

Supporting learning and progression in the workplace

The role of trade unions in Wales

David Hagendyk



Learning and Work Institute

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The role of trade unions in supporting learning and progression

1. Background

Learning and Work Institute is a research, development and campaigning charity which focuses on the importance of adult education, skills, lifelong learning, employability, and the quality of work. We were formed in 2016 with the merger of NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. We operate across the four nations of the UK and have offices in Cardiff, Leicester and London.

As well as advising government and carrying out research projects for a range of different funders, L&W is also funded by the European Commission to lead work in the UK on the European Agenda for Lifelong Learning. For the current programme (2017-19) our work is focusing on entry pathways into learning, supporting progression for people in work, and what more needs to be done to support vulnerable groups to access education and skills.

We have a long-standing and positive relationship with the trade union movement in Wales and place a high value on organised learning in the workplace as a route to support individuals learn new skills for work and life. We work closely with the Wales TUC and recognise the role of Union Learning Reps to act as trusted intermediaries to help members access learning for their future career development.

2. Project Outline

The aim of the project is to look at the role and impact of trade unions as part of supporting the skills their members have for both work and for life. It considers how trade unions can best support their members to acquire the skills they need for the purposes of their individual progression and for their wider lives.

Our approach was to work with the GMB trade union to understand the career and learning aspirations of their members. This was undertaken through interviews and discussions with senior GMB officers, organisers and workplace reps working for a leading supermarket. The work has been supplemented through other relevant and ongoing L&W Cymru projects, specifically the engagement work with prospective learners and with employers for the Personal Learning Account pilot in Wales and in support of the Welsh Government in developing their right to lifelong learning. This work included further focus groups with prospective learners and a roundtable with key stakeholders in the sector which have all helped to inform the content and outcomes of this report.

Specific outcomes from the project will be to:

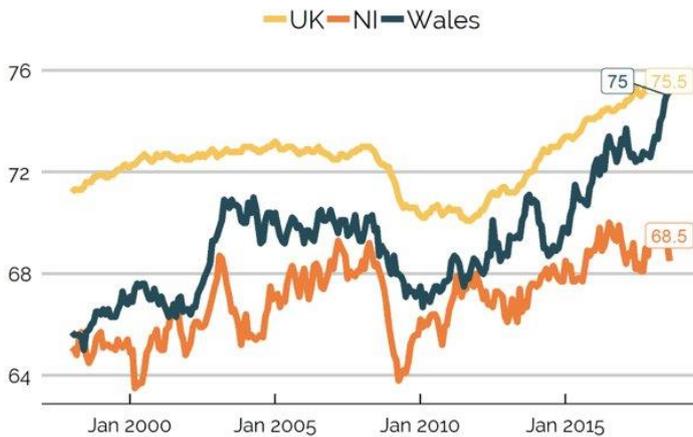
- Make recommendations for relevant policy changes to the Welsh Government and to the wider learning and training sector;
- Share the findings with the Wales TUC and identify relevant development opportunities and for them to reflect on findings.

The retail sector was chosen as a particular focus for our work, not least because it has a diverse workforce, has open entry points for people with a range of qualifications, and in much of the sector it is relatively low paid. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that retail will face a significant impact from automation and trade unions recognise this as a source of disruption, particularly in processing and distribution.

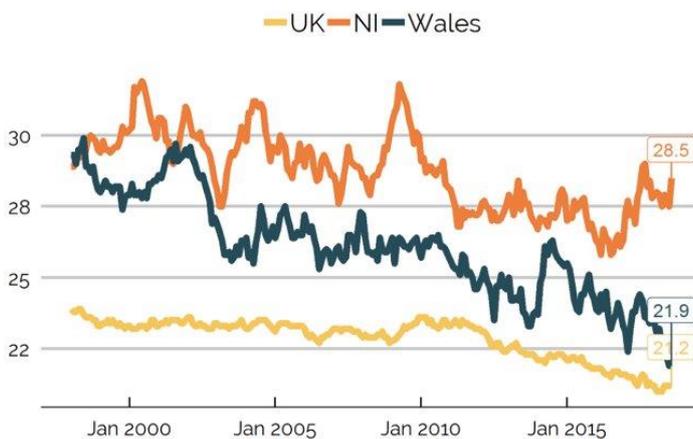
3. Policy context: devolution, labour market changes, social partnership

Over the last decade the Welsh economy has performed relatively strongly. The sustained levels of high employment that have been achieved are in line with performance elsewhere in the UK, whereas there has been a remarkable success in reducing levels of economic inactivity relative to changes in other parts of the UK.

