



## Finland Case Study on Cooperation between Trade Unions and Universities May 2009

### “STRAIGHT PIPES”

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#### 1. TRADE UNIONS AND LIFE LONG LEARNING IN FINLAND

Finnish Trade Unions have structured according to the educational and work content background of their members. The biggest Unions are:

- SAK ([www.sak.fi](http://www.sak.fi)) for industrial and public sector workers
- STTK ([www.sttk.fi](http://www.sttk.fi)) for well educated white collar workers
- AKAVA ([www.akava.fi](http://www.akava.fi)) for academic and white collar workers

All in all some 75% of the active workforce is organized in trade unions. The role of trade unions in society can be summarized as follows:

- partner in collective agreements
- expert organization in the social and economic development field
- expert organization in health and safety issues in work places
- partner in the development of work organizations
- expert organization in work related research and training

The trade union movement has responded to the employers’ human resources management (HRM) policy by new openings which emphasize co-operation and participation in the development of the company (Kalliola 2005; Legge 1995). This development requires profound know-how in business economics and production

development. Trade Union training has a strong role to strengthen economic know-how among union members.

The structure, contents and practice of trade union education and training (TUET) are tied to the union strategies concerning members, employers and the government. In different social circumstances the trade union movement follows different strategies when defending the interests of its members, and the ways of action are influenced for instance by the historical development and the position of the individual trade union. The impact of the TUET is directed outwards to employers and the government, and inwards to its internal strengthening and development (Taylor 2001; Tuomisto 1996). The education has thus a double nature both in regard to the organisation and the individual as well as to the TU movement and the powers outside it. Trade union education is also affected by the fact that the culture of manual workers traditionally has looked askance at intellectual work, and that there have been cultural borders in that direction (Alasuutari, 1997; Willis, 1977). So trade union education must overcome even this hindrance, which is partly dimming but has still an effect. The low participation of rank and file members (in education) has also been regarded as a fact that differs culturally the active and the rank and file members (Tuomisto, 1996).

Education and training has a very important role to play as a maintainer of social cohesion of the TU movement and as a combiner of different social realities. This is the reason, why the Trade Union Movement emphasises the fact, that different learning environments should support solidarity, co-operation, direct interaction and development of social skills. Education and Training in the Trade Union Movement has a role as a maintainer and facilitator for vertical and horizontal connections for union members.

Trade union education seems to produce so called metacompetences. These competences don't have a limited area of usage, but they support the development of the employer's and the employees' cooperation in various arenas. The entity becomes a process with tensions, in which emphases on different strategies are melted together into educational contents and the workers' professional and cultural competence. (Ojakangas 2003)

About 15% of the members of Central Organisation SAK have participated in trade union education. This means that about 150,000 members have at some point taken part in the education organised by the SAK-related trade union movement. Participation follows the educational offerings which mainly concentrate on active members who are taking care of different kind of tasks. The education directed towards passive or so called 'rank and file' members is a small part of the educational offerings. Education is organised nationally with TU-schools, locally and regionally. Murikka-institute ([www.murikka-opisto.fi](http://www.murikka-opisto.fi)) has annually about 3000 students mainly on short courses.

## **2. LIFELONG LEARNING IN FINNISH UNIVERSITIES**

Adult education policy in Finland is designed to provide a wide range of study opportunities for the adult population. Finland offers excellent conditions for lifelong learning. Different institutions arrange a great variety of courses and programmes for adults at all levels of formal education and the provision of liberal adult education is extensive. In addition to this, in-company training organised by firms themselves or together with outside adult education institutions, is part of normal culture in working life.

There are 20 Universities in Finland, ten multi-faculty universities, three universities of technology, three schools of economics and business administration, and four art academies. All universities have their own centres of extension studies/continuing education. They arrange various courses that range from short courses up to more extensive specialization studies (20-40 credits). The focus of the teaching depends on the orientation of the university. University continuing education (UCE) centres are also active in the field of tailor made in-company training. The UCE Centres are remarkable fund-raisers for their universities, too.

In Finland University Adult Education is usually defined in the following way:  
“UCE is any form of education, vocational or general, resumed after an interval following the continuous initial education. This may include for example, education to full time mature students, liberal adult education, part of the degrees and diplomas, post-experience professional education and training courses, staff development, open access courses and regional development through open and distance learning” (EUCEN-European Universities Continuing Education Network, [www.eucen.org](http://www.eucen.org)).

