



## **UNION MODERNISATION FUND – ROUND 2**

**UNION OF CONSTRUCTION AND  
ALLIED TECHNICAL TRADES  
(UCATT) – EMBEDDING  
MODERNISATION ACROSS THE  
UNION**

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# Union of Construction and Allied Technical Trades (UCATT) – embedding modernisation across the union

## Background

Over recent years, the construction sector has seen traditional working practices, arrangements and approaches exposed to an unprecedented level and pace of change. The Union of Construction and Allied Technical Trades (UCATT) has itself been subject to a series of dramatic changes that have impacted upon and ultimately shaped the organisation, operation, administration and business environments within which the union functions. However, UCATT is seen by the industry and trade union movement as having engaged with such change in a robust and dynamic manner.

Historically, UCATT's operation and organisational focus had been predicated on the traditional construction site and on construction workers employed by local authorities. However, in recent years these environments have changed radically. Current sectoral, business, societal and political trends have resulted in the re-structuring of local authorities, the externalisation of council services through subcontracting, the creation of arms-length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations, the industrialisation of on-site building practices (including 'lean' building, 'just-in-time' and 'no waste' production techniques), off-site pre-fabrication, a sizeable influx of migrant workers, and an increasing focus within the industry on sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Key features of the industry include a highly mobile workforce and union membership, 'nomadic' employees, an inadequate health and safety record, a poor training culture, a high proportion of employers that are SMEs (98% of the industry consists of firms employing 11 or fewer staff); and a high level of 'bogus' self-employment.

Says Jeff Hopewell, UCATT National Training and Education Coordinator:

'This array of difficulties has resulted in the union developing a combination of proactive and

reactive organisational responses to position itself within the sector. UCATT has sought to maintain its practices where they are still appropriate and successful, to transform outdated practices, procedures and approaches, and to develop engagement strategies with employers which best serve the union and its members, given the turbulent nature of the sector and its inherent challenges. The union's development of its staff, administrative processes, employer engagement strategies and overall operation has in the past been somewhat ad hoc, lacking in strategic focus, and inconsistently applied within the organisation. The work carried out by the union with support from the Round 2 Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) has significantly improved the overall coherence of its internal organisation.'

## Why this project?

The leadership of UCATT has for some time had aspirations to change and transform the way the union operates. They realised that this needed to be underpinned by a systematic training programme and a communication and dissemination approach which allows for modernisation principles to be adopted across the union - among UCATT members, the union's staff, and its full-time officials (FTOs). Jeff Hopewell explains:

'The UMF project was to act as a focal point around which UCATT could concentrate its sometimes uncoordinated and disparate attempts to modernise. There is recognition that some of the union's work around modernisation had been reactive and, at best, in its formative stages. The union had not allowed itself the time to develop a coherent modernising approach. Sometimes progress in this area had been difficult, as modernisation was often seen as an abstract concept of lesser importance when measured against ongoing day-to-day

pressures and other conflicting priorities. UMF funding allowed the union to significantly advance the debate around modernisation within the organisation and to embed new approaches and practices that have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation in general.'

At the time the bid was submitted by UCATT to the UMF, there was no consolidated document that adequately or coherently captured its many modernising activities. Instead, there was a basic statement of strategic priorities and a range of other policy documents which help progress the union's work in key areas such as training and skills, and health and safety. A central rationale underpinning the union's approach to the UMF was that the funding would allow them to:

- develop a coherent, progressive and consolidated modernising policy and practices
- implement transformational initiatives in a timely manner
- deliver an innovative and dynamic programme of training for members and union employees
- realise the benefits of investments in ICT
- survey members, staff and union officers, and conduct training needs analyses for these groups
- improve members' interaction with and access to the union, its services, administration and governance
- address the key challenges facing the union including engaging with ALMOs, housing associations, restructured local authorities, the industrialisation of the construction sector, and the integration of migrant/vulnerable workers
- represent the voice of workers on such important projects as the 2012 Olympics, PFI sites, road and rail infrastructure projects, and the Building Schools for the Future initiative.

