



BREAKING BARRIERS TO REACH NEW LEARNERS USING FLEXIBLE, SUPPORTED OPEN LEARNING WITH THE UK OPEN UNIVERSITY.

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Summary

Cross Border Openings is a partnership between the Open University, Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Centre for Cross Border Studies supported by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland.

The Open University and its partners aim to offer access to higher education for all.

The Project

- *Meets the needs of learners from the most disadvantaged sections of Irish society facilitating progression into higher education. Half of the 850 learners recruited to date intend to achieve an undergraduate degree.*
- *Offers opportunities to disadvantaged school pupils and their parents, providing a non-traditional route to progression.*
- *Is developing a range of workplace learning initiatives including one with the shop workers union and Tesco designed to enhance the personal and career progression of low paid workers.*
- *Addresses the legacy of the conflict in Ireland by tackling cultural diversity issues and promoting good relations within and between traditional and new communities.*
- *Offers a model of good practice in widening participation based on partnership with trusted organisations representing disadvantaged groups – trade unions, schools and community organisations – providing access to target groups and building confidence in our commitment to meeting the real needs of real people.*

Introduction

Cross Border Openings (CBO) is a working partnership for lifelong learning between three complimentary organisations:

- 1) The Open University (OU) – the UK's only university dedicated to supported open learning with over 150,000 undergraduate and 30,000 postgraduate students, almost all studying part-time;

- 2) The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) – the sole trade union centre in Ireland representing 750,000 workers on both sides of the Irish border;
- 3) The Centre for Cross Border Studies – a joint venture between Queens University Belfast, Dublin City University and the Workers' Educational Association dedicated to promoting practical cross border co-operation.

The Open University exists to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing access to quality higher education for all who wish to realise their ambition and fulfil their potential. That is why the University launched its Openings programme in 2000. This pan-university wide initiative is based on a suite of short introductory courses covering the main academic areas and designed for those with no previous experience of higher education. Courses, which are normally presented at a distance, focus on the development of study skills, the building of self-confidence and the identification of appropriate progression routes. Successful completion is marked by the award of 10 credit points, which can be counted towards a subsequent degree.

The Openings programme was designed to attract new learners from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education, particularly from disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Success was limited, particularly in Ireland. Barriers were most acute in the Republic where, in the absence of public funding, the cost of presenting the programme was prohibitively expensive. It was also proving difficult to reach new target groups and give potential students the confidence to overcome traditional fears and apply for a university place.

The Open University in Ireland identified two major needs:

- 1) funding to offer free places to those who could not afford to pay and to provide supplementary local support to facilitate success;
- 2) trusted partners to facilitate access to the target groups.

Discussions were opened with the ICTU, which identified two matching needs:

- 1) free, flexible study arrangements to provide progression routes from existing trade union provision
- 2) a trusted partner which shared its social vision and had the capacity to work with unions to develop workplace based lifelong learning opportunities for members, which could be supported by employers on the basis of negotiated learning agreements.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies' groundbreaking report, "Ireland's Learning Poor", highlighted the paucity of educational opportunities for potential adult learners from disadvantaged communities. They offered access to their extensive network of contacts on both sides of the border.

A joint bid was made to the European Union Fund for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland ("Peace II Programme"). Funding of over half a million Euro was obtained and this enabled CBO to provide free places and enhanced support to over 850 students since September 2004.

The programme was formally launched by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, on 3rd February 2005.

There was a near perfect match between the Peace II "target groups" and the new audiences targeted by CBO - including those who had left school with few or no qualifications, the unemployed, those in low paid jobs, migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers together with people drawn from communities damaged by the conflict in Ireland.

CBO has been highly successful in recruiting from these and other groups – reaching deeply into the most disadvantaged and marginalised sections of Irish society:

- 1) 47% of students were unemployed
- 2) 34% were in low waged jobs
- 3) 70% were women
- 4) 9% were from minority ethnic backgrounds

The programme's success in recruiting from "hard to reach" groups meant that high drop out rates might have been expected. In fact, a completion rate of 52% was achieved which was not dissimilar to the completion rate of 60% in the Openings programme as a whole where recruitment is from wider society. As the final evaluation points out, "the attrition figure of 48% appears high but is comparable to the figure for the first year on many full-time undergraduate courses."