The Ministry of Education ([www.minedu.fi](http://www.minedu.fi)) has asked all the Finnish universities to construct their own Lifelong Learning Strategies. In Finnish Universities UCE comprises generally several operations on themes such as:

- Continuing Professional Education
- Employment Training
- Open University/ODL
- Regional Development Projects
- International Projects
- Careers Services
- Research
- Publishing

The continuing education centres have organized themselves through the University Continuing Education Network in Finland -UCEF ([www.ucef.fi](http://www.ucef.fi)) . The Ministry of Education has opened a net service for UCE at URL ([www.taydennyskoulutus.fi](http://www.taydennyskoulutus.fi)). The site gives both general and detailed information on UCE at all Finnish universities. There is a comprehensive source of information on the Open University matters at [www.avoinyliopisto.fi](http://www.avoinyliopisto.fi).

### **3. TRADE UNION –UNIVERSITY CO-OPERATION IN FINLAND**

The Finnish committee for lifelong learning (1997) stressed that lifelong learning is a multilevel principle which takes into consideration, not only individuals, but also the communities guiding the learning career of individuals, active citizenship, activities of communities and the promotion of broad and continuous learning in society. The goals of lifelong learning can be divided into three categories:

- *for the individual*: a sustainable competitiveness in changing labour markets, rich life chances both inside and outside one’s work and increasing capability to learn.
- *for enterprises*: a new kind of competitive strategy, new work and learning structures, development co-operation, better use of employees skills.

- *for organisations and states* (e.g. EU, national states and their regions, trade unions): new knowledge based competition strategies, LLL-integrated education systems, social cohesion and welfare strategy. (compare Tikkanen et al. 2008).

Education and research are important means of influencing development in society and in the workplace. The ever accelerating changes in the operational environment entail further enhancing interaction between education, research and the world of work (Kester & Pinault 1997). Educational institutions clearly need to intensify their contacts with employers and the world of work including the Trade Union movement. Cooperation is needed both in the anticipation of educational needs and in the planning, implementation and evaluation of education. Trade Unions can be core players in this field in order to promote their members' learning skills and to support their facilities to study at an adult age. Unions can build a bridge between their members and universities. It is noteworthy here that the role of educational institutions as working life developers has grown in Finland during last fifteen years.

The Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions ([www.sak.fi](http://www.sak.fi)) has during the last three decades strongly driven development of Workers rights to access education and training, development of financing adult learning, demands for expanding the supply of education for adults. SAK's Educational Guidelines emphasize also education and training as a tool for strengthening Democracy and Participation in Society. This traditional goal setting has also get new aspects beside: importance of vocational growth and competitiveness. SAK's Guidelines of Educational Policy has nicely changed from structure-centered demands to emphasize individual learning and his/her possibilities to learn.

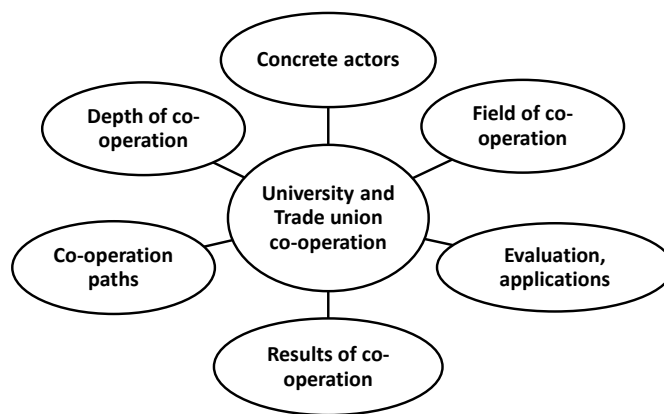
Regarding the role of research and training at Trade Union level it is obvious, that research and training are the most important sources in developing the working life and the supervision of the union members' interests. In a survey on Metal Workers union decision makers (Kalliola 2000; 2005) the Research Department of the Metalworkers' Union was singled out as the most important source of information on industrial change in the metal industry. The Union Research Department is acknowledged as a unit which gathers and analyzes information on the metal industry and on the changes in the surrounding world. The Murikka-Institute was considered the second most important channel of information providing development related co-operational training for enterprises undergoing changes. It also issues topical messages, concerning the situation of different companies, to the teaching staff who communicate this information further in their teaching and the organization at large.

On the University level we can see that The Levón Institute of Vaasa university (<http://www.uwasa.fi/levon/english>) is a very well organized research and development organization which provides extensive practical competence, applied research services and an ability to recognize the needs in education, research and development. In its services scientific / academic knowledge is combined with a practical approach. Its strongest fields of know-how are management and development of organizations, entrepreneurship, public management, multilingualism and communication, evaluation research, regional development and energy and environment. The Levón Institute co-operates closely with the private sector and the municipality and regional officials in the Vaasa area. The Institute is an active national and international actor with a continually developing network of contacts.

