



The Organising Academy - five years on

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Organising the future:
a series of discussion pamphlets

The Organising Academy

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Introduction

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In early 1998 the TUC's Organising Academy opened its doors to an in-take of 36 Academy Organisers (AOs), who were to undergo twelve months intensive training to equip them to work as specialist union organisers. Employed jointly by the TUC and a sponsoring union, the entrants were to learn the craft of organising through a programme of classroom training and practical work on live organising projects under the guidance of an experienced coach. At its end, it was expected that they would be retained as lead organisers, capable of running their own campaigns, either with their sponsor or with another TUC union¹.

Five years on, after a total of 161 trainees have entered the programme, it is timely to review the experience of the Academy and provide an assessment of what has been achieved to date. This is the purpose of this pamphlet. It uses original research to probe the record of the Academy, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and draw lessons for the trade union movement. In so doing, it addresses the following six issues:

- ❖ *Innovation*: the extent to which the Academy has produced change, in the characteristics of organisers, the targeting of organising activity and methods used.
- ❖ *Lead organisers*: the degree to which AOs have been trained in a distinctive lead organiser role that extends beyond recruitment to include involvement in 'union-building' activities.
- ❖ *Outcomes*: the record of AOs in building membership, identifying activists, establishing trade

unionism at new sites and achieving recognition during their twelve-month period of training.

- ❖ Retention: the success of the Academy in developing a network of committed organisers, who have been retained in the trade union movement.
- ❖ Union differences: identifying and explaining differences in how sponsoring trade unions have used their AOs.
- ❖ Diffusion: measuring the extent to which other union officers, beyond the Academy, have become involved in organising.

In exploring these issues we make use of two questionnaire surveys. The first has been administered each year to those graduating from the Academy. To date, 120 graduating AOs have completed the questionnaire and have provided information on their experiences as trainee organisers over the previous twelve months. The second questionnaire was administered to nearly 600 union full-time officers (FTOs) in summer 2002. This allowed us to collect information on the recruiting and organising activity of FTOs working in a broad range of Academy and non-Academy unions and provides a valuable point of comparison with the Academy Organisers.

Innovation

One purpose of the Academy was to encourage innovation. It was designed to provide an infusion of fresh organising talent and help change the profile of union officers. It was also meant to encourage more ambitious

organising and prompt more unions to tackle non-union employers. Finally, the Academy was set up to encourage experimentation with new methods, particularly those associated with the 'organising model' developed by unions in North America.

Table 1: Organising Academy innovation (percentages)

Individual Characteristics	Academy Organisers N=117-120	Full time Officers (FTOs) All Officers N=579-580	Appointed after 1997 N=112-113
<i>Characteristics:</i>			
Women	51	24	32
Aged 30 or below	55	3	13
Experience as a workplace rep	66	87	88
Experience as a branch officer	38	74	74
<i>Priority targets:</i>			
In-fill recruitment	65	81	71
Same work, non-union	45	41	41
Different work, non-union	33	22	21
<i>Frequent use of organising methods:</i>			
Mapping the workplace	54	37	46
Issue-based organising	56	44	51
Organising committee	50	39	46
Like-to-like recruitment	49	34	33
House-calls	17	1	3

Sources: Survey of Academy Organisers, 1998-2002; Survey of full-time officers, 2002

Table 1 shows the Academy record in encouraging innovation. It indicates that AOs are more likely to be women and much more likely to be aged below 30 than are conventional union officers, even those appointed recently. The price of this is that AOs have much less union

experience; though about two thirds have served as workplace representatives. It seems that the role of the Academy has been to short-circuit the long apprenticeship in lay union work that is needed for most officer positions and thereby make it easier for younger or women trade unionists to win a paid trade union position.

There are more than three million free-riders in unionised workplaces in Britain and, not surprisingly, majorities of both AOs and FTOs report in-fill organising is a major priority. This is less true of the former, however, and a higher proportion of AOs report involvement in greenfield organising. The clearest difference is that AOs are more likely to get involved in attempts to extend membership to workers doing different kinds of work to existing union members. Employment of specialist organisers through the Academy, it seems, has enabled unions to take more risks in organising and target employers outside their core territory.