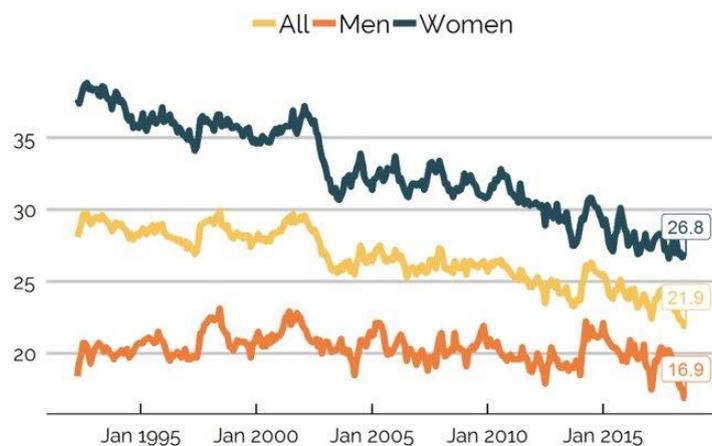
Employment rate:



Unemployment rate:



Economic inactivity rate:



The progress made however masks the challenge of low pay and in-work poverty. The scale of the challenge was highlighted by the Bevan Foundation, which found in 2018 that:

“Of the 420,000 working age adults living in poverty in Wales, 250,000 (60 per cent) live in households where at least one adult is in work.”¹

Reflecting this evidence in their report ‘*Making the economy work for people on low incomes*’, the Assembly’s Equality, Local Government, and Communities Committee stated:

“Poverty has remained stubbornly high for too long. The ability of work to deliver a route out of poverty has faltered, as more than half of Welsh working-age adults and children in poverty have at least one person in their household in work. The impact this has on the daily lives of people across Wales is significant, and affects the sustainability of communities.”²

Despite this there has been relatively little policy focus on support to enable workers to progress in work (either with their current or new employer) and instead the focus has been predominantly on helping people into employment, either after short-term or prolonged periods of absence from the labour market. Given that work is no longer a route out of poverty it is justifiable to state that a new emphasis on in-work progression is required.

The need for this emphasis has been most recognised most recently in Fair Work Wales, the report of the Fair Work Commission established by the Welsh Government. The report from the Commission was published in March 2019 and provides a six-point definition of what constitutes Fair Work. Importantly in this context it identifies both ‘Fair Reward’ and ‘Opportunity for access, growth and progression’ as key components of fair work.

¹ <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/what-we-do/poverty/>

² <https://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11562/cr-ld11562-e.pdf>

The report sets out the characteristics of access, growth and progression as:

- *“Opportunities are open to all to access work; for fulfilment and growth; to develop and progress; to acquire and use skills.*
- *Inclusive development opportunities exist which are sensitive to diverse needs.*
- *No disadvantage is experienced in terms of opportunities for progression / career paths arising from particular contractual status or personal characteristics. Occupational segregation is addressed.*
- *Workers have access to training for current job, for progression and for organisational change; there is re-skilling of older and lower qualified workers.*
- *High quality apprenticeships are offered.”*³

The Digital Innovation Review, led by Professor Phil Brown on behalf of the Welsh Government, emphasised in it’s report the importance of upskilling for the future of work and for digitally competent citizens.

*“The mainstreaming of digital skills is a particular important issue for Wales if we are to develop digitally competent citizens capable of engaging with an increasingly digitalised world.”*⁴

It emphasised too the broader importance of lifelong learning and investing in people as well as technology.

“Success in a future digital world relies on investing in people, not just technology. The challenge of an ageing society, where far more people are likely to remain in work or return to the labour market in later life, will put further pressure on Wales’ education, training, employability and careers services, to support people in different stages of their work and life.”

