

## **BUILDING GLOBAL LABOUR NETWORKS: THE CASE OF THE GLOBAL LABOUR UNIVERSITY**

*Frank Hoffer*<sup>1</sup>

ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities,  
Geneva, Switzerland

---

*"The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."*<sup>2</sup>

### **IN THE LONG RUN - IDEAS DO MATTER**

**R**eversing the marginalisation of social justice and fairness in public debate requires, first and foremost, liberation from an intellectual slavery that is unable to think beyond globalisation as an overwhelming tide of unregulated market forces. Debate leads not always and immediately to policy changes, but there are rarely policy changes without analytical groundwork, debate, and critical reflection. At any moment in time, the vested interest of big business and the logic of profit maximisation seem to be insurmountable. However, in most democratic societies, the concepts and discretion of political organizations and decision-makers are only possible within broadly shared values and ideas. In the past, ideas of equal rights, social justice, feminism, and environmentalism inspired broad social movements and changed societies for the better.

Today, only totally unreconstructed men dare to say the stupidities about women that were common male wisdom 40 years ago. In democratic societies today no one challenges equal voting rights for all citizens, something unthinkable for property owning men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The racist notion of the 'burden of the white man', formal racial segregation and apartheid are matters of the past, and most politicians standing for elections choose not to challenge the principles of a welfare state or questions the need for universal access to adequate health, education and decent employment.

There is no reason to assume that the mutual reinforcing logic of inspiring ideas and popular movements has come to an end.

## THE DECLINING HEGEMONY OF THE WRONG ANSWERS

The decade following the liberating collapse of the Berlin Wall saw a historically unparalleled pro-market hegemony. "My understanding of freedom and prosperity is founded upon a system of worldwide free trade, not man-made institutions"<sup>3</sup> was the credo of the then Czechoslovakian Prime Minister, Vaclav Klaus. George Bush Sr., while visiting Moscow told the Russian people "[...] [n]o conclave of government experts, no matter how brilliant, can match the sheer ingenuity of the market [...] [s]ome call it the American dream, but really it is the universal dream and it is the dream the Soviet people are striving to make real for themselves"<sup>4</sup>. Never, in its 150 years of existence, had capitalism prevailed so unchallenged. The *Zeitgeist* was well captured by the title of Fukuyama's best-selling book<sup>5</sup> 'End of History'.

The neo-liberal interpretation of reality is still dominant today, but the dubious results of shock therapy in transition countries, the Asian financial crisis, the poor growth record of the world economy, rising inequality, and the millions of victims of dogmatic market-only strategies, have undermined public confidence in globalisation as we know it. Public protest against the current form of globalisation has become widespread and international. Elections in Latin America, India, and several European countries have shown the lack of support for the free market agenda. As a fall-back position, the global elite is presenting the current form of globalisation as the only rational choice. Disagreement is discredited as irrational, naïve, or representative of narrow, sectional interests. The triumphal 'End of History' confidence is replaced by the TINA (There Is No Alternative) mantra. The no-choice mantra is rather more ideological than logical. Policy choices are made constantly at the local, national, or global level. The reality of diverse patterns of success and failure contradicts the 'one size fits all' approach. While all countries feel the heat of globalisation, they find different responses.

## UNLEASHING THE MARKET - UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

The utopia of the free market<sup>6</sup> is the conceptual basis for deliberate policy decisions of many national governments to adapt to globalisation by radicalizing and internationalizing the market. The illusion of its self-regulating ingenuity is the *raison d'être* for deregulation. The transfer of an ever-bigger share of societal affairs from political regulation to market regulation limits the scope for policy interventions. Power, once delegated by national governments to multilateral

institutions like the WTO, reduces the future sovereignty of states and their citizens. The structural power of IMF and World Bank recommendations reduces the scope for financial and economic policies of many countries.

Democracy is based firstly on the possibility for the people to decide upon substantive issues, and secondly, on the independence of citizens in decision-making. Policy outsourcing is reducing the spaces for decisions and the current deconstruction of the welfare state is undermining the independence of many people. Meaningful democracy requires citizens who enjoy genuine freedom - based on political, legal, religious and economic independence.

