



# Learning agreements:

**the benefits for independent  
health care sector employers**

Working in partnership to protect and promote  
learning in the workplace



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# Foreword

Any provider of health services today is aiming to provide high quality services to the community they serve, in an environment of ever increasing financial constraints. Significant levels of productivity and efficiencies are required while, at the same time, improving, protecting and developing the quality of services.

The majority of employers recognise that their most valuable resource is their staff, however, in today's climate, organisations face challenges in promoting lifelong learning, and often find it difficult to provide effective learning opportunities that provide value for money and engage staff.

I believe that the RCN can work with you to formulate a meaningful and relevant learning agreement that sets out our commitment to learning.

We can use collective resources and expertise to provide staff with effective and engaging lifelong learning and help you to maintain highly skilled and motivated staff.



Dr Peter Carter, OBE

RCN General Secretary & Chief Executive



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# 1. Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is a professional organisation, royal college and a trade union. For almost a century the RCN has pioneered professional standards for nurses in their education, practice and working conditions. With over 400,000 members, the RCN is uniquely acknowledged as the “voice of nursing” by both the government and the public.

A learning agreement is a partnership arrangement between the RCN and an employer that is positioned within a framework of mutual gains. The agreement sets out each party’s commitment to learning in the workplace, and the organisational support resources and expertise required to deliver effective and engaging learning and development. Each agreement is supported by:

- **a 12-month learning plan** – an agreed action plan, specific to your organisation, setting out how everyone will work in partnership and what outcomes will be achieved; the plan can be as simple or as ambitious as both parties feel is feasible. The plan should be reviewed and updated annually to ensure continued support and action
- **RCN learning representatives** – accredited RCN learning representatives provide information, advice and guidance about learning at both a personal and strategic level; learning representatives may already be in place or may need to be recruited as part of the learning plan
- **a learning committee** – a working group that will support, monitor and evaluate the learning plan to ensure the outcomes are achieved; the group is comprised equally of representatives from both the RCN and employer
- **learning resources** – the RCN has a wealth of free learning opportunities and resources that are available to members which can be offered more widely as part of a learning agreement.



Through developing a learning agreement, you can expect to work in partnership with the RCN learning representatives to:

- meet your safety and **quality standards** and provide better **patient care**
- **save costs** by identifying learning opportunities that are relevant and provide real value for money
- **be a more effective and efficient business** and improve employee engagement by investing in your employees and giving them a voice in planning learning
- support you to **recruit and retain staff**.

## 2. Quality standards and patient care – why learning matters

The public expect all health and social care providers will have adequately trained staff who possess the necessary skills, competencies and knowledge to provide effective care and treatment. A health and social care provider, committed to the promotion of excellent care, understands that a crucial element of providing a quality service is the continuing development of staff.

Professional and quality regulators clearly acknowledge this connection by including learning as part of the standards on which organisations can be assessed. Where an organisation fails to meet standards of patient care, either broadly or in specific incidents, learning is the key to raising standards.

The RCN has always put learning at the heart of patient care, and by developing a learning agreement with the RCN you will be engaging staff in a different and dynamic way.

1. Learning agreements that are supported by an action plan and committee can use union mechanisms (learning representatives, branch meetings, casework) to identify learning needs that may not be raised in appraisals or incident reports, making your training needs analysis more far reaching.
2. Learning representatives can support both staff and managers with personal development plans and appraisals, and ensure members know what support is on offer and how to access it.
3. A learning agreement can reflect the needs of the organisation, taking into consideration workforce delivery plans and patient care.

**Quality standards and patient care** – learning agreements ensure staff have a voice, can influence your learning and development strategies, and provide evidence of your commitment to learning. Employees engaged with learning help promote your brand and protect the organisation from the risks associated with poor patient care.

### 3. Working together to ensure value for money



For some private health and social care providers, finding the funding to keep learning on the agenda will be problematic. To keep on investing in training and development means identifying 'best value' at all times. The RCN can help increase training and development which will attract and retain a skilled work force.

If you are the manager in charge of a budget, it is difficult not to view non-mandatory training and development as a nice 'extra' or bonus for your staff that can be ill afforded. But learning is key to a high performing workplace that delivers quality care and is something that professional and quality regulators will look for. All of which means learning needs to be protected, and to do that you may need to work more creatively.

A learning agreement, supported by RCN learning representatives and a committee, offers your organisation facilitated access to all the resources and opportunities that the RCN offers its members.

