

Cutting across diversity: trade union learning initiatives and migrant workers in the Communication Workers' Union in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article examines trade union learning activities and migrant workers in the communications industry. The key research questions focus on how far this learning meets the needs and aspiration of migrant workers, whether there are structural or discriminatory disincentives to taking up union learning and how far inclusion and cohesion in the workplace and wider community can be promoted by union learning activities. The empirical research is drawn from interviews with national union officials, branch and workplace representatives, and indigenous and migrant worker learners and non-learners. The research revealed a 'superdiversity' of migrant workers in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, level of qualifications and length of stay. There were two key findings: firstly, the type of union learning activities demanded by workers cut across diversities. Some barriers to accessing union learning existed primarily associated with migrant workers disproportionately working unsociable shifts and being concentrated in lower paid, peripheral jobs. However, beyond these barriers many of the issues and problems and positive experiences related to union learning were common to all workers who were unified by a common lack of access to, or utilisation of, formal educational resources. The second key finding of the study was that a culture of union learning in these large traditional unionised workplaces, where it appears that the main focus is on learning for learning's sake, is valuable in fostering the social integration of all workers generally and of migrant and minority ethnic workers more specifically. However, this may be undermined by deregulation, privatisation and industry restructuring.

Key words: Communication workers, union learning, migrant workers, workplace cohesion

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how far learning activities delivered by trade unions meet the needs and aspirations of migrant workers and whether these workers experience structural or discriminatory disincentives. In so doing, we discuss the potential of trade union learning as an instrument for promoting inclusion and cohesion in the workplace. The empirical data is drawn from a case study of the communications industry in the UK and is based on primary research data collected during 2009, through privileged access to union representatives, indigenous and migrant workers and learners afforded by the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) in Royal Mail (RM) and British Telecommunications PLC (BT) workplaces. The context of the industry is one where work is being made increasingly precarious by deregulation and threats of privatisation, new technology and organisational restructuring. Further, the 'financial crisis' of 2008 and subsequent recession has created the potential for heightened social tensions regarding migrant workers.

There has been an emphasis on viewing migrant workers as contingent and difficult to organise (Heery and Abbott, 2000), as they are often concentrated in poorly organised private sector employment and disproportionately working for employment agencies. In this context there are tensions between recruiting, organising, servicing and including migrant workers given the limited resources of trade unions (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010). This research is a departure from previous studies in several ways. First, it focuses on a sector where there is an established trade union presence and a high membership density. Second, we emphasise the importance of scale (Cumbers, 2005; Waterman and Wills, 2001) by focusing on how national policies unfold and are implemented at the level of the workplace in terms of the inclusion and integration of migrant workers. Third, we investigate how far union learning has drawn on or facilitated linkages with non-trade union actors and community groups.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we outline the precarious nature of the contemporary working environment for, in particular, low-skilled migrant workers; we consider here how the intersectionality of two forms of inequality - class and migrant status - impacts on their workplace opportunities. We then draw upon the trade union learning literature to consider the role that the union learning agenda plays in the workplace. The second section provides a profile of the communications industry and Communication Workers Union and details the methods used for the data collection. The third section reports the findings, focussing on the learning needs of migrant workers and the extent to which these are met by the union. Barriers to union learning are also discussed. Finally, the article concludes by outlining the importance of learning in providing an integrative and cohesive factor both in the workplace and the wider community.

MIGRANT WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS

Migrant workers originate from many backgrounds and demonstrate multiple reasons and experiences with regards to their 'choice' of country and occupation. The International Labour Organization (ILO) state that 'driving forces' for migration include 'disparities in incomes and wealth, decent work opportunities, human security, demographic trends, and social networks' (ILO 2008). Studies have identified the numerous issues and challenges that migrant workers, regardless of the host country, face when entering the labour market. These include issues of social exclusion and, as compared to the host nationals, unequal treatment with regards to pay, occupational choice and career development; in many cases migrants are obliged to undertake work that is at a lower level than the work for which they are qualified (Anderson et al 2006; ILO 2008; Martínez Lucio et al 2007; Syed 2008). In his study of skilled migrant workers, Syed (2008) argues that despite their level of skills, such workers are discriminated against with regards to employment, highlighting the complex interaction between macro (national), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) factors with regards to the careers of migrant workers.

For migrants entering a labour market with few skills, the challenges they face are likely to be even greater. Following Syed's (2008) framework, from a macro perspective, governments often promote the recruitment of migrant workers to fill skills gaps in the economy, although qualifications from the migrant worker's home country are often viewed as less valuable than those of the host country. At the meso, organisational level, migrant workers may be employed to fill shortages in areas of low-skill which indigenous workers are reluctant (or refuse) to do (Anderson et al 2006). In this case, migrant workers are invariably employed as agency workers on atypical contracts which are often part-time, short-term and cover unsociable shifts, such as night work. From the micro, individual level, inevitably migrant workers have a variety of needs and aspirations when seeking employment opportunities (LSC 2007). Despite multifarious constraining structural factors at the macro and meso levels, migrant workers will to a greater or lesser extent draw upon their individual agency in order to gain and maintain employment in the host country.