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/fair-work-wales.pdf>

⁴ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/delivering-economic-transformation-for-a-better-future-of-work.pdf>

A key recommendation made by Professor Brown was to ‘scale the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) with a stronger focus on supporting workers at risk of automation’. The recommendation emphasised the importance of new ways to support job redesign and deployment in the face of new technology.

Since devolved government was established in Wales in 1999 there has been a consistent commitment to a tripartite social partnership between government, employers and trade unions and their role in both policy making and in shaping service delivery. In large part this reflects the tendency for governments in Wales to be made up of parties from the centre-left and the long-standing tradition of the trade union movement in industrial areas of Wales.

In broad terms this commitment to social partnership has manifested itself in specific mechanisms to support government decision-making and delivery, including bodies such as the Workforce Partnership Council and in policy decisions such as retaining the Agricultural Wages Board. Specifically, in relation to skills in the workplace the Welsh Government has consistently supported the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF). The Wales Union Learning Fund ‘exists to support learning initiatives in unionised workplaces where employers recognise the benefits of working in partnership with unions to up-skill their workforce. It funds a range of projects which are led by different unions and promote workplace learning.’

In December 2018 the new First Minister and the Education Secretary agreed to the development of a new ‘right to lifelong learning’. This is still in the initial stages of development and L&W Cymru has been working with the Welsh Government to identify the form the ‘right’ could take and how it could be delivered in the different types of communities across Wales. The Welsh Labour 2019 General Election manifesto suggests that the outcome and learning from the pilot of Personal Learning Accounts in Wales will help to inform the future policy direction and funding settlement for adult learning in Wales.

“It will use the learning from the recent Welsh Labour government trial of new Personal Learning Accounts and increased funding from a UK Labour government to support greater investment in adult learning and by giving more opportunities to individuals to re-train throughout their lives.”⁵

Alongside these developments the new Working Wales advice and guidance service (run as part of Careers Wales) started operating in April 2019 and will provide an all age service to support people in and out of work. It will provide signposting to individuals to help them access personalised support, guidance and training depending on their circumstances.

⁵ <https://www.welshlabour.wales/wp-content/uploads/sites/183/2019/11/Welsh-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf>

4. Research methodology

Research was a combination of desk-based research on developments around progression and low-pay in Wales, interviews with senior trade union officials in the retail sector and a focus group with lay trade union representatives. The project has also drawn on the findings and discussion from other L&W Cymru projects, including the engagement work for Welsh Government for the Personal Learning Account pilot and the work to develop the right to lifelong learning.

Finally we met with and discussed the report with the findings of the report with the Wales TUC and presented the findings to them for discussion and to inform their future development.

The objective was to understand, from their own perspective, the career and learning aspirations of people working in the retail sector and how they can be better supported by their trade unions and by government. We worked specifically with the GMB trade union and specifically with their members at Asda.

5. Overview of findings

The focus group discussion with trade union representatives was wide-ranging and, understandably, was partly focused on the circumstances within specific workplaces or with the company more generally.

In broad terms there was discussion about the sense of general uncertainty within the sector, specifically around the impact of competition and mergers, and the impact of technological change on workers in the packaging and distribution sectors. More specifically participants discussed company specific concerns related to terms and conditions and access to training, development and progression at work.

The key findings from the discussion with GMB representatives were:

- Staff in the retail sector come from a diverse range of backgrounds, entry points and stages in their careers. This means members have a diverse range of prior learning, future learning needs and career aspirations;
- Limited progression and learning opportunities exist for staff in the retail sector. There were concerns about training for job specific roles and for general personal and professional development;
- Interviewees reported that many colleagues in the retail sector have low levels of digital skills. This presents problems in them being able to access a range of HR services and functions (for example, requesting leave or accessing payslips) which are increasingly digital by default. They also reported access to digital skills was also having an impact on their non-work life;
- The irregular nature and often anti-social hours involved in shift work in the sector makes accessing personal and professional education and training difficult for staff;
- Given the relative low pay in much of the retail industry, cost of training / retraining was identified as a significant barrier. Some participants reported costs of several hundreds of pounds for courses, which represented an insurmountable barrier to them accessing courses;

- Participants reported having had little or no access to career advice and guidance since leaving school. They reported that despite often wanting to retrain or progress in their careers there were limited options to do so through their employer and they didn't know how or where to access advice.

