Paper ADH1
Assessing education and learning need in the United Reformed Church

Business Committee, Education and Learning Committee, Ministries Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	**Resolution 13** **Assembly endorses the findings and themes from the Education and Learning Consultation, and instructs the working group and others to enact the outcomes listed in section four. Assembly instructs Business Committee, Faith in Action Committee, and Ministries Committee to report back to General Assembly 2026 with an update on progress.**

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This paper responds to Resolution Y from Assembly Executive in February 2025 by setting out the education and learning needs of the denomination.
Main points	In response to Resolution Y from Assembly Executive (February 2025), an Education and Learning Consultation was held at High Leigh in Hoddesdon (April 2025). This paper sets out the following key findings: 1. Themes emerging from the consultation: a) The role of the URC's identity b) Culture and leadership c) Current E&L offering d) Design and delivery e) Learning needs of different groups f) Future of E&L provision. 2. Outcomes from the consultation: a) Denominational development, local delivery b) Rationalisation of the portfolio c) Gaps in provision d) Evaluation e) Governance.
Previous relevant documents	Paper D1, General Assembly 2024, Appendix One (EM1 URC Requirements from RCLs)

	Paper AD1, Assembly Executive Feb 2025 Resolution Y, Assembly Executive Feb 2025.
Consultation has taken place with...	E&L Working Group (representative of Business Committee, Ministries Committee, Education and Learning Committee, Resources Committee) Attendees at the Education and Learning Consultation (representatives from Synods, RCLs, Newbigin Pioneering Hub, and Assembly).

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	None.

1. Background

1.1. This paper follows Paper AD1 from Assembly Executive in February 2025, brought jointly by Education and Learning Committee and Business Committee.

1.2. Paper AD1 did not formally propose any resolutions, but there was a clear sense of purpose in the discussion, and an acknowledgment that the current situation is unsustainable, that discussion about future arrangements has been going on for too long, that the pressure on the budget is considerable, and that change is needed sooner rather than later. Two resolutions, X and Y, emerged from the discussion at Assembly Executive, and were accepted unanimously.

1.3. This paper is written in direct response to Resolution Y, which states:
Assembly Executive instructs the Education and Learning and Business Committee Working Group to design and implement a review of the learning needs of the denomination, with facilitation and external support, and to bring back a needs analysis to July General Assembly 2025.

1.4. This paper is brought before Assembly jointly by Business Committee, Education and Learning Committee, and Ministries Committee, with input from Resources Committee through the working group.

1.5. A working group was formed to respond to Resolutions X and Y, consisting of the Revd Dr John Bradbury (General Secretary), the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith (Secretary for Ministries), Ms Pippa Hodgson (Convenor of the Education and Learning Committee), the Revd Michael Hopkins (Convenor of the Resources Committee), Ms Victoria James (COO), the Revd Jenny Mills (Deputy General Secretary Discipleship), and Mr Alan Yates (Treasurer). Mr Myles Dunnett (Programme Manager, Church Life Review) also attended meetings of the working group following the Education and Learning Consultation, to provide support and 'external' input.

1.6. This paper should be read in conjunction with Paper ADH2, which responds to Resolution X from Assembly Executive in February 2025 and relates to 'proposals for addressing the excess capacity and associated costs in our formation of accredited and recognised ministries'.

1.7. This paper deals primarily with learnings from the consultation, and outlines the education and learning needs of the whole denomination.

2. Education and Learning consultation details

2.1. An Education and Learning Consultation took place on 29-30 April at High Leigh in Hoddesdon. The consultation was facilitated by Ms Victoria James (COO) and the Revd Dr Andrea Russell (Warden, Gladstone's Library). The purpose of the consultation was to consider the education and learning needs of the whole United Reformed Church in a holistic and strategic way.

2.2. There were more than 70 attendees, representing Synods (including Moderators and Training and Development Officers), General Assembly, Newbigin Pioneering Hub, leaders and educators from Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs), and others.