Low-skilled migrant workers may enter the UK labour market with few formal educational qualifications, possibly as a result of limited access to the educational resources of their home country (LSC 2007). This is not unique to migrant workers. Lack of educational opportunity in itself has been seen to stem from inequalities which permeate societies and are embedded in structures of social stratification with some people having greater access to economic and educational resources than others (Ainley 1999; Karabel and Halsey 1977). Social inequalities may exist regardless of country of origin, race, gender or ethnicity, however, for migrant workers, these inequalities may be sustained and even intensified through a complex and dynamic inter-action of all of these factors. New to a country and living outside the formal education structures, they have neither the financial nor the social resources upon which to draw in order to develop their workplace opportunities or what Becker (1993) describes as their 'human capital'. Education and self-improvement are often seen by migrant workers as critical factors in personal development

(Healy and Bradley 2011) and as a way of providing them with greater social integration and inclusion, job opportunities and mobility.

The term 'migrant worker' provides a very partial portrayal, failing to acknowledge that such workers are from multiple backgrounds and have numerous social identities. It is often at the intersection of a number of these identities that discrimination in the workplace takes place (Healy et al 2011) and it is important to recognise that as Healy et.al. point out, class 'forms a constant intersectional backcloth to our understanding of inequalities' (2011 p2). Class is a contentious issue and is the subject of much debate. For this paper, we argue that there is a socially disadvantaged class, comprising both home (UK, varying ethnicities) and migrant workers who, due to a lack of formal educational qualifications, find themselves at the lower end of the British social hierarchy. Whilst recognising the multiple intersectionalities of migrant workers and how each of these impact upon their treatment in the workplace, we consider here the intersection of 'migrant worker' and class. Access, or unequal access, to education shapes an individuals' work and career trajectory and the paper explores how workers have turned to the CWU Union Learning initiatives as a way of accessing education and developing skills in the workplace.

Although union learning has become an important element of many local trade union initiatives for recruiting, organising and integrating migrant workers (Heyes, 2009), the emphasis in this article is on the learning activities themselves, issues of access, learning outcomes and the way in which the learning is conducted.

Whilst trade unions have long been involved in the education, training and skills development of workers in general and for union members in particular (Calveley, 2007), more recently 'union learning' initiatives have been promoted. These have been developed as part of the 'lifelong learning' agenda of the government who, recognising a skills shortage in the UK, put in place public

funding for skills development. This Union Learning Fund (ULF) was established in 1998 by the then Department for Education and Skills and allows trade unions to access monies for the promotion of workplace learning. The fund has been under the administration of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) learning organisation, Unionlearn, since 2006 and has supported £15 million of union-led projects annually (Unionlearn 2010a). Approximately £100 million has been dispersed through the ULF to help unions set up innovative projects that help their members into learning (Stuart et. al., 2010).

The ULF partly funds a network of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) who are trained by the TUC and federated unions to organise and promote union learning initiatives, with over 25,000 ULRs having been trained since 1999. (Unionlearn 2010b). An Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) report in 2009 saw a positive role for ULRs:

ULRs are highly effective as role models. Their own recent re-entry to learning gives them a good understanding of learners' needs. They work very effectively with learners reluctant to participate or who have poor prior experience, and successfully promote learning to non traditional learners (Unionlearn, 2010b).

Apart from personal interest and leisure courses, ULRs have had the greatest impact in supporting literacy and numeracy and in training that leads to recognised qualifications (Unionlearn 2010b). Learning often takes place in union learning centres which may be in designated trade union study centres, union offices or located on the workplace premises. It is usually facilitated by tutors from local colleges of further education, although in some cases the ULRs themselves are trained as tutors. ULRs frequently open their courses to non-union members (Stuart et. al. 2010) and to the wider community (Wray 2007; Heyes, 2009), the latter being aimed at helping to promote social integration and cohesion.

Shelley argues that there may be a tension between the different *foci* of learning in the workplace (Shelley, 2008) and puts forward a threefold taxonomy of learning (Shelley, 2007). Firstly, he suggests that learning can be of a liberal humanist nature which is 'of direct benefit to the individual and to the achievement of their personal fulfilment'; secondly, he identifies vocational training which is effectively 'work training that enables the individual to make economic progress'; and finally he points to learning that is 'of a more radical nature [and] that is provided with a direct agenda to change society through collective as well as individual action' (Shelley, 2007:117). Shelley argues that union learning can lean towards a 'task and employer vocational orientation with some evidence of liberal humanist but little of radical learning' (2007:125). Nonetheless, he points out that 'there is a multiplicity of outcomes for learners which may be deemed 'useful' in differing ways' (2007:126).

