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Citation: Fitzgerald, Ian and O'Brien, Peter (2006) A commentary on trade union and higher education engagement. In: Critical Labour Studies, 1 November 2006, Northumbria University.

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Critical Labour Studies – Northumbria University (November 2006)

A commentary on trade union and higher education engagement

Peter O'Brien and Ian Fitzgerald

This short commentary is based on the differing roles of both authors, one an ex-TUC policy officer and the other an academic who has undertaken a number of action research projects for trade unions. It talks about the overall need for academic and trade union engagement based on the author's experiences in the North East of England.

Why have trade union and higher education (HE) engagement?

1. **The role of research in providing evidence to influence or support public policy** – The current clear reason for this need is because of new Labour's evidence based policy approach, which permeates across all levels of the public sector. You witness it at a regional and local level, with for example One NorthEast and the local authorities. However, it is important to take a critical position on how evidence is gathered by Government and its agencies, and whether evidence shapes policy or vice-versa. If Government (at all levels) has an ideological or policy position which it seeks to implement, it can find or generate evidence to support its case. It can also, and has done this recently (the Alyson Pollock example with the NHS and the Private Finance Initiative) rubbish or seek to discount evidence which disagrees with its perspective. This is part of a process whereby certain 'favourite' research or evidence (often drawn up by think-tanks) is used to influence policy, while other research or evidence, perhaps labelled as 'radical' or 'critical' is ignored.

HE involvement

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The value, then, of HE in this regard (especially HE that is policy-orientated and focused) is that it provides rigorous research based on sound methodology and an awareness of the political, economic and social environment - something certain think-tanks don't often subscribe to. Research undertaken in this fashion is difficult to disregard. Qualitative forms of research, which are action-orientated, are invaluable in this regard because they attempt to get to the heart of issues within a complex social world. Numbers can only tell so much. Often we need a qualitative 'dig' to identify and find out what is actually happening on the ground.

Change in the unions?

2. This kind of research is what trade unions require and sought to utilise

- Recently, there is a greater willingness among unions to commission and use research to support their strategic objectives. It would be nice to think that we have overcome the 'ivory towers' syndrome and the bias that is levelled at academics and their value to working class struggles! However, it still exists in some quarters. Following union mergers and the process of rationalisation of union structures, in-house union research departments were scaled down or centred on the national HQ. Yet, within a diffuse and decentralised polity in the UK - devolution to Scotland, Wales and London - regionalisation in England - there is a requirement for unions to strengthen their research capacity at sub-national, regional and local levels - if they want to influence economic, social and political policies that impact upon their members, families and society as a whole. It is difficult to respond to everything from the centre or national level. You need a strong research hub at the national level to influence Central Government, but in tandem, as experience with the Northern TUC suggests, with capacity at the regional level, which interacts with the national, regional and

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local contexts. An increase in the research and policy capacity of the Northern TUC was part of the reason why the organisation has made significant improvements in the last five years, and was able to influence policy - learning and skills, equality and diversity, sustainable development - for the benefit of working people. At the same time, this approach has to be accompanied with significant investment in organising. Unity is strength and strength is in numbers - ie. union members and activists.

3. **What has been significant here is the relationship between trade unions and the TUC and HE institutions in the North East** - There has been a long-standing relationship here – through key individuals at Northumbria and Newcastle Universities. This has proved invaluable to raising awareness and understanding about the issues of concern to unions, and strengthening union arguments and policy positions. Supporting a PhD studentship (which led to a TUC policy officer appointment in the region) was a significant statement on the part of the Northern TUC and its affiliate unions. They saw policy-orientated research as being beneficial to trade unions in an uneven and complicated system of governance. The work the Northern TUC and unions have commissioned from 'sympathetic' researchers (at Northumbria and Newcastle) has been invaluable to strengthening the capacity of union research and the profile of the unions - e.g. migrant worker research. These formal and semi-formal relationships have been crucial to the unions and have provided HE with a fertile research environment. Attempts have been made to establish networks of researchers bringing together unions and HE - Scottish Trade Union Research Network, London Union Research Network, Union Ideas Network, CLS. In the Northern TUC, researchers have been invited to sit on the NTUC Policy Forums to provide a unique perspective and input into policy debates. The Wainwright

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research that Dexter Whitfield has undertaken with Unison, the Sustainable Cities Research Institute (Northumbria University), PCS and the Northern TUC is a good example of bringing together HE and unions around common agendas to undertake research with the aim of impacting and influencing policy. Without the relationship with HE the unions and Northern TUC would not have had the impact they have had in reality.

The crux of the matter

4. **However, the relationship is getting more difficult to maintain** - as the pressures are increased within HE to pursue commercial and business-benefit research or undertake research that have clear RAE spin-offs. This is pricing unions and the voluntary and community sector out of research, and thereby stripping their ability to commission and utilise research for their ends. A situation which is very worrying, especially within the 'evidence-based' policy world we live within. Individual researchers are finding it difficult to undertake research given the pressures they face from senior tiers within HE. There is also the diminishing research funding that is likely to support traditional union research and the falling away of IR courses in HE. The challenge, therefore, is to identify new research areas (migrant labour, sustainable development) where academics and unions can work together to build awareness and strengthen research capacity amongst unions and where research funders will support. The challenge is also to find new sources of income to support research in a political environment that might not be as supportive of union activity - e.g. Tories or to build the case, using research, for union interventions in areas such as learning and skills, so that all governments could see the value of union engagement. At the same time, the unions and the TUC themselves have to take a close look at

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their organisations and priorities and ask themselves whether they see the value of investing in research and engagement with HE.

Ultimately we leave you with two key comments that we believe need to be thought about and debated as widely as possible.

1. We are all being squeezed; money is the order of the day. In HE it is now called full-economic-costing (FEC) and it will be coming to you soon! It is getting harder to find space to do the quality of action research projects required by trade unions. Either the unions pay more or we get smarter at finding funding.
2. It is going to be difficult for the unions to pay more given their current situation. We may find new funding resources but this is becoming more and more difficult given FEC. Perhaps the main way to work is to get away from traditional academic culture and really work together. Using the Critical Labour Studies group and the Union Ideas Network as starting points for trade union/HE engagement. At the end of the day the will is clearly there and we will find a way but we have to sooner rather than later.

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