Labour legislation limiting the discretion of the entrepreneur and collective property in the form of social security provisions are the functional equivalents to private property securing a degree of independence that allowed proletarians to become *citoyens*. Questioning today, in the name of globalisation, the collective property of employees undermines their relative independence, and is ultimately challenging the very foundations of democracy<sup>7</sup>.

There is a trade off between freedom and free markets. Under-regulated markets tend to create an amount of inequality and insecurity that leads to an imbalance of power and dependency that is difficult to reconcile with the concept of inclusive democratic societies.

#### **ADAPTING TO CHANGE - INFLUENCING THE PATTERN OF CHANGE**

Rapid change is the only constant element in the permanent evolution of market economies. Market-based production networks increasingly replace large, vertically-integrated factories. The individual entrepreneur has less discretion and is under tougher market competition. Decision makers in the workplace seem to be increasingly disempowered. Outsourcing, production networks, free trade, and capital mobility partly replace the visible power of the entrepreneur with the structural force of the market. There seems to be less scope within the company to compromise over the cost of restructuring and modernizing.

The scope for successful workplace militancy decreases as producers lose price-setting power. This is particularly true for company-based collective bargaining systems with weak industry-wide standards where workers' freedom and independence are not protected by labour law and welfare state provisions. At the company-level, unions are increasingly marginalized, forced into concession bargaining, or engage pro-actively in co-managing companies to weather turbulent globalisation storms.

Capital mobility erodes the tax base and reduces monetary sovereignty, while supra-national rules and regulation hollow-out national legislative power.

The downscaling and weakening of the state reduces its ability to guarantee (through public services, welfare provisions, and protective legislation) a public space outside of market competition. Labour's main negotiating partner for an institutionally embedded market economy, the nation state, is withering away. Without an international regulatory framework, national options for reducing labour competition are replaced by options to adapt to global competition, and collective bargaining is pushed toward the company level with the above-mentioned consequences.

The unleashed global market has to be civilized through global rules, global public debate, and solidarity to maintain and broaden the concept of people determining the rules of society.<sup>8</sup> An international labour agenda cannot limit itself to core labour standards. The larger body of existing labour standards provides a more comprehensive body of regulations for labour markets and social security provisions. However, labour standards in themselves are too narrow. They need to be integrated into a broader context of global fairness and governance issues, (i.e., exchange rate stability, international measures against tax evasion, fair trade rules, global taxes and the redistribution of wealth).

## **VISION AND RULES BEYOND THE NATION STATE**

The vision of social justice and meaningful democracy requires a social dimension of global governance - as the retreat towards national isolation is no option, even for powerful nations. The 'World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation' established by the ILO in 2002 deserves - despite its limitations - credit for putting this imperative of future global development on the international agenda.<sup>9</sup>

The debates for fairer solutions need to be located between fatalist surrender to market forces and distant dreams of system change. With a view to promoting mutually acceptable global rules and global solidarity, these debates have to be international in topic and composition. They need to be based on realistic pragmatism, guided by utopian realism. Neither pro- nor contra-market fundamentalists waste much time on this. In orthodox Marxian thinking and in neo-liberal concepts, interference in the market logic is seen as either impossible or undesirable. For the neo-liberals, it is against the ingenuity and efficiency of the market to interfere, while for the Marxists, the cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery which batter down all protective measures and cultural diversity.<sup>10</sup>

There is neither a neo-liberal end nor a materialist law of history.<sup>11</sup> History is an open process where answers are found through public debate and political struggle. The utopian visions of socialist thinking, or other humanitarian ideas and beliefs for that matter, are expressing the moral convictions that 'another world is possible'. They provide the motivating energy to mobilise against the unjustifiable realities of desperate poverty, growing insecurity and inequality, discrimination and outright exploitation. The vision of possible change is a necessary element to develop practical policies to achieve fairer outcomes of globalisation.

Labour grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a visionary movement, became an established institution and recognized representative labour in the aftermath of World-War I.<sup>12</sup> It consolidated itself after World War II as mass organizations that - at least in the industrialized 'western' world - improved employees' living and working conditions by reducing the power imbalance in the labour market through labour legislation, the welfare state, and collective bargaining. With the vision of socialism discredited and with declining regulating influence, the two pillars of labour's strength are eroding at the same time. Rejuvenating these two pillars requires a vision for more global justice and a policy for a regulatory framework and industrial relations extending beyond the nation state.