Trade Union learning initiatives also have the potential for engaging 'hard to reach' learners (Wray 2007) and those who may feel excluded through language barriers, for example migrant workers. The latter are often vulnerable and may suffer injustice at work (Martínez Lucio et. al. 2007). Many ULRs seek to address this by promoting English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses which not only help migrant workers with skill development but also with workplace, labour market and societal inclusion (Heyes, 2009). One reason for the success of such courses may be that ULRs are seen as more representative in respect of age and gender than union representatives as a whole (Unionlearn, 2010b).

THE RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND DESIGN

This research is concerned with the union learning needs of workers in the communications industry, one of the largest employers in the UK; Royal Mail employs around 190,000 people (Royal Mail Holdings plc, 2009:12) and BT employ approximately 87,000 people (BT, 2010b).

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) currently represents around 250,000 workers from both RM and BT (CWU 2010). In line with the government's promotion of learning in the workplace, the CWU has more than 130 Union Learning Centres (ULCs) across the UK and have trained more than 1,000 Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) (CWU, 2009).

The research was undertaken on behalf of the CWU who were concerned to ensure that the union learning needs of minority ethnic and migrant workers were being met. It was carried out in two stages.

Stage 1. Telephone interviews were conducted with thirty two CWU union officers and representatives at national, regional, branch and workplace levels around the UK in order to ascertain the workplaces in which minority ethnic and migrant workers were located and to gain an overview of union learning taking place. Of these participants, twenty eight were directly involved in the union learning taking place at branch level either as the local ULR or the Area or Regional Union Learning Project Worker. Specifically the questions sought to identify the composition of the workforce and the origin of migrant workers, the type of union learning on offer, how the learning needs of migrant workers are assessed, the extent to which courses are taken up, and how the learning provision is evaluated. These interviews were not recorded, however, extensive notes were taken.

Stage 2. Case studies were developed in eight workplaces through interviews with a diverse mix of learners and other workers including migrants and non-migrants, union members and non-union members, RM and BT staff and agency workers, together with Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and Project Workers. In order for the researchers to engage with migrant workers, workplaces were selected on the basis of the information received from the participants in Stage 1 with regards to levels of migrant workers within the workplace; and/or the union learning which was

taking place at the workplace; and consisted of both RM and BT workplaces. Learners were from diverse backgrounds with regards to country of origin and formal education. Table 1 provides an overview of the Case Study sites.

Table 1 - Case Studies

Case study site	Nature of research undertaken
<p>Case study 1 - mail sorting centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,000 workers Predominantly white workers, not reflective of the local community • The ULC had been, until a few weeks prior to the interview, open to the wider community and ran ESOL courses for a group of local (non RM) workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with two ULRs who provided information and anecdotal evidence • Tour of work-site with ad-hoc informal conversations with workers
<p>Case study 2 - large distribution centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Around 80% of the workers were from a BME background • 44 different nationalities, including Asian, African and Eastern European workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with Union Learning Area Project Worker • Group interview with six learners and the ULR, the latter also a migrant worker • Mix of ethnicities and ages and consisted of four men and three women • One interviewee of Asian background was a home worker, the rest were migrant workers
<p>Case study 3 - large distribution centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 800 workers with around 80% from BME backgrounds • Around 10% migrant workers from the 'eastern bloc', Poland and Lithuania • ULR reported that 97 dialects were spoken on the site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with two ULRs • Tour of work-site with ad-hoc informal conversations with eight workers, both migrant and non-migrant. All BME background
<p>Case study 4 - data entry centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 150 workers • Almost 100% white British females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with ULR and union representative • Interview team attended official opening of Union Learning Centre and spoke with CWU National representatives • Interviewed three learners • Focus group discussion with seven learners • All but one of the learners white women over the age of forty
<p>Case study 5 - large distribution centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 500 workers, around 30% migrant workers from a number of different backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with ULR and TU Representative • Interviewed seven workers, all migrants; three Indian, two Pakistani, two Polish
<p>Case study 6 - large mail centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 300 workers, around 10% migrant workers from diverse backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with Lead ULR / TU Representative and trainee ULR • Further interviews with three migrant workers
<p>Case study 7 - sorting office</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 1,250 workers, extremely diverse workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with Lead ULR • Focus group discussion with five learners, two of whom were union activists and another two migrant workers
<p>Case study 8 - Telecoms engineering centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly white male workers with the exception of cleaning staff the majority of whom were migrant workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interview with Lead ULR and Branch Committee officers • Group interview with learners in the classroom

Interviews with workers were semi-structured and varied with regards to format and time; they were carried out in ULCs, staff canteens during lunch or tea breaks and on the shop floor. In some cases we spoke to groups of learners together. The group of six learners in Case Study 2 had initially been reluctant to meet us, asking the local ULR why people from a university wanted to speak with them. Once the discussion on union learning got underway, however, they became so animated that the initial 'ten minutes to spare' spanned more than an hour.