There is also evidence that the Academy has encouraged experimentation with novel organising techniques, such as mapping, the use of organising committees and house-calls. What distinguishes these methods is that they embody a systematic approach to building union membership and that they seek to build collective organisation, not just recruit, amongst the target group. AOs are more likely to report use of methods of this kind, reflecting the emphasis on the 'organising model' within Academy training. It is notable though that recently appointed FTOs also report fairly high use of these methods, indicating some diffusion of systematic, union-building techniques.

Organisers or recruiters?

In the past, a number of unions have employed recruitment officers, whose job was to visit workplaces and sign up new members. Direct recruitment of this kind has been an important part of the job of AOs, particularly in industries like retail and telephone call-centres where steward organisation is weak.

In most cases, however, AOs' work has extended beyond direct recruitment to include a range of organising tasks. The evidence in Table 2 shows that recruiting activists, encouraging activists to recruit members, training activists and building workplace organisation, have all been important tasks. The Academy, it seems, has prepared most AOs to take on a fairly broad 'lead organiser' role.

The wisdom of this lies in the fact that most workers who are recruited into a union are so after an approach from a colleague or a lay representative. The value of organising, as opposed to recruiting, therefore, lies in its longer-term impact. For initiatives, like the Academy, to have more than a fleeting effect they must leave a residue of workplace organisation. The evidence suggests that, in most cases, this is being attempted.

While the job of AOs extends beyond recruitment, it falls short of the negotiating and representation role, filled by generalist full-time officers. Evidence can also be seen in Table 2, which indicates that most AOs have not been involved heavily in bargaining or servicing. Instead, they have occupied a distinctive organising role, which includes, but which is not confined to, direct recruitment.

Table 2: The job of Academy Organisers

Tasks	Academy Organisers reporting task is 'very important' Numbers	Percent
Recruiting activists	102	85
Encouraging recruitment by activists	99	83
Direct recruitment	92	77
Promoting workplace organisation	89	74
Planning organising campaigns	88	73
Preparing organising material	86	72
Training activists in recruitment	70	58
Identifying targets for organising	66	56
Representing employees with problems	12	10
Negotiating recognition	11	9
Negotiating terms and conditions	11	9

Source: Survey of Academy Organisers, 1998-2002.

Organising outcomes

The Organising Academy is first and foremost a training programme, designed to develop lead organisers. But sponsoring unions have been under pressure to demonstrate the success of their investment and from the outset it was recognised that AOs would have to contribute to the revitalization of their unions. Assessing organising success though is a not straightforward matter as there is a range of outcomes that might be considered desirable;

increasing membership, extending membership to unorganised sites, developing workplace organisation, stimulating activism and securing recognition.

Table 3: Organising outcomes

Outcomes:	All Academy Organisers N= 113-117	Outcomes per Organiser
Number of employers targeted for organising	1260	10.77
Workers recruited directly by Academy Organisers	19,596	169
Workers recruited by everyone involved in AO campaigns	39,987	348
Activists recruited on AO campaigns	1800	16
Workplaces where membership increased to more than 50%	392	3.47
Workplaces where membership established for first time	659	5.63
Cases where recognition is anticipated	255	2.18
Cases where recognition has been secured	84	0.72

Source: Survey of Academy Organisers, 1998-2002.

Table 3 shows the record of success of Academy Organisers. In combination, they have targeted more than 1200 employers, added nearly 40,000 new members and identified nearly 2000 new activists. They have also established membership at 600 greenfield sites and helped secure or raise the question of recognition for more than 300 bargaining units.

These are substantial achievements for a group of workers undergoing training. Particularly noteworthy is the success

in identifying activists and extending union membership to non-union sites. These findings underline the emphasis on organising within the Academy programme and the fact that the particular value of specialists lies in spreading organisation to non-union firms.

Despite the impressive record, it remains that the achievements of the Academy are only a fraction of what is required if unions are to stabilise membership and achieve growth. The Academy's record indicates that investment in organising can pay off but it must not be treated as a stand-alone initiative. There is a need for diffusion and particularly for efforts to re-build lay organisation as the foundation for sustainable, long-term growth.

