



UK National Report on Cooperation between Trade Unions and Universities

University of Liverpool & UNISON NW, UK

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1. Introduction

“The globalised workplace is fundamental to an understanding of University lifelong learning. It creates skills demands in and beyond the workplace that can no longer be met by initial education and training. It causes upheavals in individuals’ working lives, which may require substantial involvement in education and training during working life”

(Payne, 2001: 382)

"[There is a] need for people to have access to training during the recession and beyond. Learning new skills will give people a better chance of getting back into work as early as possible and can also safeguard existing jobs"

(TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber, 2009¹)

The quotations above epitomise the necessity for trade unions and universities to collaborate on issues surrounding work-based lifelong learning during the current economic climate and beyond. They also highlight the tensions that may arise from the (potentially) conflicting perspectives of key stakeholders in this process: the employer, the government; the academic institution; the trade union and the learner. The following report will provide an overview of the current UK national scene with regard to trade union – University collaboration in the provision of work-based lifelong learning opportunities for trade union members.

Investigations show that there are positive opportunities to develop existing collaborations as evident in the joint projects between UNISON North West and the University of Liverpool. Although barriers do exist, it is anticipated that the TULIP partnership can initiate information exchange between partners that will produce valuable advice, guidance and encouragement to enable both sectors to fulfil their aims to support the ordinary trade union member access work-based University lifelong learning.

¹ In response to a report examining the impact of Lord Leitch's review of skills.
<http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/about/index.cfm?mins=107>

A key response from this partnership will be the development of work-based University lifelong learning opportunities which meet the needs, in all aspects – practical, aspirational and educational – of all stakeholders, in particular those of the learner.

2. Political and Legislative context

Trade unions, the education sector and Government support the same agenda - getting workers back into education through opportunities to earn and learn at the same time; and empowering individuals to change career as a result of lifelong learning. The current politico-economic climate means it is necessary to have an educated workforce - the economic difficulties we face dictate an education policy that meets the demands of the labour market, industry and employer needs. Beyond that, UNISON NW and the University of Liverpool call for opportunities that enable the potential learner to make choices according to their own individual aspirations.

Since the election of the Labour Government in 1997, lifelong learning has been established as part of the national policy debate. Trade unions have been increasingly influential at the lifelong learning policy level in the UK. In particular, the TUC established a Learning Services Task Group to co-ordinate policy making. Underpinning the examples of new learning initiatives developed by trade unions are notions of 'the learning society', 'lifelong learning' and the agenda set out in the government's Green Paper 'The learning age' (DfEE, 1998 - Payne). A 'new framework for workplace learning' is seen to emerge within 'the new lifelong learning culture' and in response to the perceived presence of 'a real political will to create a learning society'.

It is apparent that a learning divide exists within the UK. There are those with qualifications who continue learning both formally and informally in work and beyond. Then there are those (the majority) who have few, if any, formal qualifications and who have not been involved in systematic learning since leaving compulsory education². Addressing this divide demands a new learning culture stretching beyond the government's current lifelong learning targets to improve basic skills and reduce the number of workers who lack NVQ2 (approximately EQF level 3) or the equivalent. UNISON supports these targets, yet recognises the need to develop them further by promoting workers' re-engagement with learning and beyond the limitations of the Skills Councils agenda.

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

'...their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice'.³

² Rob Halsall, Head of Widening Participation. Learning & Teaching in Action. <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/lta/issue5/halsall.shtml>

³ The Leitch Review was tasked in 2004 with considering the UK's long-term skills needs. Leitch Review of Skills 'Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills', December 2006.