## **SHIFTING THE PUBLIC DEBATE**

Interests are inevitably becoming more diverse, complex, and competitive within more internally differentiated societies, and within a closely interlinked global economy marked by huge inequalities and imbalances of power. The trade union movement can rely less and less on a fairly homogeneous and loyal core working class with similar workplace conditions, similar social milieus, similar values, and political orientations. Nostalgic dreams about the good old days of a broad unified working class are firstly idealizing the past, secondly ignoring the socio-economic and cultural reasons behind these changes, and thirdly leads towards isolation, and declining influence.

Labour is acting in an environment, where competing interests are constantly trying to influence and dominate public opinion. Power and reason are decisive factors in shaping debates and decisions. It is the exception that power can act totally beyond reason, and good arguments are rarely without any power. However unfortunate, daily experience shows that power often buys reason. This option does not exist for trade unions. They are financially outgunned by companies and the myriads of think tanks, foundations,

academics, and media, sponsored and at least partly controlled, by the rich and powerful. Lacking the power of money and organisational power, the power of reason becomes more important.

Engaging in debates and sometimes alliances with other civil society groups, think tanks, academic institutions etc. is part of any strategy to gain influence in public debate. It is unlikely that labour can achieve the required substantive policy changes on its own, but it certainly cannot be done without organized labour. This pivotal role of labour in any serious alliance for change creates the space for a self-confident, but open-minded approach to such dialogue processes. Historically, changes towards more democracy and social fairness grew out of such 'new deal' coalitions.

Regaining strength and membership requires, among others, attractive and innovative ideas to shape globalisation; productive international networking; efficient support for organized members; a welcoming organizational culture and an open-minded but confident internal dialogue among members, and externally with civil society organizations, academic institutions, political parties etc.

At least, in the industrialised countries, labour issues are far less prominent in the academic discourse than decades ago. At universities, many 'friends of labour' are retiring. Industrial relations are partly replaced by management and HRD research, the debate about labour law has shifted from securing dignity and respect for workers towards a discourse of labour market rigidities. Income equality is often no longer treated as a desirable objective but as an obstacle to create dynamic and competitive markets. The late 1960s, when 'sympathy with the proletariat' was en vogue among intellectuals, have passed. Trade unions can no longer assume, in the same way, a commitment to the causes of the labour movement. They have to take a much more pro-active role in building partnerships and dialogue with the academic community and civil society groups. As in personal relationships, it is as much about being the right partner as finding the right partner.

The research and knowledge base for new and innovative ideas to promote the age-old visions of social justice, freedom, and solidarity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be created without tapping into the intellectual capacity of universities and research institutions, where the bulk of research in today's world is undertaken. Within universities, there are potential allies who share the understanding that there is a need for better social global governance and that this requires genuine global discourses on these issues. However, they cannot become partners on the basis of an instrumental understanding of research

sometimes prevalent in the labour movement, where scientific 'evidence' is requested merely to support the already well-known truth.

### **BRINGING EXPERTISE TOGETHER - BUILDING A GLOBAL LABOUR UNIVERSITY**

Challenging the conventional wisdom, analysing the changing pattern of work and societies, building alliances and bridges between labour and academic institutions, and providing academic qualification programs for trade unions are the motivating forces to build a Global Labour University and global union research networks.

Trade unions need to have ideas and concepts for a social dimension of globalisation far beyond the workplace and even the nation state. This requires a different type of mobilizing power, information sharing, knowledge generation, and analytical capacity. For democratic movements, responses to global challenges cannot be found in an isolated national context, and cannot be delivered by a centralist international body. For a defensive company-based strategy, national alliances with management might, in some cases, be a workable solution to achieve an advantageous position in global competitive markets. However, for trade union efficiency within international companies, for influencing international rule making, knowing and understanding the international context and potential partners is crucial. Multidisciplinary and international research and debate is an important element of better understanding and cooperation. Pooling resources and knowledge is possible in fairly open and transparent horizontal network structures. While this requires acceptance of dissenting views, it is clearly to be preferred to the conformity of authoritarian movements, or the emptiness of lowest common denominator statements. Networks are efficient and valuable for knowledge sharing, discussions and debate - they are far less suited for decision-making. The best way to destroy a network is to try to control it from one point, or to make it a decision-making institution with inevitable dubious democratic legitimacy.

