

Adult Education – our part in its (partial) downfall and renewal

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Recently there has been some correspondence in the Guardian Newspaper in the UK concerning the demise of adult education and lifelong learning in the UK. This has been initiated by [Professor Jonathan Michie at the University of Oxford](#), who argues quite rightly in my view that funding should be made available for lifelong learning. There is a very well-established evidence base for the social and economic benefits of lifelong learning that validates the advocacy of such an approach. [Professor John Holford from the University of Nottingham](#) responds reminding readers that it is 100 years since the very first Labour government brought into law a regulation that allowed universities to offer, in collaboration with voluntary organisations (notably the Workers Education Association), funding to offer liberal adult education. John reminds us that this tradition survived until the 1990s until subject to what he describes as 'the wrecking ball' of the Thatcher government.

This has reminded me of a chapter that I wrote 20 years ago reflecting on the history of continuing education in the UK. I have dug it out, and it is attached to this briefing.

The challenge from 1989 and through the 1990s was one of accountability for the funding provided by UK Funding Councils to universities for continuing education in the liberal adult education mode. Accountability was in the spirit of Thatcherite principles, and ultimately the measure upon which it was to be determined would become enrolments on courses that carried credit at least to the level of first-year undergraduate studies. Universities in receipt of funding, mainly in the Russell Group, of course responded and introduced credit-bearing programmes, but that credit could be argued as being roubles in a dollar economy, and usually the credit was not transferable even in the same institution. This was a huge opportunity lost to create flexible part-time provision for those who wanted it - universities in receipt of the funding did not have for the most part the willingness to create structural flexibility and ultimately some could not account for the funding for credit-bearing continuing education that they had received without absorbing the allocation into the mainstream to offer a bit more traditional undergraduate provision. Inevitably many departments of adult and continuing education as we knew them disappeared, with only a few remaining. It might be added that these departments also suffered

from another accountability exercise introduced at the same time, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) later the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a story for another day.

This is not an argument that universities should not be offering liberal adult education in its 20th century form or indeed that some of this activity should not carry credit even if that credit does not lead to recognised qualifications. It may be that like a modern equivalent, ‘micro-credentials’, there is value of demonstrating achievement that complements traditional awards, particularly to enhance the possibility of employment or career progression. However, many adults, particularly older adults, do not want to be assessed and to gain credit for their studies. Yet they want the opportunity to engage in learning for reasons that are personal rather than professional. Over many decades there have been many inventories created that list the reasons adults learn. Whilst professional development is clearly the most prominent of the factors, there are other key motivations that are associated with, amongst others, satisfying cognitive interest, a desire to socialise and to gain a sense of accomplishment. And many do not have the funds to pay the £750 per course unit reported by another recent correspondent to the Guardian in response to Jonathan’s letter. I would advocate a mixed economy.

There is much cross-subsidy in universities and it is quite possible to provide education for those who want to continue learning in later life by subsidising at least some of its cost from activities that create surpluses, even in these times of economic stress, as a civic contribution. But there is also a vital role for government. Already at national level in Scotland a huge subsidy is offered to undergraduate students based on the principle that rather like schooling and health care, free higher education, as Sir Peter Scott has stated in the [Glasgow Herald](#), is for the current administration in Holyrood something that should come out of general taxation and is an expression of civic solidarity. Why therefore not a similar argument for learning in later life? In 2002, the Lifelong Learning Committee of the Scottish Parliament introduced the idea of a *lifelong learning entitlement*, a proposal that essentially sought to extend the credit equivalent of an undergraduate degree to provision that could be taken up over a lifetime. Individuals would have the opportunity to spend their credit in flexible ways dipping in and out of learning. The scheme did not come into force and was somewhat silent initially on older learning (though its final report acknowledged the deficit).

In Scotland, there is now partial support for credit-bearing provision for those who earn less than £25,000 per annum, and who take courses that range in credit from 30 to less than 120 SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework) credits (i.e. the equivalent of one year of full-time study). A grant from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) is available that for such programmes would cover from £321 to £1274 of fees. Credit-bearing short courses here at the University of Glasgow typically cost £160 for 10 credits. On that basis, a SAAS grant could cover two-thirds of cost for some adults if provision of courses in the 30-120 credit range were widely available. So whilst such an offer is not free to residents of Scotland in the way that full-time undergraduate study is, and is means-tested, it is perhaps not beyond the means of a proportion of the population. And there are still some short courses directed towards adults at various universities in Scotland, though a limited number reach the crucial 30 credit cut-off.