As encapsulated in the extract from the Leitch Report above, education has been driven by economic targets and the short term interests of business, as is apparent in UK government education policy. The UK government is highly committed to radical change in educational provision, with a number of key discernable features:

- Redistribution of funding of learning away from the state and towards individuals and employers
- Resistance to compulsion on employers in respect of addressing workforce learning and skills needs
- Conviction of a growing skills shortage and concern about the 'long tail' of UK skills
- Conviction that the solution lies in giving employers greater control of curriculum

The UK Alliance of Sector Skills Councils was launched in April 2008 and is a collective body made up of 25 fully licensed Sector Skills Councils. These employer-driven organisations claim to articulate the voice of approximately 85% of the UK's workforce on skills issues. The councils deliver Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) that map out what skills employers need their workforce to have and how these skills will be supplied – both now and in the future: '...put simply they are about getting the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time'.⁴

However, by having these Councils 'employer led' the government is not utilising the advantages that Trade unions can bring to the table. Trade unions have an interest in the aspirations and ambitions of people. The ambitious worker who wants to escape the vulnerable worker trap will help promote a prosperous UK economy. Encouraging workers to return to education can lead to empowerment and increase morale in the workforce resulting in higher productivity; and the creation of wealth and social justice (as aimed for in the Leitch report recommendations) would all flow from this encouragement. Trade unions need to learn how to improve their ability to influence government and other agencies such as the Regional Development Agency [one of many "quangos~" with influence in this matter].

Echoing the sentiments of the Fryer Report 'Learning for the twenty first century' (Fryer, 1997) the creation of a learning society, for the TUC, is seen as being characterized by 'shared commitments':

- A commitment by the employer to invest not just in job-specific requirements of the employer but also in his or her personal development needs
- A commitment by the employee to take more responsibility for and ownership of their own learning throughout his or her working life
- A commitment by the state to provide lifetime entitlements and support for employees
- A commitment by trade unions to promote and deliver quality lifelong learning opportunities to their members (TUC 1998b: 3 -Payne).

⁴ <http://www.ukces.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=4550>

These 'shared commitments', the TUC argued, are about learning initiatives that enhance employability as well as 'developing active citizens with the skills to learn and participate in a democratic society within their workplace and local communities' (ibid).

3. Employer partnerships

From a trade union perspective, many UK employers remain deeply reluctant to develop workforce skills and largely resistant to trade union efforts to promote broader learning through collective bargaining. Furthermore, concern has been expressed about the sustainability of what has been achieved through the Union Learning Fund and the TUC's Learning Academy in the event of a change of government.

The ex-Minister for Employment Relations, Alan Johnson MP, noted that:

'Workers benefit from increased training opportunities and employers gain through having better trained workers, and as a result higher productivity' (TUC, 2003b - Greenwood).

Yet, to the extent that employees and employers may have different needs and interests in relations to learning and training (Rainbird et al, 2003), much will depend on the employment relations context.

Partnerships with employers have enabled the creation of new occupational progression routes for care workers, nursery nurses, learning and healthcare assistants. The significance of this is that it provides a career pathway for predominantly low paid female workers in a sector of the labour market that traditionally has offered little opportunity for progression (Munro & Rainbird, 2000: 231). However, it must be emphasised that often, when employers do take an interest in training, it is usually narrow training related to current needs rather than addressing the long-term skill needs of the industry or the fate of employees facing future redundancy.

The concept of partnership has been used in a variety of ways: at national level, social partnership is the term applied to the tripartite discussions between government, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the TUC. Partnership arrangements at the level of company or organisation are increasingly popular. Under such agreements unions collaborate over issues:

'...partnership provides a clear workplace philosophy based on employer and union working together to achieve common goals such as fairness and competitiveness, and recognising that although they have different constituencies, and at time different interests, these can best be served by making common cause wherever possible' (IRS, 1998: 12).

There are important issues of curriculum control which should not be ignored – in each partnership there will be an element of compromise between what the trade union sees as its own requirements, what the employers see as in their own interests, what government agencies perceive as being in the interests of public policy on education and training, and what a university might conceive as 'good educational practice'. Furthermore, the interests of each individual union member will

not necessarily be identical with those of any of the above agencies. Therefore, it is apparent that lifelong learning can have different meanings to different social actors and different interests within the economic and political arena (Payne, 2001: 388). See also section 4.3 below.