Developing organisers

Another way of assessing the outcomes from the Academy is in terms of the development of committed lead organisers. Again, there is evidence of success. Most of those graduating feel they have acquired the skills of a 'lead organiser' and regard the 'organising model' as the best way of re-building membership. Most also report that the Academy has prompted the circulation of organising ideas across unions and has generated a network of organisers.

There have also been problems encountered, which in some cases have led to AOs leaving the programme early. Two main types of problem were identified in our research. The first concerned failures of management within sponsors. A third of AOs felt that excessive demands were made of them, while a similar percentage complained of

feelings of isolation and a lack of support. The other problem was one of conflicting priorities. A quarter of AOs agreed strongly with the statement that, 'My union emphasises recruitment not organising'. It seems that pressure on unions to realise an immediate return has led to conflict with AOs themselves and with the broader objectives of the programme: to develop 'lead organisers' whose job extends beyond direct recruitment.

These tensions were apparent in the career aspirations of AOs at the end of their yearlong training. Three quarters wanted to work as a full-time organiser but only half wanted to work for their sponsor, indicating a problem of burnout and some disillusionment. In fact, most AOs have been retained by their sponsors in organising positions. Amongst those who knew what they would be doing after the Academy at the time of our survey, 90 per cent reported they would be working as an organiser, 80 per cent with their sponsor. Indeed, the retention of organisers has been one of the successes of the Academy and it is notable that several graduates now have organising positions in non-Academy unions, including GMB, RMT, TGWU and UCATT. Many more are working as Academy coaches and are helping to develop the next cohort of organisers.

Union differences

Although the Academy provides a common training programme for AOs, their actual experience within their sponsoring unions has been variable. Sponsors have used their AOs in different ways, reflecting the different

organising problems they face and the different organising policies they have developed. Unions like GPMU and ISTC have been strongly influenced by the 'organising model' and have prioritised greenfield organising. USDAW, in contrast, has tended to stress in-fill work and its AOs have often concentrated on direct recruitment. AOs sponsored by public sector unions, like AUT, UNISON and NATFHE, have also often concentrated on in-fill work, coupled with attempts to re-build branch organisation.

Analysis of the survey results indicated that another factor leading to variation was the approach adopted to managing AOs. Some AOs report that their work has been closely supervised and guided by recruitment targets, while others report that they have enjoyed considerable autonomy and been allowed to experiment with different techniques. Sponsoring unions have also differed in where they have located AOs. About 60 per cent have worked in a specialist organising unit and a similar percentage reports that their coach has been a specialist organiser. Most of the remainder have been placed in regional offices and have been coached by a generalist FTO.

It is these decisions on location and coaching, which have helped shape the activities of AOs. Analysis indicated that those AOs working in a specialist unit or with a specialist coach were more likely to report three things: that greenfield organising had formed part of their work, that they had used organising methods, and that their role approximated to that of a lead organiser. The disadvantages of concentrating organisers in a specialist unit are that they can become detached from the wider union, while organising becomes regarded as a non-core function by other FTOs. The benefit though is that they can provide a supportive context for developing new organisers, allow the concentration of resources on greenfield campaigns and foster experiment with new methods.

Diffusion

The Organising Academy was intended to have a demonstration effect and furnish lessons that could be adopted broadly across the trade union movement. One way of examining diffusion is to see if unions are changing the structure of activities in order to prioritise organising.

The evidence here is mixed. One lesson that could be drawn from the Academy is that unions should recruit more specialist organisers. The survey of FTOs indicated that only eight per cent occupied specialist organising roles though fully half of this group had been appointed since 1997, compared with 16 per cent of generalist officers. There is a movement towards separating out a dedicated organising function therefore but progress to date has been limited.

A second lesson that could be drawn from the Academy is that unions should introduce training and support systems to encourage organising. There are indications that this is happening on quite a wide scale. Thus, 71 per cent of FTOs said that they set and review organising objectives, 66 per cent report training in recruitment methods, 61 per cent report training in the 'organising model' and 51 per cent report training in statutory recognition procedures. Moreover, much lower percentages report setting objectives for the bargaining or representation aspects of their work and the same is true of non-organising training². The evidence suggests that unions are trying to accentuate the organising dimension of FTOs' work so that it has priority alongside servicing. Evidence that this is having an effect is shown in Table 4, which shows the percentages of FTOs reporting whether a series of organising and servicing tasks form one of the most important parts of their job. Clear

majorities report that encouraging or undertaking recruitment is important and three quarters report heavy involvement in strengthening workplace organisation. Rather fewer officers report that aspects of member servicing such as bargaining, consultation and individual representation are major elements of their job.

