



**Cooperation between trade unions and universities:
An external perspective and summary
based on the TULIP Network National Reports**

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Organisations participating in the TULIP project (drawn from Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom) have reported on the national practice of trade unions and universities in cooperative endeavours relating to lifelong learning. This document provides a convenient summary of the information presented. Reference should be made to the original documentation for full details.

Estonia

Lifelong learning is a well-established function of national higher education institutions (HEIs), either delivered by specialised units within the university or developed organically from the existing work of academic departments. Participation in lifelong learning activities provided by HEIs has grown consistently over the last three years. Quality assurance is provided indirectly, with nationally-accredited universities imposing internal regulations for lifelong learning.

Estonia's 284 registered trade unions act as a partner in social dialogue with employers and their associations, local authorities, and the national government. They serve as a nexus for the exchange of information, consultation, and collective negotiation. Popular attitudes to trade unionism remain cautious, perhaps as a result of the relatively recent Soviet influence.

The engagement of trade unions in lifelong learning is a relatively new development, with a major trade union confederation only making express reference to the function in its 2008-2011 action plan. ('Professional associations', such as the Estonian Nurses Union, have a longer track record of training provision for their members.) Perhaps for these reasons, a formal framework has not yet been developed for systematic cooperation between universities and trade unions in lifelong learning provision. Institutions with an interest in the technical sciences may be leading the way in this regard: there are some instances of cooperation between universities and trade unions in the provision of training related to medicine and engineering. There are various instances of universities and trade unions sharing information about lifelong learning opportunities, although the 'flow' may not always be of equal strength in both directions.

Finland

Lifelong learning receives considerable political emphasis in Finland: the national Adult Education Committee has expressly linked lifelong learning to the experience of employment, as well as the attainment of economic, cultural and political goals. Future challenges are anticipated to include the ageing population, developing multiculturalism, and perceived educational 'apathy' among those with limited educational experience.

Provision is organised through some 800 institutions, including lifelong learning centres in 20 universities and 29 polytechnics. As much as half of the working-age population is believed to have engaged in lifelong learning activities, although many of these instances may have been of short duration. Some studies suggest that commitment to employment-related lifelong learning correlates with commitment to the employer; in general, however, the diversity of the participant community (especially the identity of its members and the nature of its objectives) must be emphasised. Engagement in lifelong learning is markedly greater among managerial, technical and 'professional' staff; individuals pursuing industrial and service occupations are much less likely to seek and/or to receive continuing education services.

Trade unions also prioritise education and training, although with primary reference to union strategy concerning members, employers, and the government. Finland's principal trade union confederation has taken a leading role in promoting the vindication of workers' right to education through the development and financing of adult learning. Nonetheless, a culture of scepticism about so-called 'intellectual' areas of study (even if diminished in recent years) continues to affect the extent of unions' engagement with lifelong learning. Approximately 15% of the membership of the major trade unions is believed to have engaged in education and training—but the provision available is generally tailored to the needs of 'active' union members. Uptake by 'passive' or 'rank-and-file' members is believed to be limited.

Cooperation between administration, lifelong learning providers and trade unions is reported to be good at all levels. In the Finnish metal industry, cooperation tends to focus on discrete practical initiatives (such as workplace development projects) and information exchange. It is suggested that the cornerstones of effective cooperation include the existence of trade union members with 'academic' backgrounds, the existence of university staff members with 'work' experience, and the selection of projects amenable to the trade union mandate.

France

Lifelong learning is conceived as an activity situated in the common endeavour of the state (various ministries), regional government, private companies (legally obliged to finance training for a certain proportion of their employees), lifelong learning beneficiaries (including public and private employees, job applicants, young people, the self-employed), training providers, and trade unions. Trade unions enjoy a proud position within French society, and members are legally guaranteed up to 12 days' union training annually. As such, trade unions maintain a number of training institutions to cater for their estimated 1.85 million members, and these institutions are supported by various public bodies, national (at least two of which are situated within universities: the Institute for Work at Strasbourg III, and the Institute for Work Social Science (sic.) at Paris I) and regional (at least eight of which are situated within universities).