4. Overview of UK activity

4.1 Trade Union Lifelong Learning

In their examination of trade union education Toomey and Vulliamy (2006) claimed that post-war trade union education was pioneered in University adult education departments from the 1960s, utilising liberal adult education processes and developing methodologies to support active collective collaborative learning. Historically the focus of UK trade union educational provision was specifically concentrated upon developing skills and knowledge of lay officials such as shop stewards, union learning representatives and health and safety representatives. Many trade unions developed weekend schools, sometimes in partnership with sympathetic public sector education providers and some unions developed their own education centres, often on a residential basis (ibid).

During the 1974-1979 Labour Government, unions secured the right to paid release from work for training lay representatives in matters related to their duties and public funds to assist with training and curriculum development. Emphasis was placed upon training elected lay representatives. Over recent years, a wider framework of education has been produced that includes:

- Development of full-time officers and union office staff
- Financial support for individual members
- Promotion/provision of learning opportunities at Basic Skills levels for members
- Negotiation of learning opportunities for all members for employability
- Negotiation of learning opportunities for all members for personal development
- Political campaigning for free/low cost access to adult learning opportunities for all, including retired members
- Supporting rank and file members in the area of information communication technology (ICT) and skills for life (ibid).

The majority of trade union educational provision is accredited by the Open College Network at Levels 2 and 3 (approximately EQF levels 3 & 4). There has been TUC and individual union support for study at University level by scholarships, sometimes restricted to certain institutions (Ruskin College, Northern College etc) but typically on an individual basis and restricted as to subject (Toomey and Vulliamy, 2006: 10). These traditions were eroded from the 1980s by TUC priorities for short training courses for shop stewards, largely provided in Further Education (FE), and as a

result of employer and Government hostility. In 1989, the TUC withdrew provision located within universities in favour of concentrating provision within FE Colleges and the Workers Educational Association (WEA). As we will see in the next section, only a few UK universities remain active in trade union education and many participants find themselves with extremely limited options for more sustained learning at higher level.

Unionlearn

Much has been achieved in the realm of trade union education and union learning over the past few years. But unions need to be proactive if they are to access all their members who could benefit from study at the workplace or a local college or other learning provider. This was recognised by the TUC in establishing Unionlearn in 2006 in an attempt to help unions develop and diversify their provision. It has two main functions:

1. Supporting union activists to gain the skills needed to operate within their trade unions

This is accomplished via accredited training for union representatives delivered by a network of Trade Union Education Units throughout the UK and funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). TUC Affiliate unions offer training and support to their activists, this can also attract LSC funding.

2. Supporting union members to access a wide range of learning opportunities to meet both employment and personal development needs.

Each year over 70,000 trade unionists enrol in trade union education courses organised by the TUC or by its affiliated unions - a number of trade unions have adopted their own programmes of learning such as UNISON's 'Return to Learn' programme. TUC Education offers high quality, accredited training through a network of colleges of further and higher education across the UK. Courses are offered flexibly to suit the needs of the union representatives and professionals through a ten-day release model.

UK trade unions are supportive of government initiatives that pledge to motivate and empower individuals in joining or re-joining the labour market, for instance: The Skills Pledge, Train to Gain, Sector Skills Councils, Skills for Life, Apprenticeships, Higher Level Learning. However, each of these initiatives is employer-led training. Questions remain as to the availability of work-based lifelong learning that is driven by employees' needs and aspirations.

4.2 Understanding University Lifelong Learning in the UK

The term 'lifelong learning' from the UK government's perspective covers a wide range of learning activities for both children and adults. This national lifelong learning

agenda aims to strengthen both the individual citizen's and the community's commitment to continuous learning and updating.

Within the University sector the term has a more focused definition and is generally taken to indicate flexible, innovative adult education that is usually part-time and may lead to credit accumulation rather than commitment to full awards. University Lifelong Learning can generally be divided into three main categories:

1. Continuing Education (CE), which generally is non-vocational in nature. Typical subject areas cover art, history, archaeology, languages, literature.

Typically individuals join the courses to pursue their own intellectual interests and gain personal fulfilment.

2. Continuing Professional Development (CPD), sometimes also known as 'Vocational Lifelong Learning'. These courses can range from generic business and management style provision to more focused profession-based courses such as those targeted at lawyers or veterinary surgeons.