We should also reflect that provision available to adults in universities is complemented by courses marketed as micro-credentials and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), some of which are free at the basic level. Also in a less formal way there has been increasing focus on public engagement work in our universities, which complements formal programmes in the form of lectures and debates offered through for example university museums and galleries,

and science cafes. The picture therefore is not perhaps calamitous in some universities. However there is more than could be done.

In Scotland, the fact that there is no subsidy from SAAS for courses below 30 credits is a deficiency in the system, and even with that subsidy affordability is still an issue for many in our population. It is not, for example, easy for someone on basic benefits or a state pension to dedicate limited resource to learning, no matter how strong our arguments are for its health benefits. There are a number of options that might be considered to enhance provision for adults:

- Stronger state intervention by extending grant aid, even covering 100% of cost for a certain amount of credit each year. This sounds like Individual Learning (or Training) Accounts, but unlike ILAs or ITAs or equivalents such as the SkillsFuture Credit programme in Singapore, I would advocate no conditionality on support being only for those in work or the courses themselves being work-related. There is of course an argument that many individuals are wealthy and can pay, but the contrary position as laid out by [Peter Beresford](#), also in the Guardian some years ago, is that this might be mitigated by the removal of the cost of bureaucracy in applying means-testing, and would enhance solidarity in society.
- A return to collaboration between universities and regional/city administrations in the offer of a wide spectrum of provision of adult education. Historically in Scotland some local authorities co-funded provision with their universities. Longstanding and continuing cuts in funding made available from central government ('efficiencies' of 3% annually according to the [Resource Spending Review](#)), and the challenges therefore in providing other essential services, make this difficult outside the context of [City-Region Deals](#), but here the lifelong learning component largely focuses on skills for jobs, and innovation. However, as [Sir Patrick Marmot](#), in his first report on health inequalities in 2010 stated, adult learning is associated positively with healthy behaviours and outcomes. Economic benefits surely follow by freeing up some of the resources dedicated to care and social services, an argument advocated by Tom Schuller. Community Education offered by regional authorities is currently limited in scope with largely and understandably a focus on adult literacy and ESOL with a smattering of other culture-based courses. Renewal of long-standing links with universities not only might broaden the offer, but make it available in places where learning has found it difficult to penetrate. We might then move closer to the development of the 'Learning City' advocated so strongly by UNESCO.
- Further subsidy from universities themselves for a wider categories of learners. Asylum seekers and refugees often receive free entry to some credit-bearing short courses. This could be extended to those in receipt of state benefits and pensions or we could go further and apply the arguments for unconditionality. This would be in keeping with the idea of the civic university and the original conception of liberal adult education, and could be achieved at no cost if more academics were encouraged and rewarded to make contributions to service and civic engagement that included routinely contributing to adult education provision. I daresay many would swap their membership of the academic sub-committee of the Committee overseeing committees for the opportunity to offer a public lecture or even a short course centred on their research and scholarship. This is key – we need provision of adult education from universities based on our distinct expertise and a reflection of the scholarship we possess, not an offer that could potentially be found elsewhere. That is not to say that many academics do not

already serve their communities, but the fact that this is described as ‘third mission’ is significant.

Ultimately a mixed economy to support the provision of adult learning does require the state, local authorities and universities to work in unison. Of course this triple helix needs another dimension to make it quadruple: adults themselves in our communities, and the means in place for them to make demands on the shape that provision might have.

There is currently an [Independent Review of Community Education and Development](#) in Scotland. One of the intended ‘System Outcomes’ of the Scottish Government’s [Post-school education, research and skills - purpose and principles](#) is that ‘public funding system for student support is perceived as fair, transparent and accessible by learners, providers and employers’. The work led by my colleague Professor Ellen Boeren in a project funded by ESRC, [A UK-Ireland investigation into the statistical evidence-base underpinning adult learning and education policy-making](#), will be helpful in the process of considering options, and for the first time provide comprehensive and quantified backdrop to inform policy.

A report from the Scottish Government in 2023, [Adult lifetime skills: a literature review](#), whilst addressing issues pertaining to lifelong learning as they apply to working adults, did not concern itself with the benefits of later life learning for those not seeking learning opportunity for employment purposes. I will leave it to the new Independent Review to consider options for this important segment of our population, and to include recommendations for the university sector, which has much to offer to the development of a learning society. And maybe it will offer something not just to Scotland, but the rest of the UK.