'Indigenous' workers who were engaging in union learning were also interviewed. In some cases the Union Learning Centres (ULCs) were visited while union learning was taking place and in Case Study 4, the ULC was visited on the day of its official opening (it had been operating for several months) when certificates of achievement were presented to learners. This particular site had been chosen for comparative reasons due to its lack of migrant workers. The team also visited a ULC which had been opened to the wider community (Case Study 1) allowing local residents (some of whom were migrant workers) to engage in union learning activities.

In all, at the case study sites we spoke with fifteen ULRs and local union reps and around forty-five workers, both union learners and non-union learners. The participants were men and women with ages ranging from late teens to early 60s. They came from a variety of ethnicities, including white British, BME British and migrants from Africa, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. The migrant workers had been in the UK for varying lengths of time. One ULR, a migrant from India, had been in the UK for over twenty years and now viewed it as 'home'; others had been in the UK for less than three years. For some participants, the length of their residence in the UK was clearly a private matter, therefore it was not always possible to ascertain this whilst some others simply stated that they had been here for 'a number of years'. The participants also had different levels of spoken English and different educational levels; in line with the findings of other commentators who found migrant workers undertaking jobs below their skill levels (Anderson et al 2006; ILO 2010; Martínez

Lucio et al 2007; Syed 2008), we spoke with two Polish interviewees working as sorting staff whilst both having degrees.

The vast majority of those spoken with were unskilled workers, or working in jobs with low-skill requirements, the exception being the BT engineers who, according to the ULRs in these workplaces, were well educated UK nationals. Conversely, the majority of cleaning and catering staff at these sites were migrant agency workers, these latter workers being both hard to unionise and reluctant to engage with union learning activities.

FINDINGS

Four significant areas emerged from the research and are presented here. The first three are fully supported by quotes from the telephone interviews, with additional material from the case studies interspersed; the fourth area draws much more significantly from the case studies.

Migrant workers in the communications industry

What emerged from the research is that it is problematic to utilise the generic term 'migrant worker' as there appeared to be no clear patterns of migrant workers across the organisations. From the telephone interviews and case studies it was not possible to ascertain numbers of migrant workers in the industry. As the study was accessed through the trade union, there was no access to employment data. The table below presents some of the responses to the question 'what proportion of workers are migrant workers?' put to the telephone interviewees:

Telephone interview question	Response
What proportion of workers are migrant workers?	<p>'a large proportion, about 30%'</p> <p>'we have a large minority of people with English as their second language'</p> <p>'we have about 80% of non-white people but I don't know how many are migrant workers'</p> <p>'you know, some people who were not born here have been living here for many years and now see themselves as British'</p> <p>'very few. There's not much work here for them now'</p> <p>'we have approximately 800 workers here. About 80% of them are from a minority ethnic background and about eighty to a hundred are migrant workers'</p> <p>'not sure really, probably about 10-15%'</p> <p>'there are about twenty-eight different nationalities working here'</p> <p>'we have a mixture of ethnic minorities but not many migrants'</p> <p>'yes, a very diverse workforce from different nationalities. A real melting pot! We did have about ten people from Eritrea, but they've gone now'</p> <p>'there are very few minority ethnic workers or migrant workers here and it doesn't represent the local population at all'</p> <p>'I wouldn't know whether they are migrant workers unless I go around asking them'</p>

It is apparent from the findings that migrant workers within the communications industry are concentrated in certain areas of the country. In three regions respondents reported that there were very few migrant workers; the North-East, East and North-West. This partly reflected the composition of the workforce in these locations, as being in general less diverse. Further, where unemployment is relatively high the turnover of employees is likely to be less which would reduce job opportunities for new entrants as a whole. By contrast, other areas identified a high proportion of migrant workers; the Midlands, London and South-East. A common theme across all workplaces is that both RM and BT workforces have not been increasing staff numbers in recent years; at best the headcount is remaining static and in many places the number of posts is being reduced. Opportunities for new migrants to join are thus limited.

Union learning needs and provision for migrant workers

When asked about the union learning need and provision of courses for migrant workers, the telephone interviewees commented as follows:

Telephone interview questions	Responses
Have you identified any particular training needs for migrant workers? / Do you have any union learning initiatives specifically aimed at migrant workers?	<p>'quite a few need English'</p> <p>'ESOL, but the funding has changed now and we can't do it'</p> <p>'they just join the courses with everyone else, especially the IT courses'</p> <p>'special help with English'</p> <p>'most ask me if I can put on English, literacy and computer courses and apart from the English that's the same that everyone's interested in'</p> <p>'IT courses with English embedded. Our courses are vital for some of these people because they're very intelligent but they struggle with their English, especially their written English so we try to help them'</p> <p>'some people ask about how they open a bank account and things like that'</p> <p>'we ran an ESOL course but nobody came. I think that people won't admit that they need to learn English. Now we run IT courses with embedded literacy and they come to them'</p>

Without exception, learners interviewed at the case study sites demonstrated a high degree of commitment to learning, and the union learning provision specifically, seeing it as a way of enhancing their portable skills and improving their opportunities for employment outside their current workplaces. One British BME learner in his forties said he had not done well at school. When we probed the reason for this he laughingly told us that he had been 'more interested in girls than school work'. He went on to say:

'doing the courses here has given me more confidence and I would like to go and do a college course now'

A colleague of his in the same ULC who was a migrant worker of Asian origin, said:

‘I joined the course [literacy] so that I can help my children with their schoolwork’

Although reflecting the views of a number of interviewees this was more frequently stated as a motivator for participation in union learning by migrant workers and follows the observations of Healy and Bradley (2011) that education and self-improvement are often viewed by migrant workers as critical factors in their personal development.