Universities developing their CPD provision may deliver courses that are open to individual enrolment. Alternatively they may work side by side with employers and the professions to develop tailor-made courses that meet both organisational and individual requirements. Many of these will be Non-credit-bearing (NCB); that is carrying no University academic credit.

Some of these courses may in fact carry professional body recognition or accreditation other government bodies e.g. NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications) but they do not carry any University credit. This particular subsection of lifelong learning has a significant volume in the UK, contributing millions of Euros to UK universities.

Increasingly these courses may involve flexible and distance learning study - often with the support of new technologies. This means that they can accommodate demanding work patterns and allow participants to progress at their own pace.

3. Widening Participation aims to encourage and support people who traditionally would not have considered going to University to study for a degree. Whilst involving some adults returning to education, the main focus of initiatives and activity in the UK tends to support young people aiming to access undergraduate study.

Delivery of University lifelong learning:

Within the University sector lifelong learning is largely overseen by departments with this specific focus. They may be called a 'Centre for Lifelong Learning', 'Department of Continuing Education', or 'CPD Unit', or another similar term, but their remit will be similar. The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UaLL) has over 100 member institutions.

What does differ considerably across the sector is the method of CE delivery. In some cases it is fully centralised, with all academic and administrative staff located within a CE department. In other cases the delivery is devolved to the separate academic departments but the administration and marketing are

undertaken centrally. And some universities may operate as a mix of the two. In the case of CPD provision, especially if it is NCB, often these courses are offered by individual academic departments without any central involvement at all.

4.3 Current University Provision in Trade Union Education

At present few UK universities offer specific trade union education, with the courses tending to take two forms: the highest level being that of a foundation degree and secondly the subject base being limited to a focus upon the role of a trade union representative/activist. Although a necessary subject for education, what remains to be provided is work-based University lifelong learning for trade union members without restriction by subject focus or limited to that of a Foundation Degree.

What is a Foundation Degree?

A Foundation degree (Fd) is a vocationally focused higher education (HE) qualification that integrates academic and work-based learning (WBL) through close collaboration between employers and programme providers. It is designed with employer involvement and is intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment. It is located at intermediate skills level in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (EQF equivalent level 5). An Fd is a stand-alone qualification, but it provides opportunities for further (lifelong) study, which could take a number of different forms, including progression to at least one articulated and appropriate honours degree programme (EQF equivalent level 6).

Foundation degrees are distinctive from most degree courses in that they require learners to demonstrate a high level of workplace competence alongside the equivalent standard of academic attainment. Work-based learning is integral to Foundation degrees with courses designed to support workforce development of large numbers of learners who are in employment.

Foundation degree frameworks are produced by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and from other sector bodies in consultation with employers and other key stakeholders from the sector they represent. The frameworks provide information about the distinctive features of foundation degrees and their role within the sector. Furthermore, they communicate to providers the requirements of industry and employers in terms of curriculum design and delivery.

It appears that much of UK university work-based lifelong learning provision is strongly influenced by the Government's focus upon skills and the needs of the employer. Trade union lifelong learning however is based upon developing the skills of their stewards i.e. negotiating. University lifelong learning will benefit from the support of the trade union perspective that moves beyond the narrow employers' perspective towards wider learning opportunities for their members. These opportunities need to go beyond Foundation Degree level with access determined by prior experience and knowledge.

Over recent years, the academic infrastructure in UK universities has generally developed to become more responsive to the needs of individual adult students. In addition to policies and procedures to support the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APL), some institutions have developed smaller more flexible awards which require a more limited commitment on behalf of adult students (eg. the Personal and Professional Development Certificate, University of Liverpool). However, under-financing of part-time study continues to be a problem.

Examples of good practice

4.3.i University of Liverpool and UNISON NW

University of Liverpool and UNISON NW have engaged in collaborative work since 2004 resulting in a number of successful projects. In order to open up lifelong learning activities to UNISON's target audience – mainly low paid women many of whom have few formal qualifications – the University's Centre for Lifelong Learning and UNISON formed a number of Reading Groups. Shared reading activities stimulate critical thinking, analytical skills, the construction of argument and the precise articulation of concepts, emotions and ideas – all essential to fulfilling and effective workplace performance. In addition, reading remains not only an essential skill for anyone involved at any level of educational activity, but is also a gateway to all areas of Higher Education. Another initiative by the University invites UNISON members with an interest in the arts to participate in group activities that raise awareness of the place of art in society.

