

PERSPECTIVES

ADULT EDUCATION IN A COLD CLIMATE: BRITISH ADULT EDUCATION TO THE YEAR 2000

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It was the best of times, it was the worst
of times ...

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Abstract

Adult Education in Britain finds itself in considerable difficulties in the last years of the 20th Century. The strong, though diverse and conflict-ridden traditions of adult education are almost all at odds with the prevailing ideology of the present period. Moreover, post-school education in general, and universities in particular, have suffered very severe financial cutbacks in recent years. Adult education has therefore been through very hard times recently. And the market orientation threatens the liberal ideological basis of the whole enterprise. There are, however, several crucial respects in which the current context potentially *favours* adult education development: demographic trends; cost effectiveness; the realisation of the need for both lifelong education and training; and a greater flow of mature students into higher education. All these are positive developments for adult education. Can adult education survive and prosper in this context or will it become so compromised or integrated that its very existence will be under threat by the year 2000?

Résumé

Les dernières années de ce 20e siècle s'avèrent difficiles pour l'éducation des adultes en Grande-Bretagne. Les traditions de l'éducation des adultes, bien que diverses et parfois conflictuelles, s'opposent presque toutes à l'idéologie qui domine actuellement. De

plus, au cours des dernières années, l'éducation post-secondaire en général, et les universités en particulier, ont beaucoup souffert des coupures budgétaires qui leur ont été imposées. L'éducation des adultes vient donc de traverser une dure période. En outre, la base de sa structure, l'idéologie libérale, est menacée par l'orientation du marché. Cependant, sous plusieurs aspects, le contexte actuel peut favoriser son développement: les tendances démographiques, les coûts-bénéfices, les besoins d'éducation continue et de formation, et le flot plus important d'étudiants matures au niveau des études supérieures. Ce sont là des développements positifs pour l'éducation des adultes. Est-ce que l'éducation des adultes peut survivre et prospérer dans ce contexte ou deviendra-t-elle tellement compromise ou intégrée que son existence-même sera menacée en l'an 2000?

Reviewing the year of 1988, the Times Higher Educational Supplement remarked that it had been "a good year for the ideas men, but a bad one for the practitioners of adult and continuing education. One where good intentions—or at least declarations of good intent—tended to be matched by bad consequences."¹ It may be a cliché, but it is certainly no exaggeration, to claim that adult education in Britain is at one and the same time in crisis and on the verge of perhaps its most important era.

The context of this volatile and paradoxical situation is in part the result of much wider political and educational factors. To understand the present position we must first rehearse briefly the history and ideological roots of adult education in Britain.² From the beginnings of modern adult education in the Extension Movement of the 1870s there have been diverse and competing ideological perspectives concerning its nature and priorities. At the heart of the adult education ideology lay the 'liberal tradition'—a seemingly consensual concept committing adult educators to impartial, open-ended and individualistic education.³ In reality, the 'liberal tradition' was—and is—a contested concept *par excellence*. At one end of the spectrum, in fact outside any meaningful category of 'liberalism', were those 'High Tories' who saw adult education as a means of ideological social control. If the working class were to acquire unprecedented economic and thus political power, it was essential, so it was argued, that the working class be inculcated with acceptable (that is, bourgeois) ideas and analyses: This was of particular importance in the politically sensitive subject areas: economics, political studies, and industrial relations.

The notion of education as social control has of course far wider applicability than *adult* education. But it is important to remember how central a motivating factor this was in making adult education a priority for many in the educational and cultural establishment. Linked to this, however, was the equally 'High Tory' commitment to altruism, to the ideals of 'noblesse oblige': the governing elite had a duty to disseminate the cultural inheritance of the nation to the wider society.⁴ This cultural commitment was itself a part of the wider Disraelian philosophy of 'one nation Conservatism' (which led a little later to the Tory Democracy movement).

In part, the liberal individualist tradition of Albert Mansbridge, the founder of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), stemmed from this particular Tory attitude. Adult education was justified *a priori*, and specifically not because it might lead to vocational or material benefit. Similarly, education could not be justified, or indeed judged, by *political* criteria: specifically, education must not be merely a vehicle for socialist propaganda and indoctrination. This has been probably the central framework in British adult education: liberal non-vocational education for the individual, with the intention and justification of enriching the individual's life, culturally and socially.