Cooperation between universities and trade unions is now considered more urgent than ever because of the rapid change and instability in society, industry and the

workplace. In the Finnish metal industry sector university- trade union co-operation has mostly been based on thematic concrete subjects, like workplace development projects dealing with training co-operation and action research.(see Reijonen 1997; Koivisto1997). It can also be based on exchange of information, from which new

research topics arise. In the following picture, university and trade union co-operation is theoretically modelled to illustrate different aspects of this co-operation:



Our development and co-operation experience tells that there are some basic human conditions which promote this co-operation.

1. First academic educated specialists inside the Trade Union Movement can act as a resource in building a bridge to the university and research world. Personal contacts play an important role here as well as their experience about academic study and research.
2. On the other hand we emphasize the importance of the role of those university specialists who have some working life experience outside of universities. We have experience that co-operation with them is easier than with those, whose working life orientation is only gained from the university world.
3. The Third precondition is to find those arenas which can connect Trade Unions and Universities. European projects are one path to find European and also National arenas of co-operation. Concrete connections are also created during working life research projects and conferences.

From the perspective of Trade Unions this training and research cooperation must be connected to normal union work. This work can be divided into three levels: workplace level (microlevel), union level (macrolevel) and mesolevel organizations, like trade union schools, research organizations, consultancies. Co-operation between Trade Unions and Universities can build a bridge from national level to workplace level and vice versa. Mutual know-how and trust can lead to work place development projects, which promote organizational as well as individual learning. Mesolevel organizations also are in mediating positions and can deliver good practices from case to case. Case-reports at national level can help Unions to

reformulate their working life attitudes and working agendas. At the same time mesolevel organizations can support Employers organizations to search for co-operation with Unions and work place representatives.

#### 4. CURRENT TRENDS CAUSING CHANGES IN FIRMS IN FINLAND

There are a lot of trends and facts which are causing problem situations, discussions and concrete changes in firms just now. Of course, situations vary between different firms and depending on whether the changes are taking place within the family or by selling the business or by closing down the business. In the following the discussion is at a general level only.

**Changes in the management and ownership in family businesses** is a very concrete problem situation nowadays. For example in Finland some 50,000-80,000 SMEs are in this situation between years 2005-2015. This concerns not only the owner and the manager of the firm but other persons with an interest in the business: employees, suppliers, customers and financiers. There are many questions that, for instance, employees might have:

- what will happen to the firm after changes in ownership and/or management?
- how will the management culture change?
- are there changes in the work itself?
- what will happen to me?

**Globalization** is affecting all kinds of business. In its utmost meaning even the home country of the business might change especially for those businesses where competitiveness is based on low costs (wages) that are in danger. Subcontracting and assembly businesses are most often facing changes due to globalization.

Business life is in general more turbulent and many are experiencing changes almost continuously. It is very typical that people are resisting changes even though in the long run the changes might be good for them and secure their working places.

**Change resistance** is a difficult human resource management problem

In firm's internal surveys **internal communication** very often gets the lowest ranking. There is always room for improvement in the content, in timing or in the methods of communication. Now when the world is having a recession, so called crisis-communication in firms is very important, but also difficult.

In order to survive in an ever increasing competition firms should be more innovative and the staff should accept more flexibility and be more committed. **Innovation management and rewarding systems** are part of this development and they affect the whole staff. Firms who are good in these matters can get competitive advantages through these activities.

#### 5. DRAMA "STRAIGHT PIPES"

In order to get better discussion in firms about the issues stated above and to avoid conflicts between trade unions and employers, we need new ways of handling the problems. Levón Institute asked a professional drama writer (Peter Snickars) to make a short 30 -minute drama where the current problem situations are played out in front of the audience. Peter Snickars is a dramaturge and director in a local Wasa Teater and he is very experienced in writing dramas. The two actors playing in the 'Straight

Pipes' drama are part-time "amateur"-actors from the same Theatre. During the writing process the business experts from Levón Institute gave insight on the current business problems.

The drama 'Straight Pipes' is built around the circumstances of a small family owned subcontracting company in the metal industry. It is played by two actors: one in the role of a new young manager (after generation change within the family) and another an old worker having been employed more than 30 years and knowing the father's management culture and all the details of how they "used to do things" earlier. The firm has recently received news from the main client that they should adopt new technology if they want to continue as their subcontractor. The pedagogical idea is that drama is more efficient and realistic than just reading about problems or someone talking or lecturing about the problems.