The key to successful recruitment and retention from the target groups was partnership working and the key partner was the trade union movement.

In Northern Ireland, statutory recognition was extended to Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in 2004. This gave them the right to reasonable time off to promote the learning and training needs of members and to consult and negotiate with employers. In the Republic, no matching statutory right exists but the development of voluntary arrangements has been encouraged by successive national social partnership agreements between the unions, employers and government.

The promotion of lifelong learning in the workplace and the negotiation of supporting learning agreements has been a major strategic objective of the programme. Four major cross border conferences have been organised on the topic. These have been well attended by trades unionists and by employers from both public and private sectors. Agendas focussed on learning from best practice in GB and Europe. The conferences have helped ensure that workplace learning is now firmly on the negotiating agenda on both sides of the border. This offers the best route to long-term sustainability now that EU funding has ended.

At a practical level, union negotiation with employers has secured positive support for learners including

- 1) time off to attend briefing/recruitment sessions
- 2) assistance with fees when progressing to higher level study
- 3) provision of study facilities in the workplace
- 4) formation of workplace based study groups providing mutual support

We are currently working on the development of an exciting new pilot partnership with the shop workers union (USDAW) and the large supermarket chain, Tesco, designed to enable low paid staff to enhance their skills and career prospects through enrolment in the Openings programme. Participation will also benefit Tesco by giving staff the confidence to apply for hard to fill supervisory positions.

CBO has also developed partnerships at local level with a wide range of voluntary groups and schools. The following are some typical examples:

- 1) Dungloe – a village located in the remote, Irish speaking "Gaeltacht" area of Donegal. The partnership with the local community association enabled 6 students to complete the Understanding Society and Understanding Management courses. Supplementary tuition was provided and paid for by the local educational authority.
- 2) Strabane/Lifford – two neighbouring towns on either side of the Irish border. The partnership with a local women's centre enabled 12 students to complete the Open to Change course, with additional support provided and paid for locally.

- 3) St Gemma's Secondary School, located in one of the most disadvantaged parts of Belfast. The partnership enabled 19 school pupils, who would not otherwise have been studying for an accredited qualification, and 6 unemployed parents to complete the Understanding Children and Understanding Health courses. Additional local support was provided by three teachers from the school.
- 4) Milburn Primary School, located at the centre of a disadvantaged housing estate in Coleraine. 9 parents enrolled on the Understanding Children course with additional tutorial support provided in the familiar environment of their local school.

CBO has also contributed to the promotion of peace, reconciliation and good relations within Northern Ireland and between North and South. Cultural diversity training has been an integral part of the programme from the outset. This has been provided through day schools and residentials facilitated by external consultants who are experts in the field. The events have created a safe space within which participants can confront and discuss their divisions with a view to developing strategies for living, working and studying together and for contributing more broadly to the lives of their communities.

Initially, the workshops were focussed almost exclusively on the traditional Catholic/Protestant, Unionist/Nationalist and North/South divisions in Irish society. Increasingly, however, with recent and substantial inward migration and the creation of new communities, the focus has shifted to include wider issues.

A specially commissioned research project carried out by "Trademark" noted evidence that foreign-born students may have benefited disproportionately from this training. One student was quoted as saying "CBO has not only given me the opportunity to develop my study skills, the cultural diversity training has provided me with the knowledge, skills and insight to help me to integrate in Irish society."

This is but one example of the ways in which CBO has had a dramatic effect on the lives of participants.

As the Trademark report found, "it is obvious from interviews that the majority of students have had a very negative experience of education.....Most left education with little or no formal qualifications and went into low skilled work and/or various periods of unemployment".

- 1) 15% had no qualifications at all
- 2) 71% had less than basic university entry qualifications.

Most participants have had no previous opportunity to enter higher education. As the final evaluation commented, "this lack of opportunities was exacerbated by the conflict which disrupted the lives of a whole generation of people across Northern Ireland and the border counties (of the Republic)".

The evaluation found that "one of the key impacts of the project is that it widens people's horizons and raises their awareness of the opportunities open to them. This also has a ripple effect on families and on the local community as people see that this (CBO) is a realistic option even for people who have dropped out of school with no qualifications."