Both groups share the same rationale – to bring together individuals from very different backgrounds and circumstances and introduce the idea that something they have an interest in, can be pursued through University lifelong learning activities – simply put, it shows participants how education can be relevant and accessible in their daily lives and creating the understanding that lifelong learning activities are available beyond the traditional structures of education.

Through collaborative studentship research, a PhD student from the Department of Geography has been allowed access to UNISON members; participation in international events; access to records on international development and financial assistance. This provided UNISON with insight into their members' perspectives on current international policies as a result of research data, as well as integral research on the changing nature of their sector and what this means for their members. This project and a previous one entitled 'Transformations' (the findings of which are now widely used by the union in understanding how and why women become (or cease to be) politically active) identify that there is scope for further research collaborations between the two partners.

Although still in the very early stages of this process, it is apparent that there are many possibilities that could emerge including further interdisciplinary projects working across departments and faculties. Further academic - union collaborations may be explored within the North West region.

4.3.ii UnionLearn work with The Open University

The Open University holds similar values to trade unions and believes that learning should be a lifelong activity for everyone and access to education and training should be open to all. The following is an extract from the collaborators' website:

“John F. Kennedy once famously said “all of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop our talent” a sentiment shared by both the Open University and Unionlearn”.

The partnership was established in 2006 as both organisations shared the common goal of widening life opportunities and offering support to those who want to develop new skills. The Open University offers a huge range of courses to suit all abilities. And true to its aim of being ‘open’ the individual does not require previous formal qualifications to enrol for study. The Open University has more than 600 courses including short courses in effective leadership skills, managing conflict, transferring life skills to employment skills or improving your negotiation skills to full degrees. All of The Open University’s courses are flexible enough to allow the individual to stay in work whilst studying.

There are other examples of university-trade union lifelong learning at various levels – from Foundation Degree to Masters (see references below). Clearly these full awards may not be the most appropriate for all trade union workers – given the time and financial commitment required. There remains the question therefore as to what type of awards might yet be developed to respond most effectively to needs and aspirations but which also provide a stepping stone to further personal and professional development.

5. The perspective of UNISON NorthWest and University of Liverpool

Although it is apparent that there are many educational opportunities available, the provision of widespread, coherent work-based University lifelong learning for the ‘ordinary’ grassroots trade union member who does not automatically take the route of activism or officer requires stronger development. UNISON North West represents 200,000 members based within the public sector. Almost 75% of those members are women, often working in low paid, low skilled jobs. In some instances they are working in up to three separate part time jobs in order to cope with the rising costs of living in today’s erratic economic climate. The Women at Work Commission⁵ argues many of these workers left compulsory education at the age of sixteen and are now finding that this choice, (made at such a young age, and often out of financial necessity), has resulted in being trapped in insecure employment and one of a vast number of vulnerable workers in the UK labour market.

The recent TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment (CoVE) report re-emphasised that many workers are unable to change decisions on education made at the age of sixteen and return to education at a later stage. The report critiques a UK Government report from 1999, which claimed that vulnerable work acts as a precursor to better and more secure employment, and maintains that temporary work

⁵ Women at Work Commission reference.

does *not* lead to better jobs for low paid workers. This confirms the Low Pay Commission's findings that although some workers may progress from minimum wage work, a large percentage of these individuals do not move into better jobs (with women being at a higher risk of persistent low pay than men)⁶.

What we now have to pursue is how we - UNISON and the University of Liverpool – can continue to develop ways of making academia accessible for members such as these. The Transformations project⁷ highlighted that trade union membership can act as a catalyst for working class women to access University education. Education gives workers opportunities, offering them the choice to change the career path they chose at sixteen. Empowered by access to education, many workers may find the skills they use daily and learning from their experience can be recognised academically. For instance, a carer/nurse clinically trained may have an ambition to be a medical doctor, yet often has not had the further opportunity to enter education to pursue this training. They may now want to pursue the option of using their learning from experience to gain some form of academic recognition in order to pursue this goal.

