and that is what we are doing.

3.2 Debates

[Further Education Funding](#)

4 November 2020 | Westminster Hall | Volume 683 cc.148WH-172WH

That this House has considered funding for further education.

3.3 Early Day Motions

[Unionlearn](#)

EDM 1039 | session 2019-21

Grahame Morris

19 October 2020

That this House recognises the exemplary and invaluable role played by Unionlearn in helping people acquire skills and qualifications to boost their job prospects and make a valuable contribution to the economy; applauds Unionlearn for aiding hundreds of thousands of learners at all levels, from basic numeracy and literacy to degree level qualifications; notes that during the past 12 years more than 40,000 Union Learning Representatives have been trained, and over a quarter of a million people are being given training and learning opportunities through their union every year; is appalled that the Government intends to axe this vital resource at such a challenging time for education, employment and the economy; and calls upon the Government to reconsider and reverse this damaging decision.

4. Further reading

4.1 House of Commons

[Coronavirus: Getting people back into work](#)

8 September 2020

4.2 Other

[Levelling up skills after coronavirus](#)

Joe Dromey, *Learning and Work Institute*

October 2020

This report explores the links between trade unions and workplace training, and the potential benefits of social partnership in the skills system.

[Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund Rounds 15-16 and Support Role of Unionlearn](#)

High Cook et al, *Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change (CERIC), University of Leeds* with Hilary Stevens, *Marchmont Observatory, University of Exeter*

October 2016

[Union Learning Fund](#)

Unionlearn from the *TUC*

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