6. Recommendations and action points

Based on the findings the following actions are recommended:

1. The TUC and trade unions should be an integral part of developing the Personal Learning Account in Wales and . The two colleges leading the pilot and the Welsh Government should work closely with the Wales TUC and with trade unions representing members in the retail sector to promote this opportunity to potential participants.
2. Welsh Government should continue to support the work of the Wales Union Learning Fund and recognise the value it provides to both individuals and to employers. The future development of WULF should be informed by regular qualitative engagement to ensure the programme reflects the changing needs of people in the workplace.
3. In advance of the 2021 Assembly Elections and the subsequent development of a new Programme for Government, the scope of the WULF should be widened (and funded) to include a greater emphasis on addressing digital skills deficiencies and to support members (both collectively and individually) to improve their digital skills for work and for wider life. In this context, the WULF should be seen as a key vehicle for addressing the challenges set out in the Digital Innovation Review. This will also help to address the challenge identified by GMB members about digital by default services in the workplace and in their personal lives.
4. In recognition of the diverse backgrounds and needs of trade union members (in the retail sector and elsewhere) trade unions should develop ways to support their members to access personalised career support. This would supplement the extensive and wider services that many trade unions offer to their members. One option to consider should be to develop a Mid Life Career Review service to help support trade union members aged over 50 and looking for advice on the next stage of their careers and planning for retirement.
5. The new right to lifelong learning should specifically consider how to meet the learning needs of people in work and those with varied hours, particularly in the gig economy. The Wales TUC and individual trade unions should look for ways to exert influence in this policy space and to work with providers to help them deliver flexible learning routes that meet the needs of their members.

6. Working with the Wales TUC, L&W Cymru should conduct further focus groups with participants on the WULF programme to better understand the needs, aspirations and barriers to participation.
7. Building on the work of the Fair Work Commission and how the Wales TUC intends to support workplace representatives the findings of the report will be used to help inform collective bargaining around the right to learning and support for specific groups of workers. Specifically the findings will be used to inform the development of a new toolkit for older workers to be used to support workplace reps.

8. Detailed findings

A. Diverse career paths and progression routes

Participants were keen to stress that their members (and staff within the sector in general) came into retail from different points in their careers. This has an impact on the type of learning and career progression they want and need.

“Some our members don’t have a lot of qualifications. They’ve been here a long time. They like shifts that help them manage their family and things like that. Others are in their 30s and 40s and want to do something different. And we have graduates that start with us, thinking they will be stay for a few months before they get a job to do with their degree. A lot them are still with us years later.” (GMB workplace rep)

From discussions with the more senior reps much of the focus for their training provision centred on supporting individuals to undertake trade union duties or to specific workplace challenges (for example, health and safety, and mental health first aid and awareness around autism). Reps and officials both acknowledged that support for members was available through the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) to help meet some essential skill needs (it was noted however that this would only be available to members in Wales, even though the region on which the union organises includes both Wales and the South West of England).

Given the diversity of backgrounds and future career aspirations of their members it was recognised that there is likely to be unmet demand from members for support to access training that is appropriate to their needs.

Participants also reported there were limited training and developing opportunities provided by their employer. This included training for job-specific tasks and roles, as well as opportunities for career and pay progression. They also reported it would be a challenge for them to be given the time off by their current employer to access training for a role outside of their current company. This reflected the findings of the development work conducted by Learning and Work Institute for the Welsh Government Personal Learning Account pilot.

“Sometimes we don’t have enough training or support to do the job we are supposed to do. They (current employer) are going to give us time off or support to train for a different job.” (GMB workplace rep)

‘They (current employer) wouldn’t let me go and try the training for something else. So the issue for myself is the time to go and do it, when, when will I be able to do it? That’s the big issue for me.’ (Focus Group participant, Newport)

Meeting the demand from members for progression outside of their current employer will present a challenge for trade unions. Traditionally, unions will organise learning in partnership with employers as part of a shared agenda of raising productivity and upskilling

the workforce. Supporting members to meet their own personal progression and career switching aspirations will require a different approach to traditional collective organising.