Although men and women from both the indigenous and migrant workforce alike engaged in union learning, men were more likely to join IT classes than literacy classes while women were willing to undertake both. Nonetheless, all cited IT courses as their main interest for union learning.

Reflecting the views of the telephone interviewees, the migrant workers we spoke with also identified communication skills (both oral and written) as an important learning need, although it is important to note that these were cited as highly relevant by learners from all origins. Some suggested that current courses are limited in their use, but those courses with practical outcomes for communication skills (such as writing a business letter or CV) embedded as examples, were seen as more useful. One ULR said:

‘we were being asked by people how to write a letter to the bank so now we have that as part of the course’

All workers indicated an interest in engaging in life enhancing courses in a wider range of areas including digital photography, counselling, sign language and yoga. Language courses were particularly popular, but the withdrawal of state funding is now a deterrent to uptake, and ULRs were having to find more ‘innovative’ ways of providing this service to workers, particularly through other state-funded basic skills/Skills for Life courses.

Although both major employers have written tests as part of recruitment procedures, ULRs working on sites where workforce recruitment for manual, non-skilled jobs was more difficult were rather sceptical about the level of spoken and written English of some workers, suggesting that recruitment processes may be less rigorous in these workplaces. This ULR explained:

‘there are English tests, but I think that when they’re looking for people for the night shifts and can’t get anyone to do them they sort of turn a blind eye’

He believed that basic skills requirements needed to be addressed and that the company were leaving this to the union to do. Indeed at one such site the research team spoke with three migrant workers (all non-learners) who struggled with their spoken English.

Many ‘off-the-shelf’ courses run by accredited providers enable the learner to gain a transferable qualification, for which state funding is direct to the learner or the learning provider. Although qualifications are not linked to pay and progression with their current employer, certification was important to nearly all of the learners who saw this as evidence of acquiring transferable skills ‘particularly in the current recession’ as commented by more than one learner. A number were hopeful that it may help them in a future career outside the industry.

Regardless of background, all learners interviewed were proud to have embarked on their learning journey and were particularly pleased to have obtained certificate levels in their chosen studies. Taking a liberal humanist (Shelley 2007) approach to their learning, a number of the women spoken with in the ULC at Case Study 4 told of their delight in gaining certificates. One woman said:

‘I am really pleased and my family are amazed, I haven’t been in a classroom for over forty years and this is the first certificate I’ve ever got!’

In line with the vocational element of learning as identified by Shelley (2007) other courses are based on the state-sponsored 'Train 2 Gain' vocational training initiative and in addition to value to the individual learner, are also immediately relevant to the current employer and indeed funding has to be bid for in collaboration with the employer. Yet other courses are non-accredited learning, based on more informal and local initiatives, and these often have the advantage of being more tailored to learners' needs and enable flexibility in provision. In these situations ULCs often produce their own certificates of achievement in the absence of formal awarding bodies.

One important service offered by a number of ULRs that was particularly relevant to migrant workers is the arranging of the translation of overseas certificates into English and mapping these to UK qualifications. One of the telephone interviewees commented that:

'the Eritreans were all well educated but their qualifications weren't recognised here'

Unequivocally, workers from *all* backgrounds were seeking certification of their learning achievements and most were looking to progress beyond some of the basic courses. ULRs and other union learning activists could not make assumptions about learning need based on ethnicity or country of origin as a variety of learning needs cut across diversities in the workforce. The strong common link amongst learners was social class, evidenced by a lack of access to, or inability to utilise, formal educational resources prior to employment.