However, many networks lose momentum because they lack an active and acknowledged facilitator, purpose or commitment. Most people are very busy and will only contribute to a network if this is related to specific projects or tasks. Focusing the GLU around the development and implementation of Masters programmes on labour policies and globalisation at different universities has created a common purpose and strong commitment among the partners.

The possibilities, the potential, and the need for international networking, exchange, and cooperation increase. However, the barriers remain formidable. Business, academic, cultural, political, sport, or entertainment elites have created global communities. Labour is lagging behind. The lack of language skills, cultural differences, financial constraints, and competing interests make direct communication and cooperation difficult.

The need to:

- a) enhance the analytical capacity of trade unions to understand and challenge the existing common wisdom about globalisation;
- b) build alliances with the broader civil society;
- c) develop alternative ideas for a fair and inclusive globalisation; and
- d) build sustainable networks

put additional challenges on trade union research, labour studies, and workers' education in a broad sense. This concerns the content, the instruments, and the methodology of cooperation. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has a mandate to support international cooperation among its constituencies and the obligation to respond to their requests and needs. The ILO is the only UN specialised agency where organized labour has institutional representation. The ILO was created to achieve social justice and respect for workers' global dignity. Its body of international labour standards is the most advanced set of international rules and recommendations to provide a framework for internationally compatible fair labour markets and decent work. Within this mandate, the ILO initiated, in cooperation with Global Unions, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, universities and national trade union centers from Brazil (University of Campinas/Central Unica dos Trabalhadores), Canada (York University, McMaster University and Canadian Labour Congress), Germany (Berlin School of Economics/University of Kassel/ Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund/Hans Böckler Foundation and DGB Bildungswerk), South Africa (University of Witwatersrand/ Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the UK (University of Cardiff, TUC) a Global Labour University project.

The Global Labour University (GLU) idea was launched in 2002, in order to facilitate discourse, stimulate research, and provide university-level qualification programs on the political, economic and social dimensions of globalisation for labour and trade union experts. The immediate objectives are to:

- a) engage with trade unions and universities to develop and implement new university curricula to broaden the debate and knowledge base on labour and equity issues in universities;
- b) qualify trade unionists and other interested labour experts, through internationally recognized university-based post graduate programs, on the political, economic and social dimensions of globalisation from a labour perspective;
- c) establish a network for joint research on global labour issues; and
- d) facilitate discourse among trade unionists and researchers concerning the challenges of globalisation.

The first activity of the GLU network in the pilot phase from 2002-2005 was the development and implementation of a pilot Masters course on “Labour Policies and Globalisation” at the universities in Kassel and Berlin. An international group of academics and trade unionists developed the curriculum for this course over the last three years at a series of workshops. International experts joined the staff from the two universities to teach at the pilot course. National and international trade unions actively engaged by offering internship opportunities to the students. In September 2005, 23 students from 18 countries successfully graduated from the pilot course. A continuous feedback and evaluation process between the students, the universities and the broader network allowed the course to be modified. Many “teething problems” were already addressed in the second course that finished in September 2006.

#### **Curriculum of Master Program on Labour Policies and Globalisation<sup>13</sup>**

##### **Regular Courses**

[R 1 Trade Union Strategies in a Global Economy](#)

[R 2 Governance of Globalisation](#)

R 3 Strategies of Multinational Companies and Labour

[R 4 Economic Policy & Union Strategy](#)

[R 5 Labour rights and Sustainable Development](#)

R 6 Organisational Development of Trade Unions

##### **Elective Courses**

[E 1 Workers' Rights in the Informal Economy](#)

[E 2 Theories of Social Justice](#)

[E 3 International Trade Union Politics](#)

[E 4 Gender & Globalisation](#)

[E 5 Migration and Global Labour Markets](#)

[E 6 Legal Framework of International Trade Union Influence](#)

One World Seminar

Colloquium on current Trade Union Policies

Six weeks' internship with national or international trade union organisation

E 7 Globalisation and the Welfare State

E 8 Privatisation, Deregulation, and Liberalisation of Services

E 9 History of Trade Unions

E 10 Work and Society

E 11 Development Economics

International teams are working on textbook developments concerning global governance, macro economic regimes and development, trade unions and globalisation. The annual GLU Conference is a platform for researchers, trade unionists, and GLU students to debate the global challenges labour is facing. The conferences are also opportunities to develop new joint research initiatives. The findings of the annual conference are published in regular GLU yearbooks.

