

Nuffield Foundation Small Grants Scheme

End of Project Report

Evaluating recent developments in training trade union organisers

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The project set out to evaluate the impact of training for specialist organisers within British trade unions. This is of particular importance and timeliness because 2008 marks the 10th anniversary of the TUC's Organising Academy (OA) which explicitly aimed to contribute to the revitalisation of the trade union movement. Further, the key idea of the Academy - to train *specialist* organisers, rather than to rely on generalist union officers to undertake organising work - has spread through the union movement and has changed as it has been taken up by individual unions. We therefore wanted to find out what Organising Academy graduates thought about the training they received, what they went on to do in their subsequent careers, and how useful they felt the training was in their current roles. We also wanted to understand the spread of these initiatives in more detail, and the consequences of individual unions taking on different approaches to training organisers.

The research

We successfully completed all of the work that we set out in the project proposal. With assistance of the TUC we aimed to track all Organising Academy trainees including those that had left the movement. However, tracing the graduates was surprisingly problematic because of the poor records kept by the TUC and the fact that organisers appear to be fairly peripatetic. We began by emailing all the people for whom the TUC did have email addresses and asked people to cascade the email to others on their OA year in order to find their contact details. Using this method and mailing to other email networks we traced the majority of graduates. In all, we ended up with names of 215 people who had been recruited to the Academy. Of these, we found contact details for 191 people who had graduated between 1998 and 2007, but we were unable to locate the remaining 23. We then sent an 8-page questionnaire with 39 questions to 191 graduates. The majority were returned by email, although a few who wished to remain anonymous and those who wanted to complete a printed version sent them back via post.

From a population of 191 we had a total of 134 (70%) responses. If we were to include the 'missing' graduates that we were unable to trace in our sample, the population increases to 215 and the response rate decreases to 62% – either way this is a good response rate to an email questionnaire. It is probable that these people are untraceable because they left the trade union movement and this has been accounted for in the interview stage of our research design – see below. Beyond that, we have no reason to believe that these people were over-representative of any particular group.

We then undertook follow up interviews with 32 graduates (24% of the questionnaire respondents) in order to explore in more detail the answers they gave. We selected interviewees based on criteria that included ensuring a sample from each year of the Academy, by sponsoring union, gender, age, and those from prior union and non-union backgrounds. We were particularly keen to over-sample two key groups; people who were no longer working in the trade union movement (see above), and black and minority ethnic (BME) graduates. Our reasoning for this was that there have been relatively few BME trainees and we particularly wanted to capture their experiences, as one of the aims of the OA was to encourage under-represented groups to become union officials.

In addition to this work with the TUC Academy, we wanted to understand better the spread of specialist organiser training within three of the UK's largest unions: the

TGWU (now Unite), the GMB and Usdaw. We therefore conducted a further 21 interviews with senior union officials in the TUC and these three large unions that have established their own in-house 'academies'. Finally, we undertook periods of observation of training at the TUC, TGWU and Usdaw. We were unable to undertake training observation at the GMB because their training programme was not underway at the time of the research. Nonetheless, we interviewed key decision makers and we have decided to continue to include them in the research because it is a union that provides an interesting contrast to the other settings.

The findings

The project focused on four main questions. How do OA graduates evaluate their experiences of the training? What are OA graduates doing now and to what extent do they use the training they received? How do they relate this to organising within their current union? Is there evidence of any wider impact of OA on the UK trade union movement?

1) The training experience

In terms of the training experience, it is clear from that the OA has delivered mixed outcomes. Academy graduates come from a much more diverse background of skills, gender and age than their generalist officer counterparts. The OA has also largely been successful in training a cadre of graduates in basic organising skills; a high proportion of whom have remained employed in the union movement. On other measures of success, however, the evidence is far more mixed. Training in some of the more strategic skills such as planning organising strategies and planning for the transition between the organising and representation phases of a campaign seem to have been less successful. Evidence from individual campaigns shows that where unions fail to manage these more strategic aspects, it is extremely difficult to sustain short-term organising gains.

2) What are they doing now?

The continued influence of graduates on the unions in which they work is clear, with around half employed as specialist organisers and half in more generalist positions. Of those who remain in organising roles, frustrations were expressed about the generally low status of organising and the relative lack of opportunity for promotion and career development. Indeed, it is precisely these pressures that have pushed many of those who have taken on a different role to do so. Despite this, a high proportion of both specialists and generalists report that they use their organising skills in their current roles and this reflects a perception that people who have been trained as organisers continue to have an 'organising perspective'. In this regard, many of the OA graduates see a clear role for themselves in promoting an organising 'culture' within their unions and beyond even though they may not be directly employed as specialist organisers themselves. They are overwhelmingly optimistic about the potential for union renewal despite the lack of clear evidence in this direction.