The WEA, however, also embodied a strong commitment to collective, social purpose adult education for the working class. This was very much a part of the democratic socialist Labour Movement and its ideological roots went back to Chartism and beyond. In this context, education was seen as the key to working-class emancipation and as a centrally necessary tool in the process of transforming capitalist into socialist society. As with labourism as a whole, though, working-class adult education was envisaged explicitly and firmly in the *liberal* mould. It was the acquisition of knowledge *per se* and the wisdom and understanding acquired through cultural education that was the objective. Strongly implicit within this approach was the reformist labourist ideology—that capitalism could be reformed through moral and political pressure and persuasion—and that a democratic socialist society could be created through the existing Parliamentary and other institutions.

At the extreme end of the spectrum were those of Marxist or syndicalist views who rejected the WEA's ideological stance and argued for an unambiguously socialist curriculum. The purpose of adult education was to equip the working class ideologically, to ensure that a full understanding of socialist (Marxist) analyses was achieved so that the working class could become fully class conscious

and mobilized politically to defeat capitalism and bourgeois society and its institutions.

Just as the Labour Movement has always been an uneasy series of alliances between fundamentally incompatible ideological tendencies,⁵ so the adult education movement has always had these conflicting perspectives within it.⁶ The form of the arguments, and the language in which differences are articulated, has of course changed markedly since the turn of the century: but much of the ideological content of the debate remains the same.

It would be grossly misleading though to imply that nothing of importance had changed in adult education. Leaving aside larger social and political changes, three broad developments in adult education itself stand out as especially important in the post war period: the growth since the 1944 Education Act of Local Education Authority (LEA) provision, usually of a recreational or low-level vocational nature and often linked to the Further Education service; the large expansion, again since the end of the last war, in post-school education—which has had a series of knock-on effects for adult education; and, finally, the increasing emphasis upon training, retraining and vocational education generally, which has been especially notable in the 1970s and 1980s with the rapid growth of training schemes under the auspices of the Government's Manpower Services Commission (now retitled as the Training Agency).

Adult education now forms an important part of a complex post-school education system. And adult education reflects the hierarchical and elitist nature of that post-school system.⁷ All forms of adult education have been greatly affected by governmental policy and indeed, ideology. LEA provision has been cut back, often at very short notice, as a result of resource constraints imposed by central government. This has applied especially to the large urban authorities which are normally Labour controlled. Education is the largest single item of expenditure for LEAs; and much of the allocation to schools cannot, statutorily, be reduced. Adult education has thus been subject to very severe cutbacks throughout the last decade. (In the case of London, adult education has become embroiled in the whole saga of Mrs. Thatcher's determination to abolish the Labour controlled Greater London Council (GLC), and, by extension, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).) Most LEAs, in response in part to the cuts and in part to the radical populist culture of Thatcherism which has had such a profound influence on national attitudes to education as to all else, have made their adult education provision more market-oriented. Thus, general recreational and leisure LEA courses tend to have fee levels

and minimum attendance numbers which produce a programme of self-financing courses (at direct rather than full cost). Vocational courses (for public examination courses, skill based certificate courses, etc.) are similarly organized and financed. Most LEAs maintain a 'middle stratum' of programming where fee levels are subsidised from public funds in order to encourage the general citizenry to attend: but this provision is almost everywhere under pressure to conform to the dictates of the market and to abandon public subsidy. It is declared Government policy to accelerate this process and it is likely that the 1990s will see a move towards a largely self-financing LEA within the education sector. However, almost all LEAs (certainly those in urban areas) have developed programmes of adult education provided for specific disadvantaged groups, usually at very low or no cost. Much of this work is directly linked to the training programmes of the Training Agency; but a significant amount is geared to the educational needs of particular groups—the ethnic minorities, for example.