In 2007, the Universities of Witwatersrand (South Africa) will offer an additional Masters Program on labour policies and globalisation within the Global Labour University framework. Regular international workshops provide the opportunity to assess jointly the experiences gathered in the pilot program. The extension to two southern universities will further strengthen the north/south cooperation within the GLU and allow students to pursue their studies partly in the north and partly in the south. It will also help to overcome a certain dominance of Euro-centric thinking in the pilot course.

An international graduate school on the social dimension of globalisation for PhD students will be launched in 2007 at the University of Kassel. The concept of the GLU is based on the assumption that influencing the globalisation process is a continuous effort that requires not only joint teaching but also research collaboration.

The first phase of the Global Labour University project<sup>14</sup> has been successful in:

- agreeing, among very diverse project partners, the structure and content of the curriculum;
- selecting a highly motivated, diverse and gender balanced group of trade unionists/students for the course;
- establishing a certified and internationally recognized Masters course on 'Labour Policies and Globalisation';

- initiating new forms of international cooperation between trade unionists and academics;
- initiating joint research and textbook development;
- contributing to the international debate on global labour issues; and
- qualifying trade union experts on global labour issues.

However, many issues remain for further debate. Some of the constantly debated questions will be discussed in more detail below. They are:

- A. Managing and benefiting from cultural diversity and language barriers.
- B. Gender mainstreaming beyond numerical balance.
- C. Finding good applicants and keeping them in the movement.
- D. Why a residential course in the age of the Internet?
- E. Recognized Masters program versus labour education and adult learning versus university teaching.

#### **A. MANAGING AND BENEFITING FROM CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

Bringing people from different cultural backgrounds together is a precondition for experiencing and understanding cultural diversity. It offers unique opportunities to learn from each other, to look at globalisation processes from different perspectives and to debate globally acceptable visions and strategies. However, putting people from around the world in one group by no means automatically creates multicultural understanding. Being in a foreign country, facing dual language barriers, (re)starting university studies and working within a group of 18 nationalities creates insecurity, stress, and sometimes an initial reaction of retreat. The fact that all participants share some common trade union values is helpful, but sharing the same political values does, by no means, imply necessarily personal sympathy or practical solidarity. People become more aware about their cultural differences. Not everybody becomes friends and a need for genuine tolerance remains because differences remain after overcoming initial ignorance, insecurity, or prejudices. Pro-active facilitation is required to kick-start the common study process.

Language is a central problem. Those who have to communicate in a foreign language face an additional barrier in discussions and monolingual Anglophones do not always reflect sufficiently on their 'language advantage',

and quite 'naturally' dominate discussions. The more limited ability of non-native English speakers to express themselves in writing and speaking creates high levels of stress. The fact that most natives in Kassel and Berlin prefer to speak *deutsch* is an additional cultural and language challenge for the participants in the pilot course. On the other hand, it also puts at least native English speakers under the need to operate outside the classroom in a foreign language. However, 'broken' English is the lingua franca of our time and whoever wants to participate in a global debate has to master this language, and labour needs more people from the non-English speaking world to broaden the global discourse about labour policies and globalisation. The understanding of globalisation processes and the search for policy responses will greatly benefit from more trade unionists outside the English speaking world bringing their knowledge into the debate. The only good thing with the language problem is that while other problems might grow during a course, this is bound to diminish over time.

## **B. GENDER MAINSTREAMING BEYOND NUMERICAL BALANCE**

The program has been successful in ensuring a high participation of women (more than 50 per cent). This was achieved through strong encouragement for qualified women to apply, and safeguarded by a compulsory quota of a minimum of 40 per cent participation by women. Ensuring a gender balance among the teaching staff and the international network proved to be more challenging. This is partly due to the fact that, within the academic institutions, and also in many trade unions, women are strongly underrepresented in leading positions. The network itself has limited control about the decision of network partners who will represent the organisation at network activities. It requires a constant awareness raising effort to ensure that the commitment to gender mainstreaming is maintained in practice at all levels.