Hard statistics tell part of the story

- 1) 56% intending to progress into higher level study
- 2) 22% progressing to a further Openings course
- 3) 13% progressing into part-time employment
- 4) 27% progressing into full-time work

But hard statistics tell only part of the tale. It is tempting to regard immediate progression into higher-level study as the key measure of success. In working with "hard to reach"

groups, however, there is a need to recognise that other criteria may apply. Students may, for example, discover that they are not yet ready for higher-level study and that further preparation is required. For many in this category, the key achievement is a boost to their self-esteem and the confidence to try and try again. For others, the key achievement will be enhanced confidence to participate more effectively in their community, their union or their workplace. The Trademark report found numerous examples of this “soft outcome” across the whole range of participants as illustrated by this selection of extracts from student interviews:

- 1) “I feel much better since I did the course”
- 2) “I am proud of myself for the first time ever”
- 3) “I know a lot more about myself, my community and my job than I ever did”.

These quotations tell us more about success than hard statistics. The point is further reinforced by sample case studies:

- 1) Caroline left school at sixteen, worked in shops and restaurants for 25 years and was the principal carer for a family member. Illness forced her out of work for a time and she progressed into CBO from a local community educational programme. She is currently taking a second course, intends to study for a history degree and is working as a volunteer on a heritage site.
- 2) Joan also left school at 16 and did little training before joining CBO. She has now progressed into taking a foundation course in nursing and into a substantial part-time job in a nursing home. Joan is considering doing a degree in nursing.
- 3) Maria, a migrant worker from Mexico, came to Ireland with some qualifications in Public Relations. She joined CBO in order to enhance competence and confidence in speaking, reading and writing English. Maria is now teaching Spanish, initially part-time because of family responsibilities.

Four main conclusions can be drawn from the success of the Cross Border Openings programme:

- 1) Widening Participation – breaking barriers and removing constraints and disadvantages

The key to success in recruiting from new target groups has been the development of partnerships with trusted organisations representing and working with disadvantaged groups – principally trade unions, schools and voluntary community organisations. This is the most effective way to break down barriers to access caused by lack of confidence and self-esteem and a general perception within target groups that “universities are not for the likes of us”. Universities appear to be remote, intimidating and off-putting to those with no family background of involvement in higher education. Trusted partner organisations can provide the human face, facilitating access to target groups, and can help potential participants to see universities as institutions which can meet the real needs of real people.

- 2) Cultural Diversity

The key to success in this area is to build on the confidence which participants acquire through studying Openings courses. This can facilitate the open discussion of differences with a view to promoting mutual understanding and tolerance rather than bland agreement. The process of discussing local divisions is assisted by placing these divisions in a global context – a process enhanced by the presence of foreign-born students.

- 3) Retention and Completion – good practice

The key to success in this area is local partnerships and local support. Our major partner organisation, the trade union movement, is very large but it breaks down into relatively small,

local units bringing members together in discrete workplace locations. Other partners can be very small indeed. But the lesson from CBO is that it is the smallness and the localisation that makes all the difference. It brings new learners together with known work colleagues or neighbours. By studying together, participants can give each other the encouragement and confidence to stick at it. Experience has proved that there is nothing as valuable as peer support and even, perhaps, a bit of peer pressure.

4) Sustainability – partnership and networking

EU funding for CBO has now ended and the project is currently seeking alternative sources of funding to extend the work over a five-year period. Short-term funding and sustainability are a major concern. CBO therefore aims to secure financial commitment from both the public and private sectors by embedding Openings courses within education and training programmes. Partnership is therefore a necessity and not just an advantage. In the long run, the partnership with the trade union movement represents the route to sustainability.

When the modern trade union movement developed in the nineteenth century, providing for the education and training of members was a core role. This role was largely abdicated to the state in the aftermath of World War II. More recently, and largely a result of the emergence of a “smaller state” since the 1980s, the trade union movement rediscovered this core role.

Employers also have an interest in the education, training and up-skilling of their workers. They are not always over enthusiastic about finding the money to pay for this but who better to convince them – or press them – on this than the unions representing their workers.

The Cross Border Openings project has demonstrated, albeit on a relatively small scale, that the development of lifelong learning partnerships in the workplace is a significant key to the promotion of widening participation in higher education.