During development work on the right to lifelong learning there is evidence that after a significant period of decline in participation the sector is responding with new investment in part-time, flexible learning opportunities. As well as the Personal Learning Account pilot, this also includes initiatives such as the Weekend School at Cardiff and Vale College and the Better Work, Better Futures programme at Gower College Swansea. Further development of flexible pathways that meet the needs of people in work will be an essential part of developing a new right to lifelong learning.

B. Supporting career switching and progression

There is scope for trade unions to do more to enable their members to access personalised, flexible training to enable them to progress within their current roles or to retrain for a new sector.

The Welsh Government is piloting a Personal Learning Account programme, which is being led by Coleg Gwent and Grwp Llandrillio Menai. The key elements of the proposal are:

- Eligible participants are those in work and earning less than £26,000 per annum;
- Participants can choose from a range of pre-agreed courses and qualifications. Courses will be free for participants.
- The aim of the programme is to help individuals to switch to new careers in either construction, engineering or ICT.

During discussions with GMB officials the opportunity of the Personal Learning Account pilot as an opportunity to help their members to access training to reskill for new careers in different industries. L&W Cymru has been supporting the development of the pilot programme and as a result of our engagement work as part of the development project with the GMB, recommended to Welsh Government that ‘colleges should work with trade unions representing members in the retail sector to recruit potential learners.’

Following up this recommendation as part of this development project, we have further worked with both colleges and established links between the Wales TUC and the PLA Pilot Implementation Group. The intention is that through this work trade unions within the retail sector can support their members to access the Personal Learning Account programme.

During interviews with representatives from the GMB and the focus groups for the PLA pilot, participants also expressed their frustration that there was little support available for people in work.

‘Just because you’ve got a job people think you’re lucky but you still want to improve yourself.’ (PLA Focus Group participant, Newport)

'Alternatively there's nothing for people who are even part-time employed, is there, to retrain and have access to the same (access to training as people who are unemployed).'
(PLA Focus Group participant, Newport)

'If you are already in work you don't get much help. I looked at a course but it cost about £300. I couldn't afford that.' (GMB workplace representative)

One element of support required by people in work looking to access learning and career development is through independent advice and guidance. The launch of the Working Wales programme represents a step towards providing this but there is also a role for trusted, third party intermediaries (such as trade unions or housing associations). Mid-life Career Reviews could be one option through which trade unions could support the progression of their members.

C. Digital by default and Essential Skills

Participants reported the challenge that many members had to access HR functions and services digitally through the Walmart staff hub. They described that many members did not have the experience of using computers and did not have access to them either in work or at home.

"Lots of people don't have a computer at home and if they are on the shop floor they can't easily access one at work either. It's not a problem for everyone but it does make it harder for some people to do things like request leave." (GMB workplace rep)

While poor digital skills amongst members were not believed to be universal and it was thought there was a split based partly on age, participants believed there were a significant number of colleagues unable to access basic HR functions online and who also had a limited ability to access digital services in their personal lives.

It was recognised too by participants that digital and ICT skills were essential elements not just for an individual's current work but also for future participation and progress in the labour market.

It should however be recognised that access to digital skills is not just a challenge for trade unions seeking to support their members in the workplace. *Delivering Economic Transformation for a Better Future of Work*, the Welsh Government commissioned report by Professor Phil Brown, identified four key challenges to deliver the digital transformation required to develop the Welsh economy:

- Resource pressures of supporting the lifelong learning needs of individuals;
- A lack of capacity at all levels of the education system to deliver significant reform;
- Delivering the complex skills required for future work using a system which is heavily predicated towards qualification attainment rather than agile skilling;
- Reducing the gaps in digital skills based on age, gender and social background as well as between Wales and other parts of the UK.

Through interviews with GMB officials and reps, as well as through discussions with the Wales TUC, the value of the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) was evident. It provides an important route for trade unions to collectively organise to address the skills and learning needs of their members. A particular focus of WULF is to address the Essential Skills deficit (literacy, numeracy and digital) of trade union members in the workplace. There are different case studies provided by the Wales TUC that highlight the impact of the programme.