Says Jeff Hopewell:

'It was felt within the union that not addressing these issues would lead to inefficiencies and other problems, as the organisation would continue to replicate or maintain practices that were ineffective or unsuitable in dealing with the current business environment and industrial

relations. It was also expected that substantial savings would be derived from UMF-resourced activity as staff and full-time officers would work more efficiently and competently, both with each other and with employers. The pace and level of change in the construction sector is a challenge for UCATT and for the employers with whom it wishes to engage. Trying to develop positive partnership activity centred around (effectively) 'nomadic' members and employers requires innovation and a flexibility of approach, which UCATT has worked hard to address through this project. As a result of the changes experienced in the construction sector, UCATT wanted to transform its operation and organisational systems to connect more closely with workers and employers in the new organisational settings in which they operate.'

## **Methodology and outcomes**

The project comprised the following elements:

A **survey** of UCATT members, staff and FTOs - was used to inform UCATT's modernising activity. The survey was based on the 'McKinsey 7-S' framework model (shared values, strategy, structure, systems, skills, staff, and style). It covered topic areas including communications, services, benefits, learning and skills, health and safety, levels of support and representation, access and engagement with the union, and equality issues.

To canvass the views of members and FTOs, extensive use was made of SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) during meetings and training courses conducted in all regions. Steve Craig, National Project Worker, explains:

'This proved to be a very popular and effective analytical tool, as members and FTOs felt they could inform the modernising agenda and process from the bottom up. This engendered a sense of ownership of the direction and management of change being

progressed across the union.'

To complement this initiative, project staff embarked on an employer engagement strategy to identify attitudes, perspectives and opinions about UCATT's position within the sector. Surveying these companies enabled project staff to capture evidence of and opportunities for partnership working and improving working relationships with employers and other external agencies:

'This approach helped inform UCATT's engagement with the construction major contractors group (MCG), with ALMOs and local authorities, with the HSE/CONIAC over health and safety standards, and to improve the way the union worked with the relevant sector skills council, Constructionskills.'

**A training needs analysis** - addressed individual and group training requirements to determine what support was to be provided and to ensure training on modernisation issues would be tailored to the specific needs of course participants

An **accredited training programme** - delivered to over 150 participants in various roles within the union, including lay members, convenors, branch secretaries, executive council representatives, development officers and regional secretaries. The training was supported by the TUC/Unionlearn, Construction skills, Bradford University, OH Parsons solicitors, along with contributions from UCATT staff. It covered the following areas:

- Building a stronger union
- Employer engagement
- New ACAS disciplinary and grievance procedure
- Role of UCATT reps, lay members, and their relationship with employers and the union
- Time management
- Health and safety
- Coaching and mentoring
- IT training
- Communications
- Union learning reps and the training and skills agenda

All seminars involved sessions on the modernisation strategy and the training and development needs of UCATT staff, convenors and branch officials. In addition, officers were encouraged to attend courses offered under the TUC Union Professionals programme (both regionally and nationally) and the extensive programme of courses offered by Construction skills and the Institute of Employment Rights.

Reflecting on the training, Tom Allison, a development officer in UCATT, commented:

'The training was a welcome additional support for UCATT's full-time officers and is a very positive development. It will improve the support we give to UCATT members in terms of individual and collective representation. Every employer should offer training and personal, professional development to its staff, therefore it is important that UCATT can demonstrate best practice to construction employers.'

Steve Cottingham, a partner at OH Parsons, the union's solicitors, who provided training on employment law within this overall training programme, added that the training had allowed the firm to contribute in a broader way to the union's modernisation agenda:

'We want to be involved in other areas of the union's work, including helping to deliver its education programme and assisting with developing policies and procedures, as this helps us to better understand each other and work together. It's a two-way process that helps us to exchange views and learn from each other's experiences. The full-time officer training and activists' schools we were involved in running gave us an additional opportunity to meet face-to-face with officers and reps, and provided a great forum for discussing and exchanging ideas and experiences.'