There is strong evidence of an exchange of ideas and practices between unions emerging through both formal and informal networks. These networks also lend support to people who frequently report feeling that they are in a minority and/or a junior position trying to promote cultural change within their unions. It should also be noted that the establishment of the TUC organising training programme for officers has directly encouraged individual unions to adapt and tailor specialist organiser training for their own needs.

3) *Tensions between organising and servicing*

As well as commenting on the Academy training specifically, the research examined the impact of the graduates on the wider union movement. Here, tensions arising from the organising focus of the training can be seen. Organisers frequently report fundamental tensions between the organising and servicing functions, and register disappointment at what many of them perceive to be a lack of broader cultural change within their unions. There is a widespread perception of a lack of progress in unions' efforts to renew themselves.

A key conclusion, therefore, is that an unintended consequence of the decision to create specialist organisers is the institutional separation of organising and servicing roles. This causes perceived problems for organisers in integrating their activities and ideas within the wider culture of their employing unions. This has implications for broader questions about union renewal. First, the creation of specialist functions appears to have entrenched the divide between organising and servicing activity. As a result many specialist organisers perceive resistance from other officials to the cultural change they are trying to promote.

Second, the perception of organising being of a lower status level limits the potential for career progression paths open to many Academy-trained organisers. There are relatively few senior organising roles available across the UK union movement. This means that organisers often have to move beyond their specialism in order to move up the career ladder. Whilst this is not inherently problematic, they are likely to lose an organising focus as they move into generalist roles. Given the long-term and intensive nature of greenfield organising work, if these specialists are unable to deploy their specialist skills as they become more senior, realisation of the vision of union renewal becomes somewhat problematic.

4) *Organiser training in individual unions*

Finally, we examined the ways in which organiser training has transferred into the three large UK unions. We established a clear lineage between the establishment of the TUC Academy and the individual union training programmes with many of the core ideas retaining remarkable similarity. However, there were important differences between the four programmes which, we argue, arise from the effort to reconcile the tensions discussed above.

The TGWU (Unite) uses the idea of specialist, highly skilled organisers who can be deployed on particular campaigns. This *specialisation* of the organiser role means that they are inevitably separate from generalist officers, but ensures that specific organising skills and resources are available within the union. By contrast, the GMB seeks to *mainstream* the organising role into that of generalist officers. Whilst this has the advantage of ensuring that all officers are taking on organising duties, serious challenges remain as to how they prioritise this activity when faced with the myriad of roles they are expected to take on. This further contrasts with Usdaw where they have taken the approach of *routinising* the organising role so that lay union activists can be taken out of their workplaces for 6 months and trained in the core recruitment skills with the expectation that they will return to their employers after that period. These different approaches reflect the very different contexts (labour markets, political context, history and legacy) within which these unions operate. And they signal very different ideas about what these unions regard as the objectives of their organising activities.

Appendix

Dissemination and outputs

- 1) Paper written and submitted
 - We have written and submitted one journal paper based on these findings (see attached). This is currently under review at the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.
- 2) Academic conference presentations completed
 - International Industrial Relations Association conference, Manchester, September 2007 – paper presented.
 - Work, Employment and Society conference, Aberdeen, September 2007 – paper presented.
 - International Labour Process conference, Dublin, March 2008 – paper presented.
- 3) Academic-practitioner presentations completed
 - Bristol Business School, University of West of England, staff-practitioner seminar, December 2007 – paper presented.
 - Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University, staff-practitioner seminar, February 2008 – paper presented with discussion by Paul Nowak of the TUC.
- 4) Academic staff seminars completed
 - European Work and Employment Research Centre, University of Manchester, staff seminar, March 2008 – paper presented.
- 5) Forthcoming dissemination activity arranged and underway
 - Presentation to German trade union organisers from ver.di union – London, April 2008.
 - Cardiff University academic-practitioner symposium on union organising, April 2008.
 - Critical Labour Studies academic-practitioner symposium on the TUC Organising Academy, Birmingham, April 2008.
 - Abstract submitted to the British Universities Industrial Relations Association annual conference 2008 (see attached). We intend to submit this paper to *Work, Employment and Society*.
 - Pamphlet for the TUC currently being prepared and due for publication in September 2008.
 - Book currently in preparation and due to be completed in 2009. Anticipated publication date 2010.