Access and barriers to union learning

The study found three issues that constitute barriers to the participation of migrant workers in union learning. The first is a structural issue which pertains to problems in providing courses for workers on late and/or night shifts where migrant workers and those from ethnic minorities tend to be disproportionately concentrated as the telephone interviews demonstrate:

Telephone interview question	Response
Do migrant workers work particular shifts?	<p>'no, all our shifts are based around the seniority system so the longer you have been here the better shift you get'</p> <p>'we have the seniority practice so if you've been here a long time you can choose which shift you want to work. Everyone hates nights'</p> <p>'we have the seniority system but there are more non-white workers on lates and nights'</p> <p>'I wouldn't let the management get away with it [treating migrant workers differently]'</p> <p>'yes, some choose to do the night shifts because it's better pay'</p> <p>'there are a lot of cleaners who are black or from Poland and places like that'</p> <p>'a lot are on short-term contracts and get the shifts nobody else wants or where there are vacancies. They're often doing the heavier manual work'</p>

One ULR unwittingly identified the intersectionality of migrant worker and social class when he suggested:

'Some of the migrant workers are desperate for the money so they do the night shifts or they work very long shifts. Some have two jobs. They are very hard to recruit onto courses, they don't have the time or the energy'

Union organisation generally appears a much stronger activity during the daytime, and this is especially the case with ULRs and learning project workers. In a number of cases, the RM/BT employers' restrictions on out-of-hours access and security arrangements also hinder access to learning centres outside of daytime provision.

The second issue surrounds payment for non-funded courses which was a deterrent in undertaking courses for all workers. Many interviewees suggested that they would not have sufficient resources to fund themselves due to the low paid nature of the employment. A migrant worker who was a

tradesman in his home country and working as a cleaner in RM, described the difficulties he was facing supporting his wife and two children in a one-bedroom flat. As he commented:

‘I need to move to a bigger flat but I can’t get enough money to get a deposit’
so he was changing from one daytime shift to two shifts (‘lates’ and ‘nights’) as these unsociable hours carried a small monetary premium. Neither money nor time was available for union learning although he would have liked to engage with the learning activities on offer.

Another issue relating to cost was the change in government funding for the provision of ESOL. In 2007 funding for ESOL up to level 2 was removed with fee remission being available only to people receiving means-tested benefits and tax credits. The changes mean that many people with ESOL needs have to pay for courses themselves, unless employers make a contribution. Likewise, this affects funding for ULRs attempting to provide English language support. Although it was clearly not the case that all migrant workers needed additional language support, on the contrary many of those interviewed had very high levels of English language skills, a few ULRs, and some of the learners interviewed, were of the view that colleagues with little English would not enrol for English language courses as this raised their visibility and emphasised what they perceived as a skill deficiency, making them feel vulnerable. The research found that a number of ULRs were creatively addressing both of these issues by introducing literacy and numeracy courses, open to - and popular with - workers from all backgrounds but with English language training embedded in them.

A third problem relates to a lack of access to externally funded courses for workers from outside of Europe without a British passport. These workers were unable to be enrolled on courses provided by the local college of further education for example.

Beyond these barriers many of the issues and problems concerning access to union learning and variances in take-up of activities when offered are common to all workers, not just migrant workers.

Most of the barriers to learning tend to be structural, cutting across ethnicities and staff groupings, and particularly revolve around issues of location, ownership, employer, time and cost.

All the CWU learning undertaken in the study is provided from within fixed learning centres or training rooms within one workplace in the area. There is an access problem for workers who work more independently, in smaller satellite workplaces or on the road. In order to overcome this, a number of union branches are developing 'outreach' learning centres in an attempt to deliver training to smaller offices in the branch.

The industry is characterised by having various levels of jobs sub-contracted to other privately-owned contractors and employment agencies, especially in cleaning, catering and security work, areas in which migrant workers are more likely to be employed. The study found that workers employed by either RM or BT are more likely to have access to union learning than those from other agencies and contractors, although such levels of access do vary from workplace to workplace including a number of locations where the RM/BT employer has agreed to extend access to CWU learning to all other workers on the site. Most learning centres provided learning to non-union members as well as union members. Employers were generally supportive of initiatives that benefit the whole of the workforce providing their service.

Some centres have no agreement to workers' time off for learning. Others have a 'match-time' arrangement, typically of employer and employee each providing one hour per week. Such two hour blocks are at the start or end of shifts. The 'match-time' initiative is a popular idea amongst learners and non-learners at other centres. Non-learners at centres where there was no 'match-time' believed that similar agreements would encourage them to engage with union learning activities. Learning is almost entirely classroom-based and is almost entirely provided by Further Education (FE) colleges who supply tutors and materials to the CWU learning centres. There are some examples

of colleges being prepared to run classes into the evening, but most of their provision is daytime which can preclude those working the evening and night shifts. Where the charitable organisation the Workers' Education Association (WEA) is the provider, there appears to be greater flexibility in terms of minimum class sizes, times of delivery and tailoring of courses, but this organisation has a minority of union learning provision for the union. The need to move to a greater flexibility in timings of classes is seen as very important by ULRs and other union learning activists.

The vast majority of CWU learning is computer based (PCs and laptops). This offers flexibility for learners to drop-in to learning centres and work individually, although it is also constraining. A few centres are experimenting with taking laptops out into smaller workplaces and satellite locations to run classes outside the main learning centre and at alternative times. However, there are issues of security, quality of the classroom environment, and physical transport of laptops to be overcome, as well as ownership of laptops (union learning-funded laptops may be used for this; RM/BT employer-funded laptops were not allowed to leave the workplace).