2.3. The consultation was immediately followed by a 24-hour meeting of the working group, who analysed the themes and refined them into a set of actionable outcomes in response to Resolution Y.

2.4. The aims of the consultation were to:
- Map current learning and development needs
- Challenge ourselves on effectiveness and any gaps
- Explore future needs and approaches to delivery
- Examine what an effective cohort size is.

2.5. The consultation opened with words from John 21:15-17: 'Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep'. These words encouraged attendees to reflect on the deep theological, pastoral, and missional imperative behind education and learning provision.

3. Themes emerging from the consultation

3.1. Ms Victoria James and the Revd Dr Andrea Russell led a series of rich and creative conversations, enabling exploration of the URC's education and learning provision at a local, regional, and denominational level. This section outlines the high-level themes which emerged from the consultation.

3.2. **Committing to a safe space for discernment**
At the outset of the consultation, those present were invited to commit to hold a safe space for difficult conversations. Attendees agreed the following core values: trust, confidentiality, honesty, and clarity. In this session, several helpful tensions were surfaced, which are discussed in section 4.2. Participants agreed a series of principles for the conversations, including respecting everyone's voice, thinking about the needs of others, encouraging bravery and compassion, honouring confidentiality, and being creative. Setting these principles out from the beginning meant the consultation was both highly productive and conducted in a way which ensured the safety of all participants.

3.3. **Education and Learning informed by the URC's identity**
Attendees were asked to think about the URC's identity in relation to how it shapes and informs the denomination's approach to education and learning. It is critical for training to simultaneously nurture the URC's Reformed, non-conformist roots, whilst also responding to emergent change, becoming a

portfolio that inclusively meets the requirements of life and faith in the 21st Century. Key findings include:

- Strong calls for learning that is accessible, contextual, and Spirit-led
- The importance of helping those in the church grow in confidence to share their faith through discipleship
- Affirmation of the priesthood of all believers and the importance of equipping everyone to serve, not just ordained leaders or particular groups
- A commitment to lifelong learning and an enhanced understanding of the role of discipleship as a communal quality of Church
- The centrality of the URC's Reformed and reforming identity in evolving its education and learning portfolio
- Appreciation for the URC's theological diversity, and commitment to training which encourages open and honest dialogue
- The ways in which the URC's polity shapes its identity and how this should influence the governance, development, and delivery of education and learning.

The URC's identity as inclusive, dissenting, ecumenical, and collaborative were seen as key to defining the nature of its education and learning. The conversations reaffirmed a deep love for the URC's roots, demonstrated a commitment to inclusivity and nimbleness, and centred on a vision of a Church where education and learning is available to everyone.

3.4. **Culture and leadership**
One key question was 'what culture do we need to support education and learning?' Answers centred on a culture that is formational, rooted in values yet adaptive, open but purposeful, innovative, and inclusive. These attributes are not just strategic, but based on deep discernment of where God is leading the Church. The emphasis was clearly on building a culture that is dynamic, Spirit-led, and fit for the future.

Conversations about culture led on to a discussion about what leadership looks like within the URC's conciliar polity; it is frequently leaders who have the most influence on an organisation's culture. One of the most commonly cited leadership styles was *visionary*, implying a need for leaders who can see ahead and guide people through uncertainty. Paired with this, there is a need for leaders who are *relational* – collaborative and emotionally intelligent. Leaders also need to be spiritually discerning – creative, prayerful, and biblically literate. There is clearly a call for a style of leadership that is rooted in scripture, discerning in action, and committed to developing others. An initial attempt to define some of the key responsibilities of leadership in a conciliar church is outlined in section 4.5 below.

3.5. **Better understanding the current education and learning offering**
All thirteen Synods, three RCLs, the Newbigin Pioneering Hub, and the Offices of General Assembly gave brief presentations outlining their current education and learning provision. The diversity of current provision was notable, as were the extensive examples of duplication of effort. There is clearly a very considerable amount of delivery taking place across the councils of the church. There is a substantial diversity and scale to the current offering, with an associated optimism and hope related to the perceived impact of training interventions and efforts to equip the whole people of God. Despite this, there is concern that the

offering is outdated in places. In terms of breadth, there is a degree of consistency, albeit with widespread idiosyncrasies, but there are notable gaps which are discussed in section 3.10 and 4.5.