George Guy, UCATT North West Regional Secretary, said that he and his officers found the employment law updates, particularly the session dealing with the new ACAS code of practice on grievances and disciplinary

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procedures, which came into force in April 2009, particularly useful:

**'For regional full-time officers, dealing with employment tribunal cases and grievance and disciplinary hearings is our bread and butter work. There is not a week goes by when we are not involved in supporting members taking a tribunal case or attending a grievance or disciplinary hearing. We therefore need to be completely up-to-date with any changes in employment law in order to provide first-class support.'**

He added that, because officers have a construction, rather than administrative background, the workshop on building a company file was invaluable:

**'Full-time officials in the union have come from the construction industry – they are building workers and office and organisational skills are often pushed to one side. It was invaluable to have the opportunity to sit down together and set up a standardised procedure for recording information about companies – recording all the company and union shop steward contact details, information about the type of employment, direct employment or construction industry scheme (CIS) (a form of self-employment) and so on in one place. It has led to massive improvements in our administration and organisational skills, which in turn has led to us improving the service we give to our members.'**

A **toolkit** for development officers and regional secretaries - provided templates, pro forma, and information, advice and guidance on such issues as partnership activity and information and consultation arrangements, which was made available online. The toolkit helped to maximise the outcomes of the training and capture and disseminate good practice.

An **online communication centre (OCC)** - accessible by members and officers in the workplace, local library/internet café or home. UCATT had already invested in the development of the union's website and was engaged in developmental work to set up the OCC for the use of members and full time officers. This facility was initially developed to support the union's learning and skills activity, and it was

hoped that the UMF project would realise its further potential to support a broader transformation of the union and to improve the union's communication and engagement approach, both internally and externally. Sadly, it was not to be, as Jeff Hopewell explains:

**'Unfortunately, although developmental work took place around this online resource, it has not been fully established due to the failure of a key company the union hoped to work with in setting it up. In spite of this, the union has moved towards greater active communication with its membership. While the overall plan for the OCC was not realised, the principles guiding it have been maintained within the union. For example, proposed improvements to the UCATT website (funded by the union), the increased use of newsletters ('Hard Hat' and 'In Site') and USB memory sticks, which contain pre-loaded materials (such as promotional materials, employment law checklists and advice, and pdfs of promotional literature), distributed to full-time officers, lay reps and members.'**

A consolidated **UCATT modernising strategy** – disseminated throughout the organisation, this had an overarching link to the union's UMF Round 3 bid in autumn 2009. Presentations on modernisation were made to UCATT regional secretaries, and meetings took place to address regional council members as a means of further disseminating and communicating information on UCATT's modernisation activity.

A **UCATT convenors' induction plan** - has helped standardise convenor training, capture reciprocal expectations between the individuals and UCATT, and improved communication between workplace reps, the union and its full-time officers.

A **shop steward/convenor handbook** was researched and written, its format allowing interface with both web-based media and USB memory pens. Additional content and information was included with the help of TUC/Unionlearn and OH Parsons.

**A multi-agency partnership group -**  
established to help support UCATT's project and deliver:

- **four partnership arrangements -**  
agreed with employers (Nottingham City Homes, Kier, Lincoln City Council, and Inspace/Mears) as part of UCATT's employer engagement activity
- **a more flexible, responsive and professional union,** better positioned to engage with employers at all levels of the construction sector.

A range of work with partner organisations has now been facilitated through UMF support. This includes the following:

- A UCATT **best practice case study**, drawn up in late 2008 and included in: *It's Time To Talk Training – how to develop a dialogue on skills at the workplace* (TUC-CBI-DIUS-BERR) publication.
- UCATT has secured an agreement with Kier, a firm responsible for housing and public building maintenance, to set up a new **national forum** for convenors within the firm. The group's employee relations manager, Kathy Almansoor, commented that '**the national convenors' forum provides an excellent opportunity for putting policies supporting good employee relations, cooperation and mutual respect into action**'.
- UCATT has signed a **code of practice agreement** with the ALMO Nottingham City Homes, which will promote and increase the numbers of apprenticeships offered by the employer (under the Decent Homes initiative and the '1 in £1 million' scheme). The project will lead to more than 200 apprenticeships being offered in both craft and business administration.
- Meetings were held with OH Parsons Solicitors to agree their contribution to the proposed **programme of training**, to draft **course materials** for legal update sessions, and to produce and disseminate a **member's legal advice wallet** outlining advice on legal protection, employment law, plus health and safety on site. An initial run of 10,000