The WEA is in many senses a declining force though its problems have different causes to those of the LEA sector. Its financial base, always fragile, has come under increasing pressure as both Government and LEA funding has diminished in real terms. In 1989 the Government decided to end the long standing system of "direct grants" to the WEA: public support will in future come via LEA educational finances. However, given the extreme pressures upon LEAs, and the difficulty of permanently earmarking funds for the WEA, the financial future for the organization looks bleak. Equally important has been the decline in the number of active voluntary members in the WEA and the failure of the organization to harness the energies of younger adults. Whilst the WEA does still maintain a significant programme of industrial studies work with trade unionists, this is very largely on Trades Union Congress (TUC) devised courses on 'health and safety at work' or 'shop steward training': the TUC has had little interest in recent years in the liberal adult education perspective of 'education for citizenship' and the focussing of industrial studies courses on the analysis of the union, the Labour Movement and the working class within the wider social and political context. Similarly, whilst the WEA continues to make significant provision in the non-vocational academic field—predominantly in the arts and social studies areas, but including some science too—those attending are in most areas overwhelmingly middle class. The *raison d'être* of the WEA—to provide via a voluntary movement a programme of liberal adult education for the working class⁸—is thus not at present being fulfilled and the future of the organization is at best uncertain.

By the late 1940s most universities had an extramural department and most were organized to provide a mix of courses—some jointly with the WEA (tutorial classes aimed at the working class), and some, largely for professional and/or middle class groups, organized by the university alone (extension classes). With the wholesale expansion of the university system in the 1960s, extramural departments grew rapidly and the scale of provision increased markedly.⁹

Since the late 1970s this progress has been checked and severe problems encountered. The context for this change has been the continuous and prolonged series of resource constraints within the university system as a whole. Although this process began in the early 1970s it was not until the major University Grants Council (UGC) package of cuts in 1981 that the constraints really began to bite. A major contraction of the system has been in process ever since, with 'early retirement' inducements, increased emphasis upon income generation, and a continuing reduction in real terms in salaries and overall resources. This has been a wholly unproductive and depressing decade for universities and reflects the Thatcher government's lack of interest in higher education and its impatience with what it sees as an over-generous public subsidy. The *results* of this policy have been little short of catastrophic: morale is at rock-bottom; there has been virtually no recruitment of academic staff (with the resultant high age profile of academic staff and lack of promotions), and universities find it increasingly difficult to fill senior positions, especially in 'marketable' disciplines where able professionals in the private sector can command not only salaries several times greater but, equally important, far better research facilities and ancillary support. For these reasons, there has been a marked increase in the so-called 'brain-drain'¹⁰ robbing the system of many of its remaining leading figures. As well as all these effects, universities have been pushed and pulled into a far more market-oriented approach. There is a greater emphasis upon 'vocationally relevant' subjects and a corresponding decline in 'academic' areas: some universities, for example, are now without a philosophy department, unthinkable as recently as a decade ago when philosophy was still regarded as *the* central discipline of academic life. Universities have become generally less concerned with educational quality and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and more concerned with market relevance, cost effectiveness and 'balance sheet' criteria.

University adult education has been affected to the full by all these factors: indeed, in most universities disproportionately so. However, at the same time, the funding base for extramural work has been

changed. First, the Government's Department of Education and Science (DES) direct grant system was altered so that payment of grant was made largely on a crude productivity criterion ('effective student hours'), and the overall amount of the grant was reduced by 14.3 per cent over three years. As if this were not enough, it was decided in 1988 to end the whole direct grant system and transfer the responsibility for funding liberal adult education to the Universities Funding Council (UFC) from April 1989 (the UFC replaced the UGC under the 1988 Education Reform Act). The UFC has introduced a system of 'tendering' whereby individual universities are invited to bid for public funding to support teaching and related costs for the production of a number of full-time equivalent students, across a number of adult or continuing education areas—extramural, vocational and 'other'. Small amounts of money are to be allocated in addition for research and innovatory projects. The UFC has made it clear that there should be an increasing reliance on fee and other income and a corresponding reduction in the level of public subsidy. Vocational education is expected to be self-financing (though through meeting its full or marginal costs is unclear). At the same time, the UFC expects overall levels of adult and continuing education provision to increase. (At the time of writing, UFC allocations for individual universities for adult and continuing education for 1990/91 had not yet been announced.)

This extreme volatility within a context of continuous and severe cutbacks has had results little short of disastrous for university adult and continuing education. The University of Leeds provides a fairly typical example of the cumulative effects of the last decade. In 1980 there were 31 full-time academic staff in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education; in 1988 this had reduced to 20; the University's 'target' for 1992 is 14. Meanwhile 'productivity', measured in student contact hours increased approximately 45 per cent between 1983 and 1988. Inevitably, this has meant the employment of far more part-time tutors, a strong emphasis upon provision likely to attract large numbers of students at minimal organization cost, and a marked increase in the administrative and developmental roles of academic staff—often at the expense of both adult teaching and research work. Most important of all, with the increasing pressure to generate income and become more cost effective, some of the most valuable areas of work are under threat. For example, the labour-intensive, community-based provision for the unemployed and for ethnic minorities produces no fee incomes and has a high support resource base. Arguably, resources could be more productively used elsewhere: and yet by common consent nationally this 'Pioneer Work' section of the Leeds Department

produces some of the most valuable and original programme and research output in the country.