Partnership working can generate a number of advantages for your organisation that include:

**The RCN learning representative** – an on-the-ground worker who can provide support for RCN members in relation to learning and development. They understand how to engage adults in learning, can organise learning opportunities and are able to think strategically about learning provision.

Their peer-support style has encouraged thousands of workers to continue in lifelong learning, and their ability to encourage workers who are either more reticent or hard-to-reach learners has transformed organisational learning. (Clough, 2012) The improved voluntary take-up of learning by individual staff members creates teams with transferrable skill sets and an increased desire to progress within the same organisation. Indeed, learning representatives have been so successful across all sectors that the current government views them as a highly effective way of ensuring equality of access to learning (Hayes, 2011).

Many generic skills used by workers in the health and social care sector are highly transferable (such as empathy and support, language skills,

mathematical skills, information society skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, team working skills and others). By undertaking a confidential skills analysis, a learning representative can identify any gaps and develop cost-effective learning opportunities that facilitate the increased levels of transferable skills within your organisation.

If your organisation has no learning representatives at present, the RCN can recruit, train and mentor your staff to become learning representatives through its nationally accredited development programme.

**Purchasing power** – the RCN has significant purchasing power with many national and regional providers of learning at both further and higher education levels, and has negotiated discounted charging for many courses. These benefits or savings can be accessed by learning representatives and passed on to employers where there is a formal partnership agreement in place.

**Free resources** – the RCN can provide a wide range of learning resources and opportunities such as publications, events and conferences. These can be specific to nursing and health care, or can look more broadly at personal development and lifelong learning. For example, the RCN has free learning resources for health care assistants, along with nutrition and dignity resources which are all available through a formal partnership learning agreement.

**Make saving costs without cutting learning** – learning agreements enable organisations to identify relevant provision that provides value for money by utilising the union learning offer and engaging staff on a peer-to-peer level.



## 4. Employee engagement – why learning is valued by your staff

Effective managers know that staff engagement occurs when workers feel and act positively towards the work they do, their colleagues, and the organisation that they work for. Two major themes in employee engagement are ‘supporting personal development’ and ‘enabling involvement in decision making’.

For staff to be engaged, managers need to provide learning and development. But that is not necessarily enough to engage them.

Engaging all employees in learning and development can be challenging as there may be barriers, many of which may be personal. An employee may have had poor experiences of education and training or feel that they are not ‘cut out for learning’. Perhaps they feel their job is at risk and that there is ‘no point’. Shift patterns could make learning seem inaccessible or it may seem that nothing is really relevant to where they are now, or where they want to be in the future.

Learning agreements cannot meet all the learning and development needs and challenges faced by employers in the current climate, and any work carried out through this partnership is complementary to the HR and training function of the organisation. However, a learning agreement, supported by an action plan, committee and learning representatives, gives you a unique connection to your employees.

RCN learning representatives can engage with staff, providing information and support and gathering information at a personal level to compliment the analysis you undertake as an employer. The learning agreement, committee and action plan, enable you to take that information and work with it at a strategic level. Research by Heyes and Stuart (1998) revealed that training activity is enhanced where trade unions are actively involved in training decisions.



**Employee engagement** – where an effective learning agreement is in place, staff are engaged at a personal level, but have a voice at a strategic level. Those ‘hard to reach’ learners are identified, helping you to ensure your plans are inclusive. It’s an extra offer that is definitely worth considering.



## 5. Improved recruitment and retention

A learning agreement with the RCN extends your current offer to potential new recruits (both at the point of job advert and selection) while opening the way to retaining those already in your employment to give your organisation a boost in the difficult and expensive arena of recruitment and retention. Through its Learning Zone, the RCN offers learning resources that are suitable and specific to all – from apprentice HCAs to high level clinical staff.



## 6. First steps to a learning partnership with the RCN

You'll find we've made it easy to start a learning partnership thanks to agreement templates that form the basis for negotiation and the development of your unique action plan.

To take the first step, simply email us at [learning.agreements@rcn.org.uk](mailto:learning.agreements@rcn.org.uk). We will arrange to meet with you to discuss the benefits and the process of developing a learning agreement specific to your organisation. We will also work with any other union that you recognise to draw up draft agreement ready for negotiations.

A blank template for a learning agreement for independent health care sector employers can be downloaded in Microsoft Word format from [www.rcn.org.uk/learning\\_agreement\\_independent](http://www.rcn.org.uk/learning_agreement_independent)

## 7. References

Clough, B (2012) *The role and impact of unions on learning and skills policy and practice: a review of the research*, London: Unionlearn. Available online at <http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/files/publications/documents/231.pdf> (accessed 30/4/2012).

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