wallets was produced and distributed to all UCATT regions. It was agreed that UCATT and OH Parsons would produce a full-time officers' Legal Update **e-newsletter** and also a quarterly Employment Law Update for lay members – both these publications became available in early 2009. The union and OH Parsons developed a template for the procedure and administration of the union's **employment tribunal applications**, and a **briefing document** and **training module** on the Information and Consultation directive was also developed.

- In response to the continued increase of redundancies across the sector, and in the context of the current recession, UCATT wanted to modernise its response when dealing with members and employers facing **redundancy**. For example, eight employers in Hull announced they were making workers redundant, and the union's approach to dealing with these problems was significantly helped by UMF support. As a way of improving servicing and representation of members in such circumstances, UCATT developed a **partnership network** to deliver a redundancy information, advice and guidance day event. UCATT had enlisted the support and collaboration of Hull City Council, East Riding Council, Jobcentre Plus, Yorkshire Forward, Hull Forward, East Riding College, the LSC, Business Links, OH Parsons, Skills Initiatives and a financial advice organisation. Says Jeff Hopewell:

'Working with these various external agencies in the region has allowed the union to provide members with a wide range of advice on employment law, training, re-skilling, self-employment, money management, interview skills and CV writing. This initiative also attracted the involvement of local employers and has been seen as an innovative and positive contribution to address the

many difficult issues faced by all parties in the current climate.'

- UCATT attended a meeting to agree a **joint union response** to the development of the Mediacity UK complex in Manchester. (This will include developments related to the build but also the accommodation of BBC and other production staff being relocated from London. UCATT proposed a number of recommendations to improve collaboration - the meeting was attended by UCATT, Unite, Unionlearn and five of the Federation of Broadcasting unions .
- Meetings have been held with the TUC/Unionlearn to progress activity to help with the improvements of UCATT '**Management Capacity' training courses** for union staff, contributing to forthcoming training and HR management projects.
- UCATT produced the **publication**: '*A UCATT Report: Apprenticeships – A Firm Foundation*', prepared with Steve Davies, Senior Research Fellow, Cardiff School of Social Sciences.
- Peter Wilson, the union's Northern Region health and safety advisor, has attended a **Construction skills course** to help improve his health and safety management capabilities and inform his analysis of and contribution to improving UCATT's overall policies on health and safety.
- UCATT has been asked to attend meetings of the **Summit Skills sector skills council**, following approaches from the TUC/Unionlearn, as a result of the unions' partnership activity and work with migrant workers in the sector.
- UCATT's **partnership relationship** with Unite the Union (Amicus Section) resulted in a successful bid to Unionlearn North West, and a **learning centre** initiative began in late 2008 for six months. Activity related to improved industrial relations, health and safety, occupational health, and partnership working was agreed between the partners, who include Galliford Try Pihl,

HBG, Merseytravel, Liverpool Museum and the HSE.

### **Sustainability**

- The overall aims of UCATT's UMF project were underpinned by notions of sustainability. It was noted in the early stages of preparation for the project that, as in many organisations, some UCATT staff and members may be fearful of change and what it may entail. Inclusiveness was also important in the project. Consequently, the union made sure that all groups and levels of staff and officials within the organisation were engaged with in some way, with a view to securing commitment to the process across the union. Says Jeff Hopewell:  
*'This approach, largely supported by the distribution of questionnaire surveys, the training programme, and the development of the OCC would, it was hoped, engender a sense of security and support for the project throughout the union, thereby enhancing sustainability and organisational commitment to the project's objectives. What's more, the benefits for individuals and the organisation will help to perpetuate the project outcomes. For example, members, staff and FTOs have all benefited from the positive transformations achieved because of the project, and the organisation is benefiting from improved skill levels, professionalism, employer engagement and better representation. The union's stable financial position has also allowed the organisation to budget to sustain its future modernising efforts. It is anticipated that there will be substantial savings from the transformational improvements, including reductions in print costs and postage, and savings from better time management, improved competency of staff and organisational efficiency. These savings are being re-invested in future modernising activity to*

further embed the sustainability of the project.'