If all sectors of adult education are riven with such problems, are there any *positive* aspects? Before looking at some rather more optimistic trends let me return briefly to the initial 'ideological framework' discussion. Of the positions somewhat schematically outlined, it is clear that almost all have been under heavy attack in the last decade. The crude philistine populism of the Thatcher years—'Market Rules OK'—has seemingly obliterated much of the liberal tradition. But, liberal provision *does* survive, if not prosper; and there has been a heartening, though admittedly small scale, *increase* in funding for specific community-based work with the disadvantaged. More important than this, however, have been the new initiatives and new roles for adult education that rather paradoxically have opened up as a result of the problems of the larger university system. It is to a discussion of these that attention is now turned. But it is as well to hear in mind, too, that the commitment to certain core values of the liberal approach—individual enrichment and collective social progress among them—are deep-rooted in our culture, and will hopefully survive the present social and political environment.

In the meantime, though, we continue to live for the short-term in a culture dominated by Thatcherite values and priorities. What then are the prospects for adult education in the remaining years of the twentieth century in Britain? Enough has been said to indicate that these years are likely to see adult education under continuing pressure; and they are certain to see further change. There is plenty of evidence, therefore, that these are indeed the 'worst of times': but are there correspondingly *positive* aspects for present and future adult education? Three 'pragmatic' factors stand out above all others in this context: adult education is cost effective (that is, cheap); there is an increasing realisation by government that, given the pace of social and technological change, continuing education throughout adult life is essential ('education' is seen largely as 'training or re-training'); and demographic trends are such that every effort has to be made to increase the flow of mature students into higher education. Added to these educational factors is the more general policy commitment to make focussed provision—whether educational or social—for particular, disadvantaged groups in society.

Together, these constitute a context within which adult education *could* be poised for its most significant period of expansion. In the LEA sector much will depend upon relations with the training

schemes separately funded by central government, and on the degree to which government and European Economic Community (EEC) financing of special provision for disadvantaged areas and groups is passed through to LEAs.

In higher education similar arguments apply. For the first time in the post war period adult (or continuing) education is seen, at least potentially, as being an essential part of the mainstream provision of the university, rather than a somewhat idiosyncratic if not esoteric offshoot. There is much talk today of 'mainstreaming' adult education, or building adult education into the programming of all departments and making it as normal a part of university teaching as is undergraduate and postgraduate work. This nicely illustrates the potential and the dangers of the current climate: such a move *may* result in adult education assuming a quite central role in university activity with all the increased priority and resources that that implies; or, at least as likely, it *may* provide the universities with a rationale for severely reducing in size and resources, or indeed abolishing altogether, specialist departments of adult education. (The result of this would almost inevitably be the virtual disappearance of adult education from university provision in a short time as there would be no focal point for its professional development.)

Following the more optimistic of these scenarios, however, it is clear that there are several fields of adult education which are potential growth areas. Continued professional education is perhaps the most obvious. Provision of high level, intensive updating courses for professionals in the field who need to familiarise themselves with the latest applications of research in the relevant disciplines has been a growth area in Britain over the last decade. (And, of course, in North America it has long been the basis of much university continuing education work.) Such provision fulfils a number of useful functions for the university: it produces high income (though it is a myth to believe that it can ever be *fully* self-financing); it demonstrates the university's 'relevance' for the 'real world' and thus brings the university demonstrably into the 'enterprise culture' of Thatcherism; and it provides a potentially fruitful context for academics and professional practitioners to come together. How far such provision can be genuinely educational as opposed to being concerned exclusively with updating and training, must remain an open question. Similarly, how far, if at all, it can be practised within the liberal, critical framework of adult education is debatable. But at the very least this provides the field with an opportunity for working with parts of the university—largely in the science and

engineering areas—which have hitherto had relatively little involvement with adult education.