There is scope to extend the WULF through the Wales TUC to deliver a more explicit focus on addressing digital skills for work, life and progression. The fund should also be extended to enable the Wales TUC to co-ordinate the delivery of Career Reviews. This should initially Mid-Life Career Reviews to help support workers 50 and over, with the aim of ensuring that they can access appropriate advice and support for their own learning, as well as accessing wider advice services (e.g. financial planning, retirement).

Case study: Cardiff Council Essential Skills

Over the last two years there has been a drive within Cardiff Council to raise the essential skills and digital literacy skills for staff across the organisation. With more service delivery and employee support moving to digital platforms there was a recognised need to develop the digital skills of many staff, particularly those in front line and manual positions.

The bespoke programme has developed as a partnership between the employer Cardiff Council, the Wals TUC, GMB, Unite and Unison, and Cardiff and Vale College. Access and inclusion have been at the forefront of the delivery, with courses delivered at times and locations to meet the needs of frontline workers.

Feedback from the programme demonstrated an impact across a range of different areas, including workforce communications, the ability to deliver on-line training, workforce engagement and career transition.

By 2018, more than 115 learners had enrolled on short courses accredited by Agored Cymru, reaching all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Over the last year the Essential Skills Team have signposted many employees from the programme to progression options - at least 20 members of staff have progressed onto waste management apprenticeships.

One employee, Terry who completed the Essential Skills course, has gone on to undertake a higher qualification within his service area.

Terry said, "I like that the Essential Skills course was customised for each individual, the tutor and Essential Skills team were very approachable, it was in works time and it is for all ages. It has given me confidence with IT skills that has helped me in my role as a Trade Union representative."

The commitment of the Essential Skills team at Cardiff Council and the partnership with the recognised trade unions has been highlighted as key to the success of the programme. The Essential Skills team has been responsible for co-ordinating the partnership, dealing with the practicalities of arranging sessions for staff at different times and locations, securing their release from work and most importantly engaging and building the confidence of staff to take part. Since implementing the programme Cardiff Council have invested in permanent staff roles and an ongoing Essential Skills programme across an increasing number of sites.

WULF case study A: Communication Workers Union Learning Together Project

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"I hadn't done any training since I left college, but I enjoyed refreshing my writing and number skills. Now I've got the driving qualification I feel it will help in my career within Royal Mail but I've also got the qualification there in case I ever had to look for another job in the event of redundancies."

Mike, Royal Mail

Mike attended Essential Skills training and completed a Foundation in Driving Goods Vehicles (DGV) course with support from the project.

The CWU's Learning Together project works to increase the skills and learning opportunities of people in the workplaces where it is represented. It is active in workplaces across the whole of Wales. The project is funded through the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF), which is provided by Welsh Government. The project aims to create a learning environment where the benefits of undertaking regular learning and training are recognised by both the employer and the individual.

With the support of its network of workplace union learning reps (ULRs), the project delivers workplace learning opportunities to help people to learn new skills - be that to enhance their current role or to provide the potential for promotion or career change.



Some examples of courses the project has organised:

- Driving Goods Vehicles apprenticeships
- Essential Skills
- IT courses
- CPR and First Aid
- Welsh Language
- Mental Health First Aid
- Health and Wellbeing courses

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This project is currently funded by Welsh Government until 31 March 2018.



GMB WULF Project: The Learning Advocacy

The GMB is a 'general' union with members in many of the UK's biggest 50 companies. GMB members work across sectors including retail, security, schools, distribution and the utilities, social care, the NHS and ambulance service and local government.

The GMB's "The Learning Advocacy" WULF project is funded by Welsh Government through the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF). It is the latest in a series of highly successful workplace learning projects the union has led in Wales.

Focussing on new developments in the recognised key sectors and industries, the project aims to work in partnership with employers to promote learning opportunities and upskill workers.

To support this work, it has developed a network of union learning reps, digital champions and essential skills ambassadors in workplaces across Wales.

The project's aims include:

- offering high quality information, advice and guidance for individuals and employers
- improving progression from Essential Skills into higher level learning
- increasing employer engagement in all relevant skills programmes
- funding for at least 200 individuals to gain accredited qualifications



Mark Church, GMB Learner of the Year

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