



Case Study on Organisational and structural comments on the Liaison Office University – Trade Unions (Kooperationsstelle) at the Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg

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1. General Introduction

Even today the cooperation of academics and employees is not yet common practice. In academia much has changed towards a more application-based approach; also in enterprises and administration the handling of academic findings is no longer reserved for engineers and managers. Usually, however, employees are confronted with academic results that change their work reality. Transfer of results, not cooperation in projects, is still the common link between academia and labour, and processes of common handling of problems in cooperative projects are still rare. The reasons are not so much to be found among the acting persons but are due to structural circumstances. Academia and labour operate according to different logics; practical courses of action require a different approach and different mode of operation than academic analysis does.

Cooperation centres consider it their task to communicate these different logics, approaches and modes of operation with the aim of establishing an active cooperation. Academics gain a better understanding of their empiricism this way and employees gain new capacity to act. Mediation in this way refers to all aspects of the cooperation, starting with the definition of the problem that has to be worked out, methods and ways for its analysis right up to the reorganisation in practice. The mediation tasks comprise theoretical as well as practical, communicative as well as analytical activities, research and reorganisation. Cooperation centres initiate, organise and moderate the process between academia and labour.

Based on the fact that academic knowledge is applied with increasing frequency and more systematically and hence influences living and working conditions tremendously, in the 1970s the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) already demanded more participation of employees and their lobby in research and development. The first cooperation centres were founded at the University Oldenburg and Bochum in 1974/75. Opportunities and barriers for academic study which is oriented towards employees' interests has been investigated and documented thoroughly.

For the future it has been suggested that the work of the cooperation centre should focus on discourse. It has also been proposed to organise discussion between trade unionists and works committees with academics of the regional university in order to further mutual understanding and to initiate cooperative projects. Clarifying the opportunities of cooperative academic work was regarded a major task of cooperation centres. "In detail this means:

- to identify deficits and possible meaning of employees' problems in research,
- to point out chances of improving the quality of academia through access to those concerned and through interdisciplinary reference
- to present enhanced possibilities of implementing research results.”

Reference: Klaus Kock “Between Chairs and Work Benches” 2007 p 4-5, 8 , see attached document.

Please also cross-refer to the DE national report for TULIP.

2. Case Study

The Carl von Ossietzky University as well as Arbeit und Leben, Trade Union are partners in the Tulip Project. Arbeit und Leben is strongly connected with the Kooperationsstelle, which itself is part of the university.

As noted above, the Kooperationsstelle Oldenburg is one of the oldest in Germany. In our case study, we describe its tasks and structure as an example of an excellent model of cooperation between universities and trade unions. We will focus on structure, finances, contact between university and trade union, networks and current thematic foci.

2.1. Structure of the Organisation

As a staff unit, the Liaison Office University – Trade Unions is assigned to the Presidential Chair and hence directly responsible to the university president. Staff and communication about focal points of work hence take place in direct consultation with the president. This structure is rather unusual compared to other liaison offices in Lower-Saxony and the region, where there are different allocations and directive structures for liaison offices. The Liaison Office Oldenburg is currently equipped with 1.5 staff posts, i.e. a full time director, which is a position as a research associate with a respective salary, and a half time post assigned to an administrative assistant.

2.2. Finances

The permanent expenses and personnel costs are covered by a special budget of the university, financed directly by the region of Lower-Saxony. Thus if the university management decided to stop the work of the liaison office, the personnel costs as well as other direct costs would be paid back to the state budget. Hence such a decision would not endow the university with any financial advantage. Besides the financing of personnel costs for the 1.5 posts mentioned, the liaison office has a yearly budget for other direct costs that amounts to approx. 12.000 Euros. This budget serves to cover all expenses of the liaison office – office direct costs as well as costs of a conference and other focus points of work. This budget for direct costs is the same for all liaison offices in Lower Saxony (i.e. 5 offices) – the rest of the financing is acquired by very different means (partly by regional or supra-regional trade unions). This also means that there are no uniform federal or state regulations for the financing of a liaison office.

2.3. Contacts – Exchange between University and Trade Unions

Liaison Advisory Board

The work of the liaison office is accompanied by an advisory board, in which trade unions and the university are both represented. On behalf of the trade unions, the head of department of the DGB federal district Lower-Saxony responsible for universities, the regional executive secretary of the trade union educational association as well as colleagues from the individual trade unions from the Weser-Ems region are present in the advisory board. From the universities there are representatives of professors, research associates as well as technical and administrative staff. The advisory board meets approx. twice a year

Kooperation Information

Every six months information about the work and the projects of the liaison office is published. In Lower-Saxony this information dissemination is conducted in cooperation with the other four liaison offices. The aim of this information dissemination is to provide the universities and trade unions with up-to-date information about the main fields of work of the liaison office and thus give directives and suggestions for further cooperation.

