



UK Case Study on Cooperation between Trade Unions and Universities

UNISON NW & University of Liverpool, UK

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Introduction

Global competition now requires highly skilled, flexible and adaptable workplaces and workers to ensure economic prosperity. This is becoming increasingly apparent not only in the UK private sector but in the public sector as well where there is a danger that a 'disposable workforce' mentality becomes the norm for many employers. A key response to this change is the development of lifelong learning opportunities which meet the needs, in all aspects – practical, aspirational, educational - of both employees and potential employees.

Increasingly, both the university and trades union sectors in the UK have begun to recognise the need to meet the challenge of offering these new opportunities both individually and, in the case of the collaboration between the University of Liverpool and UNISON, North West, collaboratively.

The University of Liverpool Strategic Plan (2009-2014) explicitly articulates the institution's commitment to widening participation to its programmes of study, for example, one of its stated aims is to "create new paths of entry from new areas". This underpins the collaborative work with UNISON North West.

In its partner role in the TULIP project, UNISON North West supports the necessity for lifelong learning to reinforce career stability and create pathways through sustainable employability; the acquisition of new skills; the career development and retraining of staff; and the implementation of accreditation of prior skills and learning. UNISON recognises the need to develop a lifelong learning agenda to meet the needs of the economy, but primarily wants to address the needs and ambitions of working class people – its members.

The UNISON worker in Context

UNISON North West represents 200,000 members based within the public sector. Almost 75% of those members are women, often working in low paid, low skilled jobs. In some instances working in up to three separate part time jobs in order to cope with the rising costs of living in today's erratic economic climate. Many of these workers left compulsory education at the age of sixteen and are now finding that this

choice, [made at such a young age, and often out of financial necessity], has resulted in feeling trapped in insecure employment and being one of a vast number of vulnerable workers in the UK labour market.

The recent TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment (CoVE) report highlighted that many workers are unable to change decisions on education made at the age of sixteen and return to education at a later stage. The report critiques a UK Government report from 1999 which claimed that vulnerable work acts as a precursor to better and more secure employment and maintains that temporary work does not lead to better jobs for low paid workers. This confirms the Low Pay Commission's findings that although some workers may progress from minimum wage work, a large percentage of these individuals do not move into better jobs (with women being at a higher risk of persistent low pay than men)¹.

Male workers also face vulnerable employment and, regardless of gender, when faced with a cycle of low paid, low skilled, precarious work, individuals become disengaged from society. A significant body of data links this to subsequent ill health and often the trap of "worklessness" and existing on invalidity benefit.

Over the last decade, the use of temporary agency work has increased markedly. Estimates from the European Confederation of Private Employment Agencies for the UK suggest that in 2005 there were some 6,000 officially designated employment

agencies operating through 14,400 branches and sourcing 1.2 million workers a day (5% of the national workforce). The sector turnover was calculated at £24 billion or 3% of GDP.²

It is apparent from numerous pieces of research, in particular the findings from the CoVE report, that agency workers are a cheap source of labour for employers. A cheap and flexible labour force recruited in many instances to cope with peaks and seasonal work and increasingly using migrant workers. Agency workers are seen as a disposable workforce, the ultimate in flexible employment, which can be hired and fired at will. UNISON believes that this exploitation of agency workers, in particular migrant workers, will act as a catalyst to exploit indigenous workers – including and in particular its members.

UNISON and the University of Liverpool Collaboration

In their commitment to build relations between academia and the trade union movement, the University of Liverpool and UNISON North West have engaged in ongoing discussions about collaborative activity since early 2004. Generally, the University and UNISON have aimed to develop a multifaceted relationship which is not restricted to a single area of activity but which ranges across a number of project areas and is interdisciplinary in nature. Initially, the relationship grew out of broad based discussions involving the University and other trade unions across the North West of England which explored the potential for the establishment of a Knowledge Transfer Centre. Recognition of the potential of working in partnership resulted in the development of collaborative working in the area of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), reflecting the trade union sector's growing belief that its focus should be broadened and developed to respond to the increasing importance of the lifelong

¹ Data from the COVE Report.

² <http://www.euro-ciett.org> Cited in McKay, S. (2008) 'The Drive towards agency employment – why employers favour agency staff'. Working Lives Institute.

learning agenda generally and the problems associated with employer led training for workers (e.g. lack of investment, short-term thinking).