Several Synods acknowledged the blessings of partnerships between Synods and networks, but there remains problematic levels of overlap, duplication, and repetition. There are widespread opportunities for enhanced cooperation and collaboration. Synods related that there is widespread usage of Stepwise and Leading Your Church in Growth (LYCiG). Notable too were the unique and robust contribution of RCLs and exciting work on pioneering.

3.6. **Design and delivery**

A session exploring the dynamics of designing, delivering, and assessing training programmes within the church helped define the role each group – namely Synods, RCLs, the Pioneering Hub, and the offices of General Assembly – might play. Key themes of empowerment, accountability, and adaptation to local contexts emerged throughout the discussion.

Who designs?

Attendees were asked to consider which communities of interest should be involved in the design and development of training. Key findings were that:

- Co-creation is central to the design of training programs, and should involve, where appropriate, RCLs, Synods (particularly TDOs and CYDOs), local churches, and the Newbigin Pioneering Hub
- Design is not a one-off process – learning material should be continuously reviewed and adapted as contexts change and in response to learner feedback
- The convening and coordination power of RCLs, drawing from both internal and external expertise, is seen as a helpful way to bring different groups together to co-create
- A collaborative approach may include workshopping, trialling, and co-design with ecumenical partners and other organisations or experts
- Empowerment and accountability are key to the co-creative process.

Who delivers?

Attendees were asked to consider the appropriate delivery method for training, with an emphasis on ensuring that learners can access high quality teaching. Key findings were that:

- Delivery depends on context and the type of training, and delivery may occur within any council of the church
- Delivery should be of a high quality, with efforts to ensure the deliverers have been trained
- RCLs play a key role in delivering training, but not exclusively
- Accredited courses are delivered by RCLs and Synod trainers, and can include mixed modes, like e-learning and peer-to-peer sharing
- A focus on quality and intergenerationality ensures that local leaders, ecumenical partners, and specialist trainers are equipped to provide inspirational and context-specific training
- Training should not be one-size-fits-all – a diverse mix of methods and a hybrid approach will best meet the needs of the learning community.

What is the role of RCLs and the Newbigin Pioneering Hub?
Key observations about the role of RCLs and the Pioneering Hub were that:
- They help maintain high standards of education due to their expertise
- They play an important role in spiritual renewal and ecumenical partnerships
- They ensure that training is not reductive, with a focus on specialist training and quality assurance
- A collaborative approach ensures that training is responsive to needs and can be delivered locally while maintaining high standards.

3.7. **Ecological and societal challenges: a call to action**
The Church is faced with a growing number of challenges, particularly deepening societal divisions and ecological breakdown. These multiple and worsening crises challenge all Christian churches, and the URC is called to respond and lead faithfully. As a denomination, we need to equip leaders to address these challenges, and this should be included in future training design.

3.8. **Learning needs of groups across the URC**
Across the two days, a key topic of discussion was the learning needs of various groups in the URC. It was notable that this question was initially a challenge to attendees: this was the first time a group like this had been brought together to collectively reflect on big education and learning questions in a strategic way. The focus of the conversations was on supporting discipleship, enhancing leadership, and helping people to effectively fulfil specific roles, ensuring that all members, whether ordained or lay, are equipped for mission and ministry. Every member of the URC has a ministry, and they must be equipped to fulfil their role in the church and the world. There are therefore certain training needs which apply across all roles, including safeguarding, compliance, racial justice, equality, inclusion, and discipleship.

Role-specific training needs
Training should be tailored to the specific needs of different roles within the URC. A non-exhaustive list of role-specific training needs follows, outlining some of the most commonly identified needs for each group:

Ministers and Church-Related Community Workers (CRCWs):
Education for Ministry, team ministry and teamwork, pastoral skills, conflict and crisis management, time management, and ongoing development (spiritual resilience, cross-cultural competence, and ecumenical/interfaith collaboration).