Although such notions remain critically undeveloped, there is a strong concern with the 'learning divide' between adults who do and do not participate in formal learning activities. Widening provision, guidance, childcare facilities and financial support towards tuition fees and study costs are seen as contributions towards developing entitlements to learning that address that learning divide (Payne, 2001: 387). We recognise that there is a need for trade union members to be able to pursue wider access routes into University work-based lifelong learning that is not necessarily based on trade union skills or employment skills as shown earlier in this report.

6. Issues and barriers in future development of collaborative working

One of the main issues emerging from this project is an acknowledgment that collaborative working requires an understanding of each others cultures, ethos, ways of thinking and working! Furthermore, quite often it is necessary to overcome perceptions and expectations of the partner. To some, academia can appear elitist with their work style based upon thought processes and theoretical debate; whereas the trade union movement is militant, quick thinking and assertive in nature. Of course these are merely stereotypes, yet perceptions such as this can play a major element in constructing effective working relationships.

Funding may act as a major barrier in pursuing our aim in continuing to develop University lifelong learning for trade union members. This is two-fold: for the individual needing a sound financial basis to be able to access learning whilst working; and the possibility of re-routing government and employer funding towards this form of education.

A barrier that must be overcome is that of engagement with the employer. It may be that examples of good practice are increasing but if the employer will not allow potential learners time off then all attempts at widening access to lifelong learning will

⁶ Data from the COVE Report.

⁷ Transformation project 2004-05 was a research project conducted by UNISON North West and the University of Liverpool with the aim of exploring the expectations of female UNISON members who were, or had been, politically active.

have been a rudimentary process. To overcome this, all stakeholders must increase engagement on this issue - individuals empowered through learning are more motivated in their work resulting in higher levels of productivity and increased community cohesion in wider society as evident in the Leitch Report.

It is important that all stakeholders are included within future working; therefore it is suggested that contacts be made with employers and the business community in an attempt to create further discussions on widening opportunities for employees regarding lifelong learning opportunities.

Potential opportunities for future collaboration: new partners / new activities

It is clear that TULIP has highlighted additional opportunities for the extension of close bipartite or tripartite collaboration to sit alongside more broadly based networking activities. These may be national collaborations (eg. in new member states) or cross-border partnerships and will be explored through future project working.

7. Websites

London Metropolitan University

Union Learning (Certificate in Professional Development)

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ug-prospectus/courses-10-11/union-learning.cfm>

Labour and Union Studies BA (Hons)

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ug-prospectus/courses-10-11/labour---trade-union-studies.cfm>

Labour and Union Studies MA

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/pgprospectus/courses/labour-and-trade-union-studies.cfm>

The Open University

<http://www.open.ac.uk/union/p3.shtml>

Unionlearn

<http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>

Blackpool and the Fylde College (an Associate College of Lancaster University)

Trade Union Studies, Foundation Degree Level 5

<http://www.blackpool.ac.uk/course/trade-union-studies-foundation-degree-level-5-lancaster-university>

University of Hull

Foundation Degree

<http://www2.hull.ac.uk/IFL/shortcourses.aspx>

University of Keele

The Keele Certificate in Industrial Relations

<http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/education/learn-2768-f0.cfm>

University of Liverpool

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/cil/index.htm>

University of Wolverhampton

FD (Arts) Trade Union Studies

<http://courses.wlv.ac.uk/Course.asp?menu=1&id=11787&type=1>

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TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment (CoVE)
<http://www.vulnerableworkers.org.uk/cove-report/>

Wallis, E. Stuart, M. and Greenwood, I. (2005) 'Learners of the workplace unite!: an empirical investigation of the UK trade union learning representative initiative'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19: 283.

Women and Work Commission
http://www.equalities.gov.uk/what_we_do/women_and_work/women_and_work_commission.aspx

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