The University and UNISON have undertaken three distinct collaborative projects all of which impact on lifelong learning and work based learning .

1. Lifelong learning, Reading and Work

In spring 2006, the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) and UNISON undertook a series of discussions about the potential to open up ULLL to UNISON members. The key issue for any proposed ULLL actions was that it should be responsive and attractive to its target audience – mainly low paid women many of whom have few (if any) formal qualifications. Following discussion, it was agreed that a number of Reading Groups or Book Clubs should be formed. “Reading” underpins a significant proportion of the ULLL agenda - from Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (vocational courses related to job roles and career paths) through Continuing Education (CE) (part-time day or evening courses in a range of topics often studied for personal interest) to Widening Participation (courses and other support systems for adults without traditional entrance qualifications). It is believed that shared reading activities engender critical thinking, analytical skills, the construction of argument and the precise articulation of concepts, emotions and ideas – all essential to fulfilling and effective workplace performance. In addition, reading remains not only an essential skill for anyone involved at any level of educational activity, but is also a gateway to all areas of Higher Education.

Two reading groups based in Merseyside (in the North West region of the UK) were established. These are currently being run as pilot schemes with the potential to be expanded across the region should their current success continue. A further initiative is based upon arts appreciation for which UNISON members with an interest in the arts are invited to participate in group activities that aim to raise awareness of the place of art in society. All of the groups detailed here share the same rationale – to bring together individuals from very different backgrounds and circumstance and introduce the idea that something they enjoy as a hobby, or have an interest in, can be pursued through ULLL – simply put, it shows participants how education can be relevant and accessible in their daily lives and creating the understanding that ULLL is available beyond the traditional structures of education.

2. Transformations: changing careers, meanings and expectations of women’s political activism”

The report findings of this 2nd project are now widely used by the union in understanding how and why women become (or cease to be) politically active within UNISON. It identified issues of overlap and interaction between union activity, working life, community identity and home life and aimed to shed light on what being a woman activist in UNISON means³. The report also laid the foundations for the development of work-based learning opportunities.

3. ESRC Collaborative Studentship

In 2006, UNISON NW undertook a four year ESRC (Economic, Social and Research Council) Collaborative Studentship entitled ‘Membership and branch perspectives on

³ Colls R, Featherstone D, O'Brien M and Sadler D (2005) *Transformations: Changing careers, meanings and experiences of women's political activism*. Manchester: North West Region of UNISON.

trade union internationalism and international development activity'. In this collaborative research based within the Department of Geography, UNISON NW is the subject of research, and the student elected is provided access to UNISON NW members, participation in international events, access to records on international development and financial assistance in completing the study.

Discussions on future research developments in this successful partnership have occurred. A series of joint briefing sessions have been cited as an opportunity to create debate between trade unions, academics, students, workers and the wider public on the future of the trade union movement. Further research collaborations have also been posited to establish debate and potentially aid UNISON future policy direction. Two such potential projects surround current research staffs' interests – the Gangmasters Licensing Act 2007 and the increasing use of agency staff globally. These are issues that UNISON members across the North West region experience, be it through the inequalities of temporary staffing and agency work; community cohesion issues; or the union's ability to act in supporting its members in light of a multi-tiered workforce.

Research projects such as these result in strengthening the relationship between the two partners, the basis of which is an understanding that both partners have something to gain. Researchers are able to place theoretical understandings into a 'real life' context beyond the academic arena; whilst trade unionists can gain an insight into their members' perspectives on current policies as a result of longitudinal, in-depth research data as well as integral research on the changing nature of their sector and what this means for their members. Whilst conducted by researchers this work enables trade unions to use their time fully to focus upon the core issues of trade unionism. It is apparent that developing this relationship further is of benefit to all those concerned.

The University – Trade Union Relationship

Of primary concern in developing the relationship between the University of Liverpool and UNISON NW, is promotion of the idea that education can, and must, extend beyond the traditional elite structures of the current system to provide opportunities for all workers regardless of educational background or financial circumstance. This ethos is encapsulated in UNISON's promotion of ULLL to its members – both partners share the belief that education should be driven by equity and accessible for all and this is matched by the Universities commitment to equity and diversity – as stated in its 2009-2014 Strategic Plan: "Fair access is already one of our core values. Over the next five years we want to build upon our strategic objectives for widening participation.."