Children and Youth Development Officers (CYDOs): Specialised safeguarding and compliance, communication skills, intergenerational awareness, project management, Mental Health First Aid, community development, and ongoing pastoral supervision.

Training and Development Officers (TDOs): Induction training, facilitation training, and best practice in development of learning material.

Mission Enablers Network: Forming pastorates, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and conflict resolution.

Elders: Induction process, understanding of role as a spiritual vocation, practical skills for Eldership, URC ecclesiology, governance, safeguarding, team

leadership, basic scripture and theology, employment law, facilitation skills, pastoral skills, and conflict and crisis management.

Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers: scripture and theology, cultural awareness, public speaking, spiritual formation, and mentoring.

Worship leaders: scripture and theology, communication and presentation skills, and elements of worship.

Pastoral care: specialised safeguarding and compliance, intergenerational communication, confidentiality, dementia awareness, death and dying, and listening skills.

Church Secretaries: computer skills and digital literacy, practical skills (budgeting), communication skills, conflict and crisis resolution, governance, teamwork, URC ecclesiology, legal responsibilities, safer recruitment, employment, and grant applications.

Treasurers: legal obligations, basic accountancy, computer skills, administration, budgeting, employment law, Gift Aid, regulations, insurance, property, lettings, and grant applications.

Those working with seniors: issues faced by elderly people (dementia, isolation, health, mobility), chaplaincy, preparation for retirement, and faith development.

New Christians and seekers: foundational learning opportunities with discipleship at the core, scriptural and theological foundations, and vocational exploration.

Potential for mandatory training
There was a discussion about whether certain roles should have an associated requirement for mandatory training. Whilst there was a desire to assure those in certain roles have the skills they need, there were concerns about the consequences of taking this approach. Particular roles in question include Elders, Treasurers, and line managers. The RCLs may have a role to play in the delivery of any future mandatory training. A firm view about requirement for mandatory training for specific roles was not arrived at. This is referred for future exploration.

3.9. **Looking to the future: education and learning provision in five years' time**
Towards the end of the consultation, focus shifted to envisioning what education and learning provision might look like in five years' time, as well as the barriers that might thwart the vision. Attendees produced posters displaying an ideal future provision. Key themes across many of the posters were flourishing, core training with specialisations, a holistic provision for the whole people of God, enhanced provision for underserved groups like Elders, a continued focus on priorities like anti-racism and inclusion, the centrality of discipleship formation, and equipping for leadership in an uncertain world. Some of the most commonly identified barriers to this vision were a lack of focus, confidence, and imagination, fear of failure, limited resources and capacity, and resistance to change.

3.10. **Conclusion on overall consultation themes**

There is a broad spectrum of education and learning activity and varying levels of engagement across the councils of the church, reflecting the diversity and complexity of current provision. The offering is wide but not always deep, with clearly identifiable training gaps for key roles. Questions remain about the impact of interventions, with very limited data available to make a coherent assessment. In some cases, there is good training which is not widely used, making communication a key challenge. Likewise, an effort to make the education portfolio an offering for the whole people of God will require comprehensive and collaborative engagement with multiple communities of interest.

Many things are working well. Strong partnerships between Synods are to be nurtured and encouraged; safeguarding provision in particular stands out as a denominational success story and a model for future learning. People are undoubtedly being equipped for mission and ministry in many contexts, often in innovative and impactful ways. There is an appetite for robust resources which can be adapted and delivered locally. Programmes like Stepwise and LYCiG are widely in use and are appreciated by many. As is often the case in the URC, there is a clear and commendable effort to cover a huge range of needs with limited resources.

Given the limited resources, there is an imperative to reduce duplication. Even in areas that are bearing fruit, like Stepwise and LYCiG, there is significant overlap. Given the URC's polity and the importance of local need, some degree of duplication is inevitable. However, coordination of resources, effort, and material would allow greater focus on underserved areas and enhancement of existing delivery. This is particularly true in the case of training which can be broadly standardised. Where collaboration is happening it is informal and arranged on an ad hoc basis. The introduction of a structured process or forum would therefore be of benefit, as would a culture of enhanced intentionality and communication.

Reduction of duplication and enhanced collaboration would better allow gaps to be addressed. There is a need for better development of leaders, particularly given the complexities of conciliar leadership, as well as societal and ecological crises. Training needs to be holistic, incorporating compliance-focused initiatives, practical skills, and scriptural and theological reflection. There is space for enhanced training on inclusivity, sexual harassment, racial justice, and issue-based theology. Certain age brackets also seem to be missing from current provision, particularly older adults. Some areas of ministry training are currently underserved, in particular community engagement and intergenerational ministry. Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) were largely absent from the conversation, despite their prominence in the URC.

Overall, the consultation highlighted the breadth, energy, and complexity of the URC's education and learning portfolio. The sheer scale of need is a significant challenge, which can only realistically be met by a concerted effort to rightsize, scale, and rationalise the denomination's offering. There is notable passion, intellect, creativity, and commitment being devoted to education and learning across the Church, but this could be better applied by reducing duplication, filling gaps, and grasping opportunities for partnership. The path forward must embrace collaboration, standardisation where helpful, and a deepened focus on discipleship, inclusion, and mission.

4.   Outcomes: educational need in the United Reformed Church

4.1.   The facilitators shared some preliminary high-level outcomes with attendees at the end of the consultation. The working group subsequently expanded on these outcomes, which are discussed in detail below.

4.2.   **Tensions**

A number of tensions were surfaced, named, and acknowledged at the consultation. Participants were honest about their fears as well as their hopes, accepting that difficult strategic conversations were being held at a time of change and uncertainty. These tensions are a key outcome, because they will guide and inform the working group's subsequent discussions, as well as future decision making. The tensions include:

- A need for confidentiality vs a desire for openness
- Questions about finance vs the importance of seeing the issue through a lens of theological, educational, missional, and ministry need
- Appetite for bold action vs caution and anxiety
- Responding to acute challenges vs a need for strategic long-term thinking
- The importance of following a clear process vs holding space for prayerful and continual discernment.

4.3.   **Denominational development, local delivery**

There was a shared understanding that we should collaboratively develop materials for use across the whole denomination with wide conciliar input. These denominationally developed materials should then be contextualised and delivered locally. This requires a wide cohort of people to be drawn into the development of material, with overlap between those who design and those who deliver, to ensure learning materials are usable on the ground.

It was felt that there is a clear role for RCLs in the development of this denominational material, given their pedagogical and theological expertise, but nothing emerged to indicate the number or location of RCLs required for this to work. A process for decisions related to the RCLs is outlined in Paper ADH2.

To improve the learning experience of individuals across the URC, there is an identified need for more 'Train the Trainer' learning opportunities, which may or may not be delivered by RCLs. This would ensure that all delivery is of a consistent quality, underpinned by good pedagogical practice.

4.4.   **Rationalisation of the Education and Learning portfolio**

Implicit in section 4.3 is a necessity for an overall rationalisation of the URC's education and learning portfolio. This rationalisation would aim to significantly reduce duplication, identify and address things which are not working, fill gaps where they exist, and promote and enhance things which are already working well.

For the rationalisation to be a success, we need to enhance trust between bodies. Enhanced collaboration will be essential to establish a system where development is denominational and delivery is local, so that Synods have confidence that they can adapt high quality denominational resources, rather than create bespoke local versions.

4.5.   **Gaps in current provision**
Arising from the conversation about the education and learning needs of different groups discussed in section 3.8 above, several gaps were acknowledged in current provision. Identifying and filling these gaps is a critical factor in properly responding to the repeatedly expressed theme of whole-church education and learning, available to every member, designed denominationally, tailored to specific needs and context, and delivered locally.

Elders were identified as a group who would benefit from a clear and consistent training framework, consisting of core elements with wider training available based on contextual requirements. This is of particular importance in an era where many local churches are overburdened by compliance issues and other practical challenges. The principle of core training, alongside more specialised wider training, could be broadly applied to a number of different groups.

Another key area of training need relates to the challenges of leadership within a conciliar polity. To facilitate the development of this training, some principles for conciliar leadership are suggested. In a conciliar church, authority resides collectively in the Councils of the Church, reflecting the belief that decisions are best made together as the Body of Christ. Leadership is viewed as a spiritual gift meant to support and enable these councils in their deliberation and decision-making. Effective personal leadership, rooted in theological and spiritual insight, serves to:
- Guide councils in engaging scripture and theology
- Help understand the church's current context, opportunities and broader creation
- Provide insight and expertise to inspire vision and discernment
- Foster inclusive and diverse participation across generations, cultures, and differing perspectives and cultures
- Support those with differing views in the process of finding ways forward together, through respect, compromise, and agreement
- Ensure the decisions of councils are effectively enacted
- Link work within, across, and between councils through fostering meaningful relationships
- Ensure transparent and responsible stewardship of all resources
- Leadership empowers church councils to exercise their authority faithfully and wisely.

More should also be done to incorporate General Assembly priorities like racial justice and anti-sexual harassment into existing and future training.

4.6.   **Data, evaluation, learning outcomes, and learning objectives**
A significant weakness in our understanding of learning outcomes was identified at the consultation. In effect, this means we have little comprehensive data on whether the training being delivered is having an impact. There is an urgent requirement for data to help us better analyse the impact of the training being delivered across the denomination. Data would also help in assessing the quality of the learning opportunities on offer and areas for development. It is strongly suggested that all future learning delivery is followed up by evaluation, to assess overall participant experience and satisfaction, fulfilment of learning objectives, and in the longer term, the difference the learning intervention made to the

learner's practise. Best practice in evaluation should go beyond the completion of 'happy sheets', and explore the longer-term impact of training delivery.

Linked to a desire to better understand the impact of education and learning interventions, it is strongly suggested that every piece of training should have clearly stated learning objectives or aims, to help enhance the targeting of delivery, and to better allow evaluation against each of the objectives.

Finally, there is a need for increased accountability to be inbuilt to education and learning provision, so that we have a robust basis for future decision making underpinned by high quality data and thorough analysis.

4.7. **Cohort size**
There was no single, agreed view on what the ideal cohort size should be. Despite this, attendees at the consultation agreed that cohorts are an essential element of the learning experience and process. For EM1 in particular, cohorts provide an enduring support network, and Ministers often sustain deep and lasting friendships from within their cohorts. Examples from the RCLs, Newbigin, and Synod settings were discussed, with an emphasis on the diversity of cohort size dependent on the context. It was broadly agreed that cohort size is dependent on the programme, material, and context, and that there is no 'magic number' for a learning cohort. A key finding is that the formation of cohorts requires accountability, with a focus on group dynamics as well as practical considerations. More work may need to be done to assess the minimum cohort size in various settings, and associated questions around scalability.

4.8. **Provision of denominational materials**
Previous conversations around a potential Learning Gateway will need to be considered in light of the new denominational resources portal, which is being developed jointly by the Church Life Review and Church House Administration and Resources Team, in response to Resolution 50 from General Assembly 2023. Conversations about making denominational education and learning resources available through the resources portal will be taken forward.

4.9. **Governance**
The working group noted that underlying many of the consultation outcomes is a clear gap in governance. For key strategic outcomes to make a difference, a defined body needs to take responsibility for overseeing the changes. Practically this is challenging, because some areas are the responsibilities of Synods, and others General Assembly. It is therefore suggested that the new Ministries and Learning Forum should take on a governance role in relation to the rationalisation of the education and learning portfolio. This will be a sub-group of Ministries and Faith in Action Committees, responsible for overseeing lay and accredited training. It was also noted that the governance body may shift over time as arrangements change. Accreditation for new Assembly accredited training, where relevant, will sit at Assembly level, in line with current practice.