However, it should be noted that the percentage of officers reporting involvement in more elaborate organising tasks drops to 50 per cent or lower. Identifying sites for recruitment and recognition and negotiating recognition agreements are reported by a substantial proportion of FTOs but the evidence suggests that strong involvement in organising is probably characteristic of only a third of officers³. Interestingly, these officers are more, not less likely to report heavy involvement in servicing activity, such as bargaining and representation. This suggests that, to the extent there has been a shift towards organising, this has occurred by adding tasks to the existing work routines of FTOs, by work intensification.

Table 4 also provides separate findings for the five largest unions included in the FTO survey. It indicates that there is variation in the extent and pattern of organising activity across unions: a pattern also seen in the survey of AOs. The sharpest distinction is that between UNISON and USDAW on the one hand and the GMB, TGWU and GPMU on the other. The two mainly service sector unions concentrate their officers on in-fill work, building up membership and organisation where recognition is already established. The three manufacturing unions, in contrast, direct their officers much more to greenfield organising and in each case a majority of officers reports involvement in securing recognition. Statistical analysis confirmed this pattern: heavy involvement in organising is a characteristic of FTOs with allocations in manufacturing and who are responsible for large numbers of factory workers⁴. It is in

the relatively traditional sectors of the economy that union officers are devoting most energy to re-building union membership.

Table 4: The activities of union officers

FTO activities	Percentage of FTOs reporting, 'one of most important parts of job'					
	All N=581	Unison N=103	USDAW N=84	GMB N=60	TGWU N=57	GPMU N=44
Encouraging recruitment	81	86	94	87	90	84
Direct recruitment	67	56	88	87	72	82
Identifying sites for recruitment	51	41	48	71	61	71
Encouraging activism	77	88	89	75	81	80
Building collective organisation	71	85	75	87	75	66
Identifying sites for recognition	39	20	29	61	67	68
Negotiating recognition	41	30	37	50	68	64
Collective bargaining	69	69	60	71	90	66
Consultation	40	41	30	33	40	18
Representation in procedures	61	55	75	65	79	52
Representation at tribunals	43	45	64	33	47	27

Source: Union officers' survey, 2002.

Table 4 contains a fairly encouraging message; that recruitment and organising has come to form a significant component of the work of many FTOs. But to what extent

does this reflect the influence of the Organising Academy? For some unions, which have invested heavily in the Academy, such as Connect, GPMU, ISTC, KFAT and USDAW, the impact has been significant. The increased emphasis on organising in these unions is associated intimately with Academy involvement. Beyond the core group of sponsoring unions the influence is likely to have been weaker and less direct. There have been other potent forces encouraging unions to organise, including the tighter labour market, and resulting demand from workers, and the opportunity afforded by the statutory recognition procedure. The Academy has worked alongside these forces and is best seen as one of several factors that have encouraged unions to take organising more seriously in recent years.

Conclusions

- ❖ *Innovation:* The Academy has been successful in attracting women and younger people into trade union work and has been distinctive in the emphasis placed on targeting non-union employers and use of methods associated with the 'organising model'.
- ❖ *Lead organisers:* The Academy programme has promoted a distinctive union role, that of a 'lead organiser'. This includes, but is not confined to direct recruitment, and encompasses a range of 'union-building' activities. The logic of the role lies in fostering union membership and organisation for the longer term, rather than emphasising 'quick hits'.
- ❖ *Outcomes:* During their period of training, Academy Organisers have registered considerable success in recruiting members and activists and in extending the

union presence to non-union employers. Their record attests to the value of employing specialist organisers, particularly for greenfield organising.