In designing the program, gender mainstreaming was defined as a key feature of the curriculum. In addition to a special (elective) course on gender, all courses should be gender mainstreamed i.e., they should systematically analyse the different impact of policies on men and women. In a diverse network, this can best be done in a medium-term process through a continuous process of debate and reflection.

### **C. FINDING GOOD APPLICANTS AND KEEPING THEM IN THE MOVEMENT**

Will committed trade unionists have the time and money to leave their job for a year? Will their trade union let them go? Elected trade union officials cannot allow themselves to be away for a whole year and trade union leaders are reluctant to let their good people be away for a whole year. These constraints do make it difficult for many otherwise interested trade unionists to apply. However, there have been many applications for the pilot courses in the last three years, so that there certainly is a demand.

The program built in several safeguards to target the 'right' people to apply. Participants have to be recommended by their trade union. Applicants have to write a short essay explaining their motivation for participating in the program and indicating their research interests. For applicants from developing and transition countries the GLU has mobilized resources for scholarships. A scholarship from the programme is conditional on a matching contribution from the trade union or another donor to safeguard against recommendation letters that are more a favour to the applicant than a serious recommendation.

Requesting the endorsement from the trade union might work to some extent as a selection mechanism that excludes applicants critical of their own leadership. It gives the trade union centres a certain power of pre-selection. However, the program is designed not only for the individual skills development of trade unionists, but also for organisational capacity building. Hence, anybody who applies should be sufficiently anchored in his or her organisation, something evidenced by the organisation's support of their application.

One of the great challenges and risks of a qualification program of this type is that people lose the contact with their trade union and use the newly acquired qualification to look for better paid jobs outside the labour movement. The recommending trade unions can make their recommendation and support conditional on the commitment of the applicant to work in the labour movement at least for a number of years after finishing the course. However, it is difficult to enforce these kinds of commitments. Free and confident trade unionists will always make individual choices about their own future. Even if people take up other jobs, it is not necessarily bad for the labour movement. .

Instead of trying to keep people through these types of agreements, the stronger persuasion has to come from a design of the programme that motivates continuous work in the movement. Studying with trade union colleagues from many other countries, having the time to reflect about trade union policies and

getting new insights in the (political) economy of globalisation is stimulating and motivating. An internship with a trade union organisation is an integrated part of the course. It provides the students with an exposure to practical trade union work outside their home country and also links their academic studies with some 'down to earth' practical trade union issues.

The experience from the first two courses is that most participants returned to trade union or labour activities at home. In addition, the GLU is building an alumni network to encourage students to maintain contact over the years and to continue to work together.

Beyond internal networking the GLU needs to be embedded in broader information networks of trade union and labour research activities. The ILO is supporting an initiative of the international trade union movement to build a Global Union Research Network (GURN).<sup>15</sup> The GURN ([www.gurn.info](http://www.gurn.info)) facilitates debate, research and information exchange on global labour issues. It organises workshops, on-line debates, supports research and maintains a number of websites to provide up to date information on important global labour issues. The students are encouraged to join this network that offers the opportunity to link-up with a wider group of labour researchers. It is too early to assess the success of the strategy of network integration, but pro-active stimulation of further cooperation is seen as vital for strengthening the international debate and for supporting 'retention' of the GLU participants in the wider labour orbit.

#### **D. WHY A RESIDENTIAL COURSE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET?**

New technologies open new possibilities for e-learning and networking that allow for distant learning and time flexibility. In the age of instant global communication a residential course looks very old fashioned. The advantages of distance learning are obvious. People can do this in a flexible manner and from their computer at work or back home. They stay in their workplace and maintain contact with their communities and families. While this has advantages, it has to be balanced against the advantage of a genuine 'sabbatical' year that allows participants to step back from the day to day work and look at the global challenges for labour from a different perspective.

Distance education has also its own limitations. It is beyond this paper to discuss the difficulties extensively. However, it seems that the interaction in a classroom is of extremely high value in a learning process and not easily created in a virtual class. The value of face-to-face meetings in understanding different

cultures, debating openly, and learning from each other cannot be underestimated. In addition, distance education programmes are mainly based on written communication, which increases the communication barrier for non-native English speakers substantially.

The discipline required from participants is extremely high and distance learning does not reduce (it probably increases) the study time required and very intensive individual supervision needs to be provided. Offering a full course Masters programme would either require that someone is nevertheless released from work, or need to be stretched over three or four years.