Other areas of development are pre-degree level 'Access' provision and part-time degree courses. Both these fit far less problematically into the liberal framework of adult education provision. There are numerous and often fundamental problems of administration and finance—not least the balance of input between Departments of Adult Education and the subject departments of the university—but adult education pedagogic expertise and community contacts should ensure that adult education departments become the central agencies for these areas of development. In this context, as far as universities are concerned, the primary objective is to increase the flow of undergraduate students into science and technology based courses, where quotas are often difficult to fill and where government is keen to expand. *Demand*, however, is largely for 'Access' and part-time degree courses in the arts and social studies areas. Moreover, most adult education subject and teaching expertise, and most internal university support for and experience of mature student entry and adult education generally, comes from the arts and social studies areas.

One of the major challenges for adult education will be on the one hand to adapt and develop its provision so that science and technology 'Access' and part-time degree courses for mature students can successfully be built into university provision; and, on the other hand, to convince both university authorities and government to change and adapt their existing provision and assumptions so that adult demand is better catered for. Amongst other things, this may mean more attention being paid to inter-disciplinary, professionally related degree schemes, and a more flexible, modular and credit-based degree structure being adopted. Finally, with government and EEC concern to develop special programmes of work with the disadvantaged, there may well be significant opportunities not only for direct provision but also for monitoring, analysis and research.¹¹ Obviously, this can be made wholly congruent with the social purpose ethic of the liberal tradition—though again there are problems and tensions inherent in such work. It is all too easy for the monitoring and research work to become dominant so that the university's involvement in the work in the field is marginalised. Conversely, community pressure may lead to an inappropriately vocational or instrumental programme of course provision.

Overall, there is the danger that these new areas of work will diminish adult education's concern with making provision for the *whole* community. What guarantees are there that 'Access' and

part-time degree provision, for example, will attract to university *working-class* rather than 'merely' *middle-class* mature students?

These questions bring us back to the context in which adult education will operate for the foreseeable future: an elitist, unequal and steeply hierarchical education system which reflects the society of which it is a part. Adult education has two key roles in the new Thatcherite culture (and within the older but still grossly unequal social structure): to extend the opportunities for the whole community for entry into both degree level work *and* other, non-vocational, adult provision; and to preserve and advance the values and perspectives of the whole spectrum of the liberal tradition, almost all of which are under threat. If any adult education worthy of the name is to survive for the twenty-first century, then individual cultural enrichment, not necessarily related to material advance, must be defended as a reputable educational objective in its own right. Similarly, the 'collective social purpose' ethic of the liberal tradition—an anathema to Thatcherite ideology—must be positively affirmed and developed. Politically attractive new areas of work must not blind us to the importance of maintaining these core principles, however 'unfashionable', temporarily, they may be.

With ingenuity, sensitivity and not a little political skill these objectives may be attained in what is, in truth, a predominantly hostile environment. As always, adult education remains at its core a political and ideological movement, if not crusade, affirming humanistic and liberal perspectives. If we are to achieve in the year 2000 the 'best of times,' we have to strive for the attainment of these values politically as well as professionally.

Reference Notes

1. *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 30 December 1986.
2. See N.A. Jepson, *The Beginnings of English University Adult Education* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973).
3. For a full discussion of the liberal tradition see Richard Taylor, Kathleen Rockhill, and R. Fieldhouse, *University Adult Education in England and the USA: a reappraisal of the liberal tradition* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
4. See R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana, 1983).
5. For the classic account of these tensions see R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, 2nd ed. (London: Merlin Press, 1973). See also T. Nairn, "The Nature of the Labour Party," in *Towards Socialism*, ed. P. Anderson and R. Blackburn (London: Fontana and New Left Books, 1961).
6. Taylor, Rockhill, and Fieldhouse, *University Adult Education* (1985).
7. *Ibid.* Ch. 2.

8. See R. Fieldhouse, *The Workers' Educational Association: Aims and Achievements 1903-1977* (Syracuse, USA: Syracuse University Press, 1978).
9. See Taylor, Rockhill, and Fieldhouse, *University Adult Education*, Ch. 4 (1985).
10. See, for example, *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* (throughout 1988).
11. See, for example, the emphasis in REPLAN (the DES-funded series of projects for work with the unemployed) and the research grants given for the analysis of such work by the Further Education Unit (FEU) of the DES.