- ❖ *Retention:* Most Academy graduates want to work as organisers and have been offered the chance to do so within the trade union movement. There is evidence of some disenchantment during the course of the training year, however, that in part arises from the intensity of organising work. Burnout can be a problem for organisers and this should be recognised by union managers; by ensuring workloads are not excessive, that supports are in place and that a proper career structure exists for organisers.
- ❖ *Variation:* While there are common themes running through the experience of most Academy Organisers, there have also been differences. Thus, some unions have used their AOs to build up membership where recognition exists, while others have given greater emphasis to greenfield campaigns. These differences arise from a number of factors but one of the most important seems to be the way in which organisers are managed. Those working in a specialist unit, with a specialist coach, report more involvement in greenfield campaigns, a work profile that approximates to the lead organiser model, and more extensive use of union-building techniques.
- ❖ *Diffusion:* There is evidence of an organising agenda spreading quite widely across the trade union movement with most FTOs reporting that recruitment is a major part of their job. There is also evidence of unions increasing the amount of training in organising and of a modest increase in the proportion of officers filling specialist recruitment and organising positions. The pattern of diffusion is uneven across the movement, however, and it seems that manufacturing

unions have been most active, particularly in seeking to extend membership to non-union employers.

What broader conclusions can be drawn from this pattern of findings? One is that the Academy has proved a success. It has promoted innovation, produced a pool of organising talent and shown that investment in organising can lead to positive outcomes. Inevitably, problems have been encountered and sustaining the programme into the future will require more unions to offer sponsorship, but the record to date has been positive. The Academy should be retained and further developed, with a view to increasing the number of organisers who complete the programme.

A second conclusion is that unions can gain from investment in specialist organisers. The distinctive contribution of specialists though rests not so much in recruitment — most workers join of their own accord or are recruited by workplace representatives — but in two other activities. Firstly, they can act as points of expertise who can develop and diffuse new ways of organising that can be adopted by other union officers and lay activists. Secondly, they can be used for special projects that require planned organising activity. The most obvious use here is a recognition campaign but many AOs have also developed campaigns to restore organisation where it has collapsed and in some cases have become involved in community campaigns, seeking to generate public support for union policy. The key thing is that (in most unions) specialists are best used for special projects that require expertise and a full-time commitment, rather than bread-and-butter recruitment.

The final conclusion is that there is a continuing need to diffuse the organising agenda if unions are to secure their future. Many FTOs have expanded their involvement in recruitment and organising work but the survey evidence

suggests that there is scope for more to become active. The paid officer resources of most unions in Britain are already thinly stretched, however, and organising is often added to an already demanding schedule of work. This suggests two things. One is that there should be serious consideration given to the redesign of jobs in unions in order to identify and eliminate non-essential tasks and allow concentration on organising and other key activities. Too many union activities, arguably, continue through the force of custom rather than because they meet an explicit need.

The other is that unions should seek to focus their other key resource, lay activists and workplace representatives, on organising. Recruitment and retention of members, and their effective representation, require strong organisation at workplace level. This implies that re-building representative structures, and adapting them to changing workplaces and a changing workforce, should be central to the organising agenda. It also implies that the activities of lay representatives should be shifted to make organising a key priority. The Academy, in short, should be supplemented by further initiatives to develop lay organisers.

Notes

1. To date, a total of 18 unions have sponsored trainees at the Academy. The sponsors have been AEEU, AUT, CATU, CMA, Connect, CWU, GPMU, IPMS, ISTC, KFAT, MPO, MSF, NATFHE, PCS, TSSA, UNIFI, UNISON and USDAW.

2. There is an exception to this finding: 60 per cent of FTOs report receiving training in representation before employment tribunals.

3. The replies to the questions on organising were added together to form a statistically reliable 'involvement in organising' scale ($\alpha=.81$). A third of officers scored highly on this scale, indicating that they are heavily involved in a broad range of recruitment, organising and recognition activity.

4. The 'involvement in organising' scale was correlated with FTO responsibility for manufacturing ($p.264$; sig.000) and for plant operatives ($p.318$; sig.000).

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Organising the Future

The *Organising the Future* pamphlet series aims to deepen and widen discussion about the future development of trade unions in the UK. In particular *Organising the Future* will focus on the shift in union culture and resources towards organising; union efforts to organise not only in areas of traditional strength, but in new and emerging sectors of the labour market and economy; and how unions can sharpen their appeal to traditionally under-represented sections of the workforce.

During 2003, *Organising the Future* will feature contributions from senior academics, trade unionists and politicians.

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