## Lessons learned

Steve Craig highlights a selection of lessons learned:

- Communication is the key to success. Plan more coherently and disseminate best practice in a more timely and effective manner.
- Regular and effective project steering groups help provide focus; coordinate activity; share practice; provide a sense of 'ownership'; engage partners; evaluate project activity; contribute to 'action planning' and provide the opportunity around which project activity can coalesce.
- Keep things simple, manageable and understandable – and avoid 'mission creep'.
- Develop problem-solving capabilities (individually, collectively and corporately) and don't be afraid to make mistakes.
- Monitoring and evaluation is an invaluable management tool which helps project managers and steering groups track progress, measure performance, and evaluate project impact. Each is designed to enable unions to learn from project activity and consider three key issues: efficiency, effectiveness and impact: Monitoring and evaluation can also underpin effective project delivery in the event of a change of personnel during the project itself.
- The continuous collection of data and documentation of the project from 'day one' provides an invaluable source of information to draw on for the final evaluation report.
- Develop more effective and flexible contingency plans in advance of next steps and develop a robust 'risk matrix' (which should be updated on a continuous basis).
- Mainstream and focus on points of organisational synergy and collaborative working between internal and external partners at all levels.
- Engage the union's administration and staff more effectively in project activity – internalise what we are learning.
- Good project workers get poached by employers/other organisations, so we need to consider succession planning, the employment package and remuneration offered to project staff.
- UCATT's financial recording, reporting processes and project policies are 'fit for purpose'.
- There is 'value-addedness' in making the link between UCATT UMF and ULF projects – there are complementary and mutually supportive areas of activity and operation and both projects can benefit from 'joined-up' working.
- There are a lot of help and resources 'out there' – don't 're-invent the wheel'.
- This is hard work, which is often not recognised either internally or externally.
- When it works, project activity and its impact on individuals can be empowering and 'life changing' – there is no better reward than helping members grow and develop to realise their full potential.
- Unions and employers need to work together to help modernise our respective organisations – the alternative (not doing so) is detrimental to all parties. Some employers are willing to engage – we just haven't asked them or demonstrated that we (unions) do more than is traditionally assumed.

- Do more of what works best. We think we're getting better at this...!

## Conclusions

Much has been achieved during this UMF project and the work supported by the funding will continue, as Jeff Hopewell sums up:

'UCATT's UMF involvement has had a considerable impact on the union in a number of important areas. UMF-funded activity has had a transformational effect, and there has reportedly been a change in culture within the union as a consequence. This continuing development work has had a marked impact on the skills, confidence levels and ability of individuals, including officers, convenors, reps and members. This in turn has had a positive effect on the organisation more generally, as these new skills and improved communications have been integrated into UCATT's overall activity. These improvements and the positive cultural change described by those within the union are ongoing processes, but the benefits apparent already from this work bode well for the future. UMF support has also allowed the union to extensively develop its employer engagement strategies and its partnership working with external agencies. The success of this work to date provides for a strong basis for it to continue in future, and the extra resources that the union hopes to gain in Round 3 of the UMF should consolidate these benefits even further.'

**For more information, contact:**

**Jeff Hopewell**  
**0207 622 2442**  
[jhopewell@ucatt.org.uk](mailto:jhopewell@ucatt.org.uk)

**Steve Craig**  
**07784 254449**  
[sraig@castor20.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:sraig@castor20.fsnet.co.uk)

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills  
[www.bis.gov.uk](http://www.bis.gov.uk)  
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