Some of the workplaces visited in the study are examples of where work is being concentrated in large new 'greenfield' sites. In common with all other large workplaces visited, the union has high membership and there is sufficient volume to run a variety of courses. However, many learners had lengthy travel-to-work commutes. For some, therefore, time is a barrier as they are balancing shift work (in some cases 12-hour shifts) with family commitments and lengthy periods of travelling to and from the workplace. Learners suggested that time constraint was a significant barrier for some of their colleagues. There is a gender aspect, as female workers were noticeably not keen to be at the workplace outside a normal working day. Some workers said they are keen to learn, but prefer to attend forms of learning within their home communities; these issues apply to workers across all ethnicities and origins.

A further factor is that some learners suggested that there was a stigma attached to joining union learning classes and that their colleagues taunted them for taking part. At one case study site the ULC was next door to the staff canteen and was visible to all who went past. The ULR had asked the company for blinds on the windows but this was refused, security of computer equipment being given as the reason. One learner (British, BME) we spoke with said:

‘it was tough at first because I got a lot of stick from my mates. They were saying things like “why are you learning your ABC then?!” but now I have a qualification they don’t say anything. It would be better if we could have our lessons somewhere else though’

He identified this as a barrier to the take-up of learning opportunities by a range of workers, migrant or otherwise.

ULRs from several of the Case Studies commented on a reluctance by all workers to enrol for any courses described as ‘basic literacy’. When asked about why their friends would not enrol for these courses, one of the learners, himself a migrant worker who had completed a literacy course, said:

‘they don’t like to admit that they can’t read very well do they?’

as this might be viewed as a weakness by management and others. Overall, migrant workers may perceive themselves to be in a more vulnerable position.

The outcomes of the learning activities are seen as powerful and valuable across the diversity of learners in the study. Learners identified the importance of being able to undertake their learning at the workplace. For many there was convenient time around the start or end of shifts to fit in learning that otherwise they would not have time for. Many felt that they were learning in a more relaxed environment than at a college; and that they would not feel confident enough to attend a college. Lack of confidence was a typical characteristic of the learners, although a number of those

who had completed courses felt that they would now be more willing and able to take further courses at colleges and also felt more able and willing to deal with issues external to the workplace.

Cohesion, integration and community engagement

As identified earlier in the paper, a diverse range of workers engaged with the union learning activities and these appear to act as a conduit for multi-cultural and social cohesion in the workplace and in the wider community. A number of learners commented that they had not known each other before they joined the courses but were now 'friends'. This is particularly relevant where there is a diverse workforce. There was a strong feeling amongst learners that workers were united in the classroom by their common desire to learn, as this BME migrant worker described:

'the learning has brought us together. It breaks down barriers because we help each other'.

Many learners in the study commented upon how their learning with colleagues from other ethnic backgrounds enhanced the understanding and tolerance of differences and therefore greater social cohesion not only in the workplace but also in the wider community. In one ULC learners were 'sharing' their traditional recipes and had a day when they all brought in food representing their home area. The learners in the study were taking their knowledge home with them to share with their family and friends.

In a small number of cases, the CWU was able to bring non-workers into the learning centre – examples included family members, RM workers into BT learning centres and vice versa, and employers of private sector competitors of BT. Case Study 1 was a prime example of this. Although their own workforce did not reflect the ethnic make-up of the surrounding area, the ULC opened its doors to the wider community and had in the past provided ESOL training. They had also held classes for women from the local women's refuge and run Polish language classes for English speaking firefighters. This practice was, however, an exception and there were few other ULCs open to the

wider community, with a number of ULRs pointing to their worksite's security procedures as being a major obstacle.

A few CWU branches are now demonstrating how social inclusivity at work can link with similar outcomes in wider communities. In one area, ULRs were active in helping the local Sikh community to set up a Learning Centre. By establishing communication between members of the temple and the college that provided union learning courses at his own ULC, the ULR opened the door for the delivery of courses such as maths, English and IT at the temple. These courses were open to learners from the CWU. The link between the ULR and the members went further than learning as it forged a relationship with the union and the local community. This is evidenced by the support given by temple members who provided refreshments to CWU members during an anti-privatisation rally. However, there were also examples of learning centres which had to close their doors to the wider community, due to lack of funding and management pressure.

Overall the study shows that Union Learning Representatives play a vital role in promoting and enabling learning across cultural and ethnic diversities. They take a strong steer from union-based policies and ideology of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination. It is clear that the ULRs are dedicated and hard working with many putting in long hours outside their working day in order to ensure that workers are engaging with union learning and courses are running effectively. Nevertheless, the ability of ULRs to undertake their role varies considerably from workplace to workplace and this jeopardises the consistent inclusive treatment of learners. Although there is a basic legal entitlement, in practice time-off for union learning duties varied dramatically, some managers provided ULRs with full-time release from workplace duties while any release at all was an issue for others. In addition, ULRs are concerned that the valuable support provided to them by regional project workers is threatened by the expiration of state-funded fixed-term funding arrangements.