Information technologies do provide excellent possibilities to complement the course and networking activities. They are extensively used in maintaining the network, sharing information and teaching material among the universities and in building an alumni network. A common website provides comprehensive information about the project for a wider public. An internal communication system facilitates information sharing within the network. Course outline and course readings, bibliographies etc. are deposited on a common platform. Students can share their coursework and electronic discussion groups provide the possibilities for debates among student groups from different universities.

Finally, on a practical note, adding the dimension of distance learning to the challenge of creating a complex multi-stakeholder Global Labour University network was seen as trying too much in one go.

#### **E. RECOGNIZED MASTERS PROGRAM VERSUS LABOUR EDUCATION AND ADULT LEARNING VERSUS UNIVERSITY TEACHING**

Since the beginning of the program, the question whether the course should be a formal university course or a trade union course has been hotly debated.

Entry barriers to formal education for many workers, and the lack of recognition of experiences and informal learning, were important factors to reject formal entry requirements and exams in workers' education. The underlying assumption is that for trade union qualification programs, formal qualification is not a very valuable criterion and is an inherent element of exclusion. It was also not seen as a necessary disciplining and motivating instrument as committed trade unionists derive their learning motivation not from marks but from vision. Finally, labour - for good and bad reasons - wants to keep full political control over the learning process.

However, the fact that formal qualification standards might require undesirable modifications for the curriculum and the methodology of a course is probably the most important reason against formally recognised courses. It gives more agenda-setting and control power to the teacher and is hence less participatory and democratic. This also individualizes the learning process as people are individually assessed. Learning in closed groups of likeminded trade unionists creates an environment allowing a focus on problems from a labour perspective and creates a less competitive learning environment.

These are valid arguments to maintain traditional forms of labour education. However, there are also a number of arguments to supplement 'in-house qualification' with formally recognized high-level qualification programs. The expertise and knowledge of universities can be used, and universities are best equipped to provide knowledge and academic analytical skills that enable people to back up their political views with well-reasoned arguments and underlying theoretical concepts. Universities are motivated through joint programs to develop a stronger focus on labour issues. Being in a like-minded trade union community, in an open university environment, also reduces the risk of reinforcing the politically correct truth instead of debating the challenging questions.

Learning is not always fun and is often hard work. Participants want their hard work recognized. Certification and formal recognition provide additional confirmation of the value and quality of a given course. Recognized courses can also be an important stepping-stone for further learning and qualification. Integration into broader academic institutions can be intellectually more stimulating. The increased need for building alliances requires an open-minded environment for discussions and debate in qualification programs.

Education has always been a central element of trade union work to develop, discuss, and disseminate new ideas. Labour pioneered many concepts of adult learning. It was one of the first to discover and value the importance of learners' experiences as important sources of knowledge. There is no given set of knowledge that needs to be transferred from the teacher to the taught, but all participants involved in the learning process bring their knowledge, experience and opinion to the table. The shift from bringing enlightenment to the workers, towards facilitating learning together, and from each other, led to a language shifted from the partly paternalistic notion of workers' education to labour education, trade union training, life-long learning etc.

While discussion and sharing experience are important, they are certainly not everything and sometimes seem overvalued in labour education. Sharing

practical experience is not a substitute for studying theoretical concepts and paradigms. Indeed, practical experience can also be misleading. Daily experience at enterprise-level makes the employers' argument that wage cuts increase competitiveness and create employment quite compelling. The negative effects on productivity growth, aggregate demand, or the upward pressure on the exchange rate, are beyond daily experience and require a different level of abstract thinking.

Humankind has accumulated knowledge and theoretical understanding over many generations and there is no need (and most people do not have the ingenuity of the few great thinkers each century produces) to reinvent the wheel. While sharing experience is important, and reflection indispensable, there is knowledge that needs to be learned from books and teachers, as you cannot assume that it is instantly derived from practical experience. The more distant the causes affecting personal lives, the more difficult it is to derive understanding and responses from personal experience, or from sharing personal experience.<sup>16</sup> This needs to be taken into account in addressing globalisation issues. There is a need to broaden the experience brought together. Global problems require global sharing of experience and knowledge. There is not only a horizontal, but also a vertical problem. Complex issues cannot be understood without acquiring the accumulated wisdom of humankind. This is normally not found in classrooms, but in libraries. Despite new technology and new methodology there is no real shortcut to avoid long hours of reading which stimulate meaningful debate.