The social partners, Technology Industries and Metalworkers' Union, agreed in the collective agreement of 2007 to increase the know-how of shop stewards in business economics. For this purpose the Murikka Institute and the Institute of Management (JTO), which is owned by Employers, started a training scheme in business management for shop stewards.

Two day training courses were organized for these people. The main aims of the training were:

- to learn about business and the economy in an illustrative and practical way
- to enable better and deeper individual and collective learning
- to encourage and motivate learners to study economics
- to enhance learners' own communication and representation skills

Training methods used included a board game, which simulates the present situation of a company and future strategic and economic challenges. The game raises the following issues as the focus of learning:

- Working environment of the Technologies Industry, global economic cycles
- SWOT-type assessments of companies
- Deliberations on business ideas and strategies
- Need of investments, chances and challenges
- Product/service choice based on customer needs
- Improvement of operations according to strategy
- Basic economics: return, balance sheet, parameters
- Analysis of economic success

As stated earlier, the problems of developing this work are based on cultural, structural and functional (power) structures in the workplace. Business economics is thus not only mathematics but the interpretation of the economic situation, which is always linked to the empiric and cultural framework of people's everyday lives.

Because the participants of this training represented shop stewards from metal companies it was an excellent audience for testing the Straight Pipes drama .And so it was played as part of this training course. The drama raised discussion on important company development issues that are otherwise not so often addressed within the enterprises: How does reluctance to change affect innovations and how does work efficiency affect competitiveness. Sometimes braking blocks are found in

such simple things as horizontal and vertical relationships. A prerequisite for solving problems is, nevertheless, to identify them first. In other words, our project included:

1. the Vaasa University drama "Straight pipes"
2. management training for shop stewards
3. testing the drama in this training and
4. evaluating the training.

The drama was acted out in front of two different target groups, trade union representatives as described above (two groups having 34 participants altogether) and owner-managers (8 participants). Shop stewards training took place in Tampere and in Helsinki. The owner manager group was chosen from the Vaasa region, and they were all former participants of the Business Growth programme organised by Levón Institute. The drama was acted out during late afternoon for shop stewards (but they were supposed to participate in a two-day seminar and to overnight in the seminar premises anyhow). In the case of owner managers the drama was acted out during the normal working hours, but the participants were supposed to have their common meeting at that time in any case. The training culture in Finland makes no big difference between day-time or evening courses.

Afterwards the following questions were presented for getting evaluation feedback (Scale in the evaluations: 1= weak, 5= excellent):

- 1- The purpose of the drama is to show the possible problem situations arising from the changes in the management and ownership of the firm and to raise discussions about good practices in order to avoid such problems. Please evaluate how well the drama works in this meaning.
2. The purpose of the drama is to show the possible negative effects and threats due to globalization on a small subcontracting firm and to raise discussions about the need for changes. Please evaluate how well the drama works in this meaning.
3. The purpose of the drama is to show the problems arising from the persons change resistance during the process of implementing the changes and raise discussions about how to avoid the problems in organizations. Please evaluate how well the drama works in this meaning.
4. The purpose of the drama is to show the problems arising from unsatisfactory internal communication within the firm and to raise discussion about the role of communication in the management in general. Please evaluate how well the drama works in this meaning.
5. The purpose of the drama is to show the importance of innovation management and rewarding systems which support the workers creativity and innovativeness and to raise discussion about the role of rewarding schemes and innovation management as part of the firms` competitiveness. Please evaluate how well the drama works in this meaning.
6. Please evaluate the general applicability of the drama in work organizations` development processes.

There was also room for free comments and after every performance one hour of discussion took place.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In general the evaluations were very positive and the applicability of the drama was well accepted. The average ranking was around 4/5 in both of the groups. The drama worked especially well from the viewpoints of “change resistance” and “unsatisfactory internal communication”. The role of workers in innovation management still seems to be weak, and that is definitely one of the development areas. As expected the changes in the management and ownership of family businesses are also important from the workers point of view. Owner managers valued the effects of globalization higher than shop stewards. For more detailed analysis see the paper *Learners Perspective*.

In the discussions afterwards it became clear that, because it is short enough, the drama can easily be integrated into a special training course, but it functions separately just as well. It is recommended that an experienced business expert conducts and leads the discussion in order to get the participants to give comments and in drawing conclusions. The transferability of this case is easy and for instance, Levón Institute, has with success made use of the drama in its other training activities.

The concrete cooperation around this drama case between the University of Vaasa and Murikka Institute relies on both partners' strong experience in the field of in-company training. Even earlier than this it had been very important to find different kinds of training methods (plays, drama, role-plays, simulation games etc) for getting adult participants motivated for learning. For example Murikka Institute has used the “Apples and Oranges” game (developed in Helsinki University of Technology) when running Basic Business Finance courses. Role plays have been part of Negotiation Skills courses in simulated circumstances.

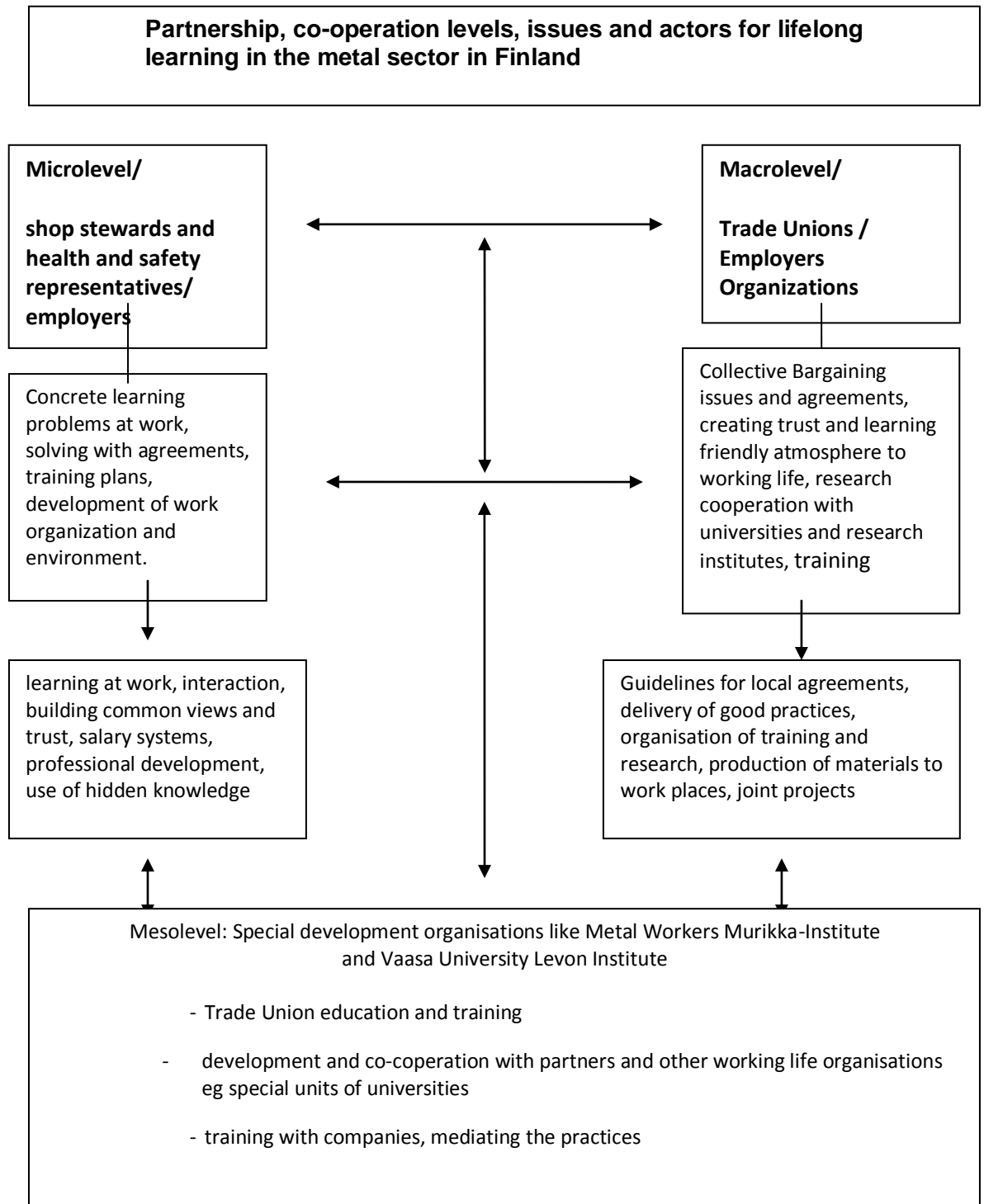
Research results show that such training methods are improving learning and are widening the learners' understanding of the different roles of people in work organizations. Learners' knowledge building from the different problem situations is improving. The evaluation results from the above-described “Straight Pipes” drama support earlier research findings.

In conclusion, relations, roles and co-operation of these organizations in promoting lifelong learning in the workplace are crucial. In this co-operation they can build bridges between different working-life levels and bind actors to the same development processes still without losing their own positions and goals ( see picture in appendix, Ojakangas 2008).

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Appendix:



(Ojakangas 2008)