Networks of the Liaison Office

An annual meeting of the Working Committee of liaison offices takes place in Germany in order to exchange work experience and discuss perspectives of the liaison offices. The meeting is coordinated and financed by the research and study foundations of the trade unions. The liaison offices in Lower-Saxony meet four times a year to exchange experiences with their work and major projects. In the context of the network of liaison offices in Lower-Saxony an annual conference is organised on the topic of “Future of work formation”. Furthermore joint projects of the individual liaison offices are planned and coordinated. At the beginning of 2008 the network of liaison offices in Lower-Saxony took part in a EU project for the second time. The liaison offices applied for it in joint cooperation with the trade union adult education institution.

The cooperation of the Liaison Office Oldenburg within the universities takes place in the following ways:

- Involving professors and research associates as speakers at conferences, which are organized by the liaison office
- Inquiring regarding contacts for courses or research projects (involving trade unions or lobbyists from businesses in the North-West region);
- Presenting the work of the liaison office to new university lecturers
- Regular exchange on the work of the liaison office with the university president
- Representing the liaison office in different research centres and university networks

The cooperation of the liaison office Oldenburg with regional trade unions takes place in the following ways:

- Regular attendance of the liaison office in several regional bodies of the trade unions
- Cooperating with the steering committee of the interregional trade union council Weser-Ems Northern-Netherlands;
- Inviting directors of the liaison offices as speakers on current political topics concerning trade unions in different bodies of the individual trade unions
- Good informal contact with all regional offices of the individual trade unions and their directors

- Organising an annual conference on a current political topic concerning trade unions, to which representatives of the steering committees of the individual trade unions or the DGB respectively and trade-union-oriented academics are invited. These conferences have developed into a forum of critical discussion of trade union politics in the region and have hence become a ‘trade-mark’ of the liaison office (as Academic-Practice-Dialogue)

2.4. Current thematic foci of the Liaison Office Oldenburg

- Precarious work relations; theoretical argumentation and monitoring of a regional DGB project on this topic
- Interregional trade union politics: Participation in the IGR at the German-Netherlands-Border; IGR as a part of a European trade union strategy
- Internationalisation of occupational education: participation in the establishing of a German-Netherlands exchange structure of trainees; monitoring the discussion on the modernisation of occupational education in the European context
- Project acquisition and conference organisation on further topics concerning trade union politics.

2.5. Other Activities

There is strong international co-operation, mainly with our nearest neighbour the Netherlands. e.g. the discussion of adjustments and counselling in the area of the labour market; professional training, especially vocational training; and contacts of specific branches of industry and their trade unions. The latest area concerns the construction business and its training, especially problems of migration labour.

Other areas are presentations regarding specific topics, which are relevant for employees in the university, for example new laws in the area of employment of academics or global changes in universities for employees.

Topics of importance for employees outside the university arising from research are offered as well, for example to representatives of staff and workers’ councils topics like “The End of Co-management – Challenges for Members of Councils“. These challenges are more and more relevant for the target group mentioned above.

2.6. Project “Academia – Practice – Dialogue”

“The Cooperation Centre Oldenburg conducted several events under the general topic of “Academia-Practice-Dialogue“. This created a framework for a discussion between academics and actors from the labour market. The events were organised and moderated in such a way that both sides had an equal say. The events took place at the university, where workers’ councils were invited to discuss their topics with academics. Thus reservations about working together were reduced and space was created for common experiences in the discussion. Workers’ councils realized that their experience could also be interesting for academia and that they are not simply asked to fill in questionnaires, but also to present their topics. Practical experience complements academic knowledge and vice versa. On certain topics, e.g. working hours policy, there are further conferences dealing with particular aspects of the topic in more detail. The university becomes the contact point for industrial lobbies. On the other hand, academics get to know workers’ councils as competent dialogue partners. The questions raised in the cooperation centre’s events and the discussion in them

- for example the issue of working hours – are of great importance to researchers, who want to come up with practical results. For teaching staff they provide a pool of practical examples, which can help to make their content more clear. “

Reference: Klaus Kock “Between Chairs and Work Benches” 2007, p 40, see attached document

3. Conclusion

The main focus in this case study concerns the quite exceptional organisational structure of an institution in the university, which is responsible for the relationship between university and trade unions, paid for by the state. This can happen within a political background of seeing the importance of cooperation between these two organisations. It allows the university as well as the trade unions to do common research as well as programmes in Lifelong Learning (LLL). In both areas there has to be an added value to all who participate. From the research point of view, it is very obvious that also trade unions must have the possibility to give an input on relevant questions, especially in the interest of employees. Research results also have to be transported into the daily work of trade unions.

The communication between universities and trade unions is often complicated. There is a different culture in both organisations, different language and often different interests. Trade unions have to look at universities from the point of view of interest for employees. Research or university teaching is often viewed as being more subject-specific.

One of the main tasks is to participate in LLL programmes, which concern academia and the interest of trade unions. The better possibilities there are for trade unions to use academia to make open questions of society more understandable, the better the quality of their work is. On the other hand, trade unions have to influence the topics of research and teaching in the interest of employees. Most of our students need a better understanding of social questions in order to become responsible citizens. Here trade unions have to play their part as well.