The current and developing lifelong learning for Unison members can act as a stepping stone to ULLL, raising awareness that there are different routes to education available and it can suit the needs of participants' daily lives and commitments.

Promoting a Culture of Learning

UNISON North West understand that many within, and beyond, the trade union movement often perceive academia as a highly selective and elitist model. UNISON NW calls for a move away from this notion of elitist systematic learning and an increase in the provision of educational opportunities for workers in recognition that

wider participation in education not only enhances participatory citizenship, but also meets economic and vocational concerns.

It is apparent that a learning divide exists within the UK. There are those with qualifications who continue learning both formally and informally in work and beyond. Then there are those (the majority) who have few, if any, formal qualifications and who have not been involved in systematic learning since leaving compulsory education⁴. Addressing this divide demands a new learning culture stretching beyond the government's current lifelong learning targets to improve basic skills and reduce the number of workers who lack NVQ2 or the equivalent. UNISON NW supports these targets, yet recognises the need to develop them further by promoting workers' re-engagement with learning and beyond the limitations of the Skills Councils agenda.

Education gives workers opportunities, offering them the choice to change the career path they chose at sixteen. Empowered by access to education, many workers may find the skills they use daily can be recognised academically – for instance, a carer/nurse clinically trained could have ambition to be a Doctor, yet will not have the opportunity to enter further education to pursue this training.

The Leitch Report in its review of education and skills (2006) claimed 'economically valuable skills is our mantra'. It claimed that the UK's natural resource is its people:

'...their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice'.⁵

UNISON can see this potential in their members and the wider workforce. Almost three quarters of the 2020 workforce has already completed their compulsory education – this points to a large number of future UNISON members entering the trap of vulnerable employment. In representing its members UNISON has a role as social partner in debates with government and other agencies on the lifelong learning agenda. As encapsulated in the extract from the Leitch Report above, education has been driven by economic targets and the short term interests of business, as is apparent in UK government education policy.

The UK Alliance of Sector Skills Councils was launched in April 2008 and is a collective body made up of 25 fully licensed Sector Skills Councils. These employer-driven organisations claim to articulate the voice of approximately 85% of the UK's workforce on skills issues. The councils deliver Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) that map out what skills employers need their workforce to have and how these skills will be supplied – both now and in the future: '...put simply they are about getting the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time'.⁶

However, by having these Councils 'employer led' the government is not utilising the advantages that Trade unions can bring to the table. Trade unions have an interest in the aspirations and ambition of people. The ambitious worker who wants to escape the vulnerable worker trap will help promote a prosperous UK economy.

⁴ Rob Halsall, Head of Widening Participation. Learning & Teaching in Action. <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue5/halsall.shtml>

⁵ The Leitch Review was tasked in 2004 with considering the UK's long-term skills needs. Leitch Review of Skills 'Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills', December 2006.

⁶ <http://www.ukces.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=4550>

Encouraging workers to return to education can lead to empowerment and increase morale in the workforce in higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice (as aimed for in the Leitch report recommendations) would all flow from this encouragement. Trade unions need to learn how to improve their ability to influence government and other agencies such as the Regional Development Agency [one of many “quangos~” with influence in this matter].

UNISON & TULIP

The TULIP project encapsulates the relationship between UNISON NW and the University of Liverpool. It enables collaborative work between the two partners as well as welcoming others from across Europe to further develop an ethos of two-way information exchange in which participants can learn from each others’ success and failures.

UNISON NW intends to provide partners with information on the UK experience of an education system that, due to its traditionally bureaucratic structure, quite often limits opportunities for working class people.

UNISON NW hopes for in-depth discussions with all partners on their experiences of lifelong learning, with a focus upon the following two questions:

- Can you provide information on educational models that effectively provide opportunities for working class people and could be applied in the UK?
- How can UNISON NW best influence central government (and other agencies e.g. Regional Development Agencies) on the lifelong learning agenda?

In Conclusion

Previous workshops have proven that participants in TULIP have experience of very different educational scenarios from which all partners can learn and provide advice and guidance. As trade unionists and academics the primary focus throughout discussions must always be on *access to education for all* regardless of circumstance.

UNISON NW has always provided support for working class people through membership when they need it; now it is taking a pro-active stance, attempting to influence education to help its members escape the trap of the disposable workforce. This is the very issue that motivates UNISON NW in its involvement in TULIP - that by working with others it can not only provide hope for its members, but potentially make change.