All universities maintain a continuing education service that assures an interface/dialogue with trade unions, companies and individuals. The 'Validation of Acquired Experience' (VAE)

is also closely associated with continuing education, enabling everyone to have suitably-proven vocational experience validated by an academic award.

Universities and trade unions collaborate in various pillars of lifelong learning, therefore. In addition to university support for trade union training, they can cooperate in the provision of expert advice to employers, the dissemination of information and advice, and supporting the individual in the most effective use of the tools at their disposal (individual training leave, individual right to formation, VAE).

Germany

Cooperation between universities and trade unions in Germany is institutionalised within specific “cooperation centres” (*Kooperationsstellen Hochschule-Gewerkschaften*). These centres engage with both the labour movement and the academy in order to sustain a forum suitable for reflection on the needs and contributions of the two communities, and to mediate between them effectively. The centres do not monopolise cooperative endeavours, yet their independent status and specific mandate of the cooperation centres enables them to work proactively and sustainably, especially in local contexts.

Perhaps the primary function of cooperation centres lies in their facilitation of meaningful communication between the “two worlds” represented by their partners. Improved dialogue alone can lead to ‘spin-off’ projects which contribute to shared goals. In addition, the centres frequently conduct continuing education-related events or activities, generally funded by a third party. Although an independent initiative, these activities are designed cooperatively, for the benefit of the centres’ stakeholders. The centres’ strong ties to their local communities mean that the substantive nature of their work can vary considerably. Funding, however, remains problematic—especially as the activities are rarely clearly ‘marketable’. Although the centres aspire to be considered as ‘public bodies’, they would benefit from a broader public understanding of their mission, their achievements, and their needs.

Universities and unions also pursue various *ad hoc* projects: the broad development of strategies to sustain work-based lifelong learning is one example of a significant independent initiative.

Lithuania

Trade unions, which are charged under Lithuanian law with the representation and protection of the “professional labour, economic, social rights and interests of employees”, are broadly organised into three confederations. All three include the facilitation of access to training or education within their mandate. Executives of these bodies contribute to the national ‘tripartite council’, a forum for dialogue between the trade unions, employers’ associations, and government.

New emphasis has been placed on lifelong learning in the course of the national educational reforms of 2003-2005, which aspire (among other objectives) to enhance cooperation/integration between general, special, vocational and higher education with a view to making the national system more coherent. Universities continue to represent an important provider of continuing education, primarily delivered at a distance in the evenings. Presently, however, this provision is not tailored to the need for professional or vocational development. There is no uniformity in the organisation of university-based lifelong provision: it may be established and administered centrally or across faculties. National quality

assurance mechanisms may include lifelong learning courses within their area of review; internal QA procedures supplement this process.

There is no systematic basis for cooperation between trade unions and universities in the development of lifelong learning. Awareness of the need for such cooperation is increasing, facilitated by the use of seminars outlining its benefits. The need for sustained dialogue between the two groups is clear. Cooperative initiatives are run sporadically to meet particular needs: a notable recent example partnered the 'Solidarity' trade union confederation with two universities in the delivery of training on employment in the 'new economy'. This project also resulted in the publication of a sample contract of cooperation between trade unions and universities.

Romania

The flourishing of trade unions after the 1989 revolution has resulted in a vigorous—if occasionally fragmented—labour movement. National interest in developing a general framework for lifelong learning and professional updating has only been recently met by legislative or executive action. This action forms part of a broader 'wave' of social and economic change which is sweeping through Romanian society. By 2005, 856 providers of professional training had been recognised for the delivery of 2,307 different training programmes. Nonetheless, a 2007 analysis indicated that Romania lags behind other EU members in national lifelong learning participation (with only 1.7% of the population engaged). European funding continues to play an important role in sustaining national lifelong learning activities.