Universities traditionally have a more vertical or hierarchical tradition of learning and they are probably overestimating the knowledge transfer, and underestimating the need for critical reflection and debate. While professors enjoy the discourse with other professors, this does not necessarily apply to the same extent to students. Professors might not always see the value of students questioning their wisdom and methodology.

Adults are prepared to learn - they do not want to be taught. People do not learn what they are taught, but what they want to understand. Adults have their own interpretation of the world and they respond on the basis of that view to any new information. It is an illusion (let alone its undesirability) that knowledge can be transferred without reflection, debate, and discussion.

Sending and receiving a message are only two loosely connected activities, whereas common understanding can only be ensured through discussion and reflection. In some lectures, students clearly felt a lack of participatory exchange with the professors and in several discussions, the two

different learning cultures, and expectations were debated. Finding better solutions is a joint, and not always easy, discussion process.

The GLU already successfully facilitated a 'clash of learning cultures' and maintains the Hegelian optimism that thesis and antithesis will be *aufgehoben* in a qualitatively higher synthesis.

## CONCLUSION

The speed of globalisation is not slowing down and the need for a global solution is growing by the day. The apparent 'Washington Disarray' offers a window of opportunity to broaden the debate about alternative forms of globalisation. To seize this opportunity requires sustainable global networks and international movements as prototypes of a global civil society. The Global Labour University is trying to make a contribution to this process by focusing on the social and labour dimension of globalisation, building international links between academia and the labour movement and qualifying trade unionists on global labour issues.

Overcoming language and cultural barriers and supporting an open, but value-based, research and learning environment is seen as a valuable contribution towards a modern labour movement trying to influence complex and differentiated globalisation processes.

Labour has a key role to play to make globalisation fair. At the end of the day, the broad involvement of working people will make the difference, whether ideas remain just ideas, or whether they will change reality.

## NOTES

- 
- <sup>1</sup> The author writes in his personal capacity.
  - <sup>2</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* 1936 Cambridge.  
[http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/keynes/john\\_maynard/k44g/chapter24.html](http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/keynes/john_maynard/k44g/chapter24.html)
  - <sup>3</sup> FT 26 March 1991
  - <sup>4</sup> FT 1 August 1991
  - <sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992
  - <sup>6</sup> see Polany, *The Great Transformation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997
  - <sup>7</sup> see R. Castell, *Die Stärkung des Sozialen*, Hamburg, 2005
  - <sup>8</sup> see Habermas, *Eine politische Verfassung für die pluralistische Weltgesellschaft*; in Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Frankfurt am Main 2005
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/faithglobalization/index.htm>
  - <sup>10</sup> K. Marx/F. Engels *The Communist Manifesto* 1848  
<http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>
  - <sup>11</sup> The nineteenth century ascending labour movement had a nearly scientific-religious faith that the collapse of capitalism and the subsequent advent of socialism were a law of history. This somehow determinist modernisation dream started to die in November 1917 and was finally buried under the

---

crumbling Berlin wall. At some stage in the future, capitalism as we know it will disappear. Nothing in history is forever. However, whether this will be for the better or for the worse is the secret of the future.<sup>12</sup> This new reality was reflected internationally in chapter XIII of the Versailles Peace Treaty, in which the governments agreed upon the foundation of the International Labour Organisation as a tripartite body to set international labour standards.

<sup>13</sup> For details see [www.ilo.org/lpg](http://www.ilo.org/lpg)

<sup>14</sup> For an extensive review see <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/actrav/glp/progr05.htm>

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed description see Verena Schmidt, 'The Global Union Research Network: a potential for incremental innovation?', in *Just Labour*, a Canadian Journal of Work and Society, 6&7 2005  
<http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume67/pdfs/06%20Schmidt%20Press.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> This is probably more obvious in natural science than in social science. We can neither see, smell nor touch radiation but it kills us. Over generations and after numerous deaths human kind would probably learn from mere experience to avoid radioactively polluted places. The theoretical understanding of the risk of radiation, the ability to measure it does not make it less dangerous but allows for better protective measures.