Currently the ULR role appears to consist of encouraging workers to sign up for courses, by walking the floor and being proactive in talking to people, with most also relying heavily on 'word of mouth' through which satisfied learners were encouraging work colleagues to partake in union learning activities. Some centres ran 'learning events' which encouraged workers to complete forms expressing their learning interests and then tried to match requests with courses. Others have prominent and colourful display boards. Some of those involved use the languages of migrant workers to advertise courses.

Although union sources indicate an increasing diversity of activists and representatives in terms of attracting younger age groups and more women into union roles as ULRs, the study found that the majority of ULRs were white British, who mainly work daytime shift patterns. In one workplace visited, however, a recently appointed ULR who was herself a migrant worker from a minority ethnic background, had achieved a significant increase in the number of workers enrolling for union learning courses. She suggested that her background encouraged other migrant and minority ethnic workers to raise learning issues with her and to ultimately engage with learning activities because:

'I'm like them and they're not afraid of talking to me'

This is in line with the findings of Ofsted (2009) as discussed earlier in this article. The desirability of increasing the ethnic diversity of ULRs and their distribution over shifts, appears to be a key issue for the union in strengthening its membership and learning base, and for the future sustainability of a socially inclusive learning strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the problematic nature of identifying discrete groups of migrant workers (Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009). Migrant workers come from many countries, have different

lengths of stay in the UK, have different qualifications and language skills and in practice are often treated indistinguishably from second or third generation black and minority ethnic workers.

Despite identifying some barriers to accessing learning for migrant workers the research found no evidence that particular migrant or minority ethnic groups were directly neglected in terms of access to learning. Indeed, the case studies demonstrated that generally there was equal access to workers regardless of their background and whether or not they were union members. Although there are a variety of union learning activities aimed primarily at migrant workers (literacy training being a good example), particularly in workplaces with high percentages of such workers, this learning is not exclusive to them and the study found that union learning courses are always open to and include the wider workplace community. In effect, the learning needs of migrant workers were consistent with and non-divisible from those of the workforce as a whole. What was apparent was the common educational disadvantage experienced by nearly all of the learners, a disadvantage that could, arguably, be related to social class and access to educational resources. The latter was particularly the case for the older workers who engaged with union learning activities. For migrant workers, it might be argued that the intersectionality of being a migrant worker and also having an education deficit could prove to be a double burden when seeking employment opportunities.

It was certainly the case that migrant workers were more often employed in the less popular evening and night shifts which resulted in their having less access to the union learning courses on offer. Although this was undoubtedly a structural disadvantage, it was not purely as a direct result of migrant status and therefore not, on the face of it, due to discriminatory factors. In the main, a 'seniority system' operated which meant that newer employees or agency workers - the groups of workers in which migrant workers are likely to be situated - worked these less sociable hours. In some cases, migrant workers 'chose' these shifts due to the small additional monetary premium they attracted.

A key finding of the study is that a culture of union learning in these large traditional unionised workplaces is extremely valuable for fostering social integration, of all workers in general and of migrant and minority ethnic workers more specifically. The main focus is on learning for learning's sake, the enhancement of transferable skills and development of social and family links; there is little evidence of conflict between learners. Defining migrant workers as a specific group is less important to union representatives than including all workers in learning activities of some sort, regardless of ethnicity and origin. Such an environment, where the focus is on meeting individuals' learning needs and skill acquisition, can be seen to cut across barriers created by class and worker ethnicities. Hence, learners are drawn from a wide spectrum of workers, from recent migrants to indigenous (white British) origins and can include highly educated people and those with basic skills needs including English language. Therefore union learning promotes and enhances a sense of community in the workplace, and facilitates links between work and family as learners develop new skills.

These conclusions do not claim that no racism or discrimination exists in these workplaces, this was not a focus of the research. What is evident, however, is a virtuous circle whereby a strongly unionised workplace can negotiate and support a range of union learning activities which reflect, to some extent at least, the needs and aspirations of all workers. Further, it is suggested that a highly unionised industry with a union committed to equality issues and anti racism is likely to create a much more favourable climate than one that is poorly unionised and where these issues cannot be taken up. The issue of scale and agency is also important. The effectiveness and enthusiasm with which national policies translate in particular workplaces depends on the cooperation and attitude of local management and most importantly the agency of branch committees and individual activists.

In conclusion, the study suggests that this social cohesion is at risk of being undermined by recession, by funding cuts and a high reliance on state and employers, and by adversarial industrial relations related to industry restructuring. The communications industry is becoming increasingly fragmented and diversified in terms of ownership and new services based on technological developments and both organisations are experiencing restructuring, privatisation and commercialisation. Both this context and the recession are contributing to a loss of union learning expertise as established ULRs are made redundant and it becomes more difficult to organise union learning. All these destabilising influences threaten the more consensual partnership climate in which socially-cohesive union learning thrives.

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