The recent development of lifelong learning means necessarily that there are presently few examples of cooperation between universities and trade unions in this sphere of activity. Different academic institutions are exploring various methods for the delivery of lifelong learning in professional contexts, and a number of initiatives seek to incentivise access to lifelong learning within industry.

A broad agenda exists for further development work in the provision of lifelong learning in Romania, calling for additional legislation as well as 'grass roots' projects in a range of institutions.

Slovenia

The phenomenon of 'social partnership', where private bodies can partner and complement public bodies in projects of national interest, is not yet developed to the same extent in Slovenia as in other European countries. Trade union involvement in education projects beyond their core operations may be said to fall broadly within this context. Representatives may participate in various committees and commissions (including the national Economic and Social Council, the Council of Experts for Vocational and Technical Education, and possibly the Council of Experts for Adult Education) but their membership is not always exercised to its fullest extent. These groups have taken some initiatives relevant to lifelong learning partnerships, including the creation of Human Resource Development Funds. These independent agencies prepare training needs analyses to adapt training programmes to the needs of the local region, and may cooperate with a wide range of partner institutions.

In principle, access to vocational and technical education is interpreted as a vital aspect of the right to work. However, trade unions' engagement with the education of their members remains at a basic stage. Existing initiatives tend to depend significantly on the personal

enthusiasm of particular individuals. Trade unions have only recently shown interest in forging links with universities. These difficulties may be attributed to internal staffing difficulties, which arise in turn from persistent restrictions on funding.

University engagement with lifelong learning is primarily delivered through the provision of part-time award-bearing programmes (in person or at a distance) or short-term non-award-bearing programmes. A significant number of university faculties have established formal structures with responsibility for lifelong learning initiatives.

It has been suggested that greater collaboration in the delivery of lifelong learning can be facilitated by a range of measures, including the creation of an institution with an appropriate mandate, greater cooperation between trade unions themselves, the training of trade union staff, and the provision of adequate funding.

United Kingdom

Present emphasis on lifelong learning is intimately associated with economic concerns. The recent recession has meant that effort is being directed by government, the labour movement and the education sector (at least in the short to medium term) to the empowerment of individuals to gain employment, update their skills, and meet employer needs. Although lifelong learning has been an established component of national policy for at least ten years, a divide remains apparent between those who have continued to pursue learning, formally and informally, into adult life and those (the majority) who have preferred to pursue (what they regard as) competing objectives. As a consequence, there is a prevailing concern in government that a significant proportion of the UK workforce is not equipped to meet the economic challenge of the coming decade(s).

Paradoxically, despite the considerable influence exercised by the trade unions on the UK lifelong learning debate over the last decade, future development seems to have been placed firmly in the hands of the employers. Lifelong learning has become, at least in part, commodified: “simply [...] about getting the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time”. Trade unions have a powerful role to play in balancing this trend. A major trade union confederation, the TUC, has thus characterised the ‘learning society’ as the product of ‘shared commitments’, with responsibility borne equally by the state, employees, employers, and trade unions. The notion of partnership is thus key.

Universities generally organise their lifelong learning provision in three strands: continuing education (generally non-vocational), continuing professional development (generally vocational, sometimes delivered with industry partners), and widening participation (aimed to promote access to university education from non-traditional students). Lifelong learning programmes may be delivered centrally or devolved across academic departments.

At present, universities are not significantly engaged with trade unions in lifelong learning; where they are, the focus tends to fall on the specific role of a trade union activist rather than the broader educational needs of trade union members. ‘Foundation degrees’ offer a common structure for this type of vocationally-focused higher education, pitched at an academic level slightly lower than an honours degree programme but drawing more significantly on work-based learning. Two key examples of broader university/union partnerships are the shared initiatives between the University of Liverpool and UNISON (North-West), and UnionLearn and the Open University. Key obstacles to further engagement include the difficulties of funding and the philosophical divide that may still remain between the